

Queering the Norms: From Taboo to Acceptance of Queer Themes in the Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of queer people in Bollywood films has undergone remarkable change over the course of several decades, which is a reflection of changing perspectives in society as well as progresses in the film industry. The representation of LGBTQ+ people in Indian cinema has evolved from early caricatures and stereotypes to delineations that are more intricate and assertive. This means that the portrayal of these characters has become more multifaceted and subtle. This paper investigates the progression of these portrayals, analysing the impact they have had on cultural attitudes as well as the ongoing path towards true-to-life depiction and acceptability in mainstream Bollywood films.

Keywords- Bollywood films, Queer representation, LGBTQ+ portrayal, Indian cinema, Stereotypes and caricatures, Intricate character delineations, Cultural attitudes, True-to-life depiction, Mainstream acceptability, Evolution of portrayals.

I. INTRODUCTION

As Encyclopaedia Britannica defines Homosexuality is “sexual interest in and attraction to members of one’s own sex” (“Homosexuality Summary | Britannica”). As a sexual orientation, homosexuality refers to “an enduring pattern of or disposition to experience sexual, affectional, or romantic attractions” primarily or exclusively to people of the same sex. It also refers to an individual’s sense of personal and social identity based on those attractions, behaviours expressing them, and membership in a community of others who share them” (“Homosexuality”). Homosexuality in India has been an issue not much talked about. Even sex between heterosexual people had been rarely spoken about openly until the last decade. It was kept in the closet, only to be written in obscure texts. Bollywood has played a passive role in portraying the true characteristics of the homosexuals. Homosexuals have long been seen as being outside the purview of the numerous rules and permutations that

govern the Bollywood box office. A. Bhim Singh’s *Naya Din Nayi Raat* (1974) featured Sanjeev Kumar in an effeminate role in the past, as did Anupam Kher in Rahul Rawail’s *Mast Kalandar* (1991) and David Dhawan’s *Dulhan Hum Le Jayenge* (2000). However, these figures were primarily intended to satirise individuals who, in common parlance, deviate from the norm. Dance instructors, especially those instructing heroines, were frequently depicted in a distinct cliché in Hindi films from the 1950s to 1980s. These characters were commonly portrayed as feminine males, exhibiting mannerisms and behaviours that highlighted their deviation from conventional masculine standards. The characters were frequently shown as sensitive, artistic, and occasionally flamboyant. However, their sexuality was seldom directly acknowledged or explored in the plot.

In Bollywood, until recent years, LGBTQ+ identities were often portrayed through narrow and stereotypical lenses. Films like *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) by Onir and Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996), which explored

same-sex relationships, faced resistance and were not widely accepted by Indian audiences. Mainstream blockbusters such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Dostana* (2008), and *Chalte Chalte* (2003) perpetuated stereotypes, portraying gay characters with comedic and sometimes derogatory undertones. For instance, in *Dostana*, Abhishek Bachchan's character adopts effeminate behaviour to secure housing, reinforcing misconceptions that equate feminine traits with homosexuality. In such a myopic portrayal, one forgets that feminine characteristics do not spell gay. A handsome macho man can also be a gay. Gay people can't simply be identified by any effeminate or masculine characteristics. We all have so-called masculine or feminine traits, regardless of our sexuality. If a gay or lesbian person is identified as being gay, it's usually because they wish to be known as such.

Next, the depiction of lesbians as excessively masculine or "macho" in films such as *Girlfriend* (2004), where Tanya (portrayed by Isha Kopikar) displays tomboyish characteristics and possessiveness, perpetuates a limited and stereotyped perspective. These depictions not only inaccurately portray the many experiences of lesbian identities but also continue to spread misunderstandings. These films impede the progress of wider acceptance and understanding by portraying lesbian characters as exaggerated clichés of masculinity. They fail to acknowledge the whole range of identities and ways of expressing oneself within the lesbian community, which leads to society being hesitant in accepting lesbians who do not fit into these narrow depictions.

There is also a tendency to rely on clichés when portraying homosexual men in Bollywood movies, particularly focusing on their fashion preferences and occupations. The depiction of individuals such as Bobby Darling, who are recognised for their extravagant clothing and makeup, perpetuates the fallacy that all homosexual males engage in cross-dressing. Similarly, the film *Dostana* (2008), *Fashion* (2008), *Gulabi Aaina* (2003) etc. portrays LGBT individuals primarily in the fashion/entertainment industry. This limited portrayal implies that many photographers, models, and fashion workers are homosexual, disregarding the diversity of people present in these industries. These preconceptions not only restrict genuine portrayal but also sustain misconceptions about the overlap between sexual orientation and career choices.

In the 1990s, came the homosexual film *Bomgay* (1996) that starred Rahul Bose. It is a collection of six short films, and is based on the poems of R Raj Rao, the first openly gay fiction writer. It talks on the distorted perception of homosexuality in metropolitan India. After that in 1996, came Deepa Mehta's controversial film *Fire*. The film deals with the topic of lesbianism; a risky topic, as the concept undermines the idea of macho-masculinity and dismembers them symbolically. Then came films like *The Pink Mirror*/

Gulaabi Aaina (2003), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *Page 3* (2005), *Dostana* (2008), *Fashion* (2008), *Dunno Y...Na Janne Kyun* (2010) etc. Among these films *Dostana* is a commercially hit film but with gays presented in a comical vein. Some may find the film's depiction of homosexuality clichéd, but it's a huge step forward for India's LGBT population as it's the first time any of Bollywood's leading actors have ever pretended to be homosexual. Filmmaker Tarun Mansukhani, the director of *Dostana* defended his idea of portraying gays in a comical vein in his film. He opines, "If I were to make a film where both my characters were gay, first of all I wouldn't get the money. Secondly, there would be no mainstream actors who'd want to play it, and thirdly, the audience would shy away from it." ("India Needs Time to Open up to Gay Films").

In India, homosexuality has been a taboo subject till the end of 20th century. The decriminalisation of homosexuality in India has been supported by a number of institutions, including the Planning Commission of India, the Union Health Ministry, the Naz Foundation (India) Trust, the National AIDS Control Organisation, and the Law Commission of India. Additionally, they have advocated for social equality and tolerance towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. The Delhi High Court made consenting homosexual relationships between adults in India legal on July 2, 2009. The Indian Constitution guarantees the fundamental rights to equality, life, and liberty. This decision was made in response to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises same-sex sexual behaviour regardless of age or consent (Dec 31 et al.). So change though a gradual one, started taking place almost a decade after the 21st century began. The following case studies examine gay and lesbian relationships with the aim of challenging and altering stereotypical perspectives about them.

II. FIRE (1996)

Deepa Mehta's controversial film *Fire* is the first of the Elements Trilogy followed by *Earth* (1998) and *Water* (2005). The film is loosely adapted from Ismat Chughtai's 1941 story *Lihaf* (The Quilt). The film is about two sisters-in-law, Radha (played by Shabana Azmi) and Sita (played by Nandita Das), who are confined in unhappy marriages, and then seek love and solace in each other's company. The film opens with Radha dreaming about her childhood. In her dream Radha complains to her mother that she cannot see the ocean. Then her mother tells her, "To see without looking" which means to look differently or to look through the eye of the mind (imagination). This is the underlying theme throughout the film. The film centres on events in the life of a Hindu joint family residing in the suburbs of Delhi. Radha and her husband, Ashok (played by Khulbushan Kharbanda) are a married couple. On a Guru's advice, Ashok vows to be a celibate

when doctors tell him that his wife cannot conceive because of an ailment. His decision is influenced by a Swamiji who says sex and pleasure can be used only for reproduction – male children to carry the lineage ahead. For a duration of thirteen years, Ashok represses his sexual urges and subjects Radha to a painful ritual where they remain completely still beside each other whenever he wishes to examine his determination. The other members of the family are Ashok's younger brother, Jatin (played by Javed Jaffrey), his bedridden mother, Biji and their servant, Mundu. Jatin is in a relationship with a westernized Hong Kong girl, Julie and spends a good deal of money on her. As Julie is not interested in marrying into a joint family, Ashok forces Jatin to marry Sita, a cheerful, lovable young woman, so that she can bear children and carry forward the family lineage. Sita enters the family with lots of expectations from her husband. But soon she realizes that her husband does not love her and their sexual relationship was just a mechanical exercise, devoid of any emotion, and with the purpose of reproduction. As Jatin starts keeping a distance from Sita and continues his relationship with Julie, Sita becomes more and more lonely and frustrated.

One evening, neglected by their spouses, affected by their mutual affections, and pushed to despair by their unfulfilled wants, Radha and Sita seek consolation in each other's company, blossoming into lovers. The master of the home is informed by Mundu about the nature of the relationship between the two ladies, and the master subsequently spies on the women. Ashok is shattered as his male ego is hurt. He is angry and jealous of the fact that his own wife, Radha can love someone else and that too a woman. Then Sita understanding the gravity of the situation, tells Radha that they should leave their home and start a new life together in a distant place. But Radha decides to discuss her walking out of marriage with Ashok. She sends Sita away and tells that she will join her later. Radha's attempt to "explain things," to Ashok only leads to a terrible quarrel. Then Ashok recognizing that Radha will not apologise to him, forces himself on her to give her passion, but soon realises that Radha no longer desired him emotionally and sexually. He pushes Radha away and in the process Radha's sari catches fire from the stove. Ashok, who had been using his masculine authority to justify his criticism of Radha, is now helpless to do anything to save her from the engulfing flames. This scene epitomises the antagonistic nature of patriarchal society towards those who try to break the rules set up by it. Refusing to be a part of the dominant patriarchal ideology, Radha and Sita challenge male hegemony. Fire, or Agni, is the ever-present household cleansing deity in ancient Hinduism. It is Agni's job to attest to the purity of women and, based on that, to decide their destinies. As a symbol of her virginity, Sita in the epic *Ramayana* undergoes the Agni Pareeksha, which means "test by fire" in Sanskrit. The purpose of this ritual is to establish her innocence and chastity. No

harm comes to Sita in the exam. Instead, she stands tall and bright in the middle of the funeral pyre. Similarly, Agni proves Radha's chastity by refraining from injuring Radha. Yet, her smeared face and blackened saree remain visible signs of the event. Radha comes into her own as a symbol of the "new India" where women hold independent agency.

Thus, God Agni by giving his verdict in favour of Radha has endorsed a relationship, which, although not traditionally accepted in class-based society, is honest, aesthetically appealing and spiritually rich against a dishonest, spiritually bankrupt, institutionalised traditional relationship constructed by the society. In the last scene of the film Radha finally meets Sita. This scene closes with Radha exclaiming, 'I can see the ocean.' This is a symbolic expression which means that she is now no longer the frightened, lonely, frustrated and dependent woman with no hope in her life but a matured, independent and strong woman who can take the decisions of her own life. She can now lead her life in a novel manner as she has learned to see differently. The vastness of the ocean makes it the most powerful and dominant water symbol, representing strength and power. It also represents spiritual awakening, peace and revival. Now Radha has found a new energy required to traverse on the road ahead which is not an easy and smooth one.

III. THE PINK MIRROR/GULAABI AAINA (2003)

Sridhar Rangayan's *The Pink Mirror*, one of the most delightful films in festivals, is the first film about transvestites ever made in India which had been banned in its native land for 13 long years. This film marks the debut of Drag Queens in India, a unique take on the Bollywood soap opera genre. Drag Queens are men who dress, and usually act, like a caricature woman often for the purpose of entertaining. Most of the drag queens are gays, though there are also drag artists of all genders and sexualities. Women who dress like men in the entertainment industry are called drag kings. Bibbo, (played by Ramesh Menon) a fashion designer and Shabbo, (played by Edwin Fernandes) a dancer are two fading drag queens in their late thirties. Both of them share a unique bonding. As the logline of the film *Gulabi Aaina* reads: "Men bring out the best in Queens... and sometimes their worst." One moment Bibbo and Shabbo are alley cats-clawing at each other, and the other moment they are two sensitive and caring human beings who are inseparable. Their immediate identification is with the Bollywood divas and their acts of seduction – a song and dance is a natural form of this seduction. Shabbo and Bibbo fall for a handsome hunk, Samir (played by Ruffy Baql) who is an aspiring actor. Shabbo secretly tries to seduce Samir, much to the annoyance of Bibbo. Both have a bitter quarrel between them and try various means to win Samir's heart. Thrown into this

crazy milieu is Shabbo's apprentice - a young annoying teenager Mandy (played by Rishi Raj), just about peeping out of his closet... a western closet - who says he is 'gay'. Mandy has also his eyes set on Samir and tries to lure him by the seductive moves of his body and by taking a peek at Samir in the shower. At the end of the film, it is seen that the two drag queens sacrifice their individual desires and love for Samir so that Mandy can be with him (Samir). Regarding the film, director Sridhar Rangayan says, "My film reflects reality of contemporary India, where homosexuals are accepted to a degree as long there is a 'contract of silence'. Portrayal of drag is not new to Bollywood, but drag queens have always been caricatured and ridiculed. I want the audience to laugh with the characters, not at them." ("THE PINK MIRROR: IN Magazine, USA ~ Dec 31, 2004")

IV. PAGE 3 (2005), HONEYMOON TRAVELS PVT. LTD. (2007), FASHION (2008)

Madhur Bhandarkar's *Page 3* delves into the life of the rich and the famous. The film portrays a gay character being observed without any bias for the first time. Rehaan Engineer plays a gay costume designer named Abhijeet. He has a clandestine affair with the man whom the protagonist - Madhavi Sharma (played by Konkana Sen Sharma) loves. In one scene, after the gay character is brutally assaulted by a group of homophobes, Abhijeet asks Madhavi: "Is it my fault if nature made me this way?" In a more cheerful context, Madhavi observes her homosexual friend staring at a female in a café. "If she's so pretty can you imagine how good-looking her brother must be?" giggles Abhijeet. *Page 3* in Indian cinema is the closest portrayal of a gay character that exhibits a semblance of empathy. Says its director Madhur Bhandarkar, "All the characters you see in *Page 3* are based on people I know. In our films, gay characters are used as props and gimmicks. In my film, Rehaan plays an identifiable character. We cannot reduce any community of people to tokens and emblems. We've to treat them as equal" ("Bollywood Trying to Come out of the Closet? - Tamil News").

The film *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* (2007) explores the theme of homosexuality through many storylines that deviate from the typical norms of Bollywood cinema. One plotline revolves around a homosexual non-resident Indian (played by Vikram Chatwal) who enters into matrimony with an Indian woman he encountered on the internet, while grappling with cultural intricacies and matters of personal identity. Another storyline depicts a recently married couple (played by Amisha Patel-Karan Khanna) dealing with the husband's discovery of his homosexuality. This challenges prejudices by portraying gay characters as macho individuals who do not possess typical feminine characteristics.

Fashion (2008) delves deeper into the theme of homosexuality within the context of the fashion industry, depicting certain male characters who openly embrace their gay identity. The film also showcases a sad narrative in which a homosexual fashion designer (played by Samir Soni), compelled by familial pressure, proposes marriage to a female friend (played by Mugdha Godse). This plotline effectively emphasizes the societal norms and individual challenges encountered by gay men inside Indian society. This representation emphasizes the film's dedication to showcasing a range of sexual orientations and the challenges individuals have when trying to balance their own wants with society expectations.

From a discussion of the above films, we can see that Bollywood has today opened up to issues like homosexuality. It is pop culture which has changed the perception of homosexuality in the Indian scenario. When eternal idols like Sir Elton John and Ricky Martin came out of the closet, fans all over the world took off some of the negative light from alternative sexuality. In India fashion icon like Rohit Bal has made being gay fashionable. While more and more portrayal of homosexuals in television and movies is required to give a voice to the homosexuals, it is also essential to avoid stereotyping them. Gay community members point out that Bollywood's reach is phenomenal and the right portrayal can change perceptions about homosexuals.

V. CONCLUSION

Queerness has always been perceived as a deviant character and queer people have always been sidelined from the mainstream as social abjects. Even media has to take caution in portraying such themes and characters with empathy. However, over the years such social standing regarding homosexuality have changed and the people have become more aware about altered sexualities. And such change can be observed in the portrayal of characters like Professor Ramchandra Siras from the movie *Aligarh* (2016), Laila from *Margarita with a Straw* (2015), Sweety from *Ek Ladki ko Dekha toh Aisa Laga* (2019), Lakshmi and Varun in *My Son is a Gay* (2017), etc. where these characters have been portrayed with compassion and sympathy. It significantly retells the gradual progress and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ people in the media. However, without the early films like *Fire*, *Gulabi Aina*, *Dostana*, *My Brother Nikhil*, *Na Jaane Kyu...Don't Know Why*, *Honeymoon Travels* etc. it would not have been possible to have such sensitive depiction of the queer people. These films have provided the homosexual characters a platform to engage in a dialogue with heteronormative people, and open opportunities to live a life with dignity, compassion and true companionship. Overall, the journey of queer stories in Bollywood continues, with both progress and challenges along the way. In conclusion, Bollywood's portrayal of queerness has

evolved, and while missteps exist, there's hope for more authentic and empathetic narratives in the future.

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