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## Idyllic History: The Role and Agency of Women and Religion in Contemporary Bollywood

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Idyllic History: The Role and Agency of Women and Religion in Contemporary Bollywood

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2022

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## ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to explore the directorial choices made by Ashutosh Gowariker, in his film *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), and Sanjay Leela Bhansali, in his films *Bajirao Mastani* (2015) and *Padmaavat* (2018), in order to evaluate the representation of women and the Muslim religion. Through use of mise en scene, I discuss lighting choices, visual display and use of color and how these elements create and support the stories Bhansali and Gowariker have chosen. I also rely on the recorded history of the time periods as well as the literature to contextualize the films.

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## INTRODUCTION

Well known for its sensationalized stories, opulent sets and extravagant dance numbers, Bollywood in the twenty-first century is also becoming known for taking on more serious topics, such as religious conflict. The films that inspire this thesis feature a Hindu versus Muslim dynamic, where one of the parties in love is Hindu and the other is Muslim and this religious divide keeps them from meeting, falling in love or ultimately ending up together. The so called “Love Jihad’ crudely but effectively argues that Muslim men are waging jihad in India through so-called love marriages” (Rao 425).

The films go both ways with the “Love Jihad” idea, having Hindu men fall in love with Muslim women, as is the case with the eponymous films *Veer Zaara* (2004) and *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), the latter of which will be further explored in this thesis. The more traditional “Love Jihad” idea is present in films like the also eponymous *Jodhaa Akbar* (2008), *My Name is Khan* (2010) and *Kedarnath* (2018), the first of which will also be further explored in this thesis. *Kedarnath*, interestingly, refers to the town of Kedarnath, a Hindu holy site in northern India. The idea of the “Love Jihad” attracts the attention of politics. If anything, it’s gained traction amongst violent religious clashes between Hindus and Muslims that persists even seventy years after the India Pakistan partition. In her analysis of the politics of aesthetics, Lubna Umar says

that “Bollywood fails to remove itself from the political tension of the nation and instead commodifies it, profiting from such unsecular, orientalist representations” (132).

Another entire sect of films deals with the Muslim man unable to attain love, even if they have a love interest, seemingly because they are Muslim and subsequently involved in a terrorist organization. *Fiza* (2000), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), *Fanaa* (2006), meaning destroyed, and *Raazi* (2018), meaning willing, fit this description, where the Muslim man ultimately dies in three of the four films. Despite playing the Muslim protagonist in both *Fiza* and *Mission Kashmir*, Hrithik Roshan’s character only makes it out of one of the films alive. The reason the Muslim protagonist lives in *Mission Kashmir*, and not in *Fiza*, is because the love of his Hindu adoptive mother “redeems” him, as he is shown respecting the Hindu religion and Hindu places of worship despite also being a terrorist. Roshan, in *Fiza*, only has a brief love interest and no strong Hindu ties to symbolically redeem him and allow him to remain in the light. The strongest female character is his sister, Fiza, who is also Muslim and therefore unable to “redeem” him. In both *Fanaa* and *Raazi*, the love interest is a Muslim woman that tries and fails to redeem the Muslim protagonist in order to save their life. In both films, the Muslim love interest unwillingly plays a role in the death of the Muslim protagonists despite loving them.

An interesting note about many of these films, both the romantic and the terrorist, is the Muslim man is generally portrayed by a strong, Hindu actor and vice versa. Hrithik Roshan, a prominent and Hindu actor, is the leading Muslim man in *Jodhaa Akbar*, *Fiza* and *Mission*



*Kashmir*. Similarly, Hindu actor Ranveer Singh portrays the Muslim leading man in and *Padmaavat* (2018). This is not an absolute, as Singh also plays the Hindu protagonist in *Bajirao Mastani*. Additionally, Shah Rukh Khan, an actor with a Muslim name if not any apparent strong religious ties, portrays the Hindu leading man in *Veer Zaara*, though he also portrays the Muslim man in *My Name is Khan*. The distinction in *My Name is Khan* is that the Muslim character is a disabled man who is redeemed by the love of his Hindu wife and Hindu son and his absolute devotion to them. The message wrought from these films is clear: Muslims can only be saved, and ultimately redeemed, by the love and acceptance of a Hindu.

With these ideas of religion so present in the contemporary stories told, how can the historical narratives escape it? When Bollywood directors turn their gaze to historical narratives, these stories become wrapped in the glamor Bollywood thrives on and part of that glamor are these deeply entrenched ideas of religion. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, director of *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat*, and Ashutosh Gowariker, director of *Jodhaa Akbar*, approach this commodification of history into entertainment in manifestly different ways. To understand their base approach, I will explore their film projects before and after the films I otherwise evaluate in the process of this thesis.

Bhansali has a significant career and has made a strong name for himself despite only directing ten films, claiming writing credit on seven of them. Many of his films are literature inspired, like *Devdas* (2002), based on Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1917 novel of the same

name, *Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013), translated as *A Dance of Bullets: Ram Leela*, and *Saawariya* (2007), meaning my love, based on Dostoevsky's 1848 short story "White Nights," and conflict ridden. *Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, originally called *Ram-Leela* and loosely based on *West Side Story* (1961), was renamed on order of Delhi High Court in order to release on time in theaters, similarly to *Padmaavat* which was renamed from *Padmavati* and delayed several times.

Death of the lovers is strangely common in his films. Both Bajirao and Mastani in *Bajirao Mastani*, Ratan Singh and Padmavati in *Padmaavat*, Ram and Leela, also played by Ranveer Singh and Deepika Padukone, in *Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, and Devdas, played by Shah Rukh Khan, in *Devdas* all die in the last few minutes their respective films. It's easy to blame the history in *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat* but Bhansali could rewrite the literature that inspired the other films, leave audiences with the promise of love everlasting or anything less morbid than Ram and Leela shooting each other simultaneously the very moment their families agree to end the feud.

On the set of Bhansali's most recent film, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), reports have recently come out about an outburst he had on set. Bhansali is directly quoted as saying "I wanted a certain atmosphere" for a scene in the film, "and then I exploded...It was my way of giving those vibes to her... I never told her. Till date she doesn't know that this is what I did to get her into that space. But as a director, I don't like to give direct instructions to people, because

it limits the actor's imagination" (The Indian Express). As a director, this seems a strange choice of words. Though it reveals a significant amount of Bhansali's thought process. He takes an unconventional approach to directing but even his off screen and personal choices are incredibly calculated. Bhansali doesn't take a decision lightly, he simply manipulates until he arrives at the desired outcome.

From his directorial filmography, Bhansali's position is clear. He is a storyteller, not a historian. When he turns his directorial eye to a project, even with historical figures like *Bajirao Mastani*, his goal is entertainment and sensationalization. Even the manufacturing of his films puts him constantly in the headlines. If he's not being ordered to change the name of his film by the Indian court system in the case of *Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram Leela*, he's being assaulted on set for perceived historical inaccuracies as was the case for *Padmaavat* and the famed *jauhar* scene.

*Padmaavat* is based loosely on an epic poem by Malik Muhammad Jyasi and set in 1303 AD. The plot is about a Hindu Rajput king, Ratan Singh, who marries a Hindu princess, Padmavati, of renowned beauty and intelligence. Padmavati, originally from Sinhala returns with Ratan Singh to Mewar. Ratan Singh has a previous wife, Nagmati. In a concurrent story thread in Delhi Alauddin Khilji, learns of Padmavati and her famed and resplendent beauty. Khilji, through a series of treasonous acts, murders his uncle and claims the Delhi Sultanate for himself. He wants Padmavati for himself, believing that every precious thing must belong to him and launches a crusade to gain her. Ratan Singh and Khilji become locked in a battle of wills, Ratan

Singh to protect his wife and Khilji out of a desire to possess Padmavati himself. The film ends with Khilji's dishonorable win over Ratan Singh and Padmavati's *jauhar*. *Jauhar*, translated as mass self-immolation, is a ritual practice undertaken by women to avoid being taken captive by invaders.

*Bajirao Mastani*, set in the 18th century, follows Bajirao's life, beginning with him earning the role of Peshwa, a prime minister-like role. As Peshwa, Bajirao conquered lands under the Marathi banner. On one campaign, Mastani, the Muslim daughter of a local Hindu Rajput king, asks for Bajirao's help to defend her kingdom from invaders. He obliges after she demonstrates considerable sword skills and eventually offering her a dagger, unaware of the local custom that says giving a woman a dagger is equivalent to marriage. Mastani then travels to Pune, where Bajirao, his wife, Kashi, and their son, Nana Saheb, live with other members of the extended family. Mastani is intercepted by Bajirao's mother who, upon learning of her religion, puts her to stay in the courtesan residences rather than tell Bajirao of her arrival. Mastani eventually meets Bajirao who explains that, due to her religion, the court will never be able to accept her, and he already has a wife for whom he cares. Mastani is insistent on staying, saying that she is prepared to face any hardship. Their hardships grow, Mastani facing social slights at the hands of her mother in law, brother in law and Bajirao's first wife and Bajirao questioned and cajoled by the same three. Bajirao and Kashi grow apart, though Kashi continues to love Bajirao. A failed plot against Mastani's life prompts Bajirao to build a separate residence for Mastani.

Shortly after, Bajirao is called away for a military campaign. Nana Saheb and his paternal grandmother seize the opportunity to imprison Mastani. Bajirao is alerted to the betrayal. He is successful in his campaign but is fatally injured. The film ends with Bajirao, in a tent near the battlefield that wounded him, and Mastani, in a prison cell, passing away simultaneously.

Ashutosh Gowariker, though comparable to Bhansali, with nine director credits and six writer credits to his name, takes a different approach. Gowariker takes on historical period films, like *Jodhaa Akbar*, *Panipat* (2019) and *Mohenjo Daro* (2016), or national pride stories, like *Swades* (2004) and *Lagaan* (2001). *Panipat* takes place in the Marathi world where Bajirao's son, Nana Saheb, is the Peshwa. Given that this is Kashi and Bajirao's son, Gowariker could have leaned into the repercussions of the Mastani drama like Mastani and Bajirao's son, Shamsher Bahadur, who does play a somewhat prominent role in the court. He could also have focused on the romance between Sadashiv and Parvati, which both mirrors and rivals the Bajirao Mastani romance minus the Muslim religion, but he chose to focus on the military conquest and political ties.

*Jodhaa Akbar*, based on the marriage of convenience between Mughal emperor Jalal-ud-din Mohammad Akbar and Hindu Rajput princess Jodhaa, is set in the 16th century. Jodhaa is promised by her father, King Bharmal, to Akbar as a show of their new union which occurs because Bharmal does not wish to grant equal rights to his nephew, Sujamal, and fears retaliation. Hindu and Muslims alike take offense to Jodha and Akbar's marriage which leads

members of Akbar's court to plot to depose and murder Akbar. Meanwhile, Sujamal unites with Akbar's brother in law and minister, Sharifuddin, as well as other local Rajput kings, who have broken from Bharmal due to Jodha and Akbar's marriage, to regain his rights. Within the Red Fort, Maham Anga, Akbar's wet nurse and advisor, taunts Jodha that she will never be a legitimate wife of Akbar because she and Akbar have not consummated their marriage. Meanwhile, Akbar learns of embezzlement by one of his ministers and deals with it severely. Simultaneously, misunderstandings between Jodha and Akbar, fostered by Maham Anga, occur, causing Akbar to banish Jodha back to her parents. However, after the betrayal by Maham Anga is revealed, Akbar realizes his mistake and sets out to win Jodha back. Shortly after they reconcile, an attempt is made on Akbar's life by an assassin sent by Sharifuddin. The climax of the film is a tearful reconciliation between Sujamal, Jodha and Bharmal followed by a duel between Akbar and Sharifuddin. Ultimately, Jodha and Akbar's love wins the day and Akbar gives a speech at the end of the film about Jodha's legitimacy as his wife, essentially declaring equal rights between Hindus and Muslims.

Romance is incidental for Gowariker, even in places where it could be the sole focus. *Swades* is a story of a nonresident Indian, Mohan Bhargava played by Shah Rukh Khan, who works with NASA in the United States but visits India to reconnect with the woman who raised him. He ends up falling in love with his childhood friend, now a school teacher, who helps him

realize that the American way, the Western way, is not the only right way to live. The entire film could have been about the romance instead of Mohan connecting with the village and lifestyle.

The same could be said of *Lagaan*. In *Lagaan*, the protagonist, Bhuvan played by Aamir Khan, has two potential love interests: the Indian village woman and the British woman. Falling into the romance trap is exceedingly easy with these conditions but the majority of the almost four hour film is spent fostering Indian national pride through cricket by building a ragtag team with people from all castes and walks of life.

In this thesis, I will examine the biases in these stories, as measured by deviation from source material. This poses potential pitfalls because cinema is manufactured for entertainment and history is not. Understanding how history functions in media and entertainment is paramount and I will navigate these pitfalls with not only the history but academic interpretations of the films that do not necessarily bring the history into direct focus.

The goal of this thesis is not to determine how historically accurate these films are or if they are accurate at all. The goal is to understand why history was manipulated. What did the director want to say that they perhaps could not say with a contemporary story? To understand this, I will utilize *mise en scene* as well as the idea of melodrama. The metric of idyllic history is also important here. Is the importance of women in these films reflective of the time period or the director attempting to make the narrative they're pushing more palatable? The extrapolation of this idyllic versus actual history is important for establishing the director as the equivalent of a

revisionist cultural historian. Which is important to understand the director's bias. If they rewrote the importance of women, might they also take the opportunity to villainize Muslims?

Ultimately, this thesis fits into a larger academic narrative about the villainization of Muslim populations in Indian popular media.

To establish the history, I will rely on recorded history or, in the case of Padmaavat, I will use social norms of the age. Regarding Padmavati of Padmaavat, there is great speculation as to whether or not she was a real person, or a fiction commissioned by political figures. Gowariker based Jodhaa Akbar on the history of the Mughal emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar and his wife, Mariam-uz-Zamani. Gowariker is forthcoming about his changes to the history, however he paints the situation as condensing and streamlining, not as major adjustments to story. Bhansali claims that Bajirao Mastani is based on the 1972 novel Rau by N.S Inamdar, rather than the Marathi Peshwa Baji Rao I. This novel is not readily available for review and, in lieu of that, I will turn to the recorded history of Peshwa Baji Rao I.



## CHAPTER 1

Melodrama permeates the space Bollywood occupies. Extravagance, theatricality and the odd clap of thunder are stalwarts of the Bollywood experience, seen plainly in everything from ensemble music numbers to sets and costumes. Melodrama, in spare terms, “originally referred to a dramatic presentation interspersed with songs and music” but has since been generalized to mean “any expressive form characterized by the sensational portrayal of an appeal to heightened emotions” (Thomas 135). Both definitions apply to Bollywood in general and the three films I will examine in this thesis specifically. This primary exploration of these films will establish the importance of modifying history in this way, through film, and explore some of the more pressing issues of set design and costume choices, leaving the other facets of mise en scene to a later chapter.

Deshpande notes “the importance of narratives of the past in public life and the emergence of the modern intellectual practice of historiography have to be... understood together within a political process whereby some narratives become official and others marginal” (6). Until Bhansali and Gowariker approached them, these historic stories had not been told on a grand scale. In choosing to bring these stories to large audiences on this scale through the medium of film, they rewrote the canon around these figures who had, until this point, not lived outside of the pages of history since their deaths. Which begs the question: given full directorial and creative power, which narratives did Bhansali and Gowariker choose to make official within the modern memory and which did they choose to marginalize? Whether they were politically, socially or creatively driven to do so, Gowariker and Bhansali each made their marks on the stories they chose to tell by modifying the history or the narrative.

Despite being historical films, historical in this sense referring to the characters and plot being based on historical figures both real and fictional rather than the films themselves claiming historical accuracy, *Jodhaa Akbar*, *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat* all employ melodramatic habits to tell their respective stories. However, in order to appreciate the melodramatic aspects and dedicated deviations from history, the recorded history must be established.

*Jodhaa Akbar* accurately captures the broad strokes of both Jodhaa and Akbar's early lives. However, it ignores, misrepresents or neglects many of the more interesting and important details of their adolescence and adulthood. Not much is formally known of Jodhaa or Maryam-uz-Zamani but Akbar's reign is well recorded. For the purposes of clarity, Jodhaa will refer to the character created for Gowariker's film while Maryam-uz-Zamani will denote the real person.

During Akbar's time, the role of women was beginning to change. His mother, Hamideh Banu Begum, and paternal aunt, Gulbadan Banu Begum, often ruled in his stead when his duties called him away (Domesticity 204-205). The former being portrayed in the film while the latter remains absent, though another feminine figure rises to prominence, the wet nurse, Maham Anga. His wives are strangely absent, especially Jodhaa, the film pronounced love of his life (Domesticity 204-205). Lal says "alongside the clear visibility of the matriarchs... is a corollary: a declining mention of the public presence of younger... women" and there is "no trace of a... favorite wife associated with Akbar... instead, the woman who emerges as an outstanding figure... is the mother of the emperor" (Domesticity 204-205).

Additional evidence of that comes regarding the birth of "the long-prayed-for son" Jahangir, "it is the father (Akbar) alone who is glorified in the birth" (Domesticity 185). Arguably, the birth of "the first surviving child of Akbar" and "the imperial heir" is a prime

opportunity to celebrate womanhood and, given that Maryam-uz-Zamani is the mother, celebrate the woman *Jodhaa Akbar* would lead audiences to believe is the most important person to Akbar (Domesticity 185). However, “the only contemporary document that names the mother of Jahangir is a later *hukm* (edict) issued by Maryam-uz-Zamani... the seal on the *hukm*... clearly identifying Maryam-uz-Zamani... and unequivocally declaring her the mother of Jahangir” (Domesticity 185).

The film makes two strong deviations from this recorded history: the omission and seeming replacement of Gulbadan Banu Begum and the inflated importance of Jodhaa. Though Gowariker is forthcoming about his filmic adjustments to history, he paints the situation as condensing and streamlining for budget and time constraints, rather than these wholesale changes to the history.

According to Bhansali, *Bajirao Mastani* is based on the 1972 novel *Rau* by N. S Inamdar rather than the real Marathi Peshwa Baji Rao I. The novel is not readily available for review and, in lieu of that, I will turn to both the history and other narratives surrounding Peshwa Baji Rao I and Maratha history. Prachi Deshpande writes about Marathi historical fiction in the Indian colonial period of the 1930’s, saying “besides serving as a vehicle for anticolonial nationalism and Marathi regional identity” Marathi historical fiction, in the form of novels, plays and eventually cinema, “served as an important site for ongoing social and cultural negotiations over tradition and modernity” (151).

The anticolonial nationalism was obviously directed at the British Empire who occupied India for about 200 years. However, Indian, more specifically Marathi, writers were constricted in their anti colonizer sentiment. In an effort to express their anti British sentiments and general

frustrations, they turned instead to a previous occupant of the Indian subcontinent, the various groups of Muslim invaders, and merged that sentiment with their already growing anti British literary protests. Popular subjects for these Marathi writers included Shivaji, who essentially broke from the dying Mughal empire to found the Maratha empire, the battle of Panipat, Sadashivrao Bhau's, the nephew of Bajirao I, last military battle which was so effective that it sent back the Muslim invaders even though the battle itself was lost, and the Bajirao Mastani romance (Deshpande 154). These narratives of the colonial period were intended to "titillate the largely young male readership of such novels" and "happily coincided with political imperatives" wherein "the Maratha warrior was the son who had to free this woman [the Hindu/Indian nation itself] ... from the 'rapacious' Muslim invader" (Deshpande 160-161).

While the Bajirao Mastani romance does not fit the mold of the "violated Hindu/Maratha woman" and the "lecherous Muslim," it does subscribe to the idea that the "world of the Maratha was... under direct and constant threat from Muslims" (Deshpande 158-160). However, the reality is "Marathas were the Marathi-speaking units in the armies of the Muslims kingdoms" and "in the 1640's, Shivaji Bhosale... carved out an independent Maratha state" by "captur[ing] important forts around the region of Pune with a small, mobile army" (Deshpande 9-10). Shivaji himself had many dealings with Muslims both positive and negative after his creation of the Maratha state. Stewart Gordon says "many of the major writers... would have us believe that Shivaji was creating a Hindu state" that was "fundamentally different and in opposition to the Muslim states that surrounded it" (65). Gordon continues "it is only those who must see Shivaji as the perfect Hindu king who will now allow that he learned and absorbed from the Muslim

states around him” (66). Which suggest that the Marathas were never as Muslim free on an administrative level or as anti Muslim on a societal level as modern narratives suggest.

Bhansali’s film deviates from both Bajirao Mastani narratives and written history in a few ways. The courting of Mastani by Bajirao and their subsequent relationship, ostensibly the focal point of a “romantic trendsetter” like the Bajirao Mastani romance, comes second to Bajirao’s military conquest and prowess, Mastani’s clashes with the Bhau family and Bajirao and Kashi’s decaying relationship. Another deviation is Bajirao’s military skills. While Bajirao was a formidable opponent whose reign was “marked by decisive military leadership” and “inaugurated the expansion of Maratha power into northern and central India,” the film overinflates and dramatizes (Deshpande 11). One particular dealing captured in the film is between Bajirao and the Nizam. The film suggests Bajirao intimidated the Nizam into full submission whereas “their brief joint campaign suggests cautious friendship” after which they shared a peaceful rivalry for about two years before finally clashing head on again (Gordon 119). Additionally, the strict order of the Maratha military campaigns and particularly the song “Malhari” suggests troops with strong military training and discipline, but Gordon says “discipline was generally low” amongst the troops (118). This is likely because “most of the troops... were peasants who fought part time” (Talbot 237).

As for *Padmaavat*, there is speculation as to whether or not Padmavati, or Padmini, was a real woman or not. For the sake of clarity, Padmavati will refer to Bhansali’s character and Padmini will refer to the historical figure, fictionalized or otherwise. One predominant thought is that Padmini is a fictionalized woman commissioned by historical political figures to “[represent] ideal Indian womanhood” and used for modern purposes by “Hindu majoritarian organizations in

India” who “have deployed such narratives of their alleged humiliation by Muslims in medieval times, to organize increasingly efficient pogroms against the country’s sizeable Muslim minority” (Sreenivasan 2).

Though originally an epic poem written by Malik Muhammad Jyasi in 1540, Padmini’s story has traversed past the bounds of Uttar Pradesh and Avadhi, the region where Jayasi lived and the language of the original poem respectively (Sreenivasan 2-3). Sreenivasan says “in a second and parallel version, narratives of Padmini were produced... in the Rajput chiefdoms of Rajasthan between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries” (3). Where the Jayasi original puts great focus on “courting and marrying [Padmini],” the Rajput version “focuse[s] on the exemplary honor of the Rajputs in defending their queen [Padmini] and kingdom against Sultan Alauddin Khalji” (Sreenivasan 3). Bhansali’s film is more aligned with the Rajput version. Maharawal Ratan Singh and Rani Padmavati are married within the first twenty minutes of the one hundred and sixty three minute film. However, they meet, court, get married and Rani Padmavati moves to Mewar in only ten minutes.

Additionally, “Nainowale Ne,” a song released as part of the official soundtrack, was excluded from the film with no strongly documented reason. Ostensibly, the song was cut for running time issues, though the song itself is one of the shortest on the soundtrack at less than three minutes. The song is part of Rani Padmavati and Maharawal Ratan Singh’s courting process, with the title meaning “the one with the beautiful eyes,” taking place immediately after Ratan Singh’s proposal. The official video released by T Series, the music company with the rights for the film’s soundtrack, is recycled scenes from the film showcasing Padmavati and Ratan Singh’s courting.

However, the song “Khalibali,” meaning commotion or turmoil, a dark and grotesque number picturized on Alauddin Khilji, was left in despite being a full minute longer than “Nainowale Ne” at three minutes and thirty seconds. The song “Ghoomar,” in which Padmavati does a traditional Rajasthani folk dance that matches the Rajputana folk song the title recalls, also remains in the film despite being highly protested for improper representation of Padmavati at well over four minutes.

Both “Khalibali” and “Ghoomar” serve the melodramatic habits of these films. Lubna Umar’s analysis of the intersection of politics and aesthetics in Bhansali’s *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat* discusses how “nationalist, Hindu narratives simplify Muslim characters and show their status as society’s deviants” (128). Umar’s analysis filters the visual aspects of “Khalibali” and “Deewani Mastani” through this “*politics of aesthetics*,” as she calls it, observing the garish nature of Khilji’s appearance and the deliberate homogenization of the background dancers (128). “Deewani Mastani” here meaning crazy Mastani, perhaps suggesting that Mastani has lost her senses in pursuit of Bajirao. She says the “jarring tune,” “animalistic and crude” facial expressions, “one-legged hops and claw-like hand gestures” “unsettles the spectators” (Umar 128). The majority of the lighting provided for the song comes from below Singh, creating a campfire scary story effect and overemphasizing his already prominent scar. The scene itself is dark and smoky in the cavernous room creating a haze over Singh and the spear-wielding background dancers. These, added to the elements identified by Umar, transform Khilji into the “figure of the demonized, exoticized *other* who threatens to consume everything” (128).

The dances performed by Mastani serve similar melodramatic purpose. Umar discusses the “soft eroticism” of “Deewani Mastani” which, by default, “caters to the wholly Hindu

spectator” and forces the “Muslim spectator to temporarily identify with the Hindu subjects... who represent Indian nationalism” (126-130). She likens Kashi to the nation-state and as the nation-state, she “cannot perform sexual gestures like Mastani” (130). The mise-en-scene of the song also bears greatly on its purpose. The set is indulgently gold and mirrored as are the background dancers as is Padukone. This creates a sort of visual blur during most of the song where there are no strong, individual colors, only opulent homogenization. Singh’s dark green vest of sorts over his kurta and Chopra’s jewel purple shawl over her sari are the song’s only source of defining color. Umar argues that this “chromophobia,” also present in “Khalibali,” is a tool to commodify Mastani in order to fetishize her (129-130). Again, the mirrored set serves this purpose as “the moving image of her multiple reflections become an advertisement of her body... she is... not just an object, but also a product on spectacular display” (Umar 131). The small, collar-like necklace which, in this context, reads more like ownership or a desire to be possessed as a pet may be, only emphasizes this point.

Padukone/Mastani performs several dances throughout the film which follow aesthetics similar to “Deewani Mastani.” “Mohe Rang Do Laal” employs another visual blur with the muted, evening palate of creams and sage greens which is severely out of place given that the song happens during a Holi celebration in a Hindu household and that the title translates to “paint me in the color of red.” Holi being the festival that rivals modern day color runs with its preponderance of color. The only evidence of Holi and color are Padukone’s red lips and red hands which look more like dried blood than Holi celebration, despite fitting with command of the title. Once again, Mastani is on display, tempting Bajirao to paint the planes of her body untouched by the red or tempting him to color himself red with her hands and lips. “Deewani



Mastani” served to commodify her to the Marathi court but “Mohe Rang Do Laal” serves to commodify her to Bajirao who has already been impressed by her masculine skills of warfare but has yet to experience her feminine skills of beauty. There are shots of Mastani’s father gauging Bajirao’s reaction, seemingly satisfied with the result, and sly shots of Bajirao, as if the camera caught him unaware, where his unabashed appreciation of Mastani is on full view. The lyrics of the song itself read like a plea and call on the story of Radha Krishna. Krishna who teased and taunted Radha though he loved her and Radha who was wholly devoted to Krishna while she complained about his taunts.

While “Deewani Mastani” and “Mohe Rang Do Laal” commodify and fetishize largely through homogenization, “Albela Sajan,” translated as “my charming beloved,” does not. Kashi is at the center of the song in brightly colored outfits surrounded by women in their own rainbow tones. The beginning of the song finds her blowing a ceremonial horn to announce the commencement of Bajirao’s arrival festivities. She is shown performing womanly duties in anticipation of her husband’s arrival and even waving the saffron flag of the Marathi empire, further solidifying Umar’s claim that Kashi is the nation-state and therefore must remain uncorrupted and incorruptible (130). Even in the end procession of the song, where it would be easy to homogenize the women, each woman has a distinct color and look to her. Kashi herself wears a bright yellow sari to signify Bajirao’s victory and her signature color, purple, as a shawl over it. This display proves that Bhansali can direct a song that does not employ the aesthetics of homogenization, commodification or fetishization and has therefore made a choice to portray Mastani in that light.

## CHAPTER 2

In all three films I examine, the women display incredible agency over their lives and their destinies, maybe even more so than modern Indian women today. This second section seeks to understand the role of women in their films and how they influenced the men and the plot as a barometer to explore how Gowariker and Bhansali are choosing to write and rewrite history.

The role of women in Mughal Era India is well documented. Women of wealth and standing exercised considerable power over their lives and the mother and paternal aunt of the emperor are no exception. Ruby Lal explains that Hamideh Banu Begum and Gulbadan Banu Begum were key figures of the Mughal Empire under Akbar and, as a corollary, no wife stood out as a favorite among Akbar's harem (*Domesticity* 204-205).

Ruby Lal, however, does note a woman of startling importance to the Mughal empire, who ruled with the mantle of Empress and distinguished herself from the “hundreds of wives and mistresses [of the Mughal haram],” Nur Jahan, wife of Jahangir (*Domesticity* 49). “It is out of such a tradition of matriarchal authority,” Lal says, “that the emergence of a figure like Nur Jahan, the renowned ‘Empress of Mughal India,’ might be understood (*Domesticity* 224). This matriarchal tradition includes Hamideh Banu Begum, Gulbadan Banu Begum and many wives and mothers before them but none of the wives of Akbar. It seems clear, given “the speed with which Nur Jahan gains prominence has often been ascribed to her close relationship with Jahangir,” that this is the woman Gowariker wanted to bring to the screen (*Domesticity* 224).

He portrays Jodhaa as strong willed and capable throughout the film. One of her earliest appearances is a sword fight with her brother where she displays commendable skills and physical strength. In *Empress*, Lal writes about Nur Jahan “mount[ing] an elephant... holding a

musket” to “protect her subjects” in Mathura from a tiger (2). “Nur lifted her musket,” Lal says, “...and pulled the trigger. Despite the swaying of her elephant, one shot was enough; the tiger fell to the ground, killed instantly” (*Empress* 3-4).

For her first meeting with Jalaluddin, she summons him to her own tent so that she may present demands. This is a far cry from the expected, demure conduct of a woman especially given that Jodhaa is not in a position or of enough standing to summon the Mughal Emperor. She may be able to get away with requesting an audience with chaperones but to proudly demand that he appear before her is bold and insolent, which the melodramatic sound effects make clear. Jalaluddin comments to the crowd outside the tent “I salute the Princess’ fearless courage and candor. Let me tell her I was born on the same soil as her. And I also possess the same courage and candor” (*Jodhaa Akbar*). It would be well within his limits to chastise Jodhaa or call off the union but Jalaluddin ultimately agrees to Jodhaa’s conditions, promising that they will be fulfilled to her satisfaction with Mughal resplendence, and the union overall (*Jodhaa Akbar*). This puts Jodhaa on the same level as Jalaluddin, an empress emperor matched set.

Aside from Jodhaa and Nur’s willfulness, there remains the matter of Nur Jahan and Jahangir’s close relationship. There is no record of Maryam-uz-Zamani and Akbar sharing a close relationship however, the songs “Jashn-E-Bahara” and “In Lamhon Ke Daaman Mein” show the gentle process of Jalaluddin falling in love with Jodhaa and Jodhaa accepting that love, respectively. In contrast to Jahangir, who “paint[ed] an admiring portrait of Nur Jahan as a sensitive companion, superb caregiver, accomplished adviser, hunter, diplomat, and aesthete” (*Empress* 103). This again shows an area where Nur Jahan dominated but Jodhaa was not present.

Akbar placed great importance on the women in his life and expecting that he may do the same for a wife is not outside the realm of possibility. However, Lal notes a marked shift during Akbar's reign where older female figures took precedence over younger (*Domesticity* 204-205). The film addresses this not with the mother or paternal aunt of the emperor but with his wet nurse, Maham Anga. Maham Anga appears to be a stand-in for Gulbadan Banu Begum. In the film, Hamida introduces Jodhaa to Maham Anga by saying "she is like a mother to him. And she is also a minister of the Mughal Court. Remember one thing, Maham Anga has special status. Jalal regards her above all the others. More than me" (*Jodhaa Akbar*). According to Lal, Maham Anga "held a high place of esteem of the Shahinshah, and who has been in his service from the time of the cradle" though "her name does not occur in the list of Akbar's nurses," she "was probably the head or superintendent of the nurses rather than chief nurse" (*Domesticity* 182-205). However, Lal also states "in the expansive community of Akbar's *haram*... notions of blood and genealogy... were not the only essential elements" (*Domesticity* 194). She continues and mentions that Akbar's "foster-community pushed the boundaries of what would normally be recognized as blood-relations" (*Domesticity* 194). Though Maham Anga did have standing with Akbar through her relation as a wet nurse and he would have taken her opinions to account, there is little evidence to suggest that she would achieve higher status than his mother, as the film suggests.

Bhansali opens a similar can of worms in *Padmaavat*. The brave Padmavati plays her role appropriately as a shining example of "ideal Rajput womanhood" (Sreenivasan 1). She takes action when Ratan Singh is captured by Khilji, devising the ingenious plan to smuggle her army into Khilji's home. Padmavati, not the senior wife Nagmati, initiates and then leads the jauhar

procession when Ratan Singh's death is imminent. Despite these brave actions, Padmavati is still more of a passive player in the film, pulled one way or another by Raghav Chetan, Ratan Singh or Alauddin Khilji. The more interesting female character is Mehrunisa, the wife of Khilji.

Throughout the majority of the film, Mehrunisa is a passive player. Her marriage to Alauddin, though she initially wants it, happens to her. She does not actively seek it out nor does she stop it once she realizes, and is visibly disturbed, that Alauddin killed a man at their wedding. Mehrunisa allows life to happen to her like a boat pushed around by waves. Alauddin kills her father and she makes no comment, he misabuses her and she does not object, regards Malik Kafur above her and she waits. On occasions where appearances of the Delhi Sultanate matter, which are few in the film, Mehrunisa fulfills her role and maintains appearances. Her only active role is a massive betrayal of her husband's trust when she helps Padmavati and Ratan Singh escape.

Her betrayal does not appear to be driven by jealousy, though she notes Padmavati's exceptional beauty upon their first meeting. If she were jealous, her energies would be better spent against Malik Kafur. As the wife of the Sultan, there are few people, even men who are above her in standing. However, Mehrunisa defers to Malik Kafur, addressing him with the formal form of you instead of an informal form. Mehrunisa doesn't seem to be threatened in her marriage to Alauddin even in the face of the beautiful woman her husband is chasing. She tells Padmavati that her beauty "can even make angels have a change of heart" and the Sultan is only human (*Padmaavat*).

Interestingly, Mehrunisa's mother was "responsible for creating problems and misunderstanding between Ala-ud-Din Khalji and his wife" (Iftikhar 47). Women of the Delhi

Sultanate were not the highly regarded advisors of Akbar's court. There are a handful of women that stand out as strong political forces; most notably Raziya, the only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate. It's clear from the protestations against Raziya, who was appointed as heir apparent by the previous sultan, that women were not common in the political sphere or as present as the women of Mughal harems. However, Mehrunisa's mother, the wife of Jalaluddin Khilji and aunt of Alauddin through her husband, made political and personal waves and "incited her daughter [Mehrunisa] to ignore her husband [Alauddin]" (Iftikhar 47). Bhansali's film erases her and allows Mehrunisa's choices, though they are few, to be her own.

Bhansali makes an interesting choice in both *Padmaavat* and *Bajirao Mastani*. In *Padmavati*, Ratan Singh goes to Singhal to acquire pearls to replace the wedding present from Nagmati's family. Nagmati is shown throwing a tantrum after Ratan Singh gives the necklace away. This is Nagmati's only active role in the film, every other event in the film happens to her. Even her tantrum is somewhat passive. She doesn't demand that Ratan Singh go to Singhal to replace the necklace; she says those pearls cannot be brought back nor can that necklace ever be remade (*Padmaavat*). The implication is that if Nagmati had been more patient or forgiving, as a woman's nature should be, Ratan Singh would not have gone to Singhal and would not have met Padmavati, fallen in love with her or brought her back to their collective doom.

Similarly, in the first scene after the opening credits of *Bajirao Mastani*, Kashi meets her friend Bhanu who is mourning her husband. She blames Bajirao for her husband's death because Bajirao was the one to condemn and then execute him. Bhanu tells Kashi she will feel the same pain of losing her husband. The implication here is that Bhanu cursed Kashi in the form of Mastani. Which begs the question: is this a revisionist history in favor of women or a cautionary

tale of what happens when women take agency? With this tactic and pair of entirely forgettable scenes, Bhansali subtly shifts the blame away from the male characters and suggests that women have more power and perhaps even a mystical power over their lives and others. Overall, this reads like an evasion tactic to absolve the men of any wrongdoings and misdeeds.

Much like Mehrunisa, Mastani allows life to happen to her. There are only two strong moments of choice that she makes, one when she initially approached Bajirao for aid and the second when she elected to follow him to Pune. Unlike Mehrunisa, who makes her choices at the end of her story as if she's finally decided to have a conscience, Mastani's choices initiate her story. Much like Mehrunisa, she bears whatever injustices come to her and persists out of love for Bajirao but Mastani never takes the option to reclaim ownership of her life the way Mehrunisa or even Kashi did. Even at the end of her life, when she is given an option to fight, she chose to submit to Nana Saheb's imprisonment rather than fight to be with her young son.

Kashi, even more so than Mastani, employs great agency over her own life and, to some extent, Bajirao's life. Kashi reluctantly realizes that her husband's happiness lies with Mastani though his duty lies with her and begrudgingly accepts it. This is most obvious during the Ganesh puja. A pundit comes to warn Kashi that Mastani will be murdered during the prayers and begs her to do something, implying that he himself has already tried to stop it to no avail and there is no one else he can turn to. Kashi is seen struggling with the decision as she walks into a spectacular display of Hindu religion. The song playing over the scene, which pictures alternatingly Kashi struggling, Bajirao praying and Mastani fighting for her and her son's life, is a religious type number glorifying the Hindu god Ganesh.

On a religious level, incredibly large statues of Ganesh Baba are shown through the song and spectacle, on top of the song and religious chanting. Kashi doesn't tell Bajirao about the murder plot until she is standing in front of one such statue, almost as if having to face God and not tell the truth is what finally makes her choose. Additionally, the way the scenes are cut in and out suggests that Mastani is drawing her strength from Ganesh Baba. Even the fire in Mastani's fight mirrors the ceremonial fire used to do the prayers in the religious scenes.

If Kashi chose to ignore the pundit's warning, she could have her husband and life back, though it would break Bajirao's heart. In telling Bajirao, Kashi chooses her husband's happiness over her own, effectively changing the shape and direction of all three of their lives. Kashi makes a similar choice at the end of the film where she allows a delirious Bajirao to mistake her for Mastani, understanding that Mastani's presence would bring her husband more peace than her presence does.

There's no denying Bajirao's mother, Radhabai, also plays an incredibly important role. Radhabai, much like Maham Anga in *Jodhaa Akbar*, is the key orchestrator in separating Mastani and Bajirao. Upon Mastani's arrival, Radhabai has her shown to the courtesan residences, instead of guest residences befitting a princess of her standing. To introduce Mastani to the court and in a move meant to demean her, she quite literally makes Mastani dance to her tune in the song "Deewani Mastani" as it's Mastani's only chance to meet Bajirao. Radhabai continues to degrade and demean Mastani and her place in the family even as Bajirao reinstates it. He gives away a new, expensive ring, given to him by Kashi as a protection, as payment to a ferryman who refuses to cross the stormy river in order to see Mastani. Not only to see her but to accept her as his second wife. Radhabai never relents and towards the end of the film, when



Bajirao leaves on what will be his final military campaign, it is Radhabai who influences Nana Saheb to imprison Mastani.

Given that these films could scarcely abide by the history surrounding the women they focused on, the directors' abilities to maintain any semblance of history when it comes to Muslim history is suspect. It is especially important to note that antagonizing and villainizing women, which is present in these films, is less socially acceptable in recent memory than antagonizing and villainizing Muslims. While the directors do not claim to be historians and make grand statements that the history they show in the film is their interpretation, their characters are still based in history. The issue is not that Gowariker and Bhansali took creative liberties with historical figures. The issue is that Gowariker and Bhansali shaped the modern image of these characters both for their local, Indian audiences and their global audiences. Deshpande says it best in her discussion of "historical memory" where she says these explorations of "popular histories" ultimately designate the dominant and non dominant stories and place historical figures into the colloquial world or scholarly world (6).

### CHAPTER 3

In the previous two chapters, I establish a sense of history for these films and explore the active and passive roles of women as well as the overall agency they exert over themselves and their stories. In this chapter, I shift back to a more physical analysis of the films. This chapter deals more deeply with *mise en scene*, particularly as a tool of villainization or demonization wielded against Muslims. Deshpande says, of Marathi historical fiction written during India's colonial period, it "serve[ed] as a vehicle for expressing anticolonial nationalism and Marathi regional identity" (151). This is to say that works that adapted these historical stories, like the *Bajirao Mastani* romance, were doing so with a conscious, or unconscious, anticolonial, really an anti-British, sentiment. Though Deshpande speaks very specifically about Marathi historical fiction, novels, plays and cinema, of India's colonial period, this idea can be applied to modern Bollywood cinema as well. The impetus for anti-Muslim rhetoric may be gone from India but the sentiment remains.

One of a director's most effective and powerful tools is *mise en scene*. *Mise en scene*, a French term directly translated to "place on stage," "refers to all the visual elements of a theatrical production within the space provided by the stage itself" (Lathrop and Sutton 1). Over time, this definition has been expanded and applied to film as well. There are four facets to *mise en scene*: setting, costumes, lighting and movement where "control of these elements provides the director an opportunity to stage events" and acts as "an essential part of the director's creative art" (Lathrop and Sutton 1).

Bhansali, especially, is aware of *mise en scene*. His films reek of visual opulence and intricate set design. His characters just as often fade to the background while the scenery

becomes the foreground because it becomes difficult to focus against the sheer scale of optical onslaught. The visual blur and monochromatic habits Bhansali employ in specific, often Muslim antagonizing, ways have already been discussed but that is only one way the director directs viewers.

The color green has long been associated with the Muslim religion. It is present in the flags of many countries with a majority or large Muslim population. In historical period films, especially in Bollywood, Muslim invaders and armies carry green banners to denote their religious affiliation. Historical period films of Bollywood often bypass the ethnic distinctions of Muslim invaders, ignoring that Afghani or Persian invaders are not Mughal invaders and not all of the Muslim invaders coexisted well with each other, and homogenize them into simply Muslim in a system where Muslim automatically equals bad. For example, the major Muslim forces in *Bajirao Mastani* are Mughal forces of northern India while in the Muslim aggressor in *Padmaavat* is a Turco-Afghan emperor but they're treated the same. The Mughals are not looking to loot India and leave, at the core, their motivations are the same as the Marathas, to conquer the subcontinent.

Similarly, the colors of red, yellow and orange have interchangeably been used to signify the Hindu religion. Most often, in the case of historical period films, the banner carried is a mango adjacent yellow color called saffron. Saffron, in many historical period films, is also synonymous with (Hindu) victory. The religious aspect here is implied because these films rarely allow the Muslim invaders to win. These two colors have formed a sort of duality that's visible in Bollywood and India at large.

Restricting Bhansali to the green saffron color palette would offend his equal parts opulent and subtle directorial eye. His subtle employment of the green saffron shines well in moments of great decision making. While Bhansali doesn't employ the traditional green saffron duality in *Bajirao Mastani*, he uses an adulterated version. Various shades of green are present across the film but its counterpart is rarely the valorous saffron. Instead, the dominant Hindu colors that emerge are Kashi purple and marital red.

Kashi purple is the plum color Kashi wears in most songs and nearly every moment of great decision. She can be seen in this color while she greets Bajirao as a shawl over a saffron sari. She's wearing Kashi purple when she decides to tell Bajirao about the murder plot against Mastani and again during the song "Pinga" where she makes a conscious decision to legitimize Mastani's union with Bajirao. Pinga is a type of dance common of newlywed women in Maharashtra, which adds a layer to Kashi's request.

Marital red is more of a burgundy color than a blood red, this distinction is particularly important in two moments: Mastani delivering *paan* to Bajirao after accepting his dagger, in a move that ceremonially weds them, and the song "Pinga." The outfit Mastani wears to deliver the *paan*, arguably her "marriage" outfit in *fig. 2*, is uncharacteristically bright for the film and the character. The color is bright blood red, especially compared to the next two most red outfits in the film.

The difference in all three reds is clear. *Fig. 2* is Mastani's "marriage" outfit. The right is Kashi allowing Mastani to claim her status as legal wife for one night in "Pinga." Mastani wears the true marital red as a Marathi style sari in *fig. 3*, which is very different from her outfits throughout the rest of the film which are more Mughal style. She also wears her hair nearly



identical to Kashi, as opposed to open, which further solidifies her status as a legal wife. *Fig. 1* is Kashi letting go of her marriage, she's symbolically blowing out the lamp of her marriage while physically blowing out the lamps in her room.

Interestingly, in the scene where Kashi's son outs the lamp Kashi used to welcome Bajirao and Mastani to their home, Kashi wears a pale green color. This perhaps to signify Kashi realizing her husband is slipping away and his happiness lies with Mastani, as Kashi explains to Mastani when presenting her with a marital red Marathi sari. Similarly, Bajirao wears a dark, jewel green shawl during Mastani's introduction to the court in the song "Deewani Mastani," perhaps signifying his feelings or longing for Mastani.

In the scene with Mastani and Bajirao after Kashi symbolically douses her marriage, Mastani is again wearing a marital red outfit, though not Marathi style clothing. She has symbolically claimed her place as Bajirao's wife, in the space Kashi deliberately opens and then vacates, though she hasn't been given the right to claim Marathi lineage. It is interesting, though somewhat expected, that Bhansali would choose to have Kashi in marital red, rather than Kashi purple or white or saffron, to douse her marriage. Out of the three, white would be most appropriate as saffron and, by extension, Kashi purple are colors synonymous with (Hindu) victory whereas white is a color of mourning. However, as Mastani is immediately seen wearing

a very similar red, the viewer begins to understand that the marital red color has been “polluted” by Mastani and is now akin to green.

These touches of varying shades of green can be explained away as Bhansali’s style of visual opulence, which includes color contrast. Kashi is often seen wearing green bangles throughout the film, even with outfits that don’t seem to match it. However, there’s a hard to ignore dialogue in the film, taking place at the naming ceremony of Kashi and Bajirao’s second son, which asserts green, and Muslims by association, into a marginal and wholly undesirable space. During the scene, Mastani attends to present gifts on behalf of Bajirao who is away and is confronted by Chimaji Appa, Bajirao’s brother. Chimaji Appa, with the encouragement of Radhabai, frequently instigates Bajirao against Mastani and Muslims in general. At the naming ceremony, he turns his scorn to Mastani directly, in the absence of Bajirao. The subtitles are transcribed below (*Bajirao Mastani*).

Chimaji Appa: “How can someone lose all shame and keep returning to your doorstep to be insulted?”

Mastani: “What offence [*sic*] can come at your own doorstep? No insult can come by your own people. I am here to bless Bajirao’s son.”

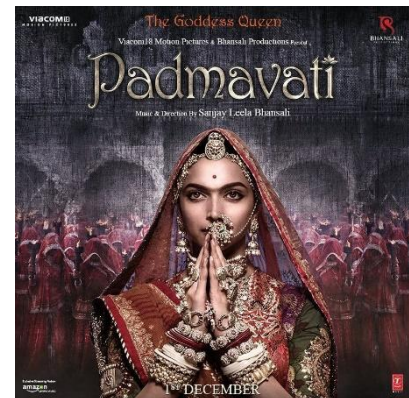
CA: “Are you here to bless relations or beg acceptance?”

M: “I am here with gifts on Bajirao’s behalf in his absence.”

CA: “If you had to please your way into our family then you should’ve got saffron clothes and not this green color.”

M: “People have associated each religion with color, but color has no religion. It is when the heart turns black that you start differentiating color.”

While *Padmaavat* doesn't fall on the green saffron duality, it certainly employs the light dark duality. Bhansali's opulent style is arguably on greater display here as there is no suggestion of modesty in *Padmaavat* or complex political interplay to focus on. The plot is direct and somewhat brutish and ostensibly sexist, with three men objectifying and coveting an autonomous woman who is chided every time she tries to use her autonomy, which leaves the door wide open for Bhansali to fetishize to his leisure.



In these promotional pictures posted by the film's official Instagram account, before the film underwent its name change, the most striking is the contrast between righteous Ratan Singh, *Fig. 5*, and animalistic Alauddin Khilji, *Fig. 4*. Ratan Singh looks almost angelic with the white, bloodied clothing and hints of blue in the sky that seem to suggest he fought with everything in his power to restore righteousness and will attain *moksha* (Hindu Heaven) in *Fig. 5*. Khilji, however, is undressed and soaking *Fig. 4*, his direct and intense gaze focused down on the audience which reads as a sort of open challenge to tame him. Neither Padmavati, in *Fig. 6*, nor Ratan Singh look into the camera, ostensibly preserving their (Hindu) modesty.

Throughout the film, Khilji is painted as brutish and rash. In one scene, his slave general Malik Kafur wakes him because his tent is burning. Khilji waves Kafur off, instructing him to save the birds, and goes back to sleep. He neither appears to care nor repair his tent afterward, even as he meets with Ratan Singh in a successful bid to kidnap him and draw Padmavati to Delhi. The contrast between Ratan Singh and Khilji in the kidnapping is deliberate. Both men wear similar white *kurtas* though Ratan's shawl is cream while Khilji's is black. Khilji's face is clean but his scar is on full display in the sunlight while his unscarred side is hidden in shadow.

Ratan Singh looks down on the audience as a father might while Khilji is shown to be the child, performative and emotional until the moment he chooses to strike. Interestingly, Ratan Singh also has a facial scar though it is never put on display in the film and never to the extent of Khilji's. Another point of interest that more often comes up with female characters is hair. Ratan Singh's hair is restrained by his headpiece while Khilji, who does occasionally wear a headpiece, has his hair open.

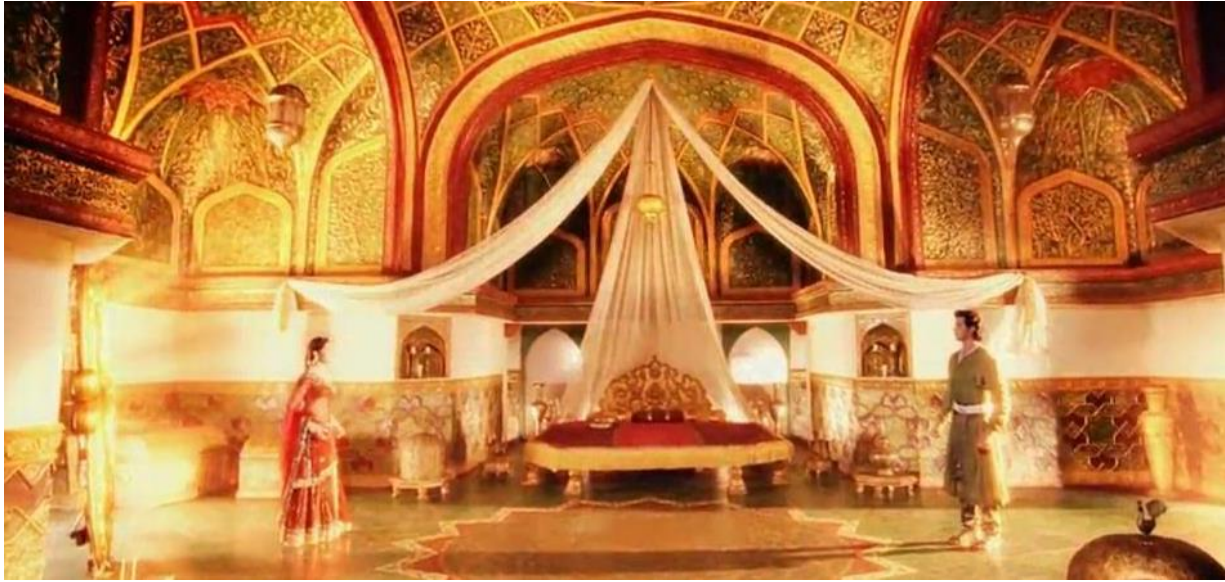
Lubna Umar, in her analysis of aesthetics in *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat*, says of Kashi "her hair is tied in the song, which is the symbol of a tamed kind of femininity and signals to the spectator that she is not sexually available" (131). While she clearly comments on the femininity of this choice, this logic can also be seen in and applied to the leading men of *Padmaavat*. Ratan Singh, outside of private chambers, is rarely seen with his hair in disarray. The only true time Ratan Singh is seen disheveled is during his tenure as Khilji's prisoner. Khilji is the manifest opposite. His hair is often open and on display, rather than corralled by a headpiece.



Bhansali is in somewhat direct opposition to Gowariker's use of green and saffron in *Jodhaa Akbar*, both Jodhaa and Akbar frequently wear green and saffron. One of the earliest occasions is when Jodhaa's marriage to Ratan Singh is formally announced. Her brother, Sujamal, storms off and, to chase after him, Jodhaa trades her saffron shawl for a green one though another friend with a red shawl is also present. Perhaps signifying her imminent union with Akbar or that she's not in a position yet to claim marital red.

Previous to her arrival, Jodhaa regularly wears green though it stops upon her arrival to the Mughal fort. Her dominant colors become her Hindu colors, saffron and marital red. However, as she begins to fall in love with Akbar, the green creeps back into her wardrobe. Even after Akbar banishes her back to her parent's home, Jodhaa can be seen wearing green. Where Bhansali uses green as a color of pollution, Gowariker uses it as a color of love.

Again, the difference in approach between Bhansali and Gowariker is apparent for light. Though Akbar begins the film in dark armor, he ends it in light armor. Especially next to his opponent and their gathered soldiers, who wear armor darker than Akbar's early armor. Importantly, Akbar's seen almost exclusively in white or cream colored *kurtas*, most often seen with reddish accent colors while most of his (Muslim) ministers wear darker colors or prominent green accents.



*Fig. 7 "In Lamhon Ke Daaman Mein" Bedroom*



*Fig. 8 "In Lamhon Ke Daaman Mein" Candle*

Light is an incredibly prominent feature of the song "In Lamhon Ke Daaman Mein," translated as "in the lap of these moments," where Jodhaa and Akbar declare their love for one another. Their love literally illuminates Jodhaa, then Akbar, in the setting sun, as seen in *Fig. 7*

then darkens both of them. However, shots of the courtyard lit full of lamps and the bright crescent moon, another symbol associated with Muslims in Bollywood, “redeem” their love and bring it back into the light. To further illuminate their love, Akbar lights a candle between them, as shown in *Fig. 8*. The candle also functions as a renewal of vows in a way, as Hindu religious customs are ceremonially witnessed by Agni, God of fire. Though they are already married in the eyes of law and religion, Jodhaa and Akbar are now making an emotional commitment to one another.



*Fig. 9 Akbar Kneeling*



*Fig. 10 Akbar Shadowed*



*Fig. 11 Maham Anga*

Another scene where light and dark are on display is when Akbar begs forgiveness of Maham Anga for killing her traitorous son. Akbar kneels like a child, tears in his eyes, at her feet

in *Fig. 9* and *Fig. 10*. Maham Anga is in full white, as she is throughout the film, burning brightly in the lighting while Akbar flickers in shadow, shown in *Fig. 11*. Akbar is struggling with the righteous choice, ultimately choosing the wrong one when he confronts Jodhaa, at night, and plunges them both into the darkness.

Choosing to put Maham Anga in the light, even though she peddles the dark option, is a manifestly interesting choice on behalf of Gowariker. Maham Anga is in the light because that is how Akbar sees her, as a source of absolute light. His remorse is real and he goes to Maham Anga for absolution. The view of Akbar, uncharacteristically small and shadowed, is Maham Anga's eyes. She cannot forgive him and so Akbar becomes smaller while Maham Anga becomes larger until Akbar stands, balking at her accusations against Jodhaa. Only then does Maham Anga fall out of the light while Akbar treads into it. Maham Anga ends the scene saying "no matter how much light a mirror reflects, it has a dark side," which summarizes the scene, and the film at large, well (*Jodhaa Akbar*).

## CONCLUSION

In the first chapter, I explore the history and establish the baseline of the three films. In terms of historical modification, both Bhansali and Gowariker are guilty of manipulating more than they admit. Both directors attach warning messages to the beginnings of the films stating that the history presented in the film has been adjusted. Gowariker's statement makes it seem that he simply streamlined Jodha and Akbar's romance, editing only for film time constraints. The reality is much harsher as the second chapter demonstrates. The representation of women in all three films is heavily modified according to source material, historical norms and, where applicable, the written history itself.

The major character Maham Anga was awarded an over inflated importance in the film. Akbar's mother tells Jodha that Akbar listens to Maham Anga above all others, even Hamida herself. She is shown in a ministerial role while the history suggests she "was probably the head or superintendent of the nurses rather than chief nurse" (*Domesticity* 182-205). Maham Anga was likely a stand-in for Gulbadan Banu Begum who has demonstrated importance to Akbar and, along with his mother, often took on imperial duties on his behalf.

Additionally, there is the matter of Jodha. Ruby Lal says there is "no trace of a... favorite wife associated with Akbar... instead, the woman who emerges as an outstanding figure... is the mother of the emperor," Hamidah Banu Begum (*Domesticity* 204-205). However, there is a strong, young wife that emerges in Jodha and Akbar's son's, Jahangir, generation. Jahangir was utterly devoted to Nur Jahan, his last wife, and their road to marriage was a long and bumpy one. Nur Jahan is everything Gowariker built Jodha into: strong willed, intelligent, fierce. Lal writes of her, in *Empress*, taking down a tiger with one shot from the top of a swaying elephant in order

to save her citizens because Jahangir was unable to do it (2). Nur Jahan, according to her husband, was “a sensitive companion, superb caregiver, accomplished adviser, hunter, diplomat, and aesthete,” all qualities film Jodha possesses (*Empress* 103). It is clear that Gowariker turned his directorial eye to Jodha and Akbar in order to recreate Nur Jahan and Jahangir’s relationship because, with Jodha as a Hindu character, the story becomes more palatable and the love is “redeemed,” where it would be impossible with two Muslim characters.

Bhansali is no better with his directorial adjustments. Both *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmaavat* are literature based, rather than history based, in a feeble attempt to insulate Bhansali from criticism. In both films, the hatred against Muslims is choking with every “pure” Hindu person viewing Muslims as natural enemies, at best, or scum, at worst. Again, history tells a different story. Deshpande says “Marathas were the Marathi-speaking units in the armies of the Muslims kingdoms” (9-10). Shivaji Bhosale, the founder of the Maratha empire, had many dealings with Muslims states around him, he learned from and even employed Muslims. Gordon poignantly says “it is only those who must see Shivaji as the perfect Hindu king who will now allow that he learned and absorbed from the Muslim states around him” (66).

Given that the early anti Muslim sentiment was borne of unexpressed anti British sentiment, the unwillingness of modern India to accept that the great Shivaji wasn’t Muslim free is understandable. The problem is not anti “‘rapacious’ Muslim invader” sentiment, the problem is viewing any and every Muslim as a “‘rapacious’ Muslim invader” (Deshpande 161). The problem is overinflating the anti “‘rapacious’ Muslim invader” sentiment until it becomes only anti Muslim propaganda parading as truth and history (Deshpande 161). Bhansali is guilty of this, especially in *Padmaavat* where every Muslim character is portrayed negatively. In *Bajirao*

*Mastani*, Mastani is still “redeemed” by her Hindu father and is allowed to behave humanly. That is not the case for any Muslim in *Padmaavat* as none of them have Hindu redeemers.

The worst is Khilji who is shown as dark and animalistic, succumbing to base urges above his duties as a leader. His song, “Khalibali,” features “jarring tune,” “animalistic and crude” facial expressions, “one-legged hops and claw-like hand gestures” that “unsettles the spectators” (Umar 128). Khilji’s scar is on garish display with the flashlight under the chin lighting choice and the dark homogenization of the scene only serves to intensify it. “Khalibali” does serve Bhansali’s melodramatic purposes, however. Bhansali is allowed to direct the audience’s mind to view Khilji as a brute, utterly unhuman and unredeemable even by the pure Hindu grace of Padmavati.

Padmavati, who is elevated from her mortal position into a deity after her gamble to regain the kidnapped Ratan Singh is successful, cannot be allowed to be tainted with Khilji’s darkness. Ratan Singh won’t allow her in the same room as Khilji, ordering her to be covered with a smoke screen and reflected through mirrors in order to fulfill Khilji’s request to see her. Mehrunisa herself says Padmavati’s beauty could tempt saints and angels alike and Khilji is only man (*Padmavati*). Ostensibly, her deified status is why her *jauhar* is allowed to proceed as a move of feminine agency, Khilji’s greatest defeat as it were, rather than the horror show it is.

The final chapter discusses mise en scene in two directed ways: the green and saffron color duality and the intersection of light and dark lighting choices. The most important distinction between Gowariker and Bhansali, regarding the green and saffron color duality, is that Gowariker uses the color green to symbolize the budding love between Jodha and Akbar while Bhansali uses the color to signify the pollution of a character.



Bhansali also largely bypasses saffron for marital red, a color Gowariker also uses but not with the same heft, or Kashi purple. Bhansali is far too crafty of a director for a detail like Kashi, and many of the women, wearing green bangles in multiple scenes to be a coincidence and a deliberately antagonizing conversation between Mastani and Chimaji Appa makes the implications of the green color clear. Green is not welcome in the Marathi's Hindu household. Aside from Mastani herself, Bajirao and Kashi are the only prominent characters to wear green. Bajirao because he's "tainted" himself with Mastani and Kashi because she allows it.

Both Bhansali and Gowariker use light and dark to create character and emotion though they employ different tactics. Gowariker uses light and dark to display individual emotion, like the play of light and shadow in the scene where Akbar begs absolution of Maham Anga. Maham Anga is in the light though she is in the wrong while Akbar is half shadowed as he wars with himself. Even in the scene immediately after, where Akbar banishes Jodha, Jodha is completely in the dark and Akbar is backlit so only his silhouette is shown.

Bhansali's plays with light are less nuanced. The Hindu characters hold the light while the Muslim characters are left in the dark. Khilji is often poorly lit or illuminated in a way that puts his facial scar on grotesque display. Ratan Singh, who has a similar facial scar, is never illuminated like that. Outside of set lighting, Khilji is often in dark clothes with an unkempt appearance and this is almost always in direct opposition to Ratan Singh, the good Hindu king. Bhansali's message is clear: the Hindu will always walk in the light.

While both Gowariker and Bhansali have made significant departures from the history and literature, modified the importance, agency and role of women, and employed elements of *mise en scene* to tell their stories, their motives and outcomes are different. Gowariker, though

not a historian, does not occupy the same sensationalized storyteller role Bhansali holds. Despite some confusing historical adjustments, namely regarding Maham Anga and Gulbadan Banu Begum, his modifications do not seek to defile or glorify either side.

However, Bhansali's changes appear to be a deliberate ploy to villainize Muslims. He over inflates the marital and social drama in *Bajirao Mastani* to a point where the romance of Bajirao and Mastani becomes background noise to conflict. Conflict between Bajirao and his family, Bajirao and Kashi, and Mastani and Bajirao's family takes center stage with Bajirao's military conquests the second major plot. It is surprising, in a romance story such as this, that the love interests would spend so little time with one another on screen. *Padmavati* becomes a story of men fighting for control over a woman whose only form of agency becomes death. There is no empowerment to be found because Bhansali spends the length of the film antagonizing its Muslim antagonist. As a last ditch attempt to salve Padmavati's reputation, he transforms her into a Goddess, properly deified so that her *jauhar* is seen as an act of Hindu defiance, refusing to allow "'rapacious' Muslim invader" access to her newly minted divine power (Deshpande 161).

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