



Redefining Patriotism: Commentary on Raazi

***Vijayakumar M. Boratti**

Contemporary India's politics, history and culture are increasingly pre-occupied with hyper-nationalism of right-wing orientation. One of the repercussions of this is that patriotism (in military terms) is appropriated into the framework of hyper-nationalism and a new definition of it is forwarded. Intellectual spaces such as history, culture and politics are made to fall in line with hyper-nationalism. In the process of assimilating these spaces into its ambit, hyper-nationalism loathes anything that is an alternative or different viewpoint. It advances its ideology dominantly as the only belief-system available in India. It is slowly sneaking into all the knowledge systems, cultural practices, and institutions and turning them to conform to its official/non-official ideology. One of its pre-occupations in the practical world is its anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim beliefs. Besides cultural and literary sphere, this is prominently an obsession in Indian cinema, be it Bollywood or regional cinema. It has led to, in the words of Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "cinepatriotism" and "Hinduness" in films.ⁱ Muslims and Pakistan in such films are shown as the "other". This "other" is demonised, marginalised, exoticized and its patriotism is constructed as wanting in all senses. Such portrayal becomes prominently visible in the case of Kashmir which is a central stage for the hyper-nationalists to scrutinise if nationalism or patriotism of the Muslims in the country conforms to its ideology or not.ⁱⁱ

Film Studies



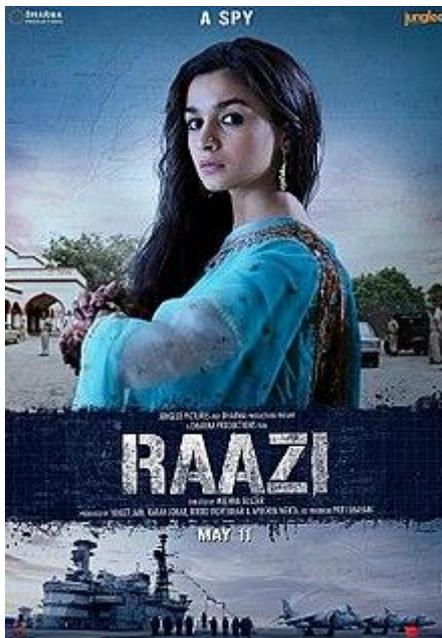
CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL3: 1 (ISSN 2454 - 9495)

DECEMBER 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

Added to this, patriotism of hyper-nationalism, in such films, celebrates anti-minority discourse; if it cannot explicitly oppose minorities, it tries to project a father-figure for patronising minorities;ⁱⁱⁱ it encourages demonstration of masculinity as a sign of patriotism and Hindu-ness; and reinforces exaggerated/exuberant historical past of its choice.

In such context, any effort at retrieving a forgotten historical episode or personality without inflated patriotism of hyper-nationalism is not only timely but also praiseworthy. Bollywood films such as *Raazi* (Agree/Willing, Hindi: 2018)^{iv} seems to be a “deviant” instance or an “aberration” to mainstream propagandist cine-patriotism of Indian popular cinema.



A Poster of the film: Source Wikipedia

The following review of the film will demonstrate how the film tries to establish that patriotism need not be verbose, partisan, masculine and monolithic or need not boast of

Film Studies



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL3: 1 (ISSN 2454 - 9495)

DECEMBER 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

inflated or exaggerated claims of *kurbani* or martyrdom for nation as per the ideology of hyper-nationalism. Instead, *Raazi* indulges single-mindedly in the retrieval of an unknown, unheard and unsung agency which “silently” serves Indian “nation” by means of “inherited” faithfulness to *vatan* without trumpeting itself. While doing so it passes remarks on familial bond vis-a-vis patriotism. The significance of the film lies in the fact that it does not subscribe to hyper-nationalism of the present day. Instead, it problematises patriotism and discretely advocates better understanding of it. Without deriding “faithfulness to *vatan*”, the film questions its nature and scope.

The Plot

Raazi is an adaptation of Harinder Sikka’s novel *Calling Sehmat* which is inspired by real-life events. The film opens with a senior Indian Army Officer Lt. Gen. Bakshi addressing a group of soldiers on board the *INS Viraat*.^v The story flashes to the 1971 India-Pakistan war and the events preceding and following it. Sehmat is a college student from Kashmir. Her father and grandfather were Indian freedom fighters. She learns of her father's impending death from cancer and his last wish for her to continue the family tradition of being in service to the country. She is soon to get married to an officer, the son of an Army Brigadier in the Pakistani Army, who is promoted to Major General. A few days before the marriage ceremony, Sehmat is hastily trained by members of RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) India's external intelligence agency, in various skills required to be a spy.

After the marriage and migration to Pakistan, Sehmat quickly settles into her married life, adjusts to a new country, and establishes the trust and confidence of her in-laws. She also falls in love with her husband Iqbal, though she shortly establishes communication channels with her handlers back in India and starts relaying information. Eventually, she spots

Film Studies



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL3: 1 (ISSN 2454 - 9495)

DECEMBER 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

information related to the planning of some sort of offensive against India and, at great risk, is able to gather the necessary details and pass them on to her handlers.

It turns out that this information points to a possible attack on the Indian aircraft carrier INS Vikrant, then deployed in the Bay of Bengal. Toward the end, Sehmat is discovered as a spy but manages to escape with the help of her handlers, at the cost of Iqbal's death. She ultimately returns to India, after which it is discovered that she is pregnant with Iqbal's child. She says that she will raise the boy alone; the boy, Samar Syed, later joins the Indian Army. In the concluding scene, an aged Sehmat sits alone at the window of a small house.

Narrating Conjuality and Espionage Dispassionately

From the beginning, the film keeps on forwarding its efforts to debunk commonly accepted stereotypes about Kashmir, Muslims and patriotism. First of all, the protagonist of the film (Sehmat) is a Kashmiri Muslim woman who is married to a Pakistani military officer after she undergoes rigorous training in India required for the task of spying in Pakistan. It is here that the film shows the double/contrastive role of Sehmat. She is a spy (usually the role is reserved for men in mainstream Bollywood cinema) who is ready for any kind of eventuality and at the same time she is a married woman who conforms to conventional norms of a married life. The portrayal of this 'double'ness moves interestingly. Training scenes of Sehmat in the film reveal and expose the strengths and weaknesses of a woman-trainee without any patronising gestures of the trainers in the Indian military camp (consisting of men only). On the other hand, the married life of Sehmat later, especially her relationship with her husband, is shown to be without overt feelings of passion or love. The film tries to be "realistic" in this sense. In other words, she is a married woman who is sincere to her husband and at the same time, she still harbours patriotism for India. At the end of the film, we witness the film's attempt to transcend the contrastive double of Sehmat by bringing

Film Studies



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL3: 1 (ISSN 2454 - 9495)

DECEMBER 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

patriotism as well as norms of family-bond under interrogation. Sehamat goes against the wishes of her husband by not surrendering to Pakistan military forces and loses him ultimately. Sehamat's patriotic feelings prove to be merely an illusion a) when she unexpectedly kills the servant of her husband's house to safeguard her secret mission and b) when the Indian intelligence, at the end of the film, tries to kill her to erase her links with Indian espionage activities when she is on the verge of being arrested by the Pakistan intelligence. Killing and being killed were never expected in her mission and she regrets both. Her regrets indicate the futility of patriotism in the context of espionage activities.

Patriotism and counter-patriotism or conspiracy and counter-conspiracy seem to be commonly accepted norms of both Indian and Pakistan military forces. Throughout the film both India and Pakistan indulge in espionage activities. The film tries its best not to castigate or lampoon patriotism of the self (India) or the other (Pakistan). This becomes very clear when both Sehamat and her husband encounter each other after the truth about the former's espionage activities are known. Both claim commitment to patriotism for their respective countries; both are ready to take risks for the sake of their countries. While Sehamat points a gun on her husband, the latter does not hesitate to arrest her for her sedition. Patriotism becomes a rallying point for both to abandon each other.

Though the film shows the triumph of India in frustrating Pakistan's military manoeuvres, it does not slip into celebration. Rather the focus is shifted to Sehamat's loss of conjugality; her doubts about the idea of patriotism and her determination to bring up her son in loving memory of her Pakistan husband which may raise eye-brows in the contemporary period of hyper-nationalism. Her son's service in the Indian navy later looks like the film is problematizing individual-identity politics, i.e. that is of one born to a Pakistani father but serving the Indian Navy.

Film Studies



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL3: 1 (ISSN 2454 - 9495)

DECEMBER 2018

(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

The film's focus on the 1971 war, on Sehamat and on Kashmir assumes historical significance because efforts are being made in contemporary India to erase such historical episodes from the memory of the people in order to establish hyper-nationalism of the aforementioned.

Notes

ⁱ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08949468.2011.583570?needAccess=true>, seen on 30th May, 2018.

ⁱⁱ This is a well-crafted task of the hypernationalists to put the Muslims/other minorities on defensive mode and mask their own jingoism.

ⁱⁱⁱ A film *March-22* (Kannada, 2017) is the best example of the Hindus for shadowing Muslim identity and patronising them when they concede and conform to Hindu sentiments.

^{iv} It is directed by Meghana Gulzar and its screenplay is also written by her and Bhavani Iyer.

^v For the plot of the film, I have heavily drawn from Wikipedia--<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raazi>, seen on 31st May, 2018.

*Dr. Vijayakumar M. Boratti teaches English at the University Evening College of the University of Mysore, India. He has a PhD from the Central university of Hyderabad in comparative literature. His monograph on P.G. Halakatti who pioneered modern studies on vahanas, the 12th century prose-poetic compositions, is published by Kannada University, Hampi, Karnataka. He has published several articles on colonial history of Lingayath Literature and Folklore in international journals such as *Journal of South Asian Studies*, *South Asia Research*, *Economic and Political Weekly* and *Folklore*.