

The Queer Rhetoric of Bollywood: A case of mistaken identity

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SUMMARY: The paper addresses the queer representation of fictional characters and gay framing, analyzing the concept of "dosti" and "yaarana" and the trope of the homo-social triangle in Hindi cinema. This film trajectory presupposes the existence of homosexuality but relies on the inevitability of heterosexuality. This strand explores traditional social themes such as love, family, tradition but within this builds up an alternative "invisible" queer narrative. By acknowledging the slippages between "real identity" and "mistaken identity" the films usher in a new queer cinematic discourse within popular Bollywood. In this paper I will chiefly look at Nikhil Advani and Karan Johar's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (If Tomorrow Never Comes, 2004); and Tarun Mansukhani and Karan Johar's *Dostana* (Friendship, 2008) and see how Queer Representations in Indian Cinema address the invisible queer politics through a case of mistaken identity(ies).

Introduction

The term "queer" has avoided a conceptual pinning down. Aligning itself with postmodern and poststructuralist theory, "queer" moves beyond the limitations imposed by the categories of "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" and "transgender." It avoids closure through its fluidity of signification and appropriation. However, it also marks a break from postmodern and poststructuralist high theory by choosing to maintain its allegiance to socio-political transformation. Jackie Stacey points out that "it is precisely this convergence of the theoretical and the political which has given the term such a generative and yet elusive life." Queer, according to Stacey, "can be played across diverse theoretical and political agendas with a range of different consequences" (Stacey, 2007:1).

Queer empowers a mode of enquiry that refuses the grid of sexual/non-sexual divisions in conceiving pleasures. In other words it repudiates conventions that classify pleasure as "innocent," and "sexual" or even "corporeal" highlighting zones of fluidity that blur such conventions, in order to generate fresh perceptions of human intimacies and corporeality. In short a queer reading is not one that attempts to look at things from a "different" angle, but one that seeks to demolish those very angles that perpetuate heteropatriarchal visions.

Cinema has become an important tool in the study of identities and sexualities today because of its ubiquitous presence as a popular medium and consequently, a powerful ideological apparatus negotiating with subjectivities and pleasures. While film studies in the early 70's and 80's concentrated on the ideological function of the cinematic text, more recent projects in this field undertake to study the viewer also as a text, already constructed by a multiplicity of discourses, actively engaging with and evolving through the process of signification.

This essay will try to map the journey of queer desires in India. It will primarily look at the evolving representations of sexualities in popular cinema and their relationship to the larger public viewership and engage in the dialogue of queer sexuality in India. In this essay I chiefly look at Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (If Tomorrow Never Comes, 2004); and Tarun Mansukhani's *Dostana* (Friendship, 2008).

Popular cinema has a complicated relationship with the world outside. Film narratives, themes and even actors are dictated by the viewership and the market forces which are steered by the audience. The same audience rejects and accepts certain films thus paving a sub narrative of the "type" of films that are made. I will look primarily at popular Bollywood[1] cinema which is made for the

mainstream audience. Popular films enjoy an iconic status among gay and lesbian subcultures in India even though "explicit references to homosexuality have been largely absent from mainstream commercial films" (Ghosh, 2007: 417). Gokulsing and Dissanayake say that "the discourse of Indian Popular Cinema has been evolving steadily over a century in response to newer social developments and historical conjunctures" (2012: 17).

Before processing an inquiry into the concept of queer framing, it is essential to analyse what constitutes a "queer film." Jeremy Seabrook in his ethnographic study of queer Indian men in Delhi (1999: 180) outlines that "sexual identity is different from sexual behaviour," hence, when viewing queer cinema it is essential to identify which of these aspects are actually being screened, as cinema will often separate representations of "gay" into desire or identification. In the prominent absence of any significant queer representation in Bollywood, most of the studies in this field have been focused on reading the queer dynamics that might be present within the otherwise heterosexual storyline. This consolidated assumption that Bollywood storylines always focus on straight viewership has however been contested in recent times. Gayatri Gopinath's analysis of the queer spaces in mainstream Hindi cinema argues that "cinematic images which in their originary locations simply reiterate conventional, nationalist and gender

ideologies may, in a South Asian diasporic context, be fashioned to become the very foundation of a queer transnational culture" (2000: 284).

Mainstream Bollywood Cinema has had a tradition of having cross-dressing male stars (Amitabh Bachchan in *Laawaris* , Anupam Kher in *Dulhan hum le jayenge* and Aamir Khan in *Holi* amongst others) or hijras (more recently in Shyam Benegal's *Welcome to Sajjanpur*) in comic or song sequences. However, a modest number of films have also placed the queer narrative as its central plot such as *Page 3* , *Tamanna* , *Fire* , *My Brother Nikhil* , *Girlfriend* , *68 Pages* , *I Am* (Dasgupta, 2011).

However within these trajectories is yet another trajectory which presupposes the existence of homosexuality but relies on the inevitability of heterosexuality. This strand explores traditional social themes: love, family, tradition, but within this builds up an alternative queer narrative. This trajectory plays with the ambiguity of sexual identities and mistaken identities.

Bollywood

India has the largest film industry in the world releasing approximately 1000 films a year to an international audience of 3.6

billion (Ghosh, 2007: 419). Love and romance are the most persistent themes which extol traditional Indian values. Though there are not a large number of queer films being produced in India, the surge towards this genre has raised serious questions and anxiety about the corroding cultural values and a shift towards this "deviancy." Most recently Karan Razdan's film *Girlfriend* (2006) opened up to widespread protest and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata party), the Hindu right-wing party disrupting screenings and causing violence. This is an echo of the earlier disruption that was caused by Deepa Mehta's *Fire* . However this anxiety is not just a religious concern, the strict strictures of the Indian society have made any mention of queer culpable. The film witnessed a public dispute on the concerns about homosexuality and raised questions on the vulnerability and attack on masculinity.

Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) not only makes visible the invisible lesbian community but it also reclaims and validates it. Gayatri Gopinath notes how the film produces a complicated relay between female homosociality and female homo-erotic practices it erotically charged up certain mundane activities such as the protagonists oiling each other's hair or just cooking. By explicitly crossing the divide between female bonding and sexuality it opened up a new way of looking at things (Bandopadhyay, 2007:17). A critical moment of rupture in Indian queer sexuality also occurred within the

film when Sita remarked to her lover Radha, "There is no word in our language to describe what we are or what we feel for each other." Whilst Mehta does not provide a clue as to which language she is referring, her intentions are explicit - to disown English as an Indian language and to show that queer sexuality is not visible within the culture of India, so much so it does not even have a name! Mehta is not alone in her views, here. Foucault claimed that sexuality-based identity categories were invented in nineteenth century Europe and that prior to this invention, they did not exist (Foucault, 1990).

The Foucauldian idea of space and its subversive potential can be harnessed in the context of the queer spaces in mainstream Indian Cinema which can be read as the Foucauldian heterotopia - a place of difference. Foucault described it as "something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia, in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (1986: 16). The alternative queer cyberspace can be considered heterotopic, where the utopic place is not only reflected but reconfigured and revealed. Affrica Taylor (1997) says that the "other" spaces of the gays and lesbians destabilise their own territories and meaning just as much as they destabilise the territories of heterosexuality.

Scholars such as Hoshang Merchant mention films like *Andaz* (A

matter of time, 1949) where according to him the real love plot is *dosti* or *yaarana* (friendship) between the two heroes. He says, "The female lead is there to only lessen the homosexual sting" (1999: xxiii). Bollywood has produced several films on friendships and despite its privilege towards romantic love stories by employing Foucault's model of heterotopia and Sedgwick's "closet" queer spaces can be revealed and read. Sedgwick (1990) argues that the closet, representing a known secret, is a central trope structuring contemporary western thinking. Sedgwick makes it clear that sustaining heterosexual normativity requires some considerable effort. In other words it is hard work to keep the known secret of homosexuality safely hidden away. In light of such a struggle to maintain the illusion of normative heterosexuality, the closet is repositioned. Instead of always being a vulnerable site of shameful hiding, it can transform into a powerful site of deliberate subterfuge. The queer heterotopia is therefore not an illusion but compensation, as a site of disclosure.

The purpose of a queer reading of Indian cinema is not to reveal any hidden agenda to please the queer identified, rather a queer reading examines the function of cinema in remoulding subjectivities, desires and pleasure. It helps us negotiate with patriarchy and masculinity and reveals the social conflicts this creates.

The Male Body

Karan Johar's *Dostana* arouses an active exchange of desire between men but subsequently places this within the space of "acceptable" desire. Male bonding has been a primary feature of Bollywood since its earliest days, as I discussed before; however, this tends to ignore the physicality of the male bonding, one of the features through which this gets defined.

The male body started being viewed as a source of visual pleasure with the emergence of Salman Khan in the mid 90's followed by many other male actors such as John Abraham and most recently Shahrukh Khan for initializing the trend of item boy (Henniker, 2010). The transformations in representing the male figure can be seen as a shift in the defining of desire, the late nineties also mark another important stage, as the "heterosexual" figures in publicity posters started to be replaced by same-sex pairs[2].

Dostana starts in Miami and explores the story of two men who pretend to be gay, so that they can rent an apartment from an older lady. Two newly acquainted men on Miami beach - Kunal (played by John Abraham), a fashion photographer and the more traditional Indian looking Sameer (Abhishek Bachchan) find themselves in dire housing straits. They chance upon a gorgeous luxury

apartment where Neha (Priyanka Chopra) needs two flat mates, but her aunt, the landlady will only allow female flat mates for her niece. At this point reminiscent of *Bosom Buddies* where Tom Hanks and Peter Scolari dress up as women to live in a girl's dorm, our heroes pretend to be a gay couple so that they can live in this house. However other circumstances force the two to dig deeper into the lie, which gets further complicated when they each fall in love with Neha. Their competition for her love strains the two men's friendship and adds another layer between the three. This mistaken sexual identity drives the rest of the plot.

What Mansukhani does in this film by introducing the mistaken sexual identity is to challenge social perceptions about sexuality. The film does not have any homophobic character which is a huge leap from the earlier *Kal Ho Na Ho* which I will discuss later on in this essay. The mistaken sexual identities of the two men and the responses to them by others accounts for much of the humour in the film but the film is careful to not let the thin line between homosocial bonding of the two characters and the homoeroticism blur. In fact their homosocial bonding is encouraged as we see in various songs and sequences in the film. Sexual ambiguity is displaced in favour of unambiguous straightness on the part of the two male characters when it is made clear that they both love the same woman. This ambiguity is further challenged in the end of the film when Neha, asks

them "Jab tum dono gay ban rahein the kya tum dono ke beech mein..." (While you were both being gay did anything happen between you both...)[3] to which both the men shudder and shout out in denial.

The film however does not just play with this case of mistaken identities. Mansukhani in an attempt to reach out to the queer audience queers the friendship between Kunal and Sameer and in this we find many common "gay couple" tropes. The two stars enact male companionship at its most playful and physical and symmetrically embody the masculine style and identity that replicate gender difference on the homosocial axis. In the Kunal and Sameer opposition we have the not unfamiliar oppositions of: butch vs dandy, lean vs pudgy, hairy vs smooth, glamorous vs authentic, heterosocial vs homosocial (Waugh, 2001) and lastly we have the off screen homoerotic teasing and the on screen homosexual anxieties. The joking juvenalisation of the male figures in this friendship narrative is a standard dynamic with almost all unmarried male characterization in Bollywood representation - as if homosocial play is alright amongst kids young adolescents; however, it is heterosexual marriage that waits once they are grown up. This is inscribed most symptomatically in the song sequences that the two perform. The *Jaane Kyon* song (Don't know why) is situated in this narrative where the two male stars celebrate their

friendship declaring that the whole world is one side and they are on the other. The song has an inbuilt sub-text within it, which can be read as a queer declaration and a challenge to society. The song shows the two stars having a little spat about watching a horror film but reconciles with a hug with Sameer caressing Kunal and snuggling up beside him in bed, the rest of the sequence is drowned when it cuts to the next day with the female lead conveniently placed between them.

Borrowing from Waugh's description of the homosocial axes (2001), I would like to place Kunal and Sameer on two different sides of the homoerotic axes, whilst Kunal has been characterised as the "masculine" active partner with his muscled torso and bared bodied visualisation, Sameer is seen through a more feminized lens in his floral print shirts and intricate scarves. I consider these images important as they mark a transformation of the agency through which desire for the male body is routed: the desiring self is not a frustrated female spectator but a male icon with a celebrated masculinity. Yet the film presents these men as straight and promiscuous functioning as respectable members of the patriarchal heteronormative society. Thus the physical intimacy between the two men is inscribed into a pleasurable spectacle, offering multiple locations of identification, without raising any significant disruptions to the patriarchal order. My attempt here is to

emphasise that the act of seeing and deriving pleasure needs to be seen as dialectic with an ever slipping trajectory of signification. The viewing subject constituted as he is at the conjuncture of a variety of discursive formations also functions as a text in his own right sliding the signification and pleasure of cinema on to ambiguous realms of intertextuality.

John Abraham demonstrates this successfully in the semi-nude opening sequence of *Dostana*. Interestingly the film breaks the stereotypical traditional Indian family in several ways. Neha and her aunt define themselves at one point as Sindhi, but as an audience we are privy to nothing else of their provenance. The sole representative from the North Indian patriarchal family is the mother figure played by Kirron Kher. The entrance of the character from her visual representation of performing *aarti*, and the auditory signifiers of *dhol* establish her as the stereotypical Punjabi. The notion of being gay is initially framed as something absurd. Subsequently, as the idea becomes accepted, it is the mother who is then depicted in an absurd manner for not accepting the sexuality of her son. Finally whilst surrounded by traditional Indian signifiers the mother figure demonstrates her acceptance through a combination of Indianness and religion. With the line "Whatever God does is for the best" the mother gives consent to the sham relationship of Kunal and Sameer in a ceremony mirroring Hindu religious imagery. Thus the

queer family is formed in a kinship that exists outside of the family bonds. Yet it is able to form a connected group, whereas the Indian figure of the mother here is isolated and not an accepted member of this microcosm until her later acceptance of homosexuality. This is in direct contravention to Ashis Nandy who says that "the indological view insists that Indian society is characterized and dominated by collectivities, the individual being particular to societies in the West" (1998: 236).

This collective bond is then acknowledged by Sameer after Kunal receives his residency permit for the US, "Thanks for making me gay, because of you I found a family, I love you dude." It is then cemented in the closing image after the end credits with the caption "And they lived happily ever after" with the ambiguous image of Sameer and Kunal and the conspicuous absence of Neha. While male-bonding clearly serves the purposes of patriarchy, where women are sidelined, their spaces limited and circumscribed, and their bodies marginalized, or used as objects of exchange, the climax in movies such as *Dostana* which is based on "yaari" and "yaarana" usually ends up reaffirming heterosexuality.

I consider the eroticization of male bodies in cinema significant as it accomplishes the creation of a powerful discursive framework within which male bodies are redefined in relation to pleasure and

desire, in the process of constituting a perceptual force field within which the spectator, irrespective of their gendered identity finds themselves located. Although gay Bollywood actors may still be in the closet the ways in which the male actors are presented for the female gaze clearly draws a strong parallel with the homo erotic. A flamboyant dress code, combined with hyper masculine images of a muscularised male body homonormalises the heterosexuality of the stars. Waugh considers "something queer is clearly going on in Bollywood. This is true certainly within the increasingly brazen and devious Mumbai studio subcultures" (2001). Hence the apportioning of a gay facade seems to be instigated from a behind the scenes authority. However for the cinema-going public in South Asia this appropriation of a queer imagery would be unacceptable and seen as a distorted representation of Hindi cinema. Rosie Thomas (2006) presents the notion that Hollywood genre classification is quite inappropriate to India. Equally the terminologies of Hindi cinema including its various forms are not used outside the nation.

Mistaken Identities

Nikhil Advani and Karan Johar's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (If tomorrow never comes) is a significant film in this section. Like *Dostana* this film also plays self consciously on the overlaps between friendship and

eroticism but maintains ambivalence on the issue by incorporating homophobia though in a humorous way through the disapproving eyes of the housekeeper Kantaben. It is a story of three friends - Naina (Priety Zinta), Aman (Shah Rukh Khan) and Rohit (Saif Ali Khan) who form a triangle of love and friendship. Naina falls in love with Aman, who suddenly lands up from India and brightens up the dull South Asian New York neighbourhood. Aman also loves Naina but dissuades her from loving him as he is suffering from a terminal disease. He loves her too much to make her go through heartbreak and thus engineers elaborate situations whereby Naina is persuaded to fall in love with her best friend - Rohit. The homoerotic moments in the film are played out in the interactions between Aman and Rohit in front of Rohit's shocked housekeeper Kantaben.

While Rohit is unaware of Kantaben's discomfiture, Aman who is fully aware goes out of his way to confirm her fears and suspicions. In one particular sequence of the film, Kantaben who goes to serve breakfast to Rohit sees Aman and Rohit half undressed in bed together and Rohit spread out over Aman to get some water from the bedside table. The horrified woman stands there shaking unable to talk and then flees from the room as the familiar refrain "O Kantaben" rises to a climax in the background. This becomes a running gag throughout the film. The homophobic anxiety is further established in another sequence between Rohit and his father where his father

takes him to a strip club and ogling the girls himself exclaims: "Nude girls... enjoy... enjoy." Rohit is completely embarrassed and says he does not want to enjoy to which his father looks shocked and exclaims if he was "normal" this sequence goes on for some more time until it is finally established that he is indeed normal by punching the air in a masculine fashion and says: "Yo its normal," thus reiterating his masculinity and manhood.

In all such circumstances, the ambivalence about whether the audiences are being invited to laugh at homophobia or homosexuality remains fluid. The use of the word "normal" in a similar vein is also left ambiguous. Even those who acknowledge such random expressions of queerness in films consider it relevant to point out that these moments are not only marginal to the main "attractions" but also transient and hence irrelevant to the narrative significations. The sporadic sojourns to the domain of queer intimacies are immediately reiterated by the quick re-establishment of a normative order. This is generally accomplished through a reinscription of the main characters into the heterosexual matrix that, one that constitutes the final marriage of the hero and the heroine.

In this film the heterosexual resolution remains fragmented or open-ended, thereby undermining its very significance as

a closure. In *Kal Ho Na Ho* Rohit remains attentive to his male friend and indifferent to Naina throughout the film until Aman coaxes him to see her as a potential lover. A final happy family tableau is a common trope of conclusion for most Indian films but what complicates the picture in this film is the continuing presence of Aman in the life of Rohit and Naina even after his death and this to some extent renders the heterosexual resolution somewhat ambiguous. I would not hesitate to see this film as "heterosocial," since the eventual constitution of the heterosexual bond is tragically devoid of much desire and prompted by gender responsibilities, preceded by a long narrative celebration of same sex desire.

Queer Politics in Cinema

Ellis Hansen notes that every film with a queer theme, notwithstanding the sexuality of its director or the origin of its funding is still embattled in a highly moralistic debate over the correctness of its politics, "as though art were to be valued only as sexual propaganda" (1999: 11). My concern in this essay is therefore not simply about good and bad politics of representation around sexuality. It is an attempt to understand how queer sexuality, since it can no longer be elided or silenced, begins to get acknowledged and understood in Bombay Cinema. The emergence of new sexualities and a diversity of desires in cinema are clearly a response to many

years of feminist and queer rights movements (Ghosh, 2007: 433). As I have discussed above, mainstream films register this acknowledgement of queer sexualities but at the same time displays great anxiety. The horror and fascination with which queer sexualities are being regarded today allow radical ruptures and reactionary closures. The ambivalent discourse in *Dostana* and *Kal Ho Na Ho* establish a tolerance for queer desires but eventually establishes the inevitability of heterosexuality. These films are certainly not revolutionary or progressive in giving the queer identity a solidified voice, rather it is somewhat reactionary in its struggle to grapple with new sexual identities as heterosexuality is thrown into a predicament.

I conclude this essay by considering the socio-cultural impact of these films in the wider representation of queer sexuality in India and in the attitudes towards both homosexuality and queerness in India. If the agenda of the film makers was financially motivated, this was achieved as both films garnered huge profits in India and abroad. However, I have also observed a liberalization regarding discourse on queer issues and societal ubiquity of the theme, in a range of transactions - from the public parody of the film in the Filmfare awards[4] ceremony to the director speaking on various media platforms on gay issues in India.

The very recent repeal of Article 377[5] of the Indian penal code, and the correlation of this to Indian cinema is an area that will benefit from further research. Suffice to say some of the societal change may be attributed in part to the effect of these films. Bringing discourse on queer issues out in the open, and actors willing to "play it gay" are just two ramifications of this.

The prominence of the overseas market through the transglobalisation of Hindi cinema and domestically the growth of the multiplex has started to ensure that the number of queer films produced will continue to increase. Thus in a way both these films opened closets in Bollywood and more significantly, in the culture and society of India.

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Filmography

- *68 Pages* . Dir: Sridhar Rangayan. 2002. Starring Mouli Ganguly, Joy Sengupta.
- *Anand* . Dir: Hrishikesh Mukherjee. 1979. Starring: Rajesh Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan.
- *Dostana* . Dir: Tarun Mansukhani, Produced by Karan Johar. 2008. Starring John Abraham, Abhishek Bachchan, Priyanka Chopra, Kirron Kher, Sushmita Mukhopadhyay.

- *Fire* . Dir: Deepa Mehta. 1996. Starring: Nandita Das, Shabana Azmi.
- *Girlfriend* . Dir: Karan Razdan. 2004. Starring: Isha Koppikar, Amrita Rao, Ashis Chowdhury.
- *Kal Ho Na Ho* . Dir: Nikhil Advani, Produced by Karan Johar. 2005. Starring Shah Rukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan, Priety Zinta, Jaya Bachchan.
- *My Brother Nikhil* . Dir: Onir. 2005. Starring Sanjay Suri, Juhi Chawla, Purab Kohli.
- *Welcome to Sajjanpur* . Dir: Shyam Benegal. 2008. Starring Shreyas Talpade, Amrita Rao, Divya Dutta.

[1] By Bollywood I refer to the Hindi film industry that is based in Bombay, India. Indian cinema encompasses a large range of regional film industries such as Bengali (Tollywood) and Telegu (Kollywood), etc. The term Bollywood is derived from Hollywood. For a more detailed study of the origin of the Hindi film industry and the name "Bollywood" please see: Tejaswini Ganti, *Bollywood*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

[2] Karan Arjun, (1990) started this trend. *Dostana* , *Kal Ho Na Ho* posters have the two male friends in various poses of close physical proximity which deliberately eroticises the physical contact

between the bodies. The female lead is usually seen in a more de-eroticised pose.

[3] *Dostana* , (2008) Translated from the original Hindi by me.

[4] The Filmfare awards are one of the oldest and most regarded awards in Bollywood. It started way back in the 1950`s and right now commands the highest respect of the film fraternity and backing from the Film makers guild, Bombay

[5] The Indian Penal Code (IPC), of which Section 377 forms a part, was drafted in 1860 by Lord Macaulay as a part of the colonial project of regulating and controlling the British- and Indian-origin subjects. It reads:377. Unnatural offences: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offense described in this section.

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