

Beyond the Closet: A Critical Exploration of Queer Spaces and Identities in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*

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Abstract

This research critically examines the portrayal of queer spaces and identities in the movie *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020). Movies that depict reality are of supreme significance, with characters belonging to the community, living everyday life, and facing regular societal conflicts. It is evident that Cinema reaches an extensive section of society and challenges the taming of the community and even the movies; all the members of the LGBT(lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community only get cast as trivial characters, it reinforces the open disgust in the world. It is to understand that the LGBT community does not need sympathy but acceptance, understanding, and self-esteem like standard genders. In this way, condemning a person for being other than usual is entirely unjustified, and so is society's power to implement pointless control over an individual's sexuality. The research tries to take the Queer movement forward through the medium of the selected movie. The present study will try to bring to the forefront the different myths associated with the LGBT community in Bollywood and investigate how the LGBT community, its queer desires and aspirations are made visible through queer Cinema. This research paper further develops a deeper understanding of queer identity and culture in Indian Cinema.

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Queer, LGBT, Cinema

Introduction

With the decriminalization of homosexuality in India in July 2009, representations of same-sex desire have proliferated in Indian media. This is particularly true of Cinema, more popularly known as Bollywood, which has experienced an explicit shift in its visual register concerning the representations of same-sex desire. Whereas the Hindu movies of the 1980s and 1990s privileged themes of male bond and homo-society, the first decade of the 21st century saw the emergence of queer sub-plots in several films such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2004), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *Fashion* (2009) and *Dostana* (2009). Scholars have analysed these representations by queering the older themes of male bonding and homosociality and closely reading queer subplots where such meanings are expected. Since India's Supreme Court ruled that the ban on homosexuality is unconditional, LGBT characters are represented on screen in primary roles.

Back in 1998, when Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, the first Bollywood movie to feature a lesbian relationship, was released, it was withdrawn from Indian theatres, re-released, and faced violent protests – posters were burnt, and angry Hindu activists vandalised theatres. It took two decades to release Hitesh Kewalya's *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, the first mainstream Bollywood gay rom-com. In the time between these two movies, less evidence of the distance travelled not only by the film industry but also by Indian society, which is now much more tolerant of acknowledging queer stories instead of othering or caricaturing them.

Over time, mainstream Bollywood has brought out movies about the highly dubious issue of unconventional sexuality. Many movies have featured this issue, but these films rarely got the audience's attention. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* is a recent commendable attempt by Hitesh Kewalya. The movie is a romantic comedy-drama of this recent trend. It deals with the journey of two young men who are trying hard to navigate their same-sex relationship. The two central characters, Aman and Kartik, are striving hard to seek approval

of their sexuality from their families and society. It is a comedy which breaks binaries and creates love icons for gay people. This film has been a huge success and gained an appreciation for the great acting, comic dialogues and clean plot line for the audience.

Review of Literature

The portrayal of queer identities in Bollywood has attracted several researchers. Shohini Ghosh, in her article "Queer Representations in Indian Cinema" (2007), investigates the history of queer space in Indian Hindi movies. She highlights the gradual change in representation of queer identity. Rohit Dasgupta's book *Bollywood and Queer Identity* explores the display of queer identities in Indian Cinema. In "Queering Bollywood" (2017), Aniruddha Dutta critically examines the trend of introducing queer identity into Bollywood.

The Rational of the Study

Although the Supreme Court of India removed Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code on 6th September 2018, homosexuality is still considered taboo in India; the long-marginalised section of society is deprived of its true identity in socio-cultural gestalt. The LGBT community experiences a lack of approval in society for discrimination and deserves critical attention.

The members of the community are trying hard to find a space where gender eccentricity is considered normal, as they are never portrayed as accepted members, and they are mainly displayed as bizarre characters in the movies. The study will investigate how the ostracised community is moving forward in creating its identity.

Research Methodology

'Analysis of Content' is the research methodology used for this research. A critical analysis of LGBT characters in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* is done. The movie was selected for the research study after studying several Hindi movies with LGBT themes. The gay rights movement in Indian society in 1990 gave rise to LGBT characters in Bollywood,

and the numerous myths linked with the appearance of queer space in Bollywood movies have also been studied. The following are the objectives of this study:

1. To study the representation of Queer space in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*
2. To study the LGBT characters' challenges represented in the selected movie
3. To analyse how homosexuality is still a taboo in Indian society

Critical Analysis

The movie makers have done in-depth relevant research on gay people to find the hardships of their lives. The movie is summed up in two and a half hours, and the dialogues are written to avoid common stereotyped elements in earlier Hindi cinema.

The story opens with two young men running on the railway station platform amidst a great crowd. The scene symbolises the most iconic romantic scene of the century—the *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* train boarding scene- conveying to Bollywood fans that genders and sexes play no role in love and attachment.

It is significant to note that superstar Amitabh Bachchan is famous in the gay community as he marked the launch of the two-hero movies. *Sholay*(1975) is the most iconic of such movies as the two guys prefer each other to a female. Moreover, in the same way, Kartik uses this music for his nuptials.

The makers intentionally pictured a homosexual relationship between Aman and Kartik as they kissed on the train, holding each other's back. People sometimes try to assert masculinity and femininity to both the central characters, but they display the traits in their actions. Kartik's sweet voice and gestures seem feminine, but Aman is emotionally weak. He cannot watch Kartik in agony, whereas Kartik displays his masculinity by taking blows from Aman's father for being involved in a same-sex relationship. Aman's father responds with disgust, "Yeh kya ho rha hai? Yeh kya hai?" ("What is happening? What is this?"). This episode underscores the notion that homosexual identities are shameful for our society.

Violence against Gay people is common in every nook and corner of the world, and it is entirely unacceptable to approve of the killings of gay people. The movie tries hard to display that homosexual marriages must be approved in Indian society as per the historic verdict of the Supreme Court on Section 377. However, the queer community in India finds it difficult to love and get married to people of the same sex.

In the movie, Kartik and Aman are interrupted by the police when they are unable to complete the seven vows ritual. Goggle's wedding also plays an integral part in the entire setup as her wedding forces Kartik to realise that Aman is the best man to be his husband. Aman also realised that marriage is an institution that demands mutual respect and support, and Kartik is the person who is suitable to be his life partner. There is an instance in the story when Kartik says to Aman, "Tum mere liye kuch bhi kar skte ho" ("You can do anything for me"). This notion highlights the depth of their emotional and physical bond.

On the other hand, Goggle considers marriage to be a tool that gives attention, importance, love, and respect. However, even on her wedding day, she is the most ignored person during the ceremony.

At the end of the story, Kali gobi (black cauliflower) is the symbol of people's hegemonic and orthodox approach towards homosexual relationships. The black cauliflower is the best means to symbolise the brains of homophobic people, as Homophobia lies in people's hearts and brains. In the end, this disease is like a rotten vegetable, and it has to be burnt from our social system with the complete approval of the Indian society. Nobody should worry about others' feelings and desires, and it is no one's business to decide the love affairs of others.

Conclusion

We may not approve of some scenes in the movie, but the comic relief keeps the pain and emotions light. It may not have been successful in dealing with the pains and sufferings

of people, but it is a brave move by the filmmakers. The movie may not be a perfect one, but its bold scenes and dialogues set a milestone in queer Cinema. However, it does not tick all the boxes of homosexual life, but it takes away the fear of other filmmakers to picturise homosexuality in their movies.

Cinema has always been a powerful medium for displaying social change mirroring social reality. Bollywood has contributed in a very significant way to the queer movement in India, and the projection of gender stereotypes forms society's perspective of gender roles.

Sexual minorities are slowly finding a place in Bollywood with time. The positive representation of bisexuals, gays, lesbians, transgender people and others who identify as 'queer' in movies has relieved the community. Indian society is under transformation, and many directors have portrayed the LGBT community, and its issues remain unexplored. The commercial success of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* highlights that society's attitude towards the LGBT community has changed. People experience great fear in displaying their gender identity and sexual orientation owing to conventional society's discrimination towards homosexuality. For instance, Aman says, "Main apne Parivaar se darne laga hu" ("I have started fearing of my own family"). This statement highlights the hardships for the queer community in India, and they need great acceptance in the society. Bollywood needs to be more focused on queer space to provide the much-needed platform for discussions between the people still in the closet. Thus, this paper tries to underscore the sufferings of homosexuals who have been left without their true identity. They find no representation in the social sphere of Indian society. Bollywood can play a vital role in bringing the community into the mainstream discussion through its realistic screen display. Ultimately, the Indian Cinema will play a significant role in understanding and approving homosexual individuals in India. The following recommendations are made to provide favourable circumstances to the queer community:

- (i) More inclusive portrayal of queer identities in Indian Cinema
- (ii) Providing leading roles to the queer individuals
- (iii) Critical study and evaluation of queer representation in Bollywood

Scope of Future Research

This research paper contributes significantly to queer representation in Bollywood and underscores the need for further research in this field. The following are the suggestions for future research:

- (i) A comparative study of queer representation in Bollywood and Hollywood
- (ii) Impact of Bollywood queer representation in India
- (iii) A Critical Study of the Role of Media in shaping cultural approach towards queer identity in Indian Society

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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