Heteronormativity, Homophobia, and the Counter Narratives: Queer Narratives of Contemporary Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Indian cinema and other mainstream cultural forms from India had been for a long time turning a blind eye to homosexual love and relationships. The cinema being a medium largely dominated by the middle-class values in India has almost always been operating within the heteronormative value systems of the society save for a few exceptions. However, a paradigm shift can be observed in contemporary Indian cinema. The paper investigates how the narratives of contemporary Indian cinema challenge normative heterosexual values to create counter-narratives rooted in queer politics and aesthetics. The paper will investigate it through the analysis of three contemporary movies from three different cultural contexts within India to trace the patterns of change and to situate it in the larger context of societal transformation. It includes *Memories in March* (2010), directed by Sanjoy Nag, Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* (2015), and *Moothon* (2019) directed by Geethu Mohandas. Such an analysis will provide insights into the complex processes of socio-cultural negotiations in the production and reception of contemporary Indian cinema concerning the question of homosexuality.

Keywords: Heteronormativity; Homophobia; Indian cinema; Queer; Resistance narratives.

Introduction

In 2013 Indian cinema celebrated its century year. Starting from the silent era to the present, Indian cinema has traversed a great deal to reach its heights. A scrutiny of the themes and contents in Contemporary Indian Cinema would reveal that the articulation of queerness and homoerot-

ic relationships have gained momentum in the present. The interesting point is that this paradigm shift happens not only in art house cinema but also in mainstream movies. Indian Cinema and other mainstream cultural forms of India have been turning a blind eye to alternative sexualities[1] for a long time. Cinema being a medium largely dominated by middle-class value systems and morality has almost always been operating within the heteronormative[2] value systems of the society. It's quite apparent from the stereotypical representation of queer characters in cinema. However, contemporary Indian cinema employs more genuine and effective portrayals of queer existence, homosexuality and homoerotic relationships. In doing so, they often challenge normative heterosexuality and homophobic attitudes of the society and create counter-narratives of resistance.

The shift in perceptions of alternative sexualities and gender can be traced back to the origins of gender studies as an academic discipline in the West and subsequently in the South Asian context. It is a trans-disciplinary area of study that engages itself with the study of gender realities, gender norms, gender relations, and gender identities. Gender studies as a discipline owes its origin to academic feminism, although lesbian and gay movements were separate until the 1980s. While feminism questioned the dominant patriarchal ideology, it failed to address the problems of the third gender or the "other". This group includes the people referred to as part of the LGBT community: lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Queer Theory can be considered as a part of gender studies. In modern theoretical parlance "queer" is an umbrella term used to refer to sexual minorities. The term suggests the very attitude of the society towards sexual minorities. By accepting the term "queer" the minorities accept their difference at the same time asserts their difference as natural. According to queer theorists, all sexuality, in a certain sense, is deviant. There is no norm for it; rather there is only a variety of possibilities both for gender identity and for sexual practices. They assert the role of culture in establishing and maintaining gender norms.

The entry of Judith Butler with her work, *The Gender Trouble* (1990), into the academic arena marks a revolutionary beginning of queer studies in the Western context. Even today, it's considered a seminal text in the study of gender and alternative sexualities. For Butler, gender is nothing more than a performance.

> The "unity" of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through compulsory heterosexuality. The force of this practice is, through an exclusionary

apparatus of production to restrict the relative meanings of "heterosexuality", "homosexuality" and "bisexuality" as well as the subversive sites of their convergence and resignification. (Butler 31-32)

Eve Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and *Between Men* (1985) reflected upon the notions of homophobia and gay bashing along with the emergence of homosexual- heterosexual dichotomy. Sedgwick's work was centred on antihomophobic projects[3] which are rooted in seven axioms. Adrienne Rich's identification of sexuality as a spectrum defies the strict binary of "male" and "female" in heterosexuality which is oblivious to the multiplicity of possibilities offered by alternative sexualities.

In the context of India homosexuality had been a criminal offence from the time of British rule. The criminalization of homosexuality by the colonizers can be understood in connection with Victorian morality which had a strong influence on the culture of Britain in the nineteenth century. Indian cultural perception of homosexuality before colonization is oblivious to a certain extent. However, in Indian mythology and in ancient architecture, which is very much part of the cultural repertoire of India, the instances that celebrate queerness can be traced: "Hindu mythology reveals that patriarchy, the idea that men are superior to women was invented. It makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions the notions of maleness and femaleness. Many words in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Tamil suggest familiarity with queer thought and behaviour" (Pattanaik 12).

Queer politics in India gained momentum in the 1980s and 90's "as an embodiment of both discipline and its defiance" (Judge 7). Through years of radical politics and struggles, in 2009, the High Court of Delhi decriminalized homosexuality by arguing that Article 377[4] of the Indian constitution is unconstitutional. However, a verdict made by the Delhi High Court in 2013 reinstated Article 377 and homosexuality became a criminal offence once again. In a historic verdict of the Supreme Court of India in 2018, article 377 was revoked and homosexuality was decriminalized again.

> The argument around Section 377, which eventually brought many queer activist groups together, began with contentions that seem to have emerged along the lines of gender. Activists hoping for the overturning of Section 377 began to claim that the nature of sexual activity between two consenting adults in a bedroom was a private affair, and should not be a constitutional issue. (Chatterjee 20)

It can be seen that an analysis of the trajectory of queer politics in India is pertinent to understanding the representation of homosexuality in Indian cinema. The paper focuses on three different Indian movies that came out during a time when the debates on homosexuality were rampant in the cultural scenario of India. These films can be considered representatives of contemporary Indian cinema, as they are from three different cultural contexts in India. The paper looks at *Memories in March* (2010), a movie from Bengal, directed by Sanjoy Nag and scripted by Rituparno Ghosh, Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* (2015), which is a Bollywood movie, and Moothon (2019), a Malayalam language film directed by Geethu Mohandas, to understand the complex processes of socio-cultural negotiations involved in the production and reception of these films.

Enunciating the Queer: Sanjoy Nag's *Memories in March*

Memories in March (2010) directed by Sanjoy Nag is a breakthrough film on same-sex love. The film bagged a national award for the best feature film in English. Rituparno Ghosh, director and a queer icon of India, portrays the central character along with Deepti Naval and Raima Sen. The movie portrays the emotional crisis faced by the central characters after the unexpected death of someone very dear to them. However, the central focus is on the homosexual love relationship between Ornop (Rituparno Ghosh) and Siddharth. Kaustav Bakshi and Parjanya Sen identify the movie, along with other movies which deal with queer relationships by Ghosh, as "Products of a neo-liberal sexual identity politics" (Bakshi and Sen 206). It can be seen that the portrayal of homosexuality delves deep into the emotional dimensions of the relationship rather than going about its political aspects. Nevertheless, the film is not without a radical and subversive potential.

> What these films seek to do is to insert discourses of sexual non-conformity into the consciousness of the neo-bhadrolok class, willing participants in the late capitalist consumerist culture. The aesthetics, as regards to set, costume, and dialogue, which had become characteristic of Ghosh's cinema, is consciously repeated, or so it seems, to reinforce the message that the queer individual is not an aberration but a natural (or even normal) member of the neo-bhadrolok family home, which has been the site of action in so many of hir earlier films. (Bakshi and Sen 208)

The mother character played by Deepti Naval realizes her son's sexual orientation only after his death. The moment when the character Shahana

played by Raima Sen reveals to her the relationship between Ornob and Siddharth, her very being is shocked by this new intolerable revelation about her son. In her words, the day of this realization is the worst day of her life. Unable to digest the fact that her son is a homosexual, the mother tries to find ways to assert his manliness. After finding condoms in her son's room, she argues with Shahana that her son is heterosexual and therefore "normal". When that attempt fails, she consciously or unconsciously accuses Ornob of seducing her son who in her imagination is a perfect "normal" guy. "In *Memories in March*, Ornob's queerness is once again posited in opposition to the biological woman, split across two registers – the boyfriend's oedipal mother, struggling to come to terms with the knowledge of her son's sexuality, and Shahana who once nurtured amorous feelings for him" (Bakshi and Sen 216). When she reconciles with Ornob she blames herself for her son's "abnormality". She attempts to understand this as a result of her busy career due to which, according to her, she fails to understand that something undesirable is happening to her son. Despite being well-educated, Siddharth's mother fails to comprehend the situation in the right way. This can be understood in the larger context of the middle-class value systems and societal attitudes towards alternative sexualities and Homo erotic relationships

In the movie, Siddharth Misra, the partner of Ornob, is never seen. The audience however can understand this character through his mother's reminiscences of his words to her. The character has just passed away by the time the narrative begins. However, there is not even a flashback scene or a photograph of this character being shown in the course of the narrative, even though the whole narrative revolves around his death and the ensuing emotional rupture faced by his dear ones. This can be a deliberate attempt on the part of the auteur which in fact offers a metaphorical suggestion of the invisibility of people with alternative sexualities.

The aquarium in Siddharth's house becomes an important metaphor for the closeted existence of gay people. There is a scene in which Ornob expresses how much he detests being caged by looking at the fish in the aquarium. As it is apparent in the movie, Siddharth and Ornob are unable to go public about their relationship even with their colleagues. Siddharth even expresses his difficulty in revealing to his mother about his relationship in one of his unsent messages which his mother reads from his phone after his death.

The Radha-Krishna myth, the quintessential metaphor of love in a lot of Indian movies, is employed in *Memories in March* (2010). The difference

here is that it is used to intensify the depth of same-sex love. Radha-Krishna relationship is seen as the very epitome of love in almost all the different cultures in India. It's also divine. "The trope of divine association is redeployed in *Memories in March*, where the Radha-Krishna myth functions as a subtext, particularly through two songs− Kahen sang khelu holi aj Brajpur? (With whom shall we play Holi in Brajtown today?) and Sakhi hum Mohan avisaare jaun (O friend! Am setting off for a love tryst with him!) – articulating Ornab's agony of losing hir lover" (Bakshi and Sen 213). Here the attempt is to assert that same-sex love is as pure as heterosexual love and it should not be considered undesirable.

The possibility of subversion of the societal conventions is invested in the character of Ornob. He does not conform to the norms even about superficial things like dress and appearance. Similar to the real-life Rituparno Ghosh, the character stands for the radical undermining of the standards of the "normal" heterosexual society. When Sid's mother calls her son's sexual orientation abnormal, Ornob confronts her with a violent reaction. It is a powerful answer to the whole society.

Queering Bollywood: Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh*

Aligarh is a Bollywood movie released in 2015 with widespread critical acclaim. The cinema is directed by Hansal Mehta and has Manoj Bajpayee and Rajkumar Rao in the title roles. It was produced by Sunil Lulla, Shailesh Singh, and Sandip Singh. Apoorva Asrani and Ishani Banerjee are credited with the framing of the story. The movie, based on a real-life incident, tells the story of a professor from the Department of Modern Languages at Aligarh University. It is in the arena of Bollywood cinema, where the popular representation of alternative sexualities is often mistaken and misleading, that Mehta comes forth with a powerful narrative on the trials of a gay professor. As rightly observed by Gupta in a review of the movie "Queer characters are not characters who just happen to be queer in most Bollywood movies. They are stereotypes sent up for sniggers" (Gupta 1)

The initial scene of the cinema itself focuses on the ill-treatment of the protagonist and his partner in which both of them are beaten by two stranger intruders. As observed by Eve Sedgewick on "the centrality and power of male homosexual panic as actually contributing to the credibility of the pathologizing "homosexual panic" legal defense of gay-bashers" (Sedgewick 21). The situation of the protagonist Prof. Siras has striking parallels to an instance described by Sedgewick in *The Epistemology of the Closet*

(1990). In 1973 a teacher from Maryland had been transferred from his position for being gay. Without inquiry, he was fired. Professor Siras is suspended from the university in Aligarh when his gay identity is revealed to the public. The movie beginning with the gay bashing narrative goes on to portray the difficulties faced by the character. The closeted existence of the protagonist becomes even more severe once his identity has been revealed to the public and authorities. The character is shown as being in his apartment all alone and hesitant to go out. In the portrayal of this character, the fear of being seen by neighbors is explicit. "Gay identity is a convoluted and off-centering possession if it is a possession at all; even to come out does not end anyone's relation to the closet," (Sedgewick)

The intrusion into Professor Siras's private life is arguably a violation of the closeted space. The scene taken from the outside of Siras's upstairs apartment in a long and low angle without actually showing what happens inside the apartment intensifies the tension of the moment. The sudden shift to silence followed by this tension evokes the feeling of a silenced and marginalized identity of the gay professor. "Mehta's narration of the film takes on this injustice with the simple facts. There are no iconic dialogues: but telling silence speaks volumes of Siras's solitude and captures the audience" (Kaushal). The dimly lit shots intensify the feel of the almost darkened existence led by the character and the deteriorating health conditions of Siras depicted in the following scenes can be presumed as ensuing from his traumatic experiences after the incident in the night. The direct portrayal of the incident in the night in a later scene reveals the kind of treatment he has undergone within the premises of his apartment

The scene portraying the clock tower of Aligarh can be interpreted as a symbol of institutional structures which prescribe and appropriate the norms of the society. In a later scene when the professor reveals his desire to jump down from the same clock tower, the traces of subversion can be observed as he wants to jump down and escape from the very power structures which oppress him.

The protest in front of Aligarh University against Prof. Siras portrays the societal attitudes towards homosexuality. The university authorities in a public meeting call Siras's homosexual relationship as "immoral conduct." The condition of Siras becomes even more adverse when the authorities ask Siras to leave his university-allotted apartment and also when the electricity connection to the apartment is denied without prior notice. Later in the story, Siras has to leave his second apartment too.

The scene that immediately follows the protest scene in the Aligarh campus captures the closed windows and the door of Prof. Siras's apartment which is twice locked from inside. It further reinforces the closeted existence of the character. "The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life" (Sedgewick 68). The scene also depicts the character's fear of intrusion. Later, in a scene when he hears a sound from outside, he is shown as taking a stick from the room apparently for self-defense. Again, the journalist Deepu's entry into the house is met with a violent reaction from Siras.

The complexities of the Indian legal system and its rules that criminalize homosexuality are keenly depicted in the cinema. In the beginning, the Protagonist is made to write a letter of apology for being gay to his colleague and that letter is later used by the opposition lawyer to plead against him. Here, the agency of the accused homosexual man is problematized. The opposition lawyer's ill-treatment of Siras for his sexual orientation is shown as on the verge of mental torture. "The hectoring tone of the public prosecutor in Allahabad is of a piece with the general castigation brought to bear upon the LGBT community," (Gupta 1). His constant denials to apologize and hesitation in labelling his feelings in three letters can be seen as his conscious or unconscious questioning of the norm.

The movie refers to the second July 2009, Delhi High Court verdict declaring section 377 as unconstitutional and depicts a radical protest in Delhi against the treatment of Professor Siras by Aligarh University authorities. These instances can be understood in terms of the underlying queer politics of the cinema. The movie also specifies that on 15 March 2010, the Allahabad High Court decriminalized homosexuality. The advocate of Siras argues that the underlying theme of the Indian constitution is inclusiveness and the court declares the incident which has taken place at Siras's apartment as a violation of article 21. Towards the end of the movie, the Allahabad High Court verdict in favour of Siras is declared. The declaration of the verdict is followed by a queer parade. However, the movie ends with a note that in 2013 India's Supreme Court ruled to uphold Article 377.

The protagonist Siras played by Manoj Bajpayee is portrayed as a very sensitive character. The portrayal of this character is in stark contrast with the usual ways of presenting such characters. "Bollywood generally has been hostile to accommodating queer characters and has often projected them as aberrational or outright 'abnormal'" (Bakshi and Sen 168). Several

scenes establish the nature of this character. One of the most important ones is the scene in which he listens to music completely immersed in it and on the verge of tears after a while. "Manoj Bajpayee makes of Siras a man whose bewildered fragility is up for examination, and whose gentleness demands understanding and compassion" (Gupta 1).

The marginal existence of a gay man is treated with all its subtleties in the movie. However, there are instances in which it is explicitly stated. During one of his conversations with Deepu, Prof. Siras talks about his outsider status among the married people at the university. The treatment he receives from his friend Sreedhar's house is another instance in which the character is looked upon with contempt as the "other." When it comes to the partner of Siras, the very existence of the character itself becomes a question after the night incident.

There is a conscious attempt in the movie to assert that there is nothing unusual about homosexual relationships. It is achieved by intermingling the scenes that portray Deepu's heterosexual relationship with his colleague along with Prof. Siras's intimate moments with his partner. The attempt is to articulate that sexual urges are parts of human existence, be it homosexual or heterosexual.

Geethu Mohan Das's *Moothon*: Queer Subjectivities from the "Other" Spaces

Moothon (2019) is a film from Kerala directed by Geethu Mohan Das. It is the second movie made by Geethu Mohan Das after her debut *Liar's Dice* in 2013. *Moothon* (2019) has gained widespread critical acclaim including an official entry into the Toronto International Film Festival. It was produced by Anurag Kashyap, Ajay Rai, and Vinod Kumar. The camera was handled by well-known director and cinematographer Rajeev Ravi. It is partly set in Mumbai and the rest is set in Lakshadweep islands. The movie has Nivin Pauly in the lead role along with a mind-blowing performance by Roshan Mathew and Sanjana Dipu: "Although it does not play out smoothly all through, Moothon has enough depth in it for us to dive deep, and come back with material to ponder. Geethu Mohan Das makes a brave statement with her first film in Malayalam" (Praveen 1).

The narrative is set in Lakshadweep Island which is isolated from mainland India. The place is often seen as an "other" world, an exotic region, by the rest of the Indians from the mainland. This topographical dichotomy is very pertinent to the narrative. It can be seen that the selection of

Lakshadweep islands as the background of a homosexual narrative in a way adds to the alienation faced by the protagonist and his partner for being homosexual. They are relegated to the margins and hence become the "other" in an "other" world.

From the very outset, the narrative challenges the gender notions upheld by society. The character Mulla (Sanjana Dipu), who is a girl, appears in male outfits and with a "boyish" haircut in most parts of the movie. The audience will come to know about Mulla's gender only in the latter half of the movie. Here, by creating confusion in gender identity of Mulla, the auteur is making fun of the societal assumption of how each gender is supposed to be. Mulla's denial to conform is apparent from the beginning itself. She is almost always seen with other boys on the island and even fights with boys. There is an instance in which a group of boys grab her apply lipstick and force her to wear a *burkha*. Here, she vehemently resists and fights back. Mulla's nonconformity foreshadows the non-conformist homoerotic relationship between Akbar and Ameer which is to be revealed later in the narrative.

The movie portrays a very tender relationship between Akbar (Nivin Pauly) and Ameer (Roshan Mathew). Although the auteur Geethu Mohan Das does not agree with the idea of labelling her movie as queer, it can be seen that the love relationship portrayed in the movie is homoerotic. The movie focuses on the relationship in all its emotional depths. Akbar and Ameer meet after a long time during a self-flagellation ritual. This instance can be interpreted as the beginning of the relationship in the form of a mere physical attraction. However, soon the relationship goes deep as the dumb Ameer finds in Akbar someone who understands him. Akbar easily perceives Ameer's sign language and they begin to feel special for each other. It is to be noted that the reason for their relationship ending in tragedy is nothing but the homoerotic nature of the relationship for which there is no societal approval. As Chatterjee observes: "It is, for the most part, defined based on who you are or are not attracted to, have sex with or do not, and hinged on where you consider yourself to be on the gender spectrum that exists between conventional masculinity and conventional femininity" (Chatterjee 2).

The fact that the character Ameer is dumb adds to the nature of his sexual orientation and preferences. His silence thus has a metaphorical dimension as it is symbolic of how people with alternative sexualities are silenced by the overarching narrative of normative heterosexuality. Akbar realising the silenced voice of Ameer creates the parallel between the

two characters as they belong to the same group of gay men. Ameer's hesitation to conform to societal rules is revealed when he expresses his dislike for a conventional marriage. However, in the end, he is completely silenced during his marriage ceremony in which he is unable to express his disagreement. The familial and societal insistence to conform, results in the tragic end of Ameer. This reveals a cultural scenario in which those with a sexual orientation, different from the normative, are denied agency.

> The Heterosexualisation of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between "feminine" and "masculine," where these are understood as expressive attributes of "male" and "female." The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of "identities" cannot "exist"- that is those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender. (Butler 17)

Homophobia is an important aspect of the narrative of *Moothon* (2019). Akbar's sexual orientation is unacceptable to his mother. She confronts Akbar violently for being involved in something that is considered a sin by the religion and taboo by society. Even the very intimate friend of Akbar fails to understand him in this regard. The interesting point is that Akbar himself to some extent shares the societal homophobia as revealed by his emotional trouble and bewilderment after the first sexual act. It is Akbar's fear of his homosexuality that makes him deny Ameer's plea to go with him to Mumbai.

The treatment of the homosexual love relationship in the movie is in such a way that it evokes sympathy. The movie appropriates same-sex love as a natural and beautiful feeling like any relationship of love. Through the portrayal of the tragic ends of both lovers, the film offers a powerful critique of the societal restrictions imposed upon people with different sexual orientations.

Conclusion

The narratives of contemporary Indian cinema challenge the normative heterosexual values to create counter-narratives rooted in queer politics and aesthetics. This shift in thematic and aesthetic dimensions of contemporary cinema is the result of the processes of sociocultural negotiations taking place for a long time in India. Cinema being a cultural product, that largely depends on realistic means of expression, is informed and

shaped by societal transformations. It is to be noted that cinema in turn appropriates and redefines the value systems and conceptions which exist in the society.

The value system prevailing in India ever since colonisation favours heterosexual familial structure and disregards homosexual relationships. This social scenario has been reflected in the representation of alternative sexualities and Trans-persons in cinema for a long time. However, with the growing impact of gay rights activism, and the influence of Western neo-liberal ideas, the social scenario began to change gradually. The shifts in attitudes that took place over the centuries get consolidated in the moral landscape of contemporary cinema.

Sanjoy Nag's *Memories in March* (2010) came out a year after the Delhi High Court verdict which decriminalized homosexuality. The team of Nag and Ghosh would have felt it was the right moment to come up with such a movie. As Ghosh was an already accepted queer cultural icon, the film had an added advantage too. The most important aspect of the movie is that it is scripted and enacted by a queer person. The movie has a middle-class setting and challenges their value systems.

Hansal Mehta's Aligarh (2015) came out almost two years after the decision made by the Supreme Court of India to uphold Article 377. This movie based on real-life incidents has its setting in the background of one of the most prominent educational institutions in India. The movie proves that even the higher centers of learning are not free from the biases of society. It can be seen that the straight male director's identification with the character's trauma is rooted in a vision of inclusivity.

Geethu Mohan Das's Moothon (2019) is a movie that came after the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2017 by the Supreme Court of India. The setting of the movie is Lakshadweep Island and is about the lives of common men in a less developed part of India. It can be seen that the female director is successful in her understanding and portrayal of homosexuality.

These three representative movies from different regions of contemporary India offer a powerful critique of heteronormativity and homophobic attitudes in Indian society. Though different in its temporal and spatial dimensions, the representation of homosexuality is something that unifies these narratives. Thus, through the critique of societal norms, these films offer counter-narratives of resistance that redefine the societal notions regarding homosexual relationships.

Notes

[1] Alternative sexualities refer to sexual orientations and preferences other than the one denoted by normative heterosexuality.

[2] Heteronormative is a term used to denote how heterosexuality has become a norm in society disregarding all the other possibilities of sexualities

[3] Antihomophobic project is a term used by Eve Sedgewick to denote the academic projects that work against the homophobic attitudes of society.

[4] According to Article 377 of the Indian Constitution, homosexuality and all other sexualities other than heterosexuality are criminal offenses. On 6th September 2018, the article was revoked by the Supreme Court of India

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