

The Industry of Caste - The Representations of “Khan” in Films and TV Shows

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February 12, 2020

Abstract

This paper aims to bring to light the different ways in which media “circumscribes” the image of Khans, specifically in Bollywood films and TV shows like Citizen Khan (BBC). These would include stereotyping and the predesigned representations and simulacra of “caste” and caste politics in the media. The paper further looks into how media creates and propagates myths about Khans, and how a surname has now come to define a “caste”. The paper would look into how identities are “fixed” by the media in a world of political correctness.

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Class & Power Structure

Karl Marx studied the structure of society in relation to its major classes. For that, through economic systems, he categorised the society into classes - proletariat and bourgeoisie. In some theoretical traditions in sociology, most notably Marxism, class figures at the very core of the theoretical structure (Wright, 2003).

Social stratification on the basis of ‘class’ system remains one of the most widely discussed issues. Meanwhile, this rationale has been immensely used to study or understand the power structures across the world.

Further, Max Weber was of the opinion that “class is more complex than Marx initially supposed.” According to him, status and party (power) are some important factors that add to the social inequality (as quoted in Wright, 2003).

Contrary to functionalists, conflict theorists who mostly work with Weber’s three systems of stratification - class, status, and power - argue that power is the central feature of society. Besides others, Ralf Dahrendorf sees ‘class’ as related more to power than to money or occupation. Even though class system based on economic stratification remains one of the most important frameworks to understand power structure in major parts of the world, it has some exceptions in few regions as well (Allen, 2006).

Caste System in India

The mention of different groups of people with specific jobs to do and defined occupations to pursue in the society is to be found in the ancient texts of India. Although the term “caste” came from Portugal, the socioeconomic stratification of the society along the lines of birth groups (*jaati*) in ancient India slowly turned over thousands of years into a rigid system of strictly defined social groups that each came to be associated with specific traits. But this caste system in modern times is not just confined to the division of a society along the lines of occupation and birth groups like in ancient India. India is the one of the countries having

caste-based reservation rather than class. Division also occurs on the basis of socioeconomic determinants- religion, power, technical knowledge, access to information and political experience.

Thus, the term “caste” should not only represent a “form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a lifestyle which often includes an occupation, status in a hierarchy, customary social interaction, and exclusion” (Scott & Marshall 2005, Winthrop 1991). A broader definition of caste to include the groups of modern society- which include individuals from entirely different economic, political and lately religious groups who are clubbed together (rather smoothly) through the information that they are fed and the representations that the media portrays of them, is needed.

India is considered to be one of the most diverse nations in the world. It’s a multi-cultural, multi-linguistic and multi-religious caste-oriented society. Caste system is a system of social stratification and social restriction in India in which communities are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups called *jatis* (Bayly, 2001).

Social, economic and political inequality creates different ‘classes’ of people. Caste is the major determinant of the social status. Economically & politically powerful person from a low caste still may be considered socially trivial.

This new form of stratification exists in every society and it is also reinforced through media, particularly films. But there is always a consistent pattern of the way the strata are separated from each other and there are common identifiers for the groups in this system- the lower a group lies in this stratification, the more it is identified by and with a pre-defined set of faults and foibles. These flaws are inseparable from the “caste” they have come to be attached to, and each of these is played out and played around with in a systematic way in the representations of the caste in media. Keeping in mind the above mentioned facts, ‘caste’ - which is one of the major sources of social identity in India - plays a significant role in understanding the power structure as whole.

Social Stratification in Muslims

On the other side, Muslims, the largest minority in India, have no caste system. The power structures among Muslims have been laid on an entirely different framework - names and titles. W. F. Sinclair claims that important titles or surnames (or ‘caste’ names) like Khan, Sheikh & Syed, have been adopted by many Muslim converts and these have catapulted them to a high social status (Sinclair, 1889: 171–2). Titles or surnames in Muslims like Khan, Malik, Chaudary and Sardar indicate titles of respect (Lyon, 2002: ii). All the aforementioned surnames have almost the same meanings - ‘Khan’ means ‘chief’, ‘Chaudhary’ also means ‘chief’, ‘Sheikh’ also means ‘chief’, ‘Malik’ means ‘owner’, ‘Sardar’ means ‘leader’ and Syed also means ‘leader’. It may be well established that these surnames form the upper or higher ‘class’ in the socio-political framework and power structures among Muslim societies. Such surnames which separate one ‘class’ of people from rest of Muslims have been the fundamentals to the social stratification of Muslims. For example; there are different sub-categories of the category ‘well-known family’ among Muslims. In a case, landowning families in Pakistan are categorized under the head of ‘caste’ among the category of ‘well-known family’. Families which have gained prominence through business, such as the famous twenty-two industrialist families of Pakistan, are included under this head (Rahman, 2015). Accordingly, such families adopt a ‘title’ or surname for attaching a sense of respect to their family.

Other Muslim families involved with different occupations adopt different ‘titles’ which over the period of time becomes hereditary and is being identified as a ‘caste’. Through this framework, ‘class’ system among Muslims, although not defined or outlined religiously, has become operational in the day-to-day social exchanges.

It is important to mention that there is not a complete similarity in ‘titles’ or ‘surnames’ among Muslims with same occupations in different regions of the world. This method of social stratification has been instrumental in creating different ‘classes’ in Muslims - who otherwise are based on a universal brotherhood - laying the framework for understanding the power structure in this religious community.

Besides that, among all the titles, the surname ‘Khan’ is not used as a title but loosely as a part of the name (surname) even among poor people (Rahman, 2015). Over the period of time, this surname ‘Khan’ has been adopting different meanings in different contexts through its portrayal in the media.

Khan: A ‘Title’ of Different Meanings

The surname ‘Khan’, contracted form of *Khagan*, from the Turkish *Khan* meaning “commander,” “leader”, “king” “chief” or “ruler,” is equated with power and health. With its origin as a hereditary title born by early Mongol leader, Genghis Khan, ‘Khan’ title remains to be one of the most widely used surname throughout the world (Powell, 2017).

The surname was firstly used in the Rourans, and later more widely by Islamic chieftains in what is now India, Pakistan & Bangladesh. The surname is used in different regions of the world like Turkey, South Asia, Middle East, Central Asia, Eastern Europe and East Africa. It’s 12th most common surname in United Kingdom with some more than 1 Lakh British-Asian people (Forebears, 2019). A good number of people in Jammu & Kashmir also use this surname. Further, Khan (earlier used for men) nowadays though it used to have feminine endings making it ‘Khanam’ (Rahman, 2015).

Khan is considered to be a prestigious title which has also been used as name. Surprisingly, in different parts of the world, this title has been used differently. For example; In Kashmir, ‘Khan’ has a different meaning which is totally opposite to the rest part of the world. Meanwhile, it has been attached to different meaning in United States and other Europeans countries. In India and Pakistan, particularly among Muslims, ‘Khans’ have a different connotation.

This surname has been gaining a significant importance in defining a particular sect of Muslims or Muslims as whole. Media, particularly, films media have been trying to create entirely a different meaning of the word ‘Khan’. The surname has been used in the films to create a new class of people sharing some similarities globally. A review of the literature reveals that, not the ‘chiefs’, but Khans have been assigned controversial roles in Bollywood films and other TV shows in and outside India.

Films as Mass Art

In simple terms, films have been considered as the reflections of the society. But studying films in the presence of agenda setting function of media would mean otherwise. There has been a theoretical turn from a conventional concept surrounding the categorisation of film-as-an-art (cine-art) or expressive visual art-form to a more critical approach accepting films as mass art or film-as-medium.

Perceived by masses in a context, films according to Adorno, are ‘mass-cult’; mass produced culture which presents a ‘flattened’ version of the reality. Benjamin acknowledges the potential for mass art to manipulate. “Film, as an art of the masses, embedded within society and used by social, political, moral humans, has the potential to be constructive or destructive” (D’Olimpio, 2014). Unlike the earlier theorists - Adorno & Horkheimer, Benjamin’s framework stating the potential of films to screen ideas was further reinforced by the Deleuzian’s optimism approach to films.

No film is made in a cultural vacuum. As films are an importance source of cultural data, film producers or filmmakers may be considered the cultural producers on a massive scale. Films exist in a social & cultural context one that is partially of their own creation. In film studies in particular, non-western films are much more likely to be “read” in terms of the influence that society or cultural contexts have on cinematic output (Gray, 2010).

Delluc’s work reveals that cinematography has “the unique ability to transform objects into symbols for thought and emotion” (Parkinson 1995: 64). Further, films create, produce and reinforce roles and identities. All media texts are the representations of the reality. “Rather than reproducing the ”world” spontaneously and automatically, as the ideology of realism would have the spectator believe, the cinematic apparatus always operates selectively, limiting, filtering and transforming the images that are its raw material” (Rodowic 1994, 77).

Meanings in a film are communicated through signs. Based on certain conventions, these signs constitute codified information (Kishor, 1999). The codified information, narrating the story, has different meaning in different cultures and its real interpretation is possible in the culture where the film is based (Pandey, 2014).

Muslims & Khans in Indian Films – Bollywood

“Even though Khans pretty much run the show in Bollywood, but when it comes to portraying Muslims on screen, most of such representation in the mainstream consciousness is marked by stereotypes that swing between royalty and the underworld” (rediff.com, 2018). Bollywood is the producer of cultural data for Indian masses. Bollywood caters the need of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society with a dominating Hindu population.

Studies reveal that Muslims are portrayed in a negative light in Bollywood. Meanwhile, after 26/11, Bollywood has started stereotyping Muslims more adversary (Zafar & Amjad, 2018).

Accordingly, it constructs & codifies signs and meanings. Assigning ‘names’ or ‘surnames’ or ‘titles’ to characters is among various methods to construct a particular image of a particular community. In films, names are also changed to assign meaning to a particular role. For example; “when a Muslim youth Ali Meer had to play a Hindu mythical hero called Puran Bhagat, he was given the name of Kumar” (Manto, 1991: 415). Not only in the films but Muslim talent as a whole were given Hindu names during the 1930s–40s as Bollywood was chiefly Hindu. This is how Shahida became famous as Naina (Manto 1991: 415), Yousuf Khan became Dilip Kumar, Mahjabeen Ara Kamal became Meena Kumari and Mumtaz Jahan Begum became Madhubala (Wright, 2006: 6). With Khans (Amir Khan, Salman Khan, Shahrukh Khan, & Saif Ali Khan) ruling the Bollywood at box-office now, this methodology has been completely reversed.

The playing around of the images of caste occurs so subtly that it almost goes unnoticed. The name ‘Khan’, although just a surname chiefly among Muslims, has come to represent a particular “class” of people- with specific traits and mannerisms, but almost always associated with evil or stupidity in films and TV shows.

This paper aims to bring to light the different ways in which media “circumscribes” the image of Khans, specifically in Bollywood films and TV shows like Citizen Khan (BBC). These would include stereotyping and the pre-designed representations and simulacrum of “caste” and caste politics in the media. The paper further looks into how media creates and propagates myths about Khans, and how a surname has now come to define a “caste”. The paper would look into how identities are “fixed” by the media in a world of political correctness.

Methodology

Selection of the Films

Initially, Bollywood films portraying Islamicate cultures, a categorisation of films by Ira Bhaskar & Richard Allen’s in their book ‘Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema’ (2009) was followed. Accordingly, Bollywood films in the four major categories - Muslim Historical (films on life and works of major Historical-Muslim figures); Muslim Courtesan Films; Classic Muslim Socials (films on Muslim cultures of royal aristocracy); and New Wave Muslim Socials (contemporary social reality of Indian Muslims) - were watched. These films were watched to understand the depiction of Muslims as whole.

The present research is an attempt to understand portrayal of ‘Khan’ in Hindi films. Further, keeping the purpose of the film in mind a list of films related to the subject under study was framed. Accordingly, as per need of the present research, a pilot study was conducted. Dozens of Bollywood films falling under the theme were watched for a particular fixed time slot. For example; initially, each film was watched for 15 minutes and credits either at the beginning or end of the films were also recorded. Based on this primary research, a list of 30 films was framed. This initial list of films was further refined and through the help of systematic sampling technique, five were selected from the list of 30 films based on the criteria including subject matter, popularity and box office success. The films selected for the study include;

Henna, Khuda Gawah, Zanjeer, Deewaar & My name in Khan.

Further, the portrayal of Khan in TV show *Citizen Khan* was also analysed. The positivity and negativity of the characters with Khan surname was checked by applying the emphasis farming technique (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Different frames have been used to understand the representation of Khans in Bollywood. These frames are as follows; Dialogue, dressing, language or dialect, appearance, profession and over all view.

Method

The films were analyzed using following techniques;

Visual Framing

Rodriguez and Dimitrova's four-tiered framework for frame identification and analysis of a frame depicting Khans was used. The frames were analysed at four different levels for analysing four different themes in the frames as mentioned below;

Level 1: Visuals as denotative systems

Level 2: Visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems

Level 3: Visuals as connotative systems

Level 4: Visuals as ideological representations

Through the help of Visual Framing method, various aforementioned themes in the films were studied. Further, narrative analysis method was also used to deconstruct the portrayal of Khans in the films as whole.

Analysis & Discussion

In the 1991 film, *Henna* (R.K Films, directed by Randhir Kapoor, Raj Kapoor) the character of the titular Henna's father, played by Saeed Jaffrey, is named *Khan Baba*. The film makes an absurdly ridiculous statement right at the outset by naming the character thus. This is because, as stated earlier, Khan is a surname found among commonly among Muslims. In fact, it is the 12th most common surname in the world. If one person is hailed by the name "Khan Baba", perhaps all the people of the village where the film is set would turn their heads. Naming the character "Khan Baba" is not a decision formed of artistic creativity, it is the result of a long history of cultural misrepresentation and sedimentation of reinforced stereotypes that films have carried out.

The film carries other similar tropes associated with the "Khan persona" as well. When the Muslim (Khan) characters are introduced in the film at 31:42, it begins invariably with a song. The song begins with the sound of *Rabab*, playing a deeply pious and melancholic tune, once again a trope that is consistently found among films depicting the "Khan persona".

The other important aspect of the character of Khan Baba in the film is the way Saeed Jaffrey (the actor playing the character) has been dressed and made up. The character has long hair, kohl in his eyes, wearing *salwar kameez* and speaks clunky and unrealistic dialogues in impeccable Urdu. Every time the character speaks, the *rabab* (or sometimes the *Bulbul Tarang*) returns in the background, as if to herald the speech of a prophet. His name is so often stressed throughout the film, which already feels like a ridiculously desperate attempt to paint Muslims as simple and plain, that his name becomes etched in the minds of the viewer. There are other Muslim characters in the film, but it is Khan Baba's name that is repeated and called out the most, as he is the most prominent "Khan persona" in the film.

In almost every frame that Khan Baba appears alone, there is a prayer rug, prayer beads, agricultural tool or even a hookah that appears alongside him. As if to say to the viewer that the "Khan" is not complete without all these extensions of his "persona", as if the viewer would confuse him for someone else if these props were not to accompany him in the frame. Khan Baba is not the "Khan persona" without these extensions of him in the time and space of the film universe.

Underneath all this is buried the fact that the character of Khan Baba is a “Mary Sue”¹¹, that is, he has no flaws at all, and thus there is no character development or character arc for him. He is just there to do all the good work, to preach all the good things, to tell people calling him “Khan Baba” that Muslims should behave in a certain way.

The character of Badshah Khan played by Amitabh Bachchan in the 1992 film *Khuda Gawah* (Glamour Films, directed by Mukul Anand) is shaped in the same mould. At 9:09 minutes into the film, the character of Danny Denzongpa first calls out the name “Badshah Khan”, heralding the first serving of the “Khan persona” for the viewer. Here again, although there are other Muslim characters in the film, none of them is called by the name “Khan” as much as Badshah Khan; they are called by their first names like people normally do. His appearance on the screen is accompanied by the same kind of music, his eyes have kohl and he dresses in the Pathani way (although here the dressing may be discounted as the character is an Afghan), and his name is repeated so often that it seems as if the makers suspected that the viewer would forget what the name of the protagonist was. Again, like in *Henna*, other Muslim characters also call Amitabh Bachchan’s character names like “Khan” or “Khan Bhai”. Again, like in *Henna*, the “Khan persona” is a Mary Sue.

At 37:44 in the film, Amitabh’s character says to a Rajput, “*Hum Pathan hai Pathan, ulta seedha baat sunne ka aadat nahi humko*” (*I am a Pathan, I am not used to listening to bullshit*), once again reinforcing a stereotype typical of the Khan’s in such films. To this, the Rajput retorts, “*Aur main bhi Rajput hun Khan, ye aadat mujh mein bhi nahi hai*” (*And Khan, I am a Rajput. I am not into the habit either.*) The retort involves the comparison (or a shared trait, however one interprets it) of an ethnic group (Pathans) and a surname (Khan) with a caste (Rajput). The non Muslim makers of the film seem to have no understanding whatsoever of this, and invariably contribute to the propagation of the “Khan persona” among the audience of the film.

Badshah Khan’s appearance on the screen is accompanied by props - the extensions of his persona - in this case swords, horses and flags. Once again, the Khan persona is incomplete without these props, a shallow assessment of a character that is supposed to drive the events in the film.

In the 1973 film *Zanjeer* (Prakash Mehra Productions, directed by Prakash Mehra), these tropes are visible as well. The background score, the mannerisms, the props- all build up the “Khan persona”. It is almost as if the writers of such films cannot find any other Muslim names for their characters. Once again, the Khan is a Mary Sue.

Deewaar- Let’s Bring Our Heroes Home (2004, VR Pictures, directed by Milan Luthria) goes one step further in typifying the surname “Khan” as a caste. In the film, the character of Sanjay Dutt does away with a first name completely, naming him just “Khan”, so that every other character may conveniently call him by “Khan” throughout the film. He is larger than life in the film, but this “Khan” is not a new character; he is just the “Khan persona” being portrayed by a different actor. All the clichés underneath remain the same, and this time, he even does the name-calling himself. Throughout the 2 hour 34-minute runtime of the film, Sanjay Dutt keeps repeating the phrase, “*Khan hun, Allah ki shaan hun*” (*I am Khan, I am Allah’s pride*), as if other creations of Allah are not.

As stated at the beginning of this article, “Khan” the character name is shaped in the mould of stupidity and idiocy as well. The prime example of this is the hit British TV show *Citizen Khan* (2012, British Broadcasting Corporation, created by Anil Gupta, Richard Pinto and Adil Ray). Not only is the show named “Khan”, but the characters, particularly the protagonist (portrayed by Adil Ray) make it a point to poke fun at the name “Khan” and associate it with certain tropes. In fact, the protagonist is called only Mr. Khan, and he introduces himself by this surname only. All other Muslim characters have proper names; some even are called names other than “Khan”. But it is Mr. Khan who is the stupidest, and associated with clichés of the same order as discussed above. His dressing, his appearance, his accent, his “props” are all found here as well. The “Khan persona” is alive and throbbing (the show is a major success) not just in Indian cinema, but in the Diaspora too.

Another important trait associated with all these characters is that the name “Khan” does not have any bearing on the plot of the film; it is there only to reinforce the persona. If the character is named anything else, it would not affect the plot or the narrative of the film in the slightest manner, but it would break the mould that these characters are shaped in. The nomenclature thus has only one objective- to present to the audience a caste among Muslims, to present it in a predefined manner, and to present it repeatedly and with such sheer consistency that the idea of the “Khan persona”, that is the idea of a caste, complete with its own traits and behaviours, may get established among the audience.

But films are not to be blamed entirely for this creation. Films are a mirror of the social reality and recreate and represent social truths, or are at least inspired by them. Although some inspiration for the whipping up of the “Khan persona” might have been taken from the Muslim culture itself, and indeed characters must not be separated from their cultural artifacts while being represented on the screen, the representation of the surname “Khan” has been twisted around and tampered with so much by playing up the name and misrepresenting and adding revoltingly overbearing characteristics to the characters carrying this name, that an aura has been created around the name. This aura has caused the name to look like a caste to the viewers of such films and shows, and has resulted in reinforcing this stereotype in the real world as well.

The film *My name is Khan* portrays the miseries of the Muslims in US after 9/11. In the film, Shah Rukh Khan playing the role of Rizwan Khan has been portrayed as sufferings from the Asperger’s syndrome. The surname Khan representing the whole Muslim community in US, Rizwan Khan walks an extra mile to prove the innocence of Muslims after 9/11. The film depicts that just by having name Khan, one is labelled as terrorist. The film links terrorism directly with Muslims and as depicted in the film Muslims are the Khans. As mentioned above, even though this film has been encompassing a very serious subject but the stupidity in which Rizwan Khan has been engaged in the film due to his disorder as depicted in the film again represent Khans negatively. On the other side, the film tries to link Khans with terrorists but in the end depicts a neutral message as Rizwan Khan meets the US president. In total, Khan has been portrayed as an unusual character, totally different from rest of the characters in the film. This portrayal of Khan at large has resemblance with the portrayal of Khan in other aforementioned films.

The name ‘Khan’, although just a surname chiefly among Muslims, has come to represent a particular “class” of people- with specific traits and mannerisms, but almost always associated with evil or stupidity in films and TV shows. There are also a few other moulds into which characters named Khan are shaped in and represented in films. But all of them have some basic, predefined and almost preordained signs associated with them that have led to their stereotyping in such a way that the name has come to connote a caste in films- complete with its own dress codes, appearance, language and even background score. All this has led to the synthesis of an almost new culture being associated with the name which has turned the surname into a class for many.

The audience of such films (mostly made by Hindus) having been fed this staple diet of “Khan as persona”, have been led to believe that casteism exists in Muslims as well. But this *Khan as personaphenomena* is not limited to the non-Muslim perception only, but has spread among Muslims as well. Khan has now come to represent a caste- either associated (or confused) with the Pathan culture, or with the violent *Katta* culture of the mafia of Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand, especially after the release of the films *Gangs of Wasseyapur* (Anurag Kashyap, 2012). Both these moulds have their own peculiarities, but what unites them both is a massive distortion of the demographics of Muslim societies and of the connotations of the surname Khan. These dilute the identity of Khan as a surname, and whip up a simulacrum- the “Khan persona”, one that has now become a caste in the minds of numerous audiences of such cinema.

This system of social stratification through names and surnames has been instrumental in describing the power structures among Muslims. Thus the giving of a name or a nickname is an act of power (Rahman, 2015). A name may exalt or debase a person, as they have cultural capital (Lord, 2002). In Plato’s book *Cratylus*, as Socrates points out, “slaves cannot name themselves.” (as quoted in Rahman, 2015). For example: In order to assert their high status and their right to be natural rulers, the ruling classes of Pakistan exercise power through ‘onomastic politics’ – the use of prestigious components in names (Bodenhorn and Bruck,

2006: 14). Significant caste names and surnames symbolises a socially dominant identity.

Conclusion

Films and TV shows have misrepresented the surname Khan by associating various similar tropes in different films with the “Khan persona”. Khan characters have a great similarity across the films in dressing, language, musical instruments, occupational tools and other elements. In all the films studied, Khans have been identified as a different “class” of Muslims. The surname has been used to represent a particular “class” of Muslims which have no resemblance with the history.

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