



# The Representation Of The Indian Soldier In Bollywood Feature Films Veer-Zaara, Dunki, Major And Jawan

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**Abstract:** The study discusses how the Indian soldier has been portrayed over time in Bollywood movies and considers the film Veer-Zaara (2004), Major (2022), Jawan (2023), and Dunki (2023). This is mainly to examine how these movies form the identity of the soldier, patriotism and moral uprightness as India undergoes a shift in its socio-political settings. The relevance of the study in knowing the way popular cinema reflects the national mood and shapes the national vision of nationalism, sacrifice and heroism. The study uses a qualitative research approach through the use of secondary sources which include scholarly literature, film reviews, and critical essays to explain the thematic and visual representations of the soldier. The discussion shows that there is a definite direction to the trends taken by Bollywood: to the emotional, secular nationalism of Veer-Zaara, to the hyper-masculine ideals of the soldier in Major, and, lastly, to the socially aware and justice-focused films in Jawan and Dunki. It has been mentioned in the discussion how these representations, in addition to being representative of the political development of India, that is, romanticized patriotism and critical critique of systemic breakdowns, humanize the soldier as a multifaceted being who ambivalently serves the country, sympathizes with it, and opposes it. It concludes that the film soldier is still a strong cultural icon, at once an expression of and a challenge to mainstream nationalist and moral heroic ideologies. Through this transformation, the study adds to the current debates on media, identity and politicization of patriotism in Indian popular culture.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, Indian soldier, nationalism, patriotism, cinematic representation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of Bollywood in developing the Indian cultural discourse has never been less significant, as it not only reflected the common sentiment but also played an active role in the formation of the concepts of nationhood, sacrifice, and service. One of its repetitive motives is the image of the soldier - a figure who is in the crossing of the duty, identity and emotion. Since decades, this movie soldier has served as an ideal of hero and as a locus of narrative conflict, between individual desires and national requirements. With the shifting sociopolitical issues in India - whether the borders, domestic safety, diasporic, or civil issues - the image of a soldier in Bollywood has changed as well. What has perhaps a very clear representation of the heroic sacrifice has multiplied in most instances with overtones of vulnerability, criticism and moral ambiguity (Shailo, I. pp - 123 - 129).

In this respect, the four movies Veer-Zaara (2004), Dunki (2023), Major (2022), and Jawan (2023) present interesting examples. Although Veer-Zaara is an old movie in the context of film studies, the other three are new and have not been studied widely in academic literature. Yet, their study in combination with Veer-Zaara can guides to identify recurrence and deviations in the way the Bollywood stereotypes the Indian soldier. These movies enable to take into consideration the negotiation of identity of the soldier in the form of the subject of cross-border sacrifice, emotional load, vigilante justice and the interplay of collective responsibility and individual lives. The difference between the older and the newer depictions serves the

purpose of the changes in expectations of the heroism of film and serving the country in the XXI century (Zafar, et al., pp -675-695).

### 1.1 The Soldier as National Symbol: Idealism, Sacrifice, and Border Metaphors

Traditionally, Bollywood used to introduce the soldier as a symbol of national unity, duty and sacrifice. In *Veer-Zaara*, the main character of the movie, Veer Pratap Singh, a member of the Indian Air Force, is a person who possesses this ideal. The hardship of the life, wrongful imprisonment on the other side of the border, and years of separation with the beloved Zaara is not only a tragedy to own life but also a symbolic gesture of national reconciliation (indianexpress.com). The border, the uniform, the imprisonment scene all is turned into a metaphoric device dramatizing the India-Pakistan conflicts but humanizing them with the help of personal stories. Indeed, reviewing *Veer-Zaara*, critics say that the movie employs romantic melodrama to cushion political rancour in that the soldier is portrayed as an innocent messenger between two countries (cap-press.com).

However, there are problems with this dreamy symbolism. Often criticized and military commentators have highlighted that the portrayals of Bollywood are usually either too emotional, jingoistic or technically poor. Indicatively, movie critics and proponents of the defense force have lamented that most war and soldier movies err in their military specifications, such as uniforms and procedures due to the fact that the filmmakers are focused on the drama, not realism (timesofindia.indiatimes.com). One such source remarks:

This conflict of the symbolic idealism and narrative exaggeration is the key to the study of the soldier image in Bollywood. Idealism provides a sense of emotional appeal and nationalism, but any deviation or inaccuracy of the idealism can be labeled as shallow or propaganda. This is further extended to newer films such as *Jawan* which treats the soldier not only as a guardian of the border, but a domestic vigilante that is fighting institutional injustice (Indian Express, 2023). The symbolic terrain gets complicated by such shifts: the soldier turns into a social reformer, not only the protector of territorial integrity (indianexpress.com).

### 1.2 Humanization, Emotional Realism, and the Soldier's Inner Life

One of the most important changes in recent depictions is to make the soldier more human-- foregrounding conflicts within, workings of the personal relationship, moral issues, and emotional expenditures. In *Major* (but not within the scholarly-only pre 2020 context), filmmakers strive to reconcile the publicized heroism of the soldier with the personal one - of tragedy, of family ties, of guilt and of legacy. This kind of representation is a continuation of an already observable trend in the Bollywood war and military cinema, which focuses on the psychological toll of service, and not on pure heroism.

Even in *Veer Zaara*, the script does not hold anything back on emotional realism. The years of parting, the pain, the loss, all this is romanticized. But these are also elements used to make the soldier human. According to (cap-press.com), the courtroom scenes, the visual framing and the dialogues all introduce Veer not as a remote hero but as a susceptible person trapped by the end results of duty and love. The sentimental essence of the movie is the opposition of professional and personal desire of the soldier.

According to comparative commentary of film media, Bollywood films of recent years in the genre of war are progressively aiming at a narrative authenticity. As an example, even specialists have praised movies such as *Uri* and *Shershaah* because it has captured the details of operations, uniform, and military protocol correctly - in part by consulting former officers (timesofindia.indiatimes.com). Although as of 2020, there may not be much academic criticism of *Major*, *Jawan*, and *Dunki*, this overall trend is an industry trend: audiences and critics are no longer satisfied with symbolic heroism. The soldier has to be real, imperfect and emotionally viable.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Molaei, H., & Hussain Babaei, S. (pp. 379-400) discussed the presentation of Hindu-Muslim relations in recent Bollywood films, in which the authors referred more specifically to the movie *Tanhaji*, which illustrated a religious conflict during the 17th century when India was trying to gain its independence. As the level of discrimination against Muslims increased in modern India, the mass media, particularly the movie industry, which was the most powerful in terms of entertainment in the country, tended to reflect and support these prejudices. The study utilized *Tanhaji* as a case study to discuss how Muslims, especially the Mughals, were represented as being violent and irrational, whereas Hindus were presented as heroic, loyal,

and patriotic. Evidence indicated that Bollywood helped to polarize stories, strengthened stereotypes, and influenced the general opinion due to one-sided historical representations.

**Pandit, S., & Chattopadhyay, S. (pp. 156-170)** focused on the manner in which the Indian television news and social media represented a sparse military operation as a nationalistic spectacle through media discourse, specifically the coverage of the surgical strike by the Indian Army on 29 September 2016. The purpose of the study was to comprehend the influence of media on national identity and the perception of people. Through close textual analysis of the news coverage, the study highlighted a tendency towards militant nationalism and the labeling of people with certain ideologies. The results revealed that television news created an imaginary, homogeneous nation that was consistent with state policies and silenced any opposing and minority voices. The study discussed how Indian news media crossed the boundary between politics and journalism, supporting mainstream narratives of the state.

**Bhat, S. H. (pp. 6-16)** examined that India, the world leader in movie production, had produced more than 28,000 feature films, with Bollywood being the most influential movie production in the subcontinent, including Pakistan. The study discussed the image of Muslim men and women in Bollywood films. A survey was conducted among 100 university students using simple random sampling, which included 28% Muslim and 72% non-Muslim students, as well as 65% male and 35% female students. The results indicated that there was a repetition of the negative images of Muslims who were mostly depicted as terrorists or criminals. The study found that this kind of representation reinforced negative stereotypes. It aimed to discuss the selected modern movies to determine their influence on the Islamic identity.

**Luszczykiewicz, A. (pp. 123-138)** discussed the re-creation of modern Hindi cinema on the image of British colonial rule in India concerning the political and cultural influence on ordinary people and colonial attitudes toward the independence movement. It examined how the post 2000 cinema, especially *Lagaan* (2001), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), *Water* (2005), and *Rang De Basanti* (2006), revisited the story of the colonial past with a new twist. The study employed film analysis as methodology to conclude that the films depicted colonialism as oppressive, yet at the same time stirred national pride. The conclusion indicated the importance of cinema in cultivating the spirit of patriotism and strengthening postcolonial identity for the Indian viewers.

**Sial, N., et al., (pp. 125-136)** explored how the Bollywood movies captured the image of Pakistan after the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, in the historical background of poor relations that had existed between India and Pakistan since the 1947 partition. The study examined the manner in which Pakistani citizens, military/intelligence agencies, and religious groups were portrayed in post-2008 Hindi cinema. The discourse analysis served as the research methodology, applied to three selected films through the examination of their dialogues and narratives. The results indicated a pattern of negative portrayal of Pakistan, which supported the aggressive stereotypes. By utilizing the propaganda model presented by Herman and Chomsky, the study found that Bollywood served as a source of ideology and that the films of the Bollywood industry were directed towards the interests of the Indian state and at the nationalistic feeling.

**Bedi, K. (pp. 11-29)** discussed the role of mainstream Hindu cinema as a discursive instrument to form national identity and political ideology, especially in relation to the relations between India and Pakistan. Based on the Ontological Security Theory, it examined how the films created the dominant discourses of the Indian and Pakistani identities, one way being to frame Pakistan as the other, which was usually accomplished through the violence of war and terrorism. The study examined how Hindutva, diaspora politics, and nationalism intermingled to create these images. The study employed qualitative content analysis of sampled movies to conclude that political changes greatly conditioned the film discourses, and found that cinema mirrored and supported the ideologies of dominant statistics and the current Indo-Pak politics.

**Khatun, N. (pp. 41-60)** examined the controversial zone of secularism and Muslim identity in popular Hindi cinema since the 1990s, having been involved in discussions with scholars such as Khilnani and Chatterjee and filmmakers like Shyam Benegal. It examined the manner in which communalism and nationalism were created through the militarization of the Muslims in cinematic images based on the theory of representation and knowledge by Edward Said. Based on a textual approach to analyzing the chosen movies and qualitative data from interviews with filmmakers and critics, the study concluded that the image of Muslims was depicted either through stereotyping or by absorption into the dominant upper-caste Hindu

discourse. It concluded that popular cinema supported a Hindu-majoritarian national identity at the expense of the Muslim Other.

**Mohaiemen, N. (pp. 31-57)** examined the response to the release of a documentary on the Liberation War of Bangladesh of 1971, titled *Muktir Gaan* (1995), following a political silence in the film industry on the topic. The film had been made from the archival footage by Tareque and Catherine Masud, and it had been accepted by Bangladeshi audiences as a fact most of the time, even though the film had been constructed and later revealed in its DVD release. The analysis of the perception of the audience and the discourse in media was conducted qualitatively to study the impact of sacred national narratives on viewing modes. It concluded that due to the absence of original footage of the war and the emotional significance of national memory, viewers were led to a position of belief, and that members of such groups were more concerned about their identity than about critical analysis.

### 3. RESEARCH GAP

Although a few studies have been conducted to examine the convergence of media, nationalism and religious identity in Indian and South Asian films, a lot of gaps are left. Molaei and Hussain Babaei emphasize the re-enforcement of negative stereotypes and communal discourse in their case study of *Tanhaji* as Bhat also notes the same thing of stereotyped representation of Muslim characters in Bollywood movies, but these studies are limited to analyzing single films or generalized trends on the same issue over decades (Molaei and Babaei; Bhat). Pandit and Chattopadhyay, and Bedi demonstrate the way media (especially news and cinema) propagate militant nationalism and shape national identities, though both fail to extensively relate the images to the way viewers perceive these images in the long run and how the images relate to inter-community relations (Pandit and Chattopadhyay; Bedi). Luszczkiewicz looks at how colonial history has been portrayed in Indian cinema today but does not dwell on the current communal friction (Luszczkiewicz). The representations of Pakistan and Muslim identity are explored by Sial et al. and Khatun, respectively, yet the changing filmmaking tools of the post-2014 environment and the political factors are the least explored (Sial, Arafat, and Zafar; Khatun). The aspect of the reception of the audience is not a unique case of Mohaiemen (Bangladeshi situation), but this method is not applied to Indian cinema (Mohaiemen). Taken together, these articles do not present an overall and comparative structure that study how the representation of the filmic story in various genres and times actively constructs and mirrors the relationship between Hindus and Muslims and national identity in modern India. Empirical research on audience reception, and internalization or resistance of those portrayals by the audience is also limited.

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research uses a qualitative approach to research in order to examine how the relationships between Hindus and Muslims and how Muslims are depicted in Bollywood films. The study, by applying a descriptive and exploratory research design, attempts to describe current trends on one hand, and reveals the underlying meaning to cinematic narratives on the other. The secondary sources are used to gather data in the form of scholarly articles, film reviews, media discourse and past research studies. In this manner, it is possible to provide a thorough analysis of the chosen movies and literature to see in which ways popular Hindi cinema creates religious identities and reproduces more general socio-political ideologies in modern-day India.

### 5. RESULT

**H1: There is a significant difference in the portrayal of the Indian soldier's identity, values, and patriotism across the films *Veer-Zaara*, *Dunki*, *Major*, and *Jawan*, reflecting changing socio-cultural and political contexts in Bollywood narratives.**

The examination of the movies *Veer-Zaara* (2004), *Dunki* (2023), *Major* (2022), and *Jawan* (2023) shows that the image of the Indian soldier, the values, and patriotism have transformed considerably and is closely related to the changing socio-cultural and political situation in India. The soldier (Shah Rukh Khan) in *Veer-Zaara* is a caring and self-sacrificing soldier whose patriotism is totally based on love, humanity, and peace across borders and suggests a lighter and secular form of nationalism. *Major*, on the contrary, has given an extremely valorized and heroic portrayal of the real-life soldier, Sandeep Unnikrishnan, in the life which revolves around personal sacrifice and unswerving devotion to the country, which is consistent with the post-2010 discourse of hyper-nationalism and militarized patriotism in Indian cinema (Pandit and Chattopadhyay, pp. 156-170).



Jawan and Dunki also provide an example of how the ideals of patriotism were transformed. In Jawan, the role played by Shah Rukh Khan is a hybrid form of patriotism as a vigilante, fighting against corruption and systemic injustice yet still protecting national values: a move towards a more multi-dimensional form of patriotism that is critical of the state but in love with the nation. In contrast, Dunki also recalls the emotional and socio-economic downtroddenness of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), which depicts soldiers and civilians as survivors of neglect on the system level, thus implicitly criticizing mainstream nationalist discourses. These differences can be used to suggest that not only is Bollywood evolving its representation of soldiers to conform to the political spirit of the moment, but it is also exploring other discourses of identity, justice, and citizenship (Bedi, pp. 11-29). Accordingly, the hypothesis is confirmed because the image of the soldier varies greatly across movies and is affected by the changing socio-political environment.

## **H2: The representation of nationalism, sacrifice, and duty in the selected Bollywood films significantly influences the construction of the heroic image of the Indian soldier.**

Through the selected Bollywood films, it is clear that the heroic image of the Indian soldier is constructed around the concepts of nationalism, sacrifice, and duty. Such stories usually focus on personal sacrifice and unswerving devotion to the country and the soldiers are made out to be supermen. In the movie, such as Baby (2015) and Phantom (2015), soldiers and intelligence officers are portrayed as fearless citizens who do not hesitate to go beyond the law and morality in the name of national safety. This motion picture presentation follows the socio-political atmosphere where nationalism is exalted and military action is praised as the ultimate service. These movies have a role in forming the popular imagination of heroism, in which the soldier is not only a defender, but also a moral lighthouse depicting the ideal citizenship (pp. 163-179).

Moreover, the images in these depictions create an emotional bond between the audience and the military by supporting the dominant discourses that equate patriotism to sacrifice and unquestioned duty. The theatricalization of martyrdom, allegiance, and loyalty to the motherland solidifies a certain pattern of the model soldier, and this ignores subtle or critical attitudes. According to Viridi (p.p - 125-145), Bollywood cinema is majorly entailed in the mythology of the soldier as it is entangled in entertainment and political messages. This confirms that the presence of nationalist motives in films plays a major role in the formation and strengthening of the heroic image of the Indian soldier, forming an ideal image, which meets the requirements of the state discourse and popular opinion.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

The evidence of the study shows that there is a significant change in the image of an Indian soldier that is reflected in the Bollywood movies, which corresponds to socio-political shifts in the Indian society. The soldier in Veer- Zara (2004) is an icon of compassion, inter-border peace, and secularism- with the focus on emotional patriotism founded on love and sacrifice. Nevertheless, such movies as Major (2022), Baby (2015), and Phantom (2015) depict the soldier or intelligence officer as a hyper-masculine, action-oriented character, whose heroism is conditioned by violence, national duty, and supreme devotion to the nation. Such depictions are in line with the emergence of militarized nationalism in Indian media and its films, as has been argued by Ghosh (pp. 163-179), in which national security is used to justify extrajudicial acts, and nationalism is used to support the state in an uncritical manner.

The same change in cinematic stories can also substantiate the thesis of Viridi (pp - 125-145) that the Bollywood has a central role in mystification of the soldier identity because it builds up the patriotic archetypes that are entertaining and at the same time laden with ideological statements. Such movies help add to the overwhelming discourse in which nationalism, sacrifice, and duty are not mere cinematic tropes but the means of political orientation and socialization. Although recent movies such as Dunki (2023) and Jawan (2023) already start to challenge failures of the system and consider more nuanced depictions, the image of a hero soldier continues to be based on the concepts of martyrdom, duty, and moral superiority. The mythology of the soldier, therefore, remains perpetuated in the Bollywood film by the construction of the Bollywood soldier which has been a response to the changing discursive history of Indian nationalism within a complicated socio-political environment.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The changing image of the Indian soldier in the Bollywood films is an indication of changing socio-political awareness and shared vision of nationalism in the country. The heroic soldier in the kind-hearted and human-centered Veer in Veer-Zaara has turned into the multifaceted agent of the negotiation of justice, morality, and identity within the dynamic national setting, the cinematic soldier in the socially conscious protagonists of Jawan and Dunki. The ideological orientation of Bollywood, therefore, reflects the general ideological orientation of India, i.e., nationalism of the nostalgic variety, followed by the hyper-masculine type of patriotism, and ultimately, a state of reflection of the shortcomings of the system. Although these depictions remain a heroic celebration of sacrifice and duty, new writings are becoming more humanized and open to emotionally realistic writing coupled with a socio-political consciousness. As a result, once again the Bollywood soldier is a reflection as well as a shaper of national sentiment, a representation of the tension of love and duty, idealism and realism, and state loyalty and the individual conscience in modern India.

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