

Selectively Queer(some) : Navigating the Themes of LGBTQ Presented through a few Popular Hindi Movies

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Abstract : “There is no reason to assume that gender also ought to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereas gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*). The emergence of the discussion on LGBTQA+ in the recent years has made its presence felt in every sphere, even mainstream cinema. Speaking of mainstream cinema, boasting of a massive fan following since time immemorial is Bollywood. If we begin by tracing the trajectory of mainstream Bollywood cinema, the overwhelming prominence of heteronormativity cannot be denied at any cost. The dominant cult of this inevitably existent form finds its footprints in ‘most of mainstream Bollywood’ for that matter. Earlier, the main character demography of a classic Bollywood film comprised a hero and heroine showcasing heterosexual and heteroromantic characteristic traits only. However, the recent discussions have inflicted some standardization in regard to the portrayal of LGBTQA+ of which we saw in films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan*, *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* and *Badhaai Do*. The dexterity is still that of a novice and the trials and tribulations are many, but this still feels like a breath of fresh air going by the box office numbers. Withstanding that, the otherwise continuous problematic portrayal of LGBTQA+ throughout the years of mainstream Bollywood cinema laden with sexism, racism and jokes directly targeted at the queer community, makes one gap and wonder if this misrepresentation has been deliberately done on purpose. Both veracity of their portrayal and the acute stigma surrounding their character graph is noticeable. In this paper, we will look into the course of mainstream Bollywood cinema and discuss how their queer representation has shaped over the years.

Keywords : Queer; cinema; bollywood; LGBTQA+; movies.

Representation is a term which is often given the decisive key these days, especially because it plays the role of a chief medium in various fields,

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visual media being one of them. It has the ability to make and break narratives, and is often seen as a very important tool in building up discourses. Angela Chen has rightly observed, 'Representation not only reflects, but actually changes reality' (33). An appropriate representation with all its underlying nuances can definitely opt for a powerful change in the societal norms. The stereotypical representation of the queer community in Bollywood down the years of its regime has definitely sparked some verbal debates all across the world. At times, some comparison is even made with all other forms of cinema because the exquisite delineation of other forms of cinema is very much noticeable in this very respect. So, if Bollywood has to alternate its notoriety, it has to go through some metamorphosis. The process is believed to have begun with some categorical depiction through the past few years. Even the recent release of *Ajeeb Dastaans* (2021), an anthology consisting of four stories, has been lauded for its insightfulness as in the tale of *Geeli Pucchhi*.

Research Methodology

A brief content analysis through the course of a few films from the year of 1974 to the year of 2020 has been carried out. Content analysis is a research method where documents and artifacts of various formats are studied. It determines the presence of certain words, themes and concepts in a given qualitative data.

Content analysis is mainly used for the purpose of studying patterns in a very systematic manner. The films which have been selected are *Badnam Basti* (1971), *Bomgay* (1996), *Daayra*, *the Square Circle* (1996), *Fire* (1998), *Dostana* (2008), *Student of the Year* (2012), *Bombay Talkies* (2013), *Aligarh* (2015), *Kapoor & Sons* (2016), *Ek Laadki ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), *Shubh Mangal*, *Zyada Savdhaan* (2020), *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2022) and *Badhaai Do* (2022). The representation of queer characters in these films, and how Bollywood's categorization has taken a shape from the formative stages with taking these few films as an example, have been the main objective of this paper.

Conceptual Framework

Gender Studies and Queer theory subtly explore the very many issues concerning sexuality, power and that of the marginalized population in literature and culture. They range over the manner in which sexuality is

discussed and represented altogether. Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary approach to study gender and intersection of gender with other categories such as ethnicity, nationality, sexuality etc., whereas queer theory is a vital part in the field of queer studies. Queer theory firmly rejects the concept of heteronormativity that has been the result of the patriarchal mindset embedded down through ages. It challenges the limitations of binary gender roles, and believes in a space where gender cannot be crammed in the limitedness of a particular area. It promulgates the belief of a broader space, when it comes to gender and sexuality. Thus, a critic working in queer theory or gender studies will be uncomfortable with the binary oppositional relationship which has been established by many scholars between masculine and feminine. Michel Foucault has aptly observed :

Sexuality is a part of our behavior. It is a part of our world freedom. Sexuality is something that we ourselves create. It is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it is a possibility for creative life. It is not enough to affirm that we are gay, we must also create a gay life. (97)

Analysis

Following the days witnessing the powerful surge of the radical phenomenon called Bollywood cinema, the portrayal of LGBTQA+ hasn't seen much linearity in terms of character growth and development simultaneously. The characters were mostly introduced onscreen for inducing laughter in the audience, and for acting as a companion to the male or female lead. Withstanding this fact, a few exceptions have also been noticed in this regard.

The first Indian film depicting a homosexual relationship is considered to be *Badnam Basti* (1971). The said film which was thought to have been lost, has finally been found in an archive in Berlin in the year of 2019. The movie shares its name with a Hindi novel written by Kamaleshwar Prasad Saxena. Set in a small city called Manipur in Uttar

Pradesh, this movie explores the story of a bus driver and a bandit named Sarnam Singh. He eventually gets torn by the multifaceted nature of his desire of having to choose between two individuals: Shivraj, a boy whom he had hired and Bhansari, a woman he had saved from another dacoit. The film finally ends with Shivraj getting married to Kamla in the hope of returning to a life that was considered to be normal by societal standards, and Sarnam Singh bringing Bansari and her infant to his home. Despite being edited by Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Prem Kapoor, this film didn't see much box office success. It was given an A certification for various reasons, its portrayal of dacoity and unlawful activities being one of the many profound causes deliberately present. That led to limiting its reach among the mainstream audience.

Bomgay (1996) is an anthological film consisting of six segments namely *Opinions*, *Underground*, *Lefty*, *E unema no*, *Bomgay* and *Friends*. Each of these six segments are based on a poem by an Indian writer and gay-rights activist Ramachandrapurapu Raj Rao. However, this film ceases to adhere to the traditional limitations of the film making process. The length of the film is around twelve minutes only, and the guerrilla style is strongly felt as dominant. *Bomgay* wasn't released on a wide commercial scale within India.

Directed by Amol Palekar, *Daayra, the Square Circle* (1996) explores a variety of themes which underly human existence. Among its very many themes predominant throughout, it unravels a forbidden love affair between a cross dresser dancer and gang raped woman. This film is a part of Palekar's trilogy on sexuality.

Fire (1998) is a movie which is based on Ismat Chughtai's short story "Lihaaf". This powerful narrative brings out the tale of two women Sita and Radha who choose to become each other's solace in a society which has been unsympathetically averse to their overall existence. This film is the first installment of the Elements trilogy, which is succeeded with films like *Earth* and *Water*.

While the 90's tried setting some deft examples with regard to portrayal of queer representation, most of the early 2000s saw a recurrent rise of the theme of stigmatizing LGBTQA+ with marking them as 'laughing stock' or in simpler terms, bearers of crude practical jokes. From making them act like vamps and vouching for the main lead's

attention to adding them for comic relief only, the era has seen a tremendous rise of this painstaking course. Even today, *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) can't be remembered without the painstakingly famous depiction of Kantabai and her utter homophobia.

Featuring popular faces like Abhishek Bachchan, John Abraham and Priyanka Chopra in the lead roles and produced by Dharma Productions, *Dostana* (2008) had the potentiality of depicting a steady lead in the character graphs. What somehow deviates from the whole plot point are the crude humorous jokes and there is even a song named *Maa ka Laadla Bigar Gaya* for that matter, where a child is believed to have gone spoilt because of his affinity to owning his own sexuality. In a country where people are inherently dubious in portraying the character depths of LGBTQA+ on screen, this could have been a remarkable attempt at exposing the ridiculous obscurity widespread. Now, if *Dostana* has manipulated the idea of homophobia existent in common households under the veiled threat of 'bromance', chances are it has made quite an attempt nonetheless.

The very popular young adult saga *Student of the Year* (2012) provides another example of the inexact depiction that Bollywood is infamously famous for. The principal, a homosexual man is shown crushing over the sports teacher, and also displays unnecessarily exaggerated characteristic traits for the same. The entire film showcases him to be bluntly going after his crush in a quite forceful manner, in an attempt to alleviate humorous gaps in between.

Seeing the vanguard of anthologies on various platforms in the recent years, *Bombay Talkies* (2013) is undoubtedly their true precedent in every respect. Consisting of four films, each directed by prolific filmmakers like Karan Johar, Dibakar Banerjee, Zoya Akhtar and Anurag Kashyap, this movie was released to celebrate a century of Hindi cinema and to mark a new era of modern films in the making. The first of the lot is *Ajeeb Dastan Hai Ye*, which gives an overview of the marital crisis that emerge of having to live within a closet even as years pass by. The third one narrates the story of a twelve-year-old forced to live within the barriers of conventionality. Whereas each of these narratives substantially lives up to the tale it has to tell, it manages to shed some amount of light to those issues which generally get whispers if seen or heard otherwise.

A consummative example of the unembellished depiction is *Aligarh* (2015), a film which has been directed by Hansal Mehta, and the lead roles feature Manoj Bajpayee and Rajkumar Rao. The setting of this movie is in Aligarh, a city in the realms of Uttar Pradesh. It delves deep into the story of Ramchandra Siras, a professor of Marathi at Aligarh Muslim University. With various trials and tribulations coming into the forefront due to an incident of invasion of privacy, this biopic centers around a man whose life have taken an upheaval all for an overnight cause. From winning critical acclaim from various parts of the world to Manoj Bajpayee bagging a Filmfare Critic Award, *Aligarh* has been a success regardless of having seen a major drop in the box office numbers.

Kapoor & Sons (2016) traverses through the sensitization of failed relationships in a typical canon with two brothers being at the sides of them. It skillfully deals with subjects like childhood trauma, obnoxious adultery, and the mother being implacable when she discovers her child's sexuality. The imperceptible nature of the mother can be perfectly described where she expresses her resentment at her son's homosexuality by using the following words, '*Is this your girl friend? Chee*'. But then, this reaction is completely steeped in the prejudiced notions that the mother had held to be credible, and she being a recipient of that through the generations at large. However, his sibling who was seemingly at loggerheads with him, sits down and eventually accepts him for finally coming out of the closet. The two generation's initial approaches finally culminate in a thorough going process to a favorable reception at the receiving end of it.

If the recent years are to be taken into accountability, Bollywood has seen some definitive upliftment as far as the portrayal of queer characters are concerned. The narratives do have some demanding difficulties in them, but if the previous years of deplorable representational techniques are to be taken a hold of, as in with films like *Partner* (2007), *Bol Bachchan* (2012), *Humshakals* (2014), then the considerable years have seen some improvement in this facet. With the plethora of films exploring gender fluidity worldwide, Bollywood still has a noteworthy feat to accomplish, if it has to gain some visibility in this aspect. But the following films suggest that some initiatives have begun in order to mark a fresh beginning in this very field already.

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) is a Bollywood family drama which is also held to be another coming of age drama, as defined by the makers. This film unfolds the advancing events in the life of Sweety Chaudhury, a girl who wishes to break out from her closeted identity and makes attempts for the same by trying to come out to her traditional family. *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* brings forth a Bollywood dramedy with all its ostentatious dialogues in display like, 'True love kerastemein koi na koi siyappahota hi hotahai, agar na ho toh love story mein feel kaisia ayegi...' Sahil, the male lead falls head over heels in love with Sweety, only for everyone to finally come in terms with the fact that Sweety is in love with Kuhu and is in a relationship with her already.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020) is another typical instance of Bollywood, in all its true colors, willingly shunning away the heteronormative concept of romance. It stars Ayushmaan Khurrana and Jeetendra Kumar in the lead roles. There is a very popular sequence in the song 'Mere liye tum kaafi ho' (You are enough for me), where Ayushmaan Khurrana is sitting at the back of the bike which Jeetendra Kumar is driving. The bike comes to halt at a signal, with another bike beside them. A girl is seen holding on to a boy resting her head on his back, and she smiles at Ayushmaan Khurrana. Ayushmaan Khurrana smiles back, and does the same. This unornamented scene of displaying affection can be juxtaposed with another scene, where the two of them runs behind a moving train, with Jeetendra Kumar climbing onto the compartment first, and giving out his hand for Ayushmaan Khurrana to hold and get on the train. This scene is a perfect parody of the very famed frame from *DilwaleDulhaniya Le Jayenge's* climax where Simran can be seen rushing and Raj giving his hand out for Simran to hold and climb onto the train's corridor. There is even a moment in *ShubhMangalZyadaSaavdhan*, where AyushmaanKhurrana is seen donning a Pride flag as a Superman's cape. Though this movie has its own share of some faulty errors in the backdrop, it does have some scenes of momentous significance. Special mention to the scene where an inquisitive uncle goes on with his garrulous ramblings in front of Ayushmaan Khurrana, 'Beta, tumne kab decide kiyaki tum gay banoge?' (Son, when did you decide that you would become gay?). Ayushmaan Khurrana retorts by saying, 'Aapne kab decide kiyaki aap gay nahibanoge?' (When did you decide that you would not become gay?)

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021) is a story mostly focused on the love story between Manu and Maanvi, and the complications that

arise in the mind of Manu when he discovers that Maanvi is a transwoman. Disgusted by the fact that he has had a love affair with a woman who was born as a man, Manu desperately seeks for revenge. After a while, a realization eventually dawns upon him that Maanvi is actually a woman who was born in a male body, and she simply went ahead and rectified this by surgery. This very realization was the result of Manu's attempts to educate himself on transwomen by watching videos, interaction and counselling. Manu finally unites with Maanvi at the end. This film also sheds a major light on the societal repercussions that arise whenever an effort is made to defy the binary gender roles, which the society skillfully instills in an individual when they are born.

Badhaai Do (2022) implicitly compasses over the relationships that surface out of the two gendered identities who try to build up their own space out of the heteronormative framework both of them are forced to embrace. They take up or at least pretend to take up the roles that have been imposed upon them by the societal norms, refusing to give up their own individualistic quest simultaneously. From concealing the identities of their lovers to all of them reuniting for a cause at the end of the movie, *Badhaai Do* gives a brief overview of the multiple complexities that arise out of intricate human relationships, and the precision with which the society continues to endorse this superiority of one over the other. As a result of which an ongoing battle takes place within the individual, and the urge to resist the definitive along with the pretensions of adherence taking place. 'Agar aapaur hum apasmeinshaadikar le toh, humariPariwarokichikchik band ho jayegi... Phir hum aaraaparam she rehsaktehai like room-mates.' (If you and I can get married, then the wrangle of our families will definitely come to an end. Both of us will be able to live peacefully like room-mates). Here, marriage seems more like an agreement that two people decide to take up as a shelter to hide in and live on as their respective individualistic selves. The dawning of the realization that the other person is going through the same turmoil as them occurs in these very lines with them going as, 'Jaiseapka koi interest nahihailadkomein, Par humarahai...' (Just like you don't have any interest towards boys, but I do)

Conclusion

The advent of these films in Bollywood do mark for a new beginning, where the days of problematic portrayal has finally supposed to have

terminated at last. Each of these films have their fair share of flaws, but that isn't overblown to an extent that might seem to be ostentatious. Content always demands an extra edge over the box office numbers. Even films like *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) are making their prominence felt now. But, if the box office numbers are to be calculated back at the time it released, it will definitely not be suggestive of the scenario that were to follow and is relevant today. However, some misleading movies still do make their presence felt once in a while, like *Housefull 4* did a while back. The abominable outlook of this movie is supplemented with dialogues like, 'Is ne gender ka tender nahibhara' (he hasn't filled a tender for his gender). The blatant homophobic tendency displayed in this film is horrendous to say the least. Quite a similar outlook has been seen in *Laxmii* (2020) too. The vile stereotypical sketch which is given to the transgender community in this movie is terrible to say the least. With the landmark decision and legalization of consensual homosexual intercourse by reading down of section 377 of the Indian penal code in 2018 and strong movements supporting the LGBTQA+ rights at the same time, people have begun accepting same sex relationships. Following this very path, if films like *Housefull 4* continues to make their detestable representation in the name of comic relief, then Bollywood's meticulous endeavor will seem to be unworthy. Some progressive changes are occurring and there is still a long way to accomplish for it to be visible, but the adequately demarcating transition through these years suggest that the expedition has begun and hopefully, it will be made more prominent with years to come. Richard Dunphy has truly said :

Perhaps the most radical aspect of queer politics was its claim not only to transcend homo/hetero boundary, but to do so in such a way as to challenge the sexual regulation and repression of heterosexual desire, above all female desire. Queer politics, it was claimed, had a lot to teach those accustomed to the narrow confines of male and female heterosexual roles in relationships. The re-working of notions of monogamy and the send up of marriage through queer weddings, the greater sexual adventurism, the rejection of the concept of gay men and lesbians as victims in

favor of assertiveness and redefinition, and the emphasis on the creation of more egalitarian relationships in the domestic, sexual and social spheres, were all cited as examples of how queer could contribute to a new sexual agenda of empowerment (71).

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