

Depiction of Muslim Social Issues in Films Made Under the Banner 'Mehboob Productions'

Dr. Rakesh Bawa

Associate Professor (HISTORY), Guru Nanak Khalsa College, Daroli Kalan (Jal.)

Abstract: *Mehboob Khan is one film - maker who has been instrumental in making cinema giving social messages. Best known for making Mother India, Mehboob Khan is not restricted to that on film only. Anmol Ghadi, Son of India, Amar, Andaz, Najma and Elan are his other notable works. Mehboob Khan was impressed by Cecil De Melle, the great Hollywood film - maker. In this work, the author has taken the films Elan and Najma to write this article. Tese films are predominantly Muslim Socials harping upon the backwardness of Muslim society in the decade of 40's and importance of education for development of Muslim society.*

Keywords: Mehboob Khan, Najma, Elan, Education, modernism

1. Mehboob Khan - The film - maker and his legacy

Mehboob Khan along with Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy, and Guru Dutt forms the quartet of film - makers who had installed a new purpose to Hindi Cinema. Mehboob Khan came to be identified as Cecil B DeMille of Hindi Cinema. The films of Mehboob Khan have literally shaped the history of Indian Cinema through his pioneering effort of bringing Hollywood style to India. Though his *Mother India* remains the most talked about Hindi film, his other films also have been remarkable in the narrative as well as spectacle. The themes that he represented in his films have been related to Indian society in general.

Mehboob Khan appears to be a deeply religious man as his films start with the voiceover, '*Muddai Lakh Bura Chahe to kya hota hai, wahi hota hai jo Manzur - e - Khuda hota hai*'. On the other hand, the logo of his banner shows a yellow tombstone that contains the alphabet M inside the communist/Soviet emblem of Sickle and Hammer. According to his son Iqbal Khan, Mehboob was a deeply religious man whose belief in the dignity of labor and hard work was immense. This philosophy is also represented in his films deeply.

Mehboob Khan was a son of the soil who had received no formal education at all. He was a rustic man and this sensibility of association with rural traditions motivated him to make films like *Aurat*, *Mother India* and *Roti*.

At the age of twenty - three, Mehboob Khan came to Bombay to search for his destiny in the tinsel world. In his initial days, he struggled a lot and was ready to work upon whatever he could get. His career started as an extra in the films of Ardeshir Irani, the man responsible for making *Alam Ara*. He worked as a junior artist in many films before directing his first film, *Al Hilal* (1935) inspired by Cecil B DeMille's *The sign of the cross*. The film did a good business and thus Mehboob Khan's directorial career started. *Aurat* (1940) established him in the film industry. *Andaz* (1949), *Aan* (1951) and *Mother India* (1959) consolidated his position as an ace film - maker in Hindi Cinema industry.

He is considered as a feminist film - maker. His most talked films have got strong female characters. *Mother India* has got a very strong female protagonist. The film is a remake of his earlier work, *Aurat* in which Sardar Akhtar had played the role which Nargis did in *Mother India*. *Andaz* also revolves around the character *Neena* played by Nargis in the film. *Amar* which flopped at the box - office also tells the story of a woman who is discarded by the man after having a one - night stand with her. *Najma*, first offering under Mehboob Khan's banner, also emphasizes the importance of education in Muslim society especially Muslim women.

Pirre Rissient¹, while giving his opinion about Mehboob Khan and Raj Kapoor has a belief that both were two of the greatest film - makers of India. He believed in the dictum that both the film - makers were considered as commercial film - makers but there were many moments in all their films which raised them to the level of great films. He further opines in the biography of Mehboob Khan by Bunny Reuben that in the films of both film - makers there was much more art than there was in the entire bulk of films made by Pseudo - intellectual directors. The statement by Rissient clearly looks into the Parallel Cinema movement of India with a huge question mark.

Mehboob Khan had very humble beginnings but he excelled himself as an ace film - maker. Lavish production value is the hallmark of the films made under his banner. Lavish production values did not undermine the thematic content of most of his films which are based basically on the theme of conflict between Bourgeoisie class and plebeian class. He is also the pioneer in taking Hindi films at the global level. *Aan* is the first Hindi film to be commercially released in England and other European countries. He is the film - maker who has put the stories of a fight between oppressors and oppressed on celluloid but in a grand style. Influence of Hollywood is clearly visible in the films of Mehboob Khan.

Mehboob Khan is the film - maker who is responsible for establishing the career of many personalities of Hindi

¹Pirre Rissient, born in France and a prominent face in organizing the Cannes film festival was simply known as 'man of cinema' and was instrumental in recognising the talent of Clint Eastwood as an actor.

Cinema like Surendra, Dilip Kumar, Raj Kumar, Sunil Dutt, Nargis, and Nadira. Nargis made her debut in Mehboob Khan's *Taqdeer*. Mehboob Khan's legacy is that of a film - maker indulging in lavish style of film - making using huge sets, having a melodious musical score and never wavering

from the themes which affected the society. All his achievements become more commendable in the light of fact that he received no formal education and he learned the craft of film - making at the job only.

1.1 Table mentioning the Hindi films made under the banner 'Mehboob Productions' depicting various social issues

SNo	Year	Name of The Film	Production House	Director	Social Issue Taken
1.	1943	NAJMA	Mehboob Productions	Mehboob Khan	Education in Muslim Society, Feudal structure
2.	1946	ANMOL GHADI	Mehboob Productions	Mehboob Khan	Class Division, Poverty
3.	1947	ELAN	Mehboob Productions	Mehboob Khan	Education in Muslim Society, Feudal structure, Religious Bigotry
4.	1949	ANDAZ	Mehboob Productions	Mehboob Khan	Feminism, Conflict between Modernity and Tradition
5.	1954	AMAR	Mehboob Productions	Mehboob Khan	The crisis of Conscience, Emotion of Guilt, Women Issues
6.	1957	MOTHER INDIA	Mehboob Productions	Mehboob Khan	Poverty, Peasantry Issue, Women Issue

1.2 NAJMA (1943)²



Release Year: 1943

Produced by: Mehboob

Directed by: Mehboob

Starring: Ashok Kumar, Veena, Kumar, Yakub and others

Najma (1943) is the film made under Muslim genre. This is the first film made under Mehboob Productions. The film raises many questions within the realm of the Muslim world especially the call to reform of decadent lifestyles and lack of education among Muslim women.

Social issues taken

- 1) Education
- 2) Development in Muslim society

1.2.1 Plot

The film is one of the earliest Muslim socials to be made in Hindi Film industry. Coming in 1943, even before independence of India, the film is rendered as a progressive one seeing the backwardness of Society especially Muslim society at that time. *Najma* rightly sets the tone of future Muslim socials to be made in the industry like *Elaan* (1947), *Choudhvin ka Chand* (1960), *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Mere Huzoor* (1968) and *Pakeezah* (1972). These are considered to be classic Muslim socials.

In *Najma*, *Yusuf* (Ashok Kumar), a medical student falls in love with *Najma* (Veena) who is the daughter of his wealthy

neighbour, *Nawab Rafatjah* (Majid). *Najma* considers *Yusuf* to be too progressive and forward. But their love blossoms on the occasion of Id celebrations held at *Nawab Rahatjah's* home. But unknown to *Yusuf*, his father has betrothed him to *Raziya*, his cousin brother's daughter and he now wants to uphold his word and honour by marrying *Yusuf* to *Raziya*. He considers this as his utmost duty to marry *Yusuf* within the family only. *Yusuf* opposes this match on the pretext that he did not want to marry *Raziya* as she was uneducated and she would not prove as a compatible life partner for him. Further, he is in love with *Najma*. But both *Nawab Rafatjah* and *Yusuf's* father refuses to buy his point of compatibility of minds and compels him to honour the tradition of marriages within the family only. *Najma* tells *Yusuf* to marry *Raziya* in the name of tradition but *Raziya's* marriage is fixed with *Muqqaram* (Kumar) whose character represents the intricacies associated with Nawabs who are not progressive at all. Thus, both *Najma* and *Yusuf* marry the persons whom they do not love. *Raziya* gets to know about *Yusuf's* love for *Najma* and is jealous of her. *Yusuf* meanwhile gets depressed as he is unable to forget *Najma*. He gets depressed over the scenario. Meanwhile, *Muqqaram* also comes to know about the old love affair of *Najma* and *Muqqaram* and wants to kill her. Before that, *Muqqaram* meets a serious accident and only *Yusuf* can save him. *Raziya* does not want *Yusuf* to go and treat *Muqqaram* in the fear that *Yusuf* would kill *Muqqaram* in order to marry *Najma*. But *Yusuf* ensures her that nothing of this sort was going to happen. Life of *Muqqaram* is saved by *Yusuf* and he ensures once again *Raziya* and *Muqqaram* that now both the families are settled, he does not want to take *Najma* away and would uphold the value of duty over desire.

1.2.2 The issue of education

Education as a subject of a Hindi film has not been a norm in the history of Indian film history. In the pre - Independence era, to make the issue of education as the core issue of a Hindi film was quite revolutionary especially in Muslim society. Since the medieval ages, the form of education delivered to the Muslim population was basically religious education given in *Maqtabas* and *Madrasas*. With the advent of The British in India, education reforms started gradually and Macaulay's despatch was a turning point in the dissemination of education in India. Eventually, a few of the enlightened persons took fancy to this type of education and got attracted towards the western idea of education and progressive ideas. Hindu population embraced the changes

²Film Poster and film's crew details:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Najma_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Najma_(film))

in education in a more just manner than the Muslim population. As a result, the educational backwardness crept in the Muslim society in comparison to the other classes and communities. This resulted in social and economic backwardness eventually and Muslim society started lagging behind, stuck to the feudal mentality which they had come to represent in the past. A need was felt to tell the importance of modern education to Muslim society. *Najma* can be seen and studied in this context.

Najma emphasizes the importance of education in Muslim society. The film is basically a clash between the decaying feudal values as represented by Nawab *Muqarram* which accounts for traditional values and progressive educated ideas as represented by *Yusuf* which accounts for the idea of modernity. Neo - feudal values in this film are criticised in favour of education and professional development. The film dreams of bringing in an egalitarian society. The opening scene of the film which is an interaction between the Doctor and Nawab about the orphan children is indicative of the importance of the education.



Figure 1.1: Doctor and Nawab discussing about education of the orphans: Still taken from *Najma* (Mehboob Productions Pvt Ltd)

Doctor and the Nawab are talking, indicating a care for the downtrodden and destitute classes of the society. The film also represents a clash between the call of the duty towards family and personal desires. Despite advocating the need of education to reform the society, the film fears to tread the unconventional and revolutionary path of going against the wishes of parents in the matter of marriage. The film thus advocates the bringing up of modernity in the wake of education but at the same time, it advocates upholding the value of family honour. Thus, this contrast comes out as a paradox in the film. Paradoxically, even as it makes the education of woman, central to the modernizing agenda, disciplining of the threatening desires become the key to this new reformed social body, according to Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen.³ And who is representing this paradox in clear terms? It is *Najma* herself who negotiates this paradox. She is an educated woman but is ready to preserve family

honour and tells *Yusuf* to marry *Raziya*. Feminism and tradition thus go hand in hand in this film. The director clearly points out that freedom in the name of feminism can't be accepted as it can lead to the decline of social values. It can be said that the concept of representing Traditionalism and modernity simultaneously is worked upon in this film. Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt have also used this concept in their films later on. This film also represents the *Tehzeeb* of Lucknow as the two main families shown in the film belong to a privileged class and are representatives of *Lakhnawi* etiquettes. How this film represents the matter of *Tehzeeb* and etiquettes of a *Nawabi* era has been talked of by Ira Bhaskar and Richard Allen also.

According to them, "*Najma* is equally invested in representing and ennobling the social customs of the community, as well as in presenting an image of elegance, beauty and refined courteous behaviour (*Tehzeeb*), as embodied by the family of *Nawab Rafatjah* and in the scene set up for his aristocratic home."⁴

1.2.3 Problems associated with aristocracy

Regarding *Najma*, Bikram Singh writes that *Najma* was a vintage Mehboob which had stood the test of time and the years⁵. To quote Bikram Singh from the same source, "Mehboob brings a fascinating fluidity to the narrative, deploying close - ups, to get the desired results. A towering source of strength for him is female actor Veena in the title role. The film succeeds in evoking the plush, cloistered world of the Muslim aristocracy of a bygone day". *Najma* was one of the earliest works showing Muslim aristocracy, the issues attached to the aristocracy and the problems associated with Muslim world due to lack of education.

Both the main female characters in the film, *Najma* and *Raziya* presents a picture in contrast. *Najma* appears as a progressive lady who despite, her desire not being fulfilled, dedicates herself totally towards her marriage to *Nawab Muqarram*. She is presented as a dutiful and an educated woman who wants to consolidate her marriage. Mehboob makes it sure that getting an education does not come in the way of upholding the tradition through the character of *Najma*. Education does not make the female protagonist free to do anything in the society. For the film - maker, education does not mean disobeying the long travelled customs or one's parents. She has been shown as a character that is determined to make *Muqarram* mend his ways and become responsible. *Najma* has been shown as a very responsible and educated character that pays *Muqarram* in his way only. Mehboob has used the allegory of the game of chess to show the intelligence of *Najma* and it works. In a game of chess, *Najma* wins initially playing with *Muqarram* but loses the next game knowingly when *Muqarram* receives a letter about revenue affairs of his estate. *Muqarram* wants his sub - ordinates employees to look into the matter but *Najma* tells him that as in a game of chess every move and each piece has got an importance of its own whether it is the rook, bishop, knight or pawn. One wrong move can put the king in

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Reuben, Bunny. 1994. *Mehboob, India's DeMille*, New Delhi: Harper Collins India., p. 87.

³ Allen, Richard. & Bhaskar, Ira. 2009. *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*, India: Tulika Books, p. 244.

danger and the player is defeated similarly in life, one should not leave urgent matters to the subordinates.



Figure 1.2: Najma and Muqarram playing the game of chess: Still taken from *Najma* (Mehboob Productions Pvt Ltd.)



Figure 1.3: Najma trying to put the point of responsibility through the game of chess: Still taken from *Najma* (Mehboob Productions Pvt Ltd.)

Muqarram sees her point and decides to answer the letter himself and take the revenue matters in his own hands now onwards. Here, *Najma* becomes a sort of mentor to her husband which gives a hint of early feminism. In a feudalistic set up as such, it was not possible for *Muqarram* to mend his ways, bending to his wife. It could have been seen as an insult in such a set up so the director resorted to such an example of the game of chess and successfully put forward his point.

which Mehboob has tried to give in this film, without going overboard.

Najma is an example of Cinema where tradition mixes up with modernity. Every kind of Cinema breathes within a specific space and time. The context in which narrative is presented has become outdated or is universal in nature has to be remembered. *Najma* was released in 1943. It is a pre-independence Hindi film. The issues which have been raised in this film thus become important in the light of this time frame. Being progressive and modern does not mean at all being ultra-feminist in the ideas where one overlooks the family and home. This is the main message of the film,