Selected Bollywood Films as Sites of LGBTQ Contestation, Assertion and Cultural Disruption

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Abstract:

Films function both as forms of cultural production as well as systems of representation and in those capacities, they are reflective of both; the basic patterns of production and the relational patterns in the society they project. Moreover, they have the potential to contribute to cultural economy and ecology. This article investigates the Indian experience through films from outcry against the film *Fire* (1996) to the discomforting accommodation of *Aligarh* (2015) and from the coming of age reception of *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) to the applausive responses to *Shubh Mangal Jyada Savdhan* (2020) in the context of the queer movement in India. It tracks the progressive curve of the LGBTQ discourse in reality and through a number of films. Looking at the matrix of films, the theoretical concept of conflict, along with Stuart Hall's concept of Representation and Reception provide the framework of the discussion. Although acknowledging the problems of resistance and conflict, the article emphasizes the constitutive power of the media, especially when the currently visible mass culture, with its global, virtual outreach and leverage of the easily available platforms/spaces has subverted top-down discourses. The article ends with a hope that it will soon turn into a new normal and political inclusivity will expand and extend to all aspects of culture, thereby addressing the issues of under-representation and evolving vision in relation to a highly gendered society.

Keywords: conflict, culture, films, gender, heteronormative, representation, sexuality

Introduction: The Challenge of Decoding a Culture and Films

Setting out to understand any social phenomenon in India demands delving into the complexities of a multi-layered social system. It is like an ethnographical study which needs a panoramic view of social groups and careful navigation of the intersectional and inter-categorical mapping of phenomena that occur. This entails understanding of all those intersecting fields and the nature of their interaction with that phenomenon. Along with the political, economic, and religious aspects/systems articulated in the India context, the bearing of various categories within those systems like race, class, caste and gender also require study.

However, attempts at understanding and evaluating a society within the parameters of well-defined labels of race, class, gender, religion, political orientation that it is broadly identified with, risks failure because applying these categorical lenses is like using the dichroic mirror whereby minor but crucial nuances of that society are blocked from view.

Such is the context of sexual and gender minorities in India. To understand their problems and demand for rights, representation and social reception is to understand the gender dynamics in Indian cultural history. Historically traced, these minorities in India were socially acknowledged, though not mainstreamed. Devdatt Pattnaik (2018) and Namita Singh Malik (2017) assert that ancient textual references convey the inclusive co-existence of all, and that wayward sexual behaviour was taken to be sinful rather than illegal. In fact, some architectural and scriptural evidence confirm the prevalence of homosexual behaviour too. However, social backlash and ostracizing due to the so called sinful activities in hierarchically organized classificatory Indian society cannot be ruled out. One of the most visible categories, Hizra/Kinnar/Aravani (eunuchs), skilled at song and dance, were linked with mythological beings called Kinnar. Considered to be non-functional reproductively and sexually desire-neutral, they were confined within their own marked communities and provided patronage by the heterosexual community within that framework only. Their condition ranged from being spiritually respectable to being sexually exploited. Later, under British colonial rule in 1861, the homosexual community came under the sweeping scope of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized 'unnatural' sexual relations. Having already been socially closeted, these minority groups faced further marginalisation. They were consequently deprived of the right to exercise their natural will and were rendered vulnerable to administrative and communal exploitation.

After more than a century of absence in the Indian political discourse the movement for LGBTQ rights was initiated by AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA), an activist movement in 1991. It has taken years of legal fight consisting of dismissal and hope by Non-Government Organisations like Naz Foundation, Voices Against 377, and some high profile figures who identified as homosexual such as award winning choreographer and Bharatnatyam dancer Navtej Singh Johar; celebrity chef Ritu Dalmia; hoteliers Aman Nath and Keshav Suri; historian and restorer of Indian architectural ruins, Ashok Row Kavi, journalist; and the first Indian to come out as gay. From being a purely academic issue to an issue of public interest, LGBTQ activism has come of age in the Indian legal corridors and has apparently won the battle after the Supreme Court passed the historical judgement in the case of Navtej Singh Jauhar vs. Union of India on 6 September 2018, which decriminalized Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). The judgement declared sexual orientation to be natural, and the rights to love, privacy, dignity, and equality to be integral. It legally

sanctioned the rights of the LGBTQ community, with discrimination and resistance liable for conviction. Significantly, it stressed:

> re-imagination of the order of nature as being not about the prohibition of non-procreative sex, but instead about the limits imposed by the structures such as gender, caste, religion and community makes the right love not just a separate battle for LGBT individuals, but a battle for all. (The Hindu, 2018, p. 42)

Acknowledging the stigmatizing social manifestations of the discriminatory legal provisions within the homogenous heteronormative framework, the judgement also directed the State-regulated media to be "pluralistic and non-discriminatory in respect of issues of sexual orientation and gender identity" (The Hindu, 2018, p. 87). The writers of this judgement critiqued the closeting, silencing and criminalizing of sexual and gender minorities, mainly due to Section 377 introduced by the colonial regime in India. This is what Janet Staiger (1992) terms "a comparative historical analysis …" that work through the "complex cultural, social and political context structuring what specific group of people did" (p.7) and give both the governing and governed a kind of historical balance sheet on the treatment of the LGBTQ community. Moreover, it makes the role of media crucial in mobilizing the society towards increasing openness and acceptance.

Any single, linear theoretical perspective or any linear representation falls short of evaluating a problem comprehensively from all perspectives. Consequently, an ethnographical inquiry into a culture becomes imminent. However, the proposition of grasping a culture in its entirety remains elusive unless supported by mechanisms that can help us do so. The way films bring life to life makes them that mechanism. Films serve as "records of cultural and social history" and "global forms of culture" (Thorburn, 2013). In fact, they are like the mass produced open sources of a culture which people can access easily, process conveniently and interpret individually. What is more important is that in their audio-visual-kinetic narrative formats, they get people's attention and keep it engaged more for the content, for what they offer, than what goes into their production.

From here arises the question of whether the cinematic narratives, in their representational capacity, facilitate the constitution of identity of the marginalized and minorities and transform the privileged worldviews?

This article explores how filmmakers have attempted to uncover the lid for the specifically oriented masses to see, get shocked and come to terms with the new normal of sexuality. The criminalization of homosexuality in the form of Section 377 was a colonial residue with all its toxic effects on the LGBTQ community. The article inquires whether filmmakers, with their films as the tools of representation or encoded reality, have been successful in amplifying the muted voices of this section of Indian society.

LGBTQ Representations in Indian Films

In the Indian context, films as catalytic representations have been occasionally politicized or subject to controversies. Whether films reflect or subvert and critique societal norms, it can be argued that films and activism are interconnected. Karl Marx's reflections on early society still holds true for contemporary Indian society: "In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold

gradation of social rank" (2008, p.14). Notably, gradations of biases run proportionate to such gradation of ranks and these biases never remain fixed in time and place.

Historically speaking, gender representation in Bollywood films has consistently, demonstrated a normalized pattern of exclusion wherein gender narratives that deviate from the norm are omitted, ostracised, ridiculed or demonised. Until recently, the agency of non-binary people was relatively silenced both through social structures and their soft cultural productions. This accounts for the funny, derogatory and insignificant presence of eunuchs, transgender and gay characters in mainstream Bollywood films. Other categories of the LGBTQ community are not represented at all. There have been a number of popular films wherein the protagonist use cross-dressing as a ruse, like *Bluff master* (1963), *Rafoo chakkar* (1975), *Lawaaris* (1981), Khiladi (1992), *Raja babu* (1994) *Auntie no.1* (1998), *Double dhamaal (2007)*, *Humshakals* (2014), to name a few popular titles. The representation of eunuchs and transpersons is marked with extremes of either villainy or benignity. For instance, Maharani as a scheming transgender running brothel in *Sadak* (1991), or Lazza Shankar Pandey as a fanatical child abductor and murderer in *Sangharsh* (1999) are representative of villainous characterisations. While benign characterisations include Tiku, a kind and sacrificial father figure in *Tamanna* (1997) and Munnibai, a brave and dependable but ill-fated transperson leader in *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008). Films like *Kal ho na ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2008) represent mock-homosexual characters whereas the likes of *Raja Hindustani* (1996), *Partner* (2007), *Student of the Year* (2012), *Grand masti* (2013) and *Housefull 4* (2019) show gays in peripheral roles to serve as "comical relief" (Rawal, 2020).

In the early 1990s, a disruptive phenomenon in the form of the gay rights movement occurred which caused a sub culture to emerge, a supposedly base and deviant one that challenged the attitudes of the conservative mainstream. Against the backdrop of protests and Gay Pride parades, there have been attempts to portray the fear, anxiety, struggle, constraints and insecurity of closeted homosexuals by directors like Madhur Bhandarkar (*Page 3*, 2005; *Fashion*, 2008; *Heroine*, 2012), Karan Johar (*Ajeeb Dastan Hai Ye* in the anthology film *Bombay Talkies*, 2013; *Kapoor & Sons*, 2016), Onir (*My brother Nikhil*; 2005; *I am*, 2010), wherein), Anurag Basu (*Life in a Metro*, 2007), Farhan Akhtar (*Honeymoon travels*, 2007), Abhshek Chaubey (*Dedh ishqiya*, 2014) and Shonali Bose (*Margarita with a Straw*, 2014). Although these films were produced featuring queer centric themes that represented the anguish and pain of coming out and living with its disconcerting complexities, they could not succeed in orienting the masses across stereotypical binaries and boundaries.

Previous research examining the representation of the LGBTQ community in Bollywood films highlight the challenges and subversive potential of films as a site of LGBTQ discourse. Bhugra et al (2015) find the portrayal of gay characters in Hindi films to be negative and deconstructs historical and cultural backgrounds to contextualise these negative representations. Sen (2012) takes stock of the mainstream and alternative cinema's representation of sexual minorities in films produced till the year 2010 and finds the latter to be more responsible and realistic in their approach to these minorities. Sujata Moorti (2000) examines the reaction to *Fire* in terms of a subversion of the director's "authorial intention to draw attention to the oppressive conditions of Indian women's lives [that] was subverted by nationalist modes of thinking developed during colonialism" (p. 1), whereas Radu A. Davidescu studies *Fire* as a revolutionary queer film against the backdrop of a hetero-patriarchal Indian socio-cultural landscape. Sabharwal and Singh et al (2017) offer a study of *Aligarh* and find it a well-made, meaningful film but short of an appeal that could be a dialogue setter for gay rights. However, Mehak Srivastava (2016) and Pooja and Rekha

(2018) study the contribution of Bollywood films in advancing the cause of the LGBTQ community in India through examining selected films, including *Fire* (1996) and *Aligarh* (2015), and conclude that they indicate a positive shift in the LGBTQ representation and have been able to initiate a change of perspective, though their reach remains limited. Pushpinder Kaur (2017) makes some important observation regarding Indian cinema's role in the production of meaning of queer. She finds that stereotypical representation of queer in Indian films relegate them to either being "comic relief" or a "side story" (p. 5). The discussion in this article is situated within the context of this previous research, and further explores how films, as form of non-state regulated media, engaged with discourses of LGBTQ rights to empower LGBTQ communities. It charts the Indian journey through its LGBTQ movement in the last three decades through four mainstream films, *Fire* (Mehta, D., 1996)*, Aligarh* (Mehta, H., 2015)*, Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (Dhar, 2019) and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Kewalya, 2020)*,* which centre on homosexual protagonists and garnered mass response across communities.

Overview of Films

Fire (1996)
Directed by Deepa Mehta, *Fire* features two sisters-in-law in a parochially patriarchal setting, in which their dominant husbands dictate their lives. These men represent the ostensibly considerate normative agencies who exercise will over their own desires but control the desires of their wives and thereby forcing them to be relational and functional according to their system. Radha, is the older sister-in-law. Her desire for compassion, passion and love are muted and thwarted by the self-inflicted celibacy and altruism of her husband. Sita is the younger of the two women. Her husband loves another woman and the best he offers to do for Sita is impregnate her so as to keep her occupied. She articulates her discomfort with the binding power of traditions. Both women find their desires fulfilled in each other; Radha's old school's guilt and fear are assuaged by the radically free-spirited Sita. When their relationship is discovered, Radha confronts her husband and leaves the house with Sita, with the vision of a life together.

This movie received applause outside India but was met with nation-wide violent demonstrations and vandalism, and death threats to the lead female actors. This reaction forced an unofficial ban on its screening on account of its depiction of the 'unnatural' and 'immoral' sexual relation between two females. The controversy and the reactionary activities of the "state sponsored hooliganism" prompted Mahesh Bhatt, another filmmaker, to call it a "cultural emergency" (Raval & Madhu, 1998). Reaction to the film also garnered media attention, with *BBC News* running a story titled "Hindu militants stage lesbian film attacks" (1998). In response, the Supreme Court issued directions to the government to ensure safe screening of the film. Massive support from activists, artists and many civil rights groups compelled the then Prime minister, Home Minister and a few Members of Parliament from the ruling party to condemn the violent protesters. In the support rallies, placards written with 'I am Indian and I am lesbian' were seen for the first time in India.

Aligarh (2015)
Written by Apurva Asrani, a famous filmmaker and scriptwriter who identifies as gay, the next milestone came in the form of the film *Aligarh*: an adaptation of a homosexual Indian university professor's real-life story portraying the agony, loneliness and helplessness of a gay elderly academic and poet who had to face humiliation, expulsion, persecution and mortal isolation for being gay. The narrative (and real life events) is situated within a well-

acclaimed academic space, a university. The film highlights the deeply ingrained cultural prejudices of the society at large and exposes the politicized academic environment. Dr. Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras was an award winning short story writer, an established professor and the Head of the Department of Modern Indian Languages at Aligarh Muslim University. He became the victim of a sting operation by the local media while engaged in intercourse with a male rickshaw puller in his bedroom in February 2010. While the rickshaw puller was subjected to police brutality, Siras was defamed, humiliated, ostracized, persecuted and suspended on grounds of this 'immoral' behaviour and for putting the ethos of the university in danger due to his sexual orientation. He challenged his suspension in court and was given justice in terms of being reinstated to his job and campus residence. However, his mysterious death (ruled a suicide) in his room after around three months of the incident challenges the notion that justice was achieved. Although a post mortem revealed the presence of poison, the lack of indications that he consumed any substances himself and the arrest (and later release) of a number of suspects raises continuing questions over the cause of death.

Aligarh was also greatly appreciated at different Film festivals abroad though it faced backlash from fringe groups in India and was not allowed to be screened in Aligarh City as it would have defamed the city because of its treatment of homosexuality. The Censor Board gave its trailer an "A" certificate, that is, unsuitable for children. The word "homosexual" was beeped out when broadcast on National TV. Regardless, the film was praised in Bollywood and by viewers who called it "a milestone" and "a courageous" film, with "the power of messaging" (Eros Now, 2016b); it can certainly be said to have been well received.

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019)

Amid such a progressive discursive landscape, Gazal Dhaliwal, a lesbian writer, wrote the story of a girl's alternative sexuality and her experiences in her loving but conservative home. In 2019, this story was adapted into the landmark film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (When I Saw a Girl It Seemed Like), hereafter referred to as *EKDTAL*.

Sweety, the protagonist does not dare to reveal her truth of being different from others to her grandmother and her father due to childhood experiences in which she was teased and ostracized, and saw her gay friend harassed by other students, including her brother. Her brother calls her sexual orientation a "disease" and asks her to get rid of it as it destroys the family's reputation (Dhar, 2019). An accidental meeting with a script writer, Sahil Mirza, proves to be a turning point in Sweety's story. His romantic pursuance of Sweety forces her to come out to him. He decides to help her and convinces the whole family (except the brother) to prepare a play featuring a lesbian couple as a new advertising format for their clothing line. They object to the idea of staging a lesbian couple but the prospect of people relishing the comic depiction of such people makes them agree. However, the tempo rises when the brother discovers the plan and reveals the 'dirty' truth which he had been hiding to "protect" Sweety and the family, and the father orders the cancellation of the play. However, Sweety stands firm, and questions the so called 'normal' of her brother and tells her father that the play needs to be staged to represent every confused, lonely and scared child like her. The father, in an emotionally disoriented state at hearing her mention her childhood, goes back home and reads her diary and discovers her psychological trauma of being othered. When the play begins with Sahil professing his deep love for a girl, the audience cheers and encourages him. When the lovers are revealed to be two girls, they react angrily at the 'filth' and 'nonsense' and start leaving the hall. The father arrives and finds Sweety as one of the protagonists describing her situation as "repressed, suffocated, and trapped

inside …[her]self" (Dhar, 2019), exhorting her father to let her "out", and cowering in fear of the self-styled culture-keepers "offering punishment like banishment, forceful marriage with boys or…killing" (Dhar, 2019). At this juncture, the father charges at the attacking actors and talks about the naturalness of same-sex love and the futility of force to change it. He then assures Sweety of his love and care and asks her to live the way she wants. The brother goes away offended while the rest accept and embrace Sweety and her partner. The film's portrayal of a lesbian couple was well received and it didn't face any protest.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan **(2020)**

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (hereafter *SMZS*), two male lovers, Kartik and Aman work and live together in Delhi, with Aman still in the closet. Their relationship is revealed while they are on the train No. 0377 with Aman's extended family to attend the wedding of his cousin, Rajni. Shankar Tripathi, Aman's father and an agriculture scientist, is nauseated seeing them kissing each other. Their dance and kiss at the wedding shocks the crowd of relatives and the wedding is called off. The fight to reform Aman starts. His ritual reincarnation is performed despite his protestations, his partner is scolded, forced to leave the place and beaten on coming back. Finally, he is emotionally blackmailed into agreeing to marry a girl. However, the turning point comes when the prospective bride runs away with the family's jewellery to be with her boyfriend. Kartik tries taking her place in the ceremony but is first exposed and then forced to confront everyone. Finally, with the legal debate on Section 377 of IPC going on in the background, the family shows acceptance and stands up for them when the police charge them of the crime of homosexuality. The father shears off the patriarchal garb and is seen dropping the couple off at the railway station on a motorbike which, after some resistance, he lets Kartik ride – a symbolic gesture of allowing them to decide the course of their life. *SMZS* was widely appreciated in India though it was banned in UAE for its homosexual theme.

Discussion

Stuart Hall (1973) refers to the practice of abjection and othering those who do not identify with the dominant cultural meanings thus:

> There remains a dominant cultural order, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested…the different areas of social life appear to be mapped out into connotative domains of dominant or preferred meanings. New, problematic or troubling things and events, which breach our expectancies and run counter to our common-sense constructs', to our 'taken-for-granted knowledge of social structures, must be assigned to their connotational domains before they can be said to 'make sense': and the most common way of 'mapping them' is to assign the new within some domain or other of the existing 'maps of problematic social reality'. (p. 394)

Seen in this context, these films reveal the operation of what Althusser calls ideological state apparatuses in society to keep it culturally, religiously, socially and legally in line with hegemony. The narratives in these films are encoded with the signs of systematic gender profiling by heteropatriarchy in homes and heteronormativity in society. The only reason for the society to turn against them is their sexual orientation which gets problematized. These films attempt to create space for the sexual-gender minorities to push the boundaries of their assigned domain and contest the dominant order and meanings in ways mostly similar to any other struggle for rights. The older forms of representation were either stereotypical or exclusive in their efforts to highlight the predicament of the LGBTQ community. The four

films under discussion here form a different representational range which marks a shift in gendered representation in mainstream cinema vis-a-vis the multidimensional configurations of sexuality. The analysis of these films brings out some key sites which these films engage to contest and subvert the practices of stereotypical signification through representation.

Hall (1997a) asserts that one of the most effective strategies to counter the older poetics and politics of stereotypes is:

> to occupy the very terrain which has been saturated by fixed and closed representation and to try to use the stereotypes and turn the stereotypes in a sense against themselves; to open up, in other words, the very practice of representation itself – as a practice … The very act of opening up the practice by which these closures of imagery have been presented requires one to go into the power of the stereotype itself and begin to…subvert, open and expose it from inside. (p. 21)

The events in the films are understood in reference to this representational strategy. These films have subverted the forms of representation in the first place by accessing the ruling representational system of Indian cinema and locating the authentic LGBTQ voices therein and bringing their stories out of the closet of art house cinema to the hubs of commercial cinema with popular mainstream actors as their protagonists. What Sandip Roy, a writer, journalist and radio host says about *SMZS* articulates the pride involved in such subversion: "I am thankful because it's no small thing to watch gay characters appear larger than life on a screen before you without cringing and hoping that no one sees them in you when the lights come on" (2020). Thus, they claim their narrative by entering into "a struggle over representation" and accessing a higher position of power (Hall, 1997b, p. 274).

These four films present a trajectory of such subversion of representational forms, starting from *Fire*, building momentum in *Aligarh* and *ELKDTAL* and consolidating the position in *SMZS*. The signifying practices and institutional agencies like family, law, media, religion that are harnessed by the dominant culture have been similarly utilized to make "the stereotypes work against themselves" (Hall, 1997b, p. 274). Through the image of a hegemonic family with heavily polarized opinions and rituals and recorded episodes of Ramayana series in the name of media, *Fire* serves as a launch pad to facilitate a contextualized debate on LGBTQ rights which becomes more multidimensional in latter films.

Family
The centrality of family, a space where the play of gender politics manifests itself starkly is underscored in all the films. Family honour in India mainly hinges on confirmation with dominant meanings. The question asked by Aman's uncle to Kartik, "Son, by the way, are your parents aware of this [his gayness]" (Kewalya, 2020), acts like the sword of Damocles for anyone stepping out of the boundaries (sexual or gendered) as they risk eviction, disownment or even murder. The family also risks being maligned, ostracized with detrimental impacts on other children within the family. These films present a trajectory of evolution in bringing the family to the centre of a gender neutral discourse. In *Fire,* the family as a hegemonic unit is so deeply internalized in Radha and Sita that support is unimaginable. In *Aligarh*, the absence of family support accentuates Siras's loneliness; mentioning the only link with the family, his nephew, brightens his face.

The next step comes from *ELKDTAL*, where the agency of family is evoked for the first time, albeit with help from outside. Non-hegemonic notions of sexuality are processed through a stereotypical family unit. Yet the outcome is not to rupture the institution of family, but to find accommodation within it by appealing to the high emotional quotient of its parental figure. *SMZS* functions like a mock-heroic film and trivializes the absurdity of an orthodox family. Kartik is aware of the importance of familial support and wants to calmly claim it, fighting a transformational battle with them: "There is a lot of power in the taunts of a joint family […] the fight with family is the biggest and the most dangerous of all the fights" (Kewalya, 2020). The viewers get so immersed that when Aman gives up, they want him to fight. Sandip Roy lauds the film for cleverly "making the family, not the gay couple, the butt of jokes" (2020). Thus, the role of families has been redefined through these LGBTQ narratives.

Religion

As for religion, Max Weber saw it as "a source for dynamic social change" (1971, p.xxxi) through the process of rationalization which at a higher and more complex level of cultural order leads to a sense of confinement. However, the same concept of rationalization has the potency of "processes of change and breakthrough" (p. xxxiv). In the manner of suggesting a remapping of the concept of rationalization, religion is in fact made into the safe haven of LGTBQ identities in the form of structures like a Dargah and a Gurudwara in both *Fire* and *ELKDTAL* respectively. The Dargah of Sufi saint Hazarat Nizamuddin Aulia, an embodiment of love and plurality is projected as a space, which is 'public' by nature, to help Radha and Sita negotiate their future path. In *ELKDTAL*, Sweety chooses to disclose her sexual orientation to Sahil in a Gurudwara, an embodiment of equality and all-inclusiveness. No intervention of any religious agent is shown in both the films. Rather, they seem to strategically point towards understanding the essence of religion which, in any form, does not support subjecting humans to a "hierarchy of control" (Weber, 1971, p. xxxii). Siras' statement in *Aligarh* that "religion is not a thing to be understood: start thinking and faith goes away" (H. Mehta, 2015) is a subtle subversion of the dominantly held belief about the absolute truths of culturally constructed and socially appropriated religion.

In *SMZS,* the genetically modified (GM) black cauliflower produced by Shankar Tripathi, the Hindu Brahmin scientist, is used as a metaphor for the religious interventions in modifying a person's being to fit the hegemonic definitions of a cultured and civilized person. The damaging results of such forcible attacks on nature are made prominent by the angry protests of farmers who had bought GM seeds and feel cheated because of losses incurred due to the worm-infected cauliflowers. The normative power of rituals is also challenged when Shankar Tripathi depends on religion to restore his son's 'natural' sexuality by performing a ritual of rebirth into a new person with a "natural", straight sexual orientation. The films therefore challenge the dominance of religion through protagonists who, demonstrating an understanding of the basic tenets of religious beliefs, co-opt and subvert mechanisms such as rituals to strengthen their discursive position.

Media and Law

Hall notes that the "hegemonic and discursive power" stereotyping "operates as much through culture, the production of knowledge, imagery and representation, as through other means" (1997b, p. 263). Both media and law are crucial in the wider determination, dissemination and validation of the dominant order of a culture. In *Aligarh,* the agency of media and law has been redirected at the dominant code itself. It offers a template for recoding the stereotypical image of media as a sensationalizing and polarising agency into an

empathetic and responsible 'watchdog of the Indian constitution'. The unlawful intrusion of the journalists in Siras' bedroom and the random language of Deepu's editor who calls Siras' case a sex scandal, are exposed through a conscientious journalist, Deepu, who works hard to report the truth of the event and facilitate justice and dignity for Siras. The devastation caused by media's playing into the hands of power stands widely visible against the emancipatory results of ethical journalism. In the film, Mehta makes Deepu the medium through which to receive and decode Siras' condition and position. Taking some artistic liberties, the film portrays Deepu Sebastian and Anand Grover (Siras's lawyer) as multifaceted characters who don't term Siras' case a "sex scandal", but a breach of privacy. Rather than enacting discriminatory practices, they embody broader and evolved interpretations of them.

The prosecution lawyer, with an authoritative conviction, spells out the right of the society or an institution "to filter its members" as per the parameters of its "collective morality". *Aligarh* frees law from the trappings of hegemony by transcoding such stereotypes through Grover. Highlighting "inclusiveness" as the underlined tenet of the Indian constitution, he provides the right articulation and interpretation of rights and morality. He dismisses society's right to interfere in an individual's privacy and stresses on constitutional limitations on morality:

> Morality is open to interpretation. Those who are vegan might consider meat-eaters immoral. Married people might consider divorcees immoral. What is the limit of morality? If someone strays out of one's moral boundaries, should he be punished? Because if that is the case, then every citizen of this country should be in prison for violating someone else's moral boundaries. (H. Mehta, 2015)

Grover serves as a new metaphor for revisiting the legal practices in India, differentiating the fluid and non-fluid concepts in law, removing anachronistic laws and upholding the true spirit of the constitution to avoid misinterpretations and misjudgements.

Representation matters and the filmmakers of these films have made it crucial for LGBTQ community also. Siras' discomfort in the courtroom, on the campus and in the neighbourhood is contrasted with his comfort, cheerfulness, openness in the party where he accompanies Grover's assistant lawyer, invited and hailed by people who had represented him by signing on his petition- artists, poets, and civilians including LGBTQ activists.

By placing the playwright Sahil in the centre of the debate, *ELKDTAL* accentuates the role of such representational systems for LGBTQ community. The affective power of the play staged by Sahil is instrumental in the positive transformation of Sweety's father. In the closing credits, Kuhu is seen mouthing a "thank you" to him for staging a catalytic intervention through the play. He helps the whole family, except the brother, come out of their own closets, locked by gender norms.

A new tool of the subversive representational strategy is witnessed in *ELKDTAL* and *SMZS*. They employ the tropes of the popular Hindi romantic films and weave a homosexual story with them. The act of naming *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* after the first line of a famous romantic song from a romantic comedy, *1942: a Love Story* (1994) is revealing of this attempt. The 1994 film features a heterosexual love story and romantic song associates love with every blissful phenomenon in nature. The title of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* translates in English as "be extra aware of marriage", and is a cautionary call to question the fixed notion of marriage as a heterosexual union. This film uses and transcodes the tropes of

mainstream romances: two lovers having to fight family opposition, a conflict between social norms and individual choice, emotionally charged interactions and finally, a happy ending. Kartik heroically guards his love and challenges a single minded cultural discourse on sex and gender. Holding a loudspeaker and wearing gay pride symbols (an inverted pink triangle tattoo and a rainbow flag) he calls Aman's father "very sick", and suffering from "homophobia" (Kewalya, 2020). Later, Sitting agitated at the railway after being forced out by Aman's father, he rewords the popular Jack and Jill rhyme, replaces 'Jill' with 'Johny' and sings it aloud, repeatedly. Such appropriation catches the viewer unawares and arrests attention forcing them to consider the changed reality of their narratives. By opening up the gender bracketed narratives, it expands them to accommodate diverse expressions of love across the spectrum of sexuality and gender.

Language

Power sustains by controlling the verbal repertoire and by setting the conditions for its configuration. Recognizing this, these films tend to seize this tactic and reconfigure the available repertoire in terms of giving voice to the LGBTQ experience, thus reinforcing the importance of having their own grammar and rhetoric of representation. *Fire* forced open a dialogue and a debate around the hitherto taboo subject of sexuality and its non-normative nature by igniting a search for linguistic inventory to describe Sita and Radha's state of being in response to Sita's resentment at the lack of linguistic tools of articulation: "There is no word in our language that can describe us, how we feel for each other" (D. Mehta, 1996). In *Aligarh,* Siras feels the lack of language to describe the beauty of same-sax love and struggles to define his love in abstract terms: "a beautiful word … "like a poem, emotional, an uncontrollable urge". He has a problem with having it expressed in just "three words" (H. Mehta, 2015), and making it sound like a dirty word.

However, language as a strategic tool of the politics of representation has been very effectively secured to defeat the reductionist and essentialist intent of stereotypes in these films. The Aristotelian concept of rhetoric is recalled in the manner in which these films employ dialogic rhetoric as an "an interactive means of discovering meaning through language" (Ede, 1982). The films demonstrate the importance of rhetoric in both public and private spaces.

In *Fire,* Sita jolts Radha out of her numbing comfort zone on the day of the *Karwachauth* fast which is observed by wives for the long life of their husband. She says: "Isn't it amazing we're so marked by customs and rituals? Somebody just has to press my button, this button marked tradition and I start responding like a trained monkey. Do I shock you?" Radha replies, "Yes" (D. Mehta, 1996). Later, the discourse of enlightenment by controlling desires, roots of evil, is pulled apart through a short but impassioned argument from Radha:

> Listen, I did not live when devoid of desire, and how many desires have risen in me! And hear out those desires. I desire to live. I desire Sita. I desire her affection, her emotions, her love. My desire is to live! (D. Mehta, 1996)

In *Aligarh*, the sensuousness of the metaphors in Siras's poetry not only offers an insight into the passionate heart and high-spiritedness of this otherwise demure and despondent person but reveals his predicament too:

> Oh beloved moon, fear not the dons that separate us
> For we must meet again when the world goes to sleep

> In the light of the day I am unseen […]
> We will touch as shadows touch
> Becoming one in the midnight sun. (H. Mehta, 2015)

In *ELKDTAL,* along with the persuasive composition of the monologue rendered by Sweety in the staged play, direct rhetorical questions convey the intent behind them which overrides the preconceived notions of the listener. They serve to challenge the age old fixed meanings and silences:

> Why do all people think only in one direction? Is it compulsory that I should fall in love with a boy only? Why did you (God) make me like this? […] If you don't consider yourself normal, how will others accept you? Is there anyone who will stand by you? (Dhar, 2019)

The subtlety of a simple interaction is impactful enough to send the hearer into self-reflection.

SMZS has abundantly made used as an apparatus of rhetoric as retorts to the ignorance, irrationality and extremities of the controlling codes of dominant culture. While on way to the railway station with Kartik, Aman's uncle asks him: "When did you decide to become this (*ye* in hindi)" (Kewalya, 2020). Aman vocalizes the word for him and says, "it's not called '*ye*'(this), it's called gay" and retorts: "When did *you* decide that you will not 'become' gay" (Kewalya, 2020)? The uncle pauses to think and reflects on the naturalness of his sexuality and says: "There is a point" (Kewalya, 2020). Desperate to make his parents understand and accept his truth, Aman hits at their dual perspective on love vis-à-vis its constructed and biological composition: "Your Oxytocin is love, my Oxytocin is disease!" (Kewalya, 2020). In the end, when a reference to Supreme Court's hearing on Section 377 is made, Shankar Tripathi reacts, "Will the Supreme Court take all the decisions now" (Kewalya, 2020)? The intent of the question regarding a lack of reasonable thinking about personal choices on love and partnership is not lost on the viewer.

Additionally, these films offer a novel idea which promises to be a breakthrough in the LGBTQ debate. Convinced that normalizing of homosexual love is the first step towards mainstreaming queer issues, they locate the primary site which can be engaged to mitigate the problems of LGBTQ persons; they subtly hint at the need for sex/gender education for children and engaging them in LGBT discussions. In *Aligarh,* Siras credits his closeness with the children of his brothers to the non-judgemental nature of children. In *ELKDTAL,* a little girl is shown attentively watching the play and wiping her tears at the end. This is an issue that needs serious attention to get the future generations differentiate the socially constructed reality from the biological one.

Finally, the discussion can be concluded with the observation that the protagonists in the above discussed films do not overturn the hegemonic structures of the society and remain more or less within the larger heteronormative frameworks. These films provide an insider's view into Indian psyches and households to reflect on the question of justice to LGBTQ persons and create advocacy for them. The widespread popularity, media attention, and worldwide recognition and awards received by the films is instrumental to bringing LGBTQ discourse into the mainstream.

Conclusion: Films as Potential Sites of Conflict Demonstration and Resolution

As Hall notes, representation is dialogic and sustained by "the presence of shared cultural codes, which cannot guarantee that meanings will remain stable forever" (1997b, p.10). The above critique of the four homosexuality-centred films chart the journey that such dialogue has covered till now, with regard to LGBTQ identities in India. From *Fire to SMZS*, huge positive perspectival shifts in Indian society regarding homosexuality get reflected in these films. The LGBTQ representation in the mainstream films which have started to be co-created by LGBTQ persons is significant for the LGBTQ rights movement. These films are unique in being conversation starters to debate winners to influencers to take the cause further. By using their representational potency, future films on homosexuality may take the rights movement by subverting the stereotypes of marriage and parenting too.

The discussion shows that the rich language of the film medium, with its mass appeal and extended possibilities of inclusive vocabulary are a powerful source and site where a meaningful battle can be fought and the reference frames of subversion can be sought. Representation in these films has been found to be constitutive of the LGBTQ persons' identity on par with heterosexual identities. These films provide an insider's view into Indian psyches and households to reflect on the question of justice to this gender demography and create advocacy for them. They serve as amplifiers to make the LGBTQ issues heard, understood and valued. They touch that deep cultural nerve in a transformational manner and have helped Indian culture evolve with their disruptive strategies. The analysis of these films ends with the observation that they have provided the LGBTQ movement with transformative potentials to enable it to maneuverer within the narrow hegemonic sensibilities of the socio-political system. These films represent the progressive stages in the LGBTQ struggle and have become reference points for advancing the real world debate on sex and gender to a new level.

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