

The Country in the City: The Bye-lanes of Identity¹

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Aamir (Raj Kumar Gupta, 2008, produced by Ronnie Screwvala, cinematography by Alphonse Roy), was released on June 6 2008. Shot on a small budget of Rs 2 crores, this thriller is set in the Muslim dominated streets, the by lanes of the poor residential pockets of old Mumbai especially Dongri, Bhendi Bazar and the shoddy guest houses of Bandra. It grossed Rs. 2.40 crore, recovering its Rs. 2 crore investment, within three weeks. The film, set in the same year, is the story of Dr Aamir Ali (Rajeev Khandelwal) a London based NRI physician who returns to India to be with his family. His arrival at Mumbai is not particularly pleasant: the anti-Muslim reverberations of 9/11 are active in India as well. Accordingly, he is greeted with hostility, suspicion and harassment at Mumbai Airport's immigration counter. He eventually clears immigration and finds that, unexpectedly, no one of his family has come to receive him. When he calls home, no one answers, and while he puzzles this, two unknown motorcyclists force him to accept a mobile phone. This leads to a series of cryptic conversations with an unknown person who informs him that his family is in captivity and that he must follow the instructions he receives if he wants to recover them. He is told that he has five hours to save his family. In due course he is informed that he will be given a suitcase which has to be delivered somewhere - a delivery that turns out to be fictitious. At the very end of the film, just as he begins to feel that he has completed his mission, he is told that he has been chosen to commit an act of terrorism: he must plant the suitcase-bomb that he has unwittingly taken on, in a crowded city bus. The film shares its premise with two popular Hollywood films, *Phone Booth* and *Cellular* and is remarkably similar to the 2005 Filipino film, *Cavite*. It was critically applauded as a technological, directorial, cinematic and ideological *pièce de résistance*². In fact, noted film critic Khalid Mohamed in his 2008 review of the film wrote,

Brilliant cinematography - largely executed with hidden cameras - is the hero of *Aamir*. Street shots, head-on walks through Mumbai's mean streets and *mohallas* are lensed with extraordinary stealth by Alphonse Roy. Editor Aarti Bajaj goes at the material with surgical precision.

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² See for instance <http://www.rediff.com/movies/2008/jun/05aamir.htm>, <http://buzz18.in.com/reviews/masands-corner/aamir-a-tight-thriller-35/61511/0>, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/StoryPage.aspx?id=b126609c-c143-4736-83c7-c2276c192267&&Headline=Review%3a+EMAamir%2fEM>

Most reviews identified what they called the 'secular heart' of the film, "here's a little big movie that salutes the sacrificing secular spirit" (ibid). However, Gaurav Malani (2008), writing in *The Economic Times*, was impatient with precisely this aspect which he identified as the a déjà vu factor of the film, its

...much-exploited motive of the victimized Muslim that we have come across for the zillionth time this year post a slew of films like *Black and White*, *Shaurya*, *Khuda Kay Liye*, *Hope* and a *Little Sugar* that dealt with the issue on varying intensities.

The subtle but insistent anti-Muslim stance of the film, and the pervasive blindness to it (Malani's included) are telling comments on the extent to which anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments have pervaded upper/middle class India and mainstream nationalist discourses that are routinely circulated in the public domain.

As a film, *Aamir* presents us with a set of problematics about the Indian nation-state and its minority communities, specifically the Muslims. Those of immediate concern here are first, the extent to which the principles of exclusion and othering are foundational to the formation and sustenance of the nation-state; and second, the ways in which these manifest cinematically. While examining these, this paper will examine the ways in which the city - the most significant form of social organisation in the C20th - is made to function as a signifier specifically in this film, and more generally, in cinema - the most significant cultural form of the C20th.³ It will link this to the ways in which discursive continuities are cinematically established between a country as an exclusive and unequal nation-space and a cityscape. Given that nations and cities are definitively characterised by inequities and exclusion, the figuring of the city in cinema, may be either utopian or dystopian, depending on whose city is being figured and by whom. Clarke (1997) has cogently argued how the city, as a site, a location, a signifier and a set of thematics, facilitates a complex relationship with reality that is especially productive for cinema. Part of this he notes, is purely technological, and cinema as *technik* of cinema, (a term that evokes technology as much as technique) and medium, provided a spectacular opportunity to showcase dynamism, diversity, space, variations in scale, the complexity of perception, space and light.⁴ Certainly in India, the simultaneity of the evolution of cinema with the formation of the nation-state and the acceleration of modern urbanisation led to cinema's historical involvement with nationalism, nation-building, national integration and ideas of nation, and to it playing an ethnographic role, charting and interpreting its urban habitat as it evolved. Therefore,

³ Mark Shiel in Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2001:1) identifies cinema as the most significant cultural form of the C20th, and the city as the most significant form of social organisation in the C20th

⁴ See Clarke's 1997 discussion of this his 'Introduction' pp2ff.

Cinema is at once a form of perception and a material perceived, a new way of encountering reality and a part of reality thereby perceived for the first time (Shaviro 1993: 41)

There is then, of course, the journey from the real to the represented city and back, as Mumbai emerged as one representational archive of urban images in cinema, easily flagged through iconic shots like those of the Gateway of India, Juhu or Chowpatty beach, Victoria Terminus, streaming flyovers, panoramas of skyscrapers and slums, crowded local trains, etc., all of which are invoked by *Aamir* too (but we will discuss the dynamics of this later). The city itself as a protagonist that transforms its inhabitants and the directions of their lives is not new. We have seen it in popular cinema (*Shree 420*, Raj Kapoor 1955; *Deewar* Yash Chopra, 1975; *Salaam Bombay*, Mira Nair, 1988; *Parinda* Vidu Vinod Chopra 1989); middle cinema (*Ardh Satya*, Govind Nihalani, 1983, *Satya*, Ram Gopal Varma 1998); and parallel cinema (*Chakra*, Rabindra Dharmaraj, 1981). Films like *Awara* (Raj Kapoor, 1951), *Shree 420*, and *C.I.D* (Raj Khosla 1956) examine the urban landscape as part of their critical assessment of urbanity itself. The cinematic cityscapes defined by these and a host of other films have come to constitute not just an archive (Mazumdar: 2007), but a discourse of and on the identity of Mumbai in itself – an identity that gets reoriented when the director, Gupta, alongside the conventional signalling of the existing archival icons, begins to collate a new archive of Mumbai through the distinct communalisation of its slums and chawls, and then extends this into a comment on the nation-state itself.

In *Aamir*, set as it is within the context of globalisation, Mumbai (city and countrified local) is counterpoised with an absent London (megapolis), but is also fractured and disaggregated into its many component layers. It is thus simultaneously a highly metaphorised and a highly specific rendition of the city. Through the cinematographic spread offered, not just the ‘optical unconscious’ (Benjamin in Taussig 1993: 20) but the discursive underbelly of national identity is opened. *Mise en scène* facilitates the (unwitting) exposure of what otherwise remains routinely buried: elitism, orthodox normativity, homogeneity, religious majoritarianism and the hierarchies of caste are explicitly shown to be the underpinnings of mainstream nationalism and national identity. This is possible partly because of the ways in which visual detail facilitates a complex unbinding of a normally flattened out, nearly reified City (as opposed to the country for instance).

The directorial decision to intensively specify the city is driven by imperatives of aesthetics, genre, theme and *technik*. For instance, cities like Mumbai exemplify the specific modernity of industrial capital and all it has entailed socially and technologically, including the film industry⁵. The intimate

⁵ Its appearance as a ‘default’ metropolis in popular Hindi cinema indicates among other things a self-referential acknowledgement of the location of the film industry (Prasad: 2004: 86). However Mumbai has been preferred cinematic location also because of pre film-city logistical

and intense relation between Mumbai (commercial capital of the country), big money (black and white, ill-gotten and hard-earned) and crime (white collar and underworld) account for its remarkably *noir-ish* ambience, so necessary for the imaginative and cinematic exploration of directors as diverse as Raj Kapoor, Guru Dutt, Mira Nair, Vishal Bharadwaj and Raj Kumar Gupta. It offers an archetypal but densely textured site for the exploration of themes of abandonment, transition, failure, fulfilment and so on, all of which evoke the traditional significations of the city as these get specified within the classic city-country opposition. Here the city occurs as an ambivalent space of promise and of destitution, accomplishment and corruption, attainment and death. The locale of a city – marked as it is by the migrant – also permits the fluid narrative insertion of a stranger who often initiates a critique of that milieu. However, we note that the film doesn't merely introduce a relative *stranger to the city* (i.e. Aamir); it goes on to turn him – a non-resident Indian citizen and a 'Mumbaikar' (a proper resident of Mumbai) – into an *outsider to the nation*. While Aamir as deterritorialized citizen and remote insider always occupies an interestingly liminal position in relation to the Indian nation-state; and while he is indisputably a class-stranger to the disreputable streets that he is made to walk in his expensive shoes, he eventually becomes an outsider to the nation only because he is Muslim. This is unmistakable especially because the class assumptions of the film – explicit in much of its cinematography and narrative orientation – denies the entitlement to of the actual insiders and claimants – the intensively labouring and deeply situated poor – to urban and national space. It locates them and then Aamir, only because he is Muslim, at the margin which is paradoxically also the discarded heart of the urban-national space.

It is therefore this identity that enables the film to locate the elegantly clothed and manicured Aamir not as *flâneur* – that most famous persona that the city threw up – but among far more controversial and ubiquitous figures whose mere presence reflect the problematic and brutal nature of the city. The prostitute, the beggar, the migrant, the homeless, the stalker, the serial killer, his victim and perhaps even the *flâneuse*, all offer a completely different narrative of the city from the *flâneur*. They are also situated quite differently in relation to the city. They are not marked by an easy relation to freedom and detachment, but rather by an uneasy relation to the law, to elite notions of (dis)order. They are seen to create new and different "problems" for both the police and the discoursing elite, not least because there is no place to slot or hide them: even while governments continue to invisibilise, anonymize and isolate the impoverished, the prostitute, the poor and the labouring migrant, their activities spill out into the public domain and the streets. As this constituency actually builds, moves and services the city, they pose a problem of categories to the elites: they are *simultaneously productive and criminal*, indispensable and debris. In medicalized discourses of society, they are gradually reified into symptoms and

convenience. See also Williams' 1985 (1973)

then into the disease itself⁶. The film manifests this particular discursive and ideological trajectory in relation to the Muslim population. So, unlike the *flâneur* despite the miles he walks, or in the closer context of mainstream cinema, the *tapori*, both of whom make the city theirs in some crucial way, Aamir is doomed to go from stranger to outsider and criminal/sacrificial victim. Seeking anonymity and rest, feeling utterly alien, he remains coerced and uncomprehending. The issues of freewill and choice that characterise the experience of the *flâneur* and that the film opens with, are experienced by Aamir as he walks the city streets, only in their absence.

Michel de Certeau in "Walking in the City", (1984) reminds us that walking within the city substitutes the trope of the legendary journey that opens up possibilities. In this context walking transports both Aamir and the viewer out of the routinely flattened and valorised notion of national identity into an exploration of its hypocrisies, its biases and its discursive angularities⁷. It also precludes an exalted position that his earlier location as NRI affords him. Any chance that he might have had a 'panoramic' and theoretical knowledge of both city and community is cut-off (I show later how the two - at least this part of the city - gradually become coterminous, turning the slum into a metonym of Muslim-ness/Islam in the context of the nation). His is a somewhat Icarian situation which transforms an early and potentially voyeuristic vision of both city and community into a 'down below' gut experience of both. Appropriately enough then the high visibility of the opening panoramic shot of the city is plunged immediately into the city of experience, which is too close, too fast, too textured, to register any detail even though the idea is to register both detail and a quality and pace of life.

The film in that sense brilliantly conjures the impression of presence and absence, locality and dislocation, sheer ambivalence. And Aamir, as he traverses the streets is recurrently located in the interstices of stranger and intimate: one who cognises as (cultural) intimate but who is critically lacking or mistaken (in his understanding) precisely because finally, he is a (class) stranger to this ghettoized part of the city; he would be quite comfortable in plush surroundings. This paradox of physical proximity and intense social distance that characterises Aamir's sense of foreign-ness and this condition of uncertainty are sourced in his identity as Muslim, are reiterated and complicated by his simultaneous location in the communalised underbelly of the city and nation(al) discourse. The anxieties and uncertainties that these are shown to generate within him and a

⁶ Walkowitz's (1992) landmark study of the underbelly of Victorian England demonstrates this. Closer home, the Sheila Dikshit government's disgraceful drive to 'sanitize' Delhi for the 1020 Commonwealth Games has involved the massive incarceration and displacement of the city's poor. The lakhs of underpaid laborers who have are still rebuilding the city for the Games will be removed from it as soon as they have finished their work to complete the 'sanitization' process. See *Hardnews*, March 2010 or <http://hardnewsmedia.com/12010/03/3493>

⁷ See my 2010 discussion of the cinematic negotiations with the communalization of the Indian nation-state.

presumably upper-caste Hindu audience about issues of national identity, are shown to be unsustainable.

So, rather than leading to an exit or suggesting one to him, the walking only takes him deeper into the spaces of the community and religious identity that have, in the current context, acquired legendary proportions. The unnamed man on the cell phone (Gajraj Rao) is shot in semi-darkness, extreme close ups and cut-ins, appearing thereby as an unmistakable presence and an absence at once. The anonymity and menace that are bestowed by this cinematographic decision and mode of shot-taking at once distance him – he could be anyone – and yet retain him within the familiarity of inter-textual cinematic signification (underworld included) and intense secrecy. The presence itself, when it is unmistakable, is anonymous because he is shot mainly in extreme close-up and cut-ins, except at the end, when we are given a full (though not a full-frontal) shot of him collapsing on learning of Aamir's suicide. These, along with the fact that he can *always* see Aamir, no matter where he is, serves to exalt him into a sort of 'solar' or 'celestial Eye' (de Certeau, 1984: 92) that supplements his metaphysical meditations on free-choice and determinism. However, the *noir*-ish lighting while shooting him, choice of stark high or low-angle shots that dwarf or distort and render him sinister, the darkness of his skin and the physical contrast to Aamir's fair-skinned, fine-featured face and lean upright frame, generate an opposition to the 'solar' that, in archetypal terms is closer to the 'lunar' and the demonic. This is appropriate enough, given the racial-ethnic contours of the mythico-historical discourses of communal-national identity and their moral frames. This scopic power is literalised by depicting the community as his eyes – in fact they are almost metonymic extensions of him, working like a single 'monstrous' body with compound and distributed eyes, achieving an intense sense of organicity, the alien-ness of which is turned into a signifier of the *quam*. Remarkably, the invasive scopic attributes and powers of the camera/probe become those of a community and its emblematised members. For Aamir, his telephonic tormentor remains a disembodied voice whom he never meets, authoritative but also authorial, as he promises to script Aamir's future for him. The suggestion of him as a puppet-master, or game-master, along with his ruthless clarity of purpose, heightens both his sense of power and the uncertainty we feel about the events unfolding and their possible conclusion.

By having the protagonist arrive from abroad, specifically from London, implicitly invoking (and later in the film directly alluding to) the 2005 London blasts, the theme of Islamic terrorism is opened and charted progressively by the narrative – as it moves from aircraft, through the airport, into the city and then plunging deep into the by-lanes and chawls of the city – as one with ramifying significances, from the global, through the national, the communal and the local, to the most intimate level of the individual subject of terror. The film opens with an anonymous voice-over comment that discursively frames the issues of the film: 'they say our destiny lies in our own hands' – a line that the director has

Aamir echoing later in the film to his hidden interlocutor, as a way of explaining his professional success, as well as of distancing himself (thereby) from the chiefly impoverished Indian Muslim community at large, which by implication has chosen to be passive victim of circumstance. This line resonates with varying degrees of irony through the events of the narrative, and through the representation of the communalised city as an objective and inexorable force that steadily drives the protagonist towards the climax. At one level, the film brilliantly yokes this traditional metaphysical question of free-will versus determination to a whole set of other immediately significant binaries – individual versus community, upper/middle class versus lower class, privileged versus underprivileged, secular versus communal, patriotism versus (Islamic) treachery, Hindu versus Muslim, even nature versus nurture – and so on. As the original binary of free-will versus determinism is worked out through these other binaries, it becomes more and more layered with meaning, but also more and more resonantly tense because more and more polarised, until its narrative demands a final, violent annihilation of the one or the other as resolution.

The likely candidate for this annihilation is intimated early on in the sequence of Aamir at the immigration counter. The central question that he poses to the officer then: 'If my name had been Amar would you have treated me like this?' – is left hanging, but is played out in its implications as the narrative and his tribulations unfold. This same question is reiterated, in a sense, later by his interlocutor, and at the end, as we shall see, remains a question we can pose to the filmmaker. Immediately, the question poses the central problematic of Aamir's multiple identities and their consequences for him. The difference between Aamir and Amar is not merely syllabic, and the film tracks the differences between the two through the presentation of the *quam*/community, its location within the city, its role (as Gupta understands this) within the city. Though it is suggested that Aamir is returning to India because of the increasing hostility toward Muslims in London; it is immediately revealed to him that that global urban experience has already preceded him into Mumbai and his Muslimness will overdetermine everything. As importantly, even while he is an NRI, a physician, and feels obliged to disavow his religious identity, he is never seen as anything more than a Muslim. The extent to which the national polity and social body are communalised is quickly evident as the city he enters is very quickly disclosed to be cloven in two: one, the city of airports, ranging flyovers, skyscrapers, the ceaseless movement of money, traffic and people, in other words the well-maintained cosmopolis of the urban elite (in which Aamir actually belongs); this is the city of the bourgeois, apparently secular but actually upper-caste-upper-middle-class individual. The other is the neglected, rejected, static and degenerate spaces of the communal slums into which Aamir is reluctantly but helplessly drawn). The film makes it explicitly clear that it is the Muslim component of Aamir's otherwise secular bourgeois identity that renders him susceptible to the vertiginous pull of this second city, which then relentlessly

closes in on him as visual metaphor for the second terms in all the binaries (underprivileged, community, Muslim, lower class, communal). How it chooses to mark Muslim-ness is highly significant. First, it is registered as an overwhelmingly criminal presence in the city and in the film, through the simple expedient of showing – with the lone exception of Aamir himself (and he too is eventually implicated on national TV in a terrorist act) – *all* the other Muslim characters as either directly involved in criminal activity or complicit in the criminality of the others. It also directly references the Muslim segment of the underworld in Mumbai, and their alleged involvement in various bomb-blasts in Mumbai. The particular criminality here is doubly damaging because it is aimed against the Indian nation-state and the Hindu community – repeatedly referred to as ‘them’ by the terrorist ringleader. All Muslims, by the film’s definition then, are essentially prone to treachery – an old, well-entrenched and now widespread Hindutva line. Second, through a series of remarkably explicit images, the apparently irreconcilable alterity of Muslims in relation to the dominant Hindu community and by extension, the national body itself, is evoked through the classic stereotype of the Muslim as predatorily voracious, literalised in meat-eating (posed by implication against the casteist idea of the Hindu as predominantly vegetarian). In one scene, the camera dwells with fascinated attention on a variety of non-vegetarian dishes being eaten with obvious relish by the terrorist mastermind. This scene is powerful juxtaposed with when Aamir, made to pause briefly for rest in a rundown lodge, is supplied with non-vegetarian dishes – which he pointedly does not eat – while a national geographic programme on predatory cats plays on TV, thereby marking yet again the lie (no pun intended) of his personal and political affiliations. The variable location of Aamir between communities, and therefore between (moral) worlds, signifies not an ideological confusion but rather the intervention of class loyalties which disrupt and disallow the complete communalisation of this figure. Again, as if to emphasise that the association between the Muslim community and meat-eating was no narrative or visual coincidence, we are also taken on a brief but sufficiently extended journey through a part of the *mohalla* lined by Muslim butcheries resplendent with hanging carcasses. Third, the association of Islam itself with conquest and violence is explicitly established when at one point the figure played by Gajraj Rao offers an uncharacteristically crude and ahistorical justification for his mission, ‘*Jo cheena gaya hain, usse vapas hasil karne ke liye*’ (‘to take back that which was wrenched away’). At another point, he alludes to the wisdom of the Mughals in surviving on dates in the battlefield – an association that has in fact morphed into the underlying mythology of the global identification of terrorism with Islam. The final marker of Muslim alterity and identity is the degraded and pathetic condition of the slum itself: when the terrorist ringleader points out to Aamir that this is the condition that the Indian state and the Hindu community have visited on the Muslim community, he is effectively *owning* the backwardness and poverty of

the *quam* as a mark of its identity (a point that is, sadly enough, reinforced by the Sachar Committee Report⁸). The second city is thus also a second-(or third-, or fourth-) class city (underprivileged, unkempt, filthy, uncivilised, *unknown and disowned*) because it is a Muslim city.

That this is the city that the 'other', first city is in many ways parasitic on, which it is serviced by in innumerable small but vital ways, to which that first city turns, for its secret and taboo pleasures of meat-eating and paid sex – that it is the refuse and unseen labour of the metropolis – is profusely evident even cinematically, but never acknowledged by either Aamir or Gupta. Of vital importance is the drastic intervention that is made into the discourse on the city. The familiar literary and cinematic discourse of the city as corrupt and corrupting, even deadly, for the newcomer-stranger, is here inverted as the concept of alterity attaches to the *quam* as a whole, rendering the community itself as strange, as embodied corruption, and positing the city itself (rather than the stranger/outsider) as vulnerable to such strangeness. There is no depiction of the first city as 'dreadful' but rather as 'infected' by the invasive 'monstrosity' and 'disease' that is the second city.

The *mohalla* ambience of this second city is established through the signifiers of crowds, filth, shit, grit, squalor, claustrophobically closed spaces, impersonality and anonymity. Aamir's gradual descent into this second city renders him stranger in both and outsider to the first: this is reinforced brilliantly through repeated shots of him standing still and staring helplessly as the first city, and then the second, begin to hurtle by him, with the camera switching between close, dizzying shots of his own perspective on the whirling fleeing world around him, and sweeping long shots of the city's perspective on him, as it circles around him almost predatorily. This *mohalla* ambience is also cleverly transformed into characteristics of the *quam*, especially, but not only, by infiltrating the sense of anonymity with a peculiar kind of familiarity, bred on rumours and legends of the 'dirty Muslim', and authoritatively established by the camera technique of realist 'objective' surveillance and faux documentary, complete with handheld camera. At no point does Aamir know who is watching him, but he knows, as does the viewer, that he is being watched, and that he is himself known: the mutual suspicion of watcher and watched however stem from two diverse sources – the anonymity of the city and its people for Aamir,

⁸ 'According to the 2006 Prime Minister's High Level Committee (*Sachar Committee*) study, the Muslim minority is the second-poorest population in India, with 31% of its total population and 38.4 % of its urban population living below the poverty line. Muslim per capita expenditures in 2006 were half the amount of the general Hindu population expenditures and were below those of all disadvantaged groups except the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCTs) (SACHAR REPORT TABLE 10.12, PAGE 212). Though Muslims living throughout India suffer widespread and systemic deprivations in the areas of education, health, employment, living standards, and cultural life the 2002 pogroms directed against Muslims in the State of Gujarat exacerbated the failure to protect the fundamental economic, social and cultural rights of Muslims in Gujarat'. See <http://www.coalitionagainstgenocide.org/reports/2003/hrw.jul2003>

but the explicit alien-ness of Aamir's class identity for his watchers. In this sense Gupta is deliberately picking up and reworking the cinematic trope of the stranger in the city, by interrogating the very ideas of strangeness and familiarity, and situating them in the binaries noted above. The almost incessant movement throughout the film reinforces the sense of the protagonist's lack of control over his actions and decisions, from his first involuntary movement of catching the cell-phone thrown at him to near the end when he leaves the bomb in the bus. It is only when *he* decides at the end that he will cease to move, that he will not abandon the suitcase bomb but die with it, that he regains a paradoxical control over his life – paradoxical, because it is a passing control over his life, and that only to determine its termination. The metaphysical question of free-will versus determinism and the visualisation of this through ceaseless movement is thus climatically resolved on the side of free-will – and therefore paradigmatically, on the side of the nation-state, secularism, and patriotism, but also individualism, upper/middle class values, and privilege. It is of no small import that Aamir the Muslim must die, as it were, on behalf of his treacherous Muslim brethren, so that Aamir the liberal (incidentally with a Hindu girlfriend) can uphold the values of urban, upper/middle class India, which through the very narrative requirement of his death, is shown to be communal. That he is a representative of this class and its values, is made explicit in the conversation with his tormentor earlier alluded to, and worth dwelling on in some detail: there, when he is reproached that he had made use of the *quam* but given nothing back, he retorts that he took nothing from the *quam* but made his own life, and that there was nothing to stop anyone who should choose to make something of their life through hard work (the great middle class delusion). To which his interlocutor asks, 'If everyone in the *quam* thought like you, what would happen to it?' Aamir's reply is particularly instructive: '*Har aadmi apne bare mein soche to har quam ka bhalla hoga*'. This is an almost verbatim rendering of the neo-liberal economic tenet that if every individual looks after his own good, then the good of society at large is achieved, recalling a classic tradition-modernity opposition: religion versus economics, *quam* versus the market.

Given that the film was a low-budget, niche film, made with the multiplex audience in urban areas in mind, it is clear that Gupta is seeking to retrieve the Muslim from absolute alterity by locating him (the gender is not unconsidered, given that the only significant female presence in the film is a nameless prostitute who even plays up to the role of the kind-hearted Muslim tawaif of *Pakeezah*, only to jettison even that by revealing her to be as complicit in Aamir's predicament as the other Muslims) – by locating him then, in an upper/middle class urban-liberal discourse – thereby soliciting sympathy for and even empathy with Aamir in his audience. Aamir's final smile directly into the camera – directed clearly toward this other, extra-diegetically complicitous public – before he dies is part of this strategy of invoking sympathy. At times the movement of

the camera layers our gaze (the extra-diegetic, presumed middle class audience) onto that of the diegetic audience, each observing Aamir, waiting to know how he will act, what he will choose to do. At these moments in fact the two cities are separated only by the space of the screen (the first city located in the extra diegetic audience, and the second in the diegetic audience) with Aamir – in his dual identity – located in the middle. Indeed, even the highly documentary quality of the camera work in the film – and the seamless feeding of the final scenes into what are effectively the visuals of news cameras, with the familiar voice-overs of reporters covering the blast from the bomb and speculating on Aamir’s terrorist affiliations – works to this end, given that almost all news networks essentially cater to and voice the concerns of this socio-economic class. The understanding that film records a virtual space that enables ‘proximity without presence’ (Fleisch in Clarke 1997: 9) is fundamental to this voyeuristic function of the news media on the one hand, and its vicarious consumption by the middle class on the other: Gupta’s city is very much the city of the news cameras, with the only difference being that Gupta’s narrative intent splits the city into two countries, liberal upper/middle class India and a communalist, lower class Muslim terrain that no one wants to know of, except as the breeding ground for “Islamic terrorism”. The opposition between the two is reinforced through a phone call that Aamir has to make at one point for further instructions to a third unknown party, evidently a mastermind even higher up than Aamir’s interlocutor, which turns out to be to a number in Karachi. Aamir’s liminal location at the interstices of the two countries, not just two cities, that emerge in the city then proves vital to the message of the film. For Gupta apparently the only hope for Muslims in India is their adoption of the (implicitly Hindu) liberal way of life – ironic, considering that, within the terms of his own narrative and Aamir’s final fate, that too can be a killing choice.

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