

Aliens as the *Other* in Post-Independence Hindi Cinema

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This paper seeks to understand globalization as a way to interpret the shift in the portrayal of the *Other* as allegorized as aliens in Hindi science fiction cinema. After a brief discussion of what constitutes science fiction, the paper examines four science fiction films: *Chand Par Chadayee* (Sundaram 1967), *Wahan Ke Log* (Ansari 1967), *Koi...Mil Gaya* (Roshan 2003) and *PK* (Hirani 2014). A comparison is drawn between the films produced in the twentieth century and those produced in the twenty-first, noting the vilification of aliens in the former and the positive characterization in the latter. This shift in the portrayal of aliens is argued as a result of the liberalization of the Indian economy, the strengthening of the Indian military, and other factors that contribute to today's globalized world.

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India's relationship with the *Other* has evolved since its independence in 1947. Here, the term *Other* refers to the way individuals define the people and things around them who seem alien to their own social identity (Miller 2008, 588-91). Since gaining its independence 70 years ago, India has loosened its guard when it comes to outsiders of all kinds. The early decades post-independence were characterized by a sense of discomfort and skepticism of the *Other* and a "desire to maintain the greatest possible independence in the conduct of India's foreign affairs" (Ganguly 2009, 2). The wars with China and Pakistan in the 1960s furthered the negative sentiment towards the *Other*, a sentiment that remained prevalent for several decades. The Indian government also projected *Otherness* on foreign goods, restricting their entry or heavily taxing them (Kohli 2006, 1251). It was not until the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s that India opened up its borders to the rest of the world and embraced what the *Other* had to offer, particularly in regard to commerce (ibid.). Additionally, the strengthening of the Indian military, paired with the nation's rapid growth in science and technology, provided a sense of security. This sense of security allowed India to engage more confidently with the world and changed the way India viewed the *Other*.

This evolving view of the *Other* has been reflected in Hindi science fiction film through the personification of the *Other* as an alien from outer space. In particular, a link between India's portrayal of *Otherness* in science fiction film to the nation's evolving perception of the *Other* is demonstrated to be the result of globalization within India's social, economic, and political climate. This played a role in the shift from the vilification of the *Other* to characterizing the *Other* as an agent of positive change. By examining the portrayal of *Otherness* in science fiction

film, the genre emerges as a critical tool for commentary on Indian society.

What is Science Fiction?

Popular science fiction scholar Vivian Sobchack states that:

One of the difficulties inherent in discussing the science fiction (SF) film is that the critic has to deal with the nagging conviction that he or she ought to define it before describing it, that the very act of definition is, indeed, an academic requirement as well as a personal cathartic. (1987, 17)

In her book, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, Sobchack cites definitions of several science fiction scholars and critics. Sam Moskowitz, for example, defines the genre as:

Science fiction is a brand of fantasy identifiable by the fact that it eases the 'willing suspension of disbelief' on the part of its readers by utilizing an atmosphere of scientific credibility for its imaginative speculations in physical science, space, time, social science, and philosophy. (ibid., 19)

Sobchack notes that this definition is weighted by Moskowitz's "Catholic conception of science" (ibid.). Another definition of science fiction that Sobchack finds to be "narrower" than Moskowitz is that of British author and critic Kingsley Amis,

Science fiction is that class of prose narrative treating of a situation that could not arise in the world we know, but which is hypothesized on the basis of some innovations in scene or technology, or pseudo-science or

pseudo-technology, whether human or extraterrestrial in origin. (ibid.)

If definitions of science fiction are so heavily based on one's own background and opinion (ibid., 17-9) a new definition, inspired by academic Darko Suvin (1979, 7-8) will also be put forth for the purposes of this essay: science fiction is a genre that depicts supernatural beings, imaginary (sometimes inconceivable) technologies, and fantastical settings.

The Monopoly of Hindu Mythological Films

Regardless of what science fiction might be, it has never been a popular genre of Indian cinema (Khan 2014, 186). This is largely due to the fact that the Hindu mythological drama genre already had the monopoly in the film industry (ibid.). If the ingredients that make a science fiction film include supernatural beings, imaginary technologies, and fantastical settings, then it is not a stretch to say that these mythological genre films offered the same. A prime example is the popular film *Mayabazar* (Reddy 1957), originally made in Telugu and subsequently into several Indian languages (including Hindi). This film incorporates many features of science fiction film though it is set during the Mahabharata era, a key time in Hindu religious history. For example, the female protagonist Shashirekha uses a magical box to contact her lover, Abhimanyu. Though we have Skype and FaceTime today, this was certainly an inconceivable technology in the 1950s. Suspension of belief in this technology was attributed to acceptance that such devices existed within the realm of Hindu mythology. The film also housed several super-humans, one being Krishna, who is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the other being the friendly demon, Ghatotgacha. Ghatotgacha has several

superhuman abilities including the ability to teleport, resize himself, and to assume the guise of anyone he wants.

Because the Indian populace was already accustomed to seeing features of science fiction in films through Hindu mythological narratives, there was no pressing need to experience the fantastical through science fiction. While Hindu mythological narratives are considered to be part of religious history, they, like science fiction narratives, are forms of allegorical storytelling. Nevertheless, a few production houses ventured into the territory of science fiction, mirroring the world's increasing interest in scientific research and advancement. In Hollywood, the 1950s onwards saw an increase of films in the science fiction genre in parallel to the beginnings of the Atomic Age, Space Race, and the Cold War (Mubarki 2015, 249). Addressing societal concerns through the lens of science fiction, particularly via films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Wise 1951) and *The Thing from Another World* (Nyby 1951), allowed filmmakers to comment on the times without pointing fingers at specific populations (ibid.).

Though India remained neutral for much of the Cold War (Prabha 2016, 150-1), the country's position as a newly independent nation increased anxieties around other countries' military and scientific advancement. In response, Hindi filmmakers also utilized extraterrestrial creatures to metaphorically represent these new tensions with the *Other*. Though films like *Mayabazar* (Reddy 1957) included supernatural beings like Krishna and Ghatotgacha, these characters were not considered aliens, as they were already part of the known realm of beings in Hindu mythology—humans, animals, *Devas* (Gods) and *Asuras* (Demons). The transition from mythology into science fiction came when the supernatural beings

were no longer borne of religion, but rather of science. Recognizable characters outside of cinema, such as Ghatotgacha, were replaced with aliens that were manifestations of only the film director's imagination. Additionally, mythological films took place in known time periods of Hindu religious history and were set either on Earth, heaven, or hell. Science fiction narratives, however, occurred in galactic spaces such as the Moon, Mars, and other celestial bodies. This clear distinction is illustrated in the Hindi science fiction film *Chand Par Chadayee* (Sundaram 1967) when the film's protagonist, Captain Anand, asks his alien abductor if they are going to heaven. The Lunarian abductor replies, "this is not heaven, it is space" (ibid. 1967). This transition from religion to science secularized the *Other* and created a shift in the diegesis of these films from religious history to modern and futuristic times.

Military Undertones in 1960s Science Fiction Film

The year 1967 saw the release of two Hindi science fiction films, *Chand Par Chadayee* (*Trip to the Moon*) and *Wahan Ke Log* (*People from 'There'*). Existing literature discusses these films as a reflection of military tensions in the newly independent India (Khan 2014, 189-190). The 1960s saw two major border disputes: the Sino-Indian War in 1962 with China and the Indo-Pakistani War in 1965. While some mainstream dramas addressed these tensions inadvertently, it was the science fiction genre that allegorized them fully. In *Wahan Ke Log* (Ansari 1967), Agent Rakesh (Pradeep Kumar) is on a mission to investigate the Martians that land in India and rob the rich of their diamonds. Agent Rakesh learns that the Martians are controlled by an "evil genius" named Anil, who is an Indian traitor. As we follow Agent Rakesh on his mission, we eventually find out that these "Martians" are not actually from

outer space, but rather from a "neighboring country" (Ansari 1967). In truth, Anil partnered with the neighboring country's government and dressed up his minions as creatures from Mars to deceive the Indian government in order to gain control of the country. In the final scene after Agent Rakesh uncovers Anil's plot, his boss congratulates him saying "Rakesh zindabad," ("long live Rakesh") (ibid.). Agent Rakesh patriotically replies "No, motherland zindabad" ("Victory to the motherland"). His victory embodies an invincible India against the foreign threat (ibid.).

Chand Par Chadayee follows astronaut Captain Anand (Dara Singh) who is sent to the Moon on an assignment to rescue an abducted scientist. On the way, he too is abducted by Lunarians and is sentenced to death by the Moon's court of law. Death sentences are conducted by pitting the accused against a monstrous space gorilla in a fight to the death. Much to everyone's surprise, Anand defeats the space gorilla and is there on out celebrated as a hero by the Lunarians, especially the moon princess, Shimoga. To further establish the military prowess of India through Captain Anand's heroism, *Chand Par Chadayee* continues with a secondary plot. The king of Mars, Barahatu (Anwar Hussain) cleverly schemes with traitor Lunarian Simi (Padma Khanna) to kidnap Shimoga and make her his bride. Once again, Captain Anand engages in an intergalactic battle, and saves Shimoga and the entire Moon from Barahatu (Sundaram 1967). Like Agent Rakesh, Captain Anand symbolizes an Indian hero who is not only willing to risk his life to save one of his own from foreign abduction, he is also able save the allies who are in danger. Captain Anand's victory establishes a sense of nationalism, that India will not be defeated in the face of the *Other*.

In his essay, *Bollywood's Encounters with the Third Kind*, author Sami Ahmad Khan discusses the Sino-Indian war as inspiration for *Wahan Ke Log*. Though the neighboring country is never specified, it can be assumed that the film is referencing China because the Sino-Indian war had occurred only five years prior (Khan 2014, 189). Additionally, the competition between India and China for scientific and technological advancement is reflected in the use of spaceships, artillery, and other advanced technologies (Baark & Sigurdson 1981). With regard to *Chand Par Chadayee*, scholars provide different interpretations. Khan discusses the film as an allegory for the Indo-Pakistan war. He cites Anand's use of "counteroffensive attacks" against Baharatu and Mars as a reenactment of a similar incident during the war:

On August 5, 1965 between 26,000 and 33,000 Pakistani soldiers crossed the Line of Control dressed as Kashmiri locals [and] headed for various areas within Kashmir. Indian forces, tipped off by the local populace, crossed the cease fire line on August 15. (as quoted in Khan 2014, 190-1)

Other interpretations suggest that *Chand Par Chadayee* "takes an ethical stance, implicating the nation for initiating the journey to the moon and warns against the inherent violence in the thoughtless pursuit of modern [science and technology] that had become complicit with colonialism" (Lakkad 2015, 108). Author Meraj Ahmed Mubarki of "Monstrosities of Science: Exploring Monster Narratives in Hindi Horror Cinema" elaborates on this further, citing the Moon court scene as a metaphor for the Non-Alignment Movement (2015, 250). The Non-Alignment Movement defined India's foreign policy as taking a neutral stance of mutual respect, non-aggression, non-interference, equality, mutual benefit,

and peaceful coexistence amongst countries. These principles, known as *Panchsheel*, were then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's "ethical alternative to war" (Prabha 2016, 150). In the Moon court scene, Captain Anand makes his intentions for coming to the Moon in the first place clear—he only wants to rescue the scientist that they have abducted, not wage war or colonize. He exercises the principles (*Panchsheel*) of the Non-Alignment Movement by offering to collaborate with the Moon in their scientific efforts so that the two worlds can advance together. Though the Lunarians do not initially agree, they join forces after Captain Anand overcomes the death penalty and the new allies go on to fight the King of Mars. It is Captain Anand who saves the Moon princess Shimoga from Barahatu, thereby reiterating Indian heroism.

India's independence from Britain was still fresh during the 1960s and therefore a sense of distrust and skepticism toward outsiders persisted. India was building a sense of national identity and depicted themselves as valorized in the face of intrusion by the *Other*. In the case of the two films, Agent Rakesh and the heroic Captain Anand serve as cinematic representations of early Indian nationalism.

Discomfort with the *Other* was not only limited to people, the Indian government extended this sentiment towards foreign goods by restricting their entry into the country or heavily taxing them (Kohli 2006, 1251). In the years after independence, India's economy was primarily controlled by the government—first under the governance of Jawaharlal Nehru, then under his daughter, Indira Gandhi. Both leaders expressed disfavor for a free and open market and as a result the Indian market remained primarily closed off to the outside world.

In 1991, the rapid liberalization of the Indian economy under Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and his finance minister (and future prime minister) Manmohan Singh, radically repositioned India in relation to the world. This newly liberalized market, open to foreign imports, investments, and trade, created a sense of fluidity between borders (ibid.). During this time, thousands of Indians migrated Westward and the new flow of capital created an overall heightened sense of consumerism with the rise of the Indian middle class (Kapur 2009, 226). India was connected to the rest of the world like never before. With India's economy growing rapidly and borders opening to the rest of the world, these new interactions with the *Other* enabled a shift in the presentation of *Otherness*.

This shift was reflected in mainstream dramas where protagonists were often “foreign returns” who had gone abroad to study and, along with their degrees, brought back Western consumerist behaviors (e.g. drinking Coca-Cola, wearing Gap sweaters, etc) (Nelson & Deshpande 2013). While there was weariness around Western ideals of sex and drugs, which were considered bad influences on the Indian populace, Hindi cinema did not address this through narratives of heroic Indians conquering “immoral” Western villains. Instead, filmmakers employed the “cinematic style of ‘western gloss - *desi* soul,’” (Sharpe 2018, 62) meaning that the protagonist could participate in a global economy, but they remain Indian at heart. This was the formula of 1990s Hindi cinema as the country navigated the new economic and social landscape and adjusted to the idea of globalization.

Economic liberalism was coupled with a sense of security that came with the strengthening of warfare technologies

(ibid., 190). Today, India is the fifth largest military spender in the world (Singh 2017). Additionally, while India has dealt with terrorist attacks such as the Mumbai attacks in 2008 (Javaid & Kamal 2013, 35), it has not engaged in a major war since the Kargil War in 1999.

The globally connected twenty-first century made room for a focus on more universal social issues, one being internal *Otherness*. A significant trend in films of the early 2000s was the production of films dealing with mental and physical disabilities. Films such as *Black* (Bhansali 2005) inspired by Helen Keller's story, *Taare Zameen Par* (Khan 2007) dealing with dyslexia, and *Paa* (Balki 2009) exploring progeria (Mohapatra 2012, 128), are sympathetic to their characters and seek to educate the public, a welcome change after years of stereotypical portrayals of disability (Mohapatra 2012, 130-1). This overall shift in the way the *Other* was presented was also reflected in the way science fiction films began to use aliens to explore the *Other*.

Aliens, a Beacon of Hope

After an absence through the 1990s, science fiction films returned in the twenty-first century. In 2003, former actor turned director Rakesh Roshan made *Koi...Mil Gaya* (I Found Someone) (Roshan 2003), the story of friendship between an alien and an autistic young man named Rohit. Often inaccurately considered “India's first science fiction film” by popular news sources (Gates 2003), *Koi...Mil Gaya* is certainly the first Indian science fiction film to portray the *Other* positively. In the film, scientist Sanjay Mehra designs a computer program that enables humans to communicate with aliens, but before he is able to prove its functionality to the mocking scientific community, he is killed in a car crash. His pregnant wife

survives the fatal accident and gives birth to their son, who is born with autism. Rohit grows up to be a warm-hearted young man, but with limited intellectual capacity. His childlike personality leads him to befriend all the children of the town, but is bullied by those in his age group, especially by the town collector's son, Raj. Years later, Rohit discovers his father's computer and unknowingly makes contact with aliens from outer space, signaling a spaceship down to Earth. When one of the aliens finds himself stranded on Earth after the spaceship leaves, Rohit befriends him, takes him home, and gives him the name "Jadoo" (the Hindi word for magic). More importantly, Rohit promises to hide Jadoo from the police, local government officials (including Raj's father, Harbans Saxena), and the Indian Space Research Organization who want to capture him. To express his gratitude, Jadoo uses his healing powers to rid Rohit of his autism and allow him to function as a "normal" adult (the film codes "normal" through intelligence, strength, and the ability to engage in romantic relationships). At the time when Jadoo performs magic, Rohit is at an impasse in his relationship with the mayor's daughter, Nisha. He knows that he likes her, but he is unable to understand why the two cannot get married. He also feels threatened by Raj, who is in strong pursuit of Nisha. By "healing" Rohit, Jadoo essentially enables him to attract Nisha in a standard, masculine way (Roshan 2003). Interestingly, while the alien *Other* is able to maintain its extraterrestrial characterization, the *Other* in the human form is dealt with problematically as he is changed from "different" to "normal."

Koi...Mil Gaya shows an interesting role reversal when compared to the science fiction of the 1960s, as the alien is coded as positive while the members of Indian government are negative. When the town

comes to know that a spaceship has landed in their home, Harbans Saxena declares an official holiday, citing the incident as a means of making their "small hill station famous" (ibid.). Later, after discovering that the spaceship left behind an alien, the selfish motives of government officials are revealed in an exchange between Nisha and police inspector Khan:

Police Inspector Khan: If it is an alien's footprint, then we will catch the alien. This will be a bigger achievement than man landing on the moon. It will unravel so many secrets of the universe.

Nisha: But what if the alien is dangerous?

Police Inspector Khan: Then we will shoot it. (ibid.)

It should be noted that Police Inspector Khan does not want to kill the alien simply because it could be dangerous; he knows that if Jadoo dies by his hands, he will become a hero. In a society where authorities see the alien as a tool of self-promotion, only Rohit sees the alien as a guest and promises to protect him. Rohit's expression of humanity towards Jadoo indicates a deeper bond between them. In a way, Rohit too is an alien. His peers label him "crazy" because he functions uniquely in the world. Yet, it is his alien experience that allows him to view the situation differently than everyone else.

In contrast to Police Inspector Khan, a non-*Otherved* character that is able to sympathize with Jadoo is Rohit's mother. When she first sees Jadoo, she scolds her son for interacting with "this thing" (ibid.) and runs to the phone to call the police. However, after realizing that Jadoo has helped her son and sees the bond between the two, her view of Jadoo changes entirely. When the police, the Indian Space Research Organization, and

other government officials capture Jadoo to send his body to America for research, Rohit's mother asks her son to "save Jadoo and prove that humanity still exists in the world" (ibid.). Rohit's mother is only able to come to this realization because she observes Jadoo closely through his relationship with her son. People like Harbans Saxena, on the other hand, are far removed from this experience of humanity and therefore are not able to view Jadoo in the same way. This preaching of humanity from alien to human is quite contrary to the ethos of Indian heroism presented in twentieth century iterations of Hindi science fiction film. Science fiction films were no longer allegories for foreign threats that needed to be conquered by Indian heroes. Now, the "Indian heroes" of earlier films had become corrupted by power and needed aliens to help them think globally.

Koi...Mil Gaya broke boundaries not only because Jadoo is from another planet, but because he is an outsider who is able to assimilate to India's post-liberalized cultural climate. He is able to understand "Hinglish" (the mix of Hindi and English spoken commonly in India), and he even participates in middle class consumerist behaviors such as drinking Coca-Cola with Rohit and his friends (Khan 2014, 192). These depictions speak to the increasing globalization of the concept of humanity.

Opening the gates of the Indian economy gave Indians more exposure to the world and created a new sense of affluence in the middle and upper classes (Nelson & Deshpande 2013). This newfound comfort led to the evolution of two contrasting characteristics in people: selfishness and open-mindedness. *Koi...Mil Gaya* illustrates this idea by showing both types and presenting them as products of the globalized India. The audience is encouraged to root for the open-

minded people who welcome Jadoo instead of *Othering* him.

We see this trend of aliens as agents of humanity a decade later in the immensely popular Rajkumar Hirani film, *PK* (2014). In this film, a humanlike alien from a distant planet lands on Earth as part of a research mission. Within moments of his arrival, the remote control to his spaceship gets stolen, stranding him on Earth. With no foreseeable way to get home, the alien starts learning how to live in his new surroundings. He learns about clothing, money, interpersonal relationships, and eventually receives a name, PK. Once he learns to speak, PK asks those around him how to find his remote—to which people unanimously say, "Only God can help you." Thus PK starts his mission to find God and obtain his lost remote control. However, India is a country of many religions and PK soon becomes confused as to which religion to follow in his search for God, ultimately rendering the film a critique on religion in India (ibid.). It is PK's position as an *Other* that enables him to conduct such a critique, something that a human would perceivably not be able to do objectively due to their own religious biases.

In both *Koi...Mil Gaya* and *PK*, the aliens are stranded on Earth and require the help of humans in order to go back home. The only humans who are able to help them are the ones who are themselves alienated or *Othered*, in some way. In the same way that Rohit helps Jadoo, a young journalist named Jaggu promises to help PK. Jaggu, like Rohit, is an "alien" in that she does not fit in with those around her. She is cast out by her family for falling in love with a Pakistani man and then later, for engaging in a mission to defame the family's guru, the corrupt Tapasvee. At work, she appears to be the only person committed to purposeful journalism. In short, she is portrayed as

being alone until PK comes into her life and gives her a sense of purpose—to help him find his remote and subsequently expose the fraudulent activities of Tapasvee.

When *PK* was first released in 2014, it caused a stir amongst right-wing Hindu groups. Violent protests ensued at many theaters in India under the premise that the film was an attack on Hinduism (*Times of India* 2014). What the protestors failed to understand is that the film was not targeting Hinduism, or Islam, or Christianity. Hirani was targeting the “Godmen” who exploit the name of religion for self-gain and the followers who overlook the basic principles of humanity out of fear, disguised as reverence. Only PK as a complete outsider is able to see through the absurdity of it all. There is a scene in the film where PK observes one of Tapasvee’s sermons. During the sermon, an elderly follower asks Tapasvee how to cure his ailing wife. Before he can finish, Tapasvee calls upon the higher power to “enlighten him.” After a brief act of interacting with God, Tapasvee tells the follower that he must endure an arduous eight-day journey to a temple near the Rathong glacier in the Himalayas. When the follower’s face falls with resignation, PK jumps out of his seat and confronts Tapasvee asserting that God will never ask someone to do something so absurd and would instead advise the elderly man to support his wife and stay by her side (Hirani 2014).

By giving his follower a convoluted answer “from God,” Tapasvee is creating the illusion that only he is privy to the divine secrets of the world. Tapasvee then capitalizes on this illusion as followers offer generous donations to solicit his advice. Due to his innocence, PK thinks that Tapasvee is receiving messages from a “wrong number” or “duplicate God,” because the actual God would only give practical advice (ibid.). This

dialogue addresses the idea that religion has become a tool to define the people and things around them who seem different and alien to their own social identity. *PK* reinforces the fact that religion is supposed to be an institution that supports humanity. The fact that it takes the unbiased critique of an alien *Other* to shed light on this fact reveals interesting insights on internal *Othering* in India. However, the use of the *Other* as an educational tool, as seen with the early 2000s trend on disability related films, is very much reflected in *PK* (ibid.).

In the same way that *Koi...Mil Gaya* is a critique of selfish authorities within the Indian Government, *PK* is a critique on selfish authorities that function within religion. Such self-critique of institutions within India would not have been as widely accepted in the era of *Chand Par Chadayee* and *Wahan Ke Log* because patriotism dictated the presentation of the *Other* to be feared and portrayed in a negative light. The heightened interaction with the rest of the world that evolved from globalization not only opened the borders to the rest of the world, it also opened internal borders amongst different types of people.

Conclusion

With the advent of globalization, the portrayal of the *Other* through the use of aliens changed from one of suspicion to one of acceptance and engagement. The open borders to the skies in Hindi cinema demonstrate the change within the Indian social, political, and economical milieu in the years since India’s independence on August 15, 1947. Today, aliens no longer serve as a metaphor for external threats but rather as a metaphor for hope. They are not associated with any country, but are from a completely different planet, unrepresentative of anyone on Earth. Because of international

connectivity via globalization, India as a microcosm of the world—a world that is cognizant of its ailments and one in a constant search of a fix. Through the use of alien characters, Hindi science fiction film of today suggests that it takes someone not from another country, but from another planet to show the way forward, awakening self-realization and peaceful coexistence.

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