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Queer Crisis, Stereotypes, and its Psychosocial Impact: A Delve into a Few Selected Hindi Films

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Abstract:

The paper critically examines the entrenched norms of a heteronormative society through the lens of contemporary Indian cinema. Explicitly focusing on the film *Cobalt Blue* (2022), directed by Sachin Kundalkar, and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) by Ghazal Dhaliwal and Shelly Chopra Dhar, it explores how these cinematic narratives bring queer issues to the forefront in the Indian context. The discussion encompasses themes such as bullying in educational settings, the profound sense of loneliness and isolation experienced by queer individuals, and the subtle suppression of homosexuality within societal norms. It examines the representation of delusional jealousy as a manifestation of unspoken desires. Furthermore, the paper scrutinises the various manifestations of masculinity in these films, ranging from hypo- to hyper-masculinity. It highlights the limited survival strategies available to queer individuals, including disguise, pretence, and escapism. The paper emphasises the need for society to acknowledge and normalise the existence of individuals with non-binary gender and sexual orientations. It also discusses the challenges faced by Indian families grappling with rigid gender expectations and the psycho-social adversities encountered by those with non-normative sexual orientations and gender identities.

Keywords: queerness, masculinity, psychological relatedness, child abuse.

Introduction

India's dominant heteronormative perspective has marginalized long-standing customs and cultures of same-sex love. Many instances of homosexuality documented in ancient Indian writings, religions, and other sources have been disregarded. Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, written in the ancient era, contains an entire chapter on erotic gay behaviour. The Khajuraho Sculpture,

constructed in the early seventh century, features numerous examples of erotic art representing homosexuality. There are pictures of women touching other women erotically and of men showing off their privates to one another. The Sun Temple in Konark, built in the 1200s, is another notable example. The Sultans of the Delhi Sultanate were particularly open to homosexual relationships and practices like *lauler-bazi* during the Middle Ages, despite Sharia's restrictions against it. They began relationships with men. The Jamali Kamali tomb and mosque, built in 1528, is also famous for its spirit of two male lovers who speak of their passionate love story from their graves beside each other. The monument is one of the most outstanding examples of Mughal architecture in the country's capital and is nicknamed the "gay Taj Mahal". These instances do not mean that pre-colonial India was very open towards same-sex relations. Indian repression of dissident genders and sexualities certainly predates colonialism. However, pre-colonial queer repression differed from its current form in extent and content. Pre-colonial queer repression occurred in local, limited time/space and coexisted with queer acceptance elsewhere within the borders of space currently delineated in India. Today, Indian queer repression is temporally eternalized and territorially generalised through inscription in national laws (Bacchetta 126).

During the colonial era, discussions surrounding sexual and gender identities tended to focus on the idea that the colonised people's genders and sexual orientations were different from those of the colonisers. This is important to keep in mind when considering the reasons behind the laws created to "normalise" sexual behaviour in the colonies. The British Raj, for example, believed that homosexuality was "against the order of nature" and that their colonies existed to make a profit. Foucault delves into this mindset in his book *The History of Sexuality, vol. I*, and explains how the propagation of homophobic ideas benefited certain sections of society. Only a specific type of sexuality - one that was utilitarian and fertile, with the birth of a child being the end goal - was embraced in social spaces. This suited the capitalist demand during the Industrial Revolution when labourers were exploited to their maximum. In such situations, people did not have the time for leisure and pleasure, and sex or sexual activity was completely separated from the concept of pleasure, limited only to reproduction or to reproduce labour for capitalism. The dominant people perpetuated this form of sexuality because it was economically sound and politically conservative. Pleasure and power were linked in a complex mechanism, which has also impacted India and can be seen in its laws. Even in the film *Cobalt Blue*, the protagonist Tanay has a conversation with his teacher during which the latter states,

"*The Church thought so, so did the queen, and the British Raj. And once they left, we do not know what we think. We are still governed by their laws*" (Kundalkar, 2022).

The impact of the British Empire on the Indian judiciary system can still be seen today, even if laws have changed. Same-sex marriage was recently debated in parliament, with some arguing that heterosexual marriage is natural and part of Indian tradition. This shows how the British influenced the perception of same-sex relationships in India. While the Indian Supreme Court has decriminalised homosexuality, there is still a long way to go before social reforms are made. The effects of this can be seen in Indian movies, which still often use homosexuality and effeminacy for comic relief and cast queer characters in stereotypical and antagonist roles. However, some films like *Aligarh* (2016), *Ajeeb Dastan Hai Yeh* (2013), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), and *Fire* (1996) are changing how homosexuality is portrayed.

Complete heterosexuality is a rare phenomenon, just like total homosexuality. However, most films portray heteronormativity as the norm, and the Hindi film industry rarely produces more than one or two films that sensitively focus on the queer issue. Professor Alfred Charles Kinsey of Indiana University conducted studies on sexuality, gathering several interviews from Kinsey and others. Subsequently, two books were published: *Sexual Behavior in Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in Human Female* (1953). Kinsey's experiment was a remarkable step towards normalising homosexuality. Before Kinsey's report, people were thought to be either strictly homosexual or heterosexual. However, he described sexual behavior on a continuum, ranging between 0 (extreme heterosexuality) and 6 (extreme homosexuality), which is a rare phenomenon.

Rating	Description
0	Exclusively heterosexual
1	Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
2	Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
3	Equally heterosexual and homosexual
4	Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
5	Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
6	Exclusively homosexual
X	No socio-sexual contacts or reactions

Picture source- academics.skidmore.edu.

Deconstructing the Selected Films: A Critical Analysis

Hindi films have regularly featured characters from the LGBT community. While some of these portrayals have been intended for comedic effect, others have attempted to sensitively and realistically address the subject matter. Unfortunately, many of these films have failed to dispel traditional myths surrounding the community. The primary texts for this paper are *Cobalt Blue* (2022), directed and written by Sachin Kundalkar, and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Lga* (2019), written by Ghazal Dhaliwal and directed by Shelly Dhar Chopra.

Cobalt Blue is a cinematic adaptation of Sachin Kundalkar's novel, which focuses on two siblings falling in love with the same man. The film's protagonists are Tanay, Anuja, and the Paying Guest, and the narrative takes place in a classic Maharashtrian Brahmin household in Cochin during the 1990s. The film explores the themes of non-conformity and liberation from convention, as both Tanay and Anuja defy traditional gender roles. Tanay is an unconventional man who prefers solitude and writing poetry, and he also assists his mother in cooking. He talks about love, relationships, and other things, which sets him apart from his brother, who conforms to typical male behavior. Anuja, on the other hand, is a tomboyish girl who enjoys playing hockey and has never shown any vulnerability. She plays hockey professionally and rejects preconceived ideas that limit her thoughts. Both characters seek freedom from conformity in their unique ways and express their opposition to the prevailing worldview of their families. Tanay prefers solid-coloured

attire associated with the rainbow flag, while Anuja dresses in a manner not typically associated with women. Their journey towards a non-conformist lifestyle is profoundly impacted by the entry of the paying guest into their lives. According to Kiran Keshavamurthy, Cobalt Blue captures the sensual longing of youth and the disillusionment of disappointed love. However, the prospect of a new sense of intimacy is also constrained by disillusionment, which applies to Anuja, Tanay, and the paying visitor.

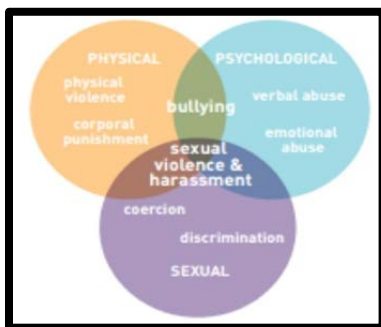
The 1919 P.G. Wodehouse novel *A Damsel in Distress* became the basis for another film chosen for this paper, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*. Ghazal Dhaliwal and Shelly Dhar Chopra wrote the screenplay for the adaptation of the latter. The film portrays the story of Sweety Chaudhary, a traditional Punjabi woman who is afraid of being rejected by society, especially her family if she comes out about her sexual orientation and gender identity. The film's plot revolves around Sweety's dilemma of being married off by her family and her eventual coming out. It portrays the societal pressures that individuals in heteronormative societies face and how they must navigate them. Sweety's character meets her lover, Kuhu, in the process of matchmaking. Later, Sahil Mirza, a playwright, helps Sweety fight her battle and plans to write a play for Balbir Chaudhary's fashion show. The play, titled "Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga," features Sweety and Kuhu as lovers. Initially, people show disagreement with the idea, but Sahil convinces them by stating it as a new generational fresh story. After many ups and downs, the film concludes with Sweety coming out in public and defending herself. Sweety's father returns to the stage and defends Sweety and Kuhu after reading her diary and realising how lonely and misunderstood she felt her entire life. The film offers a message that aims to normalise the existence of people with different sexual orientations without using the terms "lesbian" or "queer." The film portrays being queer as another normal without categorising the characters. This approach aims to present the issues faced by individuals with different sexual orientations without putting them under a single term. While categorisation is essential for political struggle, it can also be limiting. The selected films do not categorise their characters but rather reflect the issues they face. These films offer hope that society will change with time.

Depiction of Child Abuse: A Triggering Issue

The binary division of gender and sexuality can cause distress and anxiety for individuals who do not conform to societal norms, especially in educational institutions where bullying and

harassment are prevalent. This can lead to decreased academic performance and the inability to focus on studies, resulting in a lack of social acceptance and feelings of self-doubt and unworthiness. Despite the legalisation of homosexuality by the Indian Supreme Court, society still holds onto its heteronormative beliefs, perpetuated by gendered textbooks and a lack of awareness and sensitivity among educators. This has led to an increase in bullying, childhood abuse, and violence in schools and colleges. Students who do not conform to gender stereotypes are at a higher risk of facing such situations, which can impact their physical and mental health, including anxiety, stress, low self-esteem, and depression. Sexual violence is also prevalent, leading to students avoiding washrooms, which can further impact their health and studies. While violence in schools is a global issue, there is a lack of rules and training courses for students and teachers to address the problem effectively. Ultimately, this can impact the employment opportunities of individuals who have faced such violence.

The film *Ek Ladki ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* highlights the issue of school bullying and its effects on students. The movie portrays the story of Sweetie, who faces ostracism from her classmates after they discover her drawing of two brides holding hands. This leads to her feeling isolated and mentally alone in her class. Sweetie's only solace is her diary, where she can express her thoughts and emotions. Additionally, the film also showcases the story of a boy who is bullied by his schoolmates and is subjected to physical assault and humiliation. This depiction, though brief, sheds light on the plight of many students who face similar experiences. The film highlights the need to create a safe and inclusive learning environment where students can express themselves without fear of discrimination or harassment.



Picture source- www.endvawnow.org

Chitthiye video.



Picture source- Screenshot from

Incidents of school bullying and ragging are pretty common in educational institutions. However, many such cases go unnoticed and unreported until they reach their tragic end, as in the case of Arvey Malhotra and Swapnadeep Kundu. Arvey Malhotra, a school student, committed suicide by jumping off the top floor of his society in Greater Faridabad, India, on February 24, 2022, after being frustrated by school bullying. In his suicide note, he wrote, "The school has killed me." Similarly, Swapnadeep Kundu, a first-year student at Jadavpur University, India, died by suicide on August 9, 2023, after facing homophobic ragging by his hostel seniors. His last words before jumping from the balcony were, "I am not gay." As per the investigation, Swapnadeep was forced to show his erect penis to prove his masculinity, which became the reason for his humiliation and harassment. These incidents highlight the need for a safe and supportive environment for all students in educational institutions. It is crucial to stop the propagation of harmful stereotypes related to queer people and ensure that educational institutions support the diverse needs of students. Ragging, which is a common phenomenon in schools and colleges, can have severe consequences, particularly for students who do not fit into the binary division of gender and sexuality. Therefore, it is essential to take strict measures to prevent such incidents and create an inclusive environment that respects and supports everyone's rights and dignity.

'Appropriate behaviour' is one of the features expected of everyone in our society. Among men, this behaviour incorporates the desire to be 'manly' among men. These expectations and unwritten rules become a norm to be followed. It is also one of the possible causes of activities like bullying and ragging. This 'desirable' trait might be one of the reasons for the depiction of Tanay as an isolated person in the film. Though the film does not explicitly show Tanay's bullying in his school, it can be sensed from his behaviour. Bullying also happens in homes; in Tanay's case, it can be seen about his brother, where Tanay's brother can be seen scolding him for not being like him. Tanay is often asked questions that make him uncomfortable. Many a time, he is asked to take part in traditional activities, which are typically made only for males; at the time of his grandmother's death, Tanay chose to stand with the ladies of the house, but then he was asked to go for the cremation with the males. Nobody cares about these minor incidences, but stereotyping and role-defining are problematic for those who do not relate to the role imposed upon them. It often feels like living in somebody else's body. Men are often rewarded for their 'manly' deeds in a hetero-patriarchal household. However, if somebody (here, men) contributes to activities traditionally associated with women, nobody cares about it or is sometimes made fun of. His family

members entirely ignore Tanay's interest in cooking. They constantly scold Anuja for not helping in the kitchen. Anuja is never rewarded for her excellence in sports; to pursue her dream in sports, she has to escape from the family. This non-supportive nature of family and discrimination based on gender can be put in the category of bullies. Some unsupportive relatives and family members can be monsters like those in school or college.

Psychosocial Turmoil: Understanding the Crisis and Its Effects

Loneliness and isolation are everyday experiences for queer individuals portrayed in both films. Social isolation refers to the feeling of not belonging and the inability to connect and engage with others. This aspect is presented sensitively in both movies. In heteronormalised societies, queer men are expected to conform to societal norms, leading to a lack of psychological connection in their lives, marginalisation, humiliation, physical abuse, and fear of self-expression. Feeling different can also be incredibly isolating. Overwhelming emotions such as loneliness and isolation can lead to detrimental psychological changes. Social circumstances can cause biochemical changes that make a person more vulnerable to contemplating and committing suicide. Those who are not openly out lack community support, which increases their sense of loneliness and isolation. This exacerbates the issue since they do not feel accepted in their homes or have support from the outside world. Statistics show that queer individuals often do not have spouses, children, or religious associations as seniors, making them more likely to be alone later in life. Priyanka Uniyal's work, *I Am Your Reflection*, portrays the story of homosexual individuals finding a place in society and presents this crisis in a heart-touching manner. Similar situations can also be seen in both films. In both films, the protagonist hardly ever meets anyone they can relate to. Uniyal writes,

“I was crying inside, but my tears could not be whipped.

I was weeping inside, but I could not be heard.

I was bleeding inside, but I could not be aid.

And above all, I was dying inside but I could not be rescued.”

(Yadav, p 102)

In the film *Cobalt Blue*, Tanay spends most of his time alone, reading books, listening to music, etc. It seems as if he does not want his presence to be felt by others. There is a scene in the film where he observes some boys playing football, and the way he stares at them makes it very evident that he wants to get involved with them, but the fear of being different stops him from doing so. There is a pause in the film in this scene, and it is very significant; another virile man could have easily commented on the boys playing or might have started playing with them, but Tanay was unable to relate with them psychologically, so he stopped. However, he was able to initiate a conversation with the Paying guest from his side; he was able to ask him whatever he wanted. This shows that he was able to relate with the paying guest psychologically, and his presence removed loneliness from his life, but this happiness did not last long in Tanay's life, and the paying guest left. He felt so unrelated to his surroundings that he decided to leave the comfort of his own house and escape. Another incidence in which this loneliness can be felt easily is in his teacher's dialogue,

“As time goes on and as life goes on, you long for friendship, you become lonely; I am hungry for friendship and companionship; We are living in prison”
(Kundalkar, 2022).

This robust dialogue is sufficient to understand the loneliness experienced by queer people and forget about sex and marriage; it is even hard to find friends. Advancements in technology have changed the scene a little, but it has its demerit where people have started blackmailing queer people. Various cases have been found where people fall prey to some rackets after they become 'friends' via online dating applications. A similar case was found in Mumbai, where a model cum gym trainer, along with three other people, was arrested for blackmailing a hotel executive after shooting his naked video. Though the people involved were arrested, such action does not happen if the victim is not socially and economically sound, which was not the case with a hotel executive (Singh, April 19, 2014). Though this dates back to 2014, even after the decriminalisation of same-sex relations, people are afraid of such incidences as they do not want to face social torture after being 'exposed' to everyone.

In the film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, Sweety's life is depicted as isolated and lonely, except for the time she spends with her friend Kuhu and a few other friends. The movie starts with a wedding ceremony where all the family members are enjoying themselves with one

another. However, we can spot Sweety sitting alone, away from the crowd, until she meets Kuhu. At the movie's end, Sweety reveals that she had spent her entire life writing about her pains in her diary, and even her father failed to understand her. Sweety's dialogue at the end of the film is very significant in understanding her situation when she revolts against her entire family and speaks her mind,

“I would never go against you, Dad, if this was just about me. However, it is about all those children who spend their entire life in loneliness, craving for just one word of understanding...This play is for the child who lived her whole life inside her diary” (Dhar, 2019).

Masculinities in the Films Selected: Portrayals and Perspectives

Masculinity is a complex construct that can be defined as both an internal and external impression. Nigel Edley argues that masculinity is as much an impression from the outside as an expression from within. The idea of men as slaves to their nature sits fairly quickly alongside the suggestion that masculinity can be inculcated or stifled (Edley 2107, 24). Masculinity can also be defined as an expression of the male body and a powerful state of mind. Some characters in both films exactly fit this definition. Different kinds of masculinity have been depicted in both movies, like hyper-masculinity and hypo-masculinity. Their family's decision can reflect this masculinity. Tanay's father and elder brother are the perfect example of a hypermasculine character who believes in following the set social norms because they know that if they follow the rule, they will be rewarded, the reward associated with patriarchy. Tanay's elder brother always tries to act virile and talks about marriage and reproducing children. Men in heterosexual setups are very obsessed with their genitals, and there is some anxiety about presenting oneself as the father. This association between phallus and being men is a widespread phenomenon. Becoming a father is proof of manliness; in the film, Tanay's brother proudly says he will at least have three children. He tells Anuja, his sister, that he will reproduce at least three kids. All these are the ways by which men try to assert their masculinity by showing their virile nature. Furthermore, fatherhood and marriage are merely the social beginning of the 'development of human institution' and 'ideologies of male supremacy', culminating in the separation of public and private realms over which men exert control (O'Brien,1981:49). Tanay's father, the Petrarch of the house, is no different he threatens his wife that she should shift to Cochin with him immediately. Otherwise, he will find

another means of fulfilling his sexual urge; it seems as if, for characters like Tanay's father, women are just sexual objects. This film depicts soft masculinity through characters like Tanay and the Paying guest, who never restricts others, does not pretend to be virile and participates in household activities.

In the movie *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, Sweety's father is portrayed as a hypo-masculine character, which means he lacks stereotypically masculine traits. He enjoys cooking in the kitchen but is not allowed to do so freely because people believe that men only enter the kitchen to change cooking gas cylinders, which is a heavy and risky task. However, he is not rigid like his son and is even willing to understand the situation when it is explained. Ultimately, he is the first member of Sweety's family to accept her and her decision. On the other hand, Sweety's brother represents a toxic masculine character. He enjoys getting involved in fights and abusing others, has a sense of entitlement, and fails to understand his sister until the end. He is a typical example of a testosterone-powered Punjabi man. The mass culture often believes in a fixed, true masculinity that cannot be changed and that it is something that proceeds from men's bodies or expresses something about the male body, such as the belief that men are naturally more aggressive than women. These beliefs are strategic parts of modern gender ideology, and Sweety's brother perfectly fits into this argument throughout the film.

The plight of marginalised masculinity is also discussed in *Cobalt Blue*. Connell writes that masculinity is necessarily in question in the lives of men whose sexual interest is in other men because heterosexuality is taken as a granted meaning of 'love' in popular culture, and it has massive institutional support. Men in gay and bisexual networks will be dealing with issues about gender quite as severe as environmentalists. One aspect of masculine performance concerns the concurrent suppression of non-heteronormativity, suppression and marginalisation of gender and sexual identities that did not live up to hyper-masculinist ideals, which is very commonly observable. Tanay, in the film *Cobalt Blue*, is not able to share his relationship with the paying guest with anyone because, in a setting where dominant heterosexual masculinity is embraced, nobody will understand his feelings. Masculinity is not an innate quality but rather a cultural fabrication, a public social status that must be striven and maintained in specific social contexts, and to which peer recognition is essential. Men who do not fit in this product of cultural fabrication

often hide their desire to get accepted. For such men, life becomes a performance where they must act like typical men each day so that people see them as usual and as somebody different.

Seeking ‘Liberation’: Escape as a Solution

There is a problem in society where queer individuals are not given enough space and accommodation, which in turn forces them to either run away from their homes, country, and relationships or not acknowledge their true selves. Sometimes, they can only express their identity through written narratives or by escaping from their current situation. This issue is depicted in the movie *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, where the characters Sweety and Kuhu plan to elope to London because they believe their love will not be accepted in India. At one point, Sweety becomes so exhausted from hiding her true identity that she even considers taking her own life. She confides in Shahil about this while they are conversing at the Gurudwara.

The film *Cobalt Blue* portrays the character Tanay, who takes a dose of poison in an attempted suicide. However, he miraculously saves himself and ultimately runs away from his family because no one understands him. Tanay's family members fail to recognise his sadness and consider it as his casual mood swings or a reaction to his sister's elopement. Studies show that LGBTQ+ people make up an estimated 20%-40% of the homeless population despite representing only 5%-10% of the actual population. While queer people are not inherently prone to suicide, societal mistreatment and stigmatisation push them towards it. Tanay envies his sister because she is recognised for her relationship, whereas he cannot express his love for his partner to anyone. This situation is similar to Irene's jealousy in the film *Passing*, which Butler explains in her book *Bodies that Matter*. Both characters, Irene and Tanay, cannot express their love publicly because they are in a heteronormative society, but they choose different paths to come to terms with their situation. Irene chooses to pass as a heteronormative character, while Tanay escapes from the heteronormative clutch and runs away in search of peace. Schools and colleges should be careful about bullying and ragging issues, as they tend to hide such cases to save their reputation, which is unacceptable. Sensitising social institutions about gender and sexuality issues is crucial, as early scars can leave a lasting impact.

Conclusion

Films have the potential to bring about significant changes in society by highlighting relevant issues. Recently, there has been a growing focus on accurately portraying queer characters in films. In the past, queer individuals have been misrepresented in films, leading to negative consequences for this community. Realistic depictions of queer individuals in films can help society better understand the issues related to queerness. The factors discussed in this paper, such as bullying and social isolation, have a significant impact on the lives of queer individuals. These factors are linked to the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which fuels heteronormativity. The idea of masculinity in our society is associated with virility, machismo, and hardness. This construct influences gender roles, and individuals are expected to fit into these roles. Those who do not fit into these gender roles experience gender performance role stress, which is harmful to their mental health. Queer individuals who are not strong enough to fight for themselves may choose death as the solution, try to escape to other countries or live their entire lives in disguise. After the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships in India, there has been an increase in discussions about legalising same-sex marriage in the country. Although marriage is a patriarchal institution, homosexual relationships must gain legal recognition. Homosexual couples do not have any claim over each other's property or assets, and they cannot buy homes together without legal recognition. It is crucial to focus on the historical erasure of same-sex eroticism and the forced naturalisation of heterosexuality. Films that accurately depict queer individuals can help create awareness among society.

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