

## Book Review:

<b>Title:</b>	<i>Muslim Identity in Hindi Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation</i>
<b>Author:</b>	Mohammad Asim Siddiqui
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Mohammad Asim Siddiqui's *Muslim Identity in Indian Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation*, published by Routledge in 2025, provides a timely and sharp analysis of the changing portrayal of Muslim identity within Hindi cinema. The book carefully examines how perceptions of Muslim identity have evolved, tracing a path from historic films of the 1940s to modern narratives that often address the complexities of post-9/11 stereotypes and the wider issue of "global Muslim identity". Siddiqui is Professor of English at Aligarh Muslim University, an avid critic, translator, and reviewer. His main argument suggests that cinematic genres, language, and various sign systems are not just passive mirrors of societal views but actively shape and communicate ideas of identity.

The key issues, such as social diversity, tokenism, and marginality, analysing how these concepts are reflected and reinforced in Hindi films are investigated at great length. The book also delves into sensitive historical and contemporary topics, including Partition violence, communal riots, and the complex politics of interfaith relationships. The sub-title, "Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation," emphasizes cinema's powerful ability to both reflect societal attitudes and influence public perception. By claiming that cinematic elements help in understanding society, Siddiqui points to cinema's deep cultural impact and the vital need for audiences to recognise how identities are constructed through film. In appreciation of the book, Muzaffar Ali, filmmaker and artist, points out: "The book takes you on an uneasy path of belonging to the minority when an unnatural conflict with the majority is gaining momentum".

The "Introduction" provides a solid academic foundation for Siddiqui's main argument, which suggests that cinematic genres, language, and various sign systems are not merely passive reflections of societal views but actively shape and communicate ideas of identity. This theoretical approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of key issues such as social diversity, tokenism, and marginality, analysing how these concepts are reflected and reinforced in Hindi films. The book's focus is on the "poetics" of cinema. It allows a deep understanding of language, sign systems, and narrative construction, which is crucial for analyzing the evolution and role of Hindustani/Urdu within Hindi films. Perhaps that gives enough reason for Arjun Appadurai of New York University to point out that the book, '...combines encyclopaedic scholarship and a subtle critical sensibility to produce a milestone study of Hindi cinema. Focussing on the numerous forms and functions of Muslimness in Hindi popular cinema....'.

Siddiqui meticulously traces a clear evolution in the cinematic portrayal of Muslim identity, beginning from historical films in the 1930s through the late 1970s. He says:

India's first talkie *Alam Ara* (1931)...was influenced by the conventions of the Parsi theatre.... Urdu-dominated Hindustani defined Muslim historical films like *Jahan Ara* (1935), *Anarkali* (1939), *Pukar* (1939) and *Sikandar* (1941). Urdu words mark the diction of films in Hindi.... *Pyasa* (1957) imbued with the poetics of the Progressive writers' movement....*Kabhie Kabhie* (1976), in line with Yash Chopra's celebration of love and finer emotions... puts focus on Urdu poetry (11-12).

*Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) has been progressively replaced by a "Hindutva vision," which increasingly casts Muslims as the "other". This shift is more than a mere change in cinematic style; it signifies a deep politicization of historical narratives within Indian cinema. An unprecedented surge in films structured around themes related to Muslim rulers often stems from a certain naivety on the part of directors, who may believe that retelling the past, or an imagined past, can resolve questions of cultural identity. This suggests that historical films are not neutral chronicles but become active sites for ideological contestation, where the past is re-imagined and re-presented to serve contemporary political agendas. Siddiqui's analysis is richly illustrated with specific film examples that serve to solidify his arguments. *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960) is presented as a pivotal example of the earlier "inclusive vision" that has since been eroded in contemporary cinema. He offers sensitive readings of films by contemporary directors like

Raja Kumar Hirani and Zoya Akhtar, noting how their works often defy predictable markers of identity. This is consistent with observations about films such as *Zanjeer*, *Angaar*, *PK*, *Dear Zindagi*, *Chak de India*, *My Name is Khan*, *Raazi*, *Gully Boy*, and *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

Movies such as *Sikander*, *Taj Mahal*, *Anarkali*, *Razia Sultan*, *Jodha Akbar*, and *Bajirao Mastani* tend to reduce complex historical personalities to simple caricatures as “foreigners and despots”, which deepens communal rifts instead of promoting historical reflection or unity. The change in representation seems to accompany a shift in society, social beliefs, and political thinking, and features Muslim characters as roles steeped in fictional violence and unrelenting aggression. Which, in turn, Siddiqui argues, constructs a monolithic and simplistic narrative about the community that serves a counter-productive purpose. A focal point of Siddiqui’s study is that he highlights the text of genre, language, and other sign systems that obscure and construct identity. His approach is to examine films of diverse genres such as Muslim social, action thriller, gangster-biopic, and others. The poetics of cinema, which includes visuals and costumes, lyrics, music, and sound effects, may appear to be for the sake of beauty, but it holds the audience’s gaze and reinforces or counters deep-rooted stereotypes of the society.

Siddiqui dedicates a significant portion of his analysis to the portrayal of Muslim women characters, particularly in the chapter “Begums, Bais, and the New Muslim Women of Hindi Films”. He offers a panoramic view of these representations, critically examining the politics of interfaith romances. He observes a recurring pattern where “the man usually happens to be a Hindu and the girl a Muslim,” suggesting that this trope, while ostensibly driven by “political correctness and market forces,” ultimately “reveals deep-rooted sexual anxiety about protecting and preserving women”. Siddiqui describes the directors as having “an unprecedented surge in structuring films on themes related to Muslim rulers,” while simultaneously showing what can only be described as a “sense of naivety” in believing that a recounting of history, without context, would be sufficient to resolve questions of cultural identity.

It is vital to note this “naivety.” It is not benign, hurtful, as in the case of identity issues, the historical retellings, especially those drenched in a “Hindutva vision”, seek to foster understanding, oversimplifying complex historical figures into “foreigners and despots.” This lack of critical historical engagement enables the reinforcement of existing stereotypes, a reductionist view of a richly diverse community. The suggestion is

that these films, while seemingly celebratory of culture or history, are historically themed and masquerading as politically celebratory, 'other' by refusing to document relatable realities and authentic portrayals for contemporary audiences, through biased portrayals of contemporary audiences, echoing in the present. Siddiqui's arguments resonate and expand the focus of scholars like Nadira Khatun, who, in *Postcolonial Bollywood and Muslim Identity*, remarks on how Bollywood employs a "selective ideological lens" which leads to "essentialized" and "homogenized" portrayals or representations of Muslims, entirely disregarding their socio-political landscapes.

The book has a comprehensive historical sweep, meticulously covering eight decades of Hindi cinema and its detailed engagement with various film genres. It has a nuanced analytical framework, which intricately intertwines "poetics" and "politics," and provides a robust understanding of identity construction in cinema. However, the focus on Hindi cinema inherently limits its engagement with Muslim representation in other significant Indian film industries (e.g., Bengali, South Indian cinema). This presents a fertile ground for future comparative studies that could broaden the understanding of pan-Indian cinematic portrayals.

The book's primary focus on textual analysis, while rigorous, could be complemented by further research. Integrating empirical audience studies could provide a more holistic understanding of the reception and real-world implications of these cinematic representations, offering a more complete picture of the feedback loop between cinema and society. Siddiqui's *"Muslim Identity in Indian Cinema: Poetics and Politics of Genre and Representation"* is poised to become a foundational text for scholars across film studies, cultural studies, and the study of minority representation. Its incisive examinations into the mechanisms of "othering" and the ideological underpinnings of cinematic narratives will undoubtedly stimulate further critical inquiry into how marginalised identities are constructed and contested on screen, both within India and across global contexts. The book serves as a vital call for more nuanced, sensitive, and responsible cinematic portrayals, ultimately fostering a deeper and more empathetic understanding of India's pluralistic society. The book is a must-read and a treasure trove for lovers of Indian Cinema.

**Pradeep Trikha**