PORTRAYAL OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN "12 STRONG" AND "THE KERALA STORY" MOVIES: A MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This research explores the representation of Islam and Muslims in the Hollywood film "12 Strong" and the Bollywood film "The Kerala Story" through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) framework. By examining the visual, textual, and narrative components of each film, the research identifies common themes of radicalization, extremism, and cultural representation. "12 Strong" depicts Muslims in a dual role as both allies and antagonists, reflecting the complexities of post-9/11 narratives. On the other hand, "The Kerala Story" focuses more heavily on themes of forced conversion and extremism. This study investigates how these portrayals contribute to the construction of stereotypical perceptions of Muslims and how they impact audience perceptions. The analysis reveals a tendency in both films to link Muslim characters with conflict and terrorism, reinforcing negative stereotypes. The study advocates for more nuanced and balanced portrayals of Muslims in cinema to challenge Islamophobic representations and promote cultural understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of mass media has brought the world into our hands. No one can visit each corner of this world and experience the realities in its true sense. The mass media has brought the whole world into our homes and we can see interesting cultures, historical places, natural beauties, news worldwide and whatnot. The content is available to us in the form of news, dramas and films. In expressing a message, an image on a screen can have a bigger impact than hundreds of words, and in popular culture, films using images as representation establish a discourse (Senanayake, 2020). Since the early twentieth century, cinema has been the most influential medium (Bhat, 2019). Films are

extremely important in terms of entertainment, as well as the formation of opinion and teaching. They are the most affordable form of entertainment, cultural projection, and socialization. Whatever their objective, they are full of human interest and creativity. The role of movie and their power to direct traffic is unavoidable (Kiran, Qamar, Adnan, & Youssef, 2021). What we see on the screen becomes our image of that particular society.

Films, in general, have a huge impact on society. It gives rise to new trends, ideas, and traditions, among other things. Movies not only shape but also change public perception. Movies affect long-held beliefs, practices, and traditions. If one thought dominates a civilization, it can be spread

from one society to another (Ahmad, 2014). Among the world's film industries, Hollywood and Bollywood are one of the most well-known and powerful. The influence and power of Hollywood and Bollywood has grown to almost hegemonic proportions. Hollywood and Bollywood are the two largest movie industries that dominate the world in business. While they both make substantial contributions to the realm of cinema, they have distinct features that distinguish them (Testbook, 2023). The Hindi film industry is located in Mumbai, India, and is known as Bollywood. It is well-known for its prodigious film output, making it one of the world's largest film industries. Bollywood films include romantic romances, action-packed thrillers, and thought-provoking social commentary. The industry's reach goes beyond India, with a sizable fan base in other areas of the world (Desai, 2003). Bollywood films are distinguished by their lively music, vibrant costumes, extravagant dance sequences, and fascinating plots that frequently address social themes.

Hollywood refers to the American Movie industry, which is based mostly in Los Angeles, California. It is world-renowned for producing high-quality Movies that have captivated audiences for almost a century. Hollywood films cover a wide spectrum of genres, including action, drama, comedy, and science fiction (Desai, 2003). The industry is home to a remarkable roster of talented actors, skillful directors, and forward-thinking filmmakers who are always pushing the boundaries of storytelling and cinematic methods. Therefore, with this overall background, the two movies selected to study are 12 Strong and The Kerala Story. Hollywood movie 12 Strong tells the story of the first Special Forces team deployed to Afghanistan after 9/11; under the leadership of a new captain, the team must work with an Afghan warlord to take down the Taliban. In the Bollywood movie The Kerala Story, the main character Fatima Ba, a converted Muslim woman, recounts her trauma of being abducted from her family and exploited by religious vanguards before becoming an ISIS terrorist and ending up in an Afghan jail.

Decades have passed since 9/11 but the portrayal of Muslims in Hollywood and Bollywood is still negative and is always depicted as terrorists or troublemakers. According to studies, Hollywood has created countless Movies with Islamic themes and characters; nevertheless, there is a scarcity of studies that critically investigate the authenticity, nuances, and potential stereotyping inherent in these depictions. Similarly, after so many years, Bollywood is still imaging the same Muslim characters. Movies from Hollywood and Bollywood have a huge impact on public perceptions and attitudes towards diverse cultures and religions. Islam, as one of the world's major religions, has frequently been portrayed in mainstream cinema. However, the authenticity and fairness of these depictions have long been a source of criticism. With this context in mind, the purpose of this study contributes to scholarly research by performing an analysis of the portrayal of Islam, Islamic culture and Muslims in Hollywood and Bollywood movies like The Kerala Story and 12 Strong.

The researchers aim compare and analyze the portrayal of Muslims in Hollywood and Bollywood movies, to study the misinterpretation of the Muslim characters and Islam as a religion and to understand the differences and commonalities between depicting of Muslim characters in Hollywood and Bollywood movies. Align with these objectives the researchers addressed the following research Questions; How Muslim characters are portrayed in Hollywood and Bollywood movies?, How Islam as a religion misinterpreted in Hollywood and Bollywood movies?, What are the variations and similarities in the portrayal of Muslim characters in Hollywood and Bollywood Movies?

This research intends to perform a critical qualitative content analysis of how Islam and Muslims are portrayed in Hollywood and Bollywood films and to evaluate the implications of these representations for cultural understanding and social cohesion. Through this study, we understand how Islam, Muslims and Islamic culture are depicted in Hollywood and Bollywood movies. This comparative study will help to comprehend the differences and

similarities between the said depiction of Islam and Muslims in both cinemas. The study can help to recommend how the misinterpretations, generated through these movies about Muslims and Islam can be countered.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study focused on Trump's developing ideology, which since he declared his presidential candidacy, has placed him in anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic discourses. The data was studied under the Ideological Square Model. The goal of the study was to identify and analyze the self-other representations that were present in Trump's remarks during the 2016 US Presidential Elections, specifically in relation to Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments (Khan, et al., 2019). A 2011 study examined Indian and American perceptions of Bollywood. It is the first to make this comparison. Overall, the authors discovered that attitudes of Bollywood in India and the United States are both good and negative. On some dimensions, Indian and American conceptions are starkly different; on others, a few commonalities emerge. Overall, both negative and good impressions about Bollywood exist in India. While their perception of Bollywood is demeaning, stereotyping of Muslim culture, and alienating economically and culturally marginalized audiences, it is also acknowledged as preserving India's national identity, portrayal of women in some circles (e.g., alcoholics attempting to become accepted into the chic and alluring society), Hindi traditional lifestyles, and lighthearted humor. While the Bollywood phenomenon has permeated many civilizations around the world, these countries nonetheless have different perspectives on the emerging Indian film industry. This analysis not only demonstrates many lessons in cross-cultural understanding; it also confirms that Bollywood represents a growing socioeconomic stream of globalization (Matusitz & Payano, 2011). It boasts one of the world's major film industries, generating around 1,000 films per year, and has had a significant influence on Hollywood and other Western film markets.

According to a study estimates from 2021 (Ning,

2023), Muslims constitute about 14% of India's population, making them the country's second-largest community. Despite this, they have not received adequate representation in Bollywood cinema. Some of the characters are caricatures, while others are stereotypes (Tausalkar, 2023). Another detrimental trend is the incorporation of real-life Islamophobia in Indian films. Defining the representation of Islamophobia in Hollywood, Bollywood and Arab cinema, a research by Dr. Mahmoud in 2023 explains it in depth. The research says that for decades, the portrayal of Muslims in Hollywood has been a source of conflict. The image of Muslims and the Middle East in American films has frequently been impacted by current geopolitical events. Explaining Bollywood, the research reveals that as the cinematic reflection of India's enormous and diverse population, Bollywood faces the difficult problem of reflecting many religious and cultural narratives. Islamophobia in Hollywood, Bollywood, and Arab cinema provides a window into global perspectives, biases, and the ability of cinema to impact them. While issues continue, there is a rising acknowledgment of the importance of portraying Muslims in a genuine, diverse, and nuanced manner (Mahmoud, 2023). As a powerful cultural force, cinema has the potential to challenge biases, create understanding, and overcome differences.

The findings of a study conducted by Caren on Ideological Representations of Muslims in Hollywood in 2020 indicate that terrorism discourse, which labels Muslims as terrorists, is incorporated into the text. Through underlying ideologies and the use of manipulated language, Muslims are depicted and labeled as terrorists in Hollywood films, which is an example of their biased depiction (Nusrat, Kashif, & Aemen, 2020). When the foreign media paints a negative and exaggerated picture of Muslims, refining and painting the true side of the picture becomes incredibly challenging.

Muslims are dominantly represented in Indian movies. They were first portrayed as Mughal kings, then as Qawali singers or side heroes, and from the 1990s to the present, Muslims have been demonized by fragmenting Bigotry, Hate,

and Racism (Anandam & Punathambekar, 2008). Prominent Muslim characters in Bollywood are depicted as anti-social characters, terrorists, and conservatives, relating Muslims' identities as villains and terrorists through narration, texts, and other behaviors (Maidul, 2007). This has become stereotypical and damaging to the positions of muslims living in foreign cultures. A study conducted by Caren in 2020 tried to investigate the portrayal of various sectors of Muslims in Hollywood Movies. The study also attempted to discover the image of Islam through the depiction of Islamic countries in films. For this study, a qualitative content analysis was used as a research design. Purposive sampling was used to choose four Hollywood films from the year 2012 for examination. According to the findings, all segments of Muslims are anti-West. All five Islamic countries were likewise portrayed poorly in the films. The findings also found that life in Islamic countries was portrayed as visibly problematic rather than tranquil, and the inhabitants of Islamic countries were characterized as uncivilized citizens (Yousaf, Sial, Munawar, & Shahzad, 2020).

Understanding Islamophobia

The term Islamophobia has been derived from the word 'Islam' with the suffix 'phobia', which means 'fear of Islam', or in other words 'hatred towards Muslims' (Khan, et al., 2019). Bazian (2018), on the other hand, noted that Islamophobia is related to Huntington's notion of "Islamic Extremism" and that it originated from the "Clash of Civilizations." Islamophobia is, in actuality, the unjustified animosity directed towards the Muslim population worldwide (Hatem, 2018). Islamophobia is now a highly useful political concept used in a wide variety of recent studies (Khan, et al., 2019). This phrase has been used by numerous scholars to categorize the causes, effects, scope, background, and severity of anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim attitudes. "A fear, prejudice, and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslims that, both online and offline, results in provocation, hostility, and intolerance through the use of threats, harassment, abuse, incitement, and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims

(Awan & Zempi, 2020). In 1997, the publication of the Runnymede Trust report entitled Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All was the first report to raise awareness about the problem of Islamophobia in the UK (Hassan, 2021). It defined Islamophobia as 'the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims'. Islamophobia is an integral feature of Indian political communication which is also obvious in their discursive and rhetorical devices (Khan, Amer, & Hashmi, 2023). In a study, Hillary Clinton's Speech at Council of Foreign Relations during US-Presidential Elections 2016 was analyzed. The findings demonstrated that Hillary's sampling speech, in which she used a variety of discursive strategies to portray ISIS, Iraq, Syria, and Libya poorly while portraying herself as a fierce patriot, is a powerful example of the self-other binary (Khan, Adnanb, Aljuaidc, & Isa, 2019). She used a number of rhetorical techniques, such as victimization, assumption, authority, number games, evidentially, and populism, to bolster her implicitly Islamophobic arguments. She did this by polarizing the Self-Other against ISIS, Syria, and Libya.

Theoretical Framework

The study is analyzed mainly under three theories. The dialogues are investigated through Orientalism, the appearance observed through the Ideological Square Model and the appearance/scenes are evaluated by Scene Theory. Although The framework of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) was also used to systematically analyzes visual, textual, and narrative components, helping deconstruct how meaning is conveyed through various modes in films. Orientalism is a certain way of viewing Asian countries that Western authors and innovators have adopted. It portrays Asian society and cultures as exotic and mysterious destinations. Asian people and groups are portrayed in patronizing ways. Ideological Square Model; The self, or the in-group, is frequently portrayed as good, while the other, or the out-group, is shown as negative (Khan, et al., 2019).

This contrast is highlighted by the ideological square. Positive qualities of the self are always emphasized with negative aspects of the other in the representation of the self. An essay "*An ideological square analysis of the podcast discourse in "Chinese Dreams" of the BBC World Service*" analyzes polarization tactics of positive and negative portrayals of "us" and "them" in ideological discourse on the emergence of China by Western media, using the ideological square model (Van Dijk, 1998, 2000). The findings showed that negative perceptions of "them" were widely held, stressing China's shortcomings while downplaying its advantages. Discourse methods that highlight positive aspects of "us" and downplay negative aspects. Scene Theory; "Scene" refers to the details of a film or drama, such as locations, actors, language, costumes, and props. Every element is organically connected to every other element, and the arrangement of both homogeneous and heterogeneous elements expresses a particular thought (Zhang, 2017). Terry Clark is credited with introducing the notion of "Scene" to the post- industrial period of urban planning. According to the city's concept, the "Scene" is a collection of live entertainment venues that adapt to a particular class, race, gender, and other social status (Wu & Clark, 2016). It also reflects cultural venues with particular values and highlights the symbolic meaning of many everyday activities. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of multimodal discourse analysis explores how meaning is constructed through multiple modes of communication—such as images, text, and sound—focusing on three functions: representational (content), interactional (viewer relationship), and compositional (layout and structure). This theory is suitable when analysing films and media because not only does it explain how image, sound and text move meaningfully in union but also how meaning goes beyond mere written or spoken words. Applying this theory to research meant that the way characters, looks, different camera perspectives and/or spatial setting effectively convey significant themes including radicalization, cultural identification or roles is explored more thoroughly. When talking about movies such as The Kerala Story, Kress and van Leeuwen's approach is helpful as these movies employ more than one semiotic mode (visual, audio and written) when portraying messages about personal and collective identity, radicalization, and conflict. Representational function becomes useful when it comes to analyzing how such characters as Shalini undergo transformation in order to portray radicalization, whereas the interactional function is helpful when studying how the audience is positioned to develop emotional connections with these character. For example, the transformations of looks and moves that Shalini under through illustrate their inside and outside transformation. The compositional function makes the difference in terms of how these shifts are materialized at the scene level, for instance, the contrast between her pre and post radicalization illuminated by contrasting bright and dark settings.

METHODOLGY

This study is a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Hollywood and Bollywood productions, to understand how Muslim characters, Islam as religion and Muslim culture are presented. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis offers a methodical approach to examining various semiotic modes, such as images, pictures, diagrams, or graphics, in addition to the words in a media text (Multimodal critical discourse analysis of the cinematic representation of women as social actors, 2020). Visual media analysis requires a multi-layered approach because it combines various types of communication. To understand the concept, the movies are not older than 6 years. For this purpose, one movie "12 Strong" (2018) from Hollywood and one movie "The Kerala Story" (2023) from Bollywood selected to investigate the objectives and answer research questions.

Table 1: Character Portrayal Attributes and Codes

No.	Categories	Codes
1.	Physical Appearance	Hair Color, Eye Color, Height, Build, Skin Tone
	Dressing	Casual Wear, Formal Wear, Cultural Attire, Accessories, Footwear
	Makeover	Hairstyle Changes, Makeup Application, Skin Treatments, Wardrobe Update, Weight Change
	Body Language	Posture, Gestures, Facial Expressions, Eye Contact, Personal Space
2.	Social Attributes	Friendliness, Humor, Empathy, Confidence, Introversion/Extroversion
	Dialect	Accent, Slang Usage, Formality Level, Regional Expressions, Language Proficiency
	Dialogue	Tone of Voice, Speech Patterns, Vocabulary, Clarity, Persuasiveness
	Profession	Job Title, Industry, Skills, Work Ethic, Professional Attire
3.	Conduct of the Character	Decision-Making, Conflict Resolution, Responsibility, Punctuality, Teamwork
	Activities	Hobbies, Sports, Volunteering, Socializing, Learning
	Religious Practice	Rituals, Beliefs, Community Involvement, Spirituality, Observances
	Patriotism	National Pride, Civic Engagement, Historical Knowledge, Support for National Symbols, Participation in National Events
	Behavior	Respectfulness, Aggressiveness, Tactfulness, Open-mindedness, Honesty

This table categorizes the various attributes of character portrayal, dividing them into three main sections: external characteristics such as Physical Appearance and Social Attributes and behaviours such as conduct of the Character. In each section, there are descriptions of certain codes that are used to define different elements which are look, speech, demeanor, and actions, which gives a vast guidance on how character and social relations could be checked

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The Kerala Story is a film that revolves around the journey of Shalini Unnikrishnan, a Hindu girl from Kerala who is radicalized and coerced into joining ISIS. The film portrays her transformation into Fatima Ba, shedding light on themes of extremism, religious conflict, and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals. It offers a gripping narrative of radicalization and survival, raising important questions about identity, manipulation, and cultural dynamics.

Table 2: Key Characters and Their Roles in The Kerala Story

Character's Name	Character's Explanation
Shalini Unnikrishnan / Fatima Ba	A Hindu girl who is radicalized and coerced into joining ISIS.
Asifa	A manipulative friend who lures Shalini into extremism.
Nimah	A friend of Shalini who represents a different response to radicalization.
Geetanjali	Another friend of Shalini who also represents a different response to radicalization.

The above table presents the main characters in The Kerala Story and the roles they play: Shalini Unnikrishnan, who will ultimately refer to herself as Fatima Ba, is born Hindu but becomes forced to join ISIS. One of Asifa's friends named Yasmin seems to be using her friend to take her into the radical side of life. Two other friends of Shalini Nimah and Geetanjali are also depicted in the movie to portray different stance and attitude to the process of radicalization.

Two other friends of Shalini Nimah and Geetanjali are also depicted in the movie to portray different stance and attitude to the process of radicalization.

Figure 1: The Kerala Story
Source: (Kerry, 2023)

The computerized assisted analysis of The Kerala Story using NVivo provides a thematic breakdown of the film, focusing on character development, plot progression, and the portrayal of extremism and conversion. This approach allows for a detailed examination of the protagonist's transformation and the broader narrative strategies employed in the film.
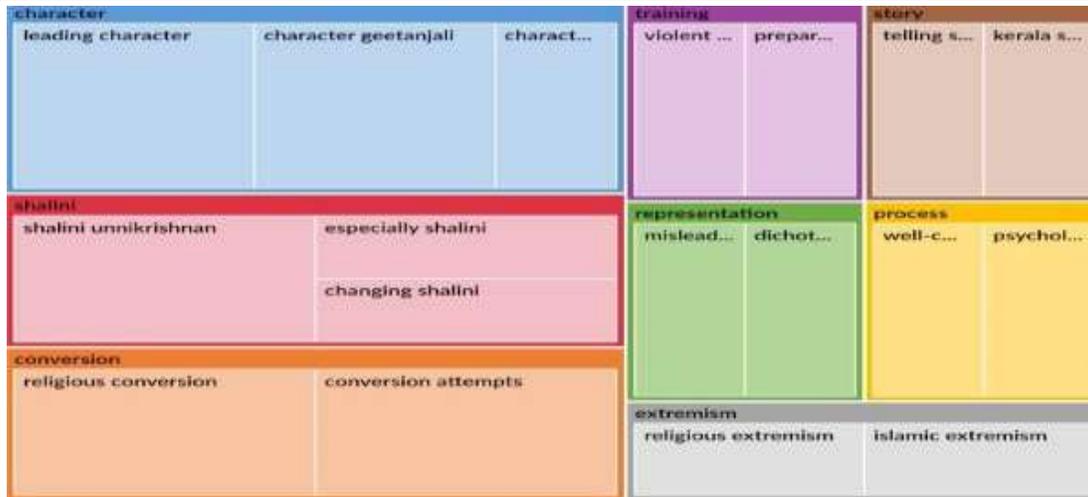
Figure 2: Dominant themes in movie

The above figure arises out of a process of thematic analysis of a narrative and categorises diverse elements into three broad areas relating to character arcs, plot gadgets, and thematic issues of extremism and conversion. These include the character development of the protagonist 'Shalini Unnikrishnan', explored in the sections titled 'especially Shalini' and 'changing Shalini.' Other sections deal with the narrative strategies such as 'training' and 'story telling' as well as larger thematic concerns such as 'representation' of extremism and the 'process' of character and plot formation. The categorization also raises such issues of the film as concerns the religious conversion attempts inside the story, places these elements into the focus of character's change and the story's progression. This kind of structure enables one to analyse all the relations between character interactions, story progression, and thematic development in terms of extremist religious and cultural contexts.
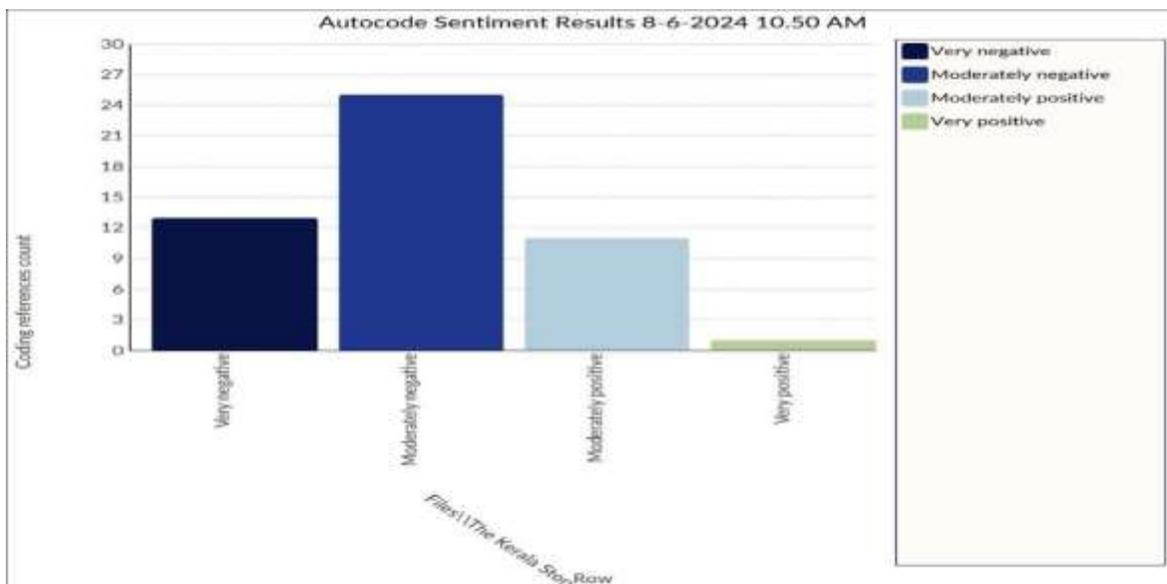

Figure 3: Autocode sentiments Result in The Kerala Story

The above bar chart is classified as "Sentiment Analysis of Character Representations" for media portrayal thesis study. The data shown in the chart depicts the frequency of positive, negative, and mixed sentiments on the coded responses, which gives an insight into how characters and themes are viewed in the narrative discussions of the thesis. The results identified a higher level of negative sentiments, where 'Moderate Negative' sentiments emerged as the most typical in the studied narratives, which is indicative of the critical or adversarial representation of the characters and contexts. The dramatically fewer scores for positive tones suggest the possible lack of narrative resonance that might suggest themes that are opposite to those identified in the thesis, such as extremism and conversion. This visualization emphasizes that negative sentiments prevail in media representations that might be quite essential for revealing portrayal biases.
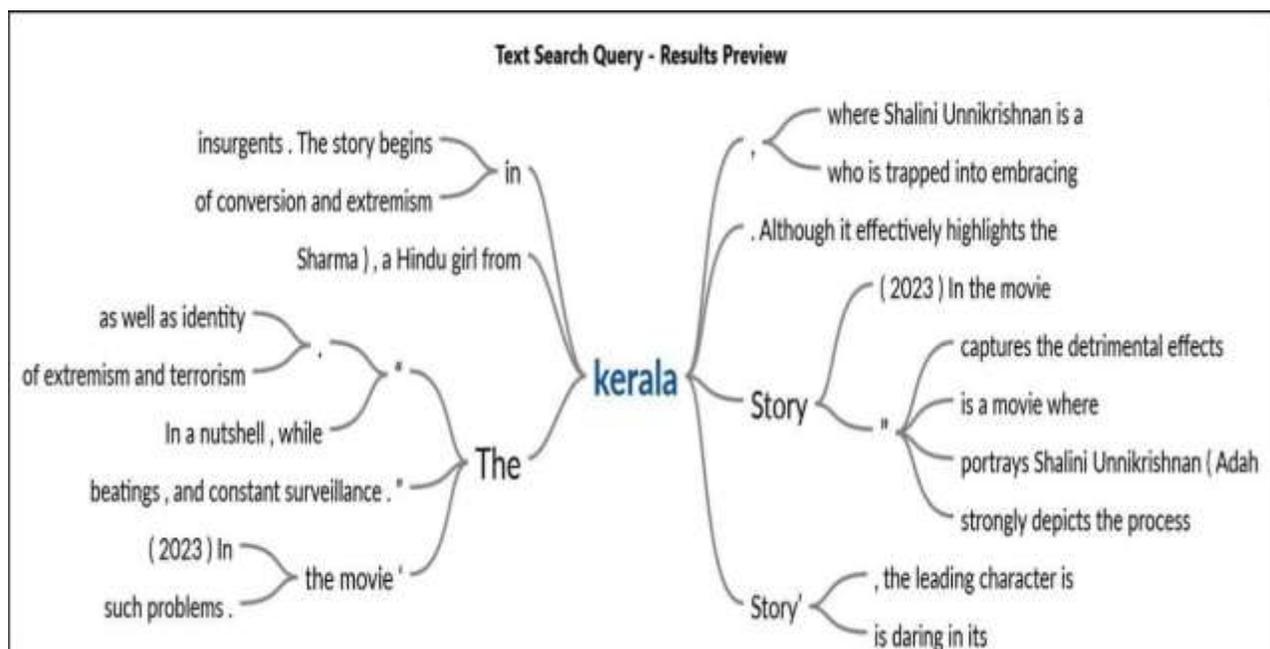

Figure 4: Text Search Query - Results Preview

The diagram is a way to display general and specific terms and the relationship between them based on the narrative approach using the story which is taking place in the area of Kerala. This diagram's focus is to pinpoint how Shalini Unnikrishnan gets implicated in concerns of identity, extremism, and force. Three nodes are connected with "Kerala", which serves as the story's motifs including "insurgents", "conversion and extremism", and "constant surveillance". These links hint at a plot in which the social pressure and extremism transform Shalini's life and the idea of her own identity. This mapping helps to understand the thesis research focus of analysing how particular stories in the socio-political setting of Kerala affect character(s) representation and construction. The thesis focuses on the presentation of characters who experience religious and cultural conversion which is often represented as forced or as a result of manipulation by the forces of socio-political conflict. Moreover, by associating political determinatives like 'conversion' and 'extremism' with individual names such as 'Kerala' or 'Shalini' the diagram reinforces the idea that the individual and cultural self is implicated in societal questions.
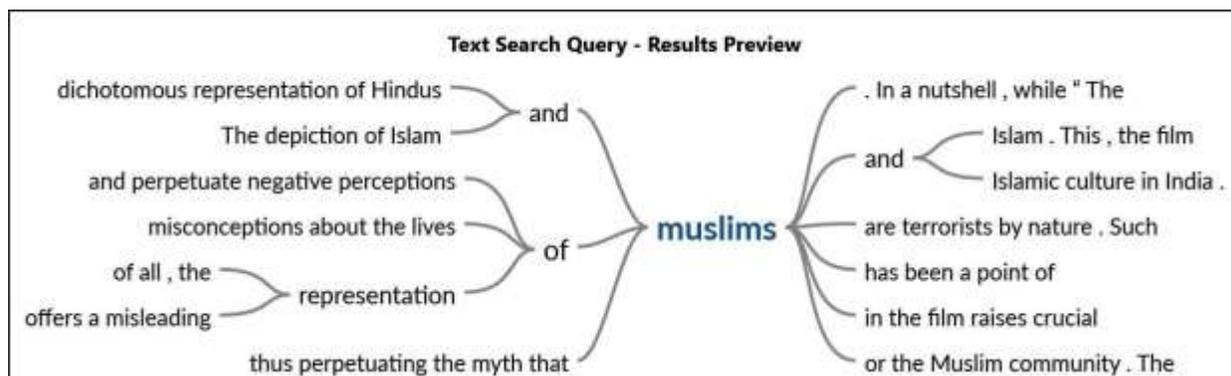
Figure 5: Textual relations from a narrative perspective

The above diagram depicts the textual relations from a narrative perspective, which deals with the portrayal of Muslims in the media. It explains how binary constructions of Hindus and Muslims play a role in reiterating stereotypical and mythologized ideas about Muslims and Islam, connecting them with other societal misconceptions. Some of the key phrases used in the diagram are directly defeat the stereotype that Muslims are inherently terrorist, which has been an issue of debate and controversy. This is related to the thesis research that examines how such films as "The Kerala Story" affect the audience's perception of religious groups in India and promote false narratives that fuel social discord and misunderstanding.
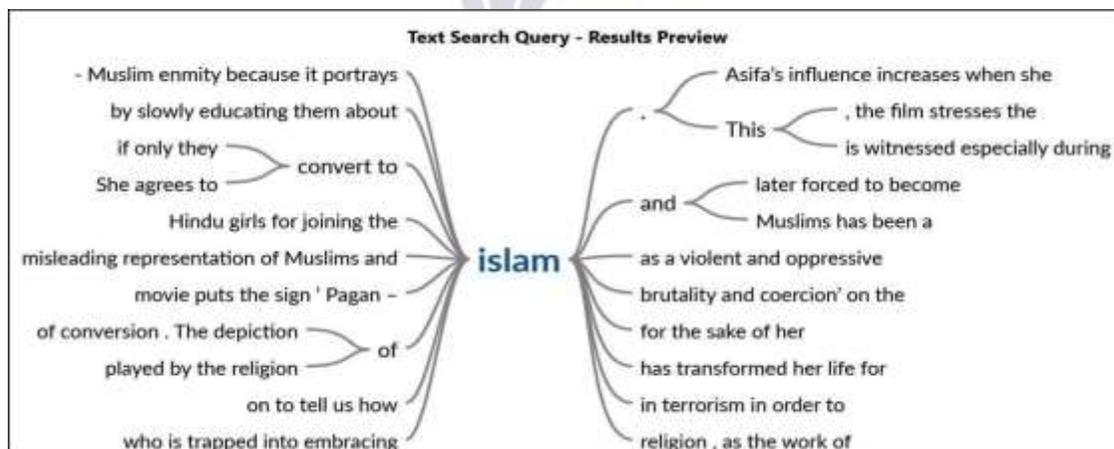
Figure 6: Representations of Islam in a narrative setting

The above plan provides a visual display of the overall work's relation to themes concerning representations of Islam in a narrative setting with focused attention to the process of conversion and influence. It refers to the issues and concerns on how Islam was being portrayed in media and other news outlets as a religion of forced conversions, barbarism, and oppression. The narrative components link the impact of a figure known as Asifa, explaining how this impact is essential in representing Muslims in a way that is negative, especially within violent scenarios, which are oppressive in nature. This analysis is in line with the thesis research that explores the manner in which films play a part in perpetuating the negative stereotype, they are misleading depictions that have a pivotal role in influencing the perception that non-Muslims have regarding the Muslim religion and its followers.

Figure 7: Media representation of Religion and Culture

This word cloud illustrates terms from a thesis that discussed media representation of religion and culture. The sample image has the name of the subject, with "Shalini" written at the center and bordered by text alluding to her role in the story. Other pertains terms such as 'conversion,' 'Islam,' 'Muslims,' 'extremism,' and 'film' hint at a plot that incorporates several significant issues of religious transition. The words "Kerala" and "Asifa" are suggestive of specific locations and a particular personality while words like "terrorists" and "extreme" suggest negativity and violence within the narrative. It is thus useful in recapitulating the thesis' analysis of how movies depict religious conversion and radicalization on the big screen, shaping the audience's perceptions of Islam and its adherents.

Figure 8: Narrative Elements and Themes in Media Analysis

This categorized grid provides an orderly framework with regards to terms effectively connected to a thesis centered on the representation of the media, that incorporates a story based in Kerala with a character named Shalini. Words such as 'Islam', 'conversion', 'ISIS', and 'extremism' are also chosen in order to emphasize religious change and radical impact in the story. The words "forced," "girls," "Hindu" used in the present passage reflect the narrative of pressures and struggles of the characters, specifically, the conflict of religion. The terms 'film,' 'story,' 'movie' ground these themes in cinematic narrative whereas words like 'portray,' 'identity,' 'freedom' suggest a theme of representation and the effects such

representations have on the viewer and the general society. This grid serves to encapsulate the thematic focus of the thesis on how such films contribute to constructing, asserting and influencing cultural and religious discourses

The Kerala Story' is a true-life inspired story that tells the horrifying experience of a Hindu girl from Kerala, Shalini Unnikrishnan, who is a victim of an organized ISIS group and forced to join the terrorists' groups (Dailymotion, n.d.). The lobotomy is portrayed where she begins transforming into Fatima Ba, whereby all sorts of psychological and physical ordeals are displayed. It is the pathetic narrative of fear, loss and survival as she escapes from her persecutors and comes back to India to let the world know the micro reality she has undergone.

Asifa's character in "The Kerala Story" is represented as oppressed and victimized, while the ISIS characters are depicted as antagonistic. Shalini is portrayed as being rebellious and easily influenced; Asifa takes advantage of their friendship directing her towards extremism. The ISIS members are depicted violent hence portraying Muslims in a violent nature this is wrong stereotype. Muslims are showcased as pointedly dangerous and violent, and differentiating the religion from extremism is often untraceable. Such representation brings about controversy with regard to perpetuating amining stereotyping and stigmatization of Muslim community.

Figure 9: Shalini's return to India and her determination to reveal the truth about her experiences

The central character in *The Kerala Story* is Shalini Unnikrishnan, a Hindu woman who is manipulated and transformed into Fatima Ba, a member of ISIS. Asifa, another key character, plays a crucial role in Shalini's radicalization, acting as the catalyst for her transformation. Nimah and Geetanjali serve as contrasting voices in Shalini's life, representing the opposing perspectives on radicalization and freedom. Each character plays a distinct role in portraying the theme of radicalization, with Shalini's character arc demonstrating the destructive impact of extremist ideologies.

Figure 10: Shalini's gradual indoctrination by Asifa, leading to her forced conversion to Islam

The primary storyline of The Kerala Story ensues like a wicked twist of power, betrayal, diminished autonomy, and pitiless conditioning. The change of Shalini from an Independent Hindu woman to sex enslaved followers of ultra-fascist fanatics is shown as the worst type of inversion of order. It does more than examining the psychological aspect of the jihadist as the man; the author also looks into the cultural, religious as well as social aspects that lead to such changes. It shows the methods by which dangerous organizations operate when in effect of snapping up innocent targets – exhibiting the darkness and vile subversive techniques that work with the instinct of fear and desperation. Shalini's is a horrific, sad narrated tale that brings out the suffering of many faced around the world.

12 Strong is a war based on true events, following a U.S. Special Forces team led by Captain Mitch Nelson as they are deployed to Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. The film highlights their mission to ally with Afghan fighters, led by General Abdul Rashid Dostum, to overthrow the Taliban and combat terrorism.

Table 3: Key Characters and Roles in 12 Strong

Character's Name	Character's Explanation
Captain Mitch Nelson	The post-9/11 commander of the United States Special Forces elite squad sent to Afghanistan.
General Abdul Rashid Dostum	An Afghan, who supports the U. S. Special Forces in their fight against the Taliban group.

U.S. Special Forces Team Members	Sergeants who are companions of Captain Mitch Nelson, and have their own characteristics and responsibilities for the operation.
Afghan Fighters	Allied forces of General Dostum who comes into partnership with the U.S team in order fight the Taliban.

The table 3 is the table showing the leading characters of 12 Strong and their positions during the war after 9/11. Captain Mitch Nelson commanding officer of the United States of America special operation force is stationed in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban. General Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Afghan leader, joins the side of the U.S. forces providing important help in their war. Team members of the U.S. Special Forces including Captain Nelson are characterized by individual roles and specialties vital in determining the mission results. Enduring allies of the Afghan fighters led by General Dostum are the partnership the U.S. team need to compete and overcome the Taliban.

Figure 12: 12 STRONG
Source: (William, 2018)

Figure 13: Word Association Grid for Military and Conflict Themes

The terms in this matrix can be categorized based on their thematic relevance. Words like "right," "war," "bombs," "taliban," "dostum," "captain," and "general" are some of the most frequently occurring and prominent terms. Each of these words is not just a descriptor but a reflection of the central narrative themes in "12 Strong." "Right" appears prominently, often associated with the moral framing of the war, decisions, or directions during military operations, possibly alluding to the moral compass of the protagonists in the film (Gleiberman and Gleiberman, 2018a)."War," "bombs," and "hell" emphasize the central conflict of the film—combat, destruction, and the emotional/psychological toll on characters. "Taliban" and "Dostum" showcase the juxtaposition of enemies and allies in the film, with the Taliban representing the antagonist forces and Dostum representing an Afghan ally. This ties into this research, where the portrayal of Afghan Muslims is not monolithic; rather, they are seen in dual lights—both as heroes (Dostum) and as adversaries (Taliban).

In "12 Strong," the word "Dostum" refers to General Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Afghan leader who allies with the U.S. Special Forces. His prominence in the word matrix reflects the film's attempt to portray a more nuanced image of Muslims, specifically Afghan fighters, as brave and crucial to the U.S. mission. This stands in contrast to films like "The Kerala Story," where Muslims are often framed as extremist antagonists. In "12 Strong," the Afghan characters, particularly Dostum, are given agency and a heroic role, pushing back against stereotypical portrayals of Muslims in Western media. Terms like "Taliban" and "bombs" still dominate the discussion of Muslims in the film. The association between Muslims and conflict is unavoidable, even when the film tries to balance the portrayal of positive and negative figures. This creates a binary representation: on one side, Muslims like Dostum are depicted as allies, while on the other, the Taliban is demonized as the primary enemy. The presence of terms like "general," "captain," "team," and "spencer" highlights the focus on leadership and military strategy. Captain Mitch Nelson, leading his team, is central to the narrative, and Dostum's inclusion as a partner symbolizes a cross-cultural military collaboration. This aligns with the heroic narrative often used in war films, where the protagonist (usually American) leads a coalition of forces, which includes "local" figures, to overcome a greater threat. this reinforces the Western depiction of Muslim allies in war: those who align with Western forces are given recognition, often as capable yet secondary to the Western hero, while those outside the alliance, such as the Taliban, are reduced to faceless villains. The clustering of words like "general," "captain," and "team" also emphasizes the importance of structured military hierarchy, further supporting the narrative of organized U.S. leadership (Gleiberman and Gleiberman, 2018b). While "12 Strong" attempts to balance the portrayal of Muslims by showing positive Afghan characters like Dostum, the dominance of words like "bombs," "Taliban," and "war" in the matrix reflects how negative associations with Islam are still prevalent. This mirrors a broader trend in media where Muslim characters are often linked to terrorism or extremism, regardless of the film's efforts to provide a more complex narrative.
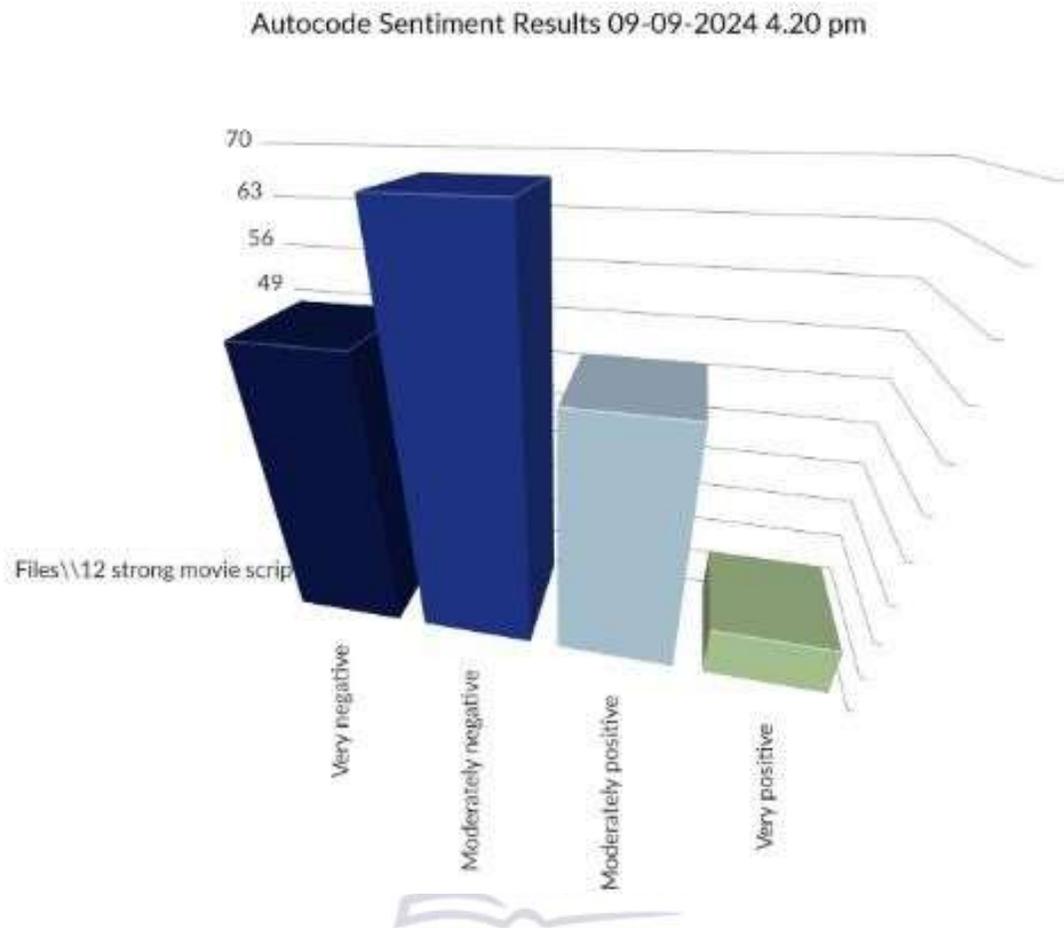
Figure 14: Autocode Sentiment Analysis Results for 12 Strong Script – 09-09-2024 4:20 pm

The Autocode Sentiment Results for the movie *"12 Strong"* reveal a significant leaning toward negative sentiments, with the highest frequency in the "Moderately Negative" category, followed by "Very Negative". Positive sentiments, both "Moderately Positive" and "Very Positive", are noticeably fewer. This reflects the film's portrayal of intense conflict, warfare, and hardship, particularly in the narrative concerning the Taliban, war-torn Afghanistan, and the struggle of U.S. forces. The predominance of negative sentiments ties into this research on the portrayal of Muslims and Islamic culture in media, as the film continues to associate Muslim characters, especially the Taliban, with violence and extremism (Lemire, 2021). While characters like General Dostum provide a more nuanced representation, the overall narrative reinforces typical Islamophobic stereotypes by focusing heavily on war and terrorism, thus contributing to the public's negative perception of Muslims and perpetuating cultural bias in Western media.

Figure 15: Text Search Query Results for 'Taliban' – Preview

The Text Search Query for the term "Taliban" in "12 Strong" reveals its frequent and prominent use throughout the dialogue, reflecting the group's central role in the film's narrative. Words associated with "Taliban"—such as "airstrikes," "Bin Laden," "Mullah Razan," and "Al- Qaeda"—emphasize the Taliban as the primary antagonist. The repeated mentions of battle plans, troop movements, and references to violence and extremism portray the Taliban as a constant threat. The search results show how the Taliban is consistently connected with conflict, warfare, and terrorism. These associations help shape the film's depiction of the Taliban as an enemy to be defeated. By linking the group with destruction and violence, the movie constructs a narrative where the Taliban's presence justifies the ongoing military operations, further developing the film's

central themes of heroism, strategy, and conflict resolution (Reyes, 2018).

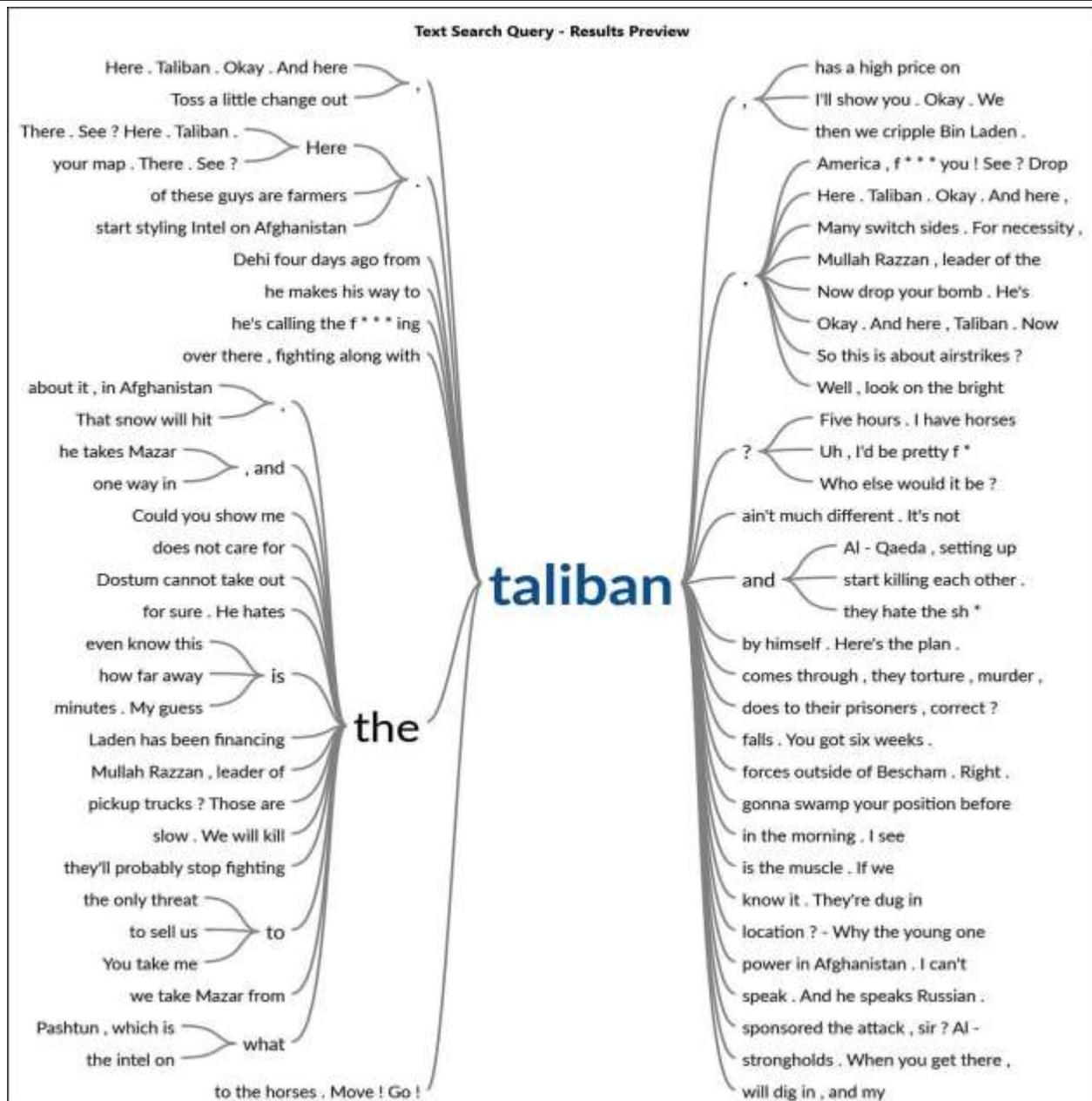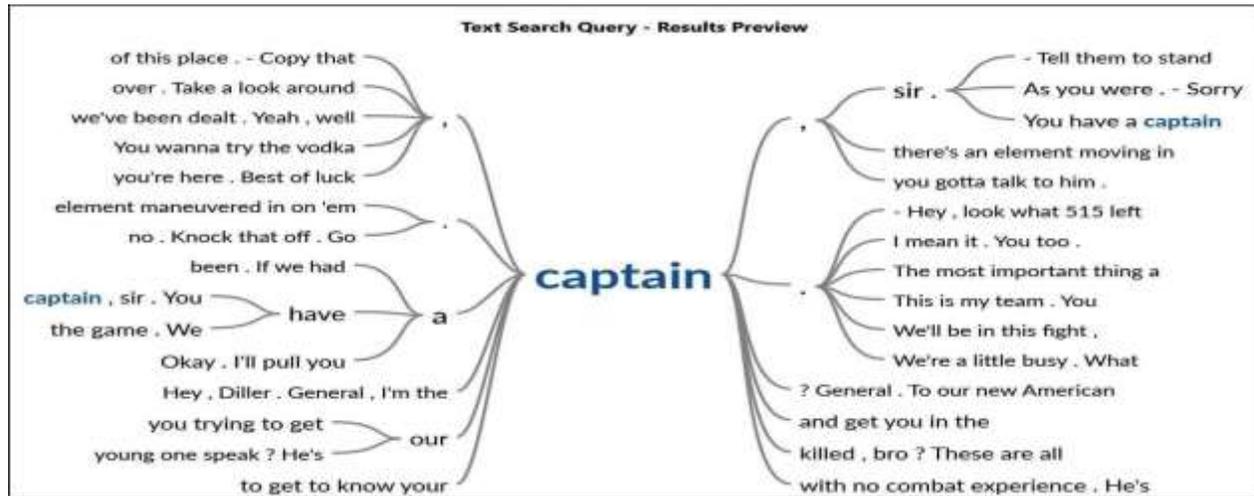*Figure 16: Text Search Query Results for 'Captain' – Preview*

The Text Search Query for the word "captain" in "12 Strong" reveals its significance in portraying leadership and authority within the film. The term is closely associated with Captain Mitch Nelson, the leader of the U.S. Special Forces team. Phrases like "You have a captain" and "This is my team" emphasize the captain's role in commanding, coordinating, and strategizing during military operations. The captain is depicted as a central figure responsible for guiding his team through intense, life-threatening situations. This focus on the captain reflects the film's broader themes of military leadership and heroism, where the captain is not only a leader but a symbol of unity and decision-making under pressure. In research on media portrayals of Muslims and conflict, this depiction contrasts with the simplistic portrayal of Afghan or Muslim characters. While the captain is shown with depth and leadership, other characters, such as the Taliban, are often reduced to adversarial roles, reinforcing stereotypes in conflict-related narratives.
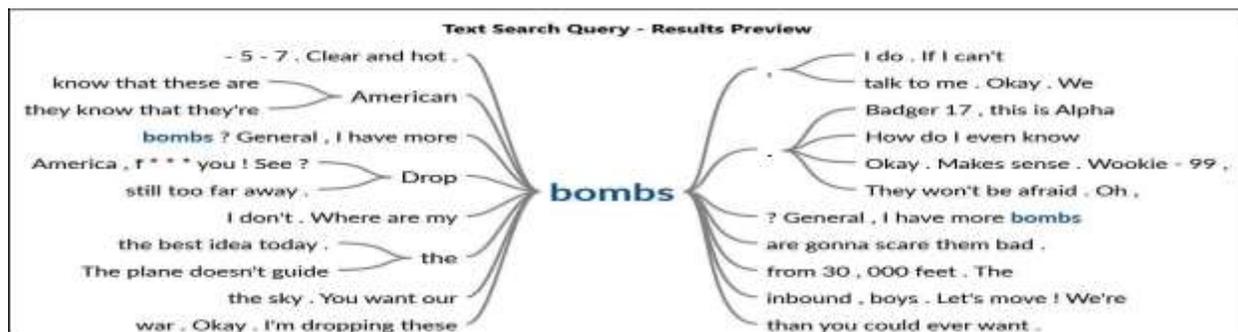

Figure 17: Text Search Query Results for 'Bombs' – Preview

The term "bombs" in "12 Strong" highlights its frequent use in conversations revolving around military strategy and airstrikes. Phrases such as "Drop the bombs" and "I have more bombs" emphasize the reliance on air power in the fight against enemy forces. These references showcase

the intense atmosphere of the film, where bombs are central to the tactical plans and are seen as a decisive factor in overcoming challenges. The dialogue surrounding "bombs" also reflects the danger and high stakes that the characters' face, further enhancing the tension within the narrative. This focus on bombs reveals how the film uses military might as a critical element of the story, portraying it as a necessary means to achieve victory. The repeated mention of "bombs" in both strategic discussions and action scenes underscores the film's emphasis on combat and warfare, where firepower is key to resolving conflicts (Support et al., 2022).

Figure 18: Word Cloud Analysis of Dialogue in 12 Strong

The word cloud from "12 Strong" emphasizes the prominence of key terms such as "right," "Taliban," "Dostum," "general," "captain," and "hey" in the dialogue, providing insight into the film's thematic focus. The word "right" appears centrally, suggesting its frequent use in both tactical discussions and moral decisions, reflecting the military's navigation of challenging circumstances. The presence of "Taliban" and "Dostum" highlights the dual portrayal of Afghan characters, with the Taliban representing the adversarial forces and General Dostum representing an ally. This emphasizes the central conflict between the U.S. forces and the Taliban, with Dostum playing a key role in the U.S. military's strategy. Words like "general," "captain," and "bombs" further reinforce the film's focus on military leadership and combat, while conversational terms like "hey" and "like" suggest a casual tone in dialogue between soldiers.

Overall, the word cloud reflects the balance of military strategy, leadership, and interpersonal dynamics in the film.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (12 Strong)

The film features detailed depictions of military uniforms worn by the U.S. soldiers and traditional attire of Afghan fighters. These costumes emphasize the cultural and professional backgrounds of the characters, highlighting their roles and affiliations.

The body language in "12 Strong" reflects the intense environment of combat and the interactions between U.S. soldiers and Afghan allies.

'12 Strong' is true events picture that tell about the Special Forces team, which was sent to Afghanistan after September 11 attacks (Watch 12 Strong 2018 Full HD on SFlix Free, n.d.).

This movie describes their quest into assembling a team with General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his Afghan forces to overthrow the Taliban. The scenarios of planning, fighting, struggling, and finally achieving the mission are portrayed in the movie showcasing the idea of war.

The Afghan Muslims in "12 Strong" are depicted as positive and negative figures. These Afghan allies, especially General Dostum, are described as heroic, cunning, and indispensable forces in the fight against the Taliban. It deepens the understanding of multiculturalism within Muslim families, depicting cooperation and respect for each other. For example, General Abdul Rashid Dostum is depicted as a brave and strategic leader, particularly in scenes where he collaborates with Captain Mitch Nelson in planning attacks against the Taliban. His character showcases loyalty and military prowess, reinforcing the idea that not all Afghan Muslims are extremists. On the other hand, the Taliban fighters are consistently shown as violent and ruthless, especially in scenes of ambushes and combat, where they employ brutal tactics such as suicide bombings and indiscriminate killings. These contrasting depictions contribute to the film's narrative of distinguishing between Muslim allies and enemies but also risk reinforcing simplistic views of Islamic culture by primarily associating Muslims with conflict and violence

Figure 19: The culmination of their efforts in a successful operation against the Taliban, highlighting the cooperation between the U.S. soldiers and Afghan fighters.

In *12 Strong*, the conversations between U.S. soldiers and their Afghan allies emphasize cooperation. These dialogues reflect the collaborative nature of their mission.

In the representational domain of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the characters in 12 Strong are examined with regard to how the characters fit into the military narrative and Afghan culture. General Dostum as the Afghan ally character of the novels reveals the duality of Afghan patriotism and military plans. Such contacts with the captain Mitch Nelson explain the cultural and wor ensuring the military nature of the war. For example, General Dostum's outfit and clothes represent his cultural and military roles of the Afghans. A typical example of this is when General Dostum told Captain Nelson 'You will be cowards if you leave.' Oh no, you're not a soldier, you're a politician." This conversation reflects Dostum's knowledge of what is at issue and differences between the American soldiers and the Afghan warriors. The nature of war

especially through Afghan territories which are depicted as cruel in the movie is highly highlighted and these terrains determine the strategies' and outcomes of wars. The cruel and merciless environ of the desert such as rocks, sand, and other barriers erase the body of the soldiers and show how they and their strategies suffer on the ground.

Figure 20: Intense and realistic combat sequences that depict the challenges and dangers faced by the team.

In the interactional domain, the look and the positioning of the bodies during character interaction are critical to the transaction between the characters and the audience. For example, 12 Strong depicts direct eye contact of the US Special Forces and General Dostum with no intimation of animosity or suspicion: they look as one. For instance, the scenes where direct look is emitted by the Special Forces team led by Chriss Hemsworth alongside with Dosstum, including the moment of showdown and friendship, showing them that two are on the same hostile side.

On the other hand, the moments of tension are introduced by non-reciprocal or by avoiding eye contact and by using sidelined gazes. The physical geography of the filming location abstracts the US soldiers and Afghan fighters at certain times illustrating the social psychological and emotional distances that military personnel need to overcome in order to form efficient combat counterparts. Similarly, use of proxemics, including close up, medium or aerial, supports these relational dimensions of visual communication to give the audience a perception of both bonding and rivalry.

Figure 21: The formation of alliances with General Dostum and his fighters, showcasing cultural exchanges and strategic discussions.

The compositional field focuses on the way in which objects, characters and other aspects become constructed and placed in the shots. In 12 Strong, relevant objects such as maps, guns, and flags of theafiying and hence on the right which according to Kress and van Leeuwen implies power. For example, maps depicting Afghanistan which were used by the U.S. military, which are frequently depicted in strategic planning scenes, are exhibited in order to convey dominance over specific maneuvers. On the other hand, Afghan fighters and surrounding terrains are often drawn on the left which a more defensive or responding side. This technique of composition presents a clean and efficient military machinery of United States against a wild and chaotic land and force of Afghanistan thus emphasizing on the main ideologies of camaraderie and existence in an alien territory. The bright luminosity and contrasting contrast of using light and darkness which is seen in the desert contrasting vivid light against the somber message of war brings out the theme of both, togetherness and conflict.

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Figure 22: The arrival of the U.S. Special Forces in Afghanistan and their initial encounters with the harsh environment and local customs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This interpretation of the research findings from The Kerala Story and 12 Strong in light of the literature on portrayal of Islam and Muslims in media. This study, therefore, employs the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) frame to analyse how these films represent Muslim identity, extremism and cultural representation. More specifically, this chapter seeks to relate the representation of Muslim characters in these movies to more general trends in current media culture: extremism and racisms. It also demystifies how these representations affect the audience and brings to bear the necessity of critical media consumption in analysing stereotyping in cinema. Collectively, this analysis provides a further piece to the scholarly discussion regarding the importance and impact of popular media messages in constructing knowledge about Islam and Muslim peoples (Hidanz Abdullah, 2019).

These findings underlined the caller's critical media literacy theory when it comes to understanding Islam and Muslims in cinema. Cultural meanings that are depicted always need to be informed to the audience that what they are watching or reading is constructed and has a particular ideology. Such forms of visual and rhetorical analysis of films such as The Kerala Story and 12 Strong therefore require scholars such as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to systematically dismantle. Critical Media takes the essence of eradicating these representations and encourages a more elaborative understanding of Muslims beyond the Manichaean construction of extremist/victim dichotomy.

Conclusion

The interpretation of 'The Kerala Story' and '12 Strong' with the help of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis framework shows how the representations of Islam and Muslims are highly nuanced. Media especially films representation of Muslims by and Islamic culture in the Global South remains a subject of considerable debate. Therefore, the present study has been mainly concerned with understanding how two films; 12 Strong and The Kerala Story, shape their viewers' perception of Muslims through representing them. Analyzing representational, interactional, and compositional domains for the films in contex, and comparing with the result of the previous part, this study exposed the many-sided lacks of balance and balanced representation of Muslim characters in Hollywood and Bollywood narratives, exposed the trends within these cinematic industries. Afghan Muslims are depicted in the Hollywood release 12 Strong in a somewhat nuanced fashion. Mehrdad and his men are portrayed as desirable friends of the US Special Forces – heroes, honest, and wise in wars tactics. This positive portrayal is significantly different from other portrayals of Muslims as either dangerous radical terrorists or innocent victims. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that the film continues to present Muslims as dangerous and violent since the main enemies are the Taliban. This logic of differentiating some Muslims as our friend and the other as foes perpetuates this unbalanced perception of Islamic identity as being defined within the codes of war and terrorism. Although such positive roles as Dostum are depicted, the overall image is still associated with war, which is characteristic of Western media. However, the content of The Kerala Story emphasizes much on the topic of radicalization and narrates the story of a Hindu girl namely Shalini who is forced to become ISIS's Fatima Ba. The plot of the movie rises around the themes of the threat of radicalisation, especially Islam, and the manipulation of a fragile person. The symbols and storytelling that the film relies on – the hijab, ISIS flags, religious quotes – all tie in very heavily to the oppressive and violent image that the filmmakers wanted to create. Although the movie tries to depict the process of traumas of radicalization, it tends to reproduce stereotypes about the Islamic threat due to cultural essentialism that links Muslimness to extremism. Due to showing the only side of Islamic radicalisation and not providing any healthy, progressive portrayal of Muslims, The Kerala Story continues to employ a stereotypical outlook toward followers of Islam. This paper shows that though the two films employ different

strategies to portray the subject, both films play part in a discourse that seeks to associate Islam with violence and extremism. In 12 Strong, the main subject is war and the Afghans are depicted as either protagonists or antagonists depending on whether they are friend or foe to the American forces. As one reads through the book 'The Kerala Story', nine out of ten pages are devoted to the issues of radicalisation and the evils of the Islamic fundamentalism. Therefore, both films are limited in their representation of Muslims and Muslim identity to the mode of conflict and war.

Limitations

This study has certain limitations. First, the analysis focuses on only two films, *12 Strong* and *The Kerala Story*, which limits the scope of the findings. A broader selection of films from different time periods and regions might provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Muslims and Islamic culture are portrayed in cinema. Second, the study primarily uses Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), which emphasizes visual and linguistic elements but may overlook other aspects such as audience reception or the production context of the films. Lastly, the subjective interpretation of the films could influence the findings, as different viewers may perceive the portrayals in varying ways. These limitations suggest that further research is needed to validate the results and expand the study's scope.

Recommendations

Future research should analyze a wider range of films from different industries, including independent and non-Western films, to provide a broader perspective on the portrayal of Muslims and Islamic culture in global cinema. Incorporating audience reception studies can provide insights into how different demographics interpret these films, highlighting variations in perception based on cultural, religious, or geographical backgrounds. Expanding the analysis to include television series, documentaries, and digital content would offer a more diverse understanding of how Muslims are depicted across various media platforms. Future studies should consider the filmmakers' perspectives and intentions, exploring how their cultural, political, and social views influence the portrayal of Muslims and Islamic culture in their works and to provide a more balanced view, future research could compare the portrayal of Muslims with other religious groups in media to identify patterns of representation and biases across different religious identities.

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