

REVIEW

Shooting Terror. Terrorism in Hindi Films. By Meenakshi Bharat. Routledge, 2020. Pp. 187.

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Shooting Terror. Terrorism in Hindi Films written by Meenakshi Bharat is a detailed investigation of the methods in which acts of terror are depicted in contemporary visual culture. Providing an overview of Hindi films on terrorism, the study outlines the divergencies as well as the convergences between Indian terrorist films and Western cinema preoccupied with similar topics. The book is divided into eight chapters outlining the manifold discernment of the topic; it contains the bibliography and index together with the list of films that the author analyzes.

Meenakshi Bharat's study is one of the most comprehensive and insightful readings of the theme of terrorism in Hindi cinema, offering a textual analysis of the films in question. The author is aware of the *Guardian's* claims that since 9/11 "a new book on terrorism has been published every six hours ... with each incident, each location, each postterrorist creative foray providing new reasons for its enunciation" (13),¹ but argues persuasively that the continual interest exposes the mechanisms of the invasion of contemporary culture and politics with anxieties concerning real and imaginary threats. The first chapters of the book touch on the topic of the original Hindi films and reveal how, despite their Western roots, the films in question reflect the avowal of the artistic and historical quality of Hindi films, which both endorse and resist the Western modes of expression. Even though Hindi cinema had matured and developed under the tutelage of Western institutions, the films entered a dialogue with mainstream Western terrorist cinema, thrillers and crime films. Unlike in the West, where the terrorist is usually a (Muslim) stranger, in India, terrorism is also perceived as "tearing away at the national fabric of the country" (6).

¹ I am aware of the possible hyphenated spelling of the term "post-terrorist" but in the review I am using the original spelling of the author.

To this effect, the opening chapter “Filmic Witness to Terror”, lays out the scene for the discussion of particular films where Bharat, asserting that “cinema, significantly, has been a key artistic respondent to this ubiquitous terror globally” (1), examines both the reasons (acts of terror) as well as the results (films) of such actions. Bharat argues that the Indian subcontinent all too frequently has witnessed violence, the response to which has emerged in popular cinema. India is a country divided by different languages and religions, a nation in which mutual hostilities accentuate such divisions. The author states that the purpose of her work is the enquiry into those aspects of contemporary Indian culture that affect its citizens most profoundly. Particular facets of the above-mentioned discords are scrutinized in Chapter Two. Chapter One, as is customary, tackles the cultural and theoretical background of the study. The author assumes that the reader of the study would know the psychological and historical basis of ethnic conflicts that lead to terrorism, which is not always the case. Thus, while the bibliography contains works on India’s turbulent history, it lacks background works such as Bruce Hoffman’s *Inside Terrorism* (2006), David L. Altheide’s *Terrorism and the Politics of Fear* (2006), and Joseph L. Soeters’s *Ethnic Conflict and Terrorism. The Origins and Dynamics of Civil Wars* (2008 [2005]). The latter would be especially of use, since Bharat claims that “[f]ilms on terrorism respond, to a greater or lesser extent, to the exasperating problems of ethicality” (5). Even though the author does “trace the trajectory” of the development of terrorism in the second decade of the twenty-first century and she intends to familiarize the non-Indian viewers of Hindi films with the films themselves (9), the book is addressed to a knowledgeable viewer, rather than to an audience unfamiliar with the films. Nonetheless, one has to admire Bharat’s assessment of the techniques of contemporary cinema, and her elucidation of “its persisting features, transformation, and evolution” (9).

As it transpires, one of the pitfalls of theoretical chapters is always the speculation of the audience’s prior knowledge; those who know and are interested would sneer at too much explanation and those who do not receive enough of it. Still, when the author evaluates “The rise of the film on terrorism in India,” a subchapter that brings to light certain stock characters appearing in Hindi films in the past, namely, a zamindar, a dacoit, a smuggler (6), she leaves it to the reader to identify these types. To remedy the possible drawbacks, Bharat highlights the “Bollywood format” of the early films on terrorism, which “create an image of the villain-hero as the successor to the formulaic ‘Bollywood’ villain, the prototypical criminal ‘boss’” (29). In this way, her claims substantiate the alterations of the prototypical rogue of the Hindi film to the figure of the contemporary terrorist, and emphasize the presence of an iconic figure whose actions nowadays go against the unity of India as a multilingual, multi-religious nation-state. Consequently, Hindi films on terror while aligning with the ever-

present juxtaposition of “us” (the Muslim believers mainly of Arab or Pakistani origin) and “them” (the Westernized depraved irreligious masses of Europe and the US) in India, indicate that such divergences are not only stemming from the religious and ethnic conflict but are as bound with India’s post-1949 history, thus gaining a “sociological and historical significance” (6). In the subsequent subchapter, “The idea of postterrorism in cinema” Bharat cites Edward Said’s “... critique of the West’s war against terrorism [which] reveals retaliatory ideological anger. We are never terrorists, they always are” (7). Although Edward Said’s *Covering Islam. How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997 [1981]) is one of the crucial works on the representation of Islam in the media, only Said’s *Orientalism* (2003 [1978]) has found its way into the bibliography.

In Chapter Two entitled “Early Films on Terrorism in Kashmir” Bharat explains how in the post-Partition period various films presented the controversial issue of radicalizing, or rather Talibanizing Kashmir, using the image of the suffering state tormented by religious conflicts. For the author, the films became historical records of the divergences, testing the national allegiances, paving the way for the representations of Kashmir of the 1990s as a space of restlessness and grief; the 1990s in Kashmir, being the peak of the terrorist actions of ‘Islamic terrorism’. Further commentary on such depictions is to be found in Chapter Three, in which the author discusses Kashmir as a “Paradise Desecrated.” By looking into the genealogy “for the Kashmir problem” (54), she draws attention to the increasingly popular metaphors of the violated paradise presented in the context of the discourses on national and ethnic identifications.

Chapters Two and Three, which deal with Kashmir, are of particular importance to the non-Indian reader, as they underscore the crucial moments in the history of enmities in the region. Thus, the chapter on “Early Films on Terrorism in Kashmir” makes the reader aware of the already existing bulk of cinematic representations of terror in Kashmir narrating momentous historical events. Furthermore, the above-mentioned discussion contextualizes the contemporary language of terror as “entrenched in the cinematic vocabulary of the new genre of the terror-focused film ...” (27) giving rise to distinctive themes in the cinema in question. Kashmir is one of the provinces united by a distinct language spoken by the Muslims as well as Hindus, a fact which is rarely given much consideration and which gives the conflict a different angle. Bharat’s survey of the inspirations behind the earlier films facilitates the reading and comprehension of the more current trends, in which Kashmir is represented through its defiled environment. The potent cinematic vision of the Kashmiri mountainscape is utilized to probe the ideas of nationality seen against the unsettling history of the region. Using the Coleridgean visions of childhood innocence, but working with the patriarchal formulas of female chastity as linked with the purity of the land, the films disclose

the corrosive influence of terrorism on family life (43, 45). The emphasis on the natural beauty of the area as amassing “the price of innocence,” which is then contrasted with the advance of terror polluting human existence, brings to light the most important characteristics of the said cinema for the non-Indian reader. Such readers and viewers, however, would have possibly benefited from a more theoretical exposition to eco-critical preoccupations, as these themes resonate with the eco-conscious concerns of contemporary culture.

Chapter Four, “Home-focused Terrorism”, sketches the implications of the riots in Punjab, which incited the Sikhs to construe them as an attack on their religion. Inspecting the senselessness of violence, the main goal of the filmmakers’ endeavors, Bharat draws attention to the historical acts of terror, for example, the Sikhs involvement in the assassination of Indira Ghandi (67). The anti-Sikh riots, which the Sikh community believed were inspired by the government forces, led to the growth of militancy and further alienated the Sikh community (67). In this part, the correlation of historical incidents and their film versions is one of the strengths of Bharat’s revision.

The processes of exclusion, this time of the Muslim community, are presented in Chapter Five entitled “Mumbai Under Attack: Gnawing Away at the Innards”, which deals with the adaptation of various Mumbai-based incidents in the cinema. Unlike other cinematic renderings, the Mumbai set films are mostly based on real-life attacks, hence, the chapter begins with the list of bomb explosions in the city (81). Bharat, however, tries to account not only for the most recent occurrences but goes back to look at the narratives inspired by the 1993 bomb blast (82); the cultural context ameliorating her argumentation.

Having drawn the impact of the home-grown radical movements, in Chapter Six “Beyond Borders: The International Reach of Post Terrorist Hindi Films” Bharat pens post 9/11 Islamophobia in American and Western melodramas, for example, *My name is Khan* (2010), but also in Hindi thrillers such as *Mission Istanbul* (2008, directed by Aproova Lakhia) and the biopic *Omerta* (2017, directed by Hansal Mehta), both underscoring the transformation of the early twenty-first century paranoid hyper-vigilance into racism. Regardless of the predictable implications of the movies, the author maintains that “... the transnational Hindi postterrorist film offers intriguing insights into the developing imaginary of the popular culture filmic constructions” (125). Chapter Six contains an in-depth reconsideration of the international reach of postterrorist Hindi films. By going beyond the national misgivings, Bharat uncovers the more general and global rifts. In her view, recent films based on religious clashes generate islamophobia feeding xenophobic behaviors around the globe. The broader cultural context of the origins and presence of xenophobia has been explored by Tabish Khair in *The New Xenophobia* (2016), which is not mentioned in Bharat’s account.

In contrast to the overall seriousness of the topic of terrorism, Chapter Seven “Growing Maturity: Humor in the Hindi Film on Terror” concerns the uses of the comic in Hindi films. It is the most striking and attention-grabbing section, which taps into the postmodern recognition of humor as a tool for dealing with trauma (129).² Standing for the response to violent ideologies of exclusion, the fact which Bharat associates with a form of cultural maturation, comedy destabilizes the clear-cut interpretations of good and evil (12). The satiric film *Tere Bin Laden*, whose poster was banned in Pakistan (132), articulates the need for jokes, for a “shared obscene solidarity” the author concurs – quoting Slavoj Žižek (151).

Chapter Eight “Reckoning Postterrorism in Hindi Cinema” provides the conclusion to diverse aspects of postterrorism in Hindi cinema and discusses Western responses to terror, in films such as Katherine Bigelow’s *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), as well as the earlier series, for instance, *Homeland* and *24 Hours*; the last two dramatized the national and international sense of fear bifurcating the post-Cold War world into heroes and villains all over again, which in itself is a reductive and fraught representation. Depicting historical events, the films display the destabilizing forces endangering Western democracy and the values it stands for. The Hindi pictures, as Bharat observes, challenge the issues of cultural, religious and national identification (156–157). The creators of the Hindi movies show attentiveness to particular regions and their troubled histories; in the Mumbai films, for example, the lives of the common people are entwined in the life of the city. Nevertheless, substituting the spy thriller of the earlier era, contemporary action films are much more brutal and controversial, tackling, among others, suicide bombings (155).

Both earlier as well as more recent theoretical works on terrorism stress the fundamental fact that one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter. Meenakshi Bharat’s study attempts to analyze both sides of the divide as she revises the black-and-white principles of ideological positions, thereby reevaluating the images of the home-grown villains as well as more exotic and fantasized constructions of the Other. In addition, and most importantly, the book contrasts two opposing general types of films (the Hollywood-style, heroic/War-on-Terror narrative vs. the critical, Third Cinema-style film) and uniquely suggests the Hindi cinema paradigms for understanding and analyzing the most important and most interesting terrorism films. Visuality undoubtedly forges the impact on the audience, but it also precipitates the inevitable side-taking “for both the filmmaker and the viewer” (5). Bharat clarifies that the terrorist characters in Hindi cinema demonstrate resistance towards the Western stereotypes of violence occurring

² Here, the classical study on the psychological perspectives on terrorism and its consequences edited by Andrew Silke (2006) could be of interest.

in India. The films analyzed in the study are the reflections of contemporary culture, in the local and global sense, and the author's explorations sensitize the audience towards the complex situation of not only religiously, but ethnically, sociologically and historically based conflicts still existing in the Indian subcontinent. Examining the most recent films, but placing them in the historical setting, the study pinpoints the Indian context, unearthing hitherto unknown aspects of Hindi cinematography. Captivatingly and unconventionally, the author explores the pathology of violence, steeped not only in ethnic and religious dogmas, but equally in the politics of control, and that is the unprecedented and unquestionable value of her research.

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