



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF COMPUTER SCIENCE AND MANAGEMENT [IJCSM]



CINEMA, CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION: A REPRESENTATIONAL ANALYSIS OF HABEEBI

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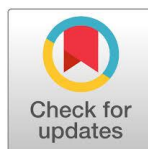
Article History

Volume:3, Issue:3, 2026

Received: 26th August 2026

Accepted: 2nd September 2026

Published:27thSeptember, 2026.



Abstract: *Regional-language Indian cinema, including Tamil cinema, has historically relegated Muslim characters to peripheral or antagonistic narrative roles. Habeebi (2023), directed by Abdul Hasan (credited as Meera Kathiravan), departs from this pattern by centering a Tamil Muslim weaving family's economic and emotional life across two timeframes, the 1980s and 2023. This study examines how Habeebi constructs and communicates Tamil Muslim identity, and evaluates its significance as a counter-narrative to the stereotypical tropes documented in prior scholarship on Muslim representation in Indian cinema. The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive single-case design, conducting a semiotic and narrative analysis of purposively selected scenes, framed through Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Roland Barthes' denotation/connotation framework, and Daniel Chandler's semiotic approach. Findings are further situated through a comparative reading against four prior Tamil films featuring Muslim characters or themes. The analysis shows that Habeebi integrates religious ritual (Mawlid, Janazah, Khula), gendered agency, and migration-driven family separation into a naturalistic narrative structure that departs from dominant tropes positioning Muslim characters as threat, spectacle, or narrative background. The study argues that Habeebi represents a distinct instance of cultural documentation in Tamil cinema and calls for broader authorship of Muslim-centered narratives across the industry, extending representation-studies scholarship beyond its predominant focus on Hindi-language cinema.*

Keywords: *Narrative Analysis; Semiotic Analysis; Representation Theory; Tamil Muslim Culture; Islamophobia; Media Stereotypes; Regional Cinema; Film Studies.*

Author's Citation: H. Mohamed Fayaz, Cinema, Culture and Communication: A Representational Analysis of Habeebi. Int.J.Com.Sci.Mgmt. Vol.3(3).2026.Pp:18-26. <https://doi.org/10.64906/IJCSM.2026.3.3.18>

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Muslim characters in Indian commercial cinema have predominantly occupied secondary or antagonistic narrative positions, a pattern documented across meta-analyses of Hindi-language cinema (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Zafar & Amjad, 2015; Najar, 2024). Tamil cinema's engagement with Muslim identity has followed a related trajectory: films such as *Vishwaroopam* (2013) and *Maanaadu* (2021) introduced Muslim protagonists, but subordinated cultural representation to political-thriller or science-fiction plot conventions. *Habeebi* (2023) departs from this trajectory by placing a Tamil Muslim weaving family at the center of its narrative. The film follows Mohammed Yusuf, a weaver from Kadayanallur in Tenkasi district, and his younger brother Syed Abuthahir, whose overseas migration for employment forms the film's central narrative device. The story is structured across two timeframes, the 1980s and 2023, which the film uses to track change in gender roles and social conditions within the same family and community.

1.2 Problem Statement

Existing scholarship on Muslim representation in Indian cinema has concentrated overwhelmingly on Hindi-language (Bollywood) cinema (Najar, 2024; Sharma, 2015; Zafar & Amjad, 2015). Comparatively little textual analysis exists on regional-language cinema's treatment of Muslim identity, despite regional industries producing a substantial share of Indian cinema's output. Within Tamil cinema specifically, prior films featuring Muslim characters or themes have generally treated cultural representation as secondary to genre convention. This creates a documented gap: limited close textual analysis exists of a Tamil film that positions Muslim cultural and religious practice as its central narrative substance rather than as narrative backdrop.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ1: How does *Habeebi* use semiotic and narrative devices to represent Tamil Muslim cultural practices, including ritual, gender relations, and migration?

RQ2: In what ways does the film's representation of Muslim identity depart from the stereotypical tropes documented in prior scholarship on Muslim representation in Indian cinema?

RQ3: How does a comparative reading of *Habeebi* against earlier Tamil films with Muslim characters or themes clarify its representational distinctiveness?

1.4 Objectives

(i) To identify and analyze the semiotic devices through which *Habeebi* constructs Tamil Muslim cultural identity. (ii) To examine the film's representation of gender, ritual, and migration against the theoretical framework of representation theory. (iii) To situate *Habeebi* comparatively against prior

Tamil films featuring Muslim characters or themes, in order to assess its distinctiveness within the regional cinematic landscape.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study extends representation-studies scholarship, which has concentrated predominantly on Hindi-language cinema, to a regional-language case. It contributes a close textual account of how cultural specificity can be positioned as central narrative content rather than as backdrop, and offers a comparative framework for evaluating future Tamil-language films addressing minority religious identity.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Muslim Representation in Indian Cinema

Meta-analytic and textual scholarship on Muslim representation in Indian cinema has consistently identified a narrow set of recurring tropes: the Muslim character as terrorist, as hyper-sexualized figure, or as an oppressor of women (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Zafar & Amjad, 2015). Najar (2024) extends this pattern specifically to Bollywood cinema, arguing that such representations recur across genre and period. Within Tamil cinema, *Maanaadu* marked a partial departure by introducing a Muslim protagonist facing a specific narrative crisis; however, this study argues that *Habeebi* extends this shift substantially further by making the protagonist's cultural and domestic life, rather than a political crisis, the film's central subject. Prior Tamil-language treatments of Muslim characters or themes, including *Vishwaroopam*, *Anti-Indian*, and *FIR*, are addressed comparatively in Section 4.4.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations

The study's central theoretical pillar is Stuart Hall's (1997) conceptualization of representation as a "signifying practice." Hall argues that meaning is not fixed within an object or person but is constructed through language and signs, a process he terms the "production of meaning." Central to Hall's framework is a critique of stereotyping as a strategy of "splitting" that excludes what does not conform to a narrow, often negative, norm.

The study draws on Daniel Chandler's (2017) semiotic framework to analyze the film's visual and auditory codes. Chandler's central argument in *Semiotics: The Basics* is that signs do not carry "transparent" or "universal" meaning, but operate within socially and culturally constructed systems of codes. Chandler's distinction between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (socio-cultural association) is applied to interpret the naturalistic visual style of *Habeebi*, alongside Barthes' (1972) foundational treatment of the same distinction. Marrone (2022) extends semiotic analysis specifically into textual and narrative structure, supporting this study's combined use of semiotic and narrative methods.

Yiheng Zhao's (2025) broader account of semiotics as meaning-making embedded across social existence informs this study's treatment of ritual practice, such as Janazah and Mawlid, as semiotic carriers of communal identity rather than incidental depicted custom.

Broader scholarship on religion, migration, and Indian cinema situates the analysis further. Dwyer (2006) and Bhaskar and Allen (2009) trace how religious identity has structured the visual and narrative conventions of Bombay cinema, providing a comparative backdrop against which Tamil cinema's more limited engagement with Muslim life can be read. Kabir (2010) demonstrates how regional cinema can function as a site of contested cultural desire and representation, a framing relevant to this study's positioning of Habeebi as an act of cultural documentation rather than political controversy. Derkach (2021) surveys representational patterns of Muslims across Indian cinema more broadly, reinforcing the pattern of marginal or stereotyped representation against which this study positions Habeebi. Given the centrality of overseas labor migration to the film's narrative, the study also draws on migration scholarship: Rajan (2016) and Gillespie (2016) document the scale of Gulf migration from India and the mediated forms, including recorded and digital communication, through which migrant families sustain relationships across distance, directly informing the analysis of cassette-based communication in Section 4.2.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design suited to the textual and semiotic analysis of a single filmic case. Rather than testing hypotheses through quantitative content coding, the study treats Habeebi as a cultural text to be read closely against theoretical frameworks of representation and semiotics (Hall, 1997; Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017). This approach is consistent with established methodology in film and media studies for single-case textual analysis (Bordwell & Thompson, 2020; Monaco, 2009).

3.2 Case Selection and Rationale

Habeebi (2023) was purposively selected because it is among the first Tamil-language commercial films to center a Muslim family's domestic and economic life as its primary narrative subject, rather than using Muslim characters as secondary figures or as vehicles for political or thriller plots, as in Vishwaroopam (2013), Maanaadu (2021), Anti-Indian (2023), and FIR (2022). This positions the film as a critical case for examining shifts in the representation of Tamil Muslim identity in mainstream cinema.

3.3 Corpus and Unit of Analysis

The primary corpus is the full theatrical narrative of Habeebi, as released in 2023. The unit of analysis comprises scenes and sequences depicting: (a) religious ritual (Mawlid, Janazah, Khula, daily prayer); (b) gendered decision-making and agency (the characters of Parveen, Nilofer, and

Saliha); (c) migration and long-distance communication (cassette-based correspondence); and (d) intercommunal relationships (Maman–Machan kinship patterns, Iftar practices). Scenes were identified through repeated viewing of the film and selected purposively for inclusion in the analytical corpus where they explicitly depicted a cultural practice, religious ritual, or a shift in gender-role representation across the film's two timeframes.

3.4 Analytical Framework

Three complementary theoretical lenses structure the analysis. Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation as a signifying practice is used to examine how the film constructs Muslim identity through repeated visual and narrative choices rather than a single fixed meaning. Roland Barthes' (1972) distinction between denotation and connotation is applied to recurring visual motifs, including headscarves, gaze, cassette tapes, and curtained shadows. Daniel Chandler's (2017) semiotic framework is used to identify codes operating at the level of costume, gesture, framing, and sound within the film's naturalistic style. Zhao's (2025) broader conception of semiotics as embedded meaning-making informs the treatment of ritual sequences as semiotic carriers of communal identity.

3.5 Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the film was viewed in full multiple times to identify recurring visual, auditory, and narrative motifs. Second, identified scenes were grouped into four thematic categories, corresponding to the four subsections presented in Section 4: narrative structure, semiotic codes, character and cultural representation, and comparative positioning. Third, each category was read against the theoretical framework outlined in Section 3.4 and cross-checked against a comparative corpus of four prior Tamil films (Vishwaroopam, Maanaadu, Anti-Indian, FIR) to assess how Habeebi's treatment of Muslim identity differs from patterns documented in prior literature (Najar, 2024; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Zafar & Amjad, 2015).

3.6 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

As an interpretive study, the analysis is shaped by the researcher's positionality and familiarity with Tamil Muslim cultural practice, which informed the identification of ritual and linguistic references (e.g., Kabil, Safar, Sabr, Mahr, Iddah, Khula) that may not be immediately legible to readers unfamiliar with the community. This familiarity is treated as an analytical resource rather than a bias requiring elimination, consistent with reflexive practice in qualitative cultural analysis. The readings offered in Section 4 should accordingly be understood as one plausible, theoretically grounded interpretation rather than an exhaustive or singularly authoritative account.

3.7 Limitations

This study is limited to textual analysis of a single film and does not include audience reception data, box-office analysis, or interviews with the filmmakers. Claims regarding the film's social impact or reception are therefore interpretive rather than empirically demonstrated, and are flagged

as such where they occur in Section 5. The comparative corpus of four prior films is illustrative rather than exhaustive of Tamil or Indian cinema's representation of Muslim characters, and a larger comparative corpus may surface patterns not captured here.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Narrative Structure and Temporal Framing

Habeebi follows a linear structure organized around two temporal frames, the 1980s and 2023. The narrative centers on Mohammed Yusuf, a weaver from Kadayanallur in Tenkasi district, and his younger brother Syed Abuthahir, whose migration for overseas employment to support the family drives the central conflict. Yusuf remains committed to the handloom weaving trade even as economic change forces its eventual abandonment, a commitment that anchors the film's first half alongside the developing romance between Abuthahir and Nilofer (referred to as "Nilavu") against the backdrop of 1980s domestic and communal Islamic life, including Mawlid rituals. The second half shifts to Abuthahir's married life and uses this period to address women's rights, freedom of expression, and property rights, contrasting Nilofer's constrained position in the 1980s with the comparatively greater legal and social access available to women in the 2023 timeframe, embodied in the character of Parveen. The film's open ending, which withholds a definitive resolution to Abuthahir's fate abroad, functions as a narrative device that resists closure and positions the audience as an active participant in constructing the story's resolution, consistent with an auteur-driven structure in which the director functions as narrator across both timeframes.

The film's title operates as a semiotic choice in its own right: while "Habeebi" conventionally denotes a term of endearment for a spouse in Arabic, the film repurposes the term to signify the experience of overseas labor migration and the recurring cycle of absence and return that structures the family's life.

4.2 Semiotic Analysis: Visual and Auditory Codes

Following Barthes' (1972) distinction between denotation and connotation, several recurring visual motifs in Habeebi carry meaning beyond their literal content. Women's headscarves and the practice of lowering the gaze when encountering men, and men averting their gaze in the presence of women, denote modesty codes but connote broader cultural boundaries around gender interaction that recur throughout the film. The character of Parveen operates as a narrative vehicle for the film's explicit use of textual quotation: blackboard citations attributed to B. R. Ambedkar, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Prophet Muhammad are deployed at specific narrative junctures, aligning social-justice discourse with Islamic teaching.

Auditory semiotics operate similarly. The film represents long-distance spousal communication through recorded cassette messages, read here as a period-specific analogue to contemporary voice-note communication. The recurring shot of a cassette rack functions as a condensed visual index of

fourteen years of marital separation, converting an accumulated object into a marker of elapsed time and emotional cost. A further recurring framing device, the mother speaking from behind a curtain with only her shadow visible, denotes a specific spatial arrangement but connotes the cultural boundary associated with Iddah, the period of seclusion observed by a widow, directly linking a cinematographic choice to religious practice.

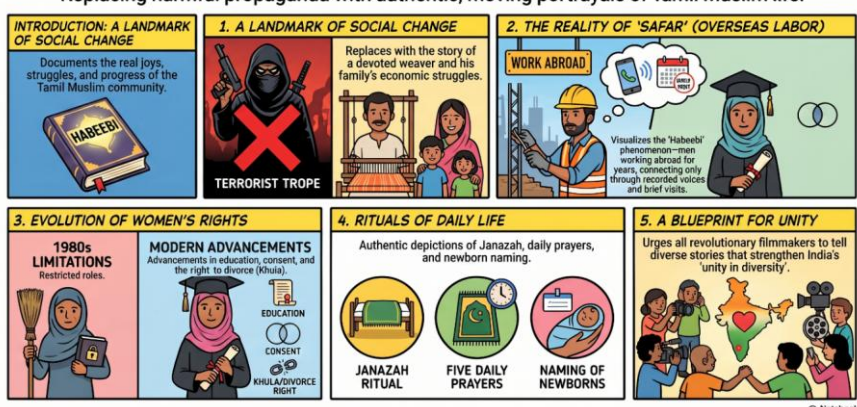
4.3 Character and Cultural Representation

Where prior Tamil and Hindi-language films have typically used mosques and Muslim characters as background setting (Najar, 2024; Zafar & Amjad, 2015), Habeebi foregrounds religious practice as central narrative content. The film depicts the five daily prayers, the Dua, and the recitation of the Shahada into a newborn's ear, and explains terms such as Insha'Allah, Masha'Allah, Alhamdulillah, and Salam alongside more specific concepts including Kabil, Safar, Sabr, Mahr, Iddah, and Khula. It also represents intercommunal relationships, including the Maman–Machan kinship pattern shared between Muslim and non-Muslim villagers and the practice of villagers providing meals for Madrasa students, as embedded features of village life rather than points of friction.

Migration for overseas work (Safar) is represented as a structural feature of rural Muslim family life, with material outcomes including funding for Hajj, weddings, and independent housing. The film also uses the character of Parveen to challenge the convention of parents arranging marriages without a bride's consent, foregrounding the Islamic requirement that a woman's consent be obtained, and linking a woman's right to determine her Mahr to a broader argument about women's education and political awareness in the contemporary timeframe.

Habeebi: Shattering Cinema Stereotypes

Replacing harmful propaganda with authentic, moving portrayals of Tamil Muslim life.



Characterization is organized around three central relationships. The first is the fraternal bond between Yusuf and his younger brother, sustained across three generations in the same ancestral home and culminating in Abuthahir's inability to return for his brother's funeral, which the study reads as a device that captures the emotional cost borne by families of overseas migrant workers. The second is the marital relationship of Saliha, who waits fourteen years for her husband and is positioned by the film in relation to the Sita figure from the Ramayana, while local cultural

convention is retained through the custom of wives addressing husbands as "Machan." The third is the relationship between Abuthahir and Nilofer, developed through restrained, largely unspoken affection. The film also uses the naming of Yusuf's son, Syed Abu Tahir, to dissolve conventional lineage-based identity categories, such as Syed, Sheriff, Pathaan, Lebbai, and Rowther, a narrative device this study reads as asserting the absence of caste stratification within the community as depicted.

The film's treatment of ritual extends to its representation of death: the Janazah sequence, comprising the ceremonial washing of the deceased, the application of sandalwood paste and attar, and the Janazah prayer, is presented in a level of procedural detail rarely depicted in prior Tamil cinema, including in *Anti-Indian*, which raises a related question of religious burial rites but does not depict the ritual itself. The film also represents Islamic mourning conventions, including the guidance that mourning should not extend beyond three days.

4.4 Comparative Analysis with Prior Tamil Films Featuring Muslim Characters

To assess Habeebi's distinctiveness, this study compares it against four prior films featuring Muslim characters or themes. *Vishwaroopam* (2013) engages international politics through a conflict involving Afghan and Indian Muslim characters and depicts shared prayer practices across religious and professional lines, but subordinates cultural representation to a geopolitical thriller plot. *Maanaadu* (2021) centers a Muslim protagonist within a political-assassination plot but is structured primarily as a science-fiction time-loop narrative rather than as an exploration of communal representation. *Anti-Indian* (2023) raises a question of religious burial rites tied to a character's mixed religious upbringing, but treats this as a narrative device serving broader political commentary rather than a sustained cultural study. *FIR* (2022), despite one line challenging the assumption that terrorism is linked to Muslim identity, relies substantially on the trope linking Muslim characters to terrorism.

Read against this comparative set, Habeebi's distinguishing feature is that cultural and religious practice function as the film's primary narrative substance rather than as backdrop to a genre plot. This is consistent with the study's broader argument that Habeebi marks a departure from the pattern, documented in prior scholarship (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Zafar & Amjad, 2015), in which Muslim characters in South Asian commercial cinema are represented through a narrow set of tropes, as threat, spectacle, or subordinate figure, rather than as subjects of sustained cultural representation.

5. CONCLUSION

The release of Habeebi within a media environment shaped by polarized and often stereotypical coverage of Muslim communities invites comparison with the Lumière brothers' 1895 exhibition of an early motion picture, whose audience is reported to have reacted with alarm to the apparent approach of an on-screen train, a response attributed to the unfamiliar representational power of the

medium at the time. This study argues that Habeebi produces an analogous, if more measured, disruption: by representing Tamil Muslim life through sustained cultural specificity rather than through the narrow tropes identified in prior literature on Muslim representation in Indian cinema, the film offers a counter-narrative that is particularly legible to Muslim audiences and to viewers already familiar with Islamic cultural practice, while functioning as an introduction to that culture for audiences unfamiliar with it. The comparative analysis in Section 4.4 suggests that this representational shift need not remain confined to Muslim directors. Films such as *Karuppu* and *Mookuthi Amman* were embraced across audience segments regardless of the religious identity of their creative teams, suggesting that culturally specific narratives are not inherently limited in mainstream appeal. The study accordingly argues for broader authorship of Muslim-centered narratives across the Tamil film industry, beyond directors already working in this space, as a means of extending representational diversity within a national cinema constituted by multiple, overlapping cultural communities. This study is limited to a single-case textual analysis and does not incorporate audience reception or box-office data; its claims regarding the film's social impact accordingly remain interpretive rather than empirically demonstrated. Future research could extend this analysis through audience-reception studies or a comparative analysis across a larger corpus of regional-language films addressing Muslim identity, to test whether the representational shift identified here in a single case reflects a broader pattern across Tamil and other South Asian regional cinemas.

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