

“I Wish Gandhi ji Were Pakistani”:

The World-Making Tool of Stereotypes in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract:

Hindi cinema has long been instrumental in defining the boundaries between the “self” and the “other,” often by providing stereotypical representations of the other’s different religious, linguistic or ethnic affiliations. It was often Pakistan that played the role of the other, especially in films dealing with international terrorism or war. However, certain recent films focus on the lives of everyday people and emphasize the possibility of redefining the India-Pakistan relationship by portraying cross-border friendship between everyday Indians and Pakistanis. In this article, I look at two such films, *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (Khan, 2015) and *Happy Bhag Jayegi* (Aziz, 2016) and investigate whether these films provide a more nuanced portrayal of Pakistani characters than previous war or spy films. Throughout the paper I suggest that this is not the case and that these films, despite their wholesome message, employ a variety of stereotypes related to gender, religion, and nationality, which have been crucial in delineating the cultural boundaries of the Indian nation.

Keywords: India, Pakistan, Hindi cinema, Bollywood, Border, Stereotype, Gender, Religion, Cricket, Urdu

Pakistan has left its mark on Hindi filmmaking, whereby Pakistan and Pakistanis have often been portrayed as enemies of the Indian nation and its people. This mode of depiction was put forward in several war and action films, in which Pakistani characters threatened the unity of the Indian nation in various open and clandestine ways (Ud Din & Langah 2012: 108). However, during the mid-2010s, some films, such as *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (Khan, 2015) and *Happy Bhag Jayegi* (Aziz, 2016), moved beyond the juxtaposition of the Indian and Pakistani state and focused on the possibility of everyday people establishing friendships across the border, showing the Indo-Pakistani relationship in a new, more amiable light.

Yet, despite the benevolent message of cross-border friendship, I argue here that both films employ a variety of cultural stereotypes to emphasize the difference between the Indian and

Pakistani characters. There are significant differences in the way the films depict issues related to gender, religion and national identity between Pakistani and Indian characters. The resulting image is perhaps less belligerent than previous ones, but it similarly aims to emphasize the difference between “us” and “them”.

To elaborate on this point, I analyze *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* and *Happy Bhag Jayegi* through textual analysis by following Homi Bhabha’s methodology. Bhabha argued that in order to engage with stereotypes, it is not enough to negate them on the basis of “political normativity”: one must look at the processes of subjectification, the power relations and the process through which the ambivalence and the sense of otherness are created (Bhabha, 1997: 294).

Consequently, we should look deeper into why these stereotypes are put in place and what they tell us about power relations. In order to do this, I look at the stereotypes about Pakistani characters in these films, locate them in the larger socio-cultural realm of the India-Pakistani relationship and focus on what this tells us about the power relations in play. Firstly, I look at some of the most relevant academic literature dealing with stereotypes. Consequently, I argue for the importance of understanding stereotypes in the India-Pakistan relationship and Hindi cinema. Then, I move on to analyze the two films along three thematic lines: 1) the portrayal of female protagonists, 2) national identity based on religion and cricket, and 3) the way in which comic scenes are formulated on the basis of stereotypes.

The Importance of Stereotypes in the Indo-Pakistani Relationship

In common parlance, we understand stereotypes as reductionist and oversimplified ideas related to people or things that we often possess little knowledge of. However, the significance of stereotypes in shaping our understanding of the world around us should not be underestimated. Following the findings of social psychology, Mrinalini Chakravorty argued that “stereotypes tap into collective imaginaries about social belonging, and how terms of exclusion and inclusion are negotiated on the basis of commonly perceived cultural norms” (Chakravorty, 2014: 16). This means that stereotypes have a world-making power that plays an important role in building identities and maintaining group boundaries. Stereotypes are instrumental in creating boundaries by marking certain behavioural norms as acceptable for members of the in-group. At the same time, stereotypes mark certain patterns of behaviour as “other”, associate these with different groups and thus help create a boundary between “us” and “them”. The tendency to use stereotypes to define boundaries between the self and the other often stems from a sense of insecurity and anxiety in the face of the unknown (Bhabha, 1997: 293). Using stereotypes to substitute actual knowledge with easy-to-digest tropes to define group boundaries is then a method to deal with such insecurities and also to regulate the behaviour of the in-group without needing much information about the other group.

This explains the importance of stereotypes in thinking about the Indo-Pakistani relationship. The two countries have been trying to define their own identities in opposition to each other ever since the cataclysmic Partition of British India in 1947. The birth of the two states has been viewed as a “creation-by-amputation” from an Indian perspective (Krishna, 1994: 509) and therefore India’s relationship with Pakistan tends to be strained. The simmering tensions have resulted in a number of wars (1947, 1965, 1971, 1999) and the persistent Kashmir conflict. Beyond

military clashes, Partition has caused an ideological stand-off that still influences the internal and international politics of the countries.

The most important aspect of the ideological conflict for the purpose of this paper is the way in which religious identification has come to the forefront of identity politics. Consequently, this influenced the perception of religious minorities in India and Pakistan. This is especially relevant in the light of the rise of Hindu nationalism that argues for the necessity of a Hindu *rashtra* or a Hindu-dominated state that breaks free from the earlier government policy of secularism and openly favors Hindus over other religious communities. As there is a tendency to conflate religious affiliation and national identity (Chattarji, 2008: ix), the problematic relationship with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan impacts on the perception of Islam in India as well. This is especially salient in terms of the perception of Indian Muslims, who are often suspected to be latent supporters of Pakistan threatening the unity of India (Kumar, 2008: 177).

Partition has also caused a certain cartographic anxiety in India, a constant fixation on the safety of the border and what lies beyond it (Krishna, 1994). This anxiety was exacerbated by the fact that the current Indo-Pakistani border runs through a territory, which has no historical precedent and follows no clear cultural or linguistic cleavages, particularly across the region of Punjab. It is for this reason that India and Pakistan have often been likened to twins violently separated at birth (Menon, 2013: 49). As the culture of everyday people in North India and South Pakistan is still congruent in many respects, maintaining and creating a division through cultural othering and stereotyping is perhaps a task as important as patrolling the geographical border. The need for self-definition that necessarily involves “dis/identification” and the othering of the erstwhile “twin” is thus more prominent in the public sphere and in popular culture (Athique, 2008: 476). We can thus suggest that stereotypes should be understood as an important tool of demarcation between “us” and “them”. Emphasizing their difference from each other has played an important role in the nation and identity building process of India and Pakistan, and both states have invested tremendous political and cultural capital into defining themselves in opposition to each other.

Stereotypes in Hindi Cinema

Popular culture has been an important tool of consolidating the ideological boundaries of the post-Partition Indian nation, especially in terms of producing norms of acceptable behaviour for its citizens. As Ravi Vasudevan argued, Hindi cinema has been instrumental in setting up the normative idea of the majoritarian North Indian, Hindu nation, in which other ethnicities are represented either by stereotypes or by their absence (2008: 229). Similarly, Dwyer (2014) and Viridi (2003) argued that Hindi films portray the world through the perspective of the hero of the film, and the audience is invited to identify with him. The hero’s values, lifestyle, and life choices depict and influence the nation’s self-perception and aspirations, whereas other ethnicities, religions, castes and genders are represented through this lens. This is especially salient since the changes in the Hindi film industry brought about by the economic liberalization (Dwyer, 2005: 276). Narratives tend to show India as a shining, prosperous, proud Hindu nation populated by upper-class Hindu, Punjabi Khatri families¹ and present the hero’s way of life as an aspirational model for the nation, while showing other ethnicities and religious communities as possessing less desirable qualities (Roy, 2016: 102). This not only defines the selfhood of the Indian nation, but portrays people who diverge from this model as the internal “other.” For South Indian characters

of various ethnic backgrounds are often clubbed together into an amorphous mass of otherness, vaguely defined by their sartorial choices or their inability to speak Hindi.² Another example is the portrayal of Sikh characters, who were sometimes portrayed as “dangerous secessionists” and sometimes as “the sword arm of the Hindus,” depending on their position vis-à-vis the assimilationist drive of the Indian state (Roy, 2014: 206).

For this paper, the most relevant stereotypes are the ones used to depict Muslim characters. Muslims were mostly portrayed in a reduced number of stereotypical roles in Hindi cinema, such as courtesans with a golden heart (Vanita, 2018), Kashmiris caught up in the triangle of India, Pakistan and the insurgency (Kabir, 2009), radical Islamists and good Muslims loyal to the Indian state (Rai, 2003). Recent cinematic portrayals of Muslims have also included revisionist period dramas, such as *Padmaavat* (Bhansali, 2018) or *Manikarnika* (Krishna, 2019) that project the current political climate onto the past and frame Muslims as outsiders, creating an overarching historical narrative of Islamophobia.

This process has not been hindered by the long tradition of mixing Hindu and Muslim cultural elements in terms of music, language, clothing and performance traditions and the abundance of Muslim film stars and filmmakers. In line with the majoritarian understanding of national culture, most of these elements have been assimilated into the national culture. Moreover, most of the Muslim stars do not identify as practicing Muslims and are vocal about the need for secularism (*Hindustan Times*, 2020). Hindu values, rituals and cultural codes have been taken to be the norm (Dwyer, 2006: 274), which suggests that the underlying understanding of an Indian nation united by Hindu culture is deeply entrenched in the world of filmmaking as well (Hirji, 2008: 61).

In light of Bollywood’s habit of typecasting Muslims and stereotyping non-hegemonic, local identities to create an ideal Indian nation on the screen, it is not at all surprising that Pakistanis, who fulfil the role of the “other” in the public discourse and politics already, also take up this role in Hindi cinema. Pakistani characters have usually been portrayed in a negative light. According to many a narrative, their aggressivity or lack of moral compass is a result of their upbringing in a state which is not as open and accommodating as India (Viswanath & Malik 2009). The portrayal of Pakistani characters tends to differ based on gender: men are often portrayed as exaggeratedly evil (e.g. *Mission Kashmir*, Chopra, 2000) and women are often portrayed as exotic beauties ensnared by patriarchy (e.g. *Veer-Zaara*, Chopra, 2004, *Ek Tha Tiger*, Khan, 2012). Despite the complex relationship of desire and othering between Pakistani stars and Indian audiences (Khdaïr, 2020), this trend is yet to see a turn towards a more nuanced portrayal, as even much-celebrated web series, such as *Sacred Games* or *The Family Man*, present Pakistan as the hotbed of extremism that turns even Indian Muslims against the Indian state (Ajmal, 2019).

Considering the importance of Pakistan in creating and maintaining India’s national identity, and portraying Pakistanis as the “other” of Indians through formulaic tropes and negative stereotypes, *Happy Bhag Jayegi* and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* thus appear particularly noteworthy. These films not only paint a less hostile picture of Pakistani characters but also allow them a larger role, as the stories depict Indian and Pakistani characters crossing the border and establishing close relationships with each other. However, this does not mean that the films would have a more nuanced way of portraying Pakistani characters or their Pakistani identity. In the following section, I explore the key aspects of the narratives and then tease out some of the stereotypes related to

gender, national identity and humour. I suggest that the “Pakistaniness” of the characters is represented through a reductionist portrayal of language, gender, religion and cricket.

Friendships Without Borders?

Bajrangi Bhaijaan and *Happy Bhag Jayegi* are by no means the first narratives in which Indian and Pakistani citizens crossed the border and interacted with each other directly. However, previous films, such as *Henna* (Kapoor, 1991), *Refugee* (Dutta, 2000), and *Veer-Zaara* (Chopra, 2004) focused on cross-border love and followed the melodramatic tradition in their plot structure and character construction. *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* and *Happy Bhag Jayegi* reference these films and the history of India-Pakistan relations on screen, but take a more light-hearted approach than earlier narratives.

Bajrangi Bhaijaan is centred around Munni, a mute Pakistani girl, who travels to India on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Nizamuddin Auliya in order to restore her ability to speak. However, on the way back Munni is separated from her mother and is left behind in India. On account of her disability, she cannot ask for help and is rescued by Pawan, a simple but kind-hearted man, who takes her to his strict vegetarian, upper-caste Hindu family who accept her based on the belief that she is their coreligionist. Soon, it turns out that not only is Munni not an upper-caste Hindu, but she is rather a Pakistani Muslim. She is thus promptly removed from the home. As there is no other solution, Pawan decides to smuggle her back to Pakistan. They are helped throughout their many tribulations by Nawab Chand, the compassionate Pakistani television reporter, who finally manages to reunite Munni with her family, and return Pawan to India. The euphoria of the happy ending is enhanced by a scene showing Munni speaking her first words.

Happy Bhag Jayegi, on the other hand, is about a young Indian woman who runs away from her arranged marriage and ends up in Pakistan by accident. She lands in the house of the ex-governor general of Lahore, thus turning the life of Bilal, the son of the governor, upside down. Happy refuses to leave unless she is reunited with her Indian boyfriend and in order to avoid the need to account for the presence of an undocumented Indian woman in his house, Bilal needs to cooperate. Thus, he is forced to travel between India and Pakistan to arrange the reunion before a scandal would endanger his and his father’s political career. The border becomes very porous as various family members, as well as criminal elements, keep crossing it to thwart Happy and Bilal’s plans. Eventually, Happy and her boyfriend are able to have a secret Hindu wedding in Lahore and return to India as a married couple with the blessings of all parties involved.

The two films are similar in many respects, as both take the forbidden act of crossing the border as a point of departure, and then later elaborate on the way everyday people can work their way around state-level enmity. Both films are critical about the nationalistic overdrive that is present in the political discourse in India and Pakistan and they reference earlier narratives about wars, spies and terrorists in a self-reflexive and satirical way. Their underlying humanistic message is also similar, as both films suggest that if everyday people in India and Pakistan were to get to know each other better, they could develop meaningful friendships with each other.

Despite this message, I argue that by taking a deeper look, we can see that Pakistani characters are still represented in a stereotypical light. In the following sections, I suggest that

these are particularly visible in three areas: the representation of the heroines, the treatment of religion and cricket, and the use of stereotypes to create humour.

Damsels in Distress

In order to understand the relevance of stereotypes in this context, it is especially important to take a look at how these films portray their heroines, as this throws light on how the intersection of gender, religion and nationality plays out on the screen. Hindi cinema has often used the figure of the woman to symbolize the nation and referred to Hinduism to portray ideal modes of femininity (Anujan, Schaefer & Kanan, 2012: 113). Traditionally, heroines of all religious denominations have occupied a secondary role to men in the films, both in production and the narrative (Madaan et al., 2018). Yet, there is significant difference in the portrayal of Hindu and Muslim heroines generally, and we can observe a difference in the case of these two films as well. Although both *Happy* and *Munni* conform to the stereotypical role of the “damsel in distress” who needs to be saved by local men, their vulnerability plays out differently. I suggest that if we read the portrayal in the context of the earlier tropes and stereotypes of Hindi cinema with regards to women and Muslims, we can see this as an effort to project a powerful image of Hinduism and India.

The fact that the Pakistani *Munni* is a helpless, mute child plays a key role in *Bajrangi Baijaan*. In the first part of the film, we witness how *Munni* is almost completely incorporated into Indian society. As a result of her fair complexion, knowledge of Hindi and the ease with which she adjusts to the everyday life of the middle-class Indian family, nobody suspects her *not* to be Hindu or Indian and when it turns out that she is the exact opposite of both acceptable categories, Pawan’s family feels they have been deceived. The revelation that a Pakistani could have passed as a Hindu Indian is a radical proposition, as it destabilizes the carefully constructed difference between Indians and Pakistanis. The anger and the horror that the family expresses could be explained by Faiza Hirji’s argument that Muslims and Pakistanis are perceived as threatening because they could pass for Hindus quite easily, and thus threaten the purity of the Hindu community or the Indian nation (Hirji, 2008: 60).

Interestingly, as she cannot speak, *Munni*’s Pakistani identity is revealed and asserted through three aspects: religion, cricket and food. The choice of these three areas is highly stereotypical and reductionist, but perhaps harks back to the earlier discussed topic of the similarity between Indian and Pakistani culture, the cartographic anxiety and the need to define the difference between the separated twins. The uncertainty about clear boundaries between Indian and Pakistani citizens results in the need to provide a stereotypical and easy-to-grasp difference between the two groups.

Another important aspect to consider with regards to difference is gender. According to the stereotypical portrayal of Hindi cinema heroines as passive victims in need of saving, *Munni* does require assistance that only the Indian, Hindu male can provide. This is in line with the recent portrayal of the Hindu man as the saviour of the Muslim woman, which we witnessed in films like *Ranjhanaa* (Rai, 2013) and *Ishaqzaade* (Faisal, 2012). As Hussein and Hussain argued, this type of narrative reinforces the moral superiority of the Hindu man vis-à-vis not only the Muslim woman but also the Muslim men, who are not capable or willing to protect their coreligionist (2015: 219). In this sense, Pawan proves his moral superiority by helping the mute Pakistani girl

despite the danger that he brings upon himself. His assistance contributes to the narrative that it is only a devout Hindu who possesses the necessary moral stature to protect the honor and safety of women. Pawan's willingness to help despite the communal logic that would suggest that each protect their own, can be read as a reassertion of the power of the muscular and self-confident Indian nation (Banerjee, 2016). This act helps to consolidate the discursive supremacy of men over women, the Hindu community over the Muslim and the Indian national identity over the Pakistani (Hussein & Hussain, 2015: 286).

Happy's character in *Happy Bhag Jayegi* contributes to the construction of a similar narrative reasserting India's positive image. Just like Munni, Happy is also on alien territory without any male protection, yet she prompts different reactions from her environment. Happy represents the archetype of the headstrong, "bubbly" and irresistible Punjabi girl who had become a staple character in Bollywood over the years with films such as *Jab We Met* (Ali, 2007), *Band Baaja Baarat* (Sharma, 2010), *Khoobsurat* (Ghosh, 2014) and the like. Keeping in touch with this mode of portrayal, Happy is a confident, feisty young woman who can bully the whole Pakistani police establishment into submission and endear herself to the Pakistani everyman. This feat is attributed to her Punjabi ethnicity, a notion that plays into the larger tendency in Hindi cinema portraying Punjabi people as full of life, headstrong and persistent (Roy, 2014).

As a result of her spirited nature and charm, the film suggests that despite her precarious position of being an undocumented Indian in Pakistan, Happy is not so desperate to be saved. She comes up with plans that she sometimes generously sets aside for the sake of others, such as not seeking help from the Indian embassy in order to protect Bilal's family's honor. Moreover, she does not actively need to take part in saving herself, as the people in her surroundings want to help her voluntarily, because they like her so much. Bilal, the Pakistani Muslim man, is not as much her saviour, as Pawan is in Munni's case, but her proxy, undertaking her wishes and commands. Happy's father, on the other hand, is reminiscent of the more traditional male characters of Hindi cinema, who think of women as the repository of community honor. His efforts can remind us of the events of the Partition, whereby men sought to recuperate the women of their family who got stuck on the wrong side of the border in order to preserve the honor of the family (Butalia, 2017).

However, Happy crosses the border 70 years later and is a confident, world-savvy woman, who can assert her own rights and protect herself. If we read Happy as the symbol of the Indian nation, we can interpret this mode of portrayal as the assertion of a more confident Indian identity, that does not need to act aggressively in order to assert its own interest, as it is well-liked and helped, even by the others across the border.

As such, the portrayal of Happy is in stark contrast with Munni who is only able to solicit help by deceit, however unwilling or unintended. Her muteness can be pinpointed as being indicative of a reductive portrayal of her Pakistani identity: the film suggests that if a Pakistani does not state her difference verbally and explicitly, the difference from an Indian person is barely noticeable. If taken forward, this could also suggest a negation of the two-nation theory itself, as it shows how a Pakistani fits seamlessly into Indian society—if she does not expressly negate her Indian citizenship or allude to it by adhering to different cultural customs.

Religion, Nationalism and Cricket

In fact, the stereotypical portrayal of national belonging is worth exploring in more detail as it plays a significant role in both films. Religious difference is the most-often cited reason for the creation of Pakistan in political narratives and in fact, both films refer to Hinduism and Islam as a point of difference. However, the proportions are quite different and it is useful to consider this point. Religion and religious difference come to the foreground in *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*, where the religiosity of Pawan's family is much more emphasized than the subtle, normalized Hinduness that the average Bollywood film showcases, such as the default use of Hindu surnames and rituals (Das, 2016; Dwyer, 2006). Here, Pawan and his family are closely connected to the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the right-wing paramilitary organization. Throughout the film, the narrative paints a very favourable picture of the organization, along with its values of hard work and integrity. Moreover, Pawan is portrayed as the biggest *bhakt* or devotee of the god Bajrangbali, or Hanuman. This might evoke associations with another right-wing organization, the Bajrang Dal, or Hanuman's Army (Dwyer, 2017: 264), however, this connection is not made explicitly. Apart from locating the hero's viewpoint through this framing, stereotypes about other castes and religions help establish Orthodox Brahmin customs as the norm.

The normativization of Hinduism then results in a stereotypical portrayal of the relationship between Hinduism and Islam in the film. Although the film is ostensibly about tolerance, we can observe that there are only certain aspects of Muslim culture that are shown in a positive light. The emphasis is on ecumenic spirituality and not on ritualistic practice or orthodoxy. Amongst others, we can witness this in the scene where Munni's mother takes Munni on a pilgrimage to India. Here, the focus is on them listening to *qawwali* music at Nizamuddin Auliya's shrine, a scene that can be familiar from a number of films that are not set in a Muslim context, such as *Rockstar* (Ali, 2011). Later on, the film also introduces an open-minded *maulvi* in Pakistan, who protects and hides Pawan from the Pakistani state and its agents, the policemen and the border patrol. He is shown to have risen above traditional differences between Hinduism and Islam and symbolizes ecumenic humanism. This mode of portrayal reflects a particular interpretation of secularism in the modern Indian state that tolerates Islam and Muslims so long as they accommodate to Hindu customs. The *maulvi* expresses his appreciation for Hindu customs and does not expect Pawan to behave according to Islamic customs, therefore he is deemed acceptable. Throughout the film, we see behaviour that is different from North Indian upper-caste practices, such as meat-eating, through the eyes of the hero. The viewer is invited to take part in this worldview and therefore this mode of portrayal fulfils the world-making role of stereotypes that we earlier discussed. Certain aspects of Islam are portrayed as out of bounds: Pawan is not willing to enter the mosque and eating meat is portrayed as a despicable, transgressive act. It would seem that the film outlines three aspects of Islam that are acceptable in modern-day India: a certain ecumenic spirituality, Mughal architectural heritage and those Muslims who respect Hindu customs and are willing to abide by them. This mode of portrayal reflects real-life tendencies as well.

Eventually, the closing scene of the film goes beyond this subtle justification of the supremacy of Hindu India. The mute Munni's first words echo Pawan's catchphrase: "*Jai Shri Ram!*" ("Hail Lord Ram!"). This not only signifies the special bond that has developed between the two characters in the film, as the greeting has prominent extratextual connotations, associated with right-wing Hinduism and anti-Muslim violence. Hindu mobs beating up Muslims often force them to chant "*Jai Shri Ram*" as a way of humiliating them (Pandey, 2019). By making this the second-ever utterance of a mute Muslim Pakistani girl, the film certainly does nothing to de-

legitimize the narrative of right-wing, militant Hinduism in which Muslims must pledge alliance to Lord Ram and acknowledge every aspect of Hindu culture as the normative, national culture.

Apart from the conflation of religion and national belonging, another important signifier of national identity in both films is cricket. Cricket has often been used both in real life as well as in films to demonstrate the dynamics of the India-Pakistan relationship. On account of the larger-than-life popularity of the sport in both countries, cricket has proven to be an effective tool of diplomacy, however India-Pakistan matches are also often surrounded by nationalist outbursts. Popular culture has also taken cricket as a symbol of national struggle and unity (Lichtner & Bandhopadhyay, 2008), and films often explore the India-Pakistan conflict in the framework of cricket (e.g. *Dil Bole Hadippa*, Singh, 2009), where the victory of the Indian team always symbolizes the victory of the Indian nation over Pakistan.

Bajrangi Bhaijaan presents cricket as a sign of difference. Cricket is an important aspect of Munni's identity, as she is named 'Shahida' after the famous Pakistani cricketer Shahid Afridi. Later, it is her support of the Pakistani cricket team that gives away her Pakistani nationality. This could remind the viewer of the accusation that Indian Muslims support the Pakistani cricket team (Jha, 2017). As opposed to cricket signifying national difference, *Happy Bhag Jayegi* shows how cricket can connect the two countries, as Bilal's aborted career as a cricketer and his suppressed trauma makes him more susceptible to other people's ambitions. However, the stereotypical image of the India-Pakistan cricket opposition is represented in the scene where the Amritsari boys playing cricket in the *gully* only muster enough effort to overcome Bilal when they learn that he is from Pakistan and feel the need to defend the pride of India.

Stereotypes in Action: Laughing at Pakistan

Whereas stereotypical representations of religion and national identity are often quite subtle in these films, an area where stereotypes visibly come to the fore is in providing comic episodes. Many of the humorous scenes refer to earlier stereotypical representations of Indo-Pakistani relationships on the screen and set up a self-reflexive discourse around the way in which the Indo-Pakistani border is securitized and then depicted in films. Both films insert the "Indian man on Pakistani soil misunderstood for a spy" trope that we have seen in earlier films, such as *Henna* or *Veer-Zaara*. However, as opposed to earlier narratives where this confusion led to tragic events, here, it is followed by a clumsy chase scene. In *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* Pawan flees wearing a burqa, which is humorous considering his aversion towards most things related to Islam, and humorous on the extra-textual level considering the hypermasculine image of Salman Khan in real life. In *Happy Bhag Jayegi*, Happy's father is thought to be a dangerous suicide bomber. This is a reversion of the usual Hindi film scenario in which Pakistani characters are often suspected of such intentions. However, in both cases, it is the incompetence of the Pakistani police force that adds a layer of humour to the scenes, through which the audience can associate itself with the fleeing Indian characters and feel a certain schadenfreude towards the police when they are tricked.³

In *Happy Bhag Jayegi*, the incompetence of the Pakistani police is epitomized by Afridi, the police superintendent of Lahore, who also acts as a sidekick to Bilal. This association portrays the Pakistani police as being at the whim of the Pakistani political elite, however, Afridi does have his own agenda. Afridi has a very inflated sense of self-importance that is not matched by his actual abilities. This dissonance often leads to humorous situations. Throughout the film, he is on

a mission to prove that Pakistani culture is superior to Indian culture, however, it is clear from the beginning that he is mostly trying to convince himself rather than others. His catchphrase throughout the film is “I wish XY were Pakistani”, whereby XY always refers to a famous Indian person, such as Mirza Ghalib or Mahatma Gandhi. Of course, on a superficial level, we could find it entertaining that both Gandhi and Mirza Ghalib were born well before the Partition, which means that it would have been impossible for them to be Pakistani. However, an alternative reading to this seemingly self-deprecating joke of a Pakistani officer could also be that this is a deprecating joke coming from India, that pokes fun at historical memory, creation of knowledge, and historical stereotypes with regards to Pakistan and Pakistanis. This joke plays into the Indian preconception that since Pakistan received fewer resources at the time of Partition both in terms of historical and natural resources, this gave rise to a certain envy and inferiority complex with regards to India, that still guides Pakistani politics and culture (Desai, 2016).

Afridi tries to compensate for his feelings by speaking an extremely formal and flowery version of Urdu when Indian characters are around. Said Indian characters are in awe of his knowledge and are quick to note that Urdu is a more refined and musical language than Hindi. This recurring exchange plays into the stereotype that it is in the field of language that Pakistan has gained more than India. Urdu, the language of poetry and court culture for centuries, has been kept alive and sustained in Pakistan. This can be a source of nostalgia and resentment in learned circles in India (Jafri, 2019). Nevertheless, as Afridi speaks in a perfectly colloquial register of Hindi-Urdu when he is not consciously trying to impress others, viewers can be reassured that he is simply trying to overcome his inferiority complex. Thus, Indian viewers who are the primary target audience of this film, might feel a sense of pride over winning this round of the culture war between the two countries that has been going on in the fields of political rhetoric, public discourse and entertainment industries of the two countries with varying intensity for the past 70 years.

Friends with Reservations

Having looked at two Hindi films, *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* and *Happy Bhag Jayegi*, that portray the Indo-Pakistani relation in a supposedly different light than previous cross-border dramas, I suggest that these films, in fact, continue with the stereotypical mode of portrayal of previous films. However, as Bhabha suggested that the academic analysis should move beyond identifying stereotypes and focus on the power relations behind these, we should ask what the stereotypes about Pakistani women, children, religious leaders and policemen tell us about the Indo-Pakistani relationship.

Throughout the paper I argued that despite the guise of the benevolent storyline of the films, the portrayal of the Pakistani characters is not independent of earlier portrayals of Pakistani characters and should be read in accordance with the larger tradition of portraying Muslims as others, integral to defining the boundaries between the self and the other. The stereotyping and belittling of the Pakistani characters could be read as corresponding to the Indian national narrative of projecting a Hindu majoritarian picture that is in line with how India wishes to see itself. Throughout the analysis, I suggested that although these films seem to provide a rupture in the history of India-Pakistan narratives on the screen and focus on cross-border friendship and humanity, in reality, much of the humour in these films is derived from cultural stereotypes of the Pakistani characters, especially those related to the Pakistani state. Although the films promise a friendlier and more humanistic take on the matter, they reflect asymmetrical power relations.

Pakistan does not need to be overcome by violent means any more, but the Indian characters assert their supremacy in more subtle ways. If we take a look at the friendships formed in these films, we can observe that Pakistani friends are not equal to their Indian counterparts, either in terms of age, courage or assertiveness. The Pakistani characters need their Indian friends in order to progress in life, Munni needs Pawan to return home and Bilal needs Happy to realize his dreams. The key to their friendship is an acknowledgement of this difference. Portraying the Indian characters as more charming, heroic and self-confident contributes to creating a more robust self-perception of Indian nationalism, to which the figure of the Pakistani other created through stereotypes is absolutely necessary.

Notes

¹ According to Das, this is a result of the dominance of Punjabi filmmakers, most prominently Yash Chopra and his families, who sought to put the Partition behind the Punjabi communities and focus on the prosperous present and future through a series of successful “Khatri dramas” that glorified the lifestyles of Punjabis in India and abroad (Das, 2016: 465)

² If we look at some of the recent portrayals of South Indians in Bollywood cinema, we can see how *Chennai Express* (Shetty, 2013) depicts Tamil characters wearing the typical clothes of Kerala, or how *2 States* (Varma, 2014) portrays South Indians as unable to speak Hindi and how the North Indian characters struggle to fit in both environments.

³ It is also worth mentioning that the Indian police is not portrayed in such a comical light in either of the films.

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