

Fantasizing Desire and Emulating Desirability

Queer Spectatorship and Popular Hindi Cinema

Aditi Maddali

Abstract

When it comes to love in India, popular Hindi cinema is the hero of the story. Whatever the genre of the movie, popular Hindi cinema almost always has an underlying love story. The form of the cinematic text with elaborate stories, songs, drama, action and comedy elements, allows for multiple subversive readings. While it appears to be innocently portraying heteronormative content, it has its pockets of transgression.

This paper is however not the story of queering the text, but of identifying and exploring the queer eye. The seemingly heterosexual text is not just catering to the assumed 'normal' spectator but also to a section that lies on the other side of 'normal'. Through various conversations on love, desire, gender, sexuality and popular Hindi cinema, the paper looks at the representation and reception of ideas around gender from popular Hindi cinema. It explores the practices and adaptation of gender identities from cinema to understand how emulation can also act as a correction of non-normative gender practices to align them along the 'normal'. Furthermore, it traces how these rigid notions of 'normal' are constantly subverted by the queer spectator and identifies their individual preferences of representation. The conversation moves on to the fantasy of the desired

and how the phantasmic nature of cinema allows for a subversive reading for the queer spectator.

Keywords: Queer audiences, Emulation, Fantasy, Popular Hindi Cinema.

Introduction

It had to be Amitabh Bachchan because it was the 80s and I had seen *Sholay* at that time. And I became obsessed with *Sholay*. I'd seen that movie 30 times. I think I got a little irritated of the romances because they (her friends) would take me and they would start crying and then I would be the only one not crying. And then everyone would be leaning on me and I would get irritated. I remember even imitating Amitabh. I wanted to smoke because Amitabh was smoking in *Sholay*. And I did. I loved Madhuri too but I never wanted to be her, I always wanted to be the other and I could never think of emulating her.

- Rish, 34, Animal trainer

Rish describes her love for the heroes and heroines of popular Hindi cinema. She is clear that she liked Amitabh Bachchan and loved Madhuri Dixit among other contemporaries but she only emulated Bachchan. Social and economic norms have decided that women like romance and men prefer action cinema, but that is for a binary world. Rish, on the other hand, grew up being the biggest fan of Kung Fu films till she discovered Bachchan's angry-young-man genre of films. Taking a look at the genre of films, Raj Rao in his essay *Memories Pierce the Heart*, talks about how Bachchan's angry-young-man themed films were revered among men and hence theatres became homosocial spaces for audiences to not only connect with the hero on the screen, but also with one another in the dark spaces of the room, away from the eyes of society (Rao 2008). However, one may argue that at a time that the angry-young-man themed films were popular, women's access to public spaces was minimal and was validated by work. It would have been difficult for women like Rish to watch Bachchan's movies in the theatre.

This paper delves into the representation and reception of the ideas around gender and the imagination of romance from popular Hindi cinema. The seemingly heterosexual cinematic text is not just catering to the assumed ‘normal’ spectator but also to a section that lies on the other side of ‘normal’. The paper attempts to steer away from queering the text, and move towards identifying and exploring the queer¹ eye through various conversations on love, desire, gender, sexuality and popular Hindi cinema. For understanding the relationship of the spectator and the screen, the much nuanced method of media ethnography was used. In this, I went about by primarily focusing on conducting unstructured interviews. The interviews were themed around the cinema watching practices of the interviewees, directly related to the screen; the cinema cultures that they carry outside of the screen; their imagination of the idea of desire or love and factors that are directly associated with it like gender and sexuality and negotiation with the content of popular Hindi cinema. While I did not get to do any participatory observation, i.e., actually physically watch films with any of my interviewees, the in-depth interviews were personalized and involved much memory building in order to recall their anecdotes, experiences, fantasies and practices that they had indulged in from their childhood. This also gives a clearer picture of the social and ideological setting of their upbringing vis-à-vis their current location. This exercise also made it feasible to contextualize their responses with the changes in technology and the socio-political and economic conditions of the country. I interviewed ten people, five of whom identified themselves as lesbian women and five who identify as gay men, at that time. I approached them in Mumbai between March 2013 and December 2014. I chose Mumbai for reasons apart from access. It is one of the more queer friendly cities in the country. Moreover, with the popular Hindi cinema industry residing here, escaping it is not possible.

The age of the interviewees falls under the range of 23 years to 40 years. All of them come from middle to upper middle class households and were residing in Mumbai at the time of the

¹ I derive the idea of queer from Narrain and Bhan (2005) who point out how the term is not only inclusive of the identities of the communities that identify themselves as gender and sexual minorities but also aims to deconstruct the larger notions of heteropatriarchy, institutions like marriage and family that function around it and its intrinsic relationship with societal forces such as caste, class and religion.

interview. Most of the respondents have migrated to Mumbai for educational or work purposes. All of them have at least a Masters' Degree, except Zal who has done Engineering. All of them, except for Arya, actively participate in the queer movement. Zal is Sikh and the others are born into Hindu families. Minal, Rishi, Diyan, and Parul insist on not affiliating themselves to any religious thought and tradition. Kabir was born Hindu but now follows the Buddhist faith. Similarly, all of them belong to privileged² castes or admit to not being adversely affected by their caste status because of their class status.

Beyond the Binary

Our everyday lives are filled with agents of gendering that define the accepted notions of gender, reinforce them and correct gender-deviant behavior. Judith Butler, in her canonical work *Gender Trouble*, explains the preservation of heteronormativity as a simultaneous preservation of gender hierarchy. She says, “it is not heterosexual normativity that produces and consolidates gender, but the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations” (Butler 1999: xii). Therefore, the most effective ways of safeguarding heteronormativity is by ‘policing gender’ (Ibid. xii). Valocchi, in his paper, *Not Yet Queer Enough* talks about the creation of categorical identities which are reinforced by the modes of institutions that reinforce them (media, other forms of socializing), in order to maintain the hegemony of gender. He adds that as an addition to social and cultural histories, people acquire fixed notions of identities and perform them “with a fairly predictable relationship between the subjective awareness of one's identity, the behaviors that correspond to or enact the identity, and the social institutions that enforce this identity” (Valocchi 2005: 754). These institutions work towards the maintenance of heteronormativity because it maintains the society's power structure of gender hierarchy. Therefore, as Valocchi

² Due to the lack of access, I wasn't able to transgress class and caste lines. While I depended on social networking to approach the respondents, it also reflects the nature of the movement and its reach, to some extent. Hence, the respondents are all English speaking, urban, middle-class (onwards), physically able, educated film buffs, who are a part of the struggle for love.

points out, social institutions are constantly at work to maintain predetermined notions of identity based on social norms. These in turn distance us from the idea that gender, an essential part of identity formation, is not natural and rigid. One such premier social institution that is responsible for the maintenance of the gender binary is cinema. It repeatedly reproduces codes of heteropatriarchal norms and positively reinforces them through the cinematic text, hence maintaining heteronormativity and preserving gender hierarchy. While cinema barely represents non-normative characters out of the fear of breaking the binary, whenever it has attempted to do so, it usually ends up portraying homosexual characters as the breakers of normativity. The homosexuality that is being represented in popular Hindi cinema today is informed by economic power relations and the politics of hegemony where homosexuality is defined around the terms of heteronormativity. On one hand the queer community is depicted as secondary, villainous or comical, or as deviants with derogatory connotations, while on the other hand the ‘image’ that is constantly being made visible of the community is of a particular kind— the effeminate gay and, if represented at all, the butch lesbian.³ These new identities constructed for representation also derive themselves from heteronormativity.

Gender in Cinema

The main characters in popular Hindi cinema are usually represented as hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine and these notions are reinforced through continuous reward and punishment. When gender hierarchy and heteronormativity are seen to be under threat, gender policing begins to operate. Commonly, the hero, who shows no deviance from the prescribed masculine behavior, falls in love with the heroine, who also performs conventionally acceptable feminine behavior. As long as they comply with these levels of gender conformity, they are rewarded with love, marriage and family. On the other hand, deviance from such behavior often results in

³ Lesbians are rarely portrayed in popular Hindi cinema. Butch women are usually portrayed as desexualized or undesirable women.

unrequited love, undesirability, desexualized secondary characterization or is represented in comical or villainous ways in the film. Hence, cinema constantly gives out strong messages of gender conformism and sexual normativity.

For me *Main Hoon Na* was all about Sushmita Sen, I totally have the hots⁴ for her. But I couldn't help notice that there is a shift in Amrita's character. This happens in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* also. I remember liking Kajol until she was feminized. The other movie I can't help bring here is that one with the irritating ending—*Dil Bole Hadippa* with Rani Mukherjee. She's in drag, playing cricket as a boy in the movie.

- Rish, 34, Animal Trainer

Rish talks about how she felt that if she was Anjali (Kajol), from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), who was a tomboy, she may not find love. In the movie, Anjali's desired one Rahul (Shahrukh Khan) fell for a more feminine girl, Tina (Rani Mukherjee). Moreover, in the second half of the film, Anjali undergoes complete transformation from being a tomboy to blossoming into a saree-clad damsel with long hair. It is after the feminization that her desired lover Rahul begins to notice her and fall in love with her. Similarly, in *Main Hoon Na* (2004), Sanjana (Amrita Rao) consciously undergoes a 'make-over' from being an undesirable 'tomboy' into a hyper-feminine back-less blouse and saree-clad woman, only to knock her desired one, Lucky, (Zayed Khan) off his feet. He automatically notices her and begins to fall in love with her after the transformation while he considered her his best friend before that. In *Dil Bole Hadippa* (2009), Veera (Rani Mukherjee) is a dancer who is passionate about cricket. She is denied membership to the cricket team that was to play against Pakistan for the 'Aman Cup' because she is not a man. She auditions for the team dressed as a man, Veer, and gets in. During the course of the movie, the coach (Shahid Kapoor) discovers that Veera is a woman in drag and accuses her of deception. During the final match, when the team is on the verge of losing, Veera goes onto the field as Veer to win the match after which she unveils her drag and talks about women's exclusion from sports in India. Zal talks

⁴ Sexually attracted.

about the dissemination of strong messages of having to follow gender norms to be socially accepted.

In Bollywood, the thing is, people just stereotype very badly. I still remember how there is no clear way to tell someone that you are gay. The first image that comes to their mind is Bobby Darling. Because in films *wahi dikhaya gaya* (that is only what is shown) and Bobby Darling is not even gay! That is what happened when I came out to my parents also.

- Zal, 25, Management Consultant

With no reference to give to his parents and the lack of an alternative language, Zal tells his mother he is gay and her first reaction is that he doesn't look or dress like Bobby Darling.⁵ The queer community is seldom represented in popular Hindi cinema and more often than not, they occupy the roles of the scorned deviants- the villains or the comic characters. They are used to add to the element of 'entertainment' of the film and are usually depicted as overtly effeminate. The only representation of deviancy from the gender binary is that of the effeminate 'gay', the third gender and the butch woman, who is either desexualized or is the undesirable one because of her gender. It is also necessary to note here that due to the lack of familiarity, there exists an ambiguity in distinguishing between non-normative gender and sexual deviance. In the story about homosexuality in *Bombay Talkies* (2013), the father calls his son a *chakka* (a term used for transgenders) when he learns that he is gay.

Gender and sexuality have a strange relationship with each other. While on one hand, heterosexuality is one of the reasons for the maintenance of the conventions of gender binaries, sexuality and gender do not have a causal relationship with one another. In fact, as Judith Butler puts it, "gender designates a dense site of significations that contain and exceed the heterosexual matrix. Whereas it is important to emphasize that forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and non-reductive connection between sexuality and gender is

⁵ Bobby Darling is a trans woman who has been one of the very few characters who has been playing queer roles in cinema. Most of her roles have been to invoke comedy through homophobia.

nevertheless crucial to maintain” (Butler 1993: 27). Therefore, as discussed earlier, the intricate relationship between gender and sexuality often leads to misidentification where they are mixed with one another. Hence, it is taken for granted that gay men are effeminate or effeminate men are gay. This leaves a compulsion among heterosexual men to perform their masculinity in order to prove their heterosexuality—a phenomenon often reinforced through cinema. Here, I am reminded of Zal’s only disappointing moment in his latest favorite movie *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhaniya* (2013). He has watched the movie over twenty times for his favorite actor Varun Dhawan. He tells me that he is so engrossed watching Varun that there are times when he is not paying attention to Alia Bhatt, the female lead actor, in the movie. But the one thing that troubles him about the movie is the depiction of a homosexual character in the film. He says, “The guy is shown very macho and all that and then they tell *kei* (that) find out one flaw in him and then they say the flaw is that he is gay. That is so wrong! Especially coming from a person (Karan Johar) who is talked about to be one from the community.”

From the 2000s, there has been a shift in the depiction of masculinity. Popular films like *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001), *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011), and *Kai Po Che!* (2013) stand testimony to the increasing metrosexuality in popular Hindi cinema. Singh, in his article *Visibly Queer Bollywood* says, “While queer in its own way, *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001) gave us male characters who wore their emotional masculinity (still heterosexual) on their sleeves while being in touch with their feminine side” (Singh 2011). While *Dil Chahta Hai* and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* demonstrate a high degree of Western influence, *Kai Po Che!* does not distance itself culturally. Characters with an emotional side, also often played by actors like Ranbir Kapoor tend to question the erstwhile ideas of masculinity. However, even though the way masculinity is represented is undergoing some change, it is nonetheless not to question it. By the end of the film, masculinity, at the level of heteropatriarchal structures, continues to be maintained. Can these films of homosocial bonding be called the new-age buddy films? Do these films also, hence, have subversive

potential? Moreover, the male body has also undergone transformation with respect to how it is presented - it is now increasingly on display for consumption for the spectator.

Emulation

Minal talks about how she had always been a tomboy and the fact that it was easy to be one when she was young. The problem began once she started growing up. Unlike many young girls she grew up with, she didn't have *that* actress, from the films, whom she wanted to be like. For her, emulating film stars, especially women, was out of question. If she ever would emulate a film star, it would be a male one. However, looking up to film stars was beyond young Minal because her family values didn't allow her to take Bollywood seriously. She says, "I never aspired to look like or be like those heroes. I was a tomboy in my own way." Even when it came to participating in "girls' dances", as she puts it, she always preferred being the boy in the scene. However, she always had to balance it out by playing a few female roles, to keep her parents happy.

Emulation is one of the primary forms of learning. People emulate their idols all the time. Fan cultures thrive on emulating favorite characters and recreating stories. Emulation comes from the desire to aspire to be what one sees. Since the representations of characters usually typify the normative social codes, this often becomes a way to learn normativity or unlearn subversion.

Being gay I'm sure it was primarily the looks that they had at that point in time. Even with Varun and Shahid, it was their looks. That's the first thing to catch my eye. I remember wearing denim jackets like Shahid used to when *Isbq Vishq* had come out. I may not go forward and buy clothes like Varun's, like I did with Shahid but I am sure his dressing style influences mine.

- Zal, 25, Management Consultant

The thing Aamir did *Aati Kya Khandala*, I did that a lot. The thing with the match stick really appealed to me. The only other thing was imitating the actors smoking and because

Amitabh was smoking in *Sholay*, I also wanted to smoke. I did smoke and imitate all these things.

- Rish, 34, Animal Trainer

Zal talks about how his fashion sense may be derived from his favorite actor Varun Dhawan and Shahid Kapoor, when he was younger. Similarly, Diyan had Kajol's haircut from *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* because she admired her "cheerful and active presence" on the screen, which was unlike most of her contemporaries who Diyan thought were porcelain dolls. Diyan, like Rish, disappointedly mentions,

"By the second half of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, she became all conforming, as if once you fall in love you become all conforming, which I erase. Even today, I watch the first half and skip the second half"

-Diyan, 40, Pursuing M.Phil. in Women's Studies.

Diyan expresses her love for the smaller, secondary roles that tomboys play in films. These are women who go unnoticed. She also talks about her phase in life when she used to wear pants which had 'Aflatoon' written on them, like Akshay Kumar used to wear and net ganjis (vests) in bright colors, like Hrithik Roshan did in the early 90s. While some copied fashion and style, some others like Rish, adopted habits from actors. Rish admired Amitabh Bachchan from his angry-young-man phase so much that she incorporated similar characters in the plays she used to write for her friends. She also learned how to smoke, like he did in *Sholay*. She even tried the trick with the match stick that Amir Khan does in his popular song *Aati kya Khandala*⁶ from the movie *Ghulam* (1998).

Emulation can range from copying physical appearances to adapting behavior. The song and dance sequences are the most consciously mimicked parts of films. Celebrations during festivals and social events, in several parts of the country, often include dance sequences which are

⁶ *Aati Kya Khandala*, translated to 'Will you come to *Khandala*?' is a song that is famous for a particular sequence where Aamir Khan sets off a matchstick using his tongue, to impress the heroine.

choreographed like the ones in the film. The latest fashion trends in the market also resonate styles from popular Hindi cinema.

I always emulated Sridevi. I didn't merely emulate her, I celebrated her!. I used to dress up as Nagin⁷ and when there was no one at home, I used to do this nagin, *nagina* kind of a step⁸, play the beam *waala* music (snake charmer's flute) and the moment the *dhhol* (percussion instrument) would make the *tadadadbin* sound, I would get up and go running to my mother, wherever she was- bedroom, bathroom, I would go to her and do one *dhasne* (bite) ka scene. I was in awe of Sridevi, so much that I know all the dialogues of *Chaalbaaz* (1989) and *Chaandni* (1989) by heart.

- Harish, 35 years, Director Event Partnerships of an NGO in Mumbai

Children are often encouraged to imitate the fashion of actors of their assigned gender. However, once they start copying actors from genders other than their assigned gender, society operates corrective measures to realign this 'disorder'. Additionally, it is considered to be less of a taboo for young girls to be 'tomboys' since it is passed off as a 'phase' that they will eventually grow out of, to become more feminine. Young boys, on the other hand, are discouraged to show signs deviating from masculinity. They not only must look like men and dress like men but also behave like men. Kabir also recounts how his father used to constantly correct his walking style and was worried about Kabir's fascination with pink lips. He kept reminding him that he was a boy and "boys don't have pink lips".

Sexuality and Gender

Though she is butch and confesses to play the role of the 'man' in her romantic relationships, Minal never emulated a hero nor felt like a man. Even though there may be a slight shift in Bollywood's notion of gender, there continues to be a clear distinction of what constitutes 'man'

⁷ Referring to Sridevi's character in the film *Nagina* (1986) where she is a polymorphous snake.

⁸ Snake dance inspired from the movie.

and ‘woman’. According to her, this creation of binary and polarity spills over into the idea of love where the man is the pursuer, who initiates love and the woman reluctantly falls in love. She believes that she probably acquired her notions of love and gender roles from these representations of love she has been watching in films. She says:

I definitely knew I was never the heroine. I felt like I was more the hero type. I still feel that. But I didn’t want to become like the heroes. I prefer to say not-feminine rather than masculine but at no point do I move from the gender I feel. I was assigned gender female at birth and that’s how I feel. It never ever crossed my mind that I could be a man. Even when I was extremely homophobic and was in denial about liking women I knew that didn’t make me a man. It didn’t occur to me. I’m still a woman only.

Deriving from Gayle Rubin’s *Thinking Sex* (1984) and Sedgwick’s (1993) notions of the relationship between gender and sexuality, Butler asserts, “If to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man; and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever it is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an imaginary logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability” (Butler 1993: 28). This also implies, she adds, that it is not necessary “if one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender” (Ibid. 28). Thus, gender and sexuality are not structurally bound, i.e., there is no determining hierarchical relationship between the two, which in turn implies that fluidity in sexuality is associated with the destabilization of the rigidity of binaries in gender.

While Minal talks about how she likes to be the pursuer in her relationships, she extends her thoughts saying that hasn’t always been the case. She says, “I also am pursued and made to feel special. Nothing is fixed, it happens both ways. I think once we break out of this heterosexual man, woman, marriage, child, love should be like this, desire should be like this, sex should be like this, these are the man’s roles and woman’s roles, then it’s really very colorful and the more you open up your mind, the more you’ll see.” She introspects about her affinity for hyper feminine women and supposes that it’s probably because she is allowing herself to be a certain

way. She always thought this dream-like hyper feminine woman in a chiffon saree⁹ is only in the movies and doesn't exist for real. She realizes her reservation and feels she must be more open. She says, "I've been with women who are more masculine than I am, I've also been with women who are quite androgynous and my gender has also moved from long hair, nail polish and all that to being more butch. In the last ten years I have seen a wider spectrum and that has made me question not just Bollywood but also heteronormativity overall."

Rish, on the other hand, recounts how she found feminism when she was fifteen years old. After a lot of reading, she began to believe she was born in the wrong body. She says that reading Judith Butler made her realize that gender was a social construct and hence decided to reconstruct herself to her assigned gender. She says, "I thought I must socially construct myself as a woman and that's what I started doing. I started to grow my hair. If I show you a picture right now, of how I looked, you'll be really surprised because I was a complete tomboy! It took me a long time to try and construct myself as a woman." "If you were reading Butler, why did you think you had to follow the construction?" I asked. She replied:

At that time, the second and third wave of feminism was all like you want to be male because you want male privilege. That's something that I definitely didn't want! By then I had also seen a lot of instances of violence against women. Especially where I lived, men would beat up their wives. I had seen enough to be upset with patriarchy even for my own self. I remember I used to cry with anger because my grandparents' friends used to ask my brother, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and they used to tell me, "Don't grow so tall, or you won't find a man to marry you." That used to really upset me. Then I started second guessing myself and saying that I want to be a man because I want to have all this. That's what made me try and become a woman. I tried it for a long time, from fifteen to nineteen I just struggled with my gender.

⁹ In popular Hindi cinema, the feminine heroine is often shown wearing a flowing chiffon saree and this is intended to add to her sexual allure.

Fantasies, Love and Popular Hindi Cinema

Not all men are gazing erotically at women, some women are gazing erotically at women, some women who are gazed upon look like women, some men gazed upon by men look like women.

- Sue-Ellen Case, 1995

Cinema is neither a mirror nor a window, neither purely reflective nor perfectly translucent [...] it mixes opacity with a certain semi-transparency and mirror-like diffraction of the world outside. It captures images and sounds from the material world, but reassembles them into new configurations to produce new or different meanings (Ivakhiv 2011: 203).

Cinema is a space that traverses through space and time to provide an experience of phantasm through the projection of 'real' spaces that undergo cinematic treatment. Foucault, in his canonical work *Of Other Spaces* demonstrates how the cinematic experience is heterotopic where on a two-dimensional screen, there is a projection of three-dimensional worlds. According to him, "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1967). Ivakhiv (2011) in his essay, *Cinema of the Not-Yet: The Utopian Promise of Film as Heterotopia* illustrates how these spaces of phantasms are created through visual images that allow spectators to experience these spaces without actually physically being there or enable the re-imagination of these spaces through the mix of experience and memory. "Visual images can move us in this way not because they harbor a mysterious power over us, but because, through carrying and condensing meanings in forms that involve us emotionally, they mobilize a power that is already ours" (Ivakhiv 2011: 191). Hence these heterotopias permeate through multiple dimensions of space and time enabling the spectator to experience, at one level, fantasy, but also a rupture from reality.

Songs on the other hand, within the diegetic space of the film text, are spectacles of further escape from time-space continuum of the cinematic text. They are extraordinary para-narratives that accessorize and enhance the affect value of the larger cinematic experience. Their farther escape from 'real' time and space enables them to be pockets of rupture from the limitations of reality. This makes them optimal spaces which allow for the expression of pleasure, desire and fantasy. This characteristic feature of songs permits them to be the quintessential spaces of desire and fantasy, subverting reality, even when the song is removed from its diegetic space.

Audiences desire to take the place of characters on the screen, emulate them in their everyday lives and also fantasize romancing them. Lead characters in popular Hindi cinema are often so extravagantly depicted in 'normal' life situations that they become the space to imagine the possibility to desire them, acquire them, and fantasize about them.

Kabir tells me that he has sexual fantasies for a lot of Hindi film heroes. His sexual fantasies are usually of muscular men of the film industry- Salman Khan, Saqib Saleem and John Abraham. Though he is a friend of his favorite actor John Abraham, he can't stop fantasizing about 'John's perfect body'. According to him, actors possess such perfect bodies and also display them so that people fantasize about them and "that's why they look hot and better than most of the *janta* (common people). That's something which you want- a perfect body and that perfect lover." John Abraham is a popular icon among the queer community, especially among gay men. His fan following got upgraded after he played one of the lead characters in *Dostana* where he pretended to be gay and in love with Abhishek Bachchan's character in order to share a home in Miami. John has however never endorsed the community in public. Harish is also an admirer of John and considers him to be his '*tan badan ka swami*' (god of sexual desire). He says, "For me it's not between your legs but between the arms, the heart matters to me the most. And I think John has a beautiful heart, I know him personally also."

“When *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* came out, I remember, everyone loved the film for Shahrukh and I loved the film for Kajol. I remember at that time I was fascinated with the way her lips moved, the way she would play with her hair, her dialogue delivery. I used to day dream about her all the time, of being an assistant to her”, says Minal. According to her, the fantasies were barely sexual. They were more to do with watching Kajol and wanting to be with her. She went on to watch *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* four times in the theatre, something her parents had never let her do before. I asked her why she dreamt of being their assistant and not their lover, to which Minal says:

That was the thing! I didn't want to be the hero ever and I of course definitely didn't want to be the heroine. In *Darr*, Juhi Chawla did quite a few flesh showing scenes. I remember in some scene, it starts raining and she gets wet and she removes some blouse or something and I was like woowww! Without recognizing it! But I have had those memories from that day and I have words for them now, feeling sexual arousal. I was like ‘Oh my god! Look at that woman’. I've dreamt of being an assistant or her friend or flat-mate, where I can just help them with their day and just be around them.

She recalls that she was around fifteen years old when she spent endless hours day-dreaming about her two favorite actors. She never realized they were sexual fantasies, as she puts it “This lust that you just want to be close”, until she reminisced about it much later. In a conversation with her parents, who have accepted her sexuality, Minal tells them about her adoration for Kajol and Juhi to which her mother exclaims, “Like ‘Heroine *ke saath*?! (with a heroine?!)” Minal laughs and says, “that reaction is not because of the sexuality part but because it (the fantasy) is with a Bollywood heroine!”

Like Minal, Rish also imagined meeting and talking with her favorite heroine Hema Malini. She says she began liking Hema more because she starred in *Sholay* with Amitabh and then was

fascinated by Basanti¹⁰ “because she was very spunky, with the horse—which really appealed to me.” Both of them realize that they have a pattern in the kind of women they like to emulate and it is usually the ones with greater agency in the cinematic text. This takes us to Senthoran Raj’s essay, *Igniting Desires: Politicizing Queer Female Subjectivities in Fire* (2012) where he draws on Judith Butler to elicit queer desire by breaking gender norms. He says that gender norms are ‘troubled’ when a man is dressed as a woman (or vice versa); the ‘performativity of gender’ is reiterated leading to the ‘denaturalizing of sex’. Thereby, “the fantasy or gender play, is more than a psychoanalytic attempt to recuperate heterosexuality, it is a space for articulating queer pleasures and gender masquerades through atypical Bollywood 'drag' performances” (Raj 2012).

Beyond the Male Gaze

At this point it would be necessary to invoke Laura Mulvey's acclaimed work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Mulvey talks about ‘scopophilia’ where one derives pleasure from ‘seeing’. She draws her argument from Freud’s understanding of ‘scopophilia’, who says that in the case of children there is pleasure in wanting to see what is ‘forbidden and private’. Mulvey takes this forward by saying that “Although the instinct is modified by other factors, in particular the constitution of the ego, it continues to exist as the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object” (Mulvey 1975: 381).

Though she elucidates that the woman is ‘represented as a spectacle’ for the male gaze, it will be necessary to complicate Mulvey’s argument in this context where the relationship between the spectator and the character on screen is breaking the gender binary of man and woman. Moreover, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that the queer pleasure desired from popular Hindi cinema doesn’t completely rely on the audience. While the cinematic text has the ability to bear

¹⁰ Basanti is a feisty female character in *Sholay* played by Hema Malini. In the movie, she makes a living by driving horse-carts.

multiple meanings, they may not always have to be ‘seen’ differently. Gayatri Gopinath in her essay talks about subversive readings in the subgenres of cinema and points out that to ‘see’ same-sex desire there may not necessarily be a need to have a transgressive text. Using popular cinema like *Hum Aapke hain Kaun* (1994), *Raja Hindustani* (1996), *Utsav* (1984), etc, she discovers that the text leaves out ‘pockets’ for subversive readings. These pockets are usually found in subgenres of films in themes around homo-social spaces, where “these spaces allow numerous possibilities for intense female friendship to slip into queer desire” (Gopinath 2008: 285). She says, “these representations are useful for queer purposes in that they hint at other possibilities of gender and sexualities that fall outside the confines of traditional heterosexuality” (Ibid. 292). While, these representations of queer desire are not overtly intended to show any transgression from the heterosexual norms, she also notes that these representations may not be positive, hence they “also tend to shut down these (subversive readings) almost as quickly as they raise them” (Ibid. 292).

Kabir and Harish’s fantasies are more to do with the physical appearance of the hero, their ‘sex appeal’ as Kabir puts it. While the gaze of the audience is in question, it is also necessary to understand that there has been a shift in the representation of gender, especially for the heroes of Hindi cinema. Charu Gupta (2007), using the two popular Hindi cinema texts *Saawariya* (2007) and *Om Shanti Om* (2007) talks about how the objects of desire on display are the heroes and not the heroines. The films are centered on the consumption of their bodies and the men are not depicted as hyper masculine. This reliance on the male hero for commercial success “directly addresses this fascination and takes care to present the star as both an object of sexual desire and a figure of identification” (Muraleedharan 2005: 77). According to him, the “act of seeing and deriving pleasure needs to be seen as a dialectic with an ever-slipping trajectory of signification. The viewing subject, constituted as *he* is at the conjuncture of a variety of discursive formations,

also functions as a text in his own right, sliding the signification and pleasure of cinema on to the ambiguous realms of inter-textuality” (Ibid. 76-77).

Conclusion

The pervasiveness of popular Hindi cinema and its narrow and stereotypical depiction of gender and sexual identities have repercussions greater than those explored. This paper isn’t suggesting that these responses serve as prototypes for the queer community, the enquiry is merely an initiation into identifying and acknowledging differences in perception of gender identification, emulation and fantasizing, which is directly linked to representation. While on one hand, most of the people interviewed for this study express distress and anger towards the representation of the queer community, like Zal in the above comment, it would be interesting to interject this with Harish’s response:

The pansy gay man is also a part of my community. So every time a pansy gay man is shown, are we going to get up and start screaming that, “*Ye stereotyping hai!* (This is stereotyping)” *Tob uska representation kab hoga?* (Then when will he get represented?) Normalizing *humare dimaag main kab hoga?* (When will be normalize it in our heads?) People cannot always make a PSA. Gay people are normal people and gay people also like to have fun. Every joke on a Sardar is a straight joke. Do you think they are trivializing heterosexuality by making straight-sex jokes? Do we call them straight jokes? Why can’t we laugh at ourselves sometimes? Why is it considered stereotyping- sometimes it’s done in a caricature-ish way, but there are times when it’s okay.

This response is a reminder that there is not just one way of seeing cinema. However, Harish talks about how even this minimal representation, of whatever form is good for visibility. While his opinion might differ radically from those of the others in the study, it is necessary at this

junction to realize that being critical of popular Hindi cinema is not to diminish its ability to entertain but to be critical of what is considered entertainment.

Queer visibility may have increased in popular Hindi cinema. By doing it in formulaic methods, it restricts the imagination of the audience, denying acknowledgement of the existence of any representation. Since the representation of sexual minorities in the public sphere is minimal, agents like cinema play a major role in determining perceptions about the community. Hence, the problem doesn't merely lie in how the effeminate gay man is represented but also lies in the fact that, more often than not, only the effeminate gay man gets represented.

Note: This paper is a part of my MA dissertation titled, 'New Ways of Seeing- *Same-sex desire and popular Hindi Cinema*'; from the school of Media and Cultural Studies, TISS, Mumbai (2015).

Aditi Maddali is an alumna of the Class of 2015 of the MA in Media and Cultural Studies at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. Her work entails research and production of multi-media content.

Filmography

Bombay Talkies. 2013. Film. Karan Johar.

Dil Bole Hadippa. 2009. Film. Anurag Singh.

Dil Chabta Hai. 2001. Film. Farhan Akhtar.

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. 1995. Film. Aditya Chopra.

Dostana. 2008. Film. Tarun Mansukhani.

- Ishq Vishkē*. 2003. Film. Ken Ghosh.
- Kai Po Che!*. 2013. Film. Abhishek Kapoor.
- Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*. 1998. Film. Karan Johar.
- Main Hoon Na*. 2004. Film. Farah Khan.
- Om Shanti Om*. 2007. Film. Farah Khan.
- Saawariya*. 2007. Film. Sanjay Leela Bhansali.
- Sholay*. 1975. Film. Ramesh Sippy.
- Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara*. 2011. Film. Zoya Akhtar.

References

- Butler, Judith. 1999. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 1993. 'Critically Queer'. *GLQ* 1: 17-32.
- Foucault, Michel. 1992. *The History of Sexuality*. London: Penguin.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. 2000. 'Queering Bollywood'. *Journal of Homosexuality* 39 (3-4): 283-297.
doi:10.1300/j082v39n03_13.
- Gupta, Charu. 2007. "Visual Pleasures For 'The Female'". *The Economic and Political Weekly*, no. 15th December: 19-20.
- Ivakhiv, Adrian. 2011. "Cinema Of The Not-Yet: The Utopian Promise Of Film As Heterotopia". *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 5 (2).
doi:10.1558/jsrnc.v5i2.186.

- Mulvey, L. 1975. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. *Screen* 16 (3): 6-18.
doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.
- Narrain, Arvind, and Gautam Bhan. 2005. *Because I Have A Voice*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Raj, Senthoran. 2012. "Igniting Desires: Politicising Queer Female Subjectivities in Fire".
Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific, no. 28.
<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue28/raj.htm>. (Accessed on 4 March 2014).
- Rao, R. Raj. 2000. 'Memories Pierce The Heart'. *Journal of Homosexuality* 39 (3-4): 299-306.
doi:10.1300/j082v39n03_14.
- T., Muraleedharan. 2005. "Crisis in Desire: A Queer Reading of Cinema and Desire in Kerala".
Because I Have A Voice (70-88). New Delhi: Yoda Press.
- Valocchi, S. 2005. "Not Yet Queer Enough: The Lessons Of Queer Theory For The Sociology
Of Gender And Sexuality". *Gender & Society* 19 (6): 750-770.
doi:10.1177/0891243205280294.