

# The Creative Launcher

**Journal URL:** <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

**ISSN:** 2455-6580

**Issue:** Vol. 8 & Issue 1, (February, 2023)

**Publisher:** Perception Publishing

**Published on:** 28<sup>th</sup> February, 2023

**Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access:** Yes

**Journal DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

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**Article History:** Abstract Received on: 11<sup>th</sup> December 2022 | Full Article Received on: 26<sup>th</sup> December 2022 | Revision received on: 27<sup>th</sup> December 2022 | Plagiarism Checked on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2022 | Peer Review Completed on: 14<sup>th</sup> February 2023 | Article Accepted on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2023 | First Published on: 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023

**Research Article**



## Typecasting Identity and Portrayal of Trauma in the Reel Rendition of the Northeast: A Cinematic Introspection through Select Bollywood Films

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 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2023.8.1.08>

**Pages:** 72-81

### Abstract

Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism*, opined that the colonialist thought process (the notion that the West is superior to the East) did not come to an end when the colonial rule ended, but continued in varied forms. The vision of the Northeast within the borderlines of India reiterates this idea when one envisions the area through the lenses of mainstream 'Indo-Aryan' and 'Dravidian' cultural practices. Often termed as a 'conflict zone', the Northeast has

always had a tense relationship with 'mainland' India, due to the differences in opinion regarding societal and cultural practices, food habits, territorial squabbles, and religion. When it came to the representation part of the Northeast in various art forms, it almost always got moulded by the mainstream imagination, which had nothing to do with real life practices related to the Northeast, and Bollywood movies act as the perfect canvas for this. This paper would attempt to contextualize the (mis)representation of identity, challenges, contestation in the portrayal of Northeast, the evolution of the process 'othering' of the characters belonging to the region in the mainstream Bollywood films, like *Tango Charlie* (2005), *Chak de India* (2007), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Pink* (2016), and the recent web series *Axone* (2019). Incisively speaking, the paper would also gyrate around some major concerns like the problematic position of Northeastern consciousness amid the ideology of one-nation-one-language that has been perpetrated in certain ways since the Nehruvian times, typecasting characters while portraying them in popular Bollywood movies, casting actors belonging to the Northeast into stereotypical roles, bereft of variety, and ultimately how off-beat cinematic presentations in OTT platforms have poised thought-provoking questions as counter-narratives to mainstream Bollywood movies of the past.

**Keywords:** Northeast, Bollywood movies, Identity, Mainstream, 'Othering', *Orientalism*, Typecasting, Trauma, Stereotyping, Conflict

Since its advent in December 1894 in Paris by the Lumiere brothers, cinema has brought people closer and bridged gaps between different cultures across the globe, apart from delineating great ordeals about life. With exhilarating settings of luscious mustard fields, female actors hovering around it in perfectly draped chiffon sarees, and actors playing the most soulful violin in the background, Bollywood has always been larger-than-life, lulling the balanced conscience of every Indian to fall back on day-dreaming. While navigating through the cobwebs that Bollywood weaves for every common Indian, it becomes an inevitable jouissance to binge on the graphic and lively portrayal of daily hullabaloo that are shown with utmost deliberation, through coloured goggles. It is observed that most of the grand-narratives<sup>1</sup> of Bollywood movies revolve around the motions and commotions of the North Indian cultural tropes, especially of the Punjab-Delhi belt or the Mumbaikars down in the west, and a stark stereotyping is done in the case of South Indian scenarios (often used in mocking ways to delineate a comic scene). This trend of stereotyping attains a new dimension when it comes to the representation of the Northeast<sup>2</sup>, as in the century-long legacy of Bollywood industry, the illustration of the region came as a new and recent afterthought to add variety and show a sense of multiformity in the diverse country. Sohini Basu opines:

...Bollywood industry has long since learnt to train its eyes on an India that offers the picture of a map that begs to differ from the one, we saw in our Geography books of yonder. In this map, some states hog the limelight in a tailor-cut fashion that has been the way since the annals of history. If that is the case, the plight and struggle and the

stories from the Northeast are kept tucked away in a far-flung corner, much like their geographical alienation in reality. (1-2)

Such distinct treatment has mostly stemmed from genuine facts like the geographical location of Northeast as well as its cultural differences with the mainland in general, which also has a prolonged history of armed insurgencies and conflicts with the central government due to a gamut of reasons. The Northeast comprises of eight states– Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya, poorly connected to the Indian mainland and most of the states attained statehood in the 60s and 70s, after being independent hill districts previously (before Independence). Prof. Pachua, while delineating her experiences as a professor teaching in JNU in her seminal work *Being Mizo: Identity and Belonging in Northeast India* recalls how masters level students could not name all the eight states of the Northeast, let alone know about their distinct cultures (33) She feels, such demarcation in minds and thoughts may be probably because of two reasons – geographically, the Northeast has a very interesting position; it shares only two percent border with the mainland and ninety eight percent with neighbouring countries like Bangladesh, China, Myanmar. Furthermore, it is connected to the mainland through a two-kilometres long stretch of land known as the ‘Siliguri Corridor’ or the ‘Chicken’s neck’. Culturally, it is a home to heterogenous population having affinity with the South-East Asian cultures, in terms of food, customs, religion, ethnicity and ideologies. So, intentionally or unintentionally, there has been a divide – the Northeast lies as a distant entity, both physically and psychologically. Most of the states have been a blazing site for political gambling and separatist movements, inter-community squabble, communal riots and miscellaneous cultural clashes within and outside the states. Sanjib Barua opines:

The region seems distant from the hearts and minds of many Indians: its lush green landscape evokes the picture of another part of monsoon Asia, and the local people, in the eyes of many, look racially different. An undifferentiated picture of nameless ‘insurgencies and Indian soldiers engaged in the defence of ‘the nation’ dominate popular impressions of the region. This is hardly the climate for an informed and vigorous national debate on nearly four decades of failed policy. (x-xi)

Representation of Northeast in literature and films have been perceived through cliched lenses, from determining actors in the lead or supporting roles to portraying characters in certain ways, the space seems to marred by misinformation and stereotypes. Whenever there is a character drawn from the Northeast, it is shown that the person is either a don in a side role or a promiscuous damsel, waiting for a sugar daddy<sup>3</sup> to support her. Such stereotyping recalls the idea of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’, where orientalism<sup>4</sup> usually refers to the exaggeration of distinctiveness, carved out of the pre-conceived notion of Western superiority over the Eastern communities, by analysing and judging the latter through clichéd lenses. This is thought to be the root cause of misconception, stereotypes and illogical cultural manifestations that build the base of Western thought and its views on the Eastern zone, especially the Middle East. Various forms of misrepresentations may manifest itself in three ways – as an academic culture or tradition, as a generalized worldview, portrayal, a “style of thought based upon an

ontological and epistemological distinction made between the ‘orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said), and most importantly, as a tool for dominating and controlling the space. The basic crux of Orientalism, as narrated by an article published by *The New Criterion*, it is “a subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their culture” (Windschuttle), which usually portrayed the ‘Orient’ as irrational, vulgar, desperate, primitive, lacking basic modern skills and manners, revealing a self-declaratory sense of superiority of the West over them. As a corollary, the essence of the heritage of India has somewhere revolved around the Indo-Aryan or Dravidian cultural tropes, which has distinctively alienated the Tibeto-Burman populace of the Northeast, giving way to stereotypes and misinformed vision about the people, ruminations of which are found in books and movies. Joy LK Pachau said, “The region known as the Northeast in India has been obscured both nationally and internationally, while also being silenced by various strands of national discourse” (1-2). In the realms of Bollywood, over the past two decades, it is observed that there has been a gradual flux in terms of the representation; while during the previous decades the depiction of Northeast was basically done through the tropes of tribal patterns (films like *Tango Charlie*), far removed from the ‘civilized’ nuances of the mainland, in the similar manner in which, as per Edward Said, the Orient views the Occident, for dominating and controlling their space, with the passing of years, cinematic representations in Hindi movies have shown the participation and triumph of Northeast in sports (films like *Mary Kom* and *Chak De India*). However, such representations are often marred by stereotypes and do not significantly remove the pre-conceived biases that casting directors or producers carry in mind towards the roles and actors of the Northeast. Then came movies like *Pink* (2016), a critically acclaimed cinematic introspection challenging the problematic notions revolving around women’s bodies, rightly smashing patriarchal mindsets. As a fringe point, the film has also revealed how unabashedly commonplace it has become to point out any young woman from the region living in metro cities to be promiscuous, free to be exploited. In the present times, with the blooming of off-beat content in the OTT platforms, comedy-dramas like *Axone* (2019) have provided a fresh and crisp representation of young students from the Northeast enjoying their lives in Delhi and going about their ways in preparing local cuisine in an urban North Indian set-up. It turned out to be one of the few films which actually represented the diverse nature of Northeast, as against the homogenized representations of the earlier times. The change is traced in parts, and the modern-day depiction of characters from the Northeast has undergone considerable flux; none-the-less, there still lies a long way to actually join the dots and bridging the gaps hovering in the minds of big production houses to cast actors and frame characters free from regional biases.

Cinema has often been looked down upon as an unreliable source of historiography as it incorporates nuances of imagination with the moot issue that it raises nonetheless, it moulds itself as a flexible field of philosophical study and provides a platform for people to nurture the thoughts. The initial phase of portrayal of Northeast in mainstream Bollywood movies gyrates mostly around excessively misinformed backgrounds and shows how history is shown to the

majority in customizable ways, backing up the mainstream Indian imagination about the Northeast. To begin with, *Tango Charlie*, a 2005 Mani Shankar film is pregnant with a deceptive view of the habits of people in the Northeast. The plot gyrates around the journey of soldiers of the Border Security Force across different regions of India. At the outset, Manipur is shown to be a site where the soldiers are in conflict with the ‘Bodo militants’. While depicting this, one finds that the latter can imitate the sounds and birds and insects to communicate with each other. Furthermore, it is shown that the militants go about killing Manipuri villagers and are bluntly violent. Historically speaking, Manipur has never been marked as an area dominated by ‘Bodo militancy’ (Lal 62). There has been no record which could show that the inhabitants can imitate sounds of birds and animals. Such picturization for the sheer sake of aesthetic appeal reveals the lack of knowledge and concern about the mainstream Bollywood directors about Northeast, which has remained as the ‘margin’ to the ‘center’, the extended ‘periphery’. Furthermore, this also shows how the generalised notion of the mainland about tribal communities to be primitive, animalistic, violent, lacking basic human decency – “The official discourse on the Northeast also frames the way in which the region is represented culturally. The language of ‘tribe’ is routinely used and is not seen as problematic; consequently, a particular form of tribal-ness becomes a facet of cultural representation” (Pachua 57). Galanter further opines that the general outlook towards the tribes’ is that, the ones having a tribal origin must show “primitive way of life, remote habitation, and general backwardness in all respects” (152).

The stereotyping in movies happen basically in two ways – the limited tropes through which a particular character is seen, and the aversion to cast an actor from the states of the Northeast itself to play a lead role, even if it means to be playing the role of someone from the region itself. It was probably for the first time that a character in a lead role was portrayed to be from the Northeast in *Mary Kom* (2014). The film basically was a biopic of the Manipuri boxer Mary Kom, who won a bronze medal for India in the 2012 summer Olympics. The Hindi-language movie reveals the struggles of Mary in her early days, and her life-altering experiences of dealing with her father and training coach, who was smitten by her determination to train and do something big. The hullabaloo and hype around the movie directed by Omung Kumar and produced by Sanjay Leela Bhansali was mainly due to the fact that Priyanka Chopra was playing the lead role of Kom. Questions were raised as to fetch a reason behind a North Indian like Priyanka Chopra being cast as Mary Kom, as there was undoubtedly a gamut of fine actors present in that region. Chopra had to train herself consistently to have a physique and grow muscles, and the makeup department had a hard time trying to make her fit in Kom’s role. Things would have been easier if an actor from the Northeast, or of Tibeto-Burman ancestry were cast in the role of Kom, but the mainstream Bollywood industry is still enamoured by the idea that an actor from the mainland having a universal aura would help them earn revenue, in a way that an actor from the Northeast could never do. This not only diminishes the scope of navigating the tropes of authenticity in depiction of real-life stories, but also reveals the biased bent of mind of the mainstream

audience in terms of acceptance. The Northeast, however, is not bereft of well-established female actors – ranging from Patralekha (*Citylights*), to Geetanjali Thapa (*Liar's Dice*), even Lin Laishram, a model from Kom's state Manipur, the list is endless. Laishram even auditioned for the lead role for Kom, only to be replaced by Chopra and settling herself by playing the role of Kom's friend.

Movies nurture the sentiments and national consciousness of the audience, and on probing deep, one would locate the tendency of films to cease down as mere entertainment devices, but as serious mind-shapers. Movies reveal how colonialism is present within the canvas of Indian film industry, 'orientalisms' or the road to view the 'other' show how representation is also a deliberate discourse, ideologically and politically derived. Films like *Chak De! India* (directed by Shimit Amin) can be viewed as an attempt by the film-makers to show the valour of national integration, beauty of the nation in its diversity, through sports. The film was related to the performance of women's hockey team in a world cup, as they were trained by Kabir Khan (played by Shah Rukh Khan), a Muslim who was allegedly traumatised after the backlash he received post an Olympic final, in which he had conceded an important goal to Pakistan. The movie reveals how he trains a diverse women's team with players from all over India training under one roof and coach, despite frequent clashes and regional squabbles. The population of the Northeast was represented through hockey players– Molly Zimik and Mary Ralte (a Naga and a Mizo, respectively). Apparently, it may seem to be maintaining uniformity in representing the 'real India', but after probing deeper, one would realise the layers of stereotyping done while delineating the characteristic features and nature of the players. After introducing the audience to the two players from the Northeast, it is shown how two men are ogling at the girls, satisfying their male gaze, hurling derogatory comments, like, "...they must have been headed for the disco or the nightclub. They must have taken a wrong turn and come here." Furthermore, the character of Shukla ji adds on to the stereotyping as he says, "I am very impressed. Players have come from the easternmost regions of our country too... why are you guests here? Welcome!" It shows how women from the Northeast are usually viewed by the urban class of people, despite vows of national integration. Though Amin's genuine trial to showcase uniform portrayal of players is appreciated, none-the-less, midway into the movie, one would barely find Molly or Mary anywhere in the lead. They are mostly observed to be dwelling behind the mainstream players, who draw most of the attention of the audience, for their emotional squabbles and strategies. Basu opines, "Introducing Molly Zimik and Mary Ralte in *Chak De India*: the camera finds no better way to roll but settles for satisfying the male gaze as they capture the attention of two men ogling lasciviously at the girls and suggesting to each other" (4). Even in *Mary Kom*, in a scene Mary could not seem to hold herself back but protest, when she was being discriminated by a Selector as he chose a girl from Haryana over her. no matter the situation, the tropes of selective adulation, garlanding and stereotyping never seem to stop, the baton is just transferred from one director to the other. Pachuau opines,

Chak De as a film, and thereby as a mode of representation, is symbolic of two aspects of the Indian nation state's association with regard to the Northeast. At one level, Hindi

cinema's rather perfunctory engagement with the Northeast is emblematic of the rather random association that Indian society in general has with the region. As an Indian newspaper once put it, the Northeast is 'on the map, but off the mind'. Secondly, the nature of engagement with the Northeast in the film itself is representative of the relationship that India has with its eastern frontier. (34)

In contrast to the above-mentioned movies, *Pink* (2016) directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, did not revolve around the (mis)representation of a Northeast character as the prime narrative, rather opened up scopes for introspection. In the movie, the young and independent girl Andrea is asked by the lawyer of the opposition party uncomfortable and mindless questions about her origin, as mentioned by one of the male characters in the movie that she looks 'Arunachali-Sikkimese-Manipuri'. Her lawyer Deepak Sehgal (played by Amitabh Bachchan), however, flips the narrative of the trial room by saying that she is from Meghalaya— an abode of 'Megh' or clouds. He, on one hand shows how regions of the Northeast are just not about conflict or cater to a homogenized entity, but rather culturally diverse and geographically serene; on the other, he busts certain myths about North-eastern women that even though the communities of the Northeast may have matriarchal setups in parts and restrictions are fewer on women as compared to that of women from the mainland, it could never surmount to men thinking that the women are free to be exploited, sexually objected, or taken for granted. As a Khasi woman from Meghalaya, Longnam Wanbiang Kharpuri said that she could relate to Andrea Tariat, her trauma, her contestation and struggle to retain her identity in a land which appeared alien to her, and the fact that her role just was perfectly brewed. She says:

...I find it imperative that curious minds be fed and ignorance be done away with. There is a reason for the paucity of understanding about us 'North Eastern' people – and that is because our education system fails to integrate us into the temporal geographical landscape of our children and students ... the movie brilliantly puts forward: women, as much as men – deserve to be treated as subjects and not objects. We are to be respected, as any other person, for our history, our culture, our accomplishments and most importantly, our basic humanity. (Kharpuri)

The recent Netflix film *Axone* (2020) adds in a gamut of mixed comic and serious elements in the new dimensions of representation of Northeast in mainstream movies. Shillong-born director Nicholas Kharkongor portrays a group of young students from different parts of the Northeast living in Delhi and their experiences of living in a distinct urban setup. For a change, all the characters belonged to different states of Northeast, led by Lin Laishram, Sayani Gupta and Tenzing Dalha, lending to a sense of authenticity to the portrayal. The word 'Axone' (pronounced as 'akhuni') refers to a fermented soya dish of Nagaland, whose smell is too strong for the Delhi neighbourhood of the students to bear. The storyline comically shows how 'smelly' the bond between the Northeast and the rest of the country is. (Chetia) Furthermore, it also reveals, how politics is being carried out regarding 'food' in the social scenario of the country. There is a scene where a group of friends and acquaintances call upon different people at different times and the situation turns messy. They go on about their own ways, speaking

their own regional languages, distinct dialects, so that they audience could catch the subtle differences in them. Albeit, Bollywood has a long way to go to particularly delineate the differences between Ao Naga, Kokborok, Khasi, Meitei or even Assamese or Apatani. Lest not forget, one needs more films like *Axone*, which would break free from the stereotypical portrayal of Northeast as a homogenous whole, speaking one language and having one culture. Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L K Pachuau opine,

Stereotypes expressed in a condensed form a range of images: they can celebrate and demean, valorize and marginalize. They seek to map attributes on to social bodies, to fix and naturalize them. But stereotypes too have history, often trouble and fraught. They are not only produced and circulated, but also questioned and reworked. These negotiations, in fact, define the shape of the stereotypes, the way they operate, the limits to which they are accepted, and the social power they have. If the eye of power proliferates images, producing a surplus that often undercuts the efficacy of the images produced, those subject to power confront these images in conflicting ways. For an understanding of the identity formation in the Northeast, an exploration of this politics of stereotyping is particularly significant. (10)

Movies have shown such vistas of stereotypes which point out towards social learning that has caused such generalized ideas about the Northeast. Though initially, cinematic depiction of the region gyrated only around illustrations of tribal expanses, Bollywood seems to have woken up to reformist motifs and have finally started to show inclusiveness. From Chum Darang making a mark on the screen as a lesbian admirer of Bhumi Pednekar in 2022 movie *Badhai Ho* to the depiction of the strong and determined boxer played in Andrea Kevichusa in *Anek* (2022), Bollywood has started showing signs of progression and the fact that acting as an activity surpasses region and culture. However, actors like Parineeta Borthakur expresse concern when she is often asked the reason behind not looking Northeastern enough. It is to be noted that the region is a home to almost two hundred and fifty tribes, differing from each other in terms of culture, religion and customs. To homogenize and entire area of eight states into one umbrella term or meaning is classificatory, limiting and exclusionary. When it comes to the current depiction of movies, there has been a significant change, especially from the previous decade. It is to be noted that, the real essence of any medium of art is not to try to homogenize every distinct aspect but rather recognize and validate the differences and exist peacefully.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Grand-narrative (singular, meta-narrative) refers to the socially accepted and popular narratives of historical significance, knowledge or experience, which incurs social validation and legitimization through discursive practices. Jean-Francois Lyotard, the post-modern critic, in his seminal essay *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) propounded the term, where he vouched for his abrasion towards the



autocratic nature of ‘grand-narrative’. Instead, he sought to emphasize and ponder over the other smaller narratives present in the remote pockets of a social structure.

- <sup>2</sup> The region lying at the north-east of Rangpur (now in present Bangladesh) was earlier designated as the ‘Northeast’, as per the written record of S.C. Chaube (1973). The region currently consists of eight states, and organizations like the Northeast Council (NEC) and separate ministries like Ministry for the Northeast in the Union Government (MoDONER) have contributed to making the area ‘official’, unlike certain regions in India, which are named homogenously, based on culture.
- <sup>3</sup> The term ‘sugar daddy’ (mostly a slang term) means a filthy rich, old man who pays young girls to stay with him for company and sexual favours.
- <sup>4</sup> *Orientalism* is the seminal work by Edward W Said, published in book form in 1978, where the term ‘orientalism’ is introduced as an expository concept to delineate the West’s usual idea and depiction of The East, or the ‘Orient’. The inhabitants of the ‘orient’ are those residing in Asia, Middle East, North Africa and are viewed by the West in certain discursive ways. Such viewing is fully associated with the imperialist societies who perceived it, stemming from their mind, which later lead to a lot of Orientalist works to be politically driven, subservient to power.

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