

Our transcultural cinema

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THE transportation, mutation and convolution of the Alibaba fable in Indian cinema is noteworthy. It testifies to an extraordinary transcultural collaboration — the DNA of the story, Indianised by the pioneer Parsi theatre owners, film producers and financiers, has traces of various nations and continents, much like the DNA of the people of South Asia.

This eclectic collection of essays on Islamic influences — the term is used to distinguish cultural forms associated with Islam from the religion itself — is relevant in the times we're living in. They explore a deep and complex linkage of belief systems, dance and music and other art forms, languages and poetry. These threads are woven in a complex tapestry that can't be undone.

The essay explaining the popularity of Salman Khan, running exactly parallel to the deepening polarisation in the Indian society, right from the late 1980s, is fascinating — Sohini Ghosh concludes that “the desire, fascination, frenzy and affection with which the body of Salman Khan is gazed upon... is a quiet inversion, however inadvertent and accidental, of the hostile, surveillant gaze” that falls on the Muslims.

In his essays on the depiction of Muslims in *Padmaavat*, Hilal Ahmed observes that “there is a new genre of historical films which employ a profound anti-Muslim narrative to reclaim the nation in unequivocally Hindu terms”, citing *Bajirao Mastani*, *Kesari* and *Panipat* as examples. Hindi cinema as an instrument of polarisation? Perhaps this is a response to the ideological Pakistan, carved out of India, where people of the land celebrate their conquerors from the north because they brought Islam with them.

Less controversial is the Alibaba story,



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The Bengali adaptation of Alibaba, 1937.

just one example of transcultural collaborations in Indian cinema. It is said to be first told to a Frenchman, Antoine Galland, by a Syrian monk, Hanna Diab, in the 19th century. But, scholars have argued, Galland's work in bringing Arab folklore to Europe can be seen as transcultural creative work “shaped into its presently visible form by European demand and influence”. The Alibaba story isn't found in any Arabic source that predates Galland's French translation — in other words, it can be “confidently claimed as an original text” by Galland, who was meeting the European demand for ‘Oriental’, mystical stories.

Its currency in the British popular culture “undoubtedly influenced its wider take up within India, notably through the Urdu-Parsi theatre”. The story was reworked and popularised by touring theatrical companies. It took the “Bengali theatre world by storm” at the turn of the century and it was natural that Hiralal Sen, a pioneer of Bengali cinema, would film it, as he did in 1903.

In her essay, Rosie Thomas writes that the

Bengali version of 1937 can be read as “a nationalist allegory about clever slaves and their greedy colonial masters who live a luxurious lifestyle funded by found and stolen wealth”. Slave girl Marjana and Abdullah, the family manservant, are the real stars of the story. It's Marjana who sees through the plots of Abu Hasan — the ruthless leader of the 40 thieves — and thwarts him repeatedly, stabbing him to death in the end.

Alibaba got transformed over the years in Indian cinema — he became a young handsome man in the 1954 version. Marjana isn't a slave girl but a dancer fallen on hard times, and Abdullah the African slave disappears, and the underlying theme is of “the evil rich and worthy poor”. “The story line is less an anti-colonial allegory and more overtly about good and bad governance, a topical theme at that time,” writes Thomas.

In the original story, it's Marjana who presses the dagger into the heart of the villainous Abu Hasan. It changed in Indian cinema — various Alibabas finish off Hasan: it's NT Rama Rao in the Telugu version, Sanjeev Kumar in the 1966 Hindi production, or MG Ramachandran in the 1956 Tamil version. Marjana, in the final sequences, is disempowered.

The Alibaba fable has come a long way. At various times, it's suffused with the spirit of independence, good governance, social justice — but always with Arab or Islamic tropes, and delectable songs in Urdu.

Just what is the language of the ‘Hindi’ films? How did Hindi/Urdu become the language of the Bombay film industry in the 1930s when the producers and financiers were Parsi and Gujarati? Being shrewd businessmen, they knew that movies in a mix of Urdu and Hindi would reach the maximum number of people and maximise profits. The talkies gave a big boost to Urdu through the very popular songs, and the *ghazals* by KL Saigal in the 1930s.

These essays are scholarly and descriptive, not ideological or idealistic, and would appeal to the serious follower of Indian cinema.



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