

## **Kashmir in the Cinematic Universe of Vidhu Vinod Chopra: A Study on Khamosh (1986), Mission Kashmir (2000) and Shikara (2020)**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the paradigm shift in the depiction of Kashmir in Vidhu Vinod Chopra's cinematic universe across four decades. The study is based on the analysis of three of his films based in Kashmir as the locale – Khamosh (1986), Mission Kashmir (2000) and Shikara (2020). Khamosh, a small budget whodunit thriller, is an exceptional film, especially considering the other contemporary commercial films as well as the later works of Chopra himself. Sans song and dance, it also completely averts the formulaic shackles of its genre as a Bollywood thriller. As a film based in Kashmir too, it sheds all the stereotypical nuances of picturesque landscapes on one hand; on the other, there is no reference to terrorism in Khamosh. Mission Kashmir and Shikara, which are separated by a time span of two decades, represent two different aspects of the same contentious issue of terrorism in Kashmir. Mission Kashmir, released at the beginning of the new millennium, is a reflection of the contemporary era. Shikara flashes back and forth in time, transporting the narrative to the 1990s. Hindi Cinema being a nexus between the cultural and the political phenomena, the study is focused on these depictions, as in consonance of the national realities with the fictional milieu in the context of representation of Kashmir.*

**Keywords:** Kashmir, Cinema, Hindi Cinema, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Films, Bollywood, Khamosh, Mission Kashmir, Shikara, terrorism, stereotypes, representation.

### **Introduction**

This paper is based on the study of depiction of Kashmir in filmmaker Vidhu Vinod Chopra's three films: Khamosh (1986), Mission Kashmir (2000) and Shikara (2020). Conflict in Kashmir has always grabbed the headlines and also drawn attention of filmmakers in India. Hindi Cinema being a nexus between the cultural and the political phenomena, the study is focused on Chopra's depictions, as in consonance of the national realities with the fictional milieu in the context of representation of Kashmir.

*“On 5<sup>th</sup> August 2019, government took a decision and under leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a new era of development has begun in Jammu and Kashmir, especially in the Valley...All-round development of Kashmir is close to Shri Narendra Modi's heart...,”* says Shri Amit Shah, Union Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Cooperation during his visit to Srinagar in October, 2021 (Press Information Bureau, 2021).

Terrorism had claimed 40,000 lives in the valley prior to the abrogation of Article 370 (Press Information Bureau, 2021). These facts and figures pertaining to Kashmir have also been reflected in the cinematic universe with depiction of Kashmir in Hindi films being largely synonymous with the theme of terrorism and vice versa (Raychaudhuri, 2018).

As opposed to a large number of commercial American films, commercial Hindi films do not strive to increase the fears of the viewers; instead, they promote solutions for living together, and one can sense a strong desire for reconciliatory narratives and plot structures (Richter, 2009). The mass culture representation of terrorism in Hollywood is problematic due to the highly suggestive effect of imaginary combined with ideological subtext (Riegler, 2010). With the exception of Hollywood, other national and transnational cinemas condemn violence, but provide balanced, personalized portrayals of both terrorists and counterterrorists (Bettwy, 2015). Arguably, the films from Hollywood have merely copied the rhetoric and logic of neo-conservative politics onto the silver screen (Richter, 2009).

Hindi cinema is by far the most popular form of mass entertainment in India and thus both a mirror and matrix of popular Indian culture (Trivedi, 2008). As a result of escalation of conflict in Kashmir in conjunction with other events which marked Indian history in the 1990s, the portrayal of terrorists in Hindi cinema witnessed an enhanced use of the subject as the threat (Kumar, 2013).

The protagonists are the focus in any cinema, including political films; and, by establishing the identity of the protagonist, we explore the reality represented and the political attitude of the filmmaker (Mazierska, 2014). According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, auteur theory is defined as the theory of filmmaking in which the director is viewed as the major creative force in a motion picture. Technique, personal style and interior meaning are the three premises of the auteur theory, which emphasizes the body of a director's work rather than masterpieces (Sarris, 1962).

### **Khamosh (1986)**

In *Khamosh*, Kashmir as the location of the film itself as well as the film-in-the-film has absolutely zero significance. Except for shots of what is most likely the Lidder river, *Khamosh* does not even try to explore the picturesque valley or the snow-clad mountains. Even the shots of the river are limited to the scenes which depict shooting going on. The visuals of the film are mostly centred in and around the eponymous Pahalgam Hotel.

*Khamosh* does not have even a latent reference to the issues of conflict in Kashmir. It solely focuses on the series of murders committed by the unknown antagonist and the circumstances leading up to those murders as well as the aftermath of the murders. The factors which are primary precursors to the murderous spree include sexual exploitation of women in the film industry and the objectification of the female body, both on and off-screen.

The only other criminal activity represented on screen is the usage of drugs by one of the characters of *Khamosh*, Kukku played by Pankaj Kapoor. Kukku, the younger brother of the film producer and the so-called co-producer is shown as pestering his older brother for money and using drugs soon afterwards. How the drug addict gets his fix in the valley are off-screen events. But the existence of an illicit drug racket is implicit and undeniable.

The geopolitical realities of the milieu have no bearing on the course of events. Kashmir is merely a backdrop in the film *Khamosh*, being kept literally silent or 'khamosh'.

### **Mission Kashmir (2000)**

*Mission Kashmir* focuses solely on the problem of the militarization of the Kashmiri Muslim youth at the behest of the unidentified foreign hand. The film also offers the solution—the

concerted efforts of the antagonistic forces to turn the young men from Kashmir against their own nation can only be stemmed by other Kashmiri Muslims who are patriotic members of the government machinery and the civil society. This is also consistent with the observations of Kumar (2013) regarding *Fanaa* (2006) which very subtly reflects “the debate over a good Muslim and a bad Muslim in a totally different setting and in a perspective that insists that Muslims themselves must carry the onus of culturing themselves to be a good Muslim”. This theme in particular becomes a common trend in Hindi films of the genre, irrespective of the setting of the film (Raychaudhuri, 2018).

At the individual level, the two main protagonists, who symbolize the Kashmiri male, are more alike than disparate—irrespective of their ideological differences and the fact that they are on opposite sides of the law. Both are Kashmiri Muslims. Sanjay Dutt as Inayat Khan and Hrithik Roshan as Altaaf have used violence, though their causes were different. They have both inadvertently spilled innocent blood. During one of Khan’s covert missions to take out a dreaded terrorist (who had killed his friend along with his family and also led to the death of his only child), young Altaaf’s parents and younger sister are killed in the crossfire.

Khan and his wife (Sonali Kulkarni as Neelima Khan) adopt the orphaned Altaaf as an act of redemption and to fill the void (after losing their son) respectively. But this new family based on emotionally symbiotic relationships is fractured as Altaaf discovers the true identity of the “killer” of his biological family. The young boy’s first act of revenge, shooting at his foster father with his own service revolver backfires and the father too shoots back at him.

A decade later, the grown-up Altaaf returns as a full-fledged terrorist. He is still plotting his revenge but is still very fond of his loving foster mother who also happens to be a Hindu. Although Neelima was also privy to her husband’s secret and even helped him maintain it, there is no lack of mutual trust and love between the mother and her son. Yet, in his quest for vengeance, Altaaf blows his beloved mother to smithereens by mistake. Among the four protagonists of the film, Neelima was the only Hindu and (since it is mentioned that she hails from Lucknow) the only non-Kashmiri by birth. The mother here is akin to the motherland, being torn apart by the conflicting sides of her own family. Eventually, in the end, both father and son resolve their differences through the path of forgiveness and unite in their quest to save Kashmir and protect communal harmony.

The other female protagonist—Preity Zinta as Sufiya Parvez—represents the media and the civil society as well as the ordinary citizen born and brought up in Kashmir. She is Altaaf’s childhood sweetheart. She is a spectator and also a pawn in the violent games being played in the valley—from Khan’s covert mission as a child to Altaaf’s manipulation for executing the nefarious plans of his masters to gain access to key installations at the Doordarshan Kendra using her credentials. Yet, it is the same gullible Sufiya who decodes and uncovers the true agenda of “Mission Kashmir”.

Mission Kashmir does not delve into Kashmir conflict from the historical perspective. At its core, the film is consistent with the contemporary mainstream Bollywood films replete with the stereotypes. Like the hero, the heroine, the hero’s family and the villains, Kashmir too is a character in the narrative but not quite the main protagonist. To justify the title of the film, the nefarious masterplan of the bad guys is eponymously codenamed “Mission Kashmir”. For the most part, Kashmir is akin to an omnipresent ornamentation in the film—visible everywhere but only on a superficial level.

### **Shikara (2020)**

Shikara is touted to be “a love letter from Kashmir”. The closing credits of the film begin with the revelation that the director Vidhu Vinod Chopra is himself a second-generation refugee from Kashmir as it reads, “for my mother Shanti who left Kashmir in 1989 and could never return.”

The protagonist, Shiv Kumar Dhar (played by Aadil Khan)—despite being a victim of violent religious persecution—does not lose his belief in equality, unity and secularism. Even while dwelling in a shabby refugee camp, he holds on to these lofty principles. The protagonist in Shikara is not a stereotypical filmi hero. He does not flex his muscles and fights off terrorists. Rather, he is friends with one. His best friend, Zain Khan Durrani as Lateef Lone, is a budding cricketer turned terrorist. And both of them nurture soft corners for each other till the latter’s death. Their religious differences did not matter to them before the conflict erupted. After the conflict escalated, even their ideological differences and contradictory interests could not make them hate each other, though they were forced to part ways.

Shiv Kumar Dhar is a hero of a different kind. Initially he was forced to abandon his cherished home and take shelter in a refugee camp in Jammu. Later, he decides to stay on and keep on teaching the hapless children in the camp instead of joining a prestigious university. He sacrifices his coveted ticket out of a forlorn camp to a fecund campus.

Similar to Shiv, Lateef Lone is not a typical tinsel town terrorist. He is an ordinary youngster who is aspiring to be a cricketer and romancing the girl he likes. His normal life is turned upside down when his father is killed, spurring him to take up arms against his nation and the very people he holds dear. He even ends up killing his love interest Arti (played by Bhavana Chauhan) mistake, during one of his missions to eliminate a government officer who happened to be her relative and was sheltering her family. He becomes part of a movement which endangers his best friend and his family. He forewarns Shiv. And yet, when his advice goes unheeded, he does not hesitate to ensure safe passage for them, although it is in fact contradictory to his conviction about the sagacity of the violent movement that he joined. Unlike other on-screen terrorists of Bollywood, Lateef is neither transformed nor terminated—he dies a lonely death while in custody, shortly after confessing to the unintentional murder of his beloved Arti who also happens to be best friends with Shiv’s wife, Shanti (played by Sadia Khateeb).

Chopra (2020) establishes the mass exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits and their plight afterwards. But the massacres and the other violent incidents are conspicuous by their absence. The violent aspects have been mostly downplayed while the role of Pakistan in fanning the flames has been confined to the plying of buses from Srinagar to Rawalpindi in broad daylight. The implication that terror camps across the border are providing training to disgruntled and/or gullible Kashmiri Muslim youths is the only role attributed to Pakistan vis-à-vis the Kashmir conflict as a whole and the persecution of Kashmiri Hindus in particular. Shiv and Shanti’s love story steal considerable time from the narrative and shift the focus from the real issue, despite the apparent stress on the chronological nuances and the semblance of adherence to historical timeline.

## **Conclusion**

Chopra’s (1986) earlier work Khamosh is unyielding to the charms of Kashmir’s beauty and unresponsive to the conflicts simmering in the valley since independence. The film could have been set anywhere else since the narrative and the location seem to be mutually exclusive and oblivious to each other. On the other hand, his later works are ingrained in the cauldron that is

Kashmir. Mission Kashmir and Shikara use the picturesque landscapes of Kashmir to the hilt along with generous helpings of the local culture and customs. The shikara (boats) are used as common motifs in both films, as significant visual elements. The two films explore two diametrically opposite, though not mutually exclusive aspects of the contentious conflict in Kashmir.

Mission Kashmir is a film “dedicated to Kashmiriyat, the centuries-old tradition of religious tolerance and harmony” (Chopra, 2000). In sharp contrast, Shikara is a film “dedicated to over 4,00,000 Kashmiri Pandit refugees who were thrown out of their homes in Kashmir Valley 30 years ago” (Chopra, 2020). Further, “the intention” of Shikara “is not to incite passions, but to contribute to learning lessons from the past in efforts towards communal harmony and unity” (Chopra, 2020). Both films try to promote the message of peaceful coexistence. The former represents the forces that disrupt this peace and the latter depicts the plight of the victims of such perpetrators. In Kashmir, the rise of terrorism is intertwined with the mass exodus of refugees as closely as cause and effect.

Yet, Chopra (2000) almost completely ignores the issue of the persecution of Hindu Kashmiris in Mission Kashmir except for one minuscule bit of dialogue between two police personnel. He even manages to dilute the issue further by adding the 1984 Sikh riots to the conversation. But he makes up for the lapse in Shikara (Chopra, 2020)—while focusing on the plight of the Hindu Kashmiris, he is not blindsided. He does not overlook the factors leading to the rise of militancy in the valley. His representation of the disillusioned Kashmiri youth who takes up arms against his own nation and his own friends is shorn of vilification. Chopra (2020) carries his message of peace and harmony to the point where the displaced protagonist is still capable of forgiving his friend turned militant, who in turn still seems to care for his bosom buddy and his family till his death.

Chopra’s Kashmir of the mid-1980’s appears peaceful. The only menace is a murderer who is an outsider who had travelled to Kashmir for the shooting of a film. None of the protagonists are Kashmiri. By the end of 1990’s, Chopra not only acknowledges the existence of terrorism in Kashmir but also the foreign puppet masters pulling the strings and funding the violent terror tactics. Two decades later, his focus shifts from the perpetrators of terrorism and the agents of counter-terrorism to the real victims of terrorism in Kashmir. As evident from the paradigm shift in the filmmaker’s depiction of Kashmir across four decades, his cinema is a reflection of how the filmmaker wants to perceive himself and his nation as well as contemporary society.

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