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The gaze of the raping Muslim man: Love Jihad and Hindu right-wing rhetoric in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Padmaavat*

ABSTRACT

This article draws a connection between the Hindu right-wing protests against Love Jihad and the film Padmaavat *(2018), arguing that the controversy surrounding the film is animated by the same discourse used to discuss the Hindu right-wing image of the Muslim man as a seducer and rapist of Hindu women. I argue that the entire film pivots around the deferred scene of desire between the Muslim Khilji and the Hindu Padmavati. Cinematically, the fetishistic scopophilic male gaze is itself a representation of desire, that is, to see is to desire. Thus, although the film refuses to show the scene of desire, it is haunted by the fear of the Muslim man as the spectator (and thereby) desirer of Hindu women. This anxiety is exemplified by the many ways in which the film represents Khilji's desire (and by extension the desire of all Muslim men) as always already aberrant: the Muslim man as a bisexual, violent rapist. Thus, the film mirrors the rhetoric of contemporary Hindu right-wing politics.*

KEYWORDS

Hindutva
homosexuality
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Sanjay Leela Bhansali's film *Padmaavat* (2018) has been the subject of much controversy. A few months before its release, Karni Sena, a Hindu right-wing party, said that the film outraged Rajput honour because it had an alleged romantic dream sequence between a Hindu, Rajput queen, Padmavati, and a Muslim ruler, Alauddin Khilji.[1] The filmmaker said that there was no such scene in the film, but despite his declamation, riots broke out and much violence accompanied the film's release (Anon. 2017d).[2]

From this, it is evident that Bombay cinema is closely tied to the public sphere of Indian politics. Moreover, this is a two-way process as the Hindu-right's views on Islam and Muslims has had a huge influence on the social and cultural imaginary of Muslims in Bombay cinema. As film critic Anand Vivek Taneja argues, in the cinema of the 1990s and onwards, the Muslim 'becomes criminalized and equated with terror, and becomes marginal to films about the globalized, yet comfortably Hindu nationalist elite which has come to dominate Indian cinema in the past two decades' (2009: n.pag.).

This article argues that the fear of Muslim male sexuality and of the Muslim male as seducer and rapist of Hindu women, which was at the centre of the Karni Sena controversy, animates the film, *Padmaavat*. In addition, the film echoes a wide range of contemporary political issues that have been a mainstay of the Hindu right-wing agenda – Love Jihad, beef lynching, Triple Talaq, the rewriting of history textbooks and the glorification of *sati*.[3] The similarity in the representational politics of Indian Muslims in cinema and in the Hindu right-wing imaginary suggests that a logic of extra-territoriality and foreign-ness structures Muslims' marginality within the Indian state.

The film parses these right-wing ideologies through its use of the fetishistic scopophilic male gaze.[4] As Laura Mulvey cogently argues in her iconic essay, women in mainstream cinema become the erotic object of the twofold male gaze: the males within the film and the male viewer. Mulvey argues that 'the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to free the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation' (1999: 63). However, in the context of *Padmaavat*, the visual and erotic delight of Padmavati's beauty is the prime mover of the narrative for the film pivots on and builds narrative tension around the fear of the Muslim male gaze on the Hindu Padmavati. Cinematically, the gaze is itself a representation of desire, that is, to see is to desire, and in this, the (heterosexual) male's erotic longing for Padmavati is focalized through his gaze.

The film's right-wing politics are far removed from the sixteenth-century epic poem on which it is based. *Padmaavat* (1540), written by Malik Muhammad Jaisi, is the story of King Ratansen's love for the beautiful queen Padmavati. Through the centuries, the poem has been read as 'as an allegorical tale containing a profoundly mystical message about all life, all beauty being essentially ephemeral' (Jalil 2018: 17). The film simply picks up key elements of the storyline such as the war over a beautiful woman and twists them into a battle between Hinduism and Islam.[5]

Briefly, the plot of the film is as follows: King Ratan Pratap Singh of Mewar meets a Sinhalese princess, Padmavati, and falls in love with her; they marry and return to Mewar. Rumours of Padmavati's beauty reach Alauddin Khilji, a despotic Muslim ruler who commands the throne of Delhi. Khilji's character is established through his sexual and gustatory excesses and his unbridled violence. More subtly, the film establishes his outsider status through language; while Padmavati and Ratan Pratap Singh speak a Sanskritized

1. On 27 January 2017, activists from a Rajput organization, Shree Rajput Karni Sena, had claimed that the director is 'distorting' historical facts in the film, with the organization's patron and founder Lokendra Singh Kalvi, saying, '[i]n no book is it written that Alauddin Khilji fell in love with Padmavati or he was her lover' (Anon. 2017d: n. pag.).

2. 'The film should be canned and thrown into the flames of Jauhar. We have heard that it is releasing on January 25 and if so happens we will take to streets and appeal our youths to hold public curfew at cinema halls', Kalvi told reporters (Outlook Web Bureau 2018: n.pag.).

3. In 1987, sati of Roop Kanwar was much celebrated by the Hindu right, who 'valorized sati's "traditional" and "religious" status' (Mani 1990: 33). As Lata Mani argues, these traditionalist defences of sati echoed colonial arguments that endorsed sati as the fulfilment of 'Hindu culture' and 'Hindu tradition' (Mani 1990: 36–37).

4. '[F]etishistic scopophilia, builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself [...] the erotic instinct is focussed on the look alone' (Mulvey 1999: 65).

5. As literary critic Rakhshanda Jalil argues, '[h]owever, nowhere does it provide the slightest latitude for the communal, polarized reading of an encounter between two opposing forces: chaste love and lustful love, purity

Hindi, used commonly in Indian TV epics about Hindu gods and goddesses, Khilji speaks a highly Persianized Urdu that is associated with Muslims and Pakistan in the Indian popular imagination. This symbolism is reinforced by Khilji's flag, which is emblazoned with a crescent moon and resembles the flag of Pakistan.

Khilji attacks Mewar without success and finally kidnaps Ratan Pratap Singh through trickery. Padmavati breaches the walls of Khilji's palace and rescues her husband. Khilji attacks Mewar once again, and, this time, he defeats Ratan Pratap Singh. He storms into the palace hoping to abduct and rape Padmavati, but Padmavati protects her honour by committing *jauhar* or self-immolation by throwing herself in a fire. Although the film does not show any intimate scenes between the Hindu Padmavati and the Muslim Khilji, it is haunted by the fear of the Muslim man as spectator (thereby) desirer of Hindu women.

In what follows, I argue that the film establishes the primacy of the male gaze to the plot by drawing a clear distinction between a 'good' male gaze and a 'bad' male gaze. I argue next that the film establishes Khilji's outsider status and his evil character through the male gaze – both homosexual and heterosexual. This gaze is used to exemplify Khilji's aberrant desire – his bisexuality, his penchant for violent sex and for rape. In conclusion, I suggest that the Muslim male gaze is finally defeated by the piety of the Hindu woman. Since the Hindu woman is a symbol for the nation, her piety saves the Hindu nation from the Muslim predator.

THE HINDU MALE GAZE AND THE NATION

From the very beginning, the scopophilic gaze is structured around the heterosexual, Hindu romance between Ratan Pratap Singh and Padmavati. We see Padmavati hunting in a forest; she chases a deer and when it disappears she shoots an arrow in its direction. The arrow, she soon discovers, wounds Ratan Pratap Singh. In the film, the arrow and the wound function as overwrought metaphors for love, drawn from the *ghazal* world – love's arrow wounds the lover's heart and makes him fall in love with his beloved.[6] The film makes literal this metaphor when Padmavati and Ratan Pratap fall in love and get married.

Although Padmavati is Buddhist and not Hindu, this is not an impediment to her union with Ratan Pratap for Buddhism according to the film, is only another form of Hinduism and can easily be easily enfolded within it. In this, the film mirrors the recent efforts of Hindu right-wing groups (which are mostly upper-caste) to make Dalit voters see themselves as Hindus and forget the historic injustices of upper-caste Hindu society, which in the past, have led Dalits to convert to Buddhism and vote for lower-caste parties.[7] In keeping with this, when Padmavati arrives in Mewar, she adopts the customs, rituals and restrictive Hindu practices of her new home, which include veiling and seclusion. Thus, from the very outset, her sexuality is restricted to the domain of the Hindu home and belongs to the righteous Hindu male, her husband.

The Hindu patriarchal order of the gaze is made evident when Padmavati participates in *ghoomar*, a folk dance to honour the goddess Saraswati. As film theorist Mary Ann Doane argues,

> The image [of woman] orchestrates a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression. The woman's beauty, her very desirability, becomes

and impurity and, by extension, between "native" Hinduism and "foreign" Islam' (2018: 17).

6. 'ko'ī mere dil se pūzchhe tire tīr-e nīm-kash ko yih ḳhalish kahāñ se hotī jo jígar ke pār hotā

   (1) let someone ask my heart about your half-drawn arrow.

   (2) where would this pricking/anxiety have come from, if it had [gone through and] been beyond the liver?' (Ghalib n.d.: n. pag.).

7. 'Rapid social change in the Hindi heartland compelled the BJP an upper caste party to move downwards and build a more inclusive social coalition, promising to bring the lower castes within the ambit of the larger Hindi identity and provide rapid economic development' (Pai 2018: n. pag.).

> a function of certain practices of imaging – framing, lighting, camera movement, angle. She is thus, as Laura Mulvey has pointed out, more closely associated with the surface of the image than its illusory depths […] which the man is destined to inhabit and hence control.
>
> (1999: 133)

This is made literal in the film when Padmavati is told that no male other than her husband might be present at the dance. The erotic pleasure of her body is thus circumscribed to the Hindu male within the film. This statement was added in the film on the direction of Rajput groups who protested that 'a princess of their community would never dance in front of men who were strangers'. Further, on the direction of this group, Padmavati's midriff was also covered using CGI technology (Mitra and Srigana 2017). From these statements, we can infer that right-wing groups feel the need to 'protect' Padmavati and by extension all Hindu women from the scopophilic gaze of the putative Muslim viewer of the film. The film's circumscription and control of Padmavati's body indicate that the film endorses and enacts the politics of right-wing groups through its verbal and visual registers.

Consequently, anyone who disrupts the Hindu patriarch's gaze is an intruder and must be punished. A love-making scene between Ratan Pratap and Padmavati is interrupted by a stir in the wind. Ratan Pratap throws a dagger in the direction of the disturbance and the dagger draws blood. In many ways this scene parallels the first scene of the film where Ratan Pratap is wounded by Padmavati, only here the dagger wounds the intruder, Raghav Chetan, the family priest. Significantly, Raghav Chetan is identified by the scent of sandalwood, which lingers on the dagger. Sandalwood is used in Hindu holy fires and this moment reminds the viewer that Chetan is first and foremost a priest who has taken a vow of chastity. As literary critic Rukmini Nair argues, '[i]t leaves him [Raghav Chetan] conflicted, desirous of power over […] women, over the world. Yet, the irony is that, despite Raghav's complex cravings, tradition decrees that worldly enticements are not for him' (2018: 19). Thus, although Raghav Chetan is a Hindu and a Brahmin, he cannot be the legitimate lover of Padmavati.

As Mulvey argues, 'mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order' (1999: 60). That is, the male gaze becomes a simulacrum for the erotic desires of the male subject. In the context of the film, the erotic longings of the male gaze need to fit into the dominant *Hindu* patriarchal order. Raghav Chetan's gaze is thus doubly violating: it is a violation of the patriarchal order in which Padmavati rightfully belongs to the Hindu patriarch and a violation of the Hindu order in which a priest who lusts after another man's wife is no longer worthy of Hinduism.

The Hindu ethics of the film persist in the aftermath of this scene. Ratan Pratap orders Raghav Chetan's imprisonment, rather than his death for to kill an upper-caste man, especially a Brahmin, would disrupt the caste order that governs his Hindu kingdom. As Raghav Chetan's punishment is being decided, Padmavati appears screened behind a curtain and says that imprisonment is not the right punishment for such a man. She says: '*jiski mitti main milawat ho jaye use mitti se door karna he acha hai*' ('the one whose soil has become tainted should be removed altogether from the soil'). Padmavati uses the word *mitti* or soil to describe Raghav Chetan's character and the same word to describe the Hindu nation. This semantic repetition draws a connection between people and nation and suggests that those citizens whose

character has been tainted do not belong to the nation. Thus, although Raghav Chetan is a Brahmin, his lustful gaze makes him un-Hindu.

Once Raghav Chetan moves out of the Hindu narrative world of the film, the film entirely disavows his upper-caste status and his Hindu identity. In keeping with the film's logic, he now enters the Muslim order, where he expresses his villainy more fully. Chetan describes Padmavati's beauty to Khilji and Khilji now begins to lust after Padmavati. Thus, the unlawful gaze of desire is transferred from Chetan to Khilji, and we are likewise meant to read Khilji's desirous gaze as a taint in his character.

Also Khilji's gaze is rendered an even greater evil by his Muslim-ness, which is emphasized through several scenes that draw their imagery from the Hindu right-wing imaginary of Muslims. Khilji's barbarism is similar to the portrayal of Mughals as uncouth, Muslim invaders in history textbooks commissioned by the Hindu right.[8] Khilji's rape and abuse of Hindu women echoes the rhetoric of Love Jihad, in which Muslim men are framed as sexual predators who prey on unsuspecting Hindu women.[9]

Finally, Khilji's carnivorous appetite reiterates the images of Muslims that have animated the 'beef lynchings' that have roiled the country.[10] In recent years, the Hindu right has spread rumours that a Muslim family or a Muslim man has slaughtered a cow, an animal considered sacred to Hindus, and have then gone on to lynch the alleged defiler of Hinduism. The most salient aspect of these lynching campaigns is the way in which the Hindu right has cannily circulated images of uncouth Muslims chewing on carcasses (similar to Khilji) on social media to incite Hindu groups across the country to participate in these 'beef lynchings'.

Khilji's evident proclivity for these deeds, which the film suggests are a natural result of his Muslim-ness, makes him unworthy of the Hindu-nation. This correlation echoes one often been made by the Hindu right, who claim that Indian Muslims cannot be legitimate citizens of the country because they engage in un-Indian activities.[11]

MUSLIM MALE SEXUALITY AND THE GAZE

The film alternates between Padmaavati's story and Alauddin Khilji's story. These cinematic parallels serve as contrasts that heighten Khilji's deviance from the heteronormative social and sexual order that undergirds the film. In other words, they establish the good Hindu patriarch's (hetero)sexuality and contrast it with the bad Muslim's deviant homosexuality and violent heterosexuality.

These contrasts are made evident in the film's heavy-handed editing for just after we see the scene of intimacy between Ratan Pratap and Padmavati, the camera cuts to Khilji's sexual encounter with his wife, Mehrunissa. Unlike Padmavati, Mehrunissa is terrified of her husband and shrinks from his touch. Khilji throws a crown on Mehrunissa's head and pulls her towards him. The crown covers Mehrunissa's face and she cannot meet Khilji's gaze. This suggests that unlike the Hindu, heterosexual couple, whose love is repeatedly reinforced through their mutual affectionate gaze, the Muslim couple can only engage in coercive, non-consensual sex. This reinforces the persistence of a right-wing discourse that originated in nineteenth-century Hindu nationalism. According to this discourse, Hindu women are modern and progressive while Muslim women are 'the "inherently atavistic" other of the "ideal modern woman" (Hindu, middle class and upper caste)' (Sarkar 2008: 74).

8. 'Hindutva history describes Christians and Muslims as "foreigners" and portrays medieval India as a period of Muslim despotism and decline' (Visweswaran et al. 2009: 101–12).

9. In May 2017, the Kerala High Court ruled Hadiya's marriage to Shafin Jehan null and void, claiming that it was an instance of 'Love Jihad' because Hadiya (formerly Akhila) was a Hindu woman who had been 'coerced into marriage' by this Muslim man. 'The HC said the marriage is a "sham and has no consequence in the eye of the law"' (Anand 2018: n. pag.).

10. 'If anyone missed these dehumanising aspects of the Muslim king, the sight of him eating meat should achieve that purpose. Is it even possible to depict the eating of meat in a civilised manner? I wonder if the gangs of young boys involved in recent 'beef lynchings' in India saw the movie? How do you think they saw the scene?' (Khalid 2018: n. pag.).

11. '[A]ccording to some, the idea and perception of Muslims are restricted to wearing a skull cap, praying five times a day and so on and so forth [...] Muslims are usually slapped with terms like "anti-national", "Pakistani", "terrorist", which I have rebutted in my book' (Ahmed 2018: n. pag.).

This rhetoric persists in multiple ways in current politics. For instance, it appears in the arguments made by the recent Supreme Court judgement on Triple Talaq. Feminist historian Flavia Agnes argues that although laws regarding specific religious groups in India are usually decided with the consensus of the community and other legal experts, the courts in India were eager to bypass these procedures and criminalize Triple Talaq because the courts were animated by the Hindu right view of Muslim men as uncivilized barbarians who mistreated Muslim women by arbitrarily divorcing them. In this instance, the court took on the role of the civilized Hindu protector of Muslim women. As Agnes writes, 'behind this hasty move is the formulation that the Muslim woman must invariably be projected as devoid of rights and lacking agency, and the Muslim male as premodern, lustful, polygamous, and barbaric' (2018: n. pag.).

Also the film's symbiotic relationship with right-wing politics means that we see Khilji with a harem of women, one of whom is a Hindu princess, whom he insults and taunts. Although we never see Khilji rape the Hindu princess we are meant to infer that rape and abduction are the only course of action for a man who defies the 'good' normative heterosexuality of the film. In this, the film participates in a longer history of depicting Muslim men as the abductors and violators of women, and as de facto rapists. As Mahua Sarkar argues, nineteenth-century imperialist and subsequently nationalist discourse framed Muslim men as sexual predators and sexually repressive. She quotes the rhetoric prevalent in Hindu women's magazines of the time:

> Each *badshah*, *nawab* or *amir* would keep hundreds of wives imprisoned in the inner quarters […]. One man could do anything that pleased him […], he would keep hundreds of helpless women enslaved in dark prisons – what terrible exploitation, what injustice!
>
> (Sarkar 2008: 66)

Khilji's aberrant sexuality is also portrayed through his homoerotic relationship with his slave, Kafur. Their sexual dynamics are in keeping with the normative gender roles that they take on: Kafur is the feminine and feminized subject while Khilji is the epitome of authoritative Muslim masculinity. The film signifies this through traditional signifiers of masculinity and femininity. Thus, Khilji has 'prominent body musculature […] an imposing nobility; and a bearing that suggests self-confidence' (Gallagher 1997: 27). In contrast, Malik Kafur appears behind a veil. In the context of the film, wherein only women are veiled, a veiled male signifies Kafur's lower status (for he is now like a woman) and his effeminacy and his homosexuality. Kafur's self-unveiling is in fact a significant moment in the film for at that moment he is both a man (in that he has the agency to unveil himself) and like a woman (in that he wore the veil in the first place). Thus, the feminine/effeminate male becomes correlated with the stereotypical view of homosexuals as not quite men.

The veil also functions as a layered metaphor for Khilji and Kafur's sexual separation. Faisal Devji explains that the notion of the veil in Muslim society of the nineteenth century was a product of the over-eroticization of the female body: 'The body of the *zaif* [lit. weak-here used for women] was eroticized to such an extent that the woman, for instance, came to be commonly described as a living sexual organ (*awrat*) which had to be hidden […]' (1991: 145). In the context of the film, Kafur is the eroticized feminized object. His body is lithe and pale, he walks with a feminine grace and his hair curls in brown

ringlets. The androgynous physicality of his body and his effeminate bodily comportment are the ways in which Kafur deliberately produces himself as an erotic subject.

His femininity is further reinforced by his class status for as a slave, he must occupy the role traditionally occupied by women, that of sexual and domestic servitude. We see this when Khilji asks Malik Kafur whether he is willing to do anything for him and Kafur says that he awaits Khilji's command. Both Khilji's open-ended question and Kafur's unquestioning acquiescence reinforce a traditional gender dynamic. Khilji commands Kafur to murder his uncle's ministers; Kafur throws off his veil and stabs the two men to death. He then turns his gaze on Khilji (see Figure 1 below). Like Padmavati and Ratan Pratap, Khilji and Kafur's eyes meet for the first time over a wound, but because the wound is fatal in this instance, the film implies that Khilji and Kafur's attraction is likewise a subversion of the lawful order – it is dirty and illegitimate.

While the film needs to convey Kafur and Khilji's bisexual/homosexual tendencies as proof of their aberrant sexuality, it cannot admit homosexuality as a sexual orientation. The scopic politics of the film unfold over the course of a scene in which homoerotic desire is implied and overlaid over a scene of heterosexual sex, rather than explicitly depicted. We see Kafur massaging Khilji in a bathtub, but much of the massaging takes place under water and we never see Kafur's hands. This cinematic technique effectively obscures any overt sexual stimulation from view; however, despite the overt elision of homosexuality in Bombay cinema, homoerotic desire is often conveyed through covertly suggestive visuals and song lyrics.[12] Here, the camera moves between a medium close-up of Kafur, who is now outside the bathtub and has just commenced singing 'Bint-e-dil', a song of erotic desire, and Khilji, who remains in the tub. In a simulacrum of an orgasm, we see a semi-naked Khilji shudder and arch his back. The camera then moves to a close-up of Khilji's eyes – his gaze, the camera implies, is fixed on Kafur, who alluringly invites him to greater pleasures through his song.

The first verse of this song is in Arabic. It is as follows: '*binte dil misriya mein*', 'the girl of your heart (your heart desires) is in Egypt'. Kafur's ability to speak Arabic and his suggestion in the song that 'the girl of [Khilji's] heart is in Egypt' that is, she is Egyptian, or more likely her beauty is akin to that of Egyptian women, indicate Khilji and Kafur's foreign, Muslim origins.[13] The



Figure 1: Kafur (Jim Sarbh) gazes at Khilji, Sanjay Leela Bhansali (dir.), Padmaavat*, 2018. India.*

12. 'I had written that female bonding whether homosocial or homosexual has been largely absent from Indian films. When it appeared fleetingly, it was only to disappear as quickly' (Ghosh 2010: 115).

13. 'It's a narrative the Sangh Parivar [A Hindu right-wing group] and any of its adherents (formal and informal) would be proud of. The 'bad Muslim' (who is a foreigner to boot from the ravaged land of Afghanistan though Khiljis were of Turkish descent) and the "good Hindu"' (Bamzai 2018: n. pag.).

song's use of Arabic, its deliberate use of Indo-Persian vocabulary (which is associated with Muslims in India) and its discussion of Egyptian women place the men and their homoerotic desire within the larger Muslim world and imply that all Muslim men are de facto homosexuals. While some critics have argued that 'Khilji's bisexuality was somehow the reason for his ruthlessness' (Iyer 2018: n. pag.) others consider Khilji's bisexuality 'as an inconsequential, everyday part of his persona, something that he doesn't resist or question but embraces and is at ease with' (Pathak 2018). I argue however, that Khilji's bisexuality must be read in the context of his Muslim identity, that is, his bisexuality is one more instance of his aberration of the Hindu heterosexual norm.

The scene then moves to a sexual encounter between Khilji and a woman. The camera frames this sexual encounter through Malik Kafur's perspective, who watches the lovers from behind a curtain while he sings the aforementioned song. While in many ways this scene parallels the earlier encounter between Khilji and his wife, which is also watched by Kafur, here the deviancy of Kafur's gaze is made evident through the visual and verbal semantics of the song. In the song, Kafur asks Khilji to forget the Egyptian girl he desires and turn his gaze instead upon Kafur's beauty. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

binte dil misriya mein
pesh hai kul shabaab
khidmat-e-aali janaab
aatish-kada adaaon se
aatish-kada adaaon se
jal uThega aapke
deeda-e-tar ka hijaab

(the girl of [your] heart is in Egypt,
presented is all this beauty
in the service of your greatness.
with these ever-burning (flirtatious) gestures,
the veil of your tearful eyes will be burned).

(Anon. 2018b)

Kafur hopes that his flirtation will burn away the 'veil of [Khilji's] tearful eyes', which prevents him from seeing the man before him (Kafur) and admiring his beauty and his flirtatious gestures, and by extension, Kafur invites Khilji to 'unveil' him, reiterating a trope of Orientalist discourse, in which the colonialist's unveiling of 'native' women was erotically and politically charged.[14]

Visually, Kafur himself drops the curtain on the scene of heterosexual sex and then watches the lovers. The curtain of the *mis-en-scène* is similar to the ambivalent signification of the veil. As feminist scholar Lama Odeh argues, 'the veil was only the concealment of an already ambivalently covered body, rather than a radical transition from "revealment" to "concealment" Likewise the segregation of the veil was only the completion of an already ambivalent separation of the sexes' (1993: 28). In this instance, the curtain mimics the veil that separates the sexes. Since it is translucent it both allows and obscures Kafur's gaze and ours – thus it acts as a titillating display of the erotic male body and a barrier that encourages fantasy.

14. 'From the outset, colonials tried to grant Algerian women a traitorous agency [...] by unveiling them [...]. The colonial[s] [...] invest the veil with an essentialist meaning (the sign of women's servitude' (McClintock 1997: n. pag.).

Film theorist Steve Neale argues that Mulvey does not consider the homoerotics of the male gaze in her theorization of the gaze and spectatorship.[15] Neale goes on to argue that 'the male image can involve an eroticism, since there is always a constant oscillation between that image as a source of identification, and as an other, a source of contemplation' (Neale and Screen Editorial Collective 1983 8). Although Neale writes in the context of the audience's view of the male image, in the context of the film, Kafur is both a spectator and a participant. As a spectator, Kafur, like the audience, can identify with and contemplate Khilji's body and as a participant in the film, Khilji's male body also becomes a source of erotic pleasure for Kafur and the viewer.

This scene parallels the earlier scene between Padmavati and Ratan Pratap Singh, in which Raghav Chetan lusts after Padmavati, although his lust is absent from view while Khilji's lust is nakedly present. This reinforces the view of the seemingly chaste Hindu and the lustful Muslim. While Chetan's gaze disrupts the patriarchal, Hindu order of the film, Kafur's homosexual gaze defiles the normative heterosexuality that underpins the narrative. Kafur's lustful gaze is very unlike that of the normative understanding of women, and in this instance his gaze becomes one more indication of his homosexuality: thus although he is not quite masculine, he is still a male and this allows him the transgressive gaze of lust, which would not be allowed to his female counterpart.

15. 'The (unstated) thesis behind these [Mulvey's] comments seems to be that in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked as explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated in some other way, its erotic component repressed' (Neale and Screen Editorial Collective 1983: 8).

THE HINDU HOME AND THE NATION

While the first half of the film draws parallels between Khilji and Padmavati through the hetero/homosexual erotic gaze, the two storylines converge when Padmavati becomes the object of Khilji's desiring gaze. From here onwards, the plot centres on the advent of the Muslim heterosexual male gaze and its consistent deferral. Although the film is ostensibly engaged in showing a war between a Hindu king and a Muslim despot, the subtext indicates that the war is a proxy for the protection of Hindu women and the Hindu home from the violating Muslim gaze. As historian Eugenia Vanina argues in the context of the relationship between the Hindu king Bajirao and the Muslim princess Mastani, the *ghar* or home became the contested site for the politics of the nation. Through my close reading of two scenes, I argue that the cinematic techniques deployed by the film for the deferral of the Muslim male gaze bring to the fore the primacy of this gaze to Hindu nationalist politics.

Khilji, having accepted a truce with Ratan Pratap, asks to meet Padmavati. Ratan Pratap is outraged and refuses the request. Padmavati intervenes and says that as the queen of Mewar, she will protect her country from war and destruction by showing her face. As Padmavati moves towards the audience hall to meet Khilji, she is intercepted by her mother-in-law, who asks her to carry prayer oblations with her, specifically a burning flame used in worship. When Padmavati appears before Khilji, the smoke from this fire obscures her face and just as the smoke lifts, a heavy curtain comes down before her, and thus Khilji is doubly prevented from seeing her (see Figure 2 below). This scene implies that the proper practice of Hindu ritual and custom and obedience to the dictates of Hindu matriarchs, such as Padmavati's mother-in-law's, protect Hindu women from the predatory gaze of Muslim men.

This visual symbolism is reinforced by the curtain. While the curtain in the earlier scenes of erotic longing is translucent and allows the spectator's gaze to partially penetrate it, the curtain in this instance is thick and stops the male gaze, and acts as 'erotic sabotage' (Stam et al. 2015: 118). The curtain is reminiscent of the practice of purdah, which, when practiced by Hindu women, is a means of protecting themselves from Muslim men. As a recent news article states, '[t]he purdah (veil) system amongst Hindu women […] originated during Mughal rule, to protect local women from Mughal invaders' (Pandit 2010: n. pag.), and the film reinforces this erroneous right-wing account of history by showing that Padmavati veils herself with the smoke of the prayer oblations and with the curtain that drops before her.

Further, Padmavati is shown through a long shot, which situates her behind many doors and arches, the interiors of the house. In this, the film draws a connection between spiritual Hindu womanhood and the Hindu home, echoing the rhetoric of nineteenth-century nationalists. As Partha Chatterjee argues, the Hindu woman, 'was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture […] No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essential spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues' (1989: 627). Here the 'spiritual quality' of the home is protected by the feminine virtue of prayer, worship and the practice of proper modesty.

This symbolism is made literal at the conclusion of the film. Khilji defeats Ratan Pratap and goes in pursuit of Padmavati. We see Khilji traversing many doors and interior spaces of the palace in his search for Padmavati, thus implying that Khilji has finally breached the barriers of the Hindu home. Also Khilji's advent into the palace is accompanied by an ominous soundtrack, a thrum of beating drums overlaid by the insistent deep notes



Figure 2: Padmavati appears before Khilji, Sanjay Leela Bhansali (dir.), Padmaavat, *2018. India.*

of a sarangi, which is meant to instil fear in the audience. These visual and sonic cues capture the rhetoric of Love Jihad, in which Muslim men breach the homes of Hindu women, trick them into falling in love and rape them (Gowen 2018).

The very last scenes of the film offer a solution to the problem of Love Jihad; the camera alternates between Khilji's advent and Padmavati's preparation for *jauhar*. Just as Khilji reaches the interior space where Padmavati is preparing for *sati*, a group of women throw coals at him. As he flees from the onslaught, another group comes forth and does the same. When Khliji finally breaches the last door, we see Padmavati entering the flames of the funeral pyre, while the women around her chant Hail the Goddess and shut the door in his face. The film ends with a voice-over in which a male narrator says that despite Mewar's defeat in the battle, Mewar was ultimately victorious because Khilji could not see Padmavati's face or possess her; the righteous and brave queen committed *sati* before her honour could be violated.

In the Hindu iconography of *sati*, the funeral pyre has been likened to a 'marriage bed' on which good wives (the word sati literally means good wife) are reunited with their husbands (Courtright 1994: 46). The concluding scene's triangulation recalls the previous scenes wherein an intruder watches a scene of sexual intimacy between a heterosexual couple. Here, Khilji attempts to abduct Padmavati from her self-immolation and reunification with her husband, but he is prevented from doing so because the door shuts and Padmavati enters the fire. Like the thick curtain that limits Khilji's gaze in the earlier scene, the door here is a metonym for the Hindu home that protects the Hindu woman. Padmavati's self-immolation suggests that Hindu women can protect themselves (and the nation) from rapacious Muslim men by adhering to the tenets of their religion until the very end.[16] Also this ritual enactment of self-sacrifice, recalling the earlier scene of smoke and fire from prayer oblations, is necessary for the preservation of the Hindu home and by extension the Hindu nation. For by killing herself, the Hindu woman prevents the Muslim man from violating her honour, which is closely tied to the honour of the Hindu family and by extension the honour of the nation. Thus, the conclusion of the film is a celebration of the Hindu woman's deflection of the Muslim intruder from the Hindu home.

Reading the film in the context of contemporary Hindu right-wing rhetoric, the closed door of the Hindu home is a metaphor for the Hindu nation, which shuts out Muslim men and inter-faith coupling.[17] In the context of contemporary politics, I read the omniscient narrator of the film as the state that explicitly endorses violence against inter-faith couples. In recent years, Muslim men who love Hindu women and Hindu men who love Muslim women have been murdered by their spouse's families.[18] A Hindu right-wing activist explains that these extreme measures are necessary to deter inter-faith couples because '[i]t's a matter of Muslims taking over our blood and taking over our wombs – the wombs that would give Hindu children' (quoted in Gowen 2018). Also Padmavati must die at the film's conclusion so that her Hindu womb is not contaminated by the seed of the Muslim man.[19]

DECONSTRUCTING HINDU RIGHT-WING POLITICS

The controversy around *Padmaavat* began with the Karni Sena's demand to ban the film and liberal intellectuals' vocal defence of the film. While liberals' defence of the film, before its release, was centred around the question of free

16. In an open letter, actor Swara Bhaskar protested the dehumanization of women and specifically the practice of *jauhar* or *sati* glorified by the film (2018).

17. This echoes an oft-repeated refrain of the Hindu right that Muslim men are not Indian and should go to Pakistan (News Desk 2018).

18. 'In 2007, a Muslim man, Rizwanur Rahman was murdered by his girlfriend's family, and more recently, in February 2018, Ankit Saxena was murdered by his wife's family' (Borpujari 2018: n. pag.).

19. 'Within this moral trope, Padmavati's observance of *jauhar vrata* becomes an act of resistance against lustful Muslim men. Padmini fought the invaders with her body through sacrificing it. The sacrifice makes Padmini holy, her body becomes the site where chastity and patriotism become perfectly blended' (Anon. 2017c: n. pag.).

artistic expression,[20] after the film's release, liberals quickly dismissed the film as misogynist Hindu right-wing propaganda.[21]

Although much was said in the media about the Karni Sena's violent actions before the film's release and their withdrawal of objections after they watched the film, the reasons for Karni Sena's initial objections to the film varied widely across newspaper reports. Some articles suggested that the Karni Sena were outraged by Padmavati's dancing, which portrayed Rajput women as immodest and overly sexual. Another report said that 'Ranveer Singh', the actor playing Khilji, had been violent on the set of the film.[22] Still another report claimed that the film had a dream sequence that showed intimacy between Khilji and Padmavati.[23]

In a Hindi news article on First Post, the true reason for the dispute over the film becomes evident. Lokendra Singh Kalvi, the leader Karni Sena, said that Ranveer Singh was asked whether he was portraying the villain in the film. In response, Singh allegedly said:

> *Ranveer Singh ne kaha ki film ki heroine ke saath agar do antrang drishya karne ko mile tou who khalnayak ki Bhumika se do kadam aagey jaaney kee baat soch sakte hai.*
>
> (Ranveer Singh said that if he had a chance to do even two intimate [*antrang*] scenes with the heroine then he would happily play the villain and more).
>
> (Anon. 2017a)

It is significant that Ranveer (according to Kalvi) used the word *antrang* to describe intimate scenes. The word *antrang* literally means private and if Singh had indeed used this word, it could simply mean that he wanted to be intimate with Deepika Padukone, his partner in real life. It is apparent from this that Kalvi confused real life with reel life, and that Singh's offhand remark about his intimacy with Padukone was read as Khilji's desire for Padmavati. In other words, Singh's real-life romance was taken as an incontrovertible fact that the film had to take into account the off-screen romance of its lead characters and introduce a romantic plot that involved them. This spurious assumption was based on nothing more than Singh's remark and Kalvi's own assumptions about the workings of the film industry.

This sequence of events unveils the true anxiety at the centre of the controversy: the spectre of the raping Muslim man on-screen, which was confused with the real romance of the Hindu Singh and the Hindu Padukone. The shared representational registers of cinema and politics suggest that the figure of the Indian Muslim is writ large in national discourse. If we hope to move away from this imaginary of the Indian Muslim male, we must work towards deconstructing it in political and judicial discourse and we must also move towards creating more nuanced and positive portrayals of Muslims in Bombay cinema, which provides much of the visual iconography for this discourse.

20. 'West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday charged that the controversy over Padmavati was a 'calculated plan' of a political party to destroy freedom of expression. She urged film industry members to come out in support of Bhansali and his film. 'The Padmavati controversy is not only unfortunate but also a calculated plan of a political party to destroy the freedom to express ourselves,' the chief minister said (Anon. 2017d: n. pag.).

21. 'But unintentionally or by design, Bhansali loves to introduce his women in all their feisty glory and then pull the agency from under their feet' (Shrikrishna 2018: n. pag.).

22. 'According to a report, Ranveer once misjudged a situation off-camera on the sets and was about to physically assault someone for a minor mistake while still being in his Khilji mode' (Anon. 2018c: n. pag.).

23. 'The allegation is the film has a scene where the famed Rajput sati-queen is shown to be dancing in front of the brutal Muslim invader Alauddin Khalji' (Anon. 2017c: n. pag.).

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