# Veil, Voice, and Violence: The Portrayal of Muslim Women in Indian Cinema (1992–2002) and a Comparative Analysis of Coverage in the Economic and Political Weekly

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**Abstract**: This paper examines the representation of Muslim women characters in mainstream Indian cinema during the decade from 1992 to 2002 — a period bookended by the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the aftermath of the Gujarat pogrom, two events that profoundly reshaped Hindu-Muslim relations and the cultural imagination of India. Drawing on close readings of significant films including Bombay (1995), Mammo (1994), Sardari Begum (1996), Zubeidaa (2001), Fiza (2000), and Lagaan (2001), among others, the paper argues that Indian cinema during this decade oscillated between two dominant archetypes: the tragic Muslim woman sacrificed on the altar of communal harmony, and the doomed Muslim woman whose modernity is punished by her own community. The paper then compares these cinematic representations with the analytical and critical discourse in the Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), which during the same period published significant scholarship on Muslim identity, communalism, gender, and secularism. The comparison reveals a productive but often asymmetrical dialogue between popular cultural production and academic criticism: while EPW scholars interrogated the ideological underpinnings of secularist representations and the politics of Muslim women's rights, Indian cinema continued to deploy Muslim women primarily as emotional and symbolic currency in narratives centred on Hindu-Muslim conflict, national belonging, and masculinist desire. The paper concludes that the decade's cinematic and scholarly production together illuminate the contested terrain of Muslim femininity in post-Babri India.

**Keywords**: Muslim women, Indian cinema, communalism, Economic and Political Weekly, Bollywood, representation, secularism, gender, post-Babri India

## 1. INTRODUCTION

On December 6, 1992, a crowd of Hindu nationalist kar sevaks demolished the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, setting off riots that killed thousands across India and fundamentally altered the texture of Hindu-Muslim relations in the country. The decade that followed — stretching to the Gujarat violence of 2002 — constitutes one of the most turbulent and ideologically charged periods in postcolonial Indian history. It was also a decade of remarkable productivity and anxiety for Indian popular cinema, which found itself compelled, willingly or otherwise, to reckon with communal violence, national identity, and the question of what it meant to be Muslim in India.

Within this broader anxious recalibration, Muslim women occupied a peculiar and revealing position. They were simultaneously hyper-visible — prominent as heroines, victims, mothers, and symbols — and deeply constrained, their subjectivity subordinated to the demands of communal allegory, nationalist sentiment, and the conventions of the melodramatic form. From Shabana Azmi's dignified performances in Mammo and Sardari Begum to Manisha Koirala's ill-fated romance in Bombay, from Karisma Kapoor's brooding intensity in Fiza to the nostalgic Muslim courtesan tradition invoked in Zubeidaa, the decade's films repeatedly returned to Muslim women's bodies and stories as sites where anxieties about belonging, modernity, and communal coexistence were staged and, often, contained.

The Economic and Political Weekly, India's foremost journal of social science scholarship, was during the same period an important venue for critical analysis of communalism, gender, and Muslim identity. Founded in 1966 and published from Mumbai, EPW combined empirical social science with political commentary and cultural criticism. Its pages in the 1990s hosted debates on the Babri Masjid demolition, the politics of secularism, the situation of Muslim women under personal law, the long aftermath of the Shah Bano controversy, and the relationship between popular culture and communal ideology. It therefore provides a rich and largely underutilised archive for understanding how intellectuals and scholars were thinking about Muslim women during precisely the same years that mainstream cinema was producing its own often problematic representations.

This paper brings these two archives — cinematic and scholarly — into dialogue. It does not claim that filmmakers were reading EPW or that EPW critics were directly responding to specific films (though such connections occasionally existed). Rather, it argues that both sets of texts were produced within and responding to the same conjuncture of post-Babri India, and that reading them together illuminates the range of available discourses about Muslim women, the points of convergence and tension between popular and intellectual culture, and the limits of each form's capacity to imagine Muslim women's full humanity.

## 1.1 Scope, Method, and Limitations

The films discussed in this paper have been selected based on critical and commercial significance, the centrality of Muslim female characters to the narrative, and their geographical and generic range. The corpus includes films produced within the mainstream Hindi film industry (what is commonly, if reductively, called Bollywood) as well as significant art-house or parallel cinema productions. The EPW articles considered were identified through an

archival search of the journal's issues from January 1992 through December 2002, using search terms including Muslim women, Muslim identity, communalism and gender, purdah, hijab, personal law, and related terms. The paper does not claim to be exhaustive; it aims to be representative and analytically rigorous.

A significant limitation is that the EPW archive for this period, while substantial, was not specifically focused on cinema. Articles discussing Muslim women in the context of film and media are fewer in number than those addressing legal, political, or sociological dimensions. Where direct film criticism does appear in EPW, it is noted; where EPW's arguments about Muslim women's social condition illuminate cinematic representations more obliquely, those connections are drawn interpretively.

## 2. HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT: POST-BABRI INDIA

To understand the cultural production of this decade, it is essential to grasp the magnitude of the Babri Masjid demolition and its aftermath as a rupture in India's secular self-understanding. The Nehruvian compact, already strained in the 1980s by the Shah Bano affair, the Mandal Commission controversy, and the Bharatiya Janata Party's growing electoral success, was deeply shaken by December 1992. The riots that followed, particularly in Mumbai, Surat, and Bhopal, revealed the depth of communal hatred and the failure of state institutions to protect Muslim citizens.

For India's Muslim population — approximately 12 to 14 per cent of the total during this period — the decade was one of intensified vulnerability, surveillance, and negotiated visibility. Muslim women found themselves at the intersection of multiple pressures: from within their own communities, pressure to conform to perceived Islamic norms of dress and comportment as markers of identity and resistance; from the Hindu nationalist project, interpellation as backward, oppressed, and in need of rescue by the Hindu state; and from liberal secular discourse, expectation to embody the possibility of Muslim modernity and integration. These intersecting pressures were not merely abstract. They shaped lives, careers, marriages, and decisions about education, employment, and public presence.

The EPW's coverage of this conjuncture was substantial and often excellent. Scholars like Zoya Hasan, Flavia Agnes, and Imrana Qadeer published analyses of Muslim women's legal status, the politics of the Uniform Civil Code debate, and the instrumentalisation of Muslim women's rights by both Hindu nationalist and Muslim communal forces in its pages. Hasan's work in

particular, which appeared in various forms in EPW through this period, argued against the simplistic framing of Muslim women as either victims of their own community or pawns of Hindu nationalist rescue narratives. Her scholarship insisted on the complexity and agency of Muslim women while documenting the real structural constraints they faced.

This political context is indispensable for reading the decade's cinema. Films were made in studios and by filmmakers who could not be insulated from the violence and anxiety of their moment. Some — like Mani Ratnam — engaged with it directly and controversially. Others — like Shyam Benegal — drew on a long tradition of humanist parallel cinema to offer more textured representations. Still others reproduced without critical examination the dominant cultural scripts about Muslim women that circulated in this charged atmosphere.

## 3. CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS: KEY FILMS AND ARCHETYPES

### 3.1 The Communal Sacrifice Archetype: Bombay (1995)

Mani Ratnam's Bombay (1995) is the decade's most commercially successful and critically debated film dealing with Hindu-Muslim relations. Its plot centres on a Hindu man, Shekhar (Arvind Swamy), and a Muslim woman, Shaila Bano (Manisha Koirala), who fall in love and marry against their families' wishes, then survive the 1992–93 Mumbai riots. The film was hugely successful, spawning considerable controversy — it was accused by some Muslim groups of misrepresenting their community, and by some secular critics of presenting a dangerously sanitised view of communal violence.

For this paper, what is most significant is the construction of Shaila Bano as a character. She is beautiful, gentle, and largely passive — her primary function in the narrative is to be desired by the Hindu protagonist and to serve as the site on which the film's secular humanist message is inscribed. Her Muslim identity is rendered through aesthetic markers — the bindi controversially placed on her forehead after marriage, her name, her family's opposition to the match — rather than through any substantive engagement with what it might mean for her to be a Muslim woman navigating post-Babri India. She is, in Srinivas's formulation, a Muslim woman seen entirely through Hindu eyes.

Shaila Bano does not have a scene in which she reflects on her own religious or cultural identity from an interior perspective. Her father's opposition to the marriage — which the film largely endorses as the antagonist's position — is presented as obscurantist communalism rather than as a complex response to the real vulnerability of Muslim families in majoritarian India. The

film's resolution, in which Shaila Bano and Shekhar's mixed-faith family is reconstituted after the riots, offers a vision of secular redemption that requires the erasure rather than the acknowledgement of Muslim women's specific experience. The romance plot colonises what might have been an exploration of Muslim female subjectivity.

EPW's response to Bombay was notably sharp. Several letters and articles published in 1995 critiqued the film's politics, with scholars pointing out that it aestheticised communal violence while displacing political agency from Muslims to a secular Hindu protagonist. M. S. S. Pandian's essay in EPW argued that Bombay exemplified the limits of liberal Bollywood's engagement with communalism — that its very sincerity and aesthetic sophistication served to naturalise a Hindu perspective on Muslim suffering. This critical apparatus was more attentive to the film's ideological operations than the mainstream press review culture, which largely celebrated Bombay as a brave and progressive film.

### 3.2 Humanist Portraiture: Mammo (1994) and Sardari Begum (1996)

Shyam Benegal's two films of the mid-1990s — Mammo (1994) and Sardari Begum (1996), both scripted by Khalid Mohamed — represent the decade's most sustained attempt at humanist portraiture of Muslim women. Both films star Farida Jalal and Ratna Pathak Shah, respectively, in lead roles, and both centre Muslim women as full, complexly realised subjects rather than as objects of the Hindu gaze or symbols of communal conflict.

Mammo tells the story of Fayyazi, a Pakistani Muslim woman called Mammo, who enters India on a visitor's visa to reconnect with her family and then faces deportation. The film is extraordinary for its period in that Mammo's Muslim Pakistani identity is not treated as a problem to be overcome or assimilated but as the very substance of her character. Her wit, her dignity, her fierce attachment to family and to her own history — all are rendered in a register that neither exoticises nor reduces her. The film's political critique is not of Muslim communalism but of the bureaucratic violence of the Indian state, which uses citizenship and immigration law to separate families.

Sardari Begum is similarly attentive to its Muslim female protagonist's interiority. The film, structured as a documentary inquiry into the life of a classical singer, builds a portrait of a woman whose artistry, sexuality, and Muslim identity are interwoven in ways that the documentary form — with its multiple witnesses offering competing accounts — refuses to simplify. Sardari Begum's Muslim identity is inseparable from her relationship to Hindustani

classical music, a tradition that itself embodies the composite culture that Hindu nationalism was seeking to fracture.

What distinguishes Benegal's films from Bombay and most of the decade's other relevant productions is the refusal of allegory. Mammo and Sardari Begum are not about Hindu-Muslim relations in any abstract sense; they are about specific women living specific lives within specific historical and cultural formations. This specificity is what makes them resist the dominant archetypes. EPW's scholarship on Muslim women's cultural production — including discussions of the courtesan tradition and women's contribution to Urdu literary culture — provides a useful framework for appreciating what Benegal's films achieved.

**3.3 The Doomed Modern: Fiza (2000) Khalid Mohamed's Fiza (2000) is a more commercially oriented film that nonetheless engages seriously with the situation of a young Muslim woman in post-Babri Mumbai. Fiza (Karisma Kapoor) is searching for her brother Amaan (Hrithik Roshan), who has disappeared after the 1993 riots and is suspected of having joined a militant group. The film is in many ways a sustained meditation on what communal violence does to Muslim families and particularly to Muslim women, who are left to negotiate between their grief, their loyalty, and a state and society that regard them with suspicion.**

Fiza herself is a significant and unusual character in mainstream Hindi cinema — educated, assertive, capable of violence, and motivated by a complex mixture of grief and rage that the film does not reduce to sentimentality. Her Muslim identity is not a source of exoticism but of specific historical injury. However, the film ultimately contains her agency within a melodramatic resolution that requires her to shoot her own brother to prevent him from carrying out a suicide bombing — a narrative choice that has been widely and justifiably criticized for its ideological implications. The Muslim woman's agency is ultimately exercised in the service of the security state, punishing Muslim male militancy.

This pattern — Muslim female agency that is ultimately recuperated into mainstream nationalist or secularist purpose — recurs across the decade's films. It is a structure that EPW scholars who wrote about Muslim women's double bind within communalist politics would have recognized: the expectation that Muslim women demonstrate their belonging to India by performing a particular kind of secular, non-threatening femininity, and that any deviation from this performance is either punished or redirected.

## 3.4 Nostalgia and the Courtesan: Zubeidaa (2001)

Shyam Benegal's Zubeidaa (2001), based on the life of actress Zubeidaa who was the mother of lyricist Javed Akhtar, occupies an interesting position in the decade's cinema. Set primarily in the 1940s and 1950s, it is a period film that nonetheless resonates with contemporaneous anxieties about Muslim women's place in Indian society. Zubeidaa (Karisma Kapoor) is a glamorous, ambitious actress who falls in love with a prince (Manoj Bajpai) and follows him into a stifling royal household, where she dies in an airplane crash — possibly suicide, possibly murder.

The film draws on a long tradition of Bollywood nostalgia for a certain kind of Muslim femininity — the beautiful, artistic, emotionally intense Muslim woman whose story ends tragically. This tradition, which includes films stretching back to Mughal-e-Azam (1960), uses the Muslim woman's tragedy to signify the passing of a composite, Ganga-Jamuni cultural world. In Zubeidaa, the nostalgia is explicitly framed through the structure of a daughter seeking to understand her mother's story — a generational transmission of Muslim female experience that gives the film some of the humanist complexity of Benegal's earlier work, while also confining Zubeidaa herself to the status of a beautiful mystery rather than a fully realized subject.

## 3.5 Other Significant Films

Several other films of the decade deserve mention. Mrinal Sen's Antareen (1993) offered an unusual study of lonely urban lives including a Muslim woman's interiority. Deepa Mehta's Fire (1996), though primarily about Hindu women, raised questions about female sexuality and agency that had implications for Muslim women's representation as well, given that the film's controversy was partly stoked by Hindu nationalist groups whose anxieties about Muslim sexuality and gender were inseparable from their objections to lesbian content. Rituparno Ghosh's Bengali-language films occasionally included Muslim women characters rendered with the humanist attention characteristic of his work.

In mainstream commercial cinema, the figure of the Muslim woman also appeared in supporting roles across numerous films, often as the beleaguered wife of a Muslim villain or as an exoticized dancer. These minor roles, which do not feature in the scholarly literature on the topic, are nonetheless significant for understanding the full range of Muslim women's representational positioning in the decade's cinema. The courtesan or nautch girl tradition,

which had historically provided a significant space for Muslim women's artistic expression, was both honored and commercialized in films that deployed Muslim aesthetic markers — Urdu poetry, ghazals, kothi settings — for nostalgic effect.

## 4. DOMINANT ARCHETYPES AND THEIR IDEOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS

### 4.1 The Secular Heroine

The most common archetype for a sympathetically rendered Muslim female character in the decade's mainstream cinema is what might be called the Secular Heroine. She is beautiful, often educated, and distinguished from stereotypical notions of Muslim femininity by her unwillingness to be confined by what the film presents as communal orthodoxy. She falls in love with a Hindu man (the most common scenario), or she asserts her artistic or professional ambitions against family opposition. Her Muslim identity is rendered largely through aesthetic markers — the name, the family background, occasional Urdu phrases — while her actual values and aspirations are indistinguishable from those of the film's presumed Hindu audience.

The Secular Heroine functions ideologically as evidence that Muslim women are capable of participating in the secular, progressive India that the film imagines. But this function comes at a cost: it requires the erasure or condemnation of the specific cultural and religious formations that shape Muslim women's actual lives, and it renders her Muslim community, particularly its male elders, as the obstacle to her flourishing. The rescue of the Muslim woman from Muslim patriarchy — by a Hindu man, by secular values, by India — becomes a recurring narrative structure that carries uncomfortable echoes of colonial justifications for interventions in Indian domestic arrangements.

### 4.2 The Mourning Mother

A second significant archetype is the Mourning Mother — the Muslim woman whose sons have been killed or radicalized by communal violence, and whose grief becomes the emotional center of films that are otherwise focused on male action and politics. This figure appears in Bombay, in Fiza, and in various other films of the decade. She does not act; she suffers. Her suffering is the measure of the cost of communalism, the emotional ledger on which the film's secular humanist message is inscribed.

The Mourning Mother is a politically ambiguous figure. On one level, films that center her grief do something important: they insist that the cost of communal violence falls most heavily

on families, particularly on women who lose sons and husbands. This is a truthful observation. On another level, the figure's passivity and her function as emotional symbol rather than political agent replicates the marginalization of Muslim women in public life that EPW scholars were documenting in their sociological and political analyses.

### 4.3 The Doomed Transgressor

A third archetype is the Muslim woman who transgresses the boundaries of her community — by marrying a Hindu man, by pursuing an artistic or sexual life outside communal norms, by asserting an autonomous desire — and who is punished for this transgression, usually through death. This archetype has deep roots in Hindi film melodrama and in the courtesan narrative tradition, but it acquired particular political charge in the post-Babri decade, when Muslim women's life choices were read as communal and national allegories.

The deaths of these women — or, in Fiza's case, her use as an instrument of punishment for her brother's transgression — serve a range of narrative functions. They can be read as expressions of sympathy (her death indicts the communal forces that destroyed her) or as expressions of containment (her transgression is literally fatal, which naturalizes the limits she exceeded). In most cases, both readings are available simultaneously, which contributes to the ambivalence that characterizes even the decade's more thoughtful films.

## 5. EPW COVERAGE: SCHOLARLY DISCOURSE ON MUSLIM WOMEN (1992–2002)

### 5.1 Legal and Political Dimensions: Personal Law and the Uniform Civil Code

The single most persistent topic in EPW's coverage of Muslim women during this decade was the debate over Muslim Personal Law and the proposed Uniform Civil Code (UCC). This debate had been ignited by the Shah Bano case (1985) and the subsequent Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act (1986), and it continued to simmer throughout the 1990s, intersecting in complex ways with the rise of Hindu nationalism and the BJP's electoral successes.

Flavia Agnes, a feminist lawyer and activist who published extensively in EPW, made a sustained argument across multiple articles that the UCC debate was being instrumentalized by Hindu nationalist forces in ways that had little to do with the actual improvement of Muslim women's lives. Her critique cut in multiple directions simultaneously: she argued that the

existing Muslim personal law did indeed disadvantage Muslim women in divorce and maintenance situations, but that the proposed UCC was not a solution because it would impose a Hindu majoritarian code under a universalist guise, and because it diverted attention from the equal or greater problems with Hindu personal law as it affected Hindu women. Agnes's work in EPW provided a sophisticated framework for thinking about Muslim women's legal situation that neither romanticized Muslim personal law nor accepted the Hindu nationalist framing of the UCC as secular progress.

Zoya Hasan, a political scientist at Jawaharlal Nehru University, contributed to EPW a series of articles analyzing Muslim political identity and the situation of Muslim women within it. Her work documented the ways in which Muslim women were caught between the Muslim Personal Law Board — which resisted reform in the name of community autonomy — and Hindu nationalist forces — which demanded reform in the name of a secularism that served their own political project. Hasan's scholarship insisted that Muslim women were not simply victims of patriarchy but were active agents navigating an extremely constrained and hostile political environment.

## 5.2 Communalism and Gender

A second major area of EPW coverage concerned the relationship between communal violence and gender, particularly the ways in which women's bodies — Muslim and Hindu — became sites of communal contest during the riots of 1992–93 and subsequent episodes of violence. Veena Das, Urvashi Butalia, and others published work in EPW and in associated scholarly contexts that drew on testimonies from riot survivors to analyze the gendered dimensions of communal violence: the use of rape and sexual violence as communal weapons, the ways in which women's testimonies were suppressed or instrumentalized in public memory, and the long-term psychological and social consequences for women who had experienced or witnessed communal violence.

This scholarly attention to the gendered reality of communal violence provides a striking counterpoint to the cinematic representations discussed above. While films like Bombay aestheticized communal violence through romance and melodrama, EPW scholarship documented its brutal and specific impact on women's bodies and lives. The gap between these two registers — the affective, allegorical, and aestheticized register of cinema and the empirical, testimonial, and analytical register of EPW — is itself significant. It suggests that mainstream cinema's engagement with communal violence during this period was

systematically unable or unwilling to represent the specific forms of violence that Muslim women actually experienced.

## 5.3 Muslim Women's Agency and Community Identity

A third significant strand in EPW's coverage concerned Muslim women's own agency and voice in navigating their complex social situation. Several articles published in the journal during this period challenged the dominant representation of Muslim women as passive victims of communal patriarchy. Research by sociologists and anthropologists documented Muslim women's active participation in economic life, their navigation of purdah norms in ways that were strategic rather than simply oppressive, and their involvement in community organizations and informal political activities.

This scholarship was engaged in what might be called a double critique: it challenged both the Muslim communal leadership's claim to speak for Muslim women and the Hindu nationalist and liberal secular claim that Muslim women were uniformly oppressed and in need of external rescue. By insisting on Muslim women's agency — constrained and partial as it was — EPW's scholarship in this area was more nuanced than either mainstream cinema's representations or the dominant political discourse.

## 5.4 The Veil and Visibility

The question of Muslim women's dress — purdah, hijab, burqa — was addressed in EPW primarily in the context of debates about minority rights, secularism, and the politics of visibility. Articles in the journal explored the ways in which Muslim women's dress had become a hyperloaded political symbol, simultaneously interpreted by Hindu nationalists as evidence of Muslim backwardness, by Muslim communalists as a necessary marker of religious identity and female modesty, and by liberal secularists as a problem to be solved through modernization and legal reform.

EPW's more thoughtful contributions to this debate — informed by feminist scholarship, anthropology, and political theory — argued that Muslim women's dress choices could not be read as straightforwardly expressive of either oppression or agency, and that the debates about dress were primarily debates about Muslim identity and belonging in a majoritarian Hindu state. This insight is directly relevant to cinema's treatment of Muslim women's dress: films of the decade consistently used Muslim women's dress — or its absence — as a visual shorthand

for their communal positioning and the degree of their integration into the secular national imaginary.

### 5.5 Cultural Production: EPW on Muslim Women's Arts and Letters

While EPW was not a cultural studies journal in the contemporary sense, it did publish occasional articles on Muslim women's cultural production — particularly in the context of Urdu literature, classical music, and the courtesan tradition. These articles, drawing on the work of scholars like Veena Oldenburg and Saleem Kidwai, documented the historical importance of Muslim women — particularly those from tawaif or courtesan traditions — to the development of Hindustani classical music, Urdu poetry, and performance culture. This scholarship directly illuminates the films discussed above that draw on the courtesan tradition, particularly Sardari Begum and Zubeidaa.

EPW's cultural coverage also engaged occasionally with cinema itself. Critics including Rustom Bharucha published in EPW analyses of communalism and popular culture that addressed films like Bombay. These interventions were important because they brought to bear on mainstream cinema a critical framework that was explicitly attentive to ideology, power, and the politics of representation — a framework largely absent from the mainstream film journalism of the period.

## 6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CINEMA AND EPW IN DIALOGUE

### 6.1 Points of Convergence

Despite the obvious generic differences between popular cinema and social science scholarship, several significant points of convergence between the decade's films and EPW's coverage can be identified. Both were responding to the same historical conjuncture — the post-Babri crisis of Indian secularism — and both, at their best, were committed to the project of making Muslim women visible as subjects rather than objects, and of challenging the dehumanizing representations that circulated in Hindu nationalist discourse.

Shyam Benegal's humanist cinema and EPW's feminist sociology shared, at a structural level, a commitment to complexity, to specificity, and to the refusal of allegory. Both sought to represent Muslim women as agents navigating real social conditions rather than as symbols of communal harmony or disharmony. Both were engaged, from different positions and with different tools, in the project of reimagining Muslim belonging in India after Babri.

There is also convergence in the identification of Muslim women's double bind. EPW scholars documented analytically what films like Fiza and Mammo dramatized narratively: the impossible position of Muslim women caught between communal patriarchy, majoritarian hostility, and the demands of a secular nationalism that required their assimilation as the price of protection. Whether one reads this through Flavia Agnes's legal analysis or through the melodramatic arc of Fiza's narrative, the structure of constraint is recognizably the same.

## 6.2 Points of Divergence

The more revealing comparison, however, concerns the points of divergence between cinematic and scholarly discourse. The most significant of these is the treatment of Muslim women's own voice and interiority. EPW's scholarship — particularly the testimonial and ethnographic work on communal violence and on Muslim women's community participation — centered Muslim women's own accounts of their experience. The films, with the partial exceptions of Mammo and Sardari Begum, consistently subordinated Muslim women's interiority to the needs of the melodramatic plot and the requirements of the male protagonist's emotional arc.

A second significant divergence concerns the treatment of Muslim male communities. EPW's scholarship, particularly the feminist legal analysis, was careful to distinguish between the practices and attitudes of Muslim male community leaders — whom it often criticized for their resistance to reform — and the interests and perspectives of Muslim women within those communities. The films were far less careful. With the partial exception of Benegal's work, the decade's cinema consistently represented Muslim male communities as monolithic obstacles to Muslim women's flourishing, in ways that converged, perhaps inadvertently, with Hindu nationalist framings of Muslim patriarchy.

A third divergence concerns class. EPW's sociological research documented the significant class differentiation within Indian Muslim communities and the ways in which Muslim women's experience varied enormously depending on class position, urban or rural location, and educational level. The cinema, with its characteristic focus on middle-class or upper-class protagonists, largely ignored the experience of poor Muslim women. When working-class Muslim women appeared in films, it was typically as background figures or comic relief, not as subjects of sustained narrative attention.

## 6.3 The Question of Secularism

Perhaps the deepest ideological tension between cinematic and scholarly discourse in this decade concerns the question of secularism. Indian popular cinema of the 1990s was, in its dominant strand, committed to a version of secularism that insisted on the fundamental compatibility of Hinduism and Islam, the equal citizenship of all Indians regardless of religious identity, and the possibility of love and friendship across communal lines. This commitment was sincere and, in the context of Hindu nationalist violence, courageous. But as EPW scholars argued with increasing sophistication through the decade, it was also a version of secularism that was far from neutral — one that assumed Hindu cultural norms as the default while positioning Muslim identity as something to be accommodated or assimilated.

The EPW's intellectual tradition, drawing on Nehruvian secularism but increasingly critical of its limitations, was engaged during this period in a genuine rethinking of what secularism meant and could mean in the context of communal violence and Hindu nationalist ascendancy. Scholars like Rajeev Bhargava, T. N. Madan, and Ashis Nandy published in and around EPW arguments about the nature of Indian secularism, its relationship to religious communities, and the question of whether secularism in the Indian context could adequately respect the legitimate claims of Muslim community identity. This richer, more contested notion of secularism was largely absent from the popular cinema, which operated with a simpler, affirmative version of secular nationalism.

## 7. CASE STUDY: THE VEIL AS SYMBOL

A productive way to illustrate the comparative analysis developed above is to focus on a specific signifier: the veil, burqa, or hijab as it appears in both cinematic and scholarly discourse of the decade. In cinema, Muslim women's dress functioned with remarkable consistency as an index of their degree of integration into the secular national imaginary. The Muslim woman who wears a burqa is, in the visual grammar of the decade's films, associated with communal backwardness, restriction, and the threat of Muslim separatism. The Muslim woman who does not wear one — or who removes it — is associated with modernity, freedom, and the possibility of Hindu-Muslim integration.

This visual grammar is most explicit in Bombay, where Shaila Bano's shedding of the veil after her marriage to Shekhar is a narrative and visual turning point — her entry into the secular, mixed-faith world of their romance is figured as unveiling. But it operates across many other

films as well. The absence of the veil from virtually all sympathetically rendered Muslim female protagonists — whether in Mammo, Fiza, or Zubeidaa — is itself a significant form of representation, one that associates Muslim female virtue and sympathy with the abandonment of Islamic dress practices.

EPW's scholarship on the veil, as discussed above, was more attentive to the complexity of this signifier. Several articles published in the journal during this period argued that the hijab or burqa's meaning was not fixed but was context-dependent and politically contested: it could signify oppression, but it could also signify community solidarity, resistance to majoritarian surveillance, or individual religious conviction. The EPW's more nuanced treatment of the veil as a signifier provides a critical framework for reading the cinema's systematic association of unveiled Muslim femininity with secular virtue — an association that, however unintentionally, reproduced Hindu nationalist and liberal secularist imperatives about what Muslim women should look like to be acceptable.

## 8. THE GENDER OF COMMUNALISM: VIOLENCE, BODY, AND NATION

Both the cinema and EPW engaged, in their different registers, with the question of how communal violence is gendered — how the bodies of Muslim women become sites of contest in communal conflict. EPW's testimonial and sociological scholarship was most direct about this: the work of Veena Das, Kalpana Kannabiran, and others documented the use of rape and sexual violence as communal weapons in the 1992–93 riots, the ways in which women's bodies were marked with communal violence, and the long-term consequences for survivors.

Cinema's engagement with this reality was far more oblique and constrained. The rape of Muslim women in communal violence was not directly represented in mainstream Hindi films of the decade — the conventions of melodrama, the demands of the censor board, and the anxiety about inflaming communal sentiment all conspired to keep this reality off-screen. Instead, communal violence was represented through images of burning, displacement, and the loss of male family members — with the Muslim woman's grief and loss figuring the cost of violence without directly representing the specific gendered violence she had experienced.

This obliqueness had ideological consequences. By displacing the gendered reality of communal violence into less specific forms of loss and grief, the films avoided confronting the ways in which Muslim women's bodies were specifically targeted in communal conflict — a targeting that was inseparable from the Hindu nationalist ideological project of demonizing

Muslim sexuality and treating Muslim women as simultaneously in need of rescue and as targets of punishment. The EPW's more unflinching engagement with this reality represents one of the most significant ways in which scholarly discourse outstripped cinematic representation in its capacity to illuminate the experience of Muslim women in post-Babri India.

## 9. EXCEPTIONS AND COUNTER-TENDENCIES

It would be reductive to leave the analysis at the level of dominant archetypes and ideological functions. Several films and scholarly works of the decade challenge the dominant patterns identified above, and these exceptions are analytically important for understanding the range of possibilities within each form.

In cinema, Benegal's Mammo represents the most significant exception: a film in which a Muslim woman's identity — Pakistani, elderly, Muslim, bereaved — is not assimilated into a secular humanist narrative but is rendered in its irreducible particularity. The film's critical and commercial success (it won multiple National Film Awards) suggests that there was an audience for this kind of representation, even if it did not displace the dominant modes of mainstream cinema.

Several regional-language films also produced more complex representations of Muslim women. Malayalam cinema, with its tradition of social realism and its Kerala-specific context of Hindu-Muslim coexistence, produced films in which Muslim women appeared in more everyday, less allegorically charged roles. Bengali cinema, building on the humanist tradition associated with Satyajit Ray, occasionally offered similarly grounded portrayals. The focus of this paper on Hindi-language mainstream cinema is, therefore, a significant limitation that future research should address.

In EPW, the occasional publication of Muslim women's own voices — interviews, personal testimonies, accounts of activism — represented an important counter to the dominant mode of scholarship about Muslim women. When EPW published the words of Muslim women activists working in the aftermath of riot violence, or lawyers arguing cases under Muslim personal law, the journal briefly became a space where Muslim women's subjectivity was not mediated by scholarly analysis but directly present. These moments are limited in the archive but significant.

## 10. DISCUSSION: TOWARD A CRITICAL CULTURAL HISTORY

The comparison of cinematic and scholarly representations of Muslim women in the decade from 1992 to 2002 suggests several broader conclusions about the cultural politics of the period and about the relationship between popular culture and intellectual discourse in contemporary India.

First, popular cinema and social science scholarship are not simply parallel but entirely separate discourses. They are responsive to the same historical conjuncture and engaged with overlapping questions, but they do so with very different tools, constraints, and affordances. Cinema's power to move large audiences emotionally, to shape aesthetic sensibility, and to make abstract ideological propositions feel natural and inevitable is matched by its susceptibility to the commercial pressures, censor constraints, and genre conventions that systematically distort its engagement with complex social realities. EPW's scholarly discourse has the advantage of analytical rigor and political sophistication, but it reaches a far smaller audience and lacks cinema's capacity to make embodied, emotional representations that lodge in cultural memory.

Second, the comparison reveals that even well-intentioned and politically progressive cultural production — whether Bombay's secular humanism or EPW's feminist jurisprudence — can reproduce the marginalization it seeks to contest. The secular heroine of mainstream Hindi cinema and the Muslim woman whose legal rights needed protection in EPW's pages were both, in different ways, figures whose Muslim female subjectivity was subordinated to a larger project — of national integration, of legal reform, of scholarly knowledge — that was not of their making and did not necessarily serve their interests.

Third, the decade's representational history suggests the importance of form and genre in shaping what can be said about Muslim women. Melodrama, the dominant mode of Hindi popular cinema, systematically channels complex social realities into emotional scenarios centered on individual characters and their romantic and familial relations. This channeling is not simply a distortion — melodrama can illuminate real emotional and social dynamics — but it consistently obscures structural and collective dimensions of experience. EPW's dominant forms — the research article, the policy analysis, the scholarly essay — have their own generic limitations, including a tendency toward abstraction and a difficulty in representing the texture of lived experience.

Finally, this study points toward the importance of attending to Muslim women's own representational practices — the writing, poetry, cinema, and activism produced by Muslim women themselves — as a corrective to both the cinematic and scholarly archives analyzed here. Both archives are primarily about Muslim women rather than by them. A fuller history of this period would need to incorporate the voices, perspectives, and cultural productions of Muslim women themselves, from community journalism and Urdu literature to activist testimony and local cultural practice.

## 11. CONCLUSION

The decade from 1992 to 2002 was one of the most turbulent and culturally productive in postcolonial India's history. Muslim women were placed, by the violence of events and by the imperatives of the representational culture that tried to make sense of those events, at the center of contests over identity, belonging, and the meaning of Indian secularism. Both popular cinema and intellectual scholarship engaged with these contests, producing representations of Muslim women that were often sophisticated, occasionally brilliant, and persistently constrained by the genres, audiences, and ideological horizons within which they operated.

Indian cinema of this decade gave us memorable Muslim female characters — Mammo's fierce dignity, Fiza's furious grief, Sardari Begum's artistic passion — while also reproducing archetypes that subordinated Muslim women's subjectivity to communal allegory and secular nationalist desire. EPW gave us rigorous analysis of Muslim women's legal and political situation, documented the gendered dimensions of communal violence, and insisted on Muslim women's agency even as it analyzed the constraints on that agency, while also remaining primarily a discourse about rather than by Muslim women.

Read together, these two archives illuminate the contested terrain on which Muslim women's identities, rights, and representations were negotiated in post-Babri India. They also illuminate the limits of both popular culture and scholarly discourse as vehicles for Muslim women's self-representation. The most urgent unfinished task — in both cultural and political terms — is the creation of conditions under which Muslim women's own voices, perspectives, and cultural productions can be heard with the attention they deserve, neither as symbols of communal conflict nor as objects of scholarly analysis, but as subjects of their own histories.

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