

Nationhood and the Representation of Military Elements in Cinemas of the Subcontinent

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Abstract

This paper examines how military elements (such as the armed forces and intelligence agencies) are represented in contemporary Pakistani and Indian cinemas. This line of inquiry has been adopted to uncover the ways in which these representations contribute to ideas of nationhood, patriotism and national identities. This paper revisits some of the questions raised by scholars to analyze the specific role of military elements in the cinemas of the Subcontinent. The theories and ideas already proposed by prominent writers such as Hassan Askari and Gita Viswanath will be reoriented to fit contemporary representations of military elements in the context of this study through the analysis of one contemporary film from each side of the border, namely *Waar/To Strike* (dir. Bilal Lashari, 2013; Pakistan) and *Phantom* (dir. Kabir Khan, 2015; India). Released two years apart and presenting their own specific narratives on the issue of terrorism, these films also provide an insight into the ways in which terrorism is perceived on both sides of the border. Thus, it is through such films that we can begin to understand how cultural elements such as cinema can be used to understand the enemy, as well as to construct ideas about the relationship between countries, such as Pakistan and India.

Keywords: Militarism, Nationalism, Indo-Pak Relations, War in Cinema, Terrorism in Cinema

Introduction

Pakistan and India are two of some British colonialism's most potent reminders. Ever since the British's departure in 1947, the two states have been locked in a tumultuous geopolitical rivalry, marked by a series of conflicts, which has given rise to a specifically unstable militaristic relationship. With Kashmir's¹²¹ long-standing status as an area of violent contention, recurring conflicts like those at

¹²¹ Since 1947, India and Pakistan have been locked in conflict over Kashmir, a majority-Muslim region in the northernmost part of India. The mountainous, 86,000-square-mile territory was once a princely state. Now, it is claimed by both India and Pakistan.

Kargil¹²² and Siachen¹²³, and the 1971 war¹²⁴ that birthed the Bangladeshi nation-state characterizing the relationship between the two states, it is safe to infer that the two states are bound in a political relationship rife with tension. Particularly salient to this research, then, is the way in which the two states derive parts of their identity from one another. Through a thorough process of othering¹²⁵ the enemy, the nation-state curates typologies of a consolidated “us” versus “them.” These typologies are the root of national identities as conceived in relation to an external entity. Throughout this paper, the role of the military within each counterpart will be analyzed as an attempt to unpack the ways in which the militaristic element defines the relationship the two have with each other.

The narratives for both the films being analyzed throughout this paper center around war, terror, and the military. These representations are informed by the contemporary political climate, much of which has been defined by the persistently growing threat of terrorism in South Asia. Beginning with the Pak-Afghan conflict in 1978, terrorism has become a pivotal theme in the politics of the region. With Pakistan’s relationship with extremism having grown increasingly complex over the years, the conception of the “threat” to the nation-state on both sides of the border has evolved as well. The Pakistani state is increasingly insecure about threats emanating internally, pushing the age-old Indian threat to the periphery. On the other hand, the growth of extremism has made the Indian state even more wary of an external threat—one still rooted in Pakistan. These developments in the political climate have also redefined the ways in which each state views the other, and thus the ways in which these representations are portrayed in mediums of art, including and especially cinema. The two movies chosen are key examples of these notions of identity and nationhood, with the conflict between the military and the terrorist factions fueling the development of the plot.

Additionally, a key intervention this paper makes regards the representation of the militaristic elements, specifically through these movies, produce narratives about nationalism, identity and nationhood. Questions regarding cinema’s relationship with identity politics, and the dissemination of information are pertinent ones to ask in the contemporary political climate of South Asia. In 2013, the year of *Waar*’s release, Pakistan was deep in the throes of the fight against terrorism, incurring a loss of lives at the hands of extremist activity on almost a daily basis¹²⁶. This political climate demanded the production of certain popular narratives that would help make sense of the situation, but also simultaneously provide a sense of consolation for an anxious body politic. Similarly, in 2015, the year of *Phantom*’s release, India also found itself caught in the crossfire between Pakistan and its extremist foes¹²⁷, leaving citizens nervous and confused, demanding answers to questions about their safety. *Waar* and *Phantom* both address these questions in their own unique ways, and observations about these representations will be delved into throughout the course of this paper.

¹²² From May-July 1999, a war was orchestrated at the hands of the then Pakistani army chief of staff, General Pervez Musharraf, in the Kargil district of Jammu and Kashmir.

¹²³ On 13 April 1984, Indian troops snatched control of the Siachen glacier in northern Kashmir, narrowly beating Pakistan. Thirty years later, the two sides remain locked in a stand-off

¹²⁴ International conflict in Afghanistan beginning in 2001 was triggered by the September 11 attacks and consisted of three phases. The first phase—toppling the Taliban (the ultraconservative political and religious faction that ruled Afghanistan and provided sanctuary for al-Qaeda, perpetrators of the September 11 attacks)—was brief, lasting just two months. The second phase, from 2002 until 2008, was marked by a U.S. strategy of defeating the Taliban militarily and rebuilding core institutions of the Afghan state. The third phase, a turn to classic counterinsurgency doctrine, began in 2008 and accelerated with U.S. Pres. Barack Obama’s 2009 decision to temporarily increase the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan.

¹²⁵ To make a person or group of people seem different, or to consider them to be different.

¹²⁶ As many as 80,000 Pakistanis have been killed in the war against terror between 2005 and 2013, says data collected by the South Asia Terrorism Portal.

¹²⁷ Jammu attack of 2015

There is also a dialectic that exists between the art and the society which the art represents or is produced for. Questions about whether art has a responsibility to its audiences is one that is often debated, and the answer is yet to be uncovered. This paper does not arrive at a definitive answer to this question, but assess different sides of the argument. Considering that the cultures of the subcontinent are not homogenous, even within constitutive nation-states, this paper questions where dominant narratives come from, whose interests they serve, and what are the motivations behind their production and popularization. In this case, the analysis will be narrowed down to understanding the link between representations of the military and nation-building. Here the paper refers to the works of prominent South Asian “cinephiliacs” (Willemsen) like Hassan Askari, Mushtaq Gazdar, and Rehan Ansari. This paper extends the arguments advanced by these writers into the realm of contemporary cinema practices and political climates.

This paper will advance a narrative analysis of the movies in question. This will be undertaken by way of breaking the narrative into two of its constitutive parts: the story and the plot (Corrigan 42). The story is expressed as all the events that have transpired and are presented to us, and the plot refers to the arrangement or construction of those events in a specific order or structure. Considering that much of the discussion undertaken in this paper is thematic, a narrative analysis of the films is the most viable option to unpack the messages being conveyed. The characters and their placement in the plot will also be looked into in order to present an understanding of how specific characters are representative of specific organizations and their ethos. This will be instrumental to comprehending the ways in which the militaristic element is used to advance ideas about nationhood.

Nationalism

The Oxford English Dictionary defines nationalism as “[the] identification with one’s own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations.” However, attempts to curate an all-encompassing definition of nationalism have always proven to be futile. This is because what the phenomenon comes to mean is often underpinned by specific cultural and social contexts. Thus, what nationalism means to the United States of America or the United Kingdom, may not mean the same for Pakistan or India. The circumstances under which nations come into being and their power relations with other nations of the world are defining factors in the way they conceive themselves, and in turn the way in which they impart these conceptualizations to citizens.

In order to correlate ideas of nationalism to the arguments and conclusions presented in this paper, I will be relying on theoretical frameworks from Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner. Gellner offers what is a constructivist¹²⁸ view of nationalism, wherein he argues that all forms of nationalism are social constructs. This implies that “national identity is forged in response to social and historical circumstances in which nationalism is a method of finding replacements for the loss of some cultural concepts” (Finkel). This aspect of Gellner’s theory of nationalism can be easily mobilized in the postcolonial context of South Asia. This is because postcolonial states undergo a significant degree of fragmentation of identity once the colonial power exits their political realm. These states must redefine who they are independent of the colonial master. This comes in the form of a restructuring of political and economic structures, as well as the formulation and circulation of an anti-colonial rhetoric, which enables the new state to distinguish itself from the colonizer’s identity.

¹²⁸ People construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences

In the case of Pakistan and India, these processes have been clearly operative. With the hasty departure of the British from South Asia, there arose a need to assert a political identity independent of the Raj. But what is particularly unique about the case of South Asian nationalisms is the separation of territory for the formation of two separate states borne of the same geographical location as well as cultural orientation. This implied that not only did these states have to assert a national identity independent of their colonial rulers, but they also had to distinguish themselves from each other on various grounds. These segregations manifested in the form of primarily religious distinctions, prominent specifically in the ‘Islamic’ rhetoric of the new state of Pakistan. This process of othering, whose roots lie in the formation of the Muslim League pre-Partition and which was cemented in 1947, has changed shape over time, but has persisted to present-day conceptions of the two nations as well. This paper analyses how this dichotomy operates in cultural expressions such as film. Through narrative analysis of the two films this paper breaks down the expression of this nationalism, through militaristic motifs.

Here Benedict Anderson’s explication of the role of the emergence of the printing press in establishing a consolidated vernacular can be extended to apply to contemporary cultural production and how it contributes to the creation of national identities. This paper connects cinema with Anderson’s concept of the printing press, in order to explain how institutions create and circulate narratives that are geared towards curating a consolidated national identity (Anderson 47-83). The way in which these cultural products then serve the function of creating an “imagined community,” wherein despite never being able to interact with one another on a personal level, citizens still feel an affinity to each other. Anderson credits this feature of nationalism to the strength of the monolith of national identity that circulates in these cultural products. The thematic narrative analysis of the movies in question describes this phenomenon further.

Military Versus the State

Waar was produced in Pakistan at a time when extremist elements still commanded a vast amount of power, preceding cleansing operations at the hands of the army.¹²⁹ The film attempts to paint the military in what can justly be interpreted as a ‘paternalistic’ light. Primarily this image is constructed by establishing a clear delineation between the bureaucratic, democratic state apparatus and the military institution. The two factions are portrayed as functioning completely independently of one another, with the democratically elected state acting subservient to its military counterpart. The armed forces and intelligence agencies are autonomous and undertake action without consulting with the democratic state, also often subverting its plans of action.

The plot of the film is constructed in such a way that the action in the political arena occurs parallel to the action in the military arena, but any course of action taken by the military directly influences the outcomes in the political arena. This tactic places the military at the center of the plot—the determiner of all tangible outcomes and effects. This simultaneously places the militaristic elite on a pedestal above the elected representatives of the people, while also cementing the narrative that the bureaucratic government needs the military to work the way it does in order for the people’s best interests to be preserved. While these ideas are reinforced throughout the movie, the ultimate resolution of the plot as

¹²⁹ Operation Zarb-e-Azb (Sharp and cutting strike) was launched on June 15, 2014 to clear the North Waziristan region of Pakistan of al-Qaeda linked militants

the terrorist camp gets wiped out and the contentious dam is constructed, all while RAW's¹³⁰ efforts at interference are thwarted, serve as the best example of the way in which the military serves as the savior of the day.

Aside from the ways in which the military and the government are juxtaposed to one another, the film also achieves many of its ideological goals through the visual depictions of the characters themselves. While all the main characters are portrayed as posh, upper class, and 'liberal,' there remains something fundamentally different about the ways in which bureaucrats are portrayed as compared to the military. The prime minister, for example, is depicted as assertive, charismatic and principled, but in a very different way than that of protagonist Major Mujtaba, who seems to be his counterpart in the military. Mujtaba is charismatic and principled, but also blatantly ruthless, undiplomatic, and crude. While this representation may be somewhat realistic because the nature of the work that army men undertake requires them to be mechanical and unempathetic, this behavior has historically translated into authoritarianism in Pakistan's political arena. What further contributes to Mujtaba's characterization, and by extension that of the entire military establishment, is the strategic use of patriotic rhetoric and nationalistic dialogue. The nature of much of the military's actions is questionable, specifically with regards to Major Mujtaba's rogue interrogation attempts, wherein he tortures his subjects, and in multiple instances ends up killing them. However, because the resolution of the film is positive, there is this implication that at the end of the day, all of these actions culminate in a net benefit for the state and its people.

Phantom also conveys the same overarching messages as *Waar*. Within the first hour of the movie, Agent Daniyal orchestrates the murder of an antagonistic character, during the course of which he causes excessive damage to public and private property on foreign soil. However, the act is justified as being positive in the grander scheme of things because it brings him closer to resolving the larger conflict at hand. Similarly, throughout the film he brings multiple innocent people in harm's way, including an old widowed woman. He also plans a bombing at a political rally, which eventually fails. All of his actions cause immense pain to the people around him, but the cost is always rendered insignificant in the face of the ultimate "greater good." Eventually all of Daniyal's chosen courses of action lead to the downfall of the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba,¹³¹ and the demise of extremist political leadership in Pakistan, thus preserving India's sovereignty and security.

Religiosity and Nationalism

In 1949, literary critic Hassan Askari wrote a landmark essay *Building Pakistan and Filmmaking*, stipulating the dynamics of cinema's relationship with identity-building. While Askari's work was produced in 1949, a mere two years after the Partition of the subcontinent, many of the observations he makes remain relevant to the fundamental questions about the ways in which art informs national identities. However, it remains true that much of the analysis he provides holds relevant specifically to the freshly born state of Pakistan. Askari argues that the task of building a "Pakistani identity" cannot be

¹³⁰ Research and Analysis Wing, India's military intelligence agency

¹³¹ Lashkar-e-Taiba is an Islamic militant organization based in Pakistan. LeT was first active in the fight against the Soviet presence in Afghanistan but changed its focus to the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir when the state rebelled against Indian control in the early 1990s. LeT has reportedly been supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) since the early 1990s as one of many paramilitary groups used by Pakistan as proxy forces to create instability in India. LeT sees the fight against Indian control over Jammu and Kashmir as part of a global struggle against the oppression of Muslims, and ultimately seeks to establish an Islamic caliphate in the Indian subcontinent.

left to the masses, because “their imagination needs support to develop” (2). He goes on to point out that “entertainment can be the basis upon which to build a national identity...” (3). The rest of the writing elaborates this chain of thought further, delving into a discussion about the representation of Muslim characters and identities, and how they either inform people’s self-conceptions, or end up muddling them up further. He points out that in the preliminary stages of the formation of the Pakistani national identity: “the entity known as the ‘Muslim Social’ came into being. The Muslim Self had awakened” (3). The development and evolution of a particular Muslim identity has been central to much of the cultural and art production of the nation since the formation of the Pakistani state. This is evident in cinematic works of the time in which Askari was writing, and the period immediately following it, and remains evident in the works produced sixty-four years after his writing.

Waar, for example, makes repeated allusions to Islam through the mouthpiece of prominent political and military figures. Not only does this reinforce ideas about ‘good’ Muslim identities, but also establishes an affinity between state elements and religious thought/belief. These typologies of good Muslim behavior are embodied in the character of Ejaz, a prominent politician contending the upcoming elections for the post of the Prime Minister, who uses religious rhetoric in his speeches to appeal to the audiences. The emphasis on his use of phrases like *assalamu alaikum* (‘peace be upon you,’ a common Islamic greeting) at the start of his speeches, or “*inshaAllah* (an Arabic phrase meaning ‘God willing’) when pitching development projects, performs the notion that good leadership comes from being a good Muslim. For example, in his meeting with the leaders of the country’s established political parties, he poses the question: “*Mir sahab yeh bataiye, kya aap Musalman hain?*”¹³², to prime his argument in favor of the dam project he wants to initiate. He relies on combining religious belief with his political motivations to pander to the sentiments of those he is in conversation with. Similarly, Mujtaba, the Inter-Services Intelligence’s¹³³ (ISI) finest specimen of an agent delivers multiple monologues about what it means to be a good serviceman and how that intersects with embodying the characteristics of a good Muslim.

Another key contribution *Waar* makes to the Muslim rhetoric lies in the way that it also establishes a dichotomy between the “right” Muslim and the “strayed” Muslim. The film juxtaposes its protagonists (the likes of Mujtaba, Ehtesham and Ejaz), to the terrorist faction the ISI is hunting down. The way the terrorist organization is portrayed and their use of religious rhetoric is clearly separated from the examples described above. *Waar* establishes a clear distinction about the right weaponization of religious sentiment and the wrong use of it. The former is portrayed subtly, as embedded into the ethos of the country’s institutions (like the ISI and the political front), and the latter is depicted as misconstrued logic irrationally used as the ideological foundation for the terrorist organization’s activities. This kind of belief is shown to be contaminated vis-à-vis its relationship with non-religious actors (RAW agents Ramal and Zoya) who enable the terrorists’ devotion to Islam as a means to instigate them to undertake certain courses of action that wreak havoc and destruction on Pakistani soil. Similarly, Ehtesham’s reliance on religious rhetoric becomes synonymous with the ISI’s, conveying messages about the enshrined status of faith in matters of the state.

On the other hand, *Phantom*’s depictions of religiosity are largely one-dimensional in that religious rhetoric is only used at the hands of terrorist factions, and extremist right-wing political parties to further destructive agendas. Religious sentiment is shown as irrational and mechanical, closed off to any reform and empathy. This is mainly because the Indian nation-state does not derive its identity from religious

¹³² “Mr. Mir, tell me, are you a Muslim?”

¹³³ Pakistan’s military intelligence agency

affinity. Instead, it conceives of itself as a secular state; while Pakistan remains engaged in a process of continuously cementing its Islamic identity, India upholds its national identity by standing opposed to this religious rhetoric on the grounds that it breeds extremism and destruction. *Phantom* reflects this tension not only through the portrayal of ruthlessness as embodied by the terrorist organization, but also through the way it conceives right-wing politics in Pakistan. During the rally at which Daniyal attempts to assassinate the leader of what is *Phantom*'s equivalent of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam¹³⁴, the leader says:

*“Assalam-o-Alaikum...Hum ne saari dunya ko bata diya hai keh hum Pakistani deen-e-Islam ki hifaazat ke maamlay mein kisi se dartay nahi hain. Na us zaalim Amreeka se, na uske naa qaabil-e-etemaad India se...O India waalo! Zara hosh mein aao! Apni aukaat mein aao! Array main ne tou tumhe pehle bhi challenge kiya tha—keh aao, kisi bhi adaalat mein bula lo, hum saabit kar denge keh dehshatgard hum hain yaa tum ho...”*¹³⁵

This dialogue attempts to establish a clear link between terrorist activity that has taken place in the past and the current political leadership of Pakistan. The leader (Sheikh Sahib) uses the rally as a platform to valorize the party's involvement with the Lashkar-e-Taiba, and to reassure his supporters that the enemy cannot come after them or cause any significant harm. In the same monologue, Sheikh sahib also mentions Kashmir, and a call for *jihad*¹³⁶, further reemphasizing the Islamic rhetoric.

Terrorism

In *The Ethics of Coexistence: Bollywood's Different Take on Terrorism*, Claudia Richter also mentions cinema's influence on the “mass consciousness” (485), with regards to Hollywood's representations of terrorism and the war on terror. Pointing to a “growing demand for spiritually edifying messages from Hollywood” (485), she explains that the American film industry continues to produce reductive and one-dimensional representations of terrorism and the war on terror. She contrasts this with Bollywood's representations of the same subject, arguing that they are multi-dimensional. She argues that rather than othering¹³⁷ the enemy, the narrative allows the audience to access the personal realm of the enemy, invoking empathy for their moral dilemmas. While this may have been true for Richter's chosen film of study (produced in 2000), it does not seem applicable to contemporary representations of the threat. In *Phantom*, the enemy is not portrayed as a singular person, but as a global network of evil conspirators, whose heart is in Pakistan. This global network is not assigned a singular leader either. Instead, it is a network that transgresses borders, with its tentacles spread in various parts of the world. This organization is decentralized, it is not assigned a single leader but is dependent on the smooth functioning of its constituent parts in different regions of the globe. Not only does this depersonalize the enemy, but also intensifies the magnitude of its power because it now takes the shape of a behemoth bureaucratic organization, with an unrelenting ideological foundation fueling its motivations.

¹³⁴ Jamiat Ulema-e Islam (Assembly of Islamic Clerics) is a Sunni Deobandi political party in Pakistan. Established as JUI (Jamiat Ulema-e Islam) in 1945.

¹³⁵ “May peace, mercy and the blessings of God be upon you. We've proven to the world that Pakistanis are not afraid of anyone when it comes to upholding Islam – neither from cruel America, nor its infidel accomplice India. O Indians! Come to your senses and know your place! I challenged you before – call me to any court of law in the world, and we'll prove who the real terrorists are – you or us!”

¹³⁶ A struggle or fight against the enemies of Islam

¹³⁷ Refer to footnote 6

Further, Richter also points out specificities in characterizations and the construction of narratives specific to Bollywood films that seem to remain applicable over time. In her analysis of *Mission Kashmir* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000), Richter emphasizes the way in which complexities of moral dilemmas and circumstantial conditions affect characters, as they would normal people (487-489). She also points out that because the movie spans over three hours, the detail of any situation and the emotions it evokes are developed over time (8). Considering that these are elements that are at the heart of the formula for successful Bollywood productions, they can be spotted in *Phantom* as well. However, the ‘humanizing’ of the enemy that Richter points out in *Mission Kashmir* is absent in *Phantom*. This is because the action is not simply one protagonist against one antagonist, it is one protagonist warding off a threat bigger than that posed by a singular actor. Every step of the way, the movie establishes that immensity of the danger Daniyal is single-handedly trying to fight.

On the other hand, *Waar*’s depiction of the terrorist organization is starkly different. The organization is extremely localized and much less sophisticated than its counterpart in *Phantom*. The organization is shown as a puppet in the hands of RAW, which has grander motivations for joining hands with what is otherwise a disorganized rural terrorist faction. The narrative of the film emphasizes the fact that the organization would never be successful in the operations it carries out if it did not have the support and backing RAW lends it. The terrorist organization is a secondary threat to the threat that is posed by RAW infiltration into Pakistani politics. Thus, the movie establishes Indian intelligence as the real terrorist organization. This is further cemented through the characterization of the agents Zoya and Ramal, who are unemotional, surgical and merciless in the way they conduct themselves and their respective missions. The only emotions they express are spite and an elusive fear of the consequences they would have to face should they fail to complete the missions they are each assigned. The true depth of their sinister natures is further emphasized during scenes when they celebrate their small triumphs—wine glasses held in hand, rejoicing with an elaborate dance routine.

What is to be noted with regards to representations of terrorism in Pakistani and Indian cinemas is the role that these portrayals play in defining how each state in question views the other. In the case of *Phantom*, for example, constant reiteration of the Lashkar-e-Taiba’s links to Pakistan reinforces ideas about the perpetual ‘threat’ Pakistan poses. Kawal ud Din and Nukhbah Taj Langah, trace the evolution of the Bollywood film industry over time, breaking it down into three distinct phases. What is important in their analysis of these phases, is the development of the Muslim character over time in Bollywood, and a “construction of Pakistaniat¹³⁸”, which juxtaposes the “Indian good” to the “Pakistani bad”. These typographies are perfectly applicable to the way the narrative is constructed in *Phantom*.

Similarly, *Waar*’s constant references to RAW and the characterization of the agents within the narrative further fortifies the concept of constant looming danger posed to the state at the hands of the Indian ‘enemy’. These messages are reflective of a larger narrative that both sides of the border have carefully constructed for over seven decades now. As has been mentioned before, the departure of the British from the subcontinent and the splitting of the region into two constituent parts demanded that these two peoples who reign from the same cultural and geographical backgrounds, now delineate their identities from one another. Because there are no other grounds on which to achieve this goal, there remains no choice but to antagonize and other one another to a point where reconciliation no longer remains an option. For Pakistan to be Pakistan, it must be juxtaposed to its counterpart India, and vice versa. Both states, thus, have been involved in an unrelenting process of creating narratives that pit one side against the other, so as to eliminate all strands of similarity between the two peoples. Additionally, if the neighbor is viewed

¹³⁸ A monolithic Pakistani identity

as constantly waging an agenda against you, any forms of sympathy or affinity one may feel towards them is automatically eradicated. This is also an attempt to ensure that the two states remember that the other side is not a ‘friend’ and must never be trusted. The fact that most of these representations in art are rooted in reality ensures that these narratives are ironclad.

Does society inform art or does art inform society?

Akbar S. Ahmad argues:

“It is difficult to distinguish between art and life in South Asian society; they no longer imitate each other but appear to have merged. Political philosophies, social values, group behavior, speech and dress society are reflected in the cinema and, like a true mirror, reflect in society. Furthermore, film stars cross over from their fantasy world into politics to emerge as powerful figures guiding the destiny millions. It is thus possible to view the cinema as a legitimate metaphor for society; this perception helps us to understand society better.”

While it is impossible to arrive at a conclusive answer to the question about whether society influences cinema or cinema influences society, advances made in either direction of the argument are worth unpacking. In the case of the films discussed here, it can safely be asserted that many of the depictions of political environments and the characters inhabiting those environments are close to reality. For example, in *Phantom*, the depiction of the threat posed by the Lashkar-e-Taiba is very realistic, in the way that it conveys the magnitude of the organization’s strength, and in the way that it depicts its motivations. The organization’s relationship with the Pakistani intelligence agency, and its links to skirmishes in Kashmir, as well as the 2008 shooting in Bombay are all well-established facts.

However, it also remains true that storytelling through the medium of cinema allows for producers to take liberties with representations in subtle manners that affect the overall way that the messages are received. These techniques are used to create intricately woven narratives, which keep audiences hooked and elicit specific responses from them. It remains true that most film productions are undertaken in order to reap profits. It is reasonable to infer, then, that emotionally charged narratives, or moral messages are just techniques in the hands of producers to reel audiences in. However, it remains true that these representations would be meaningless to audiences if they were not rooted in reality. This is perhaps the one main factor that makes war films and military-centered narratives appealing to audiences. *Waar* and *Phantom* are both dramatized depictions of real-life circumstances, dealing with themes of violence, war, and preservation of security. Each of these themes are personally relatable to audiences of the region in which they are produced and marketed. Thus, it is true that an irreconcilable dialectic between the screen and society does persist.

Marcus Power and Andrew Crampton argue that cinematic depictions of defining political events are an active effort at the hands of the ideological elite to create and sell specific ideas to audiences (193). This is a suspicion that is continuously persistent in trying to understand the role of cinema in the development of narratives about politics and identity. While it is not denied that the platform does play a role in the shaping of narratives, as well as the internalization of these narratives, the point of dispute always lies in whether the messages in these productions are intentional, or unintentional. While a conclusive answer to this question is elusive, Power and Crampton’s essay provides a detailed insight into the interactions between the authorities and the creative elite in the USA. In particular, they focus on the Pentagon and

House of Un-American Activities Committee's¹³⁹ (HUAC) dictation to directors the narratives and representations they should and should not include in films at different points in time (Power and Crampton 194).

These discoveries not only open our eyes to the fact that some ideological elite may actively be involved in the conscientious production of certain narratives, because political interests may entwine with them. This is apparent also in the case of Pakistan when the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) department actively produces and commissions movies that are “propagandist” in their representations and narratives. These movies and television shows (e.g. the 1998 drama serial *Alpha Bravo Charlie*) portray the armed forces at the center of the action, attempting to relegate ideas about nationalism by preaching ideas about service and selflessness for the nation, much as *Waar* does. Ali Nobel Ahmad points out: “The fact that New Cinema’s best-financed, most technologically advanced and highest grossing films are also those that warm the miniscule hearts of ISPR ideologues and censors is unremarkable” (347).

The functioning of the Islamabad Censor Board, and its mechanisms for clearing a film for screening or banning it, are also relevant here. Hassan Zaidi, in his article about the Islamabad Censor Board points out that the Board exercises an unchecked authority to arbitrarily decide which films are cleared for release and which will never see the light of day. Zaidi cites the example of *Verna* (dir. Shoaib Mansoor, 2017): “whatever the merits of the film itself, having seen the film in its uncut entirety, I can at least confirm that there was absolutely nothing in it that merited the hoopla raised by the Islamabad censor board”. However, when the case of *Verna* is contrasted against that of *Waar* a clear ideological bias becomes apparent. *Waar* undoubtedly puts forth portrayals of Pakistani society that would under any normal circumstances be considered too ‘vulgar’ for Pakistani audiences to consume. This is evident in a number of ways: in the way the women dress and speak and the roles that they occupy, the open consumption of alcohol at multiple instances, and the repetitive use of the ‘F word’ in the dialogue of almost all the characters. Despite these non-traditional representations of Pakistani society, the movie was screened nationwide without any qualms. The only rational explanation for this generosity exhibited at the hands of the Islamabad Censor Board then remains that the film was given the go-ahead solely because of its overarching propagandist, patriotic rhetoric. This is not to say that parts of the film were not censored when it was released for viewing in cinemas, but the Board dared not stand in the way of its release as whole.

This specific role that nationalism plays in the hearts and minds of the country’s cultural gate-keeping elite is aptly explained by Fasi Zaka: “Nationalism’s role in the arts in general, and popular culture in particular, is a heady mix—as is exemplified by *Dil Dil Pakistan*. It reaffirms state-sanctioned values to establish its bona fides with conservative gatekeepers and older audiences, while at the same time allowing space for embracing artistic influences that are contemporary, and sometimes, explicitly western”.

Conclusion

A key function of war films is to disseminate certain edifying messages about nationhood and identity. While some, as discussed above, argue that these messages are deliberately curated and circulated, others

¹³⁹ The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) was created in 1938 to investigate alleged disloyalty and subversive activities on the part of private citizens, public employees, and those organizations suspected of having Communist ties.

also point out that the construction of many of these narratives may just be an attempt at the hands of filmmakers to make sense of their geopolitical and cultural circumstances. The answer to the question about whether cinema has a responsibility to inform audiences about the true nature of things remains unknown, because a prevalent counterargument to this claim is that cinema's only responsibility is to entertain its audiences. However, the 'true' nature of things is also defined by the discourses surrounding them, which inform and shape individual perceptions. Similarly, the findings of the analysis contained within this paper unveils a strong link between cinematic conceptions of popular political events, and the dominant discourse prevalent about them. These films also offer a sense of reassurance to audiences during times of uncertainty, and about circumstances they otherwise have no means of gaining information. *Waar* and *Phantom* both deal with subjects of state espionage, terrorist activity, and the elusive topic of intelligence services. These are themes that speak to questions of citizenship and the state for all kinds of audiences.

The way these films valorize the actions of the military and uphold overall morally questionable actions of the heroes convey very strong messages about what an ideal Pakistani or Indian citizen should be like. This is specifically evident in the ways in which characters like Mujtaba, Ehtesham and Daniyal exhibit qualities of selflessness for the greater good of the nation. Ehtesham drives off with a truck armed with explosives because there is no other way to prevent the destruction, and the national anthem plays in the background right before the explosion causes the truck to disintegrate into pieces. Daniyal avenges the death of his family, but simultaneously comments on what it means to be a good Pakistani and how he is undertaking this huge task to enshrine the security and prosperity of Pakistan. Similarly, Daniyal undertakes the covert operation to restore his honor in his father's eyes but does not live to see the fruits of his efforts. The fates that these characters face convey the message that the individual is always inferior to the collective of the state, especially when it comes to questions of sovereignty and security of the state. Sacrificing oneself in the line of duty is an expected outcome of servicemen, and they are celebrated for their efforts. In a way, these individuals are turned into emblems behind which the rest of the country can rally, recalling Anderson's notion of imagined community.

Film Synopses

Waar

The film is based on a stylized depiction of real-life events surrounding the war on terror in Pakistan, including the attack on a Police Academy at Lahore in 2009. Major Mujtaba is a former army officer, who took an early retirement from the service. The plot involves a counter-terrorism operation being conducted in the Northwestern tribal region of Pakistan, led by Ehtesham (played by Hamza Ali Abbasi) and coordinated by an intelligence officer Javeria (played by Ayesha Khan), who is also Ehtesham's sister. Ehtesham and Javeria come to know of a major terrorist attack that can only be countered with the help of Major Mujtaba (played by Shaan). Mujtaba, who has suffered a tragic past has to come on board with the ISI's mission to eliminate the threat. The course of action leads him to confront and eventually kill the man (RAW agent Ramal, played by Shamoan Abbasi) responsible for the murder of his family. Parallel to the action in the military sphere, Pakistan is also undergoing a change in the democratic government and has just elected a new Prime Minister (Ejaz, played by Ali Azmat). Ejaz wants to construct a dam that promises to provide employment to thousands of people and guarantees leaps in the economic prosperity of the nation. However, the project conflicts with the interests of the Indian government, and they deploy Zoya (an intelligence agent, played by Meesha Shafi) to deter Ejaz from

pursuing the goal of constructing the dam. The ensuing action is a result of her plan to ensure the dam project is never completed. The movie ends with Ehtesham's tragic demise, and a stand-off between Ramal and Mujtaba, by the end of which Mujtaba successfully avenges the death of his wife and child. The dam project is completed, and political stability is reinstated.

Phantom

Phantom is the movie adaption of Hussain Zaidi's novel Mumbai Avengers. The story follows a disgruntled ex-army officer, Daniyal Khan (Saif Ali Khan), who is employed by RAW head, Roy, on a covert mission to kill the masterminds behind the 26/11 Mumbai attacks. The 4 targets of this mission are Sajid Mir, David Coleman Headley, Haris Saeed (whose real name is Hafiz Saeed) and Zaki-ur-Rahman Lakhvi. After being dishonourably discharged and bringing shame to his family, Daniyal believes that this mission will win him back his pride. His first target is Sajid Mir who can only be recognized by an Indian officer working with doctors without borders, Nawaz Mistry (Katrina Kaif). With her help, Daniyal follows Mir to his house where he breaks in and leaves the stove on. As Mir returns, his house explodes making his death look like an accident. Daniyal then travels to Chicago where he gets arrested for murder and imprisoned alongside Headley. Here, Daniyal poisons Headley with lead which kills him of a heart attack. The Pakistanis get suspicious and it is then Daniyal calls them and reveals his identity, seeking the LeT's help to get back at the Indian army for humiliating him. The ISI begins background research on Daniyal. Meanwhile, Daniyal agrees to meet the LeT officials in Syria to prove his identity. In Syria, Daniyal meets Nawaz all over again and takes her help to get to meet LeT officials. Nawaz helps him but when she finds out that the LeT has taken him in custody, she goes to rescue him. Syrian army ambushes the area at the same time and in a moment of misjudgement, Pakistani aide is killed by Daniyal in order to protect the mission. After losing access to get into Pakistan, Nawaz takes Daniyal there as a volunteer of her NGO." After reaching Pakistan, Daniyal and Nawaz plot the assassination of Saeed and Lakhvi. Lakhvi is held captive in Rawalpindi jail so they decide to poison his medicine with the help of his nurse who harbors hatred towards LeT. The last suspect, Saeed, is targeted at a rally. Daniyal plants bombs inside the mikes, however, as they explode Saeed manages to escape. Daniyal chases him and kills him. Meanwhile, the ISI uncover Daniyal's true identity. In a rush to leave Pakistan, Daniyal contacts Roy who instructs them to reach a port in Karachi from where the Indian navy will rescue them. As they head into international waters, the Pakistani navy spots them and opens fire, killing Daniyal. Nawaz manages to escape and returns to India. The movie ends on a bitter-sweet note; an old man sees Nawaz crying and offers her tea while he narrates the story of his son's death in the Mumbai attacks. Daniyal is portrayed as a silent hero who has helped serve justice.

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Filmography

Alpha Bravo Charlie (dir. Shoaib Mansoor, 1998)

Mission Kashmir (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000)

Phantom (dir. Kabir Khan, 2015)

Waar (dir. Bilal Lashari, 2013)