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Global Currents in Local Harbours: *Zulfiqar*, Re-Orientalism and Otherised Muslims in Bengali Culture

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Abstract

The domain of culture is always fraught with various forms of contestation, hierarchy and countercurrents based on divergent determinants of identity. Within the domain of the Bengali cultural sphere, fissures related to the issues of religious and ethnic identity and national belonging have taken on a new urgency, especially in the wake of Khagragarh bomb blast, arrest of ISI spies and terrorists from the dock areas of Kolkata and simultaneous growth of political activities focused on the foregrounding of belligerent religious identities, particularly in relation to the organized celebration of religious festivals and ceremonies, be it Ramnavami or Muharram. The proposed paper would focus on the representational politics of Srijit Mukherjee's *Zulfiqar* (2016), based on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, in the context of these developments and analyse how the makers' attempt to translate Shakespeare's Rome to Kidderpore, via the cinematic text of *The Godfather*, simultaneously produces re-orientalist stereotypes that replay the trajectories of global politics even while deepening local fractures.

Keywords: Culture; Identity; Nation; Otherisation; Re-orientalism.

Introduction

As Raymond Williams had pointed out long ago, 'culture' (Williams, 87-93) is a term characterized by remarkable fluidity and ambivalence. Quite naturally then, the concept of Bengali culture would be susceptible to similar currents of polysemic significances conditioned by space, language, ethnicity, history, religion etc. Two cardinal questions necessarily emerge in this context: firstly, what do we understand by the term

'Bengal', freighted as it is with the lacerations of colonial cartography and vested interests of sustained politicking, and secondly, what are the constituents of Bengali culture, if there is one. Answers to these questions are as much conditioned by one's own biographical determinants as they are by facets of imagination which have to be deployed for the construction or espousal of any collective identity, involving either space or culture, be they national, provincial or even trans-national.

It is in this context that Benedict Anderson's notion of "imagined communities" (*Imagined Communities* 4) also becomes significant. Just as imagination plays a crucial role in forming ideas of nationhood among isolated individuals inhabiting a shared geopolitical space, similarly imagination plays a crucial role in imagining what constitutes a cultural world and which elements are deemed either alien or even contaminating to it. While certain elements/groups, borrowing Anderson's terminology, are allowed to horizontally align themselves together, others are either ridiculed, or marginalized or erased altogether based on vertical lines of demarcation and discrimination from the cultural sphere, particularly through selective appropriation of institutions, circulation of prejudicial discourses and processes of exoticisation/commodification. The notion of Bengali Culture is imbricated within these simultaneous processes of appropriation and abrogation.

While certain iconic elements like Durga Puja, Rabindranath Tagore's songs and poems, the films starring Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen, Baul and Bhatiyali songs etc. have always been appropriated by diverse institutions and discourses to foster a notion of homogenous Bengali culture, the slant has predictably been towards the cultural practices of urban middle class Hindu Bengalis and the vast repertoire of cultural practices associated with Bengali Muslims, various Scheduled Tribes, minority ethnic groups like the Rajbangshis have generally been relegated to dusty shelves of archival documents as such groups have often been left out of the imaginary world created by various invocations to the idea of Bengal and Bengali culture. For example, one can perhaps refer to the iconic song "Tomake Chai" (1992) by Suman Chattopadhyay (now known as Kabir Suman) which refers to Durga puja, the music of Salil Chowdhury and Hariprasad Chowrasia, the novels of Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay or songs of Himangshu Datta, but never to any icon or practice associated with Bengali Muslims. Likewise Anjan Datta may sing of Mary Anne or Ranjana or Bela Bose but not of Fatima or Noor or Rokeya. This is not to accuse the individual composers but rather to delineate the alienating contours of the dominant cultural matrix and the exclusionary practices

which underlie them.

If erasure or silence represents one aspect of cultural homogenisation, another aspect is embodied in practices of exoticisation/commodification, particularly with respect to cultural practices associated with Scheduled Tribes living in different districts of Bengal. Apart from regularly featuring with song and dance troupes in governmental programmes, particularly in relation to promotion of tourism and in districts like Bankura, Pashchim Medinipur or Purulia, cultural practices of Scheduled Tribes only enter the realm of dominant Bengali culture either through themes of Durga Pujo or as essentialising episodes in iconic films like Satyajit Ray's *Agantuk*. Many caste-Hindus would not know anything about either their deities, or their food habits or their codes of conduct or even the fact that not all Adivasis are Santhals.

Finally, one has to take cognizance of various derogatory stereotypes that are deployed through diverse cultural discourses. Consider, for example the fact, that many Hindus often casually assert that Muslims are prone to violence because of all the beef and mutton that they eat or that they smell bad or are particularly dirty. Even if political correctness often prevents direct articulation of such beliefs, they still continue to circulate through everyday conversations, rumours and gossips and politically motivated communal commentaries.

All such processes contribute to a paradigm of entrenched otherisation in society as a result of which our notions of culture and cultural identity, far from embracing Anderson's idealised notion of "horizontal comradeship" (*Imagined Communities* 8), often appear to be monochromatic, homogenising and exclusionary. No wonder then that Muslim students, scholars or professionals find it extremely difficult to rent residential accommodations in Kolkata (Chaudhuri 2019). A more aggressive manifestation of the same mentality would provoke certain hoodlums to beat up an ill-educated migrant labourer from Kaliyachak in Malda because he could not state the name of the Prime Minister and taunt him by claiming that he must know who Nawaz Sharif is (Maitra 2018). More damagingly, on other occasions, cities like Asansol would suddenly succumb to the spectre of communal violence and an Imam's teenaged son would be brutally killed (Purakayastha, 12-15).

While the instances of violence are more recent, they are made possible by a more fundamental process of otherisation which can be traced back to pre-independence days and to subsequent processes such as the Great

Calcutta Killings and Partition riots, the riots of 1964, the Bangladesh Liberation War and even the eruption of violence in 1992, after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. This is also evident from the spatial distribution of Muslim populations in Kolkata across clearly identifiable and demarcated pockets which are also subjected to stereotypical representations of disgust and fear. As Anasuya Chatterjee, the author of *Margins of Citizenship: Muslim Experiences in Urban India*, explains:

> A musholman para in Kolkata, as in many other cities in India, does not merely mean a locality where a majority of the population is Muslim. A culturally loaded term, it rather signifies a space of difference, an aberration within the known and homogeneous landscape of the city, often demarcated by boundaries both physical and social.
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> "The localities are unclean", "the people have no civic sense", "the place reeks of garlic", "there is garbage everywhere", are generally how the mild-natured, biryani-loving Bengali bhadralok describe these neighbourhoods. Shops "openly" selling beef and the periodic "blaring" of azan from the local mosques add to their disdain. To top it all, a culturally-rooted distrust of the "aggressive, deceitful, sword-wielding and communally conscious Muslim" makes these neighbourhoods the veritable 'other', the 'little Pakistans' replete with their 'Lahore/Karachis'. The average middle-class Hindu typically avoids them as "unfamiliar and unsafe" entities. ("An Address in a Ghetto", *The Hindu Business Line*, 28 July 2017).

What adds to these stereotypes is the global discourse of Islamophobia, fuelled particularly by network of Jihadi terrorism, which have not only ravaged India for decades but have become closely linked with the political scenario of West Bengal in general and Kolkata in particular in recent years. A bomb blast in Khagragarh and subsequent exposure of Bangladesh-based terrorist groups, accompanied by arrest of ISI operatives from Kolkata's dock area have fanned Hindu insecurities and hatred of Muslim populations which is not only evident from the rhetoric of far-right groups but also from vitriolic statements across different forms of social media. Such statements are indicative of the sustained grip of Orientalism in contemporary discourses as pejorative representation of Islam and Muslim populations has been one of the pillars of orientalist discourses. Re-Orientalism, according to Lisa Lau, explores how "Self-Representation of the East by the East continues to be filtered through Western lenses"

and that a nation's internal Others continue to be objectified by the workings of a "brahminising comprador intelligentsia" (5). It is within this multidimensional context of Re-Orientalist images, conditioned alike by an entrenched culture of communal distrust and the global Islamophobic discourse that we need to place *Zulfiqar* (2016), to understand the dynamics of representation which shape the cinematic text.

Analysing the Film

The otherising paradigm within which the film is located is evident even before one has the chance to see the film: the trailer sets the tone quite clearly by claiming that in the land of Howrah Bridge, Tagore and Durga Puja "there lives another land". While the former three elements are iconic and integral components of the cultural imaginary associated with the city of Kolkata, the dock area, where the film is set, is immediately highlighted as this "state of exception" which chimes in with the rhetoric of difference and aberration that Anasuya Chatterjee also highlights. Significantly the trailer even contains a shot of blood splattering across a photograph of Tagore, perhaps suggesting the predominant world of crime and violence which the film highlights. This separate and apparently unfamiliar world, where according to the trailer, bullets sing, money speaks and crime lives happily ever after, is the world of Kidderpore, Gardenreach, Metiaburuz and such other Muslim-majority port areas where the film is set, dominated by such individuals as Zulfiqar, Basheer, Marcus Ali and later Akhtar.

The trailer of the film further underscores the apparent exceptionality of the area by including narration from a character in the film who goes on to claim that the area is almost like a separate country within the city of Kolkata, only without the flag and the national anthem. As this claim is uttered, the trailer offers a montage of successive scenes featuring roadside meat shops, children learning by rote in Madrasahs, preparation for sacrificing cattle, children playing with swords, Muharram observations featuring self-flagellating devotees, large alams, people wearing skull caps and Urdu signs and banners. In the process, the imagery consolidates the popular vision of Muslim localities as "mini Pakistans" and by extension suggests that the Muslim population inhabiting these areas is only accidentally a part of the Indian nation-space and not culturally integrated with either the rest of the city or the rest of the country. From the very beginning, therefore, Srijit Mukherjee invites us into a theatre of otherising representations founded on what Anasuya Chatterjee identifies as "the enduring anti-Muslim cultural prejudice of the Hindu middle classes" (Chatterjee 143).

One such misconception involves the rate of crime in the port area. While it is a fact that port areas around the world often become associated with smuggling, trafficking and other associated crimes, the trailer and the film, with their episodes of rampant murders, explosions, instances of arson and plunder seem to present the port area as a space of utter lawlessness that actually contradicts available data regarding criminal activities in the city. In fact, the analysis of Prashasti Bhattacharya (2014) shows that police stations like North Port, West Port and Metiburuz have shown a decreasing trend in number of crimes (305) and even though places like places like Gardenreach, Mominpur and Watgunj operate as clustered hotspots for criminal activities, the same holds true for various other localities like CIT Road-Manicktola, Bow Bazar-Chandni Chawk; Tiljala-Park Circus-Beniapukur, Topsia-Karaya; Gariahat, Chetla-New Alipur etc. (308) which are neither Muslim-dominated nor anywhere in the vicinity of the port area. Consequently, Karmakar and Saha (2016) argue against uninformed stereotyping and aptly remark, "In Kolkata, there are certain areas which are perceived to be crime prone by the common man. There is a chance of fallacy.

For example, the port areas of Kolkata are considered to be a place where smuggling of various foreign goods occurs. Common men often label the entire area (which actually means the entire population) as crime prone, which is illogical. As a consequence of this kind labelling, often the population of these areas remain excluded from the main stream population" (198). Srijit Mukherjee's cinematic representation only serves to consolidate such derogatory labelling by transporting the Shakespearean representation of an anarchic and violent post-Caesar Rome onto the alleys, bylanes and even the open roofs of Kidderpore. This is markedly different from other popular commercial films focusing on gang-war and associated crimes where an entire city, as in *Satya*, *Company* or *Sarkar*, becomes the site of orchestrated violence, as opposed to one particular locality, with its specifically highlighted religio-cultural identity. Even *Godfather*, which supposedly inspired Mukherji's adaptation, despite focusing on the workings of the Italian-American mafia in the United States, neither restricted itself to a particular locality of New York nor prioritised religion in the dynamics of the plot in the way that *Zulfiqar* does. In fact the famous final sequence in *Godfather* where Michael Corleone eliminates his major rivals subverts the very idea of religious sanctity by juxtaposing the scene of a baptism with successive assassinations.

The prioritising of religion not only conditions the movement of the plot but also the representation of the characters and their costumes. Consider

for example the character of Basheer played by Koushik Sen. Our first visual encounter with Basheer happens during a cricket match between India and Pakistan where Basheer roots for India and Sachin Tendulkar even as the other boys who watch the match with him are ready to celebrate the fall of Indian wickets. The idea that Muslim inhabitants of particular localities support Pakistan during India-Pakistan cricket matches not only repeats an archaic cliché but actually reinforces some of the entrenched prejudices regarding the supposedly questionable national loyalty of Muslim citizens which have even spawned the discourse of "internal threats" (148-164) espoused by such ideologues of communal hatred as M. S. Golwalkar. Furthermore, such a scenario actually identifies Basheer's patriotism as something exceptional and thereby serves to prolong the list of the "good Muslim" which other films like *Sarfarosh*, *A Wednesday*, or *Aamir* had previously established through their own problematic representations of the struggles between nationalism and terrorism. Such characters embody what Bhabha would elsewhere identify as the paradox of otherness which actually serves to exaggerate the difference of the Other (66-84). It is probably because of such exaggeration that almost all the Muslim men in the film are adorned with a customary black amulet and skull caps, irrespective of other dissimilarities. Edward Said argued that orientalism generally sought to "reduce the Orient to a kind of human flatness, which exposed its characteristics easily to scrutiny and removed from it its complicating humanity" (*Orientalism* 150). A similar flatness is deployed in the representational matrix of Srijit Mukherji's *Zulfiqar*, particularly in the second half when Akhtar, Zulfiqar's nephew, previously a guitar-strumming, clean-shaven young man, suddenly morphs into a pathan-suit clad, surma-smeared, bearded gangstar, out to avenge Zulfiqar's death.

While the idea that Akhtar is trying his best to take up his uncle's position is obvious, such visualization seems both unrealistic and anachronistic as generational shifts among the Mafioso are not supposed to be concordant with sartorial or cosmetic continuations. Films like *Godfather* or *Sarkar* can be cited as cases in point. Michael Corleone may take after his father and become the new don, but he does it with his own distinctive style. Also when Subhash Nagre's son Shankar takes up the role of the 'Sarkar', he may retain his methods but never bothers about replicating his father's dress. Instead, the character of Akhtar seems to embrace many of the mannerisms of his uncle despite belonging to a different generation and with a drastically different upbringing. As Said had demonstrated, "Imaginative geography…legitimates a vocabulary, a universe of representative discourse peculiar to the discussion and understanding of Islam

and of the Orient…They are all declarative and self-evident; the tense they employ is the timeless eternal…" (*Orientalism* 71-72). The same pattern is evident in Mukherji's re-orientalist cinematic representation as well where the imaginative geography that identifies the Kidderpore area as a "musholman para", as a country within a country, legitimates a mob aesthetic of the timeless eternal which reinforces the otherisation of the Muslim subject. Despite the fact that statistics of National Crime Record Bureau have often highlighted Kolkata's relatively safe status, compared to other metropolitan cities in India, Mukherji taps into the trope of cultural voyeurism and foregrounds a kind of criminal exotica which chimes well with the re-orientalist trend of what Lisa Lau calls the "production, marketing, and selling of Dark India" (17) that also echoes global Islamophobia. Once again, a comparison between *Zulfiqar* and *Sarkar* becomes illustrative. The chief villain of the latter, Rasheed, not only dresses with characteristic smartness but he is accompanied by a whole host of underworld operatives each of whom bears their distinctive sartorial styles and mannerisms which cannot be reduced to essentialisations of any kind.

What is also remarkable in this context is the fact that our first introduction to the power and authority of Sarkar happens when he decides to deliver vigilante justice for a traumatised father whose daughter was raped and then committed suicide due to unavailability of justice. Such an episode squarely establishes the ethical authority of Sarkar in a way which is quite different from that of the representation of the don in Godfather. While Mukherji also remains indebted to *Godfather* along with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, his Zulfiqar, despite being a reincarnation of Caesar and Don Corleone, is only introduced to us as a man of daring machismo who ends up exploding a ship full of miscreants who had dared to abduct him, along with his associates. What remains missing throughout is that ethical core which *Sarkar* so obviously acquires and thereby makes it impossible to ensure any kind of positive identification on the part of the viewer.

Particularly significant is the fact that when the syndicate is asked to consider the prospect of sheltering certain Lashkar terrorists, even though some protest on principle and others on opportunistic grounds, Zulfiqar refuses to express any opinion and agrees to abide by whatever the syndicate decides, even though he later guns down the man responsible for harbouring the terrorists. While it is perfectly reasonable for any director to characterize his protagonist as such, it is possible to argue that such representation remains elusive for Zulfiqar precisely because of the re-orientalist representational matrix within which he is situated where Muslim

identity becomes synonymous with various forms of criminality and brutishness. And even though, Srijit Mukherji claims that the chief 'villain' of the film is a Hindu character named Kashinath Kundu, the fact that he is the illegitimate son of a Muslim woman, undermines the credibility of the director's claim. This equation between Muslim identity and brutality and violence becomes particularly palpable in the scenes following the public *janaza* for Zulfiqar which showcase public grief transforming into avenging rage, instigated by the speeches of Zulfiqar's surviving associates, following the pattern of civil unrest in Rome after Mark Antony's speech at Caesar's funeral in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. However, what distinguishes Mukherji's sequence is the frenzy of arson, plunder, assault and murder unleashed by a sword-wielding, skull-cap donning, lungi-wearing mob which targets shops, pedestrians and the conspirators behind Zulfiqar's murder with indiscriminate ferocity. One is reminded, in this context, of a story like Rudyard Kipling's "The Amir's Homily" where the author writes "To the Afghan neither life, property, law, nor kingship are sacred when his own lusts prompt him to rebel. He is a thief by instinct, a murderer by heredity and training, and frankly and bestially immoral by all three" (Kipling, 2591).

The typical orientalist crudity of Kipling's narration finds a belated re-Orientalist imagining in Mukherji's cinematic universe where the word 'Afghan' could easily be replaced by the word 'Muslim'. The mobilization of such blatantly sectarian iconography in the visualization of the scenes offers a naturalization of entrenched prejudices regarding the supposed irrationality and bestiality of Muslim inhabitants which opposes the ideational anonymity of Shakespeare's Roman mob. Furthermore, the final sequence of the film, which shows Akhtar establishing supreme control in the area by eliminating every potential threat, including the police inspector who had helped him in his quest for revenge all along, is immediately followed by the song "Ek purono masjid e/gaan dhorechhe murshid e…"(*The Murshid sings in an old mosque*), coupled with the refrain "Al-madad, Allah madad". Such invocations further emphasize the fact that for Mukherji the entire film remains encapsulated within a decidedly communal vision and the panorama of murder and intrigue remains directly integrated with his perception of the Muslim community of a particular locality even though other songs speak of the wounds of time in more generalised terms. As Tanveer Nasreen, Professor of History in the University of Burdwan noted with despair and sarcasm, "The harm unleashed by the cultural metaphor used in this film will take a long time to be rectified… Thank you Srijit Mukherjee for actually pointing out that Muslims are quintessentially 'C-class' (Criminal-class) in India" ("Open Letter" 2016).

Not only does Mukherji embrace what Lau defines as "re-Orientalist strategies of depicting the underbelly of India in order to reinforce Western, almost Victorian, stereotypes of India as dirty, dangerous, exciting in a sordid way, full of criminals and corruptions" (22) but he does so by fusing re-Orientalism and Islamophobia through a unrealistic amalgamation that rampantly ignores the cultural syncretism, educational heritage and gastronomical delights so intricately associated with Kidderpore as a whole (Mukhopadhyay, 2023).

Conclusion

In the process, despite protestations to the contrary, Mukherji's *Zulfiqar* becomes aligned with both the discourses of Islamophobia currently rampant in various parts of United States and Europe where the Orientalism has re-asserted its presence with a vengeance and the ideology of virulent Hindutva ravaging different parts of India, capitalizing on the fear of Islamic Jihad, the sustained espionage activities of ISI and other organisations and various other imagined and actual threats. The same discursive matrix that sanctions the murders of Akhlaq Ahmad or Md. Afrazul is also directly and indirectly responsible for the representational dynamics of Mukherji's *Zulfiqar*. The immense commercial success of the film and the paucity of significant resistance it generated also testify to the pervasiveness of such discourses and serve to expose the underlying fissures of the Bengali cultural sphere.

If, as Pierre-Andre Taguieff reminds us, "…in racist thought, racial difference and cultural difference are two designations of the same phenomenon" (221), then it can be argued that a film like *Zulfiqar* continues to uphold the lacerations of that notorious two-nation theory which had been at the heart of the worst sectarian violence that Kolkata as a city and Bengal as a region had ever seen. In keeping with lyrics of one particular song from *Zulfiqar*, these are the embedded wounds of time which this re-orientalist film so ironically aggravates. Despite the gloss provided by the aura of Shakespeare and the kind of cultural capital associated with the stature of Srijit Mukherji himself, the film ultimately remains mired in otherising stereotypes of colonial provenance and serves to highlight the frictions and fissures associated with the domain of Bengali culture. Unless such misrepresentations are vigorously challenged, they will continue to further distrust and discord across multiple strata of society.

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