

## **(Mis) Representation of Female Homosexuality in Select Bollywood Movies**

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### **Abstract**

Being a lesbian is and has to be normal but in a society like India where heteronormativity becomes the standard, homosexual women are oppressed and threatened by several factors such as abandonment and abuse. Bollywood movies have considerable influence over our society to initiate a change to this scenario through adequate, appropriate and progressive representation of lesbian community, which it has failed to deliver most of the times. This paper focuses on the manner in which female homosexuality is represented in select Bollywood movies Unfreedom (2014) and Girlfriend (2004) and how problematic the factors such as male gaze and stereotyping have affected the very purpose of mis/representation of homosexuality in films.

**Keywords :**Homosexuality, Lesbian, Bollywood, Stereotypes, Male Gaze.

### **Introduction**

Representation is a term that stirs discussions since the past few years especially in the fields of visual media such as movies and advertisements. In the context of media, representation can be simply defined as the manner or the way with which a particular group or community of people such as people of color, women, queer community etc.is portrayed. Representation is a powerful tool in creating new meanings and believes.It also have the ability to overthrow the traditionally accepted existing believes. As much as it is possible for an inappropriate representation to create serious damages in society, apt and progressive representation can impact in the making of an encouraging and reassuring society for those still in the margins such as lesbian community.

Despite having attained commendable progress in the representation and progressive portrayal of sexual minorities due to various reasons such as reading down of Section 377 and decriminalization of homosexuality, it is a bitter truth that Bollywood still has miles to cover when it comes to the proper and adequate representation of female homosexuality. On one hand when movies that showcase female homosexuality has always been groundbreaking, taking brave steps in exploring the nuances and intricacies of female homosexuality, on the other hand inadequate or improper representation of the same has created hurdles that are harder to overcome.

A thorough examination of Bollywood movies that represent Queer community would clearly show how Bollywood has keenly progressed in the portrayal of gay men more than any other community belonging to the wide spectrum of LGBTQ+, especially the lesbian community. Out of all the Bollywood movies that has portrayed queer characters, the frequency with which a gay character is represented is far more often than that of the representation of a lesbian character. In fact the number of movies that has portrayed lesbian characters are far too low.

The intolerance showcased by our society through various manners such as violence or trolling or banning a movie that showcases the depiction of female homosexuality can be considered as the direct impact and in fact the reflection of heteronormativity and patriarchy that is so prevalent in our society. The idea of a woman exploring her sexuality or identifying herself as a person who differs or opposes the accepted norms of patriarchy is a nightmare for the existence of heteronormative, male dominant society.

Deepa Mehta's Fire (1996) can be considered as one of the first movies that showcased a lesbian relationship. After the release of Fire it took almost eight years for the Bollywood to come up with another movie that showcased lesbian relationship as a prominent theme through Karan Razdan's Girlfriend (2004). Since 2004, major Bollywood movies which portray lesbian relationship as their primary or prominent theme till 2020 are less than ten in number including Men

Not Allowed (2006), Unfreedom (2014), Angry Indian Goddesses (2015) and Ek Ladki ko Dekha toh Aisa Laga (2019). Both Dedh Ishqiya (2013) and Margarita with a Straw (2014) are movies which showcased female romantic relationships, but the protagonists are bisexual women.

Along with the lack of frequency in representation, the character development or the manner in which lesbian characters are portrayed as well face outright disparity in Bollywood movies. Most of the lesbian characters showcased in Bollywood movies till recent years were deprived of realistic or progressive representation either through stereotypes or never ending male gaze. Thus an analysis of movies such as Girlfriend and Unfreedom is required to understand the improper and inadequate representation of lesbian community in Bollywood movies.

### Objectives

- i. To study how female homosexuality is portrayed in recent Bollywood movies.
- ii. To analyse the stereotypes that are often present in the portrayal of female homosexuality.
- iii. To analyse the male gaze in the representation of female homosexuality.
- iv.

### Hypothesis

- i. As the impact of various socio cultural, legal and political developments that have taken place in the recent years, sexual minorities are finally starting to get represented in Bollywood movies.
- ii. Despite the progressive development that occurred in the representation of female homosexuality, the portrayal is not completely free of the age old stereotypes associated with it.
- iii. Portrayal of lesbians in Bollywood still caters more or less to the male gaze.

### Review of Literature

A Google search for 'Representation of female homosexuality in Bollywood Cinema' will yield almost 39,70,700 results instantly among which majority of the articles are about the general review of the representation of the Queer community rather than female homosexuality as such. This is a reminder that even today lesbianism remains as a sub topic instead of becoming and being treated as an independent topic worthy of independent discussions and research.

Gurpreet Kaur in her "The Issue of Lesbianism in Contemporary Indian Films: A Comparative Study of Transnational, Bollywood and Regional Films" examines seven Indian movies that portrays lesbian storylines to analyse how these movies have actively become a catalyst in asserting the age old stereotypes associated with female homosexuality rather than becoming a reason to encourage the acceptance of sexual minorities.

"Where are all the Lesbian Love Stories Bollywood?" by Debiparna Chakraborty (2017) is an article that analyses and criticize the manner in which lesbian relationships and lesbian characters are portrayed in Bollywood movies. Chakraborty argues how the Bollywood film industry has actively made progress in the portrayal of gay men in each passing year while the lesbian presence in the movies is rare and regressive except for a few.

"How Bollywood has Normalised Homophobia and Hate Against the LGBTQ Community" by Rakhi Bose (2018) brings forth and analyses the commonly found stereotypes associated with homosexual characters in mainstream Bollywood movies. She states that through inappropriate delineation such as "The effeminate horny gay man" and "The erotic destructive lesbian" popular Bollywood movies have created a dangerous ground for homophobia to thrive.

Vivek Maheshwary in his "Homosexuality in Popular Hindi Cinema" focuses on various societal factors related to homosexuality and the slow progression to the acknowledgment of their presence and the unacceptance that widely exists in order to understand the connection between the portrayal of homosexuality in mainstream Hindi cinema and Indian society. He has also discussed the politics behind the serious lack of lesbian visibility.

Pranta P Patnaik (2013) in "The Politics of Saving the Family: Same-Sex Love in Hindi Cinema" highlights how the heteronormative society uses its powerful and influential elements such

as family, class and religion to demonize the female homosexuality. By analyzing two Hindi films, *Fire* and *Girlfriend* Patnaik showcases how the real life of homosexual women are impacted negatively through the improper representation.

Rumpa Podder's (2018) "Suffocating Shell of Sexuality: Politics of Lesbian Identity in *Fire*" discusses about the unwelcoming and regressive atmosphere homosexual people has to face in the social spaces such as work places due to their sexuality as the result of the hegemonic heteronormative beliefs. Podder argues how Deepa Mehta's *Fire* portray this rejection of social spaces by the heteronormative society when the female protagonist came out as lesbians and how they fought the hegemonic institution and made a space of their own.

"100 Years of Indian Cinema: Homosexuality in Films" of Rituparna Chatterjee (2013) highlights how the documentaries and short films in India tried to understand the third gender and the queer movement, thus becoming way ahead of its while cinema, specifically mainstream Bollywood films are still to get rid of the age old stereotypes and taboos in their representation.

AnuradhaParasar in her "Homosexuality in India – The Invisible Conflict" observes and analyses the concept of the need for legalizing the homosexual marriages in India by taking into consideration both sides of the argument and states how it is the need of the hour to not only legalize homosexual marriages but also the decriminalization of homosexuality.

Pushpinder Kaur (2017) in "Gender, Sexuality and (Be) Longing: The Representation of Queer (LGBT) in Hindi Cinema" investigates various stereotypes and myths that are commonly associated with the queer community and how it affects the gender identity of queer individuals through its consistency in inappropriate representation.

Prateek Sharma and Vaishnavi Sundar (2016) in their article "Indian Cinema and its Misguided Portrayal of LGBT Community" discusses the manner in which the queer community is wrongly portrayed in the Indian cinema with the aid of stereotypes and how the dissociation of individuality from the queer people act as a reason for the production of ridiculous representations in large scale despite having a few movies that normalizes queerness through representation.

## Research Methodology

A brief analysis of the two major Bollywood movies that showcased female homosexuality as the prominent theme, which were released between 2004 and 2014 has been carried out. The major movies which depicted the female homosexuality as a prominent theme within this period includes *Girlfriend* (2004), *Men Not Allowed* (2006) and *Unfreedom* (2014). The movies that have been selected are *Girlfriend*, *Unfreedom*. The time period between 2004 and 2014 has been chosen due to the lack of movies that portrayed lesbian relationship as a major or noticeable theme before the 2000 and also due to the presence of the same after 2004. The theories used in the analysis of the films are Queer theory and Laura Mulvey's concept of Male gaze.

Queer theory was formulated as the result of various social movements such as The Stonewall Riot of 1969 which was one of the several uprisings that demanded the liberation and freedom of Gay community. Queer theory aims at and acts as a subversion of the age old concept of heteronormativity that proposes the concept of gender and sexual binary, that is deeply embedded in our social system and beliefs that has been regulating our day to day life for generations. Queer theory advocates the appropriate visibility of the broad spectrum of gender and sexuality which can never be limited within the cramped space of binaries.

Male Gaze is a concept developed by Laura Mulvey in her pivotal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1973). According to this concept the heterosexual man has the active role of looking or gazing while women are the passive objects that are being looked at and existing for fulfilling the active gaze and desire of the man. The theory of Male Gaze when applied in visual media thus explains how women are being objectified to gratify the heterosexual male desire in the popular mediums like films.

## Analysis

Male Gaze and *Unfreedom*:

Raj Amit Kumar's movie *Unfreedom*, released in 2014, can be regarded as one of the few Indian films that has made a wave of controversies, faced severe backlashes and even got banned by the Censor Board of India in 2015 due to the explicit nudity and violence in it. Kumar in his movie presents story of a young woman belonging to a middle class patriarchal family who identifies herself as a lesbian but still in the closet.

Even though *Unfreedom* is a movie that boldly challenges so many institutions of patriarchy and heteronormativity such as the imposition of marriage (heterosexual marriage) on women with no regards of their consent, the concept of women being the bearers of family honor, homophobia and its extremity, it has failed in certain regards that has made the movie the very tool of what it was supposed to challenge. *Unfreedom*, though its intent was to break the taboo associated with female sexualities and challenge the hegemonic norms of heterosexuality, has ended up serving greatly to satisfy the gaze of heterosexual men through several instances.

Male gaze is a concept propounded by the British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey through her key work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1973. Male gaze is a term that is used by Mulvey in order to describe the way in which popular media such as films reduces women to be mere objects that satisfies the gaze of heterosexual men. As per the theory of Male gaze, men have the active role of gazing or watching while women are the passive objects who are presented in the media to be looked at and thus having no control over the narrative or the perspective. Mulvey explains through her concept of Male gaze, how the popular cinema objectifies women to fulfill and quench the male "scopophilia" which is the sexual pleasure attained by men while looking at the passive and objectified women.

Male gaze in *Unfreedom* can be noticed initially with the introduction of Sakhi who is an artist. The movie showcases a nude Sakhi in her residence carelessly painting on a canvas while a group of conservative men along with the escort of police rings her doorbell to passively threaten her regarding an upcoming pride parade and her participation in it. Sakhi's nudity is showcased for a whole minute and more while she is surrounded by canvas in her studio showcasing similar nudity of female figures that look similar to her. The portrayal of nudity is accompanied with soft instrumental music and regular shift in camera angles that captures Sakhi's nude body from various angles.

The clothes worn by both the protagonists are extremely revealing, showcasing their cleavage, legs and bareback of both women which is more or less unnecessary. The most problematic aspect in the clothes chosen for the protagonists is that the clothes worn by Leela before she came out as lesbian are the exact contrast of the clothes she has worn after it. Before coming out Leela is shown as wearing traditional Indian clothes like churidhar but soon after she decides to elope from her house in Chandra's car Leela changes her salwar in the backseat to a western cloth that reveals most of her body. The underlying meaning that this scene propagates is highly problematic as it passively dictates the common myths about female homosexuality in our society that homosexuality is a Western concept and that women who are homosexuals like to showcase their body. This shift in the clothing style which was an absolutely unnecessary element in the movie that has been done only for the gratification of the male gaze has affected the bigger picture or the theme of challenging heteronormativity and homophobia by serving and gratifying the eyes of the heterosexual men who are one of the strong pillars of heteronormativity and homophobia.

Leela and Sakhi after their reunion decide to record their union in their home without walls set in a nearly deserted island which is followed by the portrayal of their lengthy and passionate love making. This lengthy scene has duration of almost three minutes showcasing the nude bodies of both women and the act of love making captured through various camera angles accompanied yet again with soft sensual music. This is followed by a series of scenes that portray the hunting down, arresting and imprisonment of both Leela and Sakhi by the police. Towards the end of the movie the audience witness lengthy, explicit and brutal scenes of verbal and physical abuse followed by the gang rape of both the female protagonists by male police officers with the consent and command of Leela's father while he witnesses the whole act of humiliation and violation.

Female nudity or the acts of love making are definitely not problematic subjects that should

be kept hidden but in the movie *Unfreedom*, every single scene portraying either Leela (after coming out) or Sakhi or both is artificially and forcefully compressed with overt and covert hypersexualization which most of the time turned out to be unnecessary. The movie brings in an idea that either sex or nudity is an absolute necessity or the only way to showcase the stories of lesbian women, their struggles and their relationships.

On the other hand the lengthy scenes portraying abuse and gang rape might have been intended to create the uneasiness among the audience and thus informing them explicitly about the dangers and terrors that homosexual women has to suffer in a society like India where women are burdened with safekeeping the honor and pride of family and society by conforming to the heteronormative system. Leela's father says several times in the movie that Leela is his pride and honor and once that pride has been tainted by the reality of his daughter's sexual orientation and her acts to own her identity, Leela's father starts his stoop from being her father to a random homophobic man whose sole purpose has become to hunt her down and change her through any measures possible to retain his pride. This unsafe and unfree living atmosphere is a reality of most women, specifically lesbian women and its portrayal on the big screen is a necessity in today's world to bring about a change. But instead of creating or fulfilling this aim, the abuse sequence turned out to be a lengthy shot to satisfy the sadistic pleasure of the perverted, homophobic heterosexual male eyes through the eyes of Leela's father who is now no different than any of the men who have raped her or any of the perverted homophobic eyes of the misogynistic viewer among the audience who will get the satisfaction of teaching the women who have went astray a lesson.

#### Stereotypes and Girlfriend

Karan Razdan's movie *Girlfriend* released in 2004 is a movie that holds prominence in the field of LGBTQ representation in Bollywood movies. After the release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* in 1996 that dealt with the theme of female homosexual relationship, Bollywood hasn't produced a major movie that portrays a lesbian woman as the lead character until the release of Razdan's *Girlfriend* in 2004. Despite having Mehta's *Fire* as its forerunner paving way to the acknowledgment, acceptance and normalization of female homosexuality, Razdan's *Girlfriend* fails not only in keeping up with its predecessor but also have failed as a movie that portrays an issue that is highly sensitive by loading the two hour movie with negative stereotypes about lesbian women and female homosexuality.

Queer theory developed in 1990s is an attempt to subvert or digress from the hegemonic norms a heteronormativity which has acquired the position of the normal or acceptable or default since several generations. Queer theory looks into bringing the communities that have been placed on the margins or fringes of the society to the center of the society as well as its various narratives. It criticizes any practice such as stereotypes, misrepresentation etc. that intend to reassure the hegemony and power position of heteronormativity and thus aims at bringing in or creating space for the equal existence and adequate and appropriate representation of the queer.

The problematic stereotyping of the lesbian character Tanya begins right from the very start of the movie. The movie opens with a scene that shows Tanya jogging in the morning. Even though this image seem harmless in the beginning, soon after we see Tanya fixing the water pipe and riding a bike. These images that occurs consecutively and rather quickly even though they are very least importance otherwise is used for the sole purpose of delineating the character sketch of Tanya. Through these images Tanya is portrayed as a tomboy and the movie establishes that idea within first few minutes itself. This establishment of tomboy image is one of the key stereotypes that have been frequently used in popular media such as films while depicting a lesbian character. This tomboy image later on becomes aggressive and violent with the entering of Rahul who is the love interest of Sapna whom Tanya loves. In order to further establish this image Tanya is shown to win in kick boxing against a man, the very same trope that is seen towards the end of the movie where in Tanya in disguise attacks Rahul brutally in a parking lot and Rahul gives statement to the police that he was "attacked by a man who knows kick boxing". The girl who is reckless and ready to fight, who likes the sports and martial arts is the commonly seen attributes of lesbian characters in most of

the Indian movies till recent times. Through this way, lesbian representation gets type casted and compressed to the cramped space of norms created by the heteronormative narrative in order to create a hostile impression of queer women as reckless and dangerous.

Yet another stereotype that is most frequently used to represent a lesbian character is through delineating them to be either obsessive or manipulative or both. A lesbian woman, who falls in love with another woman who is heterosexual and clueless about this romantic interest, turns out to be obsessing over the lover and actively manipulate her into hating men and choosing her has been a frequently used trope and stereotype not only in cinema but also in literary fiction. This inaccurate and most importantly dangerous stereotype have created a lasting damage in the society where in lesbians are considered as women who simply hate men, which is more or less the same character arch Tanya as well has in the movie who is portrayed as a woman who hates men as she was sexually abused during her childhood by her neighbor. In the movie Tanya's homosexuality is portrayed as the result of sexual abuse during her childhood rather than as the sexual orientation of a person.

Tanya's love for Sapna as well is clearly established in the beginning itself. Initially this interest is showcased through Tanya fixing the problems in Sapna's life from repairing the basins to arranging the rent. In order to not confuse these acts as innocent acts of caring of a roommate, the movie properly portrays Tanya's interest in Sapna through two acts. Tanya is shown as peeking into the bathroom and secretly admiring Sapna while she was bathing and also through Tanya's act of gentle caressing of Sapna who is sleeping in the same bed as Tanya. The romantic interest of Tanya for Sapna is initially showcased as gentle for a while which shifts with the arrival of Sapna's boyfriend into an obsessive pattern. Since the introduction of Rahul, Tanya is portrayed either as strategizing to break the relationship between Sapna and Rahul or as cunningly manipulating Sapna into believing that Rahul is unfaithful and undeserving of Sapna through many acts that breaches basic decency such as challenging Sapna to prove Rahul's disloyalty by trying to seduce him or by crashing the couples romantic getaway by joining them. The peak of obsession is reached during the climax where Tanya loses all the control and acts in frenzy to kill Rahul and ended up getting killed.

#### Conclusion

In a society like India where institutionalized patriarchy deeply rooted from heteronormativity controls and manages the day today life of its citizens including how they act and react, what they believe, their traditions, customs and lifestyle, it is an obvious fact that life of an average heterosexual woman is restrained through various clutches of patriarchal control. It becomes necessary, precisely in this socio cultural context, to observe and understand the plight of homosexual women who are doubly chained and oppressed, initially because of their status as women in male dominant society and secondarily because of their sexuality that doesn't approve and follow the norms of heterosexuality.

In such a social set up, the way in which female homosexuality is represented in a popular media like Bollywood movies which has a influential position in Indian society is of utmost importance and thus has to be studied. In the analysis of two Bollywood movies that discuss female homosexuality as the major theme, it has been observed that both of the movies have been laden with problematic aspects such as male gaze and negative stereotyping.

Out of the analysis conducted on two movies out of the three which were released within the span of a decade between 2004 and 2014, one of the movies that said to be challenging the norms of heterosexuality and heteronormativity winded up serving to the perverted male gaze of heterosexual men while the other movie turned out to be a conscious attempt to reassure and reestablish the taboos existing in the society about female homosexuality through various problematic stereotypes. The fact that in a society where homosexuality is still considered a taboo, the movies dealing with female homosexuality that were released in a span of ten years were laden with misleading and inappropriate representation and does not have the average of a movie per year and is disheartening.

Progressive changes have been taking place in the representation of female homosexuality in Bollywood movies these years. Movies like *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015) have succeeded in portraying female homosexuality as a matter of significance and sensitivity rather than as a prop for

fetishizing female bodies. *Ek Ladki ko Dekha* toh *Aisa Laga* (2019) is yet another movie that has portrayed the matter of coming out and its difficulty in a conservative small town. Established production companies such as Vinod Chopra Films backing up projects such as *Ek Ladki ko Dekha* toh *Aisa Laga* is a sign of hope and progress as this could promote the production of more such movies dealing with female sexuality and assure their reach among wider range of audience.

Even though visible changes are taking place in the Hindi film industry in the past few years, the movie makers still have a long road in front of them to reach adequate, appropriate and progressive portrayal of female homosexuality.

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