



Reading National Narratives: A Comparative Analysis of Representational Meanings in Indian and Emirati Action Film Posters

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ABSTRACT

Film posters are multimodal visual artefacts that offer valuable insights into the construction of national narratives, cultural meaning, and ideology. Because film posters blend visual imagery with written language, they offer a layered site of meaning-making suitable for close analysis. Despite the growing body of multimodal research on film posters, comparative studies examining the visual construction of nationhood across Indian and Emirati cinematic contexts remain limited. Employing a qualitative comparative methodology grounded in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), the study examines the posters of *Kesari* (2019) and *Al Kameen* (2021) through the representational metafunction of Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar by examining how participants, processes and circumstances convey national narratives. A detailed analysis reveals that *Kesari* foregrounds individualized heroism rooted in historical memory, cultural heritage, and patriotic sacrifice, whereas *Al Kameen* emphasizes collective resilience, military coordination, and national service. The findings highlight the importance of cultural context in shaping multimodal representations of nationhood and national narratives across different cinematic traditions.



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Introduction

Multimodal texts are gaining wider prominence in research communities due to their multifaceted role in communication. These texts function as sites where meaning is actively constructed through the interaction of visual and verbal modes. Relying not only on language for their communicative intent, these semiotic resources deploy a combination of elements like color, image, spatial arrangement and typography. Through the integration of visual elements, they hold the power to convey ideas that are complex, affective and culturally situated. Barthes, highlighting the growing dominance of visuality in constructing meaning, rightly remarks ‘the image no longer illustrates the words; it is now the words which, structurally are parasitic on the image’ (1997, p.25).

This interaction of the visual and verbal is exemplified most effectively in film posters which are one of the most pervasive forms of visual print media. Their simultaneous function as promotional tools and cultural artefacts persuade, inform and shape audience perception through a strategized blend of semiotic cues. Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) offers a comprehensive approach to studying such layered texts by focusing on how the convergence of different modes leads to meaning construction. The framework of Visual Grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) is central to this approach. It extends Halliday’s linguistic metafunctions to the visual domain, demonstrating how images are just like language in organizing meaning through representational, interpersonal and compositional choices.

Drawing on this framework, the present study centers specifically on the representational metafunction, concerning itself with how participants, processes, and settings are visually arranged to depict experiences, actions and ideas. The analysis investigates how representations construct national narratives across two distinct sociocultural contexts through a multimodal examination of two action film posters, one from India and another from the UAE.

Literature Review

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) views meaning as emerging through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources rather than through language alone. Grounded in Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978, 1994), this perspective has been extended to visual communication by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), who proposed that images realize representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings in ways analogous to language. Their framework has become one of the most influential approaches for examining how

visual texts communicate social and cultural meanings. O’Toole (1994) applied Halliday’s framework to art and architecture. Kress and van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar has been widely applied to diverse contexts including advertisements (Guo & Feng, 2017; Bedi (2019a), and movie posters (Chen & Gao, 2014; Ma, 2024).

Film posters have increasingly been examined as multimodal texts that simultaneously promote cinematic products and communicate cultural values. Scholars have shown that visual and verbal resources in posters work together to construct narratives of nationhood, power, emotion, and ideology. Studies employing Visual Grammar have demonstrated how composition, color, gaze, and symbolic elements shape audience interpretations and reinforce broader social meanings. Alharbi (2026) extends this line of inquiry by applying Kress and van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar to Saudi film posters in order to examine how national identity is visually constructed in contemporary cinematic culture. The study demonstrates that representational, interactive, and compositional meanings collectively contribute to the articulation of national identity through gender representation, spatial organization, and symbolic heritage elements. It further highlights a shift in contemporary poster design from singular, unified identity constructions toward more diversified and socially differentiated representations shaped by ongoing socio-cultural transformation. Ma (2024) conducted a detailed multimodal stylistic analysis of the poster for the movie *Dune*, to study the relationship between different modes in meaning construction. Peng (2022) applied Kress and van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar to the Chinese film poster *Hi, Mom* and demonstrated how representational, interactive, and compositional resources interact to communicate thematic and cultural meanings. The study showed that film posters function not only as promotional materials but also as multimodal texts through which broader social values and ideological messages are conveyed. Bedi (2019b) analyzed the poster of the film *The Reader*, to reveal the interplay of semiotic tools to understand meaning. Such findings reinforce the suitability of Visual Grammar for examining the cultural and national meanings embedded in cinematic promotional discourse.

Although previous studies have extensively applied Kress and van Leeuwen’s Visual Grammar to film posters and have demonstrated how such texts construct meanings related to identity, ideology, and culture (e.g., Peng, 2022; Alharbi, 2026), most existing research remains confined to single cultural or national contexts. Comparative studies that examine how similar cinematic genres construct national narratives across different cultural and

geopolitical settings remain limited. In particular, there is a lack of research comparing Indian and Emirati action film posters, despite both industries using strong visual symbolism to communicate narratives of patriotism, sacrifice, and nationhood. This study addresses this gap by conducting a cross-cultural comparative analysis of representational meanings in selected Indian and Emirati action film posters.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how representational meanings are constructed in selected Indian and Emirati action film posters through the framework of Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar. By focusing on participants, processes, and circumstances, the study seeks to explore how visual resources contribute to the construction of national narratives and how representations of heroism and patriotism differ across the two cultural contexts. To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research questions:

How are participants, processes, and circumstances represented in the selected posters?

How do these representational choices construct national narratives?

In what ways do the two posters differ in their visual construction of heroism, patriotism and national identity?

Research Methodology

This investigation employs a qualitative, comparative methodology informed by Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA). The data for the study consists of two posters: Kesari (2019) from India and Al Kameen (2021) from the UAE. The posters were selected through purposive sampling based on their cultural relevance, national significance, ideological visibility and semiotic richness.

The selected films are particularly suitable for comparison because both belong to the action genre and foreground themes of patriotism, military service, sacrifice, and national identity. At the same time, they emerge from distinct cultural and historical contexts,

allowing for an examination of how similar themes are visually represented through different national perspectives. Their strong reliance on symbolic imagery, military iconography, and national narratives makes them appropriate texts for multimodal analysis.

The analysis was conducted through close visual examination of each poster using the representational metafunction proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). Particular attention was paid to the identification of participants, narrative and conceptual processes, and circumstantial elements. Participants were examined in terms of their visual prominence, symbolic significance, and relationship to other represented elements. Narrative processes were analysed through vectors, actions, reactions, and implied movement, while conceptual processes were explored through symbolic and classificatory structures. Circumstantial elements such as setting, objects, environment, and means were also considered in order to understand how they contributed to the construction of meaning.

The study focuses specifically on representational meaning and does not attempt a comprehensive analysis of all three metafunctions of Visual Grammar. While occasional references to compositional or interactive features are made where they support interpretation, the primary concern remains the representation of participants, processes, and circumstances. Given the limited sample of two posters, the findings are intended to provide an in-depth qualitative interpretation rather than a generalizable account of action-film posters across either national cinema.

Findings

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p.45), "Representations are used to represent objects and their relations in a world outside the representational system." In the selected posters, representational choices function as ideological resources through which competing visions of nationhood are visually encoded. Rather than merely depicting heroism or military action, both posters construct distinct narrative logics of national meaning shaped by cultural memory, institutional values, and cinematic conventions.

Representational Meanings in Kesari (2019)

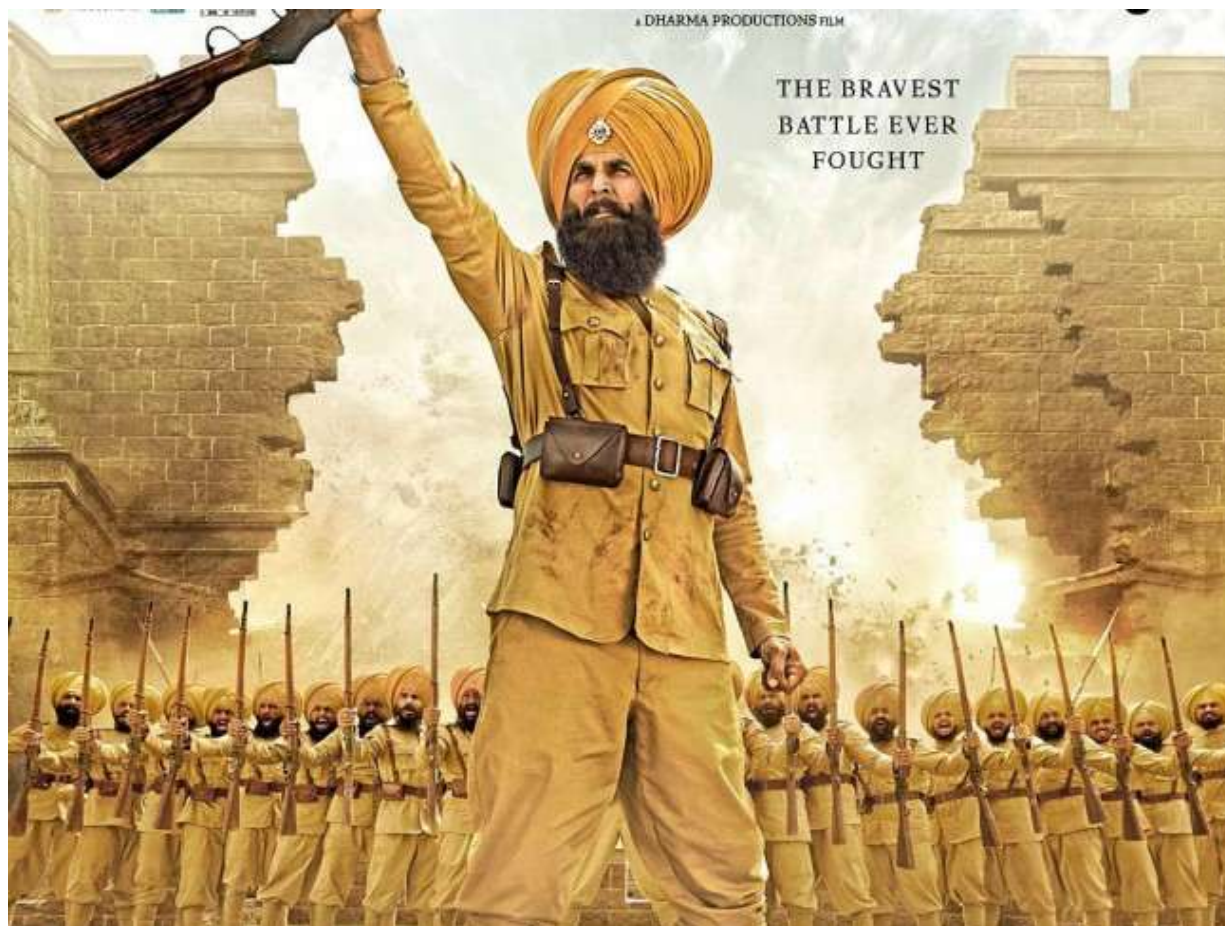


Figure 1. Poster of the film *Kesari* (2019) © Dharma Productions.

The poster constructs its narrative through a series of prominent action processes, primarily actional vectors where military readiness and heroic commitment are accentuated. At the foregrounded position of the frame is depicted a single dominant participant, a turbaned Sikh soldier, clad in traditional military attire. The protagonist is identified as an Actor in an unfolding action narrative. He has a forward leaning stance and a diagonally positioned weapon which forms a clear vector aimed towards an unseen enemy conveying a sense of imminent movement and purposeful aggression. This representation frames him as a defender of the homeland engaged in a transactional process. He has a focused gaze that functions as a reactionary process and is directed not at the viewer but into the distance, signaling vigilance and steadfast resolve. The interplay of these narrative processes constructs the protagonist as a figure motivated by collective duty rather than personal gain. Such representations are consistent with patriotic narratives frequently found in war films, where military service and sacrifice are associated with commitment to the nation. The Sikh soldier in the poster hence aligns with the broader narratives of sacrifice and patriotic valor.

Representational meaning is further shaped by the configuration of the participants within the frame.

Visually anchored through the distinctive Sikh turban, beard and regimental attire, the central figure functions as a Carrier of cultural and national identity. These attributes function not only as historical markers but also as symbolic resources through which cultural identity is communicated. The figure draws upon a long-standing cultural representation of Sikh soldiers as symbols of courage, military service, and sacrifice, particularly within narratives surrounding the Battle of Saragarhi and Indian military history. The regiment standing behind him is the secondary participant in the visual who creates a sense of collective ethos and solidarity. Their uniformity minimizes individual distinctions and foregrounds collective cohesion. As a result, the regiment functions as a visual representation of shared purpose and collective sacrifice. The poster fuses cultural identity with national identity by foregrounding a culturally specific community as the embodiment of national defense.

Circumstantial elements in the poster like setting and environment further contribute to the encoding of national narratives. The presence of the fort in the background and the arid landscape place the protagonist within a historically recognized battlefield associated with the Battle of Saragarhi. This circumstance of location situates the image in a territorial defense site placing national narrative in a specific historical and geographical memory. The earthy color palette visually

associates the soldiers with the landscape they defend, reinforcing a symbolic relationship between territory, belonging, and national identity. Weapons and military gear are the circumstances of means which position the soldiers within a tradition of armed resistance and valorized historical warfare. It is through these circumstantial resources that the poster ties national ethos to heritage, landscape and collective memory.

Conceptual processes in the poster are invoked through both symbolic and analytical structures. The saffron/orange color palette symbolizes values such as courage, sacrifice, and renunciation, which have historically been associated with both Sikh and broader Indian cultural traditions. The color also resonates with the saffron band of the Indian national flag, where it is officially associated with courage and selflessness, thereby linking cultural symbolism with national ideology. An analytical hierarchical structure is employed in the poster where the protagonist is portrayed at an exaggerated scale relative to the regiment behind him. This size differentiation elevates the central figure placing him at the representational focal point and

painting him as part leader, part symbolic hero, while the smaller figures complete the whole. This visual hierarchy encoding an ideological message about the relationship between individual leadership and collective action, reinforces national narratives in which exceptional individuals inspire communal unity and resilience.

Beyond color symbolism, the poster gains cultural specificity and concreteness from the traditional Sikh attire and historical weaponry, which ground it in real histories, traditions and communities. The Sikh regiment encoding a cultural narrative of India's identity and Sikh bravery, presents a symbol of the Indian national spirit. Taken together, the interaction between these symbolic choices projects a cohesive national vision that draws heavily on cultural heritage and patriotic duty.

Thus, the representational choices craft a visually pervasive message that does much more than just promoting the film's historical narrative. It taps into the collective memory and reconnects the viewer to a familiar narrative of courage.

Representational Meanings in Al Kameen (2021)



Figure 2. Poster of the film Al Kameen (2021) © Image Nation Abu Dhabi.

Dynamic narrative processes dominate the visual composition in the poster of Al Kameen. These processes

function to highlight danger, crisis and military intervention through foregrounding. The composition is dominated by a military vehicle engulfed in flames, moving through the desert terrain. This vehicle, the central participant, functions as the primary Actor as well as a Symbol in an unfolding high-stakes military narrative. The fire and smoke which surround the vehicle transform this inanimate armored vehicle into an animate one by forming clear action vectors that signify implied action, danger and destruction. These narrative processes situate the poster within a moment of visible danger and uncertainty. The depiction of military personnel operating amid destruction and threat contributes to representations of courage, duty, and resilience. Rather than depicting military personnel as invulnerable, the poster emphasizes their willingness to operate under extreme conditions. This representational choice contributes to a narrative of sacrifice and professional commitment.

The selection and arrangement of participants further shape representational meanings. In the poster emphasis is placed on material and environmental participants rather than on one human protagonist. The burning vehicle does more than signal conflict; it functions as a symbolic participant around which ideas of danger, vulnerability, and resilience are organized. Positioned at the center of the composition and visually dominating the frame, the burning vehicle operates as a symbolic participant around which the narrative of danger and survival is organized. Its damaged condition may be interpreted as a visual metaphor for national vulnerability, while the continued military presence suggests resilience and perseverance in the face of threat. It represents the idea that nation's protection comes at a cost, through sacrifice. The soldiers in the scene are less visually dominant and hence are the secondary participants who reinforce teamwork, solidarity and coordinated military action rather than individual heroism. Professionalism, preparedness and strategic capability are underlined through the presence of military equipment, weapons and tactical gear. Taken together, these participants emphasize military professionalism, coordinated action, and collective responsibility, thereby

contributing to a representation of heroism grounded in teamwork rather than individual achievement.

Circumstantial elements like the desert environment and the presence of fire play a crucial role in encoding national narratives. The desert setting functions as a culturally recognizable marker of Emirati geography and identity, situating the military mission within a landscape that is closely associated with the nation's historical and environmental heritage. By placing the military forces within the homeland, this circumstance of location reinforces the narratives of territorial defense. The intensity of the challenge and the extreme conditions of the mission are highlighted through the flames, swirling dust and rising smoke which function as circumstances of manner. The military vehicles and weapons function as circumstances of means underscoring technological capability and strategic readiness. Using these circumstantial elements, the poster paves the way for an Emirati identity that is resilient, courageous and committed to a land that is itself the stage for valorous action.

Representational meaning is further strengthened by compositional and symbolic choices. At the center of the frame, a flame-engulfed vehicle commands viewers' attention immediately, drawing them into an atmosphere of threat. A subtle visual tension conveying both the urgency and the gravity of the mission is depicted using the color palette that combines muted earthly tones with smoke and flames. The poster adopts a visually realistic style that foregrounds military equipment, environmental detail, and operational danger. This realism enhances the credibility of the depicted mission and supports the broader narrative of military professionalism and national service. Collectively, these visual choices reinforce the film's emphasis on military solidarity, vigilance, and national service.

Together, these representational choices construct an Emirati narrative shaped by resilience, sacrifice, and devotion to the homeland.

Discussion

Table 1. Comparative Representational Features of Kesari and Al Kameen

Analytic Feature	Kesari	Al Kameen
Central Participant	A Sikh soldier occupies the foreground and serves as the focal point of the composition	A burning military vehicle and soldiers collectively occupy the visual space
Representation of Heroism	Heroism is individualized and centered on a single courageous figure	Heroism is collective and constructed through teamwork and shared sacrifice.

Setting	Historical battlefield associated with the Battle of Saragarhi	Contemporary desert environment reflecting modern military operations.
Construction of National narratives	Linked to cultural memory, historical legacy, and sacrifice	Linked to military resilience, unity, and national service
Dominant Ideological Meaning	Emphasizes sacrifice, courage, patriotism, and resistance	Emphasizes duty, endurance, resilience, and collective responsibility
Representational Strategy	Focus on an individual protagonist as a symbol of national pride	Focus on a group effort where national strength emerges from collective action
Emotional Appeal	Evokes admiration for personal bravery and sacrifice	Evokes respect for teamwork, perseverance, and national commitment

Detailed comparison, as shown in Table 1, reveals how representational meaning is mobilized differently in the two posters under scrutiny to encode distinct national, cultural and ideological narratives. The poster of Kesari anchors its representational meaning in a human figure, the Sikh soldier, who embodies individualized heroism rooted in historical memory, cultural identity and patriotic sacrifice. Personal agency is foregrounded through narrative processes that encode nationhood through an iconic warrior figure who stands at the intersection of cultural pride and national defense. Yet, the regiment positioned behind him is a crucial representational resource which signals collective discipline and a cohesive military identity. Therefore, the poster blends individual heroism and collective action depicting the central figure as an embodiment of a united force. In contrast, Al Kameen disperses its representational focus evenly across all participants, minimizing the individual and glorifying the collective mission and the volatile environment in which it unfolds. The burning vehicle as the actor symbolizes national vulnerability and endurance as opposed to personalized heroism. Human participants are integrated into a broader operational system while representational meaning emerges through crisis, teamwork and tactical coordination. This produces a shift in the narrative whereby national narratives are articulated through collective endurance and strategic efficiency instead of through a merger of leadership and communal solidarity.

Distinct national narratives are further constructed through the setting presented in the two posters. In Kesari, the battlefield functions as a site of historical remembrance, linking contemporary national identity to a celebrated past of sacrifice and resistance. In contrast, Al Kameen situates nationhood within a present-day military context, emphasizing ongoing vigilance, collective responsibility, and resilience. Kesari relies on commemorative memory, whereas Al Kameen shifts

toward contemporary military presence and ongoing operational realism. In Kesari, identity is tied to a specific historical event and a sacred cultural memory where soldiers are embedded within a landscape of heritage and communal pride. In Al Kameen, identity is grounded in the contemporary Emirati desert with a harsh terrain and imminent danger looming large. This presents the nation as being forged through resilience, modern military preparedness and real-time sacrifice. While Kesari's vision of national history is mythic and commemorative, that of Al Kameen is ongoing, resilient and sacrificial.

Conclusively, the two posters employ narrative processes to construct nationhood but differ in their realization of participants and circumstances. The posters are an example of how choices shape culturally distinct visions of heroism, where one vision is rooted in historical valorization and the other rooted in collective action and the realities of modern warfare.

Conclusion

Taken together, the posters of Kesari and Al Kameen demonstrate how action-film posters function as cultural texts. They exhibit representational choices that portray national identity, heroism and mutual responsibility. Kesari foregrounds a historically rooted paradigm of courage that blends individual prominence with the unmistakable presence of a united regiment. At the same time, Al Kameen witnesses the construction of its narrative through the stark materiality of crisis, as heroism emerges from coordinated military action in the face of tremendous threat. Promoting a sense of nationhood and patriotism through imagery of sacrifice, shared responsibility, and shared duty, both posters function through the adoption of distinct visual strategies. These posters demonstrate how visual media participates in the construction of national narratives by transforming abstract ideals of nationhood into culturally resonant stories of sacrifice, courage, resilience, and

collective responsibility. Through their representational choices, Kesari and Al Kameen narrate distinct visions of the nation that reflect the historical, cultural, and ideological priorities of their respective societies. Thus, the present research demonstrates the usefulness of Kress and Van Leeuwen's framework for examining the importance of cultural context in shaping representational strategies across film industries.

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