

From Ambiguity to Lucidity: Interpreting Lesbian Sexuality through Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract

A woman's sexuality has always been understood within the parameters of reproduction. She has always been pushed to the periphery regarding her bodily desire, and therefore her actual sexuality never reached the public's attention. Whether in print media or cinema, her sexuality has always been criticized. In this social context, when she happens to be a homosexual, she stands in a state of the problem of whether she should come out of the closet or adjust herself into a heteronormative group. This paper deals with the comparative study of how Hindi Cinema treated lesbianism during the period when Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was criminalized and how it is being dealt with in the current state when the government has decriminalized it through four Hindi films, i.e., *Razia Sultan* (1983), *Fire* (1998), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) and *Badhai Do* (2022). Simultaneously it also deals with how female homosexuality has been received over time by Indian society and how these marginalized sexualities have created a niche in the community.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Heterosexuality, Homosexuality, Lesbianism, Indian Cinema.

Introduction

Guests that the ancients desired members of their sex. Aristophanes tell a tale about the genesis of human beings. According to his myth, humans descend from creatures that had spherical bodies, genitals on the outside, four hands and feet, and two faces each, and were divided into three genders: one group had two male genitals; the second group had two female genitals; and the third group, hermaphrodites, had one of each. With time they became conceited, and therefore Zeus punished them and split them into two. This damnation resulted

in them dying from hunger and self-neglect, and they clung to the other halves because they did not like to do anything apart. Zeus sympathized with them by moving their genitals so that they could have sexual relations with each other. This shows that we are half of a human being, each looking for our other half. Men are divided from the hermaphrodite desire for women; women who hail from a female creature look for women and not men, and men, who are split from a male body, pursue males.

From the beginning of one's childhood, one is taught that gender is a natural, invariable category and that behavior determines gender and not the other way. One depends on gender to understand and surmise people's behavior and other characteristics. The concept of 'gender' has been through so many variations that different cultures have reconstructed it differently. To an ignorant, it would solely mean a male and a female person having instincts depending on their biological factors. In contrast, to an intellectualist, it will not be considered fixed but something which would change over time in a person's gender expression or gender identity or both. Antiquity was when men and women were identified only through biological factors alone.

In contrast, in the present era, the difference between men and women is more adequately understood regarding gender, which considers the social meanings different societies attach to masculinity and femininity. When one's behavior, appearance, dress, and genitals match what one feels about themselves and what others think of them, they fit into the normative idea of gender. When there is a disparity between expectancy and reality, the person is said to be deviating from the norms and labeled as a gender nonconformist. One is being instructed to essentialize the idea of gender, which serves as a benchmark to determine people's behavior and other traits.

Sexuality has never been a new subject in human lives. Sometimes people announce it, and some have been discoursing it in secrecy. There was a time when sexuality was confined to the home, and the conjugal family looked after it, and therefore it was understood only within the concomitant of reproduction. Any marital relationship which seemed to be childless beard the hint of abnormality; Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* says that "a single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in social space as well as at the heart of every household, but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents' bedroom" (Foucault 3). Proper conduct was maintained, and contact with other bodies was avoided. Any relationship that did not come under the boundaries of generation was considered doubtful and, therefore, not sanctified. It was either rejected or reduced to silence.

As Foucault writes that "the legitimate and procreative couple laid down the law" (3); therefore, sexuality was confined to home and was looked after by the conjugal life and therefore was associated with the function of reproduction. Illegitimate sexualities have always been reasoned; therefore, they were not allowed to exhibit their 'mischief' in the supposed 'cultured' society. The appropriate places for them were the brothels and asylums where they could stealthily vent their pleasures. This shows that antiquity was not a culture of sexual libertarianism. Moral and legal rules immensely controlled sexual morality and moral preoccupations were centered on sexual practices and not on the subject of desire. The

ancients did not make sense of themselves in terms of sexual identities, whereas the policing of gender identity was of central importance to them. Within this parameter, women and children occupied a socially subordinate position. Women had the status of minors and were always under the legal guardianship of a male relative.

“Up to the end of the eighteenth century, three major explicit codes – apart from the customary regularities and constraints of opinion – governed sexual practices: canonical law, the Christian pastoral and civil law” (The Perverse Implantation 36). Each of them had adopted the division between licit and illicit. Any relationship outside marriage was considered to be illicit. Undoubtedly marriage was the most restricted relationship, a much more demonstrated topic to display than any other. Any sexuality other than this was tagged to be confused. It was therefore seen as an acceptable compromise with the material world and was praised as a building block for society by theologians. On the list of grave sins, there was not only adultery, rape, and spiritual or carnal incest but also sodomy or the mutual caress. Foucault points out that those earlier periods had stigmatized acts of sexual intercourse between individuals of the same sex. However, with the advent of the nineteenth century, people engaged in the same sex had been categorized into a species. As Foucault says, “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species (Mottier 37). During the ancient period, relationships between men were socially acceptable, standard, and widely reflected in the literature, art, and philosophy of the time when sexuality was not categorized. Some even argued that love for men was superior to that for women because the love between equals was preferable to that for inferior creatures (women).

Women were thought to be lacking in sexual self-control, which seemed to be present in men, and therefore females were considered to be inferior creatures to men. Female sexuality was therefore considered dangerous since women's sexual desire could exhaust men or turn them into women. Women's social and civic status was deficient, and male anxieties centered on stabilizing masculinity by establishing and policing gender boundaries.

It will not be mistaken to say that earlier periods had stigmatized acts of sexual intercourse between individuals of the same sex. However, now human's paradigm towards sexuality has been changed. The current global society has utterly turned out to be vocal regarding one's sexual desirability, so much so that humans have started identifying themselves with sexual identity. Previously there were homosexual acts in which people might engage; now, it has become a question instead of a sexual core or essence thought to determine the individual's very being.

Femininity has always been identified with patience and gender, whose identity has constantly been oppressed, suppressed, and subjugated. In contrast, masculinity has always been associated with aggressiveness and dominant behavior in different areas of life, including sexual activity. In antiquity, it was the penetrative sexual role that was considered to be active. Penetration was seen as active, and submission to it as passive. In Athenian culture, it was found that suitable objects of penetration were women, boys, foreigners, and enslaved people who did not enjoy the same political and social citizenship rights as men did. However, attitudes towards male to male sex were not uniform, and therefore there was

always a dispute on what is to be considered superior, the desire for a man or a woman. Some argued that love for men was superior to that for women since women were considered inferior creatures. As the Eroses, who are collective winged gods associated with love and sexual intercourse, put forward the respective advantages of love for man and women along these lines: "Marriage is a remedy devised by the necessity of procreation, but male love alone must rule the heart of a philosopher" (*Mottier 10*). This line puts forward that women serve the natural need for reproduction. However, once such basic needs are fulfilled and society develops to a higher stage, men would naturally be inclined towards forms of indulgence that, according to them, are culturally superior. David Halperin writes in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love*: "Just because commerce with women has an older pedigree than that with boys, do not disdain the latter. Remember that the first discoveries were prompted by need, but those which arose from progress are only the better for it and worthier of our esteem". Athenians considered love affairs between adult and adolescent males as natural and honorable, and there are many such incidents in antiquity where men were engaged in a same-sex relationship. However, not much material exists on sex between women, and historians of sex such as Halperin or Foucault have also focussed almost exclusively on male-to-male sex. Though little of it survives, one of the rare examples of sources depicting passionate love and infatuations between women is the work of the seventh-century BC poet Sappho, who was born in Lesbos.

Female sexuality has always remained an intense focus of problematization throughout history, and it continues to be; however, representations of female sexuality vary with sexual class and race. As Veronique Mottier writes in her *sexuality* that "women belonging to the working class who were termed as racial others were often portrayed as more sexually available or insatiable, as reflected in erotic literature such as John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748) and the anonymous *My Secret Life* (1888), while prostitutes were commonly depicted as hypersexual beings with rotten, corrupted bodies (*Mottier 35*). The Swiss sexologist Auguste Forel also said that women were generally assumed to be 'as a rule... much more the slaves of their instincts and habits than men' depending on how closely they were to primitives. This labeling was not only confined to the women belonging to the lower categories of the hierarchical scale Africans and Asians was also called to be voluptuous and more likely to engage in 'uncivilized', and 'degenerate', sexual practices.

In Foucault's words, "sexuality must not be described as a stubborn drive" (103). However, humans have a very one-dimensional approach towards it, which is why most of the communities have not been able to accept its pluralities. For instance, there have been persistent attempts by various means to reduce female sexuality to its reproductive function and heterosexual and adult form. Within this parameter, other sexual interests have constantly been subverted in society, including lesbianism. It first appeared in 1870, initially competing with the concepts of 'tribadism or 'sapphism'.

When a subject is considered taboo in society, it often gets misrepresented because of the politics associated with its name. Judith Butler has rightly said that representation, on the one hand, serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility

and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, it is the normative function of a language that is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women (*Butler 2*) About this, alternative sexualities did not make space in Indian Cinema until the 1970s, when the world was taken away by the gay rights movement. Indian cinema was more granting the romantic genre of the 50s and more realistic family themes of the 40s. Even though filmmakers tried to escape the traditional Indian themes, no share was allotted to homosexual love. It was an era where discourse on sex was surrounded by moral restriction.

Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their *Same-Sex Love in India*, have said that "two significant phenomena developed during the nineteenth and twentieth century in India, first the minor homophobic voice that was largely ignored by mainstream society in pre-colonial India becomes a dominant voice; and second, sexual love between women is depicted increasingly explicitly while such love between men is almost entirely silenced" (*Kidwai and Vanita 217*). In print media, Urdu poetry called Rekhti explicitly depicted female sexuality, especially lesbian sexuality, which was often criticized for its obscenity. The present era relies much on cinema for its entertainment, and in the last hundred years, it has played an immense role in breaking societal dogmas and creating tolerance towards alternative sexualities; on the other hand, it has also been the subject of criticism for continually depicting the worst stereotypes of sexual minorities in order to gain some immoral entertainment from the audience. In the last thirty years, Indian cinema has come a long way in portraying the queer identity in its spectrum. Though earlier, there were only a handful of movies that brought queer identity to the forefront, at the current stage, there has been a positive and severe change in the quality and in the treatment of handling such marginalized sensitive issues. Earlier films shied away from showing any severe reference to homosexuality. Many consider a man's love for an androgynous Kanwarjit Paintal dressed as a woman in *Rafoo Chakkar* (1975) to be cinema's first blurred reference to homosexuality in India. There was also *Adhura* (1995), starring the late Irrfan Khan and Ashish Balram Nagpal, pinned as the first Hindi film to deal openly with gay romance. Unfortunately, this film could not see the light of day as the Censor Board banned it. Even in the present era, Shakun Batra's *Kapoor and Sons (Since 1921)* 2016 had to face a tough time casting the film because six rejections were faced, for no actor was ready to play the role of a gay man. It is more about a dysfunctional family story where Fawad Khan plays the character of a gay, where his sexual orientation is a sub-plot rather than the film's main event. Sridevi Nair also mentions that even when the Bollywood actress Perizad Zorabian who was first cast to play in *When Kiran Met Karen* (2008), said, "I have chosen to step back from the project because of my inhibitions about playing a lesbian and for no other reason" (*The Times of India*, 2006).

The fluidity of gender and sexuality in India's mythology, literature, and society has been well-documented by authors like Suniti Namjoshi, Devdutt Pattanaik, Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, and Geeti Thadani. Many books have been written on same-sex love in India, but the written works are only meant for those who can read and write. However, a significant chunk of India's population is the unprivileged ones who are unlettered. In a country like ours,

media is crucial in creating awareness among people regarding marginalized sexualities. Undoubtedly, cinema is the most excellent tool to have happened to the queer movement in India. Only after the twentieth century that sexual minorities were able to come out of the closet and make their presence feel in public. After this movement, films made in abundance were sympathetic toward the plight of homosexual love. Some of the movies were made to free them from the chains of convention. Madhur Bhandarkar's *Page 3* (2005), Anurag Basu's *Life in a Metro* (2007), Reema Kagti's *Honeymoon Travels* (2007), Karan Razdan's *Girlfriend* (2004), Parvati Balagopalan's *Rules: Pyar ka Superhit Formula* (2003) circulated the same gay stereotypes.

However, other films and documentaries during this time were trying to understand and enlighten the mass regarding the cultural phenomena of the queer movement. Few among those were Aparna Sanyal's *Tedhi Lakeer* (2004), Nagesh Kukunoor's *Teen Deewarein* (2003), Onir's *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), Sridhar Rangayan's *Purple Skies*, Sridhar Rangayan's *Yours Emotionally* (2006), Tarun Mansukhani's *Dostana* (2008), Sudhanshu Saria's *Loev* (2015), Karan Johar's *Bombay Talkies* (Ajeeb Dastan Hai Ye), Hitesh Kewalya's *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (2020), Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* (2016), Tanuj Bhramar's *Dear Dad* (2016) and some more movies were made keeping in mind the gay sexualities and their plights.

On the other hand, only a few films have been made by Bollywood Cinema on the issue of women's same-sex desire. Some of them are Kamal Amrohi's *Razia Sultan* (1983), Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), Karan Razdan's *Girlfriend* (2004), Sachin Yardi's *Kya Super Kool Hain Hum* (2012), Anup Singh's *Qissa* (2013), Abhishek Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiyan* (2014), Raj Amit Kumar's *Unfreedom* (2015), Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a straw* (2015), Shelly Chopra Dhar's *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) and the very recent Harshavardhan Kulkarni's *Badhai Do* (2022). Out of all these movies, only a few could do justice in portraying women's homosexuality and not making it a subplot within the main plot. *Raziya Sultan* (1983) is an Indian period biographical film that gives an account of the first and only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate and creates a remarkable history by ascending the throne in the year between 1236 and 1240 was not received well by the audience for its out of tune plot and wooden acting. Although the film is based on the ruler's life and she speculated love affair with the Abyssinian enslaved person, Jamal-ud-Din Yakut, it does portray a wild homoerotic vibe between Razia and her confidante Khakun (Parveen Babi) in the song *Khwab ban kar koi ayega*. The song, sung by the "Queen of Melody," Lata Mangeshkar, and composed by Jan Nisar Akhtar, the queen's best friend, is seen lullabying her queen. When the queen sails about in a boat at her palace, dreaming of her man, Khakun rides along and sings that the princess can sleep only when she can see her prince in her dreams. The actress blushes at the lullaby with her eyes, which get clouded, and her toes tremble when she recalls Yakut's horse riding. Khakun seems to be loyal and sexual aid towards her queen, but what needs to be marked here is that while singing the song, she leans over Razia giving an impression of fondling her. To add to this scene, while two women are getting close to each other, a white plume covers their faces, making one of the two

bondwomen laugh at the royals' unusual intimacy. Talking about this scene, Vijayendra Ghatge says: "Well, there was a scene between Hema ji and Parveen Babi, which had a hint of bisexuality. After the film was released, the press and public talked about this scene, and I still remember that years later, when the film was shown on Doordarshan, this particular scene was followed by a solo song sequence by Parveen Babi, which was cropped". (*Nandini Ramnath*, Scroll.in). In Rekhti poetry, certain Hindustani words are also used for homoerotically inclined women, like *Dugan*, *Tanaka*, *za'atar*, *chapati*, and *chapattis* (*Vanita and Kidwai* 219).

On the other hand, there was Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998), featuring Shabana Azmi and Nandita Sen, which managed to deal with homosexuality. The film's title "evokes an ancient Indian symbol for energy that is not only purifying but also passionate, creative and itself created by female forces" (*Kidwai and Vanita* 244). The film is about two sisters-in-law who reluctantly but desperately fall in love with each other. It was 1998 when the film hit the Indian Cinema; based on the story of two women, Nita and Radha, enduring unhappy heterosexual marriages with their spouses. The film produced much hullabaloo in the political forum in India. The attack on the film was severe vandalism created by Shiv Sainiks, Bajrang Dal, and the Bhartiya Janata Party. However, what needs to be questioned here is whether these women's sexual orientation resulted from their despondent conjugal life or their innate sexuality, which brought them together. The film would have worked better if the two women had explored their sexuality naturally and not because of a failed heterosexual relationship.

Recently the Bollywood cinema had two lesbian-themed movies to present to its audience which brought women's sex desire to the mainstream, i.e., *Ek Ladki KO Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) and *Badhai Do* (2022) after the Supreme Court gave the historical verdict on decriminalization of homosexual activity on 6 September 2018. As Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai say in *Same-Sex Love in India*, "Indian cultures tend to be more of the type anthropologists call shame cultures than guilt cultures". "Reputation is familial rather than individual, and even harmless behaviors that cause others to gossip about one's family are considered shameful" (Kakar 135-136). Inspired by the 1919 novel *A Damsel in Distress* by P.G. Wodehouse, *Ek Ladki* tells the unconventional love story of a young Punjabi woman who hides her lesbian identity because of the guilt she possessed from the very beginning of her childhood of being a lesbian and her attempts to come out of the closet in a conservative and traditional Sikh family. A character like Babloo (Abhishek Duhan), who played the role of a tyrant brother to his sister (Sonam Kapoor), can be called a microcosm of Indian society in its perception of homosexuality. Though the film emerged as a flop at the box office, it is a movie to be appreciated for bringing a severe societal taboo into a mainstream format.

Harshvardhan Kulkarni's *Badhai Do* (2022) is about a lavender marriage – which is a hetero marriage between two homosexual persons who give their consent to be a part of the procreative relationship in order to escape the societal stigma so that they could fit into the society and live their dual life both inside and outside of their bedroom. It tells the tale of a married couple who live like roommates in their house and showcase their heterosexual

affiliation to their families, friends, and neighbors. The matrimonial compromise shown in this movie is not the ordinary one where a woman or a man chooses to be with someone of his gender to escape a heterosexual marriage; instead, the couple opts for a heterosexual marriage to give voice to their own sexual identity. The film depicts what it is to be gay and a lesbian in an Indian society where family expects them to marry their opposite gender. It also depicts how an individual has to battle with oneself and one's family when it comes to revealing their identity, which does not match the normative sexuality.

Conclusion

In classifying every creation in this world, every culture has designated man in the highest ranking. Where Hinduism believes that man descended from a high state of pure consciousness called Brahma, Islam says humans are the noblest of all creations. Christianity believes that what distinguishes humans from all other creatures is that they have been created in God's image. However, it will not be mistaken to say that he is the only man held responsible for every chaos he creates in society. Even in this ultra-modern age where so much research and ample texts have been written on the concept of alternative sexualities and calling it to be expected, people still tend to turn away from these marginal sexualities because of their non-conformity in gender stereotypes. What needed to be noticed here is that even the pioneers of sexology, such as the Germans Bloch, Kraft-Ebing, Hirschfeld, Westphal, Rohelder, Moll, and Friedlander, the Austrian Stekel, the French Fere and Thoinot, the Swiss Forel, the Hungarian Kaan, and the English Ellis did explore sexual 'abnormalcy' through zealous labeling and categorized them as deviating from the norm. Though the biological model of sexuality did not see homosexuals as sinners or criminals, they were addressed as abnormal individuals who needed a cure. Although some sexologists, including Ellis, saw homosexuality as inborn and not as a disease, the sexual science was preoccupied with problematizing and examining the marginal sexualities with a thought of how to 'correct' the perceived pathologies through rehabilitation and chemical and surgical interventions.

Categorizing human beings into heterosexual or homosexual is a modern phenomenon that emerged much later in history. During the ancient period, the social status of men and women was negotiated around the active and passive distinction where women were known to be succumbing to man's masculinity. About same-sex desire, though, several archival pieces of evidence have been found on males being homosexuals. However, it was considered unnatural and demeaning for a free-born man to desire to be penetrated because that would reduce him to the socially subordinate role of a woman. On the other hand, little material existed on female homosexuality during antiquity because women's sexual experiences were generally understood solely within the established reproduction parameters. They were considered to be proper objects of penetration. Within this framework, the life experiences of lesbians have been invalidated because sexuality is generally understood in the heterosexual paradigm. Though specific movements have been able to provide valuable support privately, it simultaneously involves mechanisms of denial and cultural silence, which continue to ensnare homoerotic desires and their practices in phobia and prejudice.

Though many human activists and authors in India have been able to do justice to their identity by penning their stories in books, articles, reflection papers, reports, etc., they do not get accessed by the common mass because a significant chunk of the population's inability to read and write. In such cases, media becomes a powerful aid to create awareness among the public. In undertaking such colossal responsibility, it often fails to comprehend the plights and pangs of lesbians and portrays them as 'inappropriate' subjects to be talked about in mainstream films. Though some independent cinemas have been able to do justice while depicting their stories (for instance, adaptations of some plays by Indian playwrights), their numbers are very few. Since the British Raj System, India has come a long way in treating homosexuality. From when the same-sex act was criminalized in India to the present era, when it is no longer a criminal offense, it has been through different legal procedures; within this edifice, female homosexuality has been through an ordeal. Though the government of India has been able to strike down a part of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, it still has to go a long way regarding their civil rights. Besides pointing towards their legal representation, where their rights have been partly protected, what needs to be reflected is how they have been represented in society and front of the media. Things have changed positively. Women with same-sex desires are now more confident to express themselves, grow personally, and own their relationships without fearing discrimination and harassment. With the growing awareness, society has shown a positive attitude toward these women. Same-sex sexuality has become much more acceptable as a subject of discourse. The print media also depicts their stories both from rural and urban parts of the country to make people aware that lesbianism is not just an urban phenomenon; there are women from the working class who are unaware of the term used for women engaged in same-sex desire. It is hard to find a newspaper, magazine, or journal that does not mention homosexuality. Indian cinema has also played a crucial role in lifting the curtain on such a sensitive subject. Some recent movies have illustrated women's sexual desire with full responsibility and sensibility. However, a significant chunk of the population remains unaware of the realities of the struggles these alternative sexualities have to go through. It is still considered to be a taboo that is often ridiculed.

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