



Exploring Homophobic Tendencies in the Contemporary Indian Cinematic Gaze and Representation

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Abstract: Queer identity or practise of alternative sexuality by an individual is often misunderstood as criminal identity (an instance of homophobia) under the purview of law even in the imaginative cinematic world. There is a wide range of homophobia still existing in our society and culture towards the people with alternative sexuality. There are gaps and fissures in the dealing of law towards the queer people which I want to focus in my paper in relation to the Bollywood films. I have mainly focussed on three Bollywood cinematic products – ‘Aligarh’ (2015), ‘Made In Heaven’(2019) and ‘Forensic’ (2022). Even though Bollywood has come a long way from making caricatures or stereotypes or laughter stock out of the non-conforming characters (for example, ‘Dostana’), we still find homophobic tendencies in the cinematic gaze and representation.

24th August, 2017 was one of the landmarks in the history of the verdicts given by the Supreme Court which ruled that every citizen should have a Right to Privacy which is a fundamental right protected under Article 21 and Part III of the Indian Constitution. The Supreme Court recognised the rights of the LGBTQ community and acknowledged that they existed and also needed some rights for existence. The section 377 of Indian law has a long legal history of its own which is getting addressed gradually by the Bollywood fraternity. While ‘Aligarh’ is a prominent film on this legal issue, homophobic tendency in general continues to be addressed in films like ‘Forensic’ which hurriedly draws to its end with no clear cut explanation regarding the psychology of the murderer who belongs to the queer community. The straight characters are unable to understand or identify the murderer due to his interchangeable sexual identity. The web series ‘Made In Heaven’ portrays a gay character Karan who is a wedding planner who runs the company along with his friend Tara. His landlord is shown to enjoy his camaraderie by filming his intimate moments enjoyed with his male partners. The twist comes in the end when it turns out that the landlord himself is gay but had to bow down to social pressures and marry and settle down.

Index Terms: Homophobia, Queer identity, law, criminality, Bollywood, cinema, web series

Introduction

Society has always posed a discriminatory attitude towards the marginalized or the queer people or people who practise alternative sexualities. Cinema or film has been an excellent medium to portray the lives of the marginalized people including the queer sections of the society. The queer sections of the society are also severely affected by the socio-economic and geo-political factors. Queer people's personal lives get intermingled with their professional lives which we find in the films under discussion here. Bollywood and its representation of LGBTQA+ community and its people with their narratives can be traced back to parallel cinema's creative approach towards representation of such characters on screen. Prem Kapoor's 'Badnam Basti' produced in 1971 is claimed as the first queer film of India. Other notable queer films are Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' (1996), Onir's 'My Brother Nikhil' (2005), Sanjay Nag's 'Memories in March' (2010), Shonali Bose's 'Margarita with a Straw' (2014), Suresh Narayan's 'Irattra Jeevitham' (2017), Kaushik Ganguly's 'Nagarkirtan' (2017), Geethu Mohandas' 'Moothon' (2019) and Neeraj Ghaywan's 'Geeli Pucchi' (2021). For my study, I have taken selected films based on queer identities and studied the cinematic gaze which is largely discriminatory towards these sections of the society.

Theoretical Framework

Law and Queer people

Collective social homophobia towards the queer people had a legal sanction as well. Section 377 has a long impressive colonial history where the Britishers wanted to categorize and criminalise some groups (including the thugees and social outcastes) who were outside the heterosexual domain. This tendency can be noticed in the Victorian era where homosexuality was banned and prohibited and punishable in all forms. Homophobic tendencies still exist in our society where people who practise alternative sexuality are barred from social domain. In my paper, I would especially like to show how collective homophobia is practised in the cinematic characters who put the protagonists practising alternative sexuality in discomfiture. Homophobia is taken as a punishing tool to criminalise such individuals who according to the parameters of society have overreached their mark in some way or the other. Homophobia is not just restricted to an inquisitive or curious neighbour but harming and scheming individuals who themselves have criminal instincts.

This part of the British law was applicable to many colonies and still is used to criminalise the LGBTQ groups. This criminal code was part of the larger British administrative way of making the subjects conform to the colonial authority. What is striking that the law did not include the word 'homosexual' but the same law is used to ban every act (termed as unnatural) outside the heterosexual activity. On September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court of India ruled that consensual homosexual activity between adults cannot be persecuted by the application of section 377. The highest court pointed out that the above way of persecution is against the constitution and the basic rights of the Indian citizen. But the law is still not abolished completely. It still remains in force concerning any unnatural sex with minors, non-consensual sexual acts and acts of bestiality. There have been several phases of movement against this colonial law. The first major landmark decision was taken by the Delhi High Court in July 2009 when it decided to mark some parts of the law as unconstitutional.

The above judgement was turned down on 11th December, 2013 in Suresh Kumar Koushal versus Naz Foundation. The court took a step back and said that amending the law should be handed over to the Parliament and not the judiciary.

The real trajectory of the laws can be contrasted or compared to the cinematic world where such different sexualities are treated in various ways.

Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) quotes from Michel Foucault about how society controls sexuality –

“In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the univocal construct of ‘sex’ (one is one’s sex and, therefore, not the other) is (a) produced in the service of the social regulation and control of sexuality and (b) conceals and artificially unifies a variety of disparate and unrelated sexual functions and then (c) postures within discourse as a cause, an interior essence which both produces and renders intelligible all manner of sensation, pleasure, and desire as sex-specific. In other words, bodily pleasures are not merely causally reducible to this ostensibly sex-specific essence, but they become readily interpretable as manifestations or signs of this ‘sex’.” (*Gender Trouble* 94-95)

Literature Review

Audrey Yue in her essay “Queer Asian Cinema and Media Studies: From Hybridity to Critical Regionality” charts the history of tolerance and acceptance of queer practices “With the exceptions of Japan, where homosexuality has been legal since 1880, Taiwan since 1896, and Thailand since 1956, the 1990s saw the spread of the de-criminalization of homosexuality in East and South Asia. In 1991, homosexuality was legalized in Hong Kong; by 2001 it was removed as a mental illness in China, and in 2009, it was decriminalized in India. These sexual law reforms heralded new media and cinematic practices that present alternative models to the rights-and-recognition discourse of the West.” (Yue 146)

Roksana Badruddoja in her essay “Queer Spaces, Places, and Gender: The Tropologies of Rupa and Ronica” notes the limitations of applying Western theory to Asian queer canon “Too often, the limitations due to undertheorized South Asian lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual histories – compounded by a queer canon overwrought with the East/West or tradition/modern equation – render queer South Asian-Americans as a monolithic homogenous category with little or no agency.” (Badruddoja 157)

Research Methodology

I want to mainly focus on three Bollywood films – ‘Aligarh’ (2015), ‘Made In Heaven’(2019) and ‘Forensic’ (2022). Films are a mirror of the society and often fire the creative imagination of the creator and the audience. These cinematic products are a reflection of the collective mentality of the society at large. These films reflect the society’s attitude towards the queer individuals and how society is still biased towards them and reject these individuals by pushing them towards the periphery of society.

‘Aligarh’ (2015)

‘Aligarh’ is a 2015 film which wonderfully showcases the journey of a gay professor of Marathi language Dr.Srinivas Ramchandra Siras whose services were terminated as he was found having sex with a rickshaw puller in his quarter. A video was made of the incident and handed over to the media and public. The role of the professor is humanely portrayed by Manoj Bajpayee and the film portrays his special relationship with a journalist who arrives to interview him. The role of the journalist is played by Rajkumar Rao.

The film ‘Aligarh’ is a sympathetic portrayal of a dignified and non-apologetic professor who cannot understand why society and his university are bothered over his sexual preferences rather than his services. He has served the university for over twenty years. It is later found out that his colleagues were not happy with his position of the director of the language department. They have plotted against him for a long time. This is the story of both a struggling journalist and a humiliated professor who is suspended and high handedly treated just three months before his retirement. The professor is forced to vacate the university premises within a week and his electricity is cut off. The public humiliation that he has to suffer is beyond description. He always keeps his windows and doors shut and is appalled by the slightest

noises outside his home. He takes recourse to drinking in order to ameliorate his condition which might be the reason for his early death.

The university accuses him of immoral acts. The film begins in the bylanes of Aligarh where a sixty four year old man returns home with a rickshaw puller at night. There is a significant suggestion by the journalist that may be the rickshaw puller named Irfan was an accomplice in the crime. Thus the door of the bedroom was unlatched by him and the lights were kept on so that the intruders could easily videotape the event and concoct the situation in the professor's disfavour. In the film, the journalist tries to find out the whereabouts of Irfan after the scandal but he fails. He only gets the information from Irfan's colony that Irfan is missing and the police had beaten him severely.

While they were sharing intimate moments, some people pounced on them with cameras and beat them severely, filmed them in forced intimate postures and handed over everything to the media who had surprisingly gathered in a short time. Professor Siras is immediately suspended by the institution. The professor is advised by his colleague to write a letter of apology to the Vice Chancellor of the university. But in spite of this Siras's suspension is not revoked. His effigy is burnt by angry demonstrators and he is banned from the campus. He has to move from one rented house to another as the court proceedings go on.

While Monoj Bajpayee stars as Prof. Ramchandra Siras, Rajkummar Rao as journalist Deepu Sebastian. Ashish Vidyarthi acts as Avocate Anand Grover. Siras develops a beautiful bond with Deepu who wants to make a story on the professor's character. Deepu arrives at the door of the professor only to find it locked from outside. He waits outside his house and when he returns from the market the professor is so exhausted that he almost falls down. He is helped onto his feet by Deepu and escorted to his room. The professor feels grateful at this gesture and asks about his university which is Delhi University. But the professor gets irritated when Deepu's colleague starts clicking pictures one after the other. Deepu is kicked out of the house. Deepu attends the university press conference where he raises some questions as to why did not the university take steps against those people who barged into Siras' room and invaded his privacy. Thus Deepu befriends a fellow university professor and through him he gets introduced to Prof. Siras.

'Forensic' (2022)

The recent Zee5 Original film 'Forensic' (2022) portrays a queer murderer who is a serial killer of young girls of eleven years old on the day of their birthday. The murderer is an adopted boy who is pushed to murder just because he feels that his adopted father who is a psychologist suffering from cancer will get better if he keeps on murdering. The murderer also is jealous of any girl who gets the love of her father on her birthday. This film also focuses on juvenile serial killers and criminal child psychology. There is always a threat in the film that the killer might be someone different. The categories are drawn by the forensic officer. At first forensic study points out that he is a left handed person, a short person or dwarf, then an eleven year old child and at last it is found that a queer person hypnotised the children to be part of such heinous tasks.

The murderer was adopted from a juvenile home by the psychiatrist who raises him to a professional like him. The son goes for a sex change operation and transforms into the beautiful and attractive Dr. Ranjana. The father knows everything about his son turned into a woman's obsession with murdering young girls but keeps silent as he does not want to lose him. The father even staged the suicide of his son under the railway tracks five years ago to hide his identity. The story writer has intertwined all the phobias and horror imaginable against adoption, sex-change and ultimately queer identity. The film is seen through the gaze of the straight characters who are completely unable to understand the queer character's mind. The queer character reminds us of the dubious character Paul in Willa Cather's story "Paul's Case" who does not conform to any fixed notion of gender. Judith Butler cites this character in her book Bodies That

Matter who cannot be identified under a predetermined gendered category. Butler explains this problematic – “The introduction to schoolboy Paul I ‘Paul’s Case’ makes clear that he is a figure ‘under the ban of suspension’. Suspended, then, but not quite expelled, Paul inhabits a temporary exteriority to the law, he is set into that exteriority by the law. But what is also ‘suspended’ here is some decision about his status, an allegory of this fiction in which what Sedgwick calls Paul’s liminal sexual and gender status remains in question. As he is called in front of the local school authorities, his clothes are described as not quite or, rather, no longer, fitting the body within, and his incommensurability between the body and its clothes is recapitulated.” (Butler 162) Butler further substantiates the queerness of the body – “Paul’s body refuses to cohere in an ordinary sense, and the body parts which nevertheless hang together appear discordant precisely because of a certain happy and anxious refusal to assume the regulatory norm. Just as his coat in the first paragraph no longer fits, suggesting an appearance outgrown, even ‘frayed’, Paul’s body in the second paragraph is given only in parts, inhabited, separated from itself, and deprived by the ‘ban’ under which he appears.” (Butler 162-163)

‘Made In Heaven’ (2019)

The Amazon Prime web series ‘Made In Heaven’ portrayed a character Karan who is a wedding planner along with his friend Tara. Karan is gay and is therefore not accepted by his family. Thus he lives in a rented house where he brings his gay friends over. Karan’s landlord has secretly placed CCTV cameras in his bedroom and keeps an eye on his movements. His landlord is shown to enjoy watching the intimate moments of Karan and his lovers. One day the landlord’s wife catches her husband over this action and demands an explanation. The landlord saves his face by divulging to his wife and he was collecting proofs and hands over every evidence to the police who arrives and arrests Karan on non-bailable offence. Around this time debate is going on in the country about revoking of section 377 of the British colonial penal code which criminalized all kinds of so called unnatural sexual acts including homosexuality. Karan is eventually released by his friend Tara and seeks the protection of lawyers who advises him to sue his landlord over the invasion of privacy. His landlord gets scared and suddenly makes a confession before Karan (whom he threatens at first to turn out of his house) that he admires Karan that he had the courage to come out and accept his sexuality in front of everyone while he could not.

Results and Discussion

The above films which showcase repression of queer people from social and legal levels can be interpreted with the help of queer theory. Queer theory as an interdisciplinary field emerged in the early 1990s. It has now become a very relevant area of research in humanities and social sciences. The broader domain of this theory goes beyond LGBT literature, film and art. Queer theory looks at how the people with alternate sexuality are affected by the power structures within the society.

Queer theory when applied to the films mainly points out its suppression as a discourse. At first queer characters were felt as absence in texts and films. They were also repressed or changed into socially acceptable characters. Eve Sedgwick has used the metaphor of the closet to talk about this repression.

Development of queer theory can be mainly attributed to three theorists – Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and Michel Foucault. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) forwarded the idea that gender was socially constructed through repeated performance of behaviours mainly masculine or feminine. Eve Sedgwick’s *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) stressed the importance of queer theory as a tool for understanding sexuality and society at large. Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (1976) analysed the power structures in society which he theorized were interconnected with sexuality.

Eve Sedgwick uses the metaphor of the closet as a kind of oppression towards the gay people who are forced to hide their sexual preferences from the public purview. The secrecy of the closet and the coming out of the individual sexualities are transgressions or crossing of many political and social parameters

which we find in the cinematic characters. Sedgwick argues "...the epistemology of the closet has given an overarching consistency to gay culture and identity throughout this century is not to deny that crucial possibilities around and outside the closet have been subject to most consequential change, for gay people." (Sedgwick 68) She also warns us of glamourizing or centralising this closet as there may be many variations or possibilities around sexuality. I would like to conclude by quoting from Sedgwick that the closet cannot be neglected and films related to this topic of queer identity should be investigated –

"The epistemology of the closet has also been, however, on a far vaster scale and with a less honorific inflection, is exhaustively productive of modern Western culture and history at large. While that may be reason enough for taking it as a subject of interrogation, it should not be reason enough for focusing scrutiny on those who inhabit the closet (however equivocally) to the exclusion of those in the ambient heterosexual culture who enjoin it and whose intimate representational needs it serves in a way less extortionate to themselves." (Sedgwick 68-69)

The closet gives an identity to the queer individuals and can be investigated or studied as alternative ways of practising/inhabiting/living sexuality. But Butler warns us that the closet should not be scrutinised by law for the purpose of criminalising or discomforting that section of the society. A particular practise of sexuality cannot be pitted or valourised or criminalised against another sexuality as Butler also finds so called heterosexual individuals who practise alternative sexualities keeping themselves cleverly within the rule of law such as the landlord of Karan in 'Made in Heaven'. Alternative sexuality is not something to be ashamed of or fit to be hidden or criminalised. As the films under study here shows queer people in India will be truly empowered if they are sanctioned all the rights at a par with any other individual in personal space, society or workplace.

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