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Cinema, Representation and Muslim Women: An Islamic Feminist Critique of Suparn Verma's *Haq* (2025)

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Abstract

Aims: *This paper critically examines Suparn Verma's Haq (2025) through the lens of Islamic feminism, with a particular focus on the representation of Muslim women, Islamic law, and gender justice. The study seeks to investigate how the film engages with issues such as Triple Talaq, marital oppression and women's legal rights, while assessing whether the narrative offers a nuanced understanding of Islamic jurisprudence or reproduces reductive stereotypes surrounding Muslim women and Muslim communities.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The paper employs qualitative textual and thematic analyses of the film, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Islamic feminism, postcolonial feminism, and feminist legal critique. Drawing upon the works of scholars such as Saba Mahmood, Leila Ahmed, Asma Barlas and Lila Abu-Lughod, the study analyses the film's narrative structure, characterization, dialogues, and socio-legal framing.*

Outcome: *The analysis demonstrates that although Haq foregrounds important concerns regarding patriarchal practices and women's vulnerability within marital structures, the film ultimately presents a limited and selective understanding of Islamic legal traditions.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper concludes that meaningful cinematic engagement with Muslim women's issues requires a more historically grounded and ethically nuanced approach to Islam, gender and law. The study suggests that future representations of Muslim women in Indian cinema must move beyond victimhood narratives and engage more responsibly with Islamic feminist scholarship and lived Muslim realities.*

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Cinema plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of religion, gender and minority communities. Stuart Hall rightly argues that representation is never neutral because “representation is constitutive of the event itself” (Hall 15). Films that claim to depict “real struggles” often influence how audiences understand complex social and legal debates. In the Indian context, cinematic portrayals of Muslim women have frequently oscillated between two extremes: romanticised exoticism and narratives of oppression requiring liberation. Edward Said’s observation that the Orient is often represented through “a system of representations framed by political forces” (Said 3) becomes particularly relevant in this context. These representations often reflect broader political anxieties surrounding Muslim identity, gender relations and secularism.

In “*Haq* Review: A Cinema of Women’s Battles, Men’s Egos, and a Nation’s Convenient Moralities”, Harshi argues that “Cinema based on 'real events' has always had a way of revealing not the past, but the anxieties of the present” (Harshi). She argues that Suparn Varma’s *Haq* (2025), which is a fictionalised reinterpretation of the Shah Bano moment, arrives at a particular historical juncture when narratives concerning Muslim women in India (as well as abroad) are increasingly mediated through state and media discourses emphasising suffering, patriarchal confinement and victimhood. These representations are often embedded within a discursive framework that serves majoritarian political interests. Within this context, any cinematic text engaging with debates like Muslim women’s position in society, their rights, religious authority and the tropes like saving Muslim women, demands examination not merely as artistic expression but as political and cultural intervention.

Haq enters this cultural landscape as a film that claims to highlight Muslim women’s struggle for justice in a patriarchal society. However, a critique of the film not merely asks whether the film supports “women’s rights,” but *how* it frames those rights, *who* gets to speak for Muslim women, and *what* political work the narrative performs in a majoritarian climate. The narrative follows Shazia Bano, a Muslim woman whose life is disrupted when her husband, Abbas, invokes instant *Triple Talaq* and takes a second wife. Shazia subsequently

challenges the injustice through legal channels, transforming her personal struggle into a broader debate about Muslim women's rights.

At first glance, *Haq* appears to align with feminist concerns regarding gender inequality, marital injustice and patriarchal abuse. However, the film raises important questions about representation and interpretation. Who speaks on behalf of the Muslim women? Does it genuinely engage with Islamic legal frameworks, or does it present Islam itself as the source of injustice? Does it recognise Muslim women's agency within Islamic traditions, or does it reinforce the orientalist and neo-orientalist narrative that liberation of Muslim women must come from outside the community, as echoed by Gayatri Spivak in her famous assertion "white men saving brown women from brown men" in a postcolonial context?

Islamic feminism provides a critical framework for examining these questions. Emerging from the work of scholars such as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Leila Ahmed, Ziba Mir-Hosseini and others, Islamic feminism seeks to reinterpret Islamic texts and traditions through a gender-egalitarian perspective. Rather than rejecting Islam as inherently patriarchal, Islamic feminists argue that many oppressive practices stem from patriarchal interpretations of religious texts rather than the texts themselves. As Asma Barlas argues, "there is a difference between Islam and its patriarchal interpretations, and the *Qur'an* itself does not teach or justify sexual inequality" (Barlas 2). Scholars like Amina Wadud have spent decades demonstrating that patriarchal outcomes in Muslim societies stem not from the Qur'anic imperatives but from historical power dynamics and male-dominated interpretive traditions. This aligns closely with the Islamic feminist methodology. From this perspective, *Haq* becomes an important site of analysis, revealing how popular cinema negotiates the tension between religious tradition, feminist critique and political discourse.

Islamic feminism challenges the assumption that Islam and feminism are fundamentally incompatible. Instead, it argues that gender justice is deeply embedded within the ethical and spiritual foundations of Islam. Scholars such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas have demonstrated that the *Qur'an* emphasises spiritual equality between men and women. The Qur'anic concept of justice (*adl*)

and moral responsibility applies equally to both genders. However, historical interpretations of Islamic law were often shaped by patriarchal social contexts, resulting in legal frameworks that privileged male authority. Islamic feminists, therefore, advocate reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) - a process of critical reasoning within Islamic jurisprudence- to recover egalitarian principles embedded within the *Qur'an* and prophetic traditions. Pertinently, the Islamic feminists take recourse to history, culture, language and feminism and reinterpret the Islamic religious scriptures from a female perspective that not only challenges the male-dominated hermeneutic tradition but also the Western stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women. A feminist interpretation of the *Qur'an* and other scriptures also provides a parallel and alternative understanding of Islam and the position of Muslim women in society.

Applying an Islamic feminist framework to *Haq* reveals that the film critiques patriarchal practices and inadvertently reinforces simplistic representations of Islam. These interpretations are politically motivated and have their origin in Western orientalism and neo-orientalism that was orchestrated to malign Islam as regressive and oppressive, and dub Muslim men as barbaric and Muslim women as weak and backward and in need of saving.

The film introduces Abbas and Shazia as a seemingly harmonious couple. Abbas is portrayed as a successful lawyer, modern and charismatic, while Shazia appears as a thoughtful homemaker. Initially, their relationship reflects a familiar middle-class domestic arrangement in which the husband occupies the public sphere while the wife manages the household.

From an Islamic feminist perspective, the film's portrayal of marriage reveals important tensions. Islamic law historically conceptualised marriage as a contractual relationship involving mutual rights and responsibilities. Women possessed the right to stipulate conditions within marriage contracts, including restrictions on polygyny or guarantees of financial security. However, *Haq* does not explore these contractual mechanisms. Instead, the narrative presents marriage as a hierarchical institution dominated by male authority. Shazia's dependence on Abbas appears primarily emotional and economic, reinforcing the impression that Muslim women possess limited agency within marriage. This representation risks

obscuring the diversity of legal tools available to women within Islamic jurisprudence. While patriarchal practices certainly exist, Islamic legal history also contains numerous examples of women negotiating contractual rights and challenging unjust marital arrangements.

One of the central conflicts in the film arises when Abbas marries a second woman. The narrative frames this act as a betrayal and as evidence of male privilege within Islamic marriage. Islamic feminist scholarship offers a more nuanced perspective. While the *Qur'an* permits polygyny, it does so under strict conditions requiring justice and fairness among wives. The *Qur'an* explicitly states: “But if you fear that you will not be just, then marry only one” (*Qur'an* 4:3, trans. Abdel Haleem). Many scholars argue that the *Qur'anic* emphasis on justice effectively discourages the practice by establishing an ethical standard that is extremely difficult to meet. As Amina Wadud notes, “the *Qur'an's* conditional permission for polygyny is tied to social justice and responsibility, not unrestricted male desire” (Wadud 83). Moreover, Islamic law historically allowed women to include clauses in marriage contracts restricting polygyny. These provisions demonstrate that women possessed legal tools to negotiate marital terms. By ignoring these legal nuances, *Haq* simplifies the issue into a narrative of unrestricted male power. The film critiques the outcome of polygyny without examining the legal conditions and interpretive debates surrounding it.

The most dramatic moment in *Haq* occurs when Abbas invokes instant *Triple Talaq* to dissolve the marriage. This act becomes the catalyst for Shazia's legal battle. However, the film's portrayal of *Triple Talaq* reflects a common misconception. Classical Islamic jurisprudence recognises divorce as a structured process involving stages of reconciliation, waiting periods and mediation. Instant *Triple Talaq*- declaring divorce three times at once- has historically been contested among scholars and widely criticised as a deviation from *Qur'anic* principles. Many contemporary Muslim scholars argue that such practices represent cultural distortions rather than authentic expressions of Islamic law. By presenting *Triple Talaq* as a central feature of Islam, the film risks conflating misuse with doctrine. An Islamic feminist critique would emphasise that reform

should target patriarchal interpretations rather than attributing injustice to religion itself.

The courtroom scenes in *Haq* portray the legal system as the ultimate site of justice. Shazia's struggle culminates in a courtroom victory, symbolising the triumph of law over patriarchal oppression. While such narratives are dramatically compelling, they also raise important questions about the relationship between religious law and state institutions.

Islamic legal systems historically operated through diverse institutions, including community courts, scholars and charitable endowments. Responsibility for social welfare did not rest solely on the state but was distributed across families and community structures. As Wael B. Hallaq observes, "the *Shari'a* was not merely a legal system but a moral and social practice embedded within the daily life of the community" (Hallaq 163). By portraying the modern state as the sole guarantor of justice, the film marginalises these historical institutions and reinforces the perception that Islamic legal systems are inherently inadequate. Islamic feminist scholars emphasise that meaningful reform requires engagement with both religious interpretation and legal institutions rather than replacing one system entirely with another.

The film portrays Shazia's education as a key factor enabling her resistance. Her ability to articulate legal arguments and challenge patriarchal authority becomes central to her empowerment. Education indeed plays a crucial role in expanding women's opportunities. Islamic history contains numerous examples of women scholars who contributed to religious knowledge, jurisprudence and education. However, the film risks presenting education as a singular solution to gender inequality. Structural issues such as economic dependency, social stigma and institutional discrimination cannot be resolved solely through individual empowerment. Islamic feminist analysis emphasises that gender justice requires broader transformations in legal interpretation, social norms and institutional structures.

Another significant issue concerns representation itself. Films about Muslim women are often produced within broader political contexts that shape how stories are told and interpreted. Edward Said's foundational critique in

Orientalism remains deeply relevant here: “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1). Such representational practices continue in contemporary media where Muslim women are frequently reduced either to symbols of oppression or objects of rescue. Postcolonial feminist scholars such as Gayatri Spivak have famously asked: “Can the subaltern speak?” This question remains relevant when examining how minority women’s experiences are represented in mainstream cultural production. Spivak further warns that dominant discourses often speak *for* marginalised women while simultaneously silencing them: “Representation has not withered away” (Spivak 275). In *Haq*, Shazia’s story is framed within a narrative that highlights her victimhood and eventual legal redemption. While the film attempts to foreground her courage, it simultaneously situates her within a discourse that portrays Muslim women primarily as oppressed subjects.

This representational pattern closely resembles what Lila Abu-Lughod critiques as the “saving Muslim women” narrative, wherein Muslim women become symbolic sites through which larger political and civilizational anxieties are negotiated. Abu-Lughod cautions against such reductionism when she asks, “Do Muslim women really need saving?” (Abu-Lughod 5). Similarly, Saba Mahmood argues that liberal feminist frameworks often fail to recognise forms of agency that emerge within religious traditions rather than outside them. She writes, “Agency is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood 15). Islamic feminist scholars have therefore repeatedly emphasised that Muslim women are not merely victims but active participants in shaping religious and social discourses. Their struggles cannot be understood solely through binaries of oppression and liberation, for Muslim women continuously negotiate faith, law, modernity and identity in complex and historically situated ways.

Despite its limitations, *Haq* does raise important questions about gender justice. The film exposes how patriarchal practices can cause profound harm and highlights the emotional struggles faced by women navigating marital conflict. In one of the film’s emotionally charged moments, Shazia asks, “Is marriage only a

right for men and a burden for women?”- a line that encapsulates the psychological anguish and structural imbalance at the centre of the narrative. The film’s concern with women’s dignity also resonates with Fatima Mernissi’s observation that “the Muslim woman’s problem is neither the Qur’an nor the Prophet, but the structures of authority that manipulate both” (Mernissi 19). By foregrounding Shazia’s emotional isolation, humiliation and struggle for recognition, *Haq* succeeds in drawing attention to the lived consequences of patriarchal interpretations and unequal marital power relations.

However, the narrative’s reliance on simplified representations ultimately weakens its feminist potential. By isolating religious practices from their legal and historical contexts, the film risks reinforcing stereotypes about Islam and Muslim communities. This is in sync with the larger Bollywood attempt to portray Muslim men as villains, gangsters and terrorists and at the same time project Muslim women as weak and victims of religious patriarchy who need to be saved and liberated. Jack Shaheen, in his influential study *Reel Bad Arabs*, argues that popular cinema has persistently constructed Muslims through images of “billionaires, bombers and belly dancers,” reducing an entire community to threatening and regressive caricatures (Shaheen 8). Paradoxically, these very politically motivated narratives have been used by the West and Europe in past to wage war against Muslim nations across the globe. Lila Abu-Lughod similarly cautions that the rhetoric of “saving Muslim women” has often functioned as a moral justification for imperial and political interventions, noting that “projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners” (Abu-Lughod 17). Again, in the presently charged socio-political situation in India, talking about and against Muslims has been weaponised as a potent tool of electoral politics. In the words of Harshi, the film *Haq* “enters the cultural space at a time when the Indian state is aggressively curating stories about Muslim women- stories of suffering, betrayal, and patriarchal captivity, often framed through a saviour narrative orchestrated by majoritarian politics” (Harshi). Muslim women are used as a trope to reinforce the already available orientalist narratives about Islam’s inherent patriarchy and suppression of women. From Bollywood to Hollywood, Muslim women are shown as pawns of history,

victimised and silenced, and ultimately saved by men from another community or religion. The film's opening credits thank the UP Chief Minister and his deputies, figures associated with a Hindutva political agenda that has systematically marginalised Muslims. This is not merely a superficial acknowledgement; it signals the film's placement within a broader cultural project that has made the 'rescue' of Muslim women from Muslim men a central trope of majoritarian politics.

While *Haq* makes some interventions by showcasing a Muslim woman's interpretive agency and challenging patriarchal distortions of Islam, it ultimately deploys what can be called 'selective solidarity'- a framework that critiques Muslim patriarchy in isolation while remaining silent on majoritarian Hindu patriarchy. Harshi argues that "by refusing to engage with this, the film sanitises the political landscape. This silence is not accidental; it is ideological". She goes on to say that "To critique only the patriarchy within the minority community while leaving majoritarian patriarchy untouched is a politically convenient choice. Patriarchy is nothing without its enablers. This film creates the impression that Muslim women need saving from Muslim men while facing competition with non-Muslim women. The Indian state- particularly the current political dispensation- is implicitly positioned as the saviour" (Harshi). While the movie criticises Muslim religious patriarchy, it forgets to question the very institution of marriage as a patriarchal institution across all cultures and communities.

The casting choices of the film further compound the problem of representation. Almost all major male Muslim characters are played by Muslim actors (Emraan Hashmi, Danish Husain), while the central female Muslim protagonist is portrayed by Yami Gautam, a non-Muslim actor. In an industry with countless talented Muslim actresses, this decision carries political weight. It suggests that Muslim women's stories require non-Muslim intermediaries to be rendered palatable for mainstream audiences. The film thus participates in what postcolonial theorist Lila Abu-Lughod has termed the "politics of pity," where suffering subjects are rendered speakable only through external saviours. *Haq* is a classical case where Muslim women are denied agency and excluded from any discussions about them. Imposing silence on Muslim women is another way of

victimising and marginalising them, something that Jasmine Zine calls ‘Imperial feminism’.

The courtroom drama in the film has been debated much. The courtroom or the legal system is portrayed as a rational, unbiased and secular space in which truth prevails ultimately. However, this representation borders on cinematic idealisation and fantasy. To quote Harshi, “The Indian legal system is not neutral, not today, not ever; it is shaped by caste, religion, class, gender, and political power. Muslim women often face additional barriers, including bias against their communities, lack of access to quality legal representation, fear of community backlash, economic dependence, and mistrust of state institutions” (Harshi).

In the film, Shazia is made to run from pillar to post to get justice. She is made to navigate the authority of the religious clerics, brace the pressures of her family and society, and face a ‘secular’ courtroom. The *Live Law* analysis observes that ‘plural legal systems often place women in a “jurisdictional maze, where access to justice depends on navigating overlapping terrains of religious, customary, and state institutions” (Reza). The community that ostracises Shazia is exclusively Muslim; the social pressure she faces comes from within her own community. But Muslim women who assert rights also face pressure from outside- from a state that views them primarily as victims requiring rescue, from a majority society that uses their suffering as evidence of Muslim backwardness, from political actors who instrumentalise their pain. These external pressures remain invisible in *Haq*. As such, an intersectional Islamic feminist analysis recognises that Muslim women face additional barriers in accessing justice, including community backlash, institutional bias and the constant threat of having their suffering appropriated. The movie fails to acknowledge that within the system, Muslim women are doubly marginalised and also rendered voiceless.

Islamic feminists are challenged with not only breaking these stereotypes about women but also challenging the Western and here the Bollywood narratives about Islam’s ‘repressive’ patriarchy. A more nuanced feminist narrative would acknowledge both the challenges faced by Muslim women and the interpretive resources available within Islamic traditions for addressing those challenges. In his review, Masoom Reza makes a very interesting observation regarding the film

and the Islamic hermeneutic tradition. He argues that “a subtle danger in feminist analysis, specifically in postcolonial contexts, is the tendency to consider religion as inherently antithetical to women’s rights” (Reza). He calls this a reductionist approach and argues that Islamic feminists like Saba Mahmood and Amina Wadud have “long cautioned against this reductionism”. Regarding Islamic feminism, he argues that “Wadud’s work on Qur’anic interpretation demonstrates that patriarchal outcomes habitually stem from historical power dynamics rather than theological necessity” (Reza). Therefore, the protagonist Shazia and her fight for her rights should be seen not as a challenge to Islam and the *Qur’an* or a simple rejection of faith, but as “a challenge to gendered authority structures, a distinction central to contemporary feminist theory” (Reza). Again, as affirmed by Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas, “Islamic jurisprudence embodies interpretive plurality, and that patriarchal outcomes often stem from socio-political dynamics” (Reza).

Thus, the central problem with *Haq* is not that it foregrounds Muslim women’s suffering, but that it frames such suffering within a limited ideological discourse that isolates Islam as the principal site of patriarchy while ignoring the historical, interpretive and political complexities surrounding gender injustice. Islamic feminist scholarship insists that religion cannot be reduced to a monolithic instrument of oppression, for within Islamic traditions themselves exist rich resources of reinterpretation, resistance and reform. By failing to engage seriously with these internal debates and hermeneutic possibilities, the film risks reinforcing neo-Orientalist assumptions that portray Muslim women as passive subjects awaiting liberation from external secular institutions. A more ethically responsible cinematic approach would recognise Muslim women not merely as victims of religious patriarchy but as intellectual agents capable of negotiating faith, law and identity on their own terms.

Haq aspires to be a feminist film about a woman’s struggle for justice and dignity. In many respects, it succeeds in portraying the emotional and psychological dimensions of this struggle. Shazia emerges as a resilient character who refuses to accept injustice and asserts her right to dignity. Yet from an Islamic feminist perspective, the film remains limited in its engagement with the

complexities of Islamic law, gender ethics and political representation. By conflating patriarchal practices with religious doctrine, it risks reproducing reductive narratives that portray Muslim women primarily as victims of their faith. As Leila Ahmed observes, “the oppression of women is neither the inevitable nor the essential outcome of Islam, but the result of particular social and historical formations” (Ahmed 239). This distinction is crucial because the film often collapses the difference between Islam as an ethical tradition and patriarchy as a historical structure of power.

Islamic feminism offers an alternative framework that distinguishes between Islam’s ethical principles and the patriarchal interpretations that have sometimes shaped its legal traditions. Rather than rejecting religion as inherently oppressive, Islamic feminists seek to reinterpret texts and institutions in ways that affirm gender equality. Meaningful discussions about Muslim women’s rights, therefore, require more than cinematic dramatisation. They require engagement with historical scholarship, legal traditions and the voices of Muslim women themselves. Rather than speaking for, Muslim women should be the active agents with agency and voice, not merely as subjects to be represented on the screen. In this context, Amina Wadud’s powerful assertion becomes particularly relevant: “The Qur’an does not define woman as dependent, subordinate, or secondary to man. Such understandings are products of patriarchal readings, not divine intent” (Wadud 74).

Only through such engagement can narratives move beyond simplified portrayals of victimhood toward a more complex understanding of justice, agency and faith. Islamic feminism demands the rights of Muslim women to tell their own stories, to define their own liberation, to be free from both communal patriarchy and majoritarian and orientalist appropriation. As Saba Mahmood succinctly reminds us, “agency is not simply the capacity to resist domination but the ability to inhabit norms differently” (Mahmood 15).

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