



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Bollywood and Hindutva: A Critical Analysis of Alauddin Khilji's Portrayal in *Padmaavat* (2018)**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article critically analyses the portrayal of Alauddin Khilji in the 2018 Bollywood film *Padmaavat*, examining it within the context of the rise of Hindutva ideology in India. By situating the film within the historical and socio-political landscape of contemporary India, the study explores how the film's representation of Khilji aligns with and reinforces Hindutva's narratives. Employing a textual analysis of the film, the research investigates the visual and narrative elements that contribute to the construction of Khilji as a barbaric, lustful, and deviant "other." The study also delves into the historical context of Alauddin Khilji's reign, comparing it with his portrayal in the film. Through this analysis, the article seeks to answer how *Padmaavat* contributes to the broader political discourse in India and how its representation of history intersects with contemporary identity politics. The article concludes that the film's portrayal of Khilji is not merely a creative interpretation but a deliberate political statement that aligns with the Hindutva project of constructing a monolithic Hindu identity against the Muslim "other." The article highlights the importance of critical media literacy and recommends a nuanced understanding of historical narratives, particularly in the context of South Asian communal politics. By analysing *Padmaavat's* portrayal of Khilji, the research sheds light on the complex interplay between cinema, history, and politics, offering valuable lessons for both India and Pakistan in navigating historical narratives and fostering a more inclusive society.

**KEYWORDS**

Bollywood, Hindutva, Historical Revisionism, Khilji, Padmavaat

**Introduction**

This study focuses on Indian filmmaker and director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmavaat* (2018). The film portrays the romance of 14th century Singhalese (Sri Lankan) princess Padmavati and the Rajput ruler of Mewar, Ratan Singh. The contented married life of the couple is disturbed by the entrance into southern India of the upstart ruler Allaudin Khilji. Khilji, lustful and barbarous, takes an instant fancy to the Indian queen, and besieges Ratan Singh's kingdom of Chittor with superior artillery, mirroring the historical events of 1303. As her husband is killed treacherously in one-on-one combat by Khilji, Rani Padmavaati refuses to become the profligate king's consort and commits immolation in a ritual act that nearly consumes Khilji himself. The film is based on the epic poem *Padmavat* (1944 [1540]), by Malik Muhammad Jayasi (1477- 1542). Jayasi was a Muslim mystic in Uttar Pradesh, who does not seem to have held too high an opinion of Khilji. While inspired by the epic, the film's portrayal

of Khilji breaks new ground, offering a characterisation that transcends historical accounts, to say the least.

Our object in this writing is to problematise the representation of the Muslim sultan in modern Bollywood by teasing out the broader matrix from which it emerges and to which it contributes. By analysing the representation of Khilji in contemporary Bollywood, this study aims to uncover the complex interplay between historical narratives, cultural stereotypes, and political agendas, specifically in what has been identified by scholars and commentators – Haqqani 2003, Ludden 2005, Jaffrelot 2019, Ellis-Petersen 2022 – as the age of the rise of Hindutva.

### Material and Methods

As mentioned above, this study takes as its primary text, a mainstream film. Still and moving images have long been considered fair game in literary and cultural analysis. In his introductory work for young readers, Mayer (1991) highlighted the similarities between films and books. Both are 'read' as still or visual texts, and can be situated in the social context of their production. Monaco (1999) offers a model for the semantic analysis of images in mainstream Hollywood. Because films are a complex medium that combines visual and auditory elements, Monaco (2009) believes they can be analysed in terms of their signs and syntax, codes, mise-en-scène, framed images, sound, and montage.

Films utilise various systems of meaning. These codes can be cultural, social, or cinematic. Understanding these codes, films can be read as texts. For the purpose of this study, we take *Padmavaat* (2018) as a cultural text that utilises various combinations of meaning-making systems to connect to its audience. While this is not a semantic analysis, the study analyses language, images, plot and characterisation in the socio-economic context of its production in line with Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (2001), who see society as constantly changing, producing and being influenced by literary and cultural artefacts. In this backdrop, art should be viewed through the time and society which produced it.

With *Padmavaat* (2018), we are in the territory of the period piece. As Stubbs (2013) writes, historical cinema encompasses a wide range of films, including those that are based on real events and people, as well as those that are fictional but set in the past. Furthermore, Stubbs (2013) identifies two streams of engagement between the period piece and history: textual and extratextual. Textual engagements with the past occur through literary devices such as plot, setting, characters, music, and narrative form. Extratextual connections between a historical film and the past are established through discourses and practices outside the film itself. These connections are not determined by the film's content but rather by how it is marketed, discussed, and interpreted within a broader cultural context. While some historical films strive for a high degree of accuracy, others take more liberties with the historical record leading to contentious debates about the role of such films in shaping public opinion, particularly when historical films portray racial/ ethnic groups, or individuals whose importance and popularity vary across demographics. Hence, through close textual analysis, we see how textual and extratextual elements combine in the meaning-making codes employed by Bhansali.

Raghuvanshi and Kumar (2017) prefigure cinema as a crucial distributor of culture. In this vein, we consider how the visual elements contribute to *Padmavaat's* overall message, and how they reflect or reinforce social and cultural values. Simultaneously, and crucially, we consider the historical and social context in which the film was made. By understanding the prevailing ideologies of the time, we arrive at an understanding of how the film reflects,

reinforces, or challenges the dominant norms and values of Narendra Modi's Hindutva-driven India.

### Indian film industry

India's mammoth Bombay Film Business or Bollywood is the world's largest film industry, conveniently doubling the annual output of Hollywood (NFI 2022.). While Bollywood is certainly an entertainment juggernaut, there are many internal contestations, contradictory trends, and consequently financial and artistic highs and lows. With a staggering 77 % of films flopping at the silver screen in 2022, 'Hindi' (arguably Urdu) cinema can be seen to be giving way to regional film production – Tamil (Kollywood), Telugu (Tollywood), and Malayalam, Kannada (Sandalwood) – from the south of India (Elles-Petersen 2022).

At the same time, Hong (2021) traces the global influence of Bollywood, particularly in China, where Indian films outperform even Hollywood. Similarly, Indian films continue to gain popularity in Afghanistan despite the official condescension of the recalcitrant Taliban regime. Increasingly, Bollywood has produced films that demonise Pakistan, and its military, as the springboard of regional and global terror. Zafar (2023) believes Bollywood has lost 'millions' of followers in Pakistan for its slanted portrayal of Muslim rulers from India's past, and of Muslims and Islam in general. Despite recent trends, India is certainly aware of its soft power, and many Indian celebrities are household names in the US, UK, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

### Literature Review

#### The Historical Khilji

The Khiljis (1290–1320) constitute the second ruling dynasty of the Muslim Sultanate of Delhi, founded by Jalal ud din Khilji (r. 1290 – 1296). Jalal ud din had played a part in the assassination of his once-benefactor, the Mamluk king Muiz ud din Qaiqabad (r. 1287 – 1290), an act that would be repeated by Jalal ud din's nephew, Alauddin. *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* (2015 [1357]) by Ziauddin Barani, a renowned historian of the 14th century, devotes some space to Sultan Alauddin Khilji. Khilji's early years, relationship with his uncle Jalal ud din, and his hand in the latter's death provide an interesting look into the mediaeval sultan's early life. We learn that Khilji married at least four Muslim/ Turkic women and Hindu princesses. However, later in his life, he seems to have grown fond of Malik Kafur, a slave who had risen as a military commander.

Ghulam Sarwar Khan Niazi's *The Life and Works of Sultan Alauddin Khalji* (1992) traces the fortunes of the Khilji dynasty and references available historical texts on the Delhi Sultans. Niazi also discusses administrative reforms during the reign of Alauddin Khilji and how he dealt with problems that were left unresolved by his uncle Jalaluddin. In 1299, Khilji attacked Gujarat, Ranthambhore in 1301, and Chittor in 1303. Nizai contends that Khilji introduced some economic and administrative reforms. Alauddin Khilji's taxation system, while effective in generating revenue for his empire, was a double-edged sword, imposing significant burdens on the populace while also contributing to economic stability (Tiwari and Rao 2017, 33-59). Historians like Lal believe the Sultanate was well-off during the reign of Khilji (Lal 1980, 1). In other words, like many mediaeval rulers, Khilji's reign was characterised by a blend of military conquests and economic initiatives, often resulting in both significant achievements and harsh consequences for his subjects

Historians like Niazi (1992) suggest that Khilji's later attack on Chittor can also be seen as a means of consolidating his trade in the northern empire. We thus learn that Rani Padmavati may not have been the sole reason for Khilji's siege of Chittor. It is certainly true that Khilji went on a rampage, gaining one kingdom after another: Devagiri in 1306-07, Warangal in 1308, Dwar Samudra in 1310, and Madura in 1311. However, he also defended India from the onslaught of the Mongols at Jalandhar in 1298, Kili in 1299, Amroha in 1305, and Ravi in 1306. After leading an eventful life, Khilji died in 1316.

Khilji is thus a divisive figure in Indian history. But scholars have also questioned the authenticity of the Jayasi tale that frames Khilji's invasion of Chittor as a means of acquiring Rani Padmavati. Indian historian Rana Safvi, for example, believes Khilji has been painted with broad brush strokes in Bhansali's film to shine a positive light on his Indian foe Ratan Singh (Press Trust of India 2018). While Jayasi's version of history is certainly conducive to his epic, later generations of Indians, particularly those of the Hindu right-wing, have taken it as gospel truth, showing the power of legends, myths and literary works to influence cultural attitudes.

### ***Padmavaat (2018) in the context of Hindutva***

Hindutva is often defined as an ideology that seeks to Hindu-ise India in political terms. It may be seen as a 'right-wing ethno-nationalist political ideology that defines the cultural identity of India in terms of Hinduism and desires to make India an overtly Hindu nation-state' (Raikar 2024). The early use of the term is often attributed to Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883 – 1966), who was a leading figure in the Hindu Mahasabha. Savarkar's initial discussion of the term in 1922-3 does not appear to have been overtly exclusionary or directed against any Indian community. He was an atheist himself and pleaded with his readers not to synonymise Hindutva with Hinduism (Noorani 2016). For Savarkar, at least, Hindutva provides the cultural basis to India's national character. However, the gap between Hindutva and Hinduism was quickly bridged as Hindutva 'split the nation into "us" and "them", and discard[ed] Indian nationalism in favour of Hindu nationalism' (Noorani 2016.).

At its core then, Hindutva takes Hinduism as the basis of Indian identity and Islam as alien to India (Sharma 2011, 4). Although the first few decades of Indian independence were avowedly secular in line with Nehruvian politics, Hindutva gathered strength particularly with the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In this upward march, Hindutva has become the dominant expression of Hinduism (Sharma 2011, 7).

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is one of the two major political parties in India. The other is the Indian National Congress. Since 2014, the BJP has been the ruling party in India. The party has been aligned with right-wing politics in India and has a close ideological link with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist, militant organisation. The BJP's policies are seen to largely adhere to the Hindutva ideologies of the RSS .

The RSS is deeply intertwined with the Hindutva movement (Jaffrelot 2019). When the Bharatiya Janata Party became eminent, it quickly aligned itself with the Hindutva ideology of RSS during their election campaigns. This is where Narendra Modi came into the picture, gaining recognition during the 2002 Gujarat Riots. Atal Bihari Vajpayee from the Bharatiya Janata Party was the prime minister of India at the time of the Gujarat Riots. Apart from the killings, what made these riots more controversial was the response by the BJP government and the chief minister of Gujarat at that time, Narendra Modi.

In the context of right-wing Hinduism, Islam is often cast as an extraterritorial incursion into Bharat Mata (or Mother India) by the RSS and other right-wing organisations.

While the Muslim population of India, currently numbering around 172 million, is certainly 'native' in the sense that most followers of Islam are converts and not of Middle Eastern stock, and India is officially a secular democratic republic with diverse cultures, ethnicities and languages, Hindutva ideologues continue to see non-Hindus as aliens that contaminate the homogeneous construct of 'self'.

Tracing the rise of right-wing Hinduism in Indian politics, Basu (2020, 4) treats Hindutva as a literary cum cultural project of the nineteenth century. As a political ideology, Hindutva seeks to homogenise India through the creation of a Hindu nation-state. This, in turn, necessitates the establishment of what Basu (2020) refers to as Hindu political monotheism. Since a unified political identity needs a unifying religious principle, Hindu political monotheism rejects diversity within Hinduism, casting it along Abrahamic lines where variant codes, scriptures, and practices are collated and drained off contradictions.

A trope oft-used in Bollywood is that of the Muslim destabilizer. Films like *Raazi* (2018), *Tiger 3* (2023), and *Pathan* (2023) show (Pakistani) Muslim characters in a negative light. While such films differentiate between Indian and Pakistani Muslims, Pakistan is usually shown as the hotbed of terrorism. Even if such films do not link Indian Muslims with state-sponsored terror, the storylines are ridden with tension since the violent villain is always a (Pakistani) Muslim out to destroy India. In this vein, films such as *Padmaavat* (2018), *Panipat* (2019), and *Samrat Prithviraj* (2022), which feature Muslim invaders as disruptors of national life, can be linked to the action-thrillers mentioned above. The Muslim outsider in the historical films is akin to the Pakistani Muslim in the blockbusters. Both are out to destabilise India.

*Padmavaat* (2018) taps directly into binaristic politics of identity. The film's storyline revolves around a fictional historical figure, Rani Padmavati, whose beauty leads to a conflict between a Hindu ruler, Raja Ratan Sen, and the Muslim invader Alauddin Khalji. The Indian couple are Hindu children of the soil, leading contended lives, and their domestic – and by extension – political peace is threatened by a Muslim invader. Alauddin Khalji is a lecherous, power-hungry villain. His personal values are in stark contrast to that of the Indian royal couple. Khalji has ascended the throne through treachery, assassinating his uncle and marrying his daughter, and brooks no dissent in his iron rule. He is willing to use any means for gaining the advantage, is cruel to his wife, and only trusts his conniving ruthless lieutenant Malik Kafur.

In one of the initial scenes, Alauddin presents an ostrich to his uncle Jalaluddin while asking for his daughter Mehrunissa's hand in marriage. The elder Khalji refuses quipping: 'Very sharp. You are asking for a rare gift by giving me one.' In reply, Alauddin says, 'Alauddin has the right to everything created by God.' Alauddin is thus presented as covetous, scheming and selfish from the get go. Furthermore, Alauddin has dark peering eyes, an evil grin, and wears dark colours throughout the film. In contrast, Maharawal Ratan Singh is portrayed as a straightforward, capable, righteous ruler. He has rightfully gained the throne, embarks on an innocent and honourable courtship with the princess Padmavati, and is shown in bright colours throughout the film. He always says what he means, which perhaps inadvertently gives more playful and wittier lines to Khalji.

The film also hints at Khalji's purportedly 'deviant' sexuality. His close association with Malik Kafur is mocked by the Rajputs. One Rajput general sees Kafur 'almost as [Khalji's] wife'. Kafur himself betrays a hint of jealousy when he says to Khalji 'no matter what I do, I cannot take Padmavati's place [in your heart].' Khalji thus is a barbaric invader, bisexual, conniving, looting, and plundering the tranquil home of steadfast, heterosexual Indians.

We argue that Bhansali's portrayal of Khilji as the barbaric deviant outsider is discursively aligned with the creation of political monotheism in BJP-led India. Even if the Hindutva project faces significant challenges due to the inherent diversity of Hinduism, it remains a central aspiration for Hindu nationalists. Distant mediaeval sultans are legitimate targets in this confrontation with diversity since a homogenous 'nation can be achieved in its true essence only if the Hindu is allowed to settle very old scores with primal enemies' (Basu 2020, 14). The Muslim 'other' can be situated along a spectrum of normalcy and pathology (Basu 202, 16). The murderous and sexually deviant Khilji is thus demented and pathological in *Padmavaat* (2018). The film's portrayal of the Muslim invader Khilji as a barbaric, deviant outsider aligns with the Hindutva project of homogenising India through the creation of a Hindu nation-state.

Khilji's characterisation, his dialogue, wardrobe, gestures and body language frame him as a cultural outsider, malicious and licentious. In stark opposition, we have Ratan Singh and the Rajput generals. This visual negotiation of self and other aligns with the Hindutva project of establishing a Hindu political monotheism, which seeks to reject diversity within Hinduism and present it as a unified, monolithic faith. By portraying the Muslim invader as a deviant and pathological figure, the film contributes to the construction of a homogenous Hindu identity. The film's portrayal of the Muslim invader as a barbaric outsider thus aligns with the broader political and cultural project of Hindutva.

## Conclusion

Following Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt (2001) who see society as constantly changing, producing and being influenced by literary and cultural artefacts, this article has analysed the Bollywood film *Padmavaat* (2018) in light of the rise of Hindutva as a political ideology in India.

*Padmavaat* (2018) can be categorised as a period piece, a genre of film set in a historical period. As Stubbs (2013) notes, historical cinema encompasses a wide spectrum of films, from those based on real events to fictional narratives set in the past. As mentioned earlier, Stubbs further identifies two ways in which period pieces engage with history: textual and extratextual. Textual engagements occur within the film itself, while extratextual connections are established outside the film within a broader cultural context. This article has shown how both textual and extratextual connections negotiate to reinforce binaristic divisions in Indian society.

*Padmavaat* (2018) might also be classified as a Bollywood epic. Stubbs distinguishes post-World War II Hollywood epics from regular/ historical films for their grand scale, spectacular visuals, and sweeping narratives. One is instantly reminded of *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). India's own *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), actually based on Pakistani playwright Imtiaz Ali Taj's *Anarkali* (2011 [1922]), meets the conditions of the historical epic with its use of real locations, thousands of extras from the military, and sundry resources for creating a realistic effect. As a modern-day epic, itself based on an epic, *Padmavaat* (2018) exemplifies the pervasive 'us versus them' narrative that often characterises the portrayal of Hindus and Muslims in Indian cinema. By starkly contrasting a native Hindu ruler with a foreign Muslim aggressor, the film reinforces a divisive discourse that has parallels in neighbouring Pakistan. Pakistan has shown a similar, if not more pernicious, tendency to demonise the Hindu as the 'other' in its historiography. As Pakistan has had a more violent history of religious and ethnic persecution, its film industry has largely shied away from exploring pre-Islamic cultural heritage, perhaps due to a clear Muslim slant in its official historiography.

Given India's substantial Muslim population and its prominent film industry, the issue of historical representation and its relationship to contemporary concerns is particularly salient. Resurgent political Hinduism is linked closely with the rise of the BJP, and Narendra Modi's assertive brand of nation building. We acknowledge the possibility that the film's portrayal of Khilji might also be taken as a creative interpretation, but we have demonstrated that the evidence suggests a rather more deliberate political statement.

## Recommendations

Bollywood's portrayal of Khilji demonstrates that cinema can be a powerful tool for shaping public perceptions of history, and that this power can be used to promote specific political agendas. In the case of Khilji, Bollywood has portrayed him as a one-dimensional villain, emphasising his brutality and alleged lust for Padmavati. This portrayal serves Hindutva ideology's portrayal of Muslims as 'outsiders', a crevice that needs to be ironed out in a seamless national fabric. This portrayal of Khilji highlights the importance of critical engagement with historical narratives presented in popular culture, and the need to consider the broader political and social context in which these narratives are produced.

Bollywood's historical revisionism offers several crucial lessons for Pakistan which is no stranger to state-sponsored historical revisionism herself. Read as a cultural document, *Padmavaat* (2018) underscores the critical importance of media literacy. By fostering a discerning viewership capable of critically analysing media narratives, including historical portrayals in films, we can empower citizens to distinguish between fact and fiction. This will promote a more nuanced and historically accurate understanding of the past, preventing the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and biases.

Importantly, Bollywood's monochromatic portrayal of India's Islamic past serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of oversimplifying history for political gain. Countries like India and Pakistan must actively resist attempts to exploit historical narratives to demonise specific religious or ethnic groups, be it Hindus or Muslims.

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