

Article**Rita Datta****Multiple Sexualities, Multiple Identities
LGBT Community and Indian Cinema: An Interface**

Public culture always thrived on only one kind of sexuality i.e. hetero sexuality. French Philosopher Michael Foucault was a self proclaimed gay thinker, so is Spanish film director Pedro Almadover. Foucault's "History of Sexuality" affirmed the existence and proliferation of peripheral sexual communities in unprecedented manner in human history. The term 'homosexual' was invented around the late 19th century. With their continuous movement and protests, the gay and lesbian communities have baled themselves to be incorporated by the states in important public spaces and policy decisions in the West since 1990s'. Culturally, queer theory involves an emphasis on permanent rebellion and the subversion of dominant social identities. Queer theory aims to transform the social order by destabilizing not only the 'taken for grantedness' of the heterosexual norms but also stable biological understandings of gay and lesbian identity. The theory emerged in the West as the institutionalized concept since the 90's and mostly started challenging the idea that gender is a part of the essential self. Gay/Lesbian studies focuses on homosexual behaviour and Queer theory includes any kind of sexual activity/identity that is normative and

deviant. It highlights the multiplicity of sexual identities and even extends its purview into cross dressing, inter sex bodies/identities, gender ambiguity and gender confirmation surgery. It also questions and subverts the heteronormative behaviour of the mainstream culture and often in the given cinematic space.

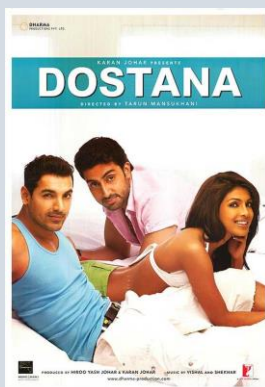
Though Queer theory is a universal phenomenon but it is mostly less articulate and less assertive. India might have shinned through in terms of overall growth and have acquired almost all consumer durables like the West, nonetheless, even in their urban milieu, homophobia is rampant in nature. Though global consumer society aspires to make Indians modern in their outlook, this modernity is “mistaken”.¹ We still nurture our feudal past and have imbibed that in our everyday culture. It would be, therefore, quite a revelation on our part to be inquisitive about so called abnormal sexuality by locating it in one of our popular medium of communication which is cinema. Let’s see how India with its newly found global exposure reacts to the phenomenon called homosexuality.

It would be better to concentrate at first onto the mainstream Hindi films as they are supposed to cater the whole India irrespective of caste/class/gender/race. In relation to psychoanalysis and queer theory let us begin with Freud. The lesbian and gay issues cannot be treated equally as they are not symmetrical, analogous and complementary. Non homo sexual people are basically categorized in three forms, bi-sexual, transgender and queers. Queer is actually an umbrella term for disparate sexual identities. Paul Robinson in his article “Freud and Homosexuality” points out that “Freud’s failure to extend to lesbians the same dispassion he lavishes on his male homosexuals is a reflection of his larger problem with women”². Indian Supreme Court decriminalized the colonial draconian law Section 377 in 2018. In ancient India, there were detailed examples of multiplicity of social norms, culture and identities. The colonial anti repressive law is drawn by British ruler Lord Macaulay. Therefore, in one word, it is the British people who found homosexuality improper and against nature. Alka Pande in her much illustrious book “Androgyne: Probing the Gender Within”³ provided the example of Shikandi, a hermaphrodite and Arjun in Mahabharata, taking the disguise of Chitrangada, in his last days of exile.

By taking the unconscious into account, Freudians psychoanalysis recasts ego identities, including those of lesbians and gays, as illusory. In Lacanian terms,

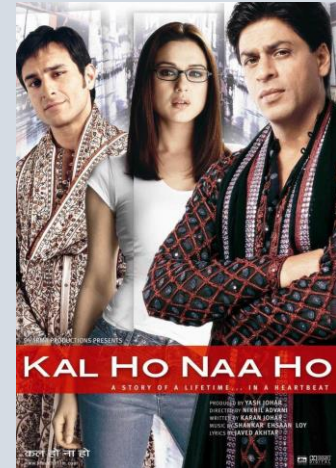
the ego is created through ‘misrecognition’ and is based on a fundamental perceptual error, it therefore, cannot provide a reliable basis for any politics concerned with sexual desire. In Foucault’s “History of Sexuality” he tried to criticize psychological modes of conceiving sexuality. In his book, Foucault has categorically shown that “peripheral sexualities entail an incorporation of perversions”.....while “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species”.⁴ Freud universalized homosexuality by declaring that “all human beings are capable of making a homosexual object choice and have in fact made in their unconsciousness.”⁵ After Freud, his Viennese followers Adler and Zurich based Jung propounded contrary to his belief, that homosexuality signalled a type of person with a fairly predictable relationship to the world.

Homosexuality thus according to the psychoanalysts is not a sexual deviance. Though after a long battle, homosexuality has been accepted as a social norm. In India, it is yet considered to be taboo subject both by the civil society and the state. Section 377 of the penal code was adjudged to violate the fundamental right to life and liberty which makes homosexuality an unnatural and criminal act. “Popular culture and mass media have a symbiotic relationship: each depends on the other in an intimate collaboration”⁶ (K.Turner). Indian popular cultures permeate the everyday lives of the society. This left over culture is especially catered to urban new generation middle or lower middle class strata. Popular culture transmits through popular communication, mediums like films, television, FM radios etc. It influences the society and its institutions in various ways. If the mainstream Directors could have handled the subject of alternative sexuality really well, it could have served the purpose of the LGBT communities. Most of the times, these films or soap operas are full of gimmicky and superficial. In this context, it would be really worth a quarry towards locating homosexuality in mainstream cinema.

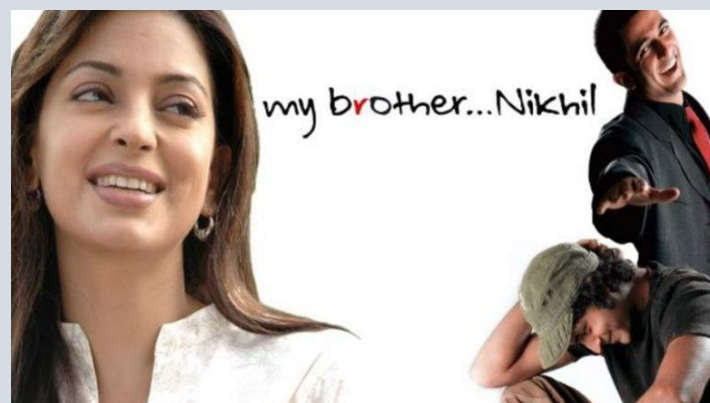


Let us begin with the popular commercial flick- *Dostana* (2008) which is about two young adults looking for a flat in Miami and posed as a gay couple to make their chances as tenants and later citizens of a flat. It was not a tribute to homosexuality but another spoof on gays and societal reaction towards them. This film never contributed into the issue of homosexuals but rather melodramatise it with twists

and turns to be able to become one of the highest grossing films at the Indian box office, 2008. Same happened in *Kaal Ho Na Ho* (2003), another highest grosser, where SRK and Saif Ali Khan had been caricatured as a gay couple, especially by their house maid Kanta!!

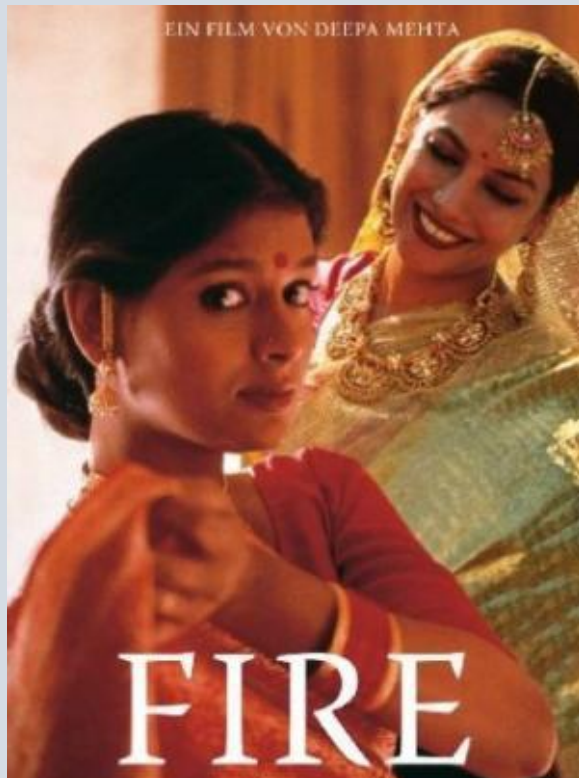


68 Pages (2007) is a film by Sridhar Rangayan (who later started the very popular Kashish Film Festival in Mumbai for the LGBTQ community) which focuses on a gay couple in order to offer hope to the AIDS patients especially with homosexual history. *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) directed by Onir depicted a gay man's struggle with his family and his country after contracting the HIV virus. Though not hugely commercially successful, *MBN* did create an impact on conservative Indians besides *Fire* (1996) directed by Deepa Mehta which sparked off heated reactions in India. In this film, two frustrated housewives take refuge in each other as a protest to the patriarchal society and its draconian norms. But in *Sancharam* (The Journey, 2004) directed by Ligy Pullapully, a Chicago based lawyer, two adolescent girls, Kiran and Deliah in a village of Kerala, get drawn to each other by mutual admiration and not as a result of any kind of institutional resistance. *I Can't Think Straight* (2008) is a romantic film of a lesbian couple living in U.K. Due to the presence of Lisa Ray, a star by herself, the film got recognition mostly in the U.S and other continents. But these films are mostly underrated and do not percolate down to the ordinary masses to have a reaction from them.



In a country, where the concept of *Ardhanarishwara* (the deity who is half man and half woman) prevail, how does the popular culture deny such “powerful living forces in the individual unconscious.....repressed by most of us, that only the deviant dare to act out”.⁷ (Sudhir Kakkar, *The Inner World*). In Karan

Razdan's *Girlfriend* (2004) there was a hint of lesbianism where the character of Isha Koppikkar reacts violently to her girlfriend Amrita Arora and her boyfriend Asish Chowdhury as a jealous partner. The film is hideous and completely means to abhor some sex companionship.

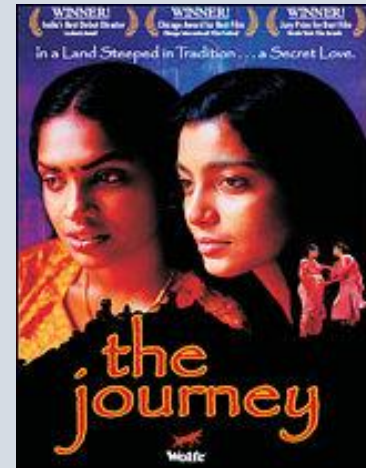


Bombay Boys (1998) is a film much ahead of its time by Kaizad Gustad. It explicitly led one of its important characters to fall in love with his gay landlord, Pesi. The films mentioned above which actually caters to the need of alternative sexuality are never popular, they remain mostly underground or get confined to film festivals or limited to niche audience. Queerdom is often bullied as a raw material of slapstick comedies. A slip has come through two Bengali Directors i.e Onir and Rituparno Ghosh who actually contributed to the appropriation of queer theory into

mainstream. *Memories in March* (2011) and *Arekti Premer Galpo* (2010) both dealt with homosexuality, where the director himself portrays the role of a gay person. Rituparno is one of the prolific filmmakers of Bengal who went on winning 10 national awards. His open proclamation of being a gay filmmaker though did not go well with the vox populi, subsequently won accolades for his brilliant acting in both these films. Whereas films like *Tamanna* (Director: Mahesh Bhatt/ Hindi/ 1997), *Fire* (Director: Deepa Mehta/ Hindi/ 1996) depicted LGBT community with utter respect and finesse.

In *Sadak* (1991) Mahesh Bhatt projected Maharani (superbly played by Sadashiv Amrapurkar) only to pave way for Tamanna where he presented Tiku (lifetime performance by Paresh Rawal) another Eunuch much more humanely and poignantly. After Onir's *My Brother Nikhil* (2005/ Hindi) and Rituparno Ghosh's *Another Love Story* (Directors: Rituparno Ghosh and Kaushik Ganguly/ Bengali/ 2010) time was ripe for mainstream Bollywood to incorporate stories like *Aligarh* (2018/ Hindi/ Hansal Mehta) where a super star

like Manoj Bajpayee portrayed the character of a gay professor named Ramchandra Siras and his tragic love story makes it way to Busan International Film Festival only to receive a standing ovation! The real life story of a professor of Aligarh University has quite stirred the otherwise complacent Indian society. Last but not the least, *EK Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019/ Hindi/ Shelley Chopra Dhar) and produced by the famous Vidhu Vindod Chopra, depicts the story of Sweety Chaudhury, a closeted lesbian, played by Star actress Sonam Kapoor who undergoes conflicting journey before coming out from a conservative Punjabi family. Coming from the mainstream Hindi industry, which often ridicule the sexual minorities, does deserve accolades and hope to have served the causes of the LGBT community.



Films about third gender used to be an oxymoron, but not anymore. Indian cinema is fighting its own battle to coming in terms with the ongoing realities of the society. Films like “More than a friend”, dialogues, organised by Sappho for Equality, Kasish film festival in Mumbai, I am the very beautiful, are very little steps towards the recognition of the third gender unshackling it from the barriers of the overtly structured society and its psyche.

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