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| |  | | --- | |  |  |  |  |  |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | | [Michael H. Hoffheimer](http://home.olemiss.edu/%7Emhoffhei/index2.htm)  is professor of law at the University of Mississippi School of Law and a serious Bollywood fan. Hoffheimer's research interests include legal history, philosophy, criminal law and civil procedure. His publications on popular culture range from Fritz Lang to American blues. His article "Bollywood Law," a study of Hindi films with legal themes, appears in a forthcoming issue of Law Library Journal.   |  | | --- | | **Read other reviews:**  [Internet Movie Database](http://www.us.imdb.com/title/tt0420332/)  [All Movie Guide](http://www.allmovie.com/cg/avg.dll?p=avg&sql=1:316189)  [Readers' comments](http://docs.google.com/user_feedback3.htm#comveer) |       For all its clichés, a commercial hit built on a love affair between Hindu and Muslim reveals how far Bollywood leads Hollywood, where credible Black-white romance is rarely attempted and, perhaps, still not achieved. | |  | | --- | | ***Veer-Zaara*: Love and Law in Bollywood**  by Michael H. Hoffheimer  Yash Chopra's 2004 megahit *Veer-Zaara* combines a "feel good" love story and courtroom drama with running commentary on hot issues like the status of women in South Asia, Indian prisoners in Pakistan, and Hindu-Muslim relations. Virtually ignored by Western legal pundits, *Veer-Zaara* should be required viewing.  Even if you are not Shah Rukh Khan, Rani Mukerji or Preity Zinta fan, the film's social and cultural impact commands attention. *Veer-Zaara* was 2004's top grossing Bollywood film and won Filmfare awards for best film, best lyrics, best story, and best dialog. See [filmfareawards.indiatimes.com](http://filmfareawards.indiatimes.com/) (announcing 2004 film awards). Its song *Main Yahan Hoon* ("I am Here") still ranked as a top ten hit as of mid 2005.  **Lawyer-client interview**  The story opens with a lawyer-client interview set in a Pakistani prison. Novice female Pakistani lawyer Saamiya Siddiqui (Rani Mukerji). meets her court-appointed client Veer Pratap Singh (Shah Rukh Khan). Imprisoned for twenty-two years on his own false confession that he was a spy, Veer reveals he is an Indian citizen.  Flashback from the interviews presents the story of Veer falling in love with a Pakistani citizen, Zaara Hyaat Khan (Preity Zinta), when she visits India to dispose of the remains of her beloved Sikh caregiver. When Veer later follows Zaara to Pakistan, corrupt Pakistani officers in league with Zaara's jealous fiancé coerce him into signing the false confession.  Because Veer forbids Saamiya from contacting Zaara, the lawyer must travel to India to find proof of Veer's true identity. There she (spoiler alert!) discovers Zaara operating a school for girls. Saamiya returns with Zaara. Veer and Zaara embrace in the middle of the courtroom as cameras circle.  **Lawyers and the search for truth**  Saamiya's courtroom triumph does not just reunite lovers and secure Veer's liberty. It proves the competence of women lawyers and vindicates the power of truth to the sneering prosecutor who had insisted, "It's not a lawyer's job to decide what's right or wrong, it's a court's job. A lawyer's job is to win the case under any circumstances. Nothing else."  Saamiya responds humbly, "Well that's the difference between you and me. Your principle is to fight to win and my principle is to fight for the truth."  When he loses, her adversary concedes, "I'm giving up law because you've taught me I'm not fit for this work." His dialogue links truth to communal reconciliation: "I always thought that a country's progress is measured [by] its judicial system. But now I understand that the future of both these countries is in the hands of youngsters like you who do not measure humans as big-small, man-woman, Hindu-Muslin, who don't rake up bitter war memories of 1947, 1965 and 1999 on every pretext, who wish to address the future with the truth and only the truth and there's no stopping a country where truth prevails."  The dialogue's point is reinforced visually. While the prosecutor blesses Saamiya, the camera centers the two lawyers in front of the bench, flanked by two Pakistani flags.  **Religious harmony**  This is Bollywood, so the fantasies favor Hindus. At the border, Saamiya, a devout Muslim, offers Veer vermillion, a traditional Hindu sign of marriage. As Veer and Zaara cross the border, Veer kneels to kiss Indian soil.  Nor is there much room for doubt as to who is to blame for religious intolerance. Veer's adoptive parents extend Zaara a specially warm welcome when they learn she is from Pakistan, and they urge Veer to marry her. But Zaara's father insists on arranging her marriage to the son of a political powerful Muslim.  The film projects a casteless, open-handed Hindu spirit. Sikhs appear repeatedly in peripheral roles where they mediate Muslim and Hindu relations. Zaara' devotion to her Sikh bibi takes her to India. Veer's Punjabi family celebrates Lohri collectively with the village Sikh community.  Over-the-top scenes--from a deathbed request to a helicopter rescue--eclipse subtleties that reward close attention. Broad depictions of Muslims should not blind Western viewers to the film's welcome departure from convention in presenting (most) Muslim characters in a positive light.  The judge, who embodies the state of Pakistan, is fair-minded, diligent, and empathetic. Even the rough Pakistani jailer redeems himself on the witness stand.  **Nostalgia**  The role of law, specifically courtroom legal process, in resolving disputes and restoring family harmony reincarnates 50s law drama formulas, updating pleas for social and penal reform to include advocacy of women's rights, religious tolerance and international cooperation. One of Yash Chopra's heroes is Raj Kapoor, and *Veer-Zaara* pays sentimental tribute to Kapoor's *Awara* (1953), the mother of Hindi law dramas and the greatest lawyer movie ever made.  Chopra's resort to nostalgia includes a soundtrack built on previously unreleased songs by Madan Mohan (1924-1975) with new lyrics by the liberal Muslim poet and activist Javed Akhtar. Even if the music did not scream retro, the marketing did: The DVD and the two-disc CD include recreations of the songs, and the CD adds two bonus songs not pictured in the film. The DVD is available from [NetFlix](http://www.netflix.com/MovieDisplay?movieid=70024184&trkid=181026) , [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B0009XBR5U/qid%3D1123200167/sr%3D11-1/ref%3Dsr%5F11%5F1/103-3653843-2656632) , [Nehaflix](http://store.nehaflix.com/veerzaaradvd.html) and [Yash Raj](http://www1.yashrajfilms.com/).  The film's multi-generational appeal includes the director's son Aditya Chopra as story writer. Aditya himself directed DDLJ, the longest screening hit (500-plus weeks) in Bollywood history.  **Border crossing**  *Veer-Zaara*'s story associates border crossing with both danger and romance. Sometimes border crossings may carry too much romantic weight. You might get the idea that Veer's family loves Zaara more than he does.  Border crossing is also associated with loss of identity. Veer loses his identity in Pakistan. Zaara's entry into India and her later marriage to Veer rupture her identity with her past life and threaten her loss of Muslim identity.  The narrative resolution ambiguously permits a reading either that she assimilates into a Hindu community or that she and Veer preserve their religious differences in a secular community. This ambiguous resolution echoes that of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001) where Kajol's Muslim character appears with mangalsutra, a Hindu sign of marriage.  Veer-Zaara's union, however ambiguous, marks a departure from Bollywood treatments of Hindu-Muslim romances which even in recent years sometimes spelled the death of one lover, the disclosure that the Hindu was really a Muslim--or both. For all its clichés, a commercial hit built on a love affair between Hindu and Muslim reveals how far Bollywood leads Hollywood, where credible Black-white romance is rarely attempted and, perhaps, still not achieved.  Veer-Zaara's romance bristles with ironies that both reinforce and subvert a traditionalist reading. Romantic love, strongly associated with family identity, overcomes religious difference. Love also overcomes patriotic militarism, for Veer does not hesitate to renounce his glam career with the Indian Air Force in order to visit Zaara in Pakistan. The ironies are coded onto the casting. Muslim SRK plays the Hindu, while Hindu Rani Mukerji plays the Muslim.  The plot exhibits a theme that has emerged as a common structural element in Bollywood romances since the 90s. Its happy ending leaves one of the protagonists uncoupled--and without the prospect of immediate coupling. Just as *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* ends with Salman Khan seeking comfort from his dead father while Ajay and Ash pair up, *Veer-Zaara* leaves Saamiya at her father's grave while Veer and Zaara walk into the sunset.  **Lawyers as lovers**  Where *Veer-Zaara* falls short is on the capacity of lawyers to be lovers. There is a tension between the son's screenplay and the father's direction. How can Saamiya help falling in love with Veer?  Ingredients of the story--Veer's captivity, idealism, status as orphan, even his love of Saamiya's mother's cooking--suggest the vulnerability and romantic compatibility of their characters. Moreover, prior screen pairings of SRK and Rani Mukerji suggest the danger of a romance.  The director's pedagogic goal of presenting Saamiya's single-minded devotion to justice keep him from developing any amorous interest between her and her client. In this the film differs from the classical melodramas of the 50s in which Raj Kapoor, Bimal Roy and Mehboob Khan regularly explored romantic ambivalence as a source of social conflict.  Comparing *Veer-Zaara* to Bollywood classics may even support the generalization that while older Hindi melodrama imposed ambiguity on characters who were emotionally indecisive (Devdas) or morally conflicted (Kapoor's eponymous Raj), contemporary Bollywood imposes ambiguity on the plot, permitting a variety of readings to suit different constituencies.  **Law and revenge**  What *Veer-Zaara* loses in emotional edge it gains in didacticism. Like traditional Bollywood law dramas, the courtroom offers Veer a platform to address political concerns. He neither denounces corruption nor demands retribution. Instead he reads a poem expressing wonder at the identity of Muslim and Hindu. The poem's universalist message simultaneously advocates communal harmony in India and promotes international friendship between Pakistan and India.  Since *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844-45), wrongful imprisonment and loss of a beloved have formed the mythic foundations of revenge-genre melodrama. *Veer-Zaara*'s refusal to identify justice with vengeance differentiates the film from most Bollywood and Hollywood fare.  *Veer-Zaara* envisages law as a force capable of surmounting national barriers and resolving personal and international disputes. The film does not present law's incapacity to restore the past as a deficit that requires individual agency.  At a time when escapist fantasy often castes lawyers as demons, *Veer-Zaara* reminds us of alternative traditions where law works to reveal true identities and lawyers serve as reconcilers and healers. The film's commercial success proves the renewed appeal of such fantasy in South Asia.  The author acknowledges the help of Jean S. Hoffheimer in preparing this article.  Posted August 5, 2005 |   **Would you like to comment on this article? Please submit your comments** [**here.**](http://docs.google.com/submit-comments.htm) |  |  | | --- | | [Top of page](#gjdgxs) |  |  | | --- | | [Home](http://docs.google.com/index.html) | [Silver Screen](http://docs.google.com/silver_screen.htm) | [Small Screen](http://docs.google.com/smallscreen/small_screen.htm) | [News & Views](http://docs.google.com/newsnviews.htm) | | |