



Rethinking Romance: Gender Performativity And Lesbian Identity In *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*

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ABSTRACT

Ek Ladki ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga, directed by Shelley Chopra Dhar, is a romantic comedy-drama movie based on an LGBTQ and displays the same gender love story inspired by the novel “A Damsel in Distress” by P.G. Woodhouse written in 1919. *Ek Ladki ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* is a story of a lesbian girl Sweety Chaudhary who belongs to a religious and traditional Punjabi family. This film is centred around young Sweety Chaudhary from Moga in Punjab who has spent her life hiding her truth from those dearest to her, but the film is not about same-gender love alone. It is about living and loving as we choose, not allowing societal norms around age, gender, religion or anything else to suffocate us and hamper or personal or professional choices. Drawing on theories of performance, heteronormativity, and cultural reception, this paper explores how the film challenges patriarchal expectations, redefines romantic conventions, and expands the discourse on same-gender love in Indian popular culture. It further analyzes how the film’s moderate box office success and critical acclaim signal a gradual but meaningful shift in public perception. Ultimately, the paper argues that *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* functions not merely as entertainment, but as a political and pedagogical text that encourages audiences to “rethink love” in a changing socio-legal landscape.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Lesbian Identity, LGBTQ+ in Indian Cinema, Post-Section 377, Queer Theory, Cultural Reception

Introduction

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) marks a significant moment in mainstream Hindi cinema for its sensitive portrayal of lesbian identity within a traditional North Indian family structure. Produced by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, the film features music by Rochak Kohli, cinematography by Himman Dhamija, and editing by Ashish Suryavanshi. Combining a commercial narrative style with a socially progressive thematic core, the film foregrounds questions of sexuality, family, and societal acceptance. Its screenplay received international recognition when it was selected for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ Core Collection, highlighting its cultural and representational significance.

The story revolves around Sweety Chaudhary, a young Punjabi woman living under the watchful authority of her conservative family in Moga. Her father, Balbir Chaudhary, runs a garment business and represents the archetype of the traditional patriarch who believes in honour, reputation, and rigid social norms. The household is further shaped by Beeji, the elderly matriarch, whose ideas about gender roles are deeply entrenched. When Beeji insists that “men do not belong in the kitchen,” the film subtly exposes how everyday domestic statements reproduce larger cultural ideologies. Such moments resonate with Judith Butler’s assertion that gender is not an innate quality but a repeated performance structured by social expectations: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (33). Beeji’s remark is not merely casual speech; it is a performative act that sustains the illusion of natural gender difference.

Sweety’s life is shaped by similar performances of normalcy. Outwardly she fulfils the role of the “ideal daughter” — attending family functions, tolerating discussions of marriage, and silently obeying domestic expectations. Internally, however, she carries the burden of a concealed truth: she is in love with a woman named Kuhu. Her brother Babloo becomes the enforcer of patriarchal morality within the household. He claims that Sweety visits Delhi to meet a Muslim man, using this fabricated narrative to restrict her mobility. His actions demonstrate how patriarchy regulates female sexuality through surveillance and control, reinforcing what Butler calls the “compulsory order of sex/gender/desire” (9-11). Babloo’s anxiety is not only about religion or honour; it is about preserving heteronormativity as the unquestioned social order.

The turning point occurs when Sweety confides in Sahil Mirza, a struggling playwright she meets through a series of comedic misunderstandings. At Beeji’s birthday gathering, Sweety reveals for the first time that she is in love with a girl. This confession disrupts the narrative of heteronormativity that has structured her life. Her disclosure also reveals the psychological toll of concealment. She recounts how, as a child, classmates mocked her for being different and how she felt isolated and “abnormal.” These experiences reflect the social disciplining Butler describes, where deviation from gender norms invites punishment and exclusion. Gender identity, Butler argues, is “a stylized repetition of acts” (179), and those who fail to repeat the “correct” acts are marked as deviant. Sweety’s childhood trauma emerges from precisely such a failure to conform to expected feminine heterosexuality.

The metaphor of the “closet” becomes central to understanding Sweety’s existence. Her silence functions as a performative strategy of survival. She performs heterosexual normalcy not because it reflects her truth but because it protects her from social sanction. Butler’s later work underscores that speech and silence both operate as forms of performativity; what is unsaid can be as socially regulated as what is spoken (*Excitable Speech*). Sweety’s silence, therefore, is not emptiness but a socially compelled performance shaped by fear, love for her family, and cultural constraint.

Sahil’s role in the narrative becomes crucial as an ally figure who helps transform private truth into public expression. He writes a play — also titled *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* — to be staged at Balbir’s fashion event. The play mirrors Sweety’s life and stages a love story between two women. Theatre within the film becomes a space of performative resistance, where heteronormative narratives are disrupted in front of a community audience. This meta-theatrical device reinforces Butler’s theory that identity itself is constituted through performance. If gender norms are sustained through repeated acts, they can also be subverted through alternative performances. The play allows Sweety to “perform” her truth publicly, thereby destabilizing the illusion that heterosexuality is the only natural form of love.

The audience's reaction within the film reflects broader social tensions. Some viewers leave the hall in discomfort, unable to reconcile their cultural expectations with what they witness on stage. Others remain, curious and contemplative. This divided response mirrors contemporary Indian society, where LGBTQ+ visibility is increasing but acceptance remains uneven. The film thus does not present change as immediate or universal; instead, it depicts it as a gradual process initiated through storytelling and empathy.

Balbir's emotional transformation forms the emotional climax of the film. After reading Sweety's diary, he confronts the depth of her loneliness and pain. His shift from denial to acceptance illustrates how personal narratives can challenge deeply internalised prejudices. While the resolution may appear idealistic, it serves an important symbolic function: it imagines the possibility of familial acceptance within a conservative cultural framework. Butler reminds us that norms persist because they are repeated, but repetition also contains the possibility of variation and change (179-188). Balbir's acceptance represents such a variation — a break in the chain of rigid heteronormative repetition.

Ultimately, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* situates lesbian identity not as rebellion against culture but as a truth struggling for space within it. Sweety does not wish to abandon her family; she wishes to be accepted by them. The film challenges the notion that queerness is “against Indian culture” by placing it within the heart of a loving, if flawed, Punjabi household. In doing so, it reframes tradition not as a fixed structure but as a living practice capable of reinterpretation.

Through its integration of mainstream cinematic form, humour, family melodrama, and queer subjectivity, the film becomes a site where Butler's theory of performativity finds vivid narrative expression. Gender and sexuality are shown not as fixed identities but as lived negotiations shaped by cultural expectation, emotional bonds, and the courage to speak. Sweety's journey from silence to self-assertion illustrates how identity, though constrained by social norms, can be rearticulated through acts of performative resistance.

CONCLUSION

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga stands at the crossroads of cinematic innovation and social transformation. By narrating a same-sex love story within the comfort zone of mainstream Bollywood aesthetics, the film succeeds in making queerness visible, relatable, and emotionally resonant for a wider Indian audience. It neither exoticises nor pathologises lesbian desire, but instead roots it in the everyday experiences of love, longing, and familial conflict—experiences universally understood but rarely extended to queer subjects in popular Indian cinema. Through the application of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, we see how the film critiques fixed gender roles and heteronormative expectations. Sweety's journey from silence to self-assertion is a performative act that redefines her identity—not as deviant but as fully human and deserving of love. Simultaneously, Michel Foucault's concept of power and surveillance underscores how queer identities are policed within families and communities, and how acts of resistance, such as coming out, are also acts of political defiance. The film also contributes to broader discussions about representation and reception in post-Section 377 India. Its relatively successful box office run and warm critical reception indicate a shift—albeit gradual—in public consciousness. Importantly, the film does not aspire to be a radical manifesto. Instead, its strength lies in its accessibility, subtlety, and humanity. By centring the story in a conservative milieu and focusing on personal relationships, it bypasses confrontation and instead encourages empathy, inviting viewers to reflect on the emotional costs of repression and the joy of acceptance.

As Indian society continues to grapple with issues of gender, sexuality, and modernity, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* serves not just as a film, but as a cultural text that tries to educate. Affirm, and gently unsettle the intricate complexities of gender norms assigned by society.

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