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The Variation in the Depiction of Queer Sexuality in India and the Question of Social Change

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Abstract:

The sexual minorities dwelling in India are fettered by the discrimination, stigmatization and continuous subjugation of the heteronormative social structure. The role of section 377 of the IPC also acted a very important role in shaping the homophobic environment in the present Indian society. The politics of creative resistance that is developed by the Indian cinema not only brings to light the plight of queer lives and experiences, but it also constructs an alternative culture against the dominant heteronormative culture that redefines the present Indian society. Indian Queer movement, like many other new social movements, is based upon the idea of bringing a social change; a change in our understanding of sexuality not from the conventional stage but from a peripheral one. It strives to demolish the manicured walls of predominant paradigms that define the sexual universe of any common man. The main argument is that with the increasing popularity of queer themes in Indian cinema a positive change can be expected to occur within subjective self of Indian society.

Keywords: *Alternative sexuality, Indian cinema, social change, heteronormativity.*

1. Introduction

Sexuality as a subject of discussion is cautiously wrapped under the satin of heterosexual social structure since an extensive period now. The dominant understanding of sex and sexuality has, over the years, naturalized and universalized a set of ideas about sex. The colonial period initiated a process of reconstructing the meaning of these terms, one that reconceived sex and sexuality as negative, contaminating and corrupting forces. Paradoxically though, “The idea of sex and sexuality as a dangerous corrupting force, to be carefully contained at all costs within family and marriage, was as Victorian as it was Indian” (Kapur, 2001). However, the untamable and volatile nature of the subject has made its way towards the same since the last two decades. With the surfacing of alternative sexualities, the universalized categories of heterosexuality, male-female binary, etc. have come under critical scrutiny. Movies, documentaries, novels, paintings, photography, etc., besides the legal protests, have become an important and innovative technique to communicate the resistance against the naturalized categories of sexuality and gender by the society and state.

Nevertheless, before discussing the role and growth of Indian cinema as a creative tool of resistance, it is important to understand the Queer movement in India. As Narrain and Bhan (2005) holds, the term queer represents both a deeply personal identity and a defiant political perspective. It embodies within itself a rejection of the primacy of the heterosexual, patriarchal family as the corner stone of our society. It not only captures and validates the identities and desires of gay, lesbian, bisexual, hijra, kothi and transgender people, but also represents, for many, an understanding of sexuality that goes much beyond the categories of heterosexual and homosexual. Queer politics speaks about the issues of these communities as ‘minority issues’ and also takes into consideration the larger understanding of gender and sexuality in our society that affect all of us regardless of our sexual orientation. It speaks of sexuality as a politics intrinsically and inevitably connected with the politics of class, gender, caste, religion and so on, thereby both acknowledging other movements and also demanding inclusion within them (Narrain and Bhan, 2005: 3-4).

It must also be said here that it was only in the 1990s when issue of sexual minorities came into the limelight in the country. Previously though several steps were taken on individual and collective level to educate the masses about the plight of sexual minorities like bringing out journals, documentary, novels, etc. yet it was only when Naz Foundation filed a case in the supreme court to repeal section 377 from the constitution, that debates around sexuality became inclusive enough to factor in the experiences of sexual minorities into the arena. Of course, the credit must also be given to the movie *Fire* (1996) which sparked waves of reaction all around the country and broke the silence about lesbian desires, for the first time at a commercial movie level.

Cinema has always acted as an important tool for articulating and dissimilating ideas upon the general masses. The influence of cinema can be felt in each and every corner of the Indian society. Besides the legal dimension of the Indian Queer Movement, Cinema has developed to be an influential creative tool of resistance towards the heteronormativity of Indian society. In fact, as already been stated, it was the movie *Fire* which for the first time bought the plight of lesbian lovers in the silver screen pushing the topic of

alternative sexuality into the fore front at the level of commercial cinema. Of course the reaction to the release was drastic in the sense that it led to the burning of many theatres in India chanting slogans that those movies destroyed the Indian culture. However, the importance of this release is immense in the sense that the topic of homosexuality was for the very first time articulated in a much bigger scale. This incident unveiled the alternative sexualities silenced for ages through cinema bringing it to the public realm.

Indian cinema better known as Bollywood have since a long time tired to portray the presence of alternative sexualities within the Indian society. Be it the portray of a brothel-madam Maharani of the *hijra* community in Mahesh Bhatt's *Sadak* released in 1991 or the cross-dressing child murderer from *Sangharsh* acted so frighteningly by Ashutosh Rana, Bollywood have always surprised its audiences by bringing alternative sexualities to the forefront. Further, the portray of *hijra* community have been quite evident in many movies for their role of performances in child birth. Another Mahesh Bhatt movie *Tamanna* released in 1997 also revolves round the character of Tiku (a *hijra* played by Paresh Rawal) who adopts a baby he had found discarded in a garbage dump, and raises her into a charming young woman (played by Pooja Bhatt).

However, it was only with the beginning of 21st century that the subject of homosexuality became pronounced in Indian cinema. Credit must of course be given to the movie *Fire* which took the discourse to a whole another level by its portray of lesbian desire in the silver screen. Beginning with *Fire*, there came other movies which dealt with the subject like *Shabnam Mausi* (2005) which was a bio-pic of the first *hijra* to be elected to public office. Depicting the world of a *hijra* much beyond performing in child birth and engaging in prostitution, this movie was able to break many stereo types about the *hijra* community depicting a *Hijra* in the leading role.

Further, the topic of homosexuality became gradually evident in many Indian movies in the beginning of the 21st century. Movies like *Teen Deewarein* (2003) which though showcased homosexuality is treated as sinful and errant, yet bought the issue in the front blended in the different colors of a prison life. Sridhar Rangayan is one of those award winning directors who highlighted the sexual stereotypes existing within the Indian society by making movies like *Gulabi Aaina* (2003), *Yours Emotionally* (2006) and *68 Pages* (2007) which was a leap forward in the field of queer Indian cinema. The self versus other (us versus them) battle is intricately exhibited in the characters portrayed by the director where he tries to encapsulate the "othered" treatment imparted to the sexual minorities under a heteronormative social set up. *Gulabi Aaina* is said to be the first Indian film to extensively center on Indian transsexuals with the entire story illustrating the lives of two transsexuals and a gay teenager's attempts to seduce a man - Samir (Rufy Baqal). The film explored the outlawed subject matter of transsexuals in India which is still much misinterpreted and looked down upon. The film has received tremendous support and critical acclaim from reviewers, festival directors and global audiences for its successful portray of one of the most marginalized section of the society. It has screened at more than 70 international film festivals and won couple of awards. With the Release of *Yours Emotionally* in 2006, a much bolder attempt was made to visibilize the invisible gay community in India challenging the heterosexual paradigm adored by the society. Revolving around the characters of Ravi and Paul, the movie tries to encapsulate the growing nature of the Indian gay community and indicate upon the "under the closet" nature of the community. Sedgwick (1990) argues that the closet, representing a known secret, is a central trope structuring contemporary western thinking. Sedgwick makes it clear that to make heterosexuality normal utmost endeavor is required (Dasgupta, 2012 :4).

Another movie named *68 pages* further highlighted the plight of sexual minorities fused with various social issues and health issues like AIDS. The movie sought to understand the rejection and subjugation of alternative sexualities and expose the triviality of society to disclose how it stigmatizes and shuns those who have HIV or even those who just want to live a lifestyle different from the dominant one in the society. Coming from some of the most ignored section of the society, like a transsexual bar dancer, a sex worker, a gay couple - take center stage in the movie to speak their tale of pain and disturbance, of contentment and hope.

In the movies mentioned above the trajectory of the so called sexual morality and fear of rejection is vividly portrayed by the director, Rangayan highlighting the social exclusion of many characters that could not fit under the stagnant heterosexual culture of the society. These movies portray, as Rubin (1989) calls, The "Charmed Circle" of sexuality. The dominant sexualities privileged by society were inside of it, while all the other sexualities that were outside and in opposition to it were marginalized and rejected. By telling the stories of the "outsiders" like the transsexual bar dancer, a sex worker, etc. in movies like *68 Pages* an attempt is made to problematize the manicured walls natural and universal. The binaries of this "charmed circle" included couple/alone or in groups, monogamous/promiscuous, same generation/cross-generational, and bodies only/with manufactured objects. The "Charmed Circle" represents the idea that there is a hierarchical valuation of sex acts (Rubin, 1989).

Further, the change in the representation of queer subject matter became very acute in the movies of Karan Johar, a commercial movie maker from Bollywood. As Margaret Redlich (2014) elaborated Johar uses his films to support the gay community's struggle for acknowledgement including blatant queer elements to the plot and for acceptance positioning his characters and stars as accepted by the gay community (Redlich, 2014: 56). Beginning from 2003 with the release of *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, Johar's movies has been trying to depict queer elements of Indian society in a light hearted comedy themed manner. *Dostana* (2008) and *Student of the Year* (2012) are examples of such depictions. It is because of which Redlinch remarks that Karan Johar's movies present the subject of homosexuality and brings "queerness into the light, avoiding controversy in the Indian public sphere" (Redlinch, 2014: 56). However, the recently released *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) presented the issue of homosexuality with much seriousness by illustrating the character of an elder son who struggles within his family to make himself accepted as a gay. Moreover, Redlich points out the difference between Karan Johar's movies and others lay in its reach to the audience. Most of these movies are hits in the Indian theatres and outside. These movies are able to reach a wider audience base and broadcast the idea of alternative sexualities that exists within each society.

These movies dealing with one of the most intimate aspects of an individual's life also portrays a social reality, the reality of living "double lives", self denials, subjugation and self struggle. It exhibits how state and society asserts its own hegemonic rule over sexual

minorities leaving them with no other choice than compromising with their desires and lifestyles. It also exposes an environment where the realization of one's full potential is restricted in the name of culture, traditions and most importantly law and morality. Moreover, besides the Karan Johar films, there are movies like *Margarita with a straw* released in 2015 which have bought the issue of homosexual lesbian desire fused with the subject of autism in a well knit Indian backdrop. Sexual fluidity¹ as a concept is well expressed in the silver screen by this movie which starts with the appearance of a heterosexual attraction by the leading lady (played by Kalki Koechin) towards a male singer but discovers her homosexual desire once she goes abroad to study and a passionate and lively girl there. This movie in that sense challenges the fixed boundaries of sexuality which is thought to be stagnant and unchanging. Another movie named *Qissa* (2015) also exposes the futility of stereotyped gender roles in the society. This movie portrays the desire of a father to have a son but on not being able to get one raise his daughter as a son. Right from the dresses to driving trucks, she is bought up as a boy to the extent that she even marries a girl. Where on one hand, this movie exposes the fixed gender roles of any society; it also exemplifies Butler's (1990) gender performativity² by questioning the mismatch of the biological sex and the leading Character's gender performance.

2. Queer Indian Cinema and the Question of Social Change

The fact that queer elements have been increasingly portrayed in the Indian cinema also has to do with the debate of social change. Change is the most inevitable phenomenon in the world. Everything which seems static and unchanging in nature now was also in fact the result of several reformations and transformations which left it in the present state. None can possibly escape change. The same is true for the society too. Society too at once did not approve many occurrences and deeds which at present is readily acceptable. For example, sati system in India which practically was nothing more than a curse upon the women finally was lifted up with the change in time and circumstances. The same is true for many other issues like ban on widow remarriage, etc. now such changes, are not overnight phenomenon. It requires months and years of relentless struggle and remonstrations, only then change could be expected for the better. Such struggles are not at all easy, because it demands something which goes against the dominant paradigm. And to change something which have gained the status of ultimate reality is not an easy task. Generations of values, rituals and customs attached to that 'given' reality makes it furthermore difficult to factor in the subaltern groups which stands discriminated by that unquestionable and 'given' reality. The same is true for the sexual minorities existing within the country because the reality of heterosexuality is worshipped with such devotion and faith that to go against it becomes something abnormal and thus is discarded by all.

Scholars like Gita Sen and Michael Edwards argue that from the perspective of change, all social systems rest on three bases: a set of principles that form an axiomatic basis of ethics and values; a set of processes - the functioning mechanisms and institutions that undergird the system; and the subjective states that constitute our inner being - our personal feelings and intuitions in the deepest sense (Edwards and Sen, 2000:608-609). The first of these bases of change describes how we understand and rationalize the workings of the social order, while the third describes how we understand ourselves. The interaction of these three bases of change determines how different forms of power are exercised in society. Economic power is expressed in the distribution of productive assets and the workings of markets and firms; social power is expressed in the status and position awarded to different social groups; and political power defines each person's voice in decision-making in both the private sphere and public affairs (ibid). These systems of power combine to produce a "social order", and transforming this social order is the task of social change. The social order that is emerging under globalizing capitalism is one which excludes or oppresses certain groups of people, especially those already on the margins (ibid).

The sexual minorities are undoubtedly one of those social groups who are marginalized and forced to live their lives in the periphery. The silky concoction of heterosexuality as an ethical and moral base of the society; along with existing mechanisms and institutions like section 377 of the IPC, bio-medicine, etc. which uphold and normalize the heterosexual structure of the society; along with the personal opinion and views of the society that homosexuality is abnormal or sin, all fuse together to produce a kind of social order that discards homosexuality completely from the society and attach a stigma to the entire issue. Now, profuse combination of these three factors is so intense that to bring about a change in that social order is not at all an easy task. Several factors need to be considered here before undertaking any step in that direction.

And in bringing about the much needed social change, a change in the attitude of the society is needed besides the legal challenges and in doing so the creative tools of resistance like the Indian cinema, novels, paintings, etc. have played an important part. The change in the inner being of any individual as depicted by Edward and Sen which is crucial in bringing about a change in any kind of social order is vehemently influenced by cinema when shown the sad plight of sexual minorities and the callous treatment imparted to them by the worshippers of heterosexuality.

The first baby steps towards a change in the heterosexual social order can be felt from the very fact that the alternative sexual identities have at least to some extent come out in asserting their identity. Further, the mainstream bollywood movies made in the exhibition of queer sexual identities have broken the much preserved silence and embarrassment related to the topic. A minor hope of

¹ Sexual fluidity is a post modernist concept which shows that sexuality is not fixed at the time of birth. It can change based on a variety of factors; external and internal. It negates the concept of sexual rigidity and harvests the concept of fluidity and change.

² Butler uses the concept of performativity in order to show how the hegemonic way of understanding gender are compulsorily acted out in order to naturalize or normalize the dominant model. Butler characterizes gender as the effect of continuous acting, one that produces the effect of a static or normal gender while it is difficult to understand the contradiction and instability of any single person's gender act.

change can be expected in the direction of viewing sexual minorities courtesy the Indian cinema because of two reasons. Firstly, by the very manner in which movies consisting queer subject matter is received by the audiences. When *Fire* was released back in 1996, the reaction to it was drastic leading to the burning of many theatres within the country and accusing it of destroying Indian culture. But after two decades of its release, the situation is not the same. *Angry Indian Goddesses*, a movie released in 2016 as already been mentioned above, though met with criticism with some hardliners, yet was not reacted the way *Fire* was targeted. Dealing with subject of lesbian marriage, the movie was able to problematize many other social issues like rape, eve teasing, sexual objectification of women in cinema, etc. Credit must be given to the long struggle of sexual minorities and the growth of Indian cinema too in dealing with the subject. Besides the legal battle of repealing section 377 of the IPC and the continuous protests going on within the country, cinema has proved its importance in dealing with the issue by bringing out the struggles of the sexual minorities both within themselves and with the society. Moreover, the recently released *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) also portray one of such stories of “coming out” where a well established son confronts of his homosexual orientation his mother who initially disowns him but gradually understands his feelings and accepts him in the family. The crowd in the hall who were people from all age groups and gender cheered at his acceptance of the homosexual son. This is social change when at one time in 1996, theatres were burnt at the screening of homosexual love and in 2016 people applauded at the acceptance of the same. Of course, it must also be noted that the situation is not uniform throughout the country, yet there is a hope of change in viewing the issue from a diverse level.

Secondly, there is also a change in presenting the subject matter to the audiences. Previously *Fire* (1996) showcased the subject of lesbian desire between two sister-in-laws who didn't have good relations with their husbands both physically and emotionally. It was under that environment of rejection that they developed a desire for each other. But the same cannot be said about the recently released movies showing homosexual desire. *Angry Indian Goddesses* a movie released in 2016 also bought the idea of lesbian desire in the silver screen but the subject matter was an intrepid step taken by two ladies to get married in a Church in Goa amidst the support of their friends who were happy and encouraging for the venture. Thus, a change in the social setting of presenting the subject to the audiences can also be felt here.

Now, as it is already being stated that to bring about a change in the social order, a change in the subjective “self” is also needed. The inner self that is constituted under the influence of varied external factors amounts much to the needed change. Movies, from the last two decades, have successfully presented the plight of sexual minorities in the silver screen to the Indian audiences and have been able to bring the tabooed subject to the sphere of light and presence within a social set up. Of course given the legal obstruction like section 377 and the continuous subjugation of the sexual minorities by police, family and other institutions of the society cannot be expected to change overnight as it has already been stated it requires much rigorous efforts and time to bring about social change. However, the increasing popularity of cinema, paintings, documentaries, etc. have provided a platform to raise the empathy of the society towards this ignored section of the society and provide a faint hope in this direction of change.

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