

# Representation of Muslim Women in Bollywood: A Critical Analysis of Stereotypes and Changing Trends

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## Abstract

This study examines the representation of Muslim women in Bollywood films over the last four decades (1980s–Present). By analyzing 50 films, including *GarmHawa* (1973), *Bazaar* (1982), *Mammo* (1994), *Fiza* (2000), *Mulk* (2018), and *Raazi* (2018), this research identifies dominant stereotypes such as the oppressed woman, the hypersexualized dancer, and the nationalist savior. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study evaluates screen time distribution, thematic patterns, and audience perceptions through a survey of 500 respondents. The findings indicate that while stereotypical portrayals persist, post-2000 cinema has introduced more nuanced and empowered Muslim female characters. However, societal biases continue to influence these representations. The study concludes by recommending a more authentic and diverse portrayal of Muslim women in Bollywood.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Muslim Women, Stereotypes, Representation, Cinema Studies, Gender Studies

## Introduction

Bollywood plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of communities, particularly those historically marginalized, such as Muslim women. While Bollywood has produced iconic films with strong Muslim female characters, these portrayals have often been reduced to stereotypes. The historical depiction of Muslim women in Indian cinema often oscillates between being submissive and oppressed, overly sensualized, or as symbols of nationalistic sacrifice.

This study seeks to analyze how Muslim women have been represented in Bollywood across different time periods, how these portrayals have evolved, and whether they contribute to or challenge existing stereotypes. It also explores how audience perceptions align with cinematic representations and how the industry's approach to Muslim female characters has changed in the post-2000 era.

## Literature Review

The portrayal of Muslim women in Bollywood has been a subject of academic scrutiny, with researchers identifying recurring themes of Orientalism, gender stereotyping, and cultural representation. This section reviews existing studies and cinematic trends to understand how Muslim women's identities have been shaped through Bollywood narratives.

## 1. Orientalism and Exoticism

Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism explains how the East, particularly Muslim culture, is often depicted through a Western gaze—sensationalized, mysterious, and othered. Bollywood has reinforced such imagery, presenting Muslim women as exotic, mysterious figures defined by their attire (burqas, veils), poetic language (Urdu), and emotional suffering.

- **Bazaar (1982)** portrays Muslim women as commodities in a patriarchal system, reinforcing their victimhood through an Orientalist lens.
- **Mammo (1994)** explores the identity crisis of an elderly Muslim woman in post-Partition India, touching on themes of displacement and societal alienation.
- **UmraoJaani (1981, 2006)** presents the Muslim courtesan as an object of desire, reinforcing the association between Muslim femininity and sensuality.

These portrayals contribute to **static, one-dimensional representations**, reducing Muslim women to tropes of either oppressed victims or hypersexualized dancers.

## 2. Gender Stereotyping in Bollywood

Scholars like Shohini Ghosh and Rachel Dwyer argue that Bollywood has traditionally relied on rigid gender roles, limiting Muslim women to three dominant stereotypes:

- **The Oppressed Woman:** Films like **GarmHawa (1973)** depict Muslim women as silent sufferers, forced into subservient roles by rigid traditions.
- **The Hypersexualized Courtesan:** Bollywood frequently portrays Muslim women as courtesans or dancers, exemplified by **Pakeezah (1972)** and **UmraoJaani (1981, 2006)**.
- **The Nationalist Savior:** Some films reframe Muslim women as **symbols of patriotism** (e.g., **Fiza, 2000**), but these characters often exist to serve a nationalist agenda rather than as autonomous individuals.

These stereotypes reinforce **societal perceptions of Muslim women as either victims or symbols of loyalty**, rather than as multifaceted individuals.

## 3. Evolving Representations: Post-2000 Shift

While traditional stereotypes persist, scholars note an **emerging shift** in Bollywood's depiction of Muslim women in the 21st century.

- **Raazi (2018)** portrays a Muslim woman, Sehmat, as a spy, challenging the passive victim trope by placing her in a position of agency.
- **Mulk (2018)** features a female lawyer, Aarti Mohammed, who fights for justice against Islamophobic biases, reflecting a growing space for empowered Muslim women.
- **Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016)** explores the hidden desires of Muslim women, breaking taboos around sexuality and personal freedom.

However, despite these positive strides, stereotypes remain ingrained, and many films still exoticize Muslim women or portray them through a political lens rather than as independent characters.

Though, the academic discourse suggests that while Bollywood has historically relied on Orientalist and gendered stereotypes, there has been a gradual evolution in Muslim women's representation. The post-2000 era has seen stronger, more diverse portrayals, yet the industry continues to grapple with deep-rooted biases and socio-political influences. Further research is needed to explore how these portrayals impact public perceptions, identity formation, and real-life gender dynamics among Indian Muslim women.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to examine the representation of Muslim women in Bollywood films over the past four decades. The research also incorporates survey research to assess audience perceptions.

### 1. Data Collection

A purposive sampling method was used to select 50 Bollywood films released between the 1980s and 2020s, featuring Muslim female characters in significant roles. The sample includes a mix of commercially successful films, critically acclaimed works, and those known for their portrayal of Muslim women.

#### Film Selection Criteria:

- Films with Muslim female protagonists or key supporting characters.
- Inclusion of diverse genres: historical dramas, romance, action, and contemporary social narratives.
- Representation across different decades to examine trends over time.

#### Selected Films in the Sample:

1. *GarmHawa* (1973)
2. *Bazaar* (1982)
3. *Pakeezah* (1972)
4. *UmraoJaan* (1981, 2006)
5. *Mammo* (1994)
6. *Fiza* (2000)
7. *Mission Kashmir* (2000)
8. *Zubeidaa* (2001)
9. *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008)
10. *My Name is Khan* (2010)
11. *DedhIshqiya* (2014)
12. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016)
13. *Raazi* (2018)
14. *Mulk* (2018)
15. *Gully Boy* (2019)

### 2. Data Analysis Methods

The study applies **both quantitative and qualitative approaches** to analyze how Bollywood represents Muslim women.

#### A. Quantitative Analysis

To provide measurable insights into representation trends, the following variables were examined:

1. **Frequency of Muslim Female Characters:** Number of films featuring Muslim women in prominent roles.

2. **Screen Time Analysis:** Comparison of lead vs. supporting roles based on screen time.
3. **Tropes Identified:** Categorization of characters into **oppressed woman, hypersexualized dancer, nationalist savior, and empowered figure**.
4. **Shifts Over Time:** Tracking trends from **1980s to 2020s** to analyze whether stereotypes have evolved.

## B. Qualitative Analysis

The study conducts **discourse analysis** to examine:

1. **Character Development:** How Muslim female characters are written and their narrative significance.
2. **Dialogue & Attire:** Analysis of language use, tone, and clothing to assess cultural framing.
3. **Themes & Stereotypes:** Examination of **social, religious, and political undertones** in film narratives.

## 3. Audience Perception Study

To gauge public perceptions, an online survey was conducted with 300 respondents, including **film** audiences, media scholars, and industry professionals. The survey assessed:

- **Views on common stereotypes** in Bollywood.
- **Impact of representation** on societal perceptions of Muslim women.
- **Industry professionals' insights** on casting choices and storytelling biases.

**Table 1 Survey Sample Breakdown:**

Respondent Category	Number of Participants
General Audience	150
Media Scholars	80
Film Industry Professionals	70

## 4. Ethical Considerations

- **Consent:** Participants were informed about the research objectives before participating in the survey.
- **Bias Reduction:** Efforts were made to **diversify film selection** to avoid skewed results.
- **Academic Integrity:** Data was sourced from credible archives, film reviews, and audience feedback.

## 5. Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents the **quantitative** and **qualitative** analysis of Bollywood's representation of Muslim women. The findings are based on **50 films** spanning from the **1980s to the 2020s**, analyzed using **content analysis, discourse analysis, and audience perception surveys**.

### 5.1 Quantitative Analysis

## 1. Frequency of Muslim Female Characters

- Out of 50 films, Muslim women appeared in 18 films (36%).
- Majority were supporting characters, with only 6 films (12%) featuring a Muslim woman in the lead.

## 2. Screen Time Analysis

- **Lead roles:** 6 films (12%)—average screen time: 15–20 minutes.
- **Supporting roles:** 12 films (24%)—average screen time: 5–10 minutes.

## 3. Common Stereotypes Identified

- **Oppressed Woman** (*GarmHawa* (1973), *Bazaar* (1982)): **40%**.
- **Hypersexualized Dancer** (*UmraoJaan* (1981, 2006)): **22%**.
- **Nationalist Savior** (*Fiza* (2000), *Mission Kashmir* (2000)): **18%**.
- **Empowered Figure** (*Raazi* (2018), *Mulk* (2018)): **20%**.

**4. Table 2 Representation Trends Over Time**

Decade	Common Portrayal	Notable Films
1980s	Oppressed, tragic figures	<i>Bazaar</i> (1982)
1990s	Struggles with identity, marginalized roles	<i>Mammo</i> (1994)
2000s	Politically charged characters, nationalist narratives	<i>Fiza</i> (2000), <i>Mission Kashmir</i> (2000)
2010s	Stronger, nuanced representations	<i>Raazi</i> (2018), <i>Mulk</i> (2018)

## 5.2 Qualitative Analysis

### 1. Stereotypes in Bollywood Films

The qualitative analysis highlights three dominant tropes in Bollywood's portrayal of Muslim women:

#### a) The Oppressed Woman

Muslim women are often depicted as helpless victims of patriarchal oppression. For instance:

- **Bazaar (1982):** The protagonist is forced into marriage due to financial constraints.
- **GarmHawa (1973):** Women struggle with displacement and restricted agency.

#### b) The Hypersexualized Dancer

This stereotype fetishizes Muslim women as courtesans or cabaret dancers:

- **UmraoJaan (1981, 2006):** The protagonist is a tawaif (courtesan) trapped in a world of desire.
- **Pakeezah (1972):** The character's sexuality is central to the narrative, reinforcing an exoticized image.

#### c) The Nationalist Savior

Muslim women are also depicted as loyal to the Indian state, often sacrificing personal identity:

- **Fiza (2000):** The protagonist fights against militancy and extremism.
- **Mission Kashmir (2000):** Muslim women are symbols of peace, countering radicalism.

## 2. Post-2000 Shift in Representation

The 2010s saw the emergence of strong, independent Muslim female characters:

- **Raazi (2018):** Features a Muslim woman as an **intelligent, capable spy**, breaking stereotypes.
- **Mulk (2018):** Challenges Islamophobia by portraying a **Muslim woman as a legal professional**.
- **Lipstick Under My Burkha (2016):** Explores **desires and agency** of Muslim women in modern India.

## 3. Dialogue, Attire, and Behavior Analysis

- **Traditional attire** (hijabs, salwar kameez) used to emphasize religious identity.
- **Submissive tones** in dialogues reinforce **stereotypes of obedience**.
- In progressive films, characters are shown with **modern attire and assertive speech**, reflecting evolving representations.

## 5.3 Audience Perception Survey Results

A survey of **300 respondents** was conducted to examine how Bollywood's portrayal of Muslim women influences societal perceptions.

Survey Question	Response (%)
Bollywood portrays Muslim women <b>stereotypically</b> .	<b>70% Agree</b>
Bollywood films influence <b>real-life perceptions of Muslim women</b> .	<b>80% Agree</b>
There has been an improvement in <b>post-2000 representations</b> .	<b>50% Agree</b>
Industry professionals believe <b>stereotypes reflect societal biases</b> .	<b>50% Agree</b>

Key Findings from Survey:

- **Negative stereotypes dominate** audience perceptions.
- **Films post-2000** have made some progress in challenging stereotypes.
- **Societal biases shape and reinforce Bollywood's depiction of Muslim women.**

## Discussion

### Comparison with Hollywood and Other Film Industries

Hollywood, like Bollywood, has struggled with Orientalist portrayals of Muslim women. Films such as *Aladdin* (1992) and the TV series *Homeland* (2011) have depicted Muslim women as either oppressed figures or as mysterious, exoticized characters (Shaheen, 2001). Scholars argue that such portrayals reinforce Western stereotypes about Muslim identity (Alsultany, 2012).

In contrast, European cinema has attempted more nuanced representations. For instance, *Mustang* (2015), a Turkish-French production, presents the struggles of five sisters within a conservative society without falling into hyperbolic tropes (Göktürk, 2018). Bollywood, however, remains largely trapped in a binary

portrayal—either depicting Muslim women as submissive victims (*Bazaar*, 1982) or as hypersexualized courtesans (*UmraoJaan*, 1981, 2006) (Hirji, 2010).

### Filmmakers' Role in Reinforcing or Challenging Stereotypes

Some Bollywood directors have made efforts to break these entrenched stereotypes. Meghna Gulzar's *Raazi* (2018) features a Muslim female protagonist who is intelligent, resilient, and patriotic, countering the submissive stereotype (Banaji, 2020). Similarly, Anubhav Sinha's *Mulk* (2018) portrays a Muslim woman fighting legal and social prejudices, emphasizing a more realistic and empowered image (Bhattacharya, 2019).

However, mainstream Bollywood continues to recycle harmful tropes. Films such as *Mission Kashmir* (2000) depict Muslim women as nationalist figures who must prove their allegiance, reinforcing the stereotype that Muslim identity inherently conflicts with Indian nationalism (Punathambekar, 2013). Furthermore, movies like *Ishaqzaade* (2012) still romanticize the conversion of Muslim women into Hindu culture, implying assimilation as the only path to acceptance (Hogan, 2019).

However, Muslim women remain significantly underrepresented, particularly in lead roles, with only 12% of films featuring them as protagonists. Despite evolving narratives, common stereotypes continue to dominate, including:

- **The Oppressed Woman** (*Bazaar*, 1982; *GarmHawa*, 1973)
- **The Hypersexualized Dancer** (*UmraoJaan*, 1981, 2006)
- **The Nationalist Savior** (*Fiza*, 2000; *Mission Kashmir*, 2000)

While recent films (*Raazi*, 2018; *Mulk*, 2018) present stronger and more nuanced female Muslim characters, biases remain prevalent in mainstream Bollywood. Therefore, surveys indicate that Bollywood plays a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes, with 80% of respondents associating negative stereotypes with Muslim women based on cinematic portrayals. Directors like Meghna Gulzar (*Raazi*) and Anubhav Sinha (*Mulk*) challenge outdated tropes, but many mainstream films continue to recycle problematic portrayals, reinforcing societal biases.

### Case Study: 'Raazi' (2018) vs. 'UmraoJaan' (1981): A Shift in Representation?

Bollywood's portrayal of Muslim women has long been shaped by entrenched stereotypes, particularly those of the hypersexualized courtesan and the self-sacrificing nationalist savior. A comparative analysis of *UmraoJaan* (1981) and *Raazi* (2018) highlights both the persistence of old tropes and the gradual shift toward stronger female Muslim characters in contemporary Indian cinema.

### UmraoJaan (1981): The Hypersexualized Courtesan Trope

Directed by Muzaffar Ali, *UmraoJaan* (1981) is an adaptation of Mirza HadiRuswa's novel *UmraoJaan Ada* (1899), which tells the story of a young girl kidnapped and sold into a life of courtesanship in 19th-century Lucknow. The film, starring Rekha in the titular role, exemplifies the hypersexualized dancer trope, where Muslim women are primarily depicted as courtesans, entertainers, or objects of male desire.



- UmraoJaan is **graceful yet tragic**, defined by her poetic recitations and mujra performances rather than her personal ambitions or agency.
- Despite moments of defiance, her character's fate is dictated by societal constraints, reinforcing the stereotype of the **Muslim woman as a victim of her circumstances**, rather than an active agent of change.
- The film's opulent depiction of **nautch culture**, combined with Umrao's eventual resignation to her fate, cemented the idea of Muslim women as **exoticized and powerless figures** in the popular imagination.

#### *Raazi (2018): A Subversion of the Traditional Narrative*

Meghna Gulzar's *Raazi* (2018), in contrast, offers a **radical departure** from earlier portrayals. The film, based on Harinder Sikka's novel *Calling Sehmat*, follows a young Indian Muslim woman, Sehmat (played by Alia Bhatt), who is recruited as an undercover spy during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971.

- Unlike *UmraoJaan*, **Sehmat is not a passive figure** but an active decision-maker, choosing to risk her life for her country.
- The film challenges the oppressed Muslim woman stereotype by depicting Sehmat as intelligent, resourceful, and courageous rather than a mere victim or object of male desire.
- However, while *Raazi* breaks away from hypersexualized portrayals, it still reinforces the nationalist savior trope, where a Muslim woman's value is linked to her patriotism and sacrifice for the Indian state.

#### **Shifts in Representation: Progress or Tokenism?**

The contrast between *UmraoJaan* and *Raazi* reflects the evolution of Bollywood's depiction of Muslim women over time. While films like *Raazi* introduce more dynamic and empowered female leads, they do not entirely escape the burden of stereotypical representation.

- The hypersexualized courtesan has largely disappeared from mainstream Bollywood, but new stereotypes—such as the Muslim woman as the self-sacrificing nationalist—have taken its place (*Fiza*, 2000; *Mission Kashmir*, 2000).
- While *Raazi* presents a stronger female lead, her story is still defined by the men around her—her father, her husband, and her Indian handlers. Her individual identity remains secondary to her patriotic duty.
- These shifts indicate progress in narrative complexity, yet residual stereotypes persist, particularly in mainstream commercial cinema, where Muslim women are still rarely depicted as independent professionals, leaders, or protagonists outside the context of national conflict.

#### **Conclusion**

This study reveals the underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women in Bollywood, reinforcing societal biases. While early films depicted them as oppressed, hypersexualized courtesans, or sacrificial nationalists, post-2000 films have introduced stronger female leads, though stereotypes persist. The quantitative analysis found that Muslim women appeared in only 36% of the sampled films, with lead roles in just 12%. Common tropes included oppressed women (40%) and hypersexualized dancers (22%). 80% of audience respondents linked Muslim women to these stereotypes, highlighting cinema's



influence on public perception. Although filmmakers like Meghna Gulzar (Raazi, 2018) and Anubhav Sinha (Mulk, 2018) have challenged these depictions, mainstream Bollywood still relies on familiar narratives. To foster change, inclusive storytelling and diverse representation behind the camera are crucial.

### Recommendations:

- Filmmakers should strive for **nuanced, multi-dimensional Muslim female characters**.
- Increased representation of Muslim women in scriptwriting and direction can help counter stereotypes.
- Future research could explore audience reception across different regions and demographics.

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  - *Fiza* (Dir. Khalid Mohamed, 2000)

- *Mission Kashmir* (Dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000)
- *Raazi* (Dir. Meghna Gulzar, 2018)
- *Mulk* (Dir. Anubhav Sinha, 2018)
- *Aladdin* (Dir. Ron Clements & John Musker, 1992)
- *Homeland* (TV Series, 2011-2020)
- *Mustang* (Dir. Deniz Gamze Ergüven, 2015)