Indian cinema, now widely recognized in the West, has attained a highly mainstream profile. Popular Hindi cinema, nicknamed Bollywood, is increasingly popular thanks to the many non-resident Indians in the US and UK stimulating the DVD market and organizing film screenings in mainstream cinemas in major cities. The popularity of Indian films and film stars is growing so rapidly that British film officials recently travelled to Mumbai to discuss working on potential co-productions, fearing that they will soon lose too much ground to the former Hindi cinema. Ironically, popular Hindi cinema was until recently completely ignored by Western film scholars and journalists, who seemed to assume that it could have no relevance for a Western audience. In light of this new interest, we examine one of its main themes, and how its portrayal varies.

So, it may be argued that there is ample scope for subtle and critical depiction of class, gender, religion, community, and society at large – the Indian nation, if you will – in (inter)national blockbusters. Yet, it is mostly in less widely distributed and discussed crossover, offbeat, or art films in which a genuine attempt to comment on present-day society is made, and in which the mainstream tendency to stereotype the Muslim as evil is successfully countered, be it through social realism or intimate parables. Among them, Fareeda Mehta’s debut film Kali Salwaar (The Black Gar- ment, 2001) tries to approach major themes in a more philosophical way. Centered on a Muslim prostitute coming from Muzaffarpur to Mumbai, Kali Salwaar is an almost abstract odyssey into migration, marginalization, and displacement. Fareeda, who was trained by Kumar Sahani, is an admirer of Ghatak and the French cinematographer Ribwak Ghatak, and follows in the footsteps of the famous cinematographer Ritwik Ghatak, who used cinema for social criticism as much as for contemplation and dialogue, like his stu- dents Kumar and Mani Kaul. Her film is based on a story by Saadat Hasan Manto, the leftist Urdu short story writer of the nineteenth century. Almost the entire film was shot in her neighbourhood in Mumbai, focusing on a lively beach. Although the main themes are displacement and the sense of loss in an amorphous metropolis, the setting breathes a striking inti- macy. Sultana, the main character, together with her husband and pimp Kudabaksh, soon find out that life in Mumbai is often beyond their control. With nothing left to make ends meet, Kudabaksh is attracted to fakir mysticism, leaving behind his wife, alone with the desperate wish to find a black gar- ment to wear during Moharram, the Islamic month of mourning. Manto himself, as the author of the story, appears in the film, together with some of the characters from his other short stories, such as the local gangster M’ah- mmad Bhai, Babu Gopinath, and Sug- handi. Some of the characters meet, while others do not. These separate life stories constitute a web of connections in which money and goods, gestures and glances, and desires and fulfillments are exchanged between people in the bustling bazaars of the city. We get a sense of an imagined commu- nity, in which the shared sorrowful memories and experiences of Partition still linger under the surface, occasion- ally shining through the dialogue.

This film is an intimate study of urban life, focusing on details in the way people are dressed, the decoration of the rooms, the colours, the smells, and takes time to consider the personal thoughts of people on the street. It is rich in sym- bolism, for example in the way in which Hindu art is placed in Muslim culture, such as the tree (Krishna’s tree, the philosophical ‘Self’, which balances internal nature with the outside world) painted on the wall of Sultana’s apart- ment. In a daring shot Sultana prepares herself for Moharram, slowly pouring warm water over her naked back and touching her face with the soft satin of the black scarf.

Fareeda captures the poetics of life, in which ornate Urdu and street slang alternate, friendship dispels loneliness, hope turns into despair, yet poverty is realistically harsh. Big Art is sold as small art, characterized by the picture of the Taj Mahal on postcards and the clas- sical tune of Beethoven’s Fur Elise playing in a cheap cigarette lighter; the rich courtesan culture is perpetuated in a cheaply dressed prostitute without money or clients, and references to clas- sical ghazal songs are sung in glossy films. According to Fareeda, Kali Sal- waar does not have a message per se, but deals with exchange of energies. In a silent way it creates ‘contemplative spaces’ in which the audience can pause and let imagination, emotions, and memory room free. Fareeda succeeds in weaving gestures and symbols into the texture of life in such a way that the film is not only about Indian Muslim culture, but about a com- munity of people living around a Mum- bai bazaar, who share to a certain extent their memories, symbols, emotions, and desires. This notion only once gets overt-