

**An Article on: Queer Identity in Indian Cinema
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Abstract

Against the background of successful developmental scenario in Indian Cinema my paper will discuss Indian Queer Identity in the context of some movies like Dostana, Fire, The Pink Mirror(Hindi), Randu Penkuttikal, Sancharram (Malayalam) etc which depict the notion of interpreting homosexuality is a threat to the nation where homosexuals are scorned, discriminated, victimized and criminalized. It will also explore that how media, culture and society categorized the gender and sexual identities, which are not fixed, because identities consist of many varied components and that to categorize by one characteristic is wrong. It will reveal the effective ways and means to deal with LGBT problems/challenges, and an understanding of its legality and illegality under section 377 of the Indian penal code that they can become the main stream part of culture.

Keywords: Queer, Culture, Cinema, Homosexuals, Bollywood, Dostana, Fire, The Pink Mirror, Sancharram.

Introduction

The 'Queer' is an umbrella term came to be used for all these categories-LGBT. Queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. We are in the age of new-generation ideologies, new-generation lifestyle, new-generation movies, and new-generation romance and so on. Perhaps, everything about the new-generation is welcomed with open arms, but what about new-generation romance? How effectively has Indian Cinema represented the homosexual community onscreen? Homosexuality has been stereotyped, looked down upon and mocked, time and again. But there is a need to change. A change which gives respect and dignity to the portrayal of homosexuals in Bollywood.

What does the term 'gay' or 'lesbian' imply? Has homosexuality been part of the Indian culture long enough to be portrayed onscreen or is it just another Western import? Over the time, laws came into existence declaring homosexuality a crime. It's been 5 years since the decriminalization of homosexuality in India. But has that offered offered a dignified space in Bollywood to portray the issue with respect? Though several filmmakers have offered homosexuality a space in their films, but has that portrayal been respectful enough? Here are a few examples:

Dostana (2008) a mainstream commercial film, dares to push envelope in its own way. It brings homosexuality out of the closet, gives it respect and dignity where Abhishek Bachchan and John Abraham pretend to be gay partners to secure a plush apartment. Though it was an laudable attempt to reflect the issue, bring homosexuality to mainstream Bollywood and show acceptance through a mother accepting her fake gay son's choice, but ultimately the entire 'concern' was portrayed in a humorous and heavily-stereotyped manner. Portraying homosexuality as a humorous subject feeds the audience with misassumptions about it, affecting the integrity of homosexuals in the society and further, creating discrimination between homosexuals and heterosexuals. The exaggerated gay persona portrayed in the film has always led to the audience roaring with laughter in reaction to the 'gay' scenes. Dostana, unfortunately presents every gay character comically, hence stereotyping the very concept of homosexuality.

In India, men have always been able to be as gay as they want - as long as they're not gay. Indian men are always publicly holding hands or linking pinkies, dancing up close together, affectionately falling asleep on one another's shoulders or wrapping their arms around the waist of the man in front as they ride pillion on his motorbike, lovingly pressing their face into his back. But they won't stand being called "gay" - not even the gays ones. The government had to coin the term MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) in order to promote condom use during homosexual intercourse because the term is disliked so much. Now India's convoluted attitude to gayness finally has its cinematic manifestation in Dostana, where no one is actually gay.

Another Deepa Mehta's Fire (1996) ignited controversies owing to its portrayal of lesbianism, tracing the story of two married yet unhappy sister-in-laws played by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das. Deepa Mehta expressed frustration in interviews that the film was consistently described as a lesbian film. She said, "Lesbianism is just another aspect of the film... Fire is not a film about lesbians," but rather about "the choices we make in life."

The Pink Mirror (2006) is witness to their happiness, jealousies, passion and anguish. Using the Bollywood soap idiom of song, dance and drama the film explores the Indian gay landscape and unearths deep, humanly tender bondings that exist between drag queens that form unique non-patriarchal families. Two transsexuals and a gay teenager seduce a handsome hunk using all their charms and some dance moves too.

Sancharram (2004) a true love saga of two lesbian in the South Indian state of Kerala. It is not as explicit as movies of its kind in the west, but it's honest in its exploration of family dynamics and the cruel, uncaring attitude of society where Kiran & Delilah have been friends since childhood with Kiran having been in love with Delilah for a while. She's not the only one though, as one of their classmates Rajan is also in love with her and asks Kiran to write letters to Delilah expressing his love for her. Kiran thinks of this as a way to express her feelings for Delilah without attracting society's disapproval. When Delilah finds out that Kiran is the one writing the letters to her, she reciprocates her feelings and the two begin a secret relationship, in spite of Delilah's initial worries.

Sancharram has been compared to Deepa Mehta's Fire, a movie which also touches upon lesbian relationships in India. However, where Fire is explicit in stating that the main characters enter their relationship due to the failure of their heterosexual marriages, Sancharram is clearly a film about two lesbians who fall in love with each other.

Randu Penkuttikal (1978) spoke about the deep, passionate love between two girls, Kokila and Girija. Girija is not so sure, and soon she falls head over heels for a handsome apprentice who takes charge in the local photo studio and gets into a physical relationship with her, and disappears. She eventually gets married to her young teacher who had in the past proposed to her but was turned away in part by the rumor mills put in motion by a deeply possessive Girija. The movie ends with the politically correct note of Girija at last seeing the light – that "this was all a phase in one's teenage years and like any normal woman, she should be married and lead a happy, productive life" by the dashing young physician who is busied by Girija and wants to marry her.

Indian cinema, mainstream and slightly off-mainstream, reflects the changing positive mindset of the mainstream towards what is generally termed 'off-mainstream'. We, the so-called 'mainstream' are constantly shedding our mental blocks against homosexuality. We are more liberated in accepting, recognizing and trying to get a better understanding of sexual desires both heterosexual and homosexual on screen. In Randu Penkuikal (1978) and Sancharam (2006) it's surprising to know that Malayalam Cinema was quite ahead of time compared to Bombay Cinema in dealing with various shades of human sexuality.

LGBT relationships were considered a taboo in Indian cinema. This is corresponded with the social rejection of such identities in real life. Times, however, have changed and slowly, as this discriminated community that is ostracized only for being 'differently' inclined in sexual terms, are coming out of their closets to raise their voices and demanding social acceptance, recognition and respect.

In present scenario the cultural environment has been hostile to LGBT in India and the representation of LGBT projects them as borderline bugs, criminals, mentally sick, or deprived of heterosexual coition. But situation is completely paradoxical. The stigmatization of homosexuality are considered of the colonial import, homosexuality is alien to Indian culture and is a source of moral corruption. The British colonial government introduced Article 377 in the Penal Code in 1868 criminalizing homosexuality and laying down stringent punishment of fine and/or life imprisonment for sexual acts against 'the order of nature'. But earlier than that in Indian culture, lesbianism and gayism were acceptable forms of sexuality – the most ancient sculptural art of Khajuraho caves and the architecture of some of the Hindu temples in Orissa bear a burning testimony.

The Supreme Court's ruling upholding Section 377 on December 11 last pushed them back. They will again be considered criminals by the law that has no right to curb their personal preferences. It is strange that no one raises questions about the legality of a person's choice of partner in heterosexual relationships but when it comes to sexual preference for another person of the same sex, the hammer comes down. Will the Supreme Court ruling out the high court's positive ruling of

2009 have an impact on the celluloid representation of the LGBT identity? The uproar in the media against the ruling both from mainstream and the LGBT communities suggests it will not.

The main project is exploring the categorization of gender and sexual identities in Indian cinema, which are not fixed, and they cannot be categorized and labeled because identities consist of many varied components and that to categorize by one characteristic is wrong. He believes that genders have an essential nature. Due to this belief in the essential nature of a person, it is also natural to assume that a person's sexual preference would be natural and essential to a person's personality. And being different doesn't mean being inferior.

There were several other films directed on this delicate subject, which unfortunately, never made it to the big screen owing to the fear of rejection and cause of controversies. Why this subject is always stereotyped on the Bollywood screen? The answer is simple, we are a hypocritical nation and we are yet to come to terms with accepting such relationships. It's sad, but true. The SC's refusing to review the ban on gay sex imposed only firmly brings to light the repressive society we live in. If we can show modernity in the content that's otherwise displayed in cinema and other popular culture, why not show some respect to these individuals as well? It's about time that filmmakers step up and use movies as a powerful medium to educate and enlighten society. Let's hope Bollywood would do justice to homosexuality and give it some screen space with love and dignity and a 'Happy Ending' too.

Reference

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