

HOMOSEXUALITY IN VISUAL MEDIA:

A Comparative Study between Indian and American Cinema

Introduction: Tracing Homosexuality

Chapter XVI, Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code dating back to 1861, introduced during the British rule in India, criminalizes sexual activities between same sex individuals as "against the order of nature". The section was declared unconstitutional with respect to sex between consenting adults by the High Court of India on 2 July 2009. That judgment was overturned by the Supreme Court of India on 11 December 2013, with the Court holding that amending or repealing Section 377 should be a matter left to Parliament, not the judiciary. However, as Arvind Narrain puts it, "India is increasingly witness to people asserting their right to be different as sexual beings in terms of their sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual practices." As the judicial system renders the LGBTQ disenfranchised and vulnerable, this essay attempts to understand the ways in which queerness is represented, discussed and disseminated in visual culture by undertaking a comparative analysis of Indian and American Cinemas.

It was really Deepa Mehta¹'s 1998 film *Fire*², depicting two women in love, which led to the beginning of discussion around alternate sexualities in Indian Cinema. The film was vociferously attacked by the moral right wing as immoral and obscene, even though the censor board had passed it. Both *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003)³ and *Dostana* (2008)⁴ dealt with the theme, but not in any serious, sustained manner. Moreover, they concluded on a note of inevitability of heterosexuality. It is with movies like *I Am* (2010)⁵ and *My Brother...Nikhil*(2005)⁶ that the realities of same sex love and its plight are showcased poignantly on celluloid. Unfortunately, these movies have had a limited

¹ Deepa Mehta is an Indo-Canadian film director and screenwriter.

² A film, loosely based on Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* that circumscribes the story of two Indian women who find themselves in an intimate relationship after their husbands choose celibacy.

³ Released under the *Yash Raj Films* banner, the movie laughingly suggests a homoerotic relationship between the actually straight male protagonists Aman and Rohit.

⁴ Released under the *Yash Raj Films* banner, the movie depicts the hilarity that ensues as the male protagonists, Sameer and Kunal assume the identity of being homosexual in order to be eligible for renting an apartment with a girl.

⁵ An anthology film of four stories directed by Onir, which depict pertinent social issues that modern India grapples with.

⁶ Based on an Indian AIDS activist, Dominic D'souza, the film explores the identity crisis within a homosexual AIDS patient.

impact on the mainstream consciousness because of their relatively restricted reach. They remain on the periphery as ‘art’ films or ‘parallel’ cinema. As popular actors and directors refuse to broach the issue, it often gets relegated to the margins as a concern only of a, to use the Supreme Court’s contemptuous phrase with pointed irony, “miniscule minority.”

Indian and American Cinema: A Comparative Study

Homosexuality and homoeroticism have long been subjects of cinema all over the world. In America, homosexuality was first depicted in *Dickenson Experimental Sound Film* and several other motion pictures in 1920s and ’30s, where homosexuals were represented as funny, languid, effeminate creatures. However, since then American cinema has evolved into depicting homosexuality in all its complexity, resisting the allure of succumbing to reductive generalisations. In India, considering that the queer person has only recently become an identity to be taken seriously, let alone be conferred rights, the representations are still very preliminary. Even offensive- homosexuality is often reduced to some kind of national joke that we all seem to be cracking together. For the purposes of the essay, however, the focus is on films that choose not to mock the homosexuals but present the multi-layered complexity as their individual identities interact with various social structures. The assessment is done through a comparison between two seminal films on male homosexuality in India- *I Am* and *My Brother Nikhil*, with two equally significant American films, *Milk* and *Boys Don’t Cry*.

2.1 Impact of the Geo-Political setting

Each of the movies being assessed provides a different exploration of homosexuality in accordance with its specific geographic and socio-political setting. *I Am* and *Milk* are set in commercial and financial hubs of their respective countries. Bringing homosexuality ‘out of the closet’ in these metropolitan areas gives a tangibility, concreteness and poignancy to queer desires and identities denied to them in other forms of representation. *My Brother...Nikhil* is set in the 1980s in Goa, a place that is imagined to be rather liberal and modern in its outlook with reference to normative Indian standards. The film, however, chooses to focus away from the Goa of beach parties, water sports and Feni to a time when the first stirrings of the HIV epidemic in India legitimises and

reproduces deep antagonism for and revulsion towards homosexuality. *Boys Don't Cry*, set in Nebraska, 'rural' America depicts deep fear and hatred of the transgender person, whose identity is punished and brutalised through double rape and murder. Such extreme representation of homophobia and transphobia helps us understand how 'developed' America is not very different from the conservative and orthodox India when it comes to the issue of non-normative sexualities and gender expressions.

1. Showcasing the Socio-political and Religious space

Each of the movies being discussed depicts strong and complex characters that challenge the unjust social stigma against homosexuality. Jai and Omar, the gay couple in *I Am*, are unfazed about expressing their desire for each other in a public café. In doing so, they reclaim, literally and ideologically, the city for the queer subject- one that has either been forced to seek anonymous, furtive sex in public parks or urinals or have had to surrender to the privacy of interiorised spaces. *Boys Don't Cry*, a far more disturbing film, gives us an insight into the violence surrounding the lives of the perennial 'other' of normal society- the transgender person. Based on real life incidents, the film is about Brandon Teena, who dares to rupture the "natural" connection between sex and gender- born female, he identifies emotionally and physically as male, and desires other women. Thus, as a female to male trans-person, he is subverting heteronormative ideologies at multiple levels. The commendable aspect of the movie is that a mainstream actor like Hilary Swank came forward to portray such a powerful and controversial character, a feat rarely seen in the Indian cinema scene. Here, mainstream actors refrain from treading such unconventional paths. The fact that Bollywood is the greatest influence on the public mind set in India and is still shying away from issues like homosexuality only goes out to show that we still have to come a long way when compared to American cinema.

Registering a break from representational traditions that portray the queer person either as stereotype or as a victim, *Milk* chronicles the life of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay politician in America. Milk is portrayed as a strong-willed, assertive and confident person, who, in an environment rife with extreme hostility and ignorance, tries to challenge the heterosexist biases of law in particular and society in general. He becomes an orator and utilises this new found power

to extend his own liberation to that of the entire homosexual community. In one of the most profound scenes of the film, Harvey and Scott kiss openly in an extremely reactionary Irish Catholic neighbourhood, as a shop hoarding titled “We Are Open” hovers symbolically in the background. The defiant aspect of queer love and desiring is highlighted in a context where homosexuality faces stiff resistance most of all from Christianity.

Speaking of queer love, *My Brother...Nikhil* takes a completely different trajectory than that of *Milk*. It attempts to normalise same sex love, by depicting a couple’s selfless and unflinching dedication of a man towards another man. This is significant in the context of the moral panic against homosexuality that prevailed at a time when India first came to grips with the AIDS scare. The film subverts the notion that gay men meet each other only for sex, and are incapable of forming enduring relationships and bonds. Indeed, Onir seeks to portray the gay relationship in all its quotidian complexities, full of moments of belongingness, jealousy, insecurities and sometimes crippling misunderstandings. It also seeks to downplay the somewhat commonsensical assumption that AIDS is a ‘gay disease’ by never revealing the exact reason why Nikhil contracted HIV. In fact, the pain of the disease and the ostracism that comes with it is counterbalanced in the film with messages of hope, humanism, love and acceptance. The film ends on a radical note, as Nikhil’s parents come to embrace Nigel for he was their now deceased son’s lifelong friend and lover.

CONCLUSION: Breaking out of the closet

When our films refuse to participate in a contract of silence around issues of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity, they are often rejected by the mainstream, as the box-office fate of films like *I Am* or *My Brother Nikhil* attests. This is coupled with the fact that serious projects on the issue of homosexuality and queerness are often seen as commercially unviable by producers, who are very unwilling to make investments in films that may potentially alienate public taste. If ‘Entertainment, Entertainment, Entertainment’ is the credo of commercial Hindi cinema, all the films that fail to fulfil that function fall flat. Films such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana* were indeed important for providing the average viewer the language to articulate queerness in our everyday lives but their contribution gets restricted to that; *I Am* and *My Brother...Nikhil* strike the inner

conscience of the viewer and confront troubling questions and issues that are far more fundamental to the identity of a queer person in India today, living as we do in these dark times.

If Karan Johar plays safe with locating homosexuality outside India, sometimes in New York and sometimes in Miami, and never in the heart of everyday, middle-class, non six-pack India, *I Am* tears apart those perfectly choreographed and gym-toned fantasies. It depicts middle class and lower middle class- and no, they are not in skimpy yellow trunks- spontaneously mingling in public spaces in the city, and also goes on to show the violence and persecution gay men face from the police when they are ‘caught’ doing that which is considered abnormal, unnatural and un-Indian. 377 never touches the lives of Johar’s protagonists, who are so busy having rollicking fun in the beach resorts of Miami that all they do most of the time is “shut up and bounce”⁷!

It is in this context that American cinema becomes an inspirational reference point for us- unlike the neglect and apathy that *I Am* or *My Brother Nikhil* were met with among the masses, *Milk* managed to keep the movie halls packed and the audiences enraptured as it depicted the unlawfulness against homosexuals. *Boys Don’t Cry* was not received so enthusiastically, causing uproar over its graphic content and unabashed portrayal of trans-phobic hate crime in America. Nonetheless, it is an undeniable fact that movies relating to homosexuality have more viewership in America, not only among festival circuits but also the less specialised audience. Acclaimed popular actors like Sean Penn and Hilary Swank are more willing to experiment with the possibilities of essaying queer characters, without the fear of being typecast. It is about time that India moved away from crass humour at the expense of the homosexual and acknowledged the presence of social diversity. We insist that homosexuality becomes less academic an issue- it is in mainstream Indian cinema that we locate the hope of change of perceptions in the viewer, painfully slow as they might be. If the message does not register in the public imagination, the social conditioning against homosexuality that we have received over generations will not be easy to eradicate.

⁷ A popular song sequence from the movie *Dostana*