

Animating Subjects: Citizenship and State in Pakistani Animated Films

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Abstract

This paper engages in textual analysis of *3 Bahadur* (dir. Sharmeen O. Chinoy, 2015) and *Allahyar and The Legend of the Markhor* (dir. Uzair Zaheer Khan, 2018) to explore the portrayal of archetypal good and evil, the ideal male and female citizen, and the depiction of the enemy. The analysis is built upon the idea of ‘politics of innocence’ and the relationship of films with the audience's deep-rooted concerns about life. In this case, all the questions that arise from engaging with the aforementioned themes. The paper finds that while in *3 Bahadur*, the ideal citizen embraces the power to fight the enemy that takes birth within the community, *Allahyar and The Legend of the Markhor* (ALM) pictures the enemy as someone residing outside the country and portrays Allahyar as the ‘Protector’. It also finds a different treatment of female protagonists in both films; where Mehru in ALM, though adventurous, is trapped by guilt for being one while Amna in *3 Bahadur*, is supported by his father to fight off the villain. This analysis is primarily necessitated by the idea of innocence, employed by selected films, to scrutinize the didactic messaging which would otherwise go unchecked, for the innocence gives the tinge of ‘unintentional’ design making it more persuasive for the audience.

Keywords: Pakistani Animation, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, Uzair Zaheer Khan, Citizenship, Nation in Cinema

The Pakistani cinema industry took a brutal hit during the martial law era of dictator Zia-ul-Haq, beginning in 1977 (Gazdar). Followed by economic and cultural policies of governments to come; and combined with the VCR and black market of videotapes of Indian movies, Pakistani cinemas suffered steep economic losses and underwent a paradigm shift. Towards the end of General Musharraf’s rule, policies started to change. The ban on screening Indian films in cinemas was lifted. The previously alienated middle-class audience, who claimed that Pakistani films have become subpar due to old production technology, poor directing, unrelatable stories, and many other factors (Khan et.al, 2005), started to come back to cinemas. Operating a cinema began to be more lucrative and Pakistani producers and directors tapped into this opportunity, and with the release of *Khuda Kay Liye* (dir. Shoaib Mansoor, 2007), a new wave of Pakistani cinema came into being. Foreign-qualified filmmakers took the reins with their digital cameras (Hamid 2016) and cinema screens in Pakistan showed *Bol* (dir. Shoaib Mansoor, 2011), *Siyaah* (dir. Azfar Jafri,

2013), *Waar* (dir. Bilal Lashari 2013), and a slew of other new digital productions. Building on this trend, Pakistan also saw the release of the first locally produced animated feature-length film, *3 Bahadur* (dir. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, 2015). This film became the 7th highest-grossing film in the history of Pakistani cinemas, showing that this genre of films had resonated with the audiences.

Scholars such as Gazdar, Ahmad, Ali, Askari, Kirk, Paracha, and others have shed light on Pakistani cinemas. They have employed the lenses of history, narrative, symbolism, semiotics, genre, sociology, and psychology to understand the ebbs and flows of Pakistani cinemas. However, their body of work has only engaged live action³⁸ cinema. This paper extends their scholarly work by presenting a textual analysis of two animated films that were released in 2015 and 2018. This analysis is inspired by Giroux's seminal work on Disney's animated films which explores their impact on values, identities, and images that are largely aimed at teaching young people to be consumers (3). This is not to claim that Pakistani animated films are propagating consumerism, but to build the argument of the potency of the didactic messaging present in the animated films. The analysis is supplemented with Whitley's idea of the 'politics of innocence' which posits that "the figure of the innocent child appears more effective as a means of persuasion than the most eloquent language, however, precisely because innocence seems devoid of intention or design" (76). As the majority of animated films use the figure of the innocent child by making children a central character such as *Alice in Wonderland* (dir. Clyde Geronimi and others, 1951), *Peter Pan* (dir. P. J. Hogan, 1953), and *The Jungle Book* (dir. Wolfgang Reitherman, 1967); or voicing animals with children's voices such as *Allahyar and The Legend of the Markhor* (dir. Uzair Zaheer Khan, 2018), or voicing non-living things with child-like voices such as *Cars* (dir. Joe Ranft and John Lasseter, 2006), this paper explores the didactic messaging in Pakistani animated films. Building on this framework, this paper looks to Baudry's argument that "films act as a sounding board and a lightning rod for audiences' deep-rooted concerns" and that "there is a constant interplay between the stories told in the films and stories discussed in the journalism, told in the classrooms and other places" (301).

In this paper, I present an analysis of two films: *3 Bahadur* and *Allahyar and The Legend of the Markhor* (hence *ALM*). In three parts, this paper explores how these films have been a site of negotiation between a citizen and the state (Giroux) and how the selected films connect with the deeply rooted concerns of Pakistani audience about citizenship and the role of the state. In this light, this paper shall engage with the concept of unity, diversity, and gender in both selected texts. The paper also argues that there are two different interpretations of the enemy; and how a citizen should face them. It is worth remembering that the reach of selected films, where children are protagonists, is not confined to children because the "...adult learns as much from the child as the child does from the adult." (Whitley 77).

³⁸ action in films involving filming real people or animals, as contrasted with animation or computer-generated effects

Archetypes of Good and Evil

Both films present the struggle between good and evil which is rooted in the center of the physical and metaphysical. In *ALM*, the manifestation of good and evil arises from a metaphysical legend. The opening of *ALM* shows a fight between a serpent and mystical old sage who protects the sacred knowledge and also has the power of talking to animals. The old sage gets the help of a markhor³⁹ and defeats the serpent. Later, when the old sage is at the brink of death, he prophesies that whoever protects the markhors and has a good heart will get all of his knowledge and the power of talking to animals (see Appendix). This legend sets the tone and later in the film; we realize that this story is a favorite bed-time story of the child protagonist Allahyar. Thus, not only the audience is introduced to this legend, but also to the hero, that is, Allahyar. On the contrary, in *3 Bahadur*, when Mangu gets his “key of evil” from Baba Balam and becomes a ruler of Roshan Nagar, only the audience and Mangu are aware of this legend. The rest of the characters of *3 Bahadur* do not know this or acknowledge the source of Mangu’s evil powers. This difference in awareness of the metaphysical narrative within both films helps us understand the motivation of heroism of the protagonists. Unlike in *ALM* where the consciousness of Allahyar is shaped through his favorite bed-time story, the protagonists in *3 Bahadur* are motivated through the chaos spread in the society they are living in.

The repercussions caused by evil are also different in both texts. In *3 Bahadur*, evil destroys the town’s society. Mangu’s goons disrupt the law and order through looting, extorting money from businesses and people have nowhere to turn to because police cannot fight Mangu’s magical evil powers. The only person (the father of Kamal, one of the three *bahadurs* or ‘brave ones’) who tries to stop Mangu on his proclamation of the city’s rule gets killed. This serves to exemplify what happens when commoners decide to speak against injustice. Employing Baudry’s insight into the role of films in playing the deeply rooted concerns of the audience, the audience is already aware because they have witnessed the story of Kamal’s father in different shapes in their surroundings and newspapers. However, in *ALM*, the effects of evil are different. There is no disturbance to the town’s life where Allahyar lives. Here, the evil (Shikari and Nawab Sahib) is trying to hunt the markhor. Many meanings can be inferred from this. Since the markhor is the national animal and the official seal of ISI, Pakistan’s military intelligence agency, here the evil is hunting the country, and only Allahyar⁴⁰ can save it. In *3 Bahadur*, Mangu decides to capture the clock tower which is also the center of Roshan Nagar. The clock tower is also the place where our three heroes get their first superpowers (described in synopsis). As the heroes get their first powers, they use it to restore order in the town. They fight off goons and save people from disasters, a covert lesson to the audience that the same center of evil can grant powers to common good citizens as well if they try.

The Ideal Male and Female Citizen of the State

In *ALM*, we see the resolve of Allahyar to protect markhor Mehru and her family from hunters as the resolve of defending the state of Pakistan from the enemy that resides outside of the boundaries of Pakistan. Here the narrative of *ALM* assumes that the evil of the enemy has not penetrated

³⁹ A species of mountain goat indigenous to northern Pakistan, *Capra falconeri*.

⁴⁰ Allahyar means the friend of Allah (God)

society yet. This assumption is helped by Allahyar's fight with Shikari and Nawab Sahib in a jungle far away from the town. The redemption of Bablu Chacha (see synopsis) also helps this narrative as it signifies the chance of redemption to people living in Pakistan getting played into the hands of the enemy from the outside for various reasons. In *ALM*, an ideal citizen is a defender and keeps the evil at bay from penetrating the society. Also, anyone can be redeemed like Bablu Chacha by helping the ideal citizen.

Mehru's depiction as a female markhor is very much in line with the depiction of female in the Pakistani films (Ahmed). The audience gets to know about Mehru's femininity through her voice, petite body, and her eyes filled with *kajal*.⁴¹ Her dialogue when she finally talks to Allahyar after the escape from the captivity of hunters is significant; she cries that had she listened to her father and not gone far from home, she would not have been in this bad situation and hunters would not have known their place. The belief that bad things happen when females disobey males is apparent in the film. The distinction between male and female ideal citizen becomes clear with this dialogue. This distinction has been deeply analyzed by Ahmed. She states that "a hegemonic gendered discourse in Pakistan highlights the importance of women's roles in maintaining the integrity of the family; the home is often seen as the bedrock of the nation and a stable family is believed to be the basis of a stable society, a logic that simultaneously elides any government responsibility" (392). In Pakistani films, when females transgress their assigned roles and go too far away from their homes, they are punished by rape. In *ALM*, Mehru is punished by guilt and by facing danger. The character of Mehru is playing a dual role. One is a personification of the state which Allahyar has to protect from the enemy that resides outside. The other role is the personification of Nature itself. In the starting credits of the film, we see the logo WWF (World Wildlife Fund for Nature). The film aimed to educate viewers on the importance of wildlife and its conservation. Combining with this fact, the dialogue of Allahyar's father on the duty of a forest ranger, that is to protect the forest at large, solidifies Allahyar's dual responsibilities, which are protecting the state and nature at once, when he is engaging with Mehru.

Engaging with the literature on the 'nature of nature' has yielded a theoretical framework that allows us to analyze the femininity of Mehru and the role of Allahyar. This analysis of nature is motivated by evolutionary biology and ascertains that nature is not static, but dynamic and static at the same time. This is captured in the famous symbol of Taoism, Yin and Yang. In this symbol, "the reality is composed of two opposing principles, often translated as feminine and masculine". Many societies assign the qualities of order and chaos to masculine and feminine genders respectively. Chaos, which is feminine in this paradigm, also represents nature as well. Though the goal of nature is to select fittest in an environment, the process of selection is chaotic due to randomness. Due to this ability to select, we often observe the reference to nature as a 'mother' (Peterson 14). All of this complicates the role of Allahyar in the film. Not only is he bestowed with the magical power of talking to animals which help him making an alliance of animals against the enemy, but his very act of saving Mehru has also made him fit for the power in the first place. This conundrum can be solved by keeping the legend in mind. The sage has set the condition which is "anyone who protects markhor and is of good heart" will have the power of talking to animals.

⁴¹ Eyeliner

Thus, Allahyar is emulating the qualities of an ideal citizen by protecting the state and nature at once.

In *3 Bahadur*, we see a different treatment of Amna, as opposed to Mehru, when she reveals to her father that she has superpowers. Amna's father supports her adventurism and her resolve to fight Mangu. This is shown when he states in a tense moment in front of the whole neighborhood that "*meri beti kabhi jhoot nahi bolti*" (my daughter never lies). The film also addresses the anxiety arising out of the tension between the youth and the older generation in Pakistan. This is exhibited in the address by Amna's father to the other protagonists' parents to believe in their children and support them during the struggle of defeating Mangu.

Who is the Enemy and How to Defeat Them?

Since the independence of Pakistan, the state has seen many "external and internal threats to its survival" (Jalal 144). The need to centralize in the presence of provincial heterogeneities and economic disparities has created a of political intrigue and instability at the local and provincial levels. Unable to reconcile the conundrums of state-building with nation-building, the ruling elites have tried to gain legitimacy by leaning on narratives of Indian threats and paying lip service to a vaguely defined Islamic ideology (Jalal 145). This narrative has evolved into the portrayal of the enemy operating from outside the boundaries of Pakistan to attack the existence and sovereignty of the state. As mentioned before in *ALM*, the fight between Allahyar and the hunters of markhor accompanied by foreign-returned Nawab Sahib is symbolized in the same light. This has been addressed in *ALM* and we observe 'interspecies' unity among the animals portrayed in the film to defeat the hunters. Despite prey-predator relations between Chakku (snow leopard) and Mehru and Mehru's distrust of him as she warns Allahyar that "*tum in janwaron ko nahi jantay*" (you don't know these animals), we see that they get united by the end of the film. During the debate between Allahyar and Mehru on the question of whether to trust Chakku or not, Allahyar says in a calm tone that "*humein rung, nasal, aur mazhab ki bunyad pe logo ko nahi parakhna chahiye*" (we should not discriminate against people based on race, color, and religion). This is aspirational citizenship on display here. As Jalal mentioned the shortcomings of the unification of the masses, this act of aspirational citizenship instructs viewers on tolerance and unity.

3 Bahadur, however, follows a similar good-evil narrative that portrays the enemy residing inside the boundaries of Pakistan. In the film, Baba Balam is the manifestation of evil intents of Mangu himself. *3 Bahadur* uses the mythology of evil to show the social problems of Pakistan. As Mangu takes over the city, lawlessness, extortion from the public, and murders, become rampant. Seeing *Roshan Nagar* (town of light) turning into *Andher Basti* (dark neighborhood) is very much analogous to seeing Karachi, also known as the city of lights, descending into chaos due to ethnic politics (Ali). Villains in *3 Bahadur* use power to make political and economic gains. This becomes more pronounced towards the climax when the goons working under Mangu block the town's water supply and start selling it illegally. We also observe the message in *3 Bahadur* that the power to restore order in the society lies within the community. Denu Chacha, who grants power to the three heroes, is also shown as the local guard. As opposed to Allahyar, where the defense against chaos is the responsibility of the Forest Rangers, a law enforcement institution, in *3 Bahadur* this responsibility is taken up by the local guard in the community.

The depiction of the settings in both films is also different. *ALM* is set in green lush fields surrounded by snow-capped peaks which not only signifies the implicit serenity of the state but also as a site facing a constant threat from outside. During the expansive shots of the entire region in *ALM*, one can see that the inspiration has come from Karimabad, Hunza which is situated in the northern areas of Pakistan on the Karakoram Highway. The majority of the living population of Hunza is Ismaili Muslims. The biggest political tension present in this area has been rooted in the fact that its residents cannot be full citizens of, and often resent, the Pakistani state. The reason is that the entire area of Gilgit Baltistan, where Hunza Valley is located, is linked with the disputed territory of Kashmir which technically bars it from being an official part of Pakistan. However, in *ALM*, we see an overt affinity for the state displayed in the region. It is evident through the depiction of the Pakistani flag at various places, most prominently on the chest of Allahyar as a decorating pin. The local characters, except for Nawab Sahab and Chakor, speak unaccented Urdu although the setting of the film is in the northern areas where the accents are heavy, and Urdu is not spoken among the locals. Although the diversity and the tension it brings are accepted through the presence of different species, there is an attempt of unification through the vehicle of language.

On the other hand, in *3 Bahadur*, we see the inspiration for the depiction of town has come from two places: Faisalabad and Karachi. The clock tower in *ALM* resembles the clock tower of Faisalabad which serves the center of the city, while the architecture of Roshan Nagar resembles a lower-middle-class area of Karachi. As mentioned before, the name Roshan Nagar also signifies this point because Karachi is also known as the ‘city of lights.’ During the film, as Roshan Nagar descends into chaos, the dialogue of one particular goon hints at the location. During his conversation with his friend on the fact that why Mangu is trying to capture this town located in the middle of nowhere, his friend replies, “*chotay chotay ilaqaon ko koi poochnay wala nahi*” (nobody cares about these little places). This explains the film’s bent on localism and how an ideal citizen is loyal to the community and is responsible for him or herself. Both films are trying to teach a moral lesson to children. They personify an ideal citizen and their conduct. In *ALM*, the ideal citizen originates through the acceptance and the act of protection of state, while in *3 Bahadur*, the ideal citizen is loyal to their community.

Conclusion

With the help of politics of innocence and Braudy’s idea of films engaging with deeply rooted concerns of the audience, I have explained the ideas of state and citizenship presented in *ALM* and *3 Bahadur*. I have argued that there is a visible difference in depicting archetypical good and evil, treatment of an ideal female citizen and a male citizen, and portrayal of the enemy. All of this is linked with the framework of unity and diversity and the tension among those two frameworks. We see that in *3 Bahadur*, the enemy is within and controlled by the hunger of power and resources causing chaos in the society. Its solution to this enemy also lies within the community which is embodied by our 3 bahadurs. On the other hand, *ALM* paints the picture of the enemy as someone from the outside of Pakistan. The American accented Nawab Sahib trying to hunt markhors with the help of Shikari is a testimony to that. The analysis of these selected texts as a site of political discourse is viewed through the idea of ‘innocence’, by employing child protagonists, which gives it the sense of unintentional design; thus, not examining their didactic messaging with the same scrutiny as one would have with other genres.

Film Synopses

3 Bahadur

The film opens up with the song that portrays a lower middle-class town named *Roshan Nagar* (the town of light). As the song ends, a character named, Mangu, tries to kidnap a little girl and gets chased by a brave man. The man, who later turns out to be a father of one of the 3 protagonists, knocks Mangu over and rescues the girl. Mangu escapes and ends up in a cave where he meets an evil creature named Baba Balam who grants him evil powers and orders him to protect the key of evil which is the source of Mangu's power as well. One night, Mangu emerges from the clock tower that is located in the center of the Roshan Nagar and proclaims kingship over the people. He gets opposition from the same man who knocked him over, but this time Mangu wins and kills him. Chaos and anarchy spread into the town after that. The city has become virtually lawless and ruled by the thugs of Mangu. The name of Roshan Nagar turns into *Andher Basti* (the town of darkness).

Here we meet with the three protagonists named Saadi, Amna, and Kamil who are upset with the situation. One day, they see a blue light coming out of the clock tower where Mangu resides. They investigated it by sneaking into the tower. There, they meet with unknown blue colored creatures who grant them super-powers. Amna gets super-fast, Kamil gets super hearing, and Saadi gets super intelligence. They use this power to bring order into the town. Meanwhile, Mangu thugs try to pin them down and get successful in bringing them to the clock tower. There, they meet with the same blue creatures who lure them into an unknown place where they meet the local security guard Chacha Denu. They also discover that Chacha Denu is the guardian of 'blue creatures' which signify the 'good'. They are granted more powers. Amna gets the ability to create shields, Kamil gets the power of high jump, and Saadi gets the ability to create blackholes. After this the protagonists have a long fight with Mangu. During the fight, Saadi discovers that Mangu was responsible for the death of his father who stood up to him and that is the reason his mother constantly stops him from going to the tower. Finally, Mangu gets defeated and gets thrown into the blackhole created by Saadi. The peace returns to *Andher Basti* and becomes *Roshan Nagar* again.

Allahyar and the Legend of the Markhor (ALM)

The film sets the opening scene with the fight between a mystical old man who has all the knowledge of the world and has the ability to talk with animals. A serpent attacks the old man to snatch the knowledge and it gets knocked over by a Markhor. Old man and the Markhor start spending time together and before dying he entrusts Markhor to protect the knowledge and gives the blessing that whoever shall save Markhors and is of good intent will get this knowledge and the ability to talk to animals. We see that later this folklore becomes the favorite story of our protagonist Allahyar. Allahyar is a lively child who lives with his father who is a wildlife protector. The love for animals in Allahyar is instilled by his father. One night, a jeep of hunters involved in illegal hunting of Markhor drops a box that contains a baby Markhor. Discovered by Allahyar and his father, they take it into their protection. Later, they get attacked by the hunters and Allahyar's father gets unconscious and he gets kidnapped along with the Markhor. Later, he also discovers that one of the hunters is his friend Bablu Chacha.

The story further develops when Allahyar and the Markhor escape from captivity and Allahyar discovers his ability to talk to animals. He talks to Markhor who tells her name as Mehru and stresses Allahyar to save her group from the hunters who are looking for a way to Siyah Koh which itself is in the shape of Markhor. The adventure of the chase begins between the hunter and Allahyar. Along the way, Allahyar encounters different animals including Hero (Chikor), Chakku (Snow Leopard) and three wolves. On the brink of Siyah Koh, hunters chase them down and the fight begins. The protagonist is joined by the family of Mehru who become the shield before Allahyar. Along with the hunter, we see Bablu Chacha and Nawab Sahib who have employed them to arrange for the hunt. Finally, the hunter gets defeated due to the change of heart in Bablu Chacha and Allahyar is united with his father again.

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