



Exploring Homosexuality In Cinema: A Critical Comparative Analysis Of *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* And *Badhaai Do*

Shreya Pathania

Research Scholar

Department of English and Cultural Studies
Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

Abstract: The present research study aims to perform a critical comparative analysis of two contemporary Indian films, that is, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* and *Badhaai Do*, by focusing on the LGBTQ+ themes and characters. The comparative analysis would be used as the methodology to compare and contrast these films on the grounds of marriage of convenience, ethical and social concerns, performance of the machismo and the iteration of the performative script. Through this analysis, a nuanced understanding of the disposition of the homosexual individuals in the Indian society would be attained. The knowledge gained would be transformative in nature and would deepen our understanding of how despite the legal acceptance of homosexuality in India, the social acceptance is quite far from reality.

Index Terms - Performative gender script, Machismo, Marriage of convenience, Homosexual identity in Indian society, Cultural stigma and heteronormativity, Queer representation in Bollywood, Comparative film analysis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Cheryl Clarke.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, there has been a slow but gradual evolution of how LGBTQ+ themes and characters are portrayed in Indian cinema. Following the landmark decision on 6th September, 2018, when the Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality, two recent Bollywood films, *Badhaai Do* and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, have contributed to this changing environment by featuring homosexuality as their main theme. These films highlight the struggles queer individuals face in India and how due to fear of prejudice and abuse, they keep their sexual orientation as a secret.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology employed would be a close reading and critical analysis of the selected films. The works would be studied using R. Radhakrishnan's comparative method and few queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler and Cheryl Clarke would be invoked to further illustrate the comparisons drawn.

III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, features a young punjabi woman named Sweetie Chaudhary as she attempts to come out of the closet to reveal her identity as a lesbian in a traditional and conservative family. She hides her sexual orientation due to her deep seated guilt, loneliness and fear of violence. Although, the film didn't perform well at the box office, it is significant in its contribution for bringing forth a serious social taboo subject.

The film *Badhaai Do* features two homosexual individuals belonging to different genders getting married to one another in order to escape social ridicule and accept the norms of the heteronormative society. The two protagonists Shardul Thakur and Sumi Singh agree to live as roommates together and pose as a united duo in front of their families and the society at large, while at the same time, live their lives with their sexual orientation intact. This film's plot highlights how difficult it is to be a gay man or a lesbian in the Indian society and not be able to live your life as per your sexual preference. This struggle is depicted in the film in a humorous fashion.

Prominent writers like Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai in their seminal work *Same-Sex Love in India* have discussed how the Indian culture is more of a shame culture where the reputation of the family is the most important aspect of life and any deviation from the norm invites criticism. Both these films are representative of such ideas and unfortunately, both did not perform very well at the box office. However, they should be applauded for bringing forth such a taboo subject matter.

The fact that these films were rejected by the Indian audience shows that despite the fact that there has been a legal acceptance since 2018, through the decriminalization of homosexuality by the Supreme Court and an acceptance at the cosmopolitan or an urban level where people are generally accepting of homosexuality or an alternate sexuality rather than the heteronormative behavior, the social acceptance is quite far from reality. This popular rejection is a reflection of the deeply entrenched homophobia in our society. This homophobic attitude is not just a huge hurdle in the lives of queer individuals but it also often comes at the cost of their life and safety.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her seminal work, *Epistemology of the Closet* said that for the gay people, the gay closet is "the fundamental feature of social life" (Sedgwick 68). There are certain closeting techniques that have been employed by the queer characters of the two movies, that is, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* and *Badhaai Do*. They make use of such techniques in order to escape the social regulation of the Indian society which monitors each move of such queer individuals and makes life suffocating for them. The queer characters of Shardul Thakur, Sumi and Sweety from the movies selected, depict their closeted lives. Shardul is a gay man in closet who due to pressure for marriage from his family keeps stalling them by saying that he is in a relationship with a Muslim girl Shaznim. He is well aware of the fact that the inter religion relationship would not be accepted by his small town family. Therefore, he employs this excuse to depict his straightness to the society and also avoids getting married to the opposite sex. This is his strategy to maintain his real sexual orientation by duping his family and the society at large. He keeps up this lie until he meets Sumi who is trying to get rid of a stalker who threatens to reveal her identity unless she sleeps with him and whilst helping her, Shardul finds out about her closeted identity as a lesbian.

Sumi is a lesbian in closet due to the fear of social abuse as she is already an easy target in the eyes of the society owing to the fact that the man she almost got married to, died two days before the marriage. Therefore, she is already a sort of an abnormality in the eyes of the society at large. If her sexual orientation got exposed as well then she would face severe prejudice from the public.

Sweety, from *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* is a lesbian in closet as well who due to certain traumatic experiences of her childhood doesn't feel safe enough to voice out her sexuality and her truth. She hides her sexual identity for fear of rejection from her family. Thus, these strategies employed by the characters depict how the closet is a space of security as well as anxiety. It is secure because by performing the part of the heteronormative script, a gay man or a lesbian can pretend to be part of the heterosexual world and it causes anxiety as well because if in case the homosexuals are caught then they would have to undergo severe oppression and abuse.

We as humans have this deep inclination to categorize everything. We categorize babies at birth into male or female, pick colours for nurseries as blue or pink and as the children grow older we categorize their behavior into what is appropriate for a woman or a man. According to Judith Butler, gender is a performative category, not something that you are born with, rather it is something which comes into your performance, and your performance is never an individual performance, it is always an iterative performance. In other words, gender is inscribed on the body of an individual. The mandates of the heterosexual world are executed through the bodies which are working as material agents of the entire gender construct. Therefore, it can be said that a performative script has to be followed by homosexuals in order to settle into the heteronormative society.

A traumatic incident is shown in the film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* through a flashback which features Sweety's teenage self wherein she witnesses her own elder brother, Babloo along with his schoolmates bully and beat up her gay friend. Her friend was beaten up due to the reason of not following the performative script which categorizes what behavior is well suited to which gender. His only fault was being born as a boy and having an alternate sexual orientation. His refusal to follow the heteronormative script leads to his subsequent abuse. Thus, he is being punished for going against the mandates of the heterosexual world. This incident instils a deep fear into the mind of Sweety and she knows that she cannot transgress this boundary anymore. She cannot reveal who she is. There is another incident in the film which further strengthens her resolve as when her diary is discovered and read by her classmates, they treat her like an outcast. From that point on, she understands that she is different from others and this is a secret she has to keep to herself as no one would understand her. The coercion used to stifle her gay friend scares Sweety to silence and she decides to follow the performative script in order to escape abuse and ostracization.

However, in *Badhaai Do*, Sumi, the lesbian protagonist is shown as a PT teacher who had been jilted by her lover when she got married and had a child. When Shardul approaches her with the proposal, Sumi agrees to get into a marriage of convenience with him in order to escape the pressure of their families. They both understand that they have to follow the performative script sooner or later and through this marriage they start on this journey together. Moreover, Shardul's preoccupation with building up of his muscles in the film depicts his need to showcase his straight masculinity so as to fit into the category of a heterosexual man, thereby following the script as well.

A marriage of convenience can also be called a lavender marriage which has emerged as a strategy by queer individuals in India to live with their sexual orientation intact and at the same time be a part of the heterosexual world. Shardul's pretense of dating a muslim girl could not hold his family's pressure off for long as in the beginning of the film, one can see that his family accepts the relationship. Luckily, he meets Sumi and enters into a lavender marriage with her, thus, keeping both their sexual identities as a secret and maintaining their image in public of being a heterosexual couple. By adopting this strategy, they settle into the heteronormative society under disguise.

A similar strategy was almost adopted by Sweety and Sahil. Sahil, although in love with Sweety doesn't wish a life of secrecy for her. However, Sweety stresses the fact that if he won't marry her, she will marry the man her family has selected for her. This shows the pressure that family has on these queer individuals and how in order to escape it, they take such steps which would lead them to further hide their sexual orientation and exist in a loveless marriage.

Moreover, this raises an ethical concern as Sweety would not just be duping her family, but most importantly the man she would be marrying. By hiding her sexual orientation and marrying a heterosexual man out of pressure, she would be destroying his life willingly and intentionally.

Furthermore, the ethical concern that arises in *Badhaai Do* is the forging of the documents in order to become eligible to adopt a child. As both Sumi and Shardul are homosexuals, they decide to adopt, however, the procedure to adopt a child requires one of the parents to be unable to conceive. Herein, we see how Shardul's masculinity takes a hit when in order to adopt, it is the document of his sperm count that has to be tampered with. Therefore, when his virility comes under question, he feels insecure as it is an indicator of his masculinity being stripped away. The way he gets extremely flustered at the prospect of being known as impotent shows his deep insecurity, as being a virile and masculine man is part of being a heterosexual male which is a performative script he follows religiously.

Misogyny, patriarchy and heteronormative sexuality are deeply intertwined and this is depicted in two such incidents from the movie *Badhaai Do*. Being a heterosexual male and being masculine go hand in hand. The masculinity is performed via the machismo which is expected of men, especially if they are heterosexuals. When Sumi confronts Shardul and says that she expected him to be a bit more empathetic and understanding of a woman's disposition as compared to his heterosexual counterparts and calls him out for thinking that women are inferior to men, Shardul's nonchalant response is, "How is it related to being gay? Every man thinks that" (*Badhaai Do* 1:09:21). This instance exemplifies how just because someone is part of the LGBTQ community, they aren't exempt from the internalized homophobia and misogynistic attitude in their day to day life.

This macho attitude is depicted in another incident where in front of his senior police officer and his wife when they are over at his house, Shardul pretends to be extremely domineering and patriarchal in his behaviour towards Sumi. He assumes a very authoritative disposition and commands Sumi to prepare tea and snacks for all of them. However, hilariously when he enters the kitchen and is in close quarters with Sumi, he becomes his docile self and his body language changes drastically. Outside the kitchen and in front of his senior, he pretends to be a dominant heterosexual man who treats his woman as almost a servant and in the kitchen he becomes his submissive self and agrees to even do the dishes and clean the house for the next week if Sumi goes along with his pretense. It is imperative to note here that Shardul is pretending to be what he assumes a heterosexual couple should look like from the outside, where the man is extremely domineering and the woman is a cowed down individual. He adopts this heterosexual masculinity as a sort of a camouflage around him to showcase himself as a traditional masculine man. When Shardul and Sumi are asked about why they won't hire a maid, Shardul responds by saying that they don't need a maid as Sumi gets free early from work and does all the household chores. He receives approval from his senior officer who applauds him on this achievement as it is considered admirable to have complete control over your wife. Therefore, Shardul manages to portray himself as a heterosexual man well enough.

Through the above mentioned incident, one can see that a sort of essentialism is being produced here wherein being a heterosexual man essentially means that you are supposed to be patriarchal as well as domineering and follow the machismo performative script. However, Shardul's meek behaviour has to be highlighted here as well to draw his connection to homosexuality. Therefore, there is a discursive essentialism present here because it is not necessary that if you are a heterosexual man you will be patriarchal and if you are not a heterosexual man you will not be patriarchal in nature.

It would be inadvisable to think that a gay man would be kind to a woman just because he is gay. It is imperative to understand that an individual is made up of an intrinsic kind of social makeup and one can't separate the misogyny from their sexual behavior as they are deeply intertwined with one another. Therefore, through this incident one can conclude that patriarchy and misogyny are working together as a means to establish a heteronormative sexual behavior and in this way the performance of homosexuality is inhibited, thus, in order to hide it and closet it entirely, the performance of the heteronormative sexuality needs to be highlighted.

In *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, the macho attitude is depicted through the character of Babloo, Sweety's domineering and homophobic brother. He keeps a tight control over her love life and her sexual orientation and repeatedly reiterates the fact that what she is, is abnormal and would bring shame to the entire family. Therefore, she cannot reveal what she is to anyone. This shows his internalized homophobia and his hatred of anything that deviates from the heterosexual normal, in this case, that is the deviance inside his sister. The incident which has already been discussed regarding Sweety's gay friend who was ridiculed and beaten up by Babloo and his friends and made to walk like a girl, reveals the deeply entrenched misogyny inside him. His character is representative of the fact that the Self cannot come close to the Other. The Self being the heteronormativity and the Other being homosexuality.

The character of Babloo, the extremely domineering and macho brother of the lesbian protagonist Sweety is representative of the assertion that being macho and maintaining the strength factor is associated with heterosexuality and being meek is a characteristic that is associated with homosexuality as represented by the gay friend. Therefore, patriarchy, heteronormativity and misogyny are deeply intertwined with one another and depicted in the selected films through these characters.

Towards the end of the film, *Badhaai Do*, the sexual orientation of Sumi gets revealed as she gets caught sleeping with her girlfriend by her mother in law. The intense homophobic reaction of her brother and mother hurt her a lot. She is accused of bringing shame to the whole family. However, she still held out hope for her father to accept her. Eventually, her father's response breaks her heart. Moreover, Shardul also has his coming out of the closet moment and reveals his sexual orientation to his family. In the confession that follows, he stresses on the fact that homosexuality is not a disease and nothing to be ashamed of. It is an alternate form of sexuality that doesn't follow the heterosexual society's footsteps. He reveals the intense loneliness he felt growing up and how he could never open up to anyone. After his confession and the resultant silence of his family, he rushes up to the roof and calls Sumi to tell her that he came out to his family and later, his mother comes after him upstairs and what follows is an incredible cathartic moment for Shardul's character as finally

his heart is not stifled, it is free. The revelation of both Sumi and Shardul's sexuality acts as a resistance to the heteronormative society. They are out and finally living their truth.

Whereas in case of *Sweetie* there is no coming out moment. Her sexual orientation is exposed by her brother Babloo in his homophobic rant towards the end of the film where he admits that he has known of her unnatural tendencies since school. Her sexuality is exposed in such a brutal fashion and is thrown in her face as something to be disgusted by. Needless to say, *Sweetie* suffers through a harrowing experience.

Shardul and Sumi from *Badhaai Do*, are excellent examples of resisting against the mandates of the patriarchal and heteronormative society. Towards the end of the film when they voice out their sexual orientation, they have actively protested against the dominant sexuality and made their own space to settle down. This is a brave act which requires courage and strength.

Cheryl Clarke, in her work, 'Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance' says that for a woman to be a lesbian in a male-supremacist, capitalist, misogynist, racist, homophobic culture is an act of resistance. *Sweetie* from *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* also represents the act of resistance when she fights back and tells her father and homophobic brother that the play depicting the same sex love story of two women would be enacted in the city of Moga and she would be acting in it as well. The play would be performed and they cannot stop it just because they fear it would bring shame to their family. This marks the first time she rebels against her father and brother. Her act of resistance serves her well as in the end her father supports her and accepts her orientation. Thus, the heteronormative mandates of the society get challenged through her protest against them.

IV. CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* and *Badhaai Do* shows that these films are crucial primary texts in their own right and contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse of LGBTQ+ literature in India. These films should be appreciated for bringing to the forefront such a social taboo subject matter to the Indian audience which suffers from extreme homophobia.

The unsuccessful performance of both these films reveals that the masses at large still think of queer topics as social taboo. This rejection by the Indian audience suggests that there is still a long way to go for us collectively as a society. It also depicts the gap that exists between the Self, that is, the heteronormativity and the Other, that is, homosexuality. This is representative of the fact that the Self cannot come close to the Other. The Other needs to blend into the Self by embracing the heteronormative script in order to exist and that has been illustrated with incidents from the films in this research paper. The comparative analysis also highlights the double bind aspect of the lives of queer individuals of India as they have to lead their lives with an intense sense of isolation due to the fear of social ostracization and violence. Their representation on screen is one of the initial steps towards inclusivity.

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