

Coming Out in the Mainstream: A Study of Contemporary Gay Bollywood Cinema

**Thesis submitted to the
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ROSHNI P.



**RESEARCH & POSTGRADUATE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
ST. JOSEPH'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS)
DEVAGIRI, CALICUT
DECEMBER 2025**

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled "**Coming Out in the Mainstream: A Study of Contemporary Gay Bollywood Cinema**" submitted by **Ms Roshni P.** to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in English**, is a *bona fide* record of research work done by her in this department. This work has not previously formed the basis for any award of degree or diploma.

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Devagiri

02.07.2026



Dr. S. Nagesh

Research Guide

Dr. S. NAGESH. MA, PhD.
Associate Professor
Department of English
St. Joseph's College
Calicut - 673 008



Dr. Binu K.D.

Co-guide

Dr. Binu K D
Research Guide
The PG Research Dept of English
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)
Devagiri, Kozhikode 673008

Dr. S. Nagesh
Research Supervisor
Research & Postgraduate Department of English
St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)
Devagiri, Calicut

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled “**Coming Out in the Mainstream: A Study of Contemporary Gay Bollywood Cinema**” submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of the Doctor of Philosophy in English is a record of *bona fide* research carried out by **Roshni P.** under my supervision and guidance. No part of this thesis had been submitted earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, title, or recognition.

Place: Devagiri

Date: 3.12.2025



Dr. S. Nagesh
Research Supervisor

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the work presented in the thesis entitled "**Coming Out in the Mainstream: A Study of Contemporary Gay Bollywood Cinema**" is based on the original work done by me under the guidance of **Dr. S. Nagesh** and has not been included in any other thesis submitted previously for the award of any degree. The contents of the thesis have undergone plagiarism check using iThenticate software at C.H.M.K. Library, University of Calicut, and the similarity index found is within the permissible limit. I also declare that the thesis is free from AI generated contents.



Roshni P.

Research Scholar



Signature of the Supervising teacher
Name **Dr S. Nagesh**

Place: **Devagiri**
Date: **3.12.2025**

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Abstract

Cinema is a dominant ideological apparatus that negotiates with subjectivities and pleasures. Mainstream Hindi cinema has evolved in its portrayal of gay narratives as socio-political and cultural changes in India have caused the shift in representations of gay identities as a subtext to explicit coming out narratives. This study explores the portrayal of coming-out narratives in mainstream Hindi cinema, focusing on how these films represent gayness within India's evolving socio-cultural context. It examines how Hindi cinema frames coming-out moments, negotiates gay identities and positions gay cinema in the mainstream. The theoretical aspects and coming-out studies challenge traditional understandings of identity, visibility, and acceptance, highlighting how homophobia continues to shape these narratives. Homophobia complicates the process of coming out by making visibility unsafe through stigma, discrimination and often violence. The turning point in coming out narratives was *My Brother Nikhil*, directed by Onir. It stands as a landmark film in Hindi cinema, shedding light on the struggles of coming out and living openly as a queer individual within an unforgiving society. The thesis studies Karan Johar's 'Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh', Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh*, Tanuj Bhramar's *Dear Dad*, and Hitesh Kewalya's *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, through which it tries to explore the trajectory of coming out narratives in Popular Cinema. The trajectory suggests a gradual shift towards a more inclusive point of view, where queer identities are not only acknowledged but also celebrated.

Keywords: Queer Studies, Coming Out, Homophobia, Stereotype, Representation

പ്രബന്ധസംഗ്രഹം

സിനിമ ഒരു പ്രധാന ആശയവിനിമയ ഉപാധിയാണ് ഇന്ന് പ്രവർത്തിക്കുന്നത്. അത് ഒരേ സമയം വിവിധ വിഷയങ്ങളെക്കുറിച്ച് ചർച്ച ചെയ്യുകയും കാഴ്ചക്കാരെ ആസ്വാദനം വഴി ആനന്ദങ്ങളിലേക്ക് നയിക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു. സിനിമയെ സമൂഹത്തിലെ മാറ്റങ്ങൾ സ്വാധീനിക്കും. ഇന്ത്യയിലെ സാമൂഹ്യവും രാഷ്ട്രീയവും സാംസ്കാരികവുമായ മാറ്റങ്ങൾ, മുഖ്യധാരാ ഹിന്ദിസിനിമകളിലെ ഗേ കഥാപാത്രങ്ങളുടെ അവതരണത്തിലും വലിയ മാറ്റം സൃഷ്ടിച്ചു. പുതിയ കാലത്തിലെ ഗേ പ്രതിനിധാനങ്ങൾ, നേരത്തെ ഉണ്ടായിരുന്ന അർത്ഥതലങ്ങളിൽ നിന്നും പുതുക്കപ്പെട്ടിരിക്കുന്നു. അവ പുതിയ കാഴ്ചപ്പാടുകളിലേയ്ക്കും അർത്ഥതലങ്ങളിലേയ്ക്കും വികസിച്ചിരിക്കുന്നു. പരിണമിച്ചു കൊണ്ടിരിക്കുന്ന ഇന്ത്യൻ സാമൂഹിക-സാംസ്കാരിക സാഹചര്യങ്ങളിൽ, ഹിന്ദി സിനിമകൾ വ്യക്തിത്വങ്ങളെ എപ്രകാരം അവതരിപ്പിക്കുന്നുവെന്ന് ഈ പഠനം അന്വേഷിക്കുന്നു. പ്രധാനമായും ഗേ വ്യക്തിത്വങ്ങൾ പുറത്തേയ്ക്ക് വരുന്ന / സമൂഹത്തിനു മുൻപിൽ തുറന്ന് പ്രഖ്യാപിക്കുന്ന നിമിഷങ്ങൾ സിനിമകളിൽ എങ്ങിനെ ചിത്രീകരിക്കപ്പെടുന്നുവെന്നും ഗേ തിരിച്ചറിവുകൾ എപ്രകാരം പ്രതിനിധീകരിക്കപ്പെടുന്നുവെന്നും ഇത്തരം വിഷയങ്ങൾ ചർച്ച ചെയ്യുന്ന സിനിമകളെ മുഖ്യധാരയിൽ ഏതെല്ലാം വിധത്തിൽ ഉൾപ്പെടുത്തുന്നുവെന്നുമാണ് ഈ ഗവേഷണം പ്രധാനമായും അന്വേഷിക്കുന്നത്. സൈദ്ധാന്തികമായ ഈ സമീപനം അവരുടെ വ്യക്തിത്വം, അടയാളങ്ങൾ / കാഴ്ച, അംഗീകാരം എന്നിവയുടെ പരമ്പരാഗതമായ ധാരണകളെ ചോദ്യം ചെയ്യുന്നുണ്ട്. ഹോമോഫോബിയ എപ്രകാരമാണ് ഇവയെ രൂപപ്പെടുത്തുന്നത് എന്ന് ഈ അന്വേഷണം തുറന്നുകാട്ടുന്നു. ഇവരെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള കാഴ്ചകൾ സാമൂഹിക അപഹാസ്യം, വിവേചനം, അക്രമം എന്നിവയിലൂടെ ഹോമോഫോബിയ അപകടകരമാക്കുന്നതിനാൽ സമൂഹത്തിനു മുൻപിൽ പ്രസ്തുത വ്യക്തിത്വങ്ങൾ തുറന്നു വെളിപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന സന്ദർഭങ്ങൾ സങ്കീർണ്ണമാവുന്നു. ഇത്തരം ചിന്തകളിൽ ഒരു വഴിത്തിരിവായ സിനിമയാണ് ഓനിർ സംവിധാനം ചെയ്ത *മൈ ബ്രദർ... നിഖിൽ*. പരമ്പരാഗത വിശ്വാസങ്ങളാൽ കഠിനമായ ഒരു സമൂഹത്തിൽ, തന്നെ തുറന്നുകാട്ടുന്ന ഒരു ക്വിയർ വ്യക്തിയുടെ പോരാട്ടങ്ങളെ ഈ സിനിമ ചിത്രീകരിക്കുന്നുണ്ട്. കരൺ ജോഹറിന്റെ *അജീബ് ദസ്താൻ ഹൈ യേ*,

ഹൻസൽ മേത്തയുടെ അലിഗഡ്, തനുജ് ഭ്രോറിന്റെ ഡിയർ ഡാഡ്, ഹിതേഷ് കൈവാല്യയുടെ ശുഭ് മംഗൽ സ്വാഭാ സാവ്ധാൻ എന്നീ ചിത്രങ്ങളെ ഈ പഠനം വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്നു. പ്രസ്തുത വിശകലനത്തിലൂടെ ഗേവ്യകുതിരങ്ങൾ സമൂഹത്തിനു മുൻപിൽ തങ്ങളെ തുറന്നുകാട്ടുന്ന പ്രക്രിയയുടെ ഭാഗമായ അവരുടെ ജീവിതയാത്രകളെ, മുഖ്യധാരാസിനിമയിൽ എപ്രകാരം അവതരിപ്പിക്കപ്പെടുന്നുവെന്ന് കണ്ടെത്തുവാൻ ഈ പഠനം ശ്രമിക്കുന്നു. അവരെയും ഉൾക്കൊള്ളുന്ന ഒരു സമീപനത്തിലേക്കുള്ള മുഖ്യധാരാസിനിമയുടെ ക്രമാനുഗതമായ മാറ്റത്തെ ഈ ഒരു യാത്ര അടയാളപ്പെടുത്തുന്നുണ്ട്. ഇവിടെ ക്വിയർ തിരിച്ചറിവുകൾ അംഗീകരിക്കപ്പെടുന്നതോടൊപ്പം ആഘോഷിക്കപ്പെടുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നു.

താക്കോൽ വാക്കുകൾ: ക്വിയർ പഠനങ്ങൾ, കമിംഗ് ഔട്ട്, ഹോമോഫോബിയ, വാർപ്പുമാതൃക, പ്രതിനിധാനം

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is an important component of modernity in a country like India that produces the majority of films in the world. Indian cinema, in particular, has always been a significant force in determining the cultural, political and social narratives. Indian films, from the beginning, have studied prominent social issues and crucial political movements such as women's emancipation, the struggle for independence and the caste reforms. Earlier films like *Achhut Kanya* (1936) and *Dharti ke Lal* (1946) addressed caste hierarchies; *Shaheed* (1948) and *Jhansi ki Rani* (1953) reinforced nationalist sentiments, while the films *Aurat* (1940) and *Mother India* (1957) examined the themes of powerful motherhood, fostering the empowerment of women and the resilience of Indian women.

After the early phase, by the 40s, a successful formula for mainstream cinema had emerged, including song, action, fantasy, dance, and spectacle. Mainstream cinema is produced primarily for commercial theatrical release and achieves significant cultural visibility through media coverage, audience reach and public discussion. Some movies that went along were *Andaz* (1949), *Kismet* (1943) and *Khandaan* (1942). By the 1950s, cinema moved on from formulaic entertainment to present socioeconomic realities, as can be seen in movies like *Paigham* (1959), *Do Bigha Zamin* (1953) and *Awaara* (1951), which explored the themes of unemployment and poverty.

Mainstream cinema catered to the masses by carrying an essentially Indian tradition of filmmaking. As Gokulsing and Dissanayake note in *Indian Popular Cinema*, “Popular films play a central role in the construction of popular Indian consciousness; they are the most dominant and pervasive force responsible for creating in the public mind the notions of ...modernity, consumption and glamour” (24).

Post 1950, Indian cinema began to look into subjects like individualism, identity, intersectionality and personal freedom. This change from collective nationalist narratives to more personal and psychological explorations reflected the changing socio-political landscape. During this period, female characters were portrayed as modern and independent individuals, and men were often caught in the dilemma of identity, vulnerability, and power. From the 1970s onwards, the impact of the Gay Liberation Movement in the West subtly began to influence Indian films. During the 70s and 80s, as academic and activist discourses on queer theory and LGBTQ rights gained momentum, portrayals of alternate sexuality began to be reflected in films too. By the 80s and 90s, the LGBTQ movement was characterised by full-fledged theories, and LGBTQ identities became part of societal as well as cinematic discourse.

The representation of queer characters in Hindi Cinema can be dated as far back as 1971, when India’s first known movie with gay representation, *Badnam Basti* (1971), was released. It is based on Kamaleshwar Saxena’s novel *Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan* (1957) and the film, considered India’s first movie that depicts a homosexual relationship, quietly suggests a romantic connection between its male leads but, like most films of its time, stops short of explicitly naming or exploring

their queerness. Instead, it leaves the audience to read between the lines. The movie follows the story of a male bus driver who has an intimate relationship with a temple cleaner. Even though the film was not found after its release until 2019, it holds historical significance as a pioneering work in gay Indian cinema. Films such as *Razia Sultan* (1983) hinted at same-sex desire through nuanced performances and coded imagery.

Gay subtexts were explored in mainstream cinema with the help of buddy movies. Shohini Ghosh in “Queer Pleasures for Queer People” notes: “Bombay cinema has a continuous tradition of framing narratives with the love of two friends. These buddy films can be read as evocative of homoerotic love, suggested through overlapping boundaries between love and friendship” (208). *Namak Haraam* (1973), *Dosti* (1964), *Anand* (1970), *Sholay* (1975), *Anurodh* (1977), *Yaraana* (1981) are all films that tried to depict the passionate friendship between two men, which was often equated with love. In these movies, two men experience romance/bromance, separation and reconciliation, conventions usually associated with heterosexual love.

During this time, mainstream cinema also began to address gay and lesbian themes but chose to portray gay characters as either comic or menacing stereotypes. Comic interludes, comic tropes of cross-dressing and effeminate characters were portrayed in films like *Padosan* (1968), *Chalti Ka Naam Ghadi* (1958), *Laawaris* (1981), *Rafoo Chakkar* (1975), and *Mast Kalender* (1991), to generate laughter by exaggerated gender stereotypes and slapstick humour, while villainous gay characters were found in films like *Sadak* (1991), *Tamanna* (1997), *Sangharsh* (1999) reinforcing the public sentiment of considering the queer individuals as dangerous and untrustworthy. Offensive stereotypes of gay men as hyper-sexualised

and flamboyant were portrayed in films like *Raja Hindustani* (1996), *Kya Kool Hai Hum* (2005) and *Taal* (1999), contributing to an image of gay people as unnatural and ludicrous. The 1982 film *Subah* explicitly refers to female same sex eroticism by naming it ‘lesbian’ and calling it pathological. The rise of the middle class and economic liberalisation during the 1990s led to an increased exploration of urban alienation, gendered oppression, and identity politics. These changes opened up spaces where themes like sexuality, traditional norms and alternate narratives were discussed.

By the 1990s, Bollywood began to address queer identities more explicitly as global discussions around gender and sexuality gained momentum. Increasing theorisation of queer and non-straight identities, along with the increasing visibility of gay, lesbian and non-straight characters in real life as well as in art, literature and film, contributed to the gradual shift in cinematic narratives. The activism of the time resulted in a rainbow coalition of gay, lesbian, transgender and other LGBTQ communities, which became a powerful force both in the politics of the time as well as in the world of visual, literary, and cinematic arts. The growing movement pushed for greater representation and recognition of diverse sexual identities in Indian society. The 1990s thus marked a turning point, with a few noteworthy attempts to bring queer themes into mainstream films. A more detailed survey of how LGBTQ characters are portrayed in Indian films is presented in Chapter Three.

By the 20th century, films began portraying queerness as a part of everyday life rather than as sensationalised exotic themes. A pivotal moment in this trajectory was the film *My Brother... Nikhil* (2005), a pathbreaking film that deals with HIV/AIDS in a sensitive and realistic portrayal of same sex relationships. It analyses

the systemic discrimination that is faced by queer individuals, especially those living with HIV. The film is noted for its sensitive and humane depiction of the gay person, while it challenges the current stereotypes that are prevailing in society. The film was widely discussed and reviewed in the mainstream media, as it was instrumental in bringing queer narratives into the mainstream and initiating conversations about visibility and acceptability. But this does not mean that after the film, there was a normalised acceptance of queerness in both movies and in the real world. There are still challenges faced by Bollywood in its representation of the queer community. One among these challenges is when cisgender and heterosexual actors play homosexual characters, demanding inclusive casting in the films. Because of the industry's focus on profit, queer storytelling is sometimes limited to narratives deemed 'acceptable' to mainstream audiences.

Hindi cinema has, over the years, evolved into a compelling medium where queer expressions are portrayed, challenging social norms and demanding inclusion. Queer identities are addressed with their different intersections of class, caste and tradition in the cultural medium of Hindi cinema. It has a huge influence on how the public perceives gender and sexuality when it normalises queerness and also when it perpetuates the harmful stereotypes.

Queer/Gay politics in India is interconnected with the social, religious, and cultural framework of our country. Vatsayana's Kama Sutra and the sculptures in temples like Khajuraho are evidence that same sex relationships were recognised in ancient India. These texts have descriptions of sexual practices between women and between men. Ancient mythology is abundant with queer references. Born a daughter to King Drupada, Shikandi later lives as a man. *Ardhanareshwara* is an

androgynous form of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. The union of Mohini, an enchanting beauty who is the female avatar of Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva results in the birth of Lord Ayyappa.

During the medieval period of Mughal administration and later of British colonisation, Indian culture was under the powerful influence of foreign cultures and religions. Queer expressions remained, even though societal attitudes towards same sex love changed due to the influence of the invading cultures. Mughal Islamic rulers brought in their perceptions of sexuality. Ruth Vanitha, in the introduction to *Queering India*, points out that in Persian poetry and the literary conventions of ghazals, “the lover and beloved, for a variety of historical reasons, were always gendered male” (Vanitha 3). But the British colonisation during the 18th and 19th centuries brought Victorian morality to India, which took a highly regressive stance towards queer expressions. “The nineteenth century was a crucial period of transition when a minor strand of precolonial homophobia became the dominant voice in colonial and postcolonial mainstream discourse” (3). Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalised same-sex relationships. The 1861 law described “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” as illegal and criminal. This law stigmatised queer people, and they were forced to hide their sexuality. While pre-colonial India believed in diverse identities like *hijras* and eunuchs, post-colonial India was rigid in its outlook on gender and sexuality.

Colonisation brought a lot of shame and stigma to the gay community, and even after 1947, queer individuals continued to suffer social and legal discrimination. With the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis during the 1980s and 1990s, gay people began to be more and more visible. Marginalised communities who were

hitherto invisible and unnoticed until then began to be increasingly noticed after that. In the wake of events involving prejudice, discrimination, intolerance, and penalising, several NGOs arose to advocate the rights of the community and their various health concerns. Ashok Row Kavi, one of the pioneers of Indian queer activism, created the Humsafar Trust in 1994, one of the country's first LGBTQ supportive organisations. It provided important services over time on matters like mental health, HIV/AIDS awareness, and legal advocacy. The trust provided the space and resources to make it easier for queer individuals to navigate the struggles of coming out. Gay Bombay was a similar collective formed for the queer community, which had offered a discreet and guarded, yet supportive space where queer men could meet, share experiences, and find a sense of belonging. These organisations have played a significant role in providing support for those who are often overlooked in mainstream LGBTQ+ conversations.

Various other NGOs like the Naz Foundation, Sappho for Equality and Nazariya have also worked hard to help people to get through the process of coming out, apart from those mentioned earlier. They helped queer individuals by building support networks and fighting for legal rights. Naz Foundation, led by Anjali Gopalan, played a major role in the historic battle against Section 377, ensuring greater visibility and legal protection for queer individuals. Sappho for Equality focused on lesbian, bisexual and transgender women and has helped assist those who are often neglected in the mainstream conversations. Nazariya offers counselling, community programs, educational programs and safe spaces with gender and sexual minorities, thereby empowering individuals who can explore and accept their identities without fear. The main concern for queer activists during this

period was their protests to revoke Section 377. Section 377 was a matter of serious concern for queer activists as many individuals were harassed, blackmailed and beaten up under this law. In 2001, the Naz Foundation filed a petition in the Delhi High Court challenging the constitutionality of Section 377. In 2009, the Delhi High Court ruled to decriminalise Section 377, which was lauded as a landmark judgement. But in 2013, this was overturned by the Supreme Court when the court re-criminalised Section 377, stating that it concerned only a handful of people ‘a minuscule fraction of the country's population’ (Navtej Singh Johar). This verdict to reinstate Section 377 caused widespread agitation and protests. Queer Pride Marches and similar movements during that period were widely noted and provided more platforms for queer individuals and their problems. After years of deliberation, the Supreme Court finally recognised same-sex relationships and decriminalised homosexuality on 6 September 2018, as Section 377 violated the right to live a life of dignity and obstructed freedom of expression. This has been reflected in a growing acceptance of queer individuals and an increased visibility of LGBTQ in arts, literature and cinema, and both in real life as well as in art, people have been encouraged to come out of the closet.

Bollywood began to include LGBTQ and ‘coming out’ as major themes from the 2000s. It slowly began to embrace more nuanced and affirming ‘coming out’ narratives, reflecting a broader shift in Indian society’s understanding of queerness. The concern of this study is to understand and analyse different disclosure narratives in the mainstream Hindi cinema of the 21st century. The study aims to explore how these narratives represent coming out within India’s sociocultural context, how

Hindi cinema frames coming out moments, how it portrays gay identities and positions gay cinema in the mainstream.

Coming out is the central problem of a gay character, as remaining in the closet is to be safe. But it is also to lead a traumatic secret life by suppressing all your desires. To come out is to be characterised by emotional turmoil when one is ostracised by the members of one's own family, people at the workplace and the world at large. It is to face both psychological and real violence, very often from members of the family who are supposed to protect them. Gay films from 2000 onwards are very often characterised by the passage from the closet to coming out to the family, workplace or to society itself. This study engages with contemporary mainstream movies in which the protagonist makes this painful transition and how their immediate human surroundings come to terms with this passage. The movies discussed in the study are *My Brother... Nikhil* where the character is outed through the disclosure of his AIDS status, "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" (2013) where a closeted married man is forced to come out to his wife, *Aligarh* (2015) where the protagonist is outed by society through media, *Dear Dad* (2016) where a father 14 has chosen to come out to his son and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020) where the coming out to the family is finally celebrated.

Onir's *My Brother... Nikhil* was a turning point as far as coming out movies were concerned. It reflected how an entire generation of closeted gays who led secret private lives were brutally outed when they were revealed to have contracted HIV/AIDS. The film is inspired by true events centering around the life of a swimming champion whose life and career were derailed after he was diagnosed with HIV. It narrates the individual, societal and institutional discriminations faced

by the protagonist Nikhil Kapoor, who was ostracised by his family, abandoned by his friends, dismissed from his career and detained by the police. It is with a touch of sympathy, warmth and normalcy that Nikhil's relationship with Nigel, his partner and Anamika, his sister, is depicted. The film is "exceptional because it is able to reimagine emergent gender and sexual identities without taking recourse to homophobia or posing a paradox between the phobic and the erotic" (Ghosh 434). The journey of coming out in the film is not limited to a singular, critical moment, but instead, it is depicted as an ongoing process that is intertwined with the other struggles of HIV related stigma. The film presents Nikhil's coming out experience as sensitive and humanising, extending beyond his sexual identity. This portrayal challenges the social norms and emphasises his fundamental requirement for acceptance, humanity and the right to live with dignity and respect. The bias faced by HIV positive people and their families in India is highlighted in the movie. The discrimination that these people suffer is framed in medical terms rather than moral ones.

"Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" is part of the anthology film *Bombay Talkies*, which is made in commemoration of a century of Indian cinema. The part directed by Karan Johar is about a closeted married man coming out to his wife. The film also explores the complexities of coming out, particularly in the workplace and within intimate relationships. Coming out is portrayed as a process that involves difficult and painful confrontation, rather than a liberating experience in the film. Dev, who is closeted and situated in a heterosexual marriage, is pitted against Avinash, who embraces his sexual identity with confidence. Dev becomes a victim of involuntary outing while Gayatri, his wife, is another victim of the gay Dev's

internal struggles. Her perspective of being in a marriage built on deception further enriches the narrative. Gayatri realises that her husband might never truly love her, adding another layer to the coming-out experience, shedding light on how the repression of closeted individuals affects those around them.

Aligarh, directed by Hansal Mehta, is a film that talks about the difficulties of coming out in an orthodox society where the legal and social frameworks do not always protect queer individuals. The film narrates the story of Prof. Siras, who is forced to come out due to a sting operation by a local TV channel, forcing him to face the shame of coming out. The film is inspired by the real life story of Prof R S Siras, who was forcibly outed through a sting operation, leading to personal and professional disaster. Prof. Siras faces devastating consequences as he is outed, like losing his job, being shunned by his academic community, and finding himself isolated from the very world he had quietly belonged to. As he was forcibly outed, Prof Siras was stripped of the fundamental right to come out on his own terms, which is an act of invasion of privacy and profound cruelty, denying him his dignity and security. The film shows the deep emotional toll of such an experience by criticising society's instinctive homophobia. It shows how a forced outing violates the privacy and dignity of an individual and how the resulting ostracism leads to a tragic end. The tragic climax of the film stresses the devastating process of intolerance in society. Section 377, as the background of the movie, makes it central to the Bollywood gay canon. Prof Siras fights a legal battle to reclaim his job and his dignity, standing up against a system that seeks to erase him rather than fade into the background. The case becomes a landmark moment in the history of LGBTQ narrative as it eventually led to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018.

Dear Dad is a significant film by Tanuj Bhramar in which the protagonist comes out to his teenage son, and the film is centred on this narrative. The film addresses the courage required to come out to one's own child, and it is a heartfelt story about love, understanding and acceptance. The doubts, fears and hopes of the gay character are captured in the film by sensitively depicting the emotional weight of this moment as he prepares for one of the most difficult conversations of his life. The film explores the bond between Nitin, a middle-aged father and Shivam, his teenage son, who is confused, desperate and unable to accept his father's sexuality. It depicts the internal struggle of the protagonist, Nitin Swaminathan, and addresses the theme of acceptance and fear of social judgment. How Shivam finally succeeds in understanding his father and acknowledging his sexuality makes this film important in the canon of coming out movies.

Hitesh Kewalya's *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* is a mainstream comedy film where the protagonists come out to their families and openly fight for their love and acceptance. The film probes the themes of love, acceptance, and the struggle against deep-seated prejudices. The film is intertextual as it subverts all the classical heterosexual love stories. It is important in its normalising of homosexuality and treating it as a part of everyday life. Set against the background of a family marriage, the central societal institution in Indian society, the film ends in the bride being replaced by another groom with a climactic same-sex marriage. This film is significant because the Supreme Court's decriminalisation of homosexuality is a central aspect of the plot itself. The film offers hope and desire for change as it treats a gay love story with humour and empathy. It is also unconventional when the narrative discusses about gay marriage and its acceptance in their family.

Bollywood films have slowly evolved into more compassionate and affirming coming-out stories, from ignoring gay identities or reducing them to stereotypes. There is still a gap in representing the full spectrum of gay experiences, even though the evolution is meaningful. Bollywood lacks compassionate narratives, especially beyond privileged, urban settings. The future of gay storytelling in Bollywood lies in capturing the realities of these untold stories of love and struggle and showing the deeply personal and varied journeys of coming out in India's diverse social fabric. Studies on gay Bollywood have thrown light on various dimensions of gay desire showcased in Hindi films.

Queer Asian Cinema: Shadows in the Shade (2000), the pioneering anthology edited by Andrew Grossman, inspects the depiction of LGBTQ+ themes across Asian cinema. This collection offers a multilayered exploration of how LGBTQ identities are represented in films from several Asian cultures. Gayatri Gopinath in "Queering Bollywood: Alternate Sexualities in Popular Indian Cinema" explores the manifestation of queer themes in mainstream Hindi cinema and the reception of these queer images by a diasporic audience. She analyses the Bollywood dance sequence as a site of coded queer desire. She introduces the concept of 'queer diasporic viewing practice' to suggest that normative portrayals of sex and gender in Indian cinema can be interpreted as queer when viewed through a transnational lens (284). "Memories Pierce the Heart: Homoeroticism, Bollywood Style", by R. Raj Rao, analyses the buddy movies and Bollywood songs of Amitabh Bachchan to show the subtler forms of homosexuality covered by the veil of patriarchy. "The bond that Amitabh Bachchan formed with other male actors on the screen, complemented by the presence of an all-male audience that had gathered to

watch him, engendered a sort of homoeroticism in the dark of the movie hall” (303). “The Changing Image of the Hero in Hindi Films” by Ashok Row Kavi deals with the emergence of a gay culture from subtext to text. Kavi argues that there is a concerted effort to shift the erotic focus from heroines to heroes. Riyad Vinci Wadia’s “Long Life of a Short Film” is an account of his experiences as an independent filmmaker making *BOMgAY*, now known as the first Indian Gay cinema.

Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society (2002), edited by Ruth Vanita, is a pioneering anthology that discovers the varied expressions and perceptions of same-sex desire in the Indian cultural and societal framework. This collection was among the first to broadly observe LGBTQ+ themes in India, spanning literary, historical, cinematic, and societal standpoints. Suparna Bhaskaran in “The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code” discusses how colonial legislation criminalised homosexual acts by embedding a legacy of legal and social stigma. Muraleedharan T. focuses on the concept of buddy films and attempts a close reading of popular Malayalam Cinema in “Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema”. In “Queer Pleasures for Queer People: Film, Television and Queer Sexuality in India”, Shohini Ghosh analyses the way queer sexuality is depicted in contemporary Indian cinema and television, addressing both progressive representations and persistent stereotypes. *Queering India* presents a comprehensive investigation of same-sex love and eroticism in Indian society and culture. The anthology brings together various scholarly perspectives and documents the historical and cultural presence of queer identities in India.

Michele Aaron's *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (2004) focuses on the New Queer Cinema, a new wave of filmmaking that emerged in the 1990s about the experiences of the gay and lesbian community. Aaron locates the New Queer Cinema in the context of the AIDS epidemic. "AIDS and New Queer Cinema" by Monica B. Pearl analyses the origins of queer cinema and the epistemic shift that AIDS brought about in gay culture.

Queer Cinema: The Film Reader (2004), edited by Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, is a comprehensive anthology that explores the history, theory, and cultural impact of the multifaceted world of queer cinema. The foundational essays in the work contest traditional definitions and suggest broader interpretations that include numerous identities and narratives beyond heteronormative frameworks. Alexander Doty's "Whose Text Is It Anyway? Queer Cultures, Queer Auteurs, and Queer Authorship" challenges traditional notions of authorship. Doty stresses the role of queer audiences in actively creating meaning, signifying that their understanding can disclose sub textual elements that might not be immediately apparent. "The New Queer Cinema" by B. Ruby Rich highlights the role of openly queer directors in disrupting conventional storytelling and representation in film. The focus of the work is on Western cinema, although it covers a variety of genres and periods, and it overlooks the contributions and depictions of queer identities in non-Western film industries.

In *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), Gayatri Gopinath studies how mainstream Hindi cinema, centred on heteronormative narratives, contains 'queer disruptions'—brief transitory moments that challenge these conventions. She postulates that these fleeting depictions of

queer subjects exist in the dominant hetero-normative framework of Bollywood films. Gopinath suggests that Bollywood offers queer diasporic audiences a means to re-imagine their homeland as a centre of queer desire and pleasure. This point of view locates the queer diasporic individual as navigating between the identities shaped by Euro-American notions of the queer and South Asian cultural contexts. The individual, therefore, negotiates between multiple homes, communities, and nations across Eastern and Western cultural registers.

The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India (2007), edited by Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, is an anthology that encompasses studies about multiple dimensions of sexuality in the Indian sociocultural landscape. “Queering Culture Studies: Notes towards a Framework” by Pramod K. Nayar suggests how “Queer Cultural Studies is an attempt to redefine identities and carve out a cultural/ political space within the dominant paradigm” (118). “Sexuality and Globalization” by Dennis Altman studies the interconnected ways in which globalisation constructs, regulates, and perceives sexuality and gender, particularly in the developing world. Nivedita Menon’s “Section 377: How Natural is Normal” and Arvind Narrain’s “No Shortcuts to Queer Utopia: Sodomy, Law and Social Change” explore the legal rights of the queer community in the light of Section 377. Shohini Ghosh’s “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities: The Phobic and the Erotic in Bombay Cinema’s Queer Vision” delves into the notions of *dosti* (friendship) and *yaarana* (companionship) as described in Bombay cinema, exploring how these relationships blur the lines between platonic and homoerotic bonds. She examines the narrative strategies and cinematic techniques that subtly

embed queer desires, challenging the dominant hetero-normative frameworks in Indian society.

R Raj Rao in his work *Criminal Love? Queer Theory, Culture, and Politics in India* (2017) critically analyses the historical, cultural and legal aspects of queerness in India. Rao inspects the colonial legacy of Section 377 in *Bharatiya Nyaya Samhitha*, according to which queer was criminalised under ‘unnatural offences’ and later decriminalised in 2018. Rao studies the way in which British legal frameworks worked and restricted indigenous expressions of gender and sexuality. Rao studies the work by Ruth Vanitha and Saleem Kidwai, highlighting the notion of precolonial fluidity of queer identities in South India. Another notable contribution of Rao is his evaluation of gay representation in Indian cinema, literature and media. He probes the conflict in Western LGBTQ+ frameworks and indigenous understanding of gender and sexuality, highlighting the need for a localised queer politics that addresses caste, class, and religious intersections.

R.W. Connell’s work in *Masculinities* (1993) outlines various forms of masculinity, notably ‘hegemonic masculinity’, which Emily Manning, in “Gay Masculinities: The Hegemonic, the Hybrid and the Homosexual”, clarifies as the dominant form in contrast to marginalised gay masculinities, which are a part of subordinated masculinity. Manning highlights how hegemonic masculinity often characterises gay men as effeminate. This is challenged by the traditionally masculine gay male. Manning observes how hegemonic masculinities have infiltrated the gay community itself and how there is a predisposition there towards hyper masculinity. The hyper masculine gay hero challenges the stereotypes of a gay man as weak and effeminate.

Influential academic papers have been devoted to understanding the dimensions of gay representations in Bollywood. Rohit K. Dasgupta's "The Queer Rhetoric of Bollywood: A Case of Mistaken Identity" in the journal *InterAlia: Pismo poświęcone studiom queer* gives a comprehensive outlook on the history of queer cinema. It is an attempt to understand how queer sexuality gets acknowledged and understood in Bombay cinema. The study examines queer representations of fictional characters and gay framing through an analysis of *dosti*, *yaarana*, and the homo social triangle trope in Hindi cinema, aligning with the 'queered readings' proposed by Rao and others.

Shiksha Bala and Tanu Gupta's essay "From Taboo to Acceptance: Tracing the Depiction of Indian Queer Sub-Culture in Bollywood" published in *Literature and Aesthetics* focuses on the portrayal of the LGBTQ community in Bollywood and addresses the homophobia within the industry. The paper attempts a qualitative content analysis to interpret the depiction of queer narratives in the context of India's diverse sociocultural backdrop.

Samyamoy Khutia and Kavya Krishna K. R., in the essay "Streaming Sexualities: The Changing Face of Gay Masculinity in Hindi Media" in *Dialogist: International Journal of Literary Studies and Interdisciplinary Research*, explore the evolving representations of gay masculinity and sexuality in contemporary Hindi films. The authors critically examine how recent Bollywood films portray gay men, tracing a shift from stereotypical and marginalised depictions toward more nuanced and assertive expressions of queer identity. These films, as political texts, open up the possibilities for an egalitarian existence for the gay community in India.

Nikita Mittal and Ajit K. Mishra in “Masking Sexuality: Studying Gay Men’s Closeting Strategies through Contemporary Bollywood”, published in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, explore the idea of an ‘evolving closet’. “The closet is not only a space of oppression, but it is also a space of safety and empowerment. It allows gay people to express and live their sexuality without fetching any external scrutiny and censor” (3). The paper attempts to address the coming out anxiety gay men feel and identifies the three strategies gay men use to conceal their orientation as a masculinity mask, a facade of heterosexuality and a homo social mask.

While there are prominent studies on queer cinema and queer representation in Bollywood, there are also significant gaps in academic and cinematic discourses. There are no major studies related to the act of coming out in Hindi cinema. Even though there are studies on the concept of coming out of the closet in Western cinema like Henry Jenkin’s essay “Out of the Closet and into the Universe” (2004), there is a notable absence of any similar study in Bollywood. Most Bollywood mainstream films depicting coming out narratives focus on upper-class, urban, gay men and the experiences of lesbians, bisexuals and transgender individuals are underrepresented. The impact of caste, region and religion in coming out narratives is seldom depicted. Different dimensions of coming out, namely conversion therapy, forced marriages, psychological and emotional trauma after coming out, need to be addressed in depth. Mainstream Hindi cinema is limited by the different aspects of Bollywood, like censorship and audience reaction. More varied content, therefore, is found on streaming platforms and in independent cinema. There is only limited academic work on the influence of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018 on Bollywood’s portrayal of coming out narratives.

The thesis is divided into eight chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction has a brief survey of queerness in Indian history and mythology. It also has a review of past work in the area that the thesis studies.

Chapter Two is a theoretical framework that helps to have an understanding of the coming out narratives. The section focuses on the basic tenets of queer theory and homophobia. The theoretical aspects of studies on coming out challenge traditional understandings of identity, visibility, and acceptance, focusing on how homophobia continues to shape these narratives. A theoretical framework of queer theory provides a critical lens through which Bollywood's engagement with non-normative sexualities and genders is analysed.

Chapter Three is a brief survey of the representation of LGBTQ characters in cinema. It examines the shifting portrayals of queer identities from stereotypes and invisibility to more layered, nuanced and authentic depictions.

Chapter Four analyses *My Brother... Nikhil*, as an example of forced outing due to medical revelations and how the coming together of moral and medical prejudices devastates the individual as well as the family. The film captures the harsh realities of the late 1980s and early 1990s when HIV/AIDS was heavily stigmatised, often resulting in the marginalisation and ostracisation of those diagnosed.

Chapter Five analyses "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" from *Bombay Talkies* and how the revelation of one's sexuality to the family results in personal betrayals and the collapse of family relationships. It shows how being outed to the partner becomes one that strips the protagonist of control over his destiny rather than being an empowering act. It is also a powerful commentary on the ethics of outing and the consequences of exposing someone's truth before they are ready.

Chapter Six of the study deals with the film *Aligarh*, in which the pain, misconduct and injustice of being forced to come out in a conservative society that penalises queer individuals using the legal systems and social norms is demonstrated. The protagonist in the film fights against the system legally for his dignity and life. The case becomes a landmark moment in the struggle for gay rights, and his fight is not just personal but contributes to the discourse that ultimately results in the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Coming out is presented not as a moment of liberation, but as a painful reckoning shaped by legal and media oppression.

Chapter Seven discusses the film *Dear Dad*, which explores an intimate and emotionally complex aspect of coming out. The film narrates the event where one reveals his truth and has to come out to his child. It shifts the focus of the narrative inward by examining the fear of losing the love, acceptance and trust of one's child. While most disclosure narratives focus on the fear of rejection and discrimination by society, *Dear Dad* presents a unique perspective because the coming out of a parent reshapes the child's understanding of their parent.

Chapter Eight of the thesis analyses the film *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, which offers a fresh, humorous take on a journey that is often depicted with sorrow and struggle. The film uses humour as a tool to highlight the absurdity of homophobia by encouraging audiences to laugh, transforming prejudice into satire. It questions prejudice in society without using deep moralising teaching while reflecting on the irrational fears that frequently surround queerness. It captures a contemporary generational shift in attitudes towards gay identities, making its message of acceptance more accessible.

Chapter Nine, the conclusion, sums up the findings of the study and how the various aspects of coming out have been portrayed in contemporary Bollywood movies.

The thesis seeks to explore the trajectory of coming out narratives in mainstream Hindi cinema, examining how these stories deal with the theme of ‘coming out’ over time and the broader social implications the act carries with it. By analysing the key films that centre on coming out, it aims to trace how these narratives of coming out have progressed from being portrayed as moments of personal crisis to stories of self-acceptance, familial reconciliation, and even humour-infused social critique. The key films are examined in the thesis using textual, narrative, visual and dialogue analysis. Each selected film was subjected to close reading and textual analysis focusing on narrative structure, characterisation, dialogue, and mise-en-scène, interpreted through the lens of queer theory and cultural representation. As printed translations of the scripts for the key films, except *My Brother... Nikhil* was unavailable; all dialogues have been translated by the researcher unless otherwise specified.

This study offers a critical examination of Bollywood’s role in shaping and reflecting queer identities and thereby seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on queer studies and Hindi cinema. It aims to uncover the possibilities and limitations of queer representation in Bollywood by analysing the intersections of sexuality, gender and culture. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of cinema as a site of cultural negotiation, where competing visions of identity and belonging are contested and re-imagined.

CHAPTER 2

QUEER: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Queer theory emerged from the gay liberation movement's ideas about gay masculinity and in combination with a questioning of all traditional binary identities, united theoretical and critical studies concerning gender, identity and sexuality. In the early 1990s, queer theory was more talked about in academia for redefining queer as a fluid, anti-normative position challenging fixed identities. Queer theory is against all labels and categorisation while highlighting that sexuality, identity and gender are shaped by society and thereby not natural. It talks about the fluidity of identity and challenges the boundaries that define an individual. "To be a queer now, then, means to be untethered from conventional codes of behaviour" (Aaron 5). It offers a more inclusive perspective by considering all the identities that were kept at the margins. Queer theory is about embracing differences and resisting definitions.

The Stonewall Riots in 1969 initiated the gay liberation movement. "Queer theory drew upon the experiences of these movements while adding philosophical and critical insights into the nature of the body, the geography of sexuality and the question of sexual identity" (Nayar 183). Suparna Bhaskaran emphasises that queer sexuality is allied with AIDS activism, the law, caste and imperialism (16). "Queer studies is defined as an attempt to redefine identities and carve out a cultural and political space within the dominant heterosexual paradigm, to simply stop being invisible or the 'perverted' or 'sick' 'other' of heterosexuality" (Nayar 184).

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. In 1981, the first reported cases of AIDS were found in the US, and it was the fight against the fatal disease that led to the establishment of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) in 1987. This has been the most influential and powerful gathering in the 1990s. An organisation for direct action called 'queer nation' was formed with LGBT community members. The organisation was formed for the elimination of homophobia and to increase the visibility of the LGBTQ. Queer was a term that was used in a deprecatory and derogatory manner, signifying the non-heterosexual identity that was later reappropriated as an empowering term to show resistance. The use of the term queer motivated scholars like Teresa de Lauretis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler to use it in their theorisation of sexuality, which later came to be known as queer theory.

Queer is now used largely as an umbrella term that houses numerous sexual and gender identities. According to Ellis Hanson, queer theory:

developed from myriad theorisations of sexuality that preceded it. The term generally presumes an analytical style strongly influenced by deconstruction, feminism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, the work of Michel Foucault, or some mixture thereof, depending on whom one reads on the subject. (4)

The study of homosexuality in cinema is a concern of serious academic study and it has become enormously influential in the last two decades. Cinema becomes the site where the politics of representation and the psychoanalysis of the cinematic gaze address the phenomenon of same-sex desire (Hanson 5). Studies in queer movies are not limited to those that involve reading against the grain. Instead, recent

academic works engage with the open and explicit portrayal of sexual minorities. They focus on movies that candidly and forthrightly speak of queer/gay concerns.

Studies of queer cinema try to adapt the tenets of queer theory with the methods and concepts of film studies so that an anti-essentialist view of sexuality is applied to cinema. Andrew Dix in *Beginning Film Studies* (2010) notes, “[q]ueer readings of films are eclectic in their choices of primary material...these genres are homosexually framed - even homophobic - and yet, suggestively, constituted by dramas of men together” (251). Film theory is already a centre of academic discussion and is an important medium where questions about desire, identity, fantasy, representation and spectatorship can be explored.

After 1990, independent filmmakers pushed boundaries of cinematic representations even further, bringing more layered and complex portrayals of queer lives to the screen through what came to be known as New Queer Cinema. These films tackled themes like coming out, love, and the AIDS crisis, using realist storytelling to make these experiences feel raw and relatable. The activism of the 1980s AIDS crisis influenced the movement profoundly, and these films were not just about representation. As a response to urgent social and political struggles, it engaged with ideas from queer theory to challenge mainstream narratives. As Benshoff and Griffin put it, “New Queer Cinema simultaneously draws on minimalism and excess, appropriation and pastiche, the mixing of Hollywood and avant-garde styles and even the mix of fictional and documentary style” (11). This meant that these films did not follow just one style or approach, but they borrowed from different traditions, mixing realism with experimentation. The result was a wave of bold, innovative films that didn’t just tell queer and gay stories but

redefined how they could be told, making space for more diverse and subversive voices in cinema.

The film theorist Teresa de Lauretis introduced the term 'queer' at a conference on lesbian and gay sexualities held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in February 1990. A year later, in 1991, the conference discussions were compiled into a special issue of *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. In her introduction to that issue, de Lauretis laid out the foundational ideas of queer theory. De Lauretis emphasised that queer theory pushes back against societal norms that reinforce inequalities based on gender, sexuality, class, and race. Annamarie Jagose defined queer in the book entitled *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1997) as:

Queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. For most, queer has prominently been associated with simply those who identify as lesbian and gay. Unknown to many, queer is in association with more than just gay and lesbian, but also cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. (21)

David Halperin defines queer in his work *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1997) as:

Whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate and the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative. (62)

The term 'queer' was historically used as a synonym for 'gay,' though it often carried a derogatory meaning before the 1980s and 1990s. However, the LGBTQ+ community later reclaimed it as a more inclusive alternative to the gender-

specific 'gay.' By accepting diverse identities and challenging rigid norms, the term 'queer' evolved into one of pride and empowerment. Queer is often considered as a perspective that opposes conventional and mainstream views on sexuality and gender while fostering a sense of affirmation within the community. "In the 1990s, 'queer' began to be used as a self-empowering term in the West" (Nayar 119). It focuses on embracing non-normative identities and expressions, challenging rigid social categories, and advocating for fluidity, diversity, and resistance to societal expectations that seek to enforce fixed definitions of identity and expression.

When discussing non- straight sexualities, the term 'queer' is often thought to be more inclusive and accurate. It embraces an array of identities and desires that do not fit into social norms, unlike rigid labels. Its flexibility allows for a more fluid and personal understanding of sexuality and gender, making it a powerful term for people who do not feel represented by labels like gay, lesbian or bisexual. Queer acknowledges the complexity of identity, attraction and self - expression by resisting binary categories. The phrase also refers to the experience of those who are unable to express their sexuality due to societal pressure, cultural expectations or personal fears. It acknowledges the hidden struggles of closeted or repressed individuals and provides a means of naming those experiences without forcing a specific label. Queer people challenge rigid ideas about sexuality and create space for more inclusive and authentic identities by embracing ambiguity and fluidity. As Benshoff and Griffin state:

While 'queer' has been re-appropriated and redefined, speaks of and from a specific historical moment, queer theory works to examine the entire history of sexuality. It allows us to examine both straight and non-straight

sexualities, in order to deconstruct the ways and means that patriarchal hegemony constructs and maintains the idea that only one sexuality is normal and desirable. (5)

Queer theory studies how gender and sexuality are moulded by society and how closet, one of the most powerful forces upholding heteronormativity, makes coming out a deeply complex experience. The closet is built by religious conservatism, systemic homophobia, and internalised shame. It is not a private space, but a structure that decides when and where homosexual people can be themselves and forces them to constantly assess their safety. The closet can feel like both a shield and a cage in conservative societies, offering protection from discrimination while reinforcing silence and shame. For many, staying in the closet is not a choice but a necessity in a world that treats queerness as an exception rather than the norm. The ongoing pressure to hide or reveal one's identity reveals how deeply heteronormativity shapes daily life, making visibility an act of both risk and resistance.

Queer theory examines how discourses of sexuality is constructed across disciplines such as medicine, law or religion while also deconstructing popular representations of alternate sexualities. It tries to understand how institutions like religion, family, medicine and law influence the popular representations of homosexuality and promote the demand and fight for sexual justice. By analysing and challenging social norms, queer theory promotes the fluidity of identity and gender, resisting the notion of 'normal'. "It is a rejection of the compulsory heterosexual code of masculine men desiring feminine women, and it declares that

the vast range of stigmatised sexualities and gender identifications, far from being marginal, are central to the construction of modern subjectivity” (Hanson 4).

Queer theory not only looks at identities that are considered ‘other’ or deviant, that fall out of the mainstream, but also shows how homophobia works. It holds that different categories of sexuality and gender are not inherently natural, but are socially constructed. Michel Foucault, in his significant work, *The History of Sexuality* (1978), postulates that sexuality is shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. Discourses around sexuality and gender are often the result of power dynamics and social didactics. Foucault’s view that narratives construct what is seen as normal and deviant and how institutional structures use discipline to train societies, regulate cultures and control individuals is indicative of the deliberate repressiveness adopted by the canonical bodies of knowledge towards differences (11).

Another early attempt to explore the social construction of sexuality is evident in the essay ‘The Homosexual Role’ (1968) by Mary Mackintosh. Mackintosh states that society created itself as pure and safe by keeping away the people who are labelled as criminals and deviants. Homosexuals, criminals and the mad were segregated from the mainstream and labelling them as criminal and deviant was a form of social control. The social institutions deemed these people as naturally deviant. This sort of labelling also helps in differentiating between permissible behaviour and impermissible behaviour. Individuals associated with impermissible behaviour are always prosecuted (183).

In 1995, Warren Gaddipalle classified homosexuality into different types. He describes situational homosexuality and covert homosexuality among other types.

Situational homosexuality is male or female homosexuality where people of the opposite sex are not available for a considerable time. Covert homosexuality is when homosexuals cover up their homosexuality from people around them, though other homosexuals will be aware of the person's sexuality. Gadpaille identifies the gay guy as someone who is openly and exclusively homosexual and is well integrated into the gay subculture. He is proud of being gay and looks for a relationship with other male homosexuals.

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), literary theorist Eve Sedgwick questions rigid sexual categories, arguing that by the 20th century, Western culture had come to define everyone by their sexual identity. She sees the history of homosexuality not as a niche subject but as central to modern society. Sedgwick introduces two perspectives: *minoritising*, which treats homosexuality as relevant only to a specific group, and *universalising*, which sees it as shaping everyone's experience of sexuality. Sedgwick describes queer as:

The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made to signify monolithically. (8)

Sedgwick looks into the concept of 'coming out' and 'closetedness' in her work and examines how the closet is not just a personal experience but a powerful social force that shapes how people navigate their identities. She clarifies that coming out is not a one time event or a straightforward transition from 'in' to 'out'. Coming out is an ongoing process, influenced by societal expectations, power and personal circumstances. Society assumes heterosexuality as a norm, leaving queer

people to remain in the closet. Queer individuals in a constant state of deciding when, where, and how to reveal their identities.

In the meantime, heterosexuality is still unquestioned and unmarked. Sedgwick also criticises the expectation that homosexual individuals “come out” as a required step for authenticity. She points out that this expectation reinforces the very power structures that created the closet in the first place. She presents coming out as a complex, ongoing process rather than a singular moment of truth. The idea of coming out of the closet is explored in this study using the ideas presented by Sedgwick in the upcoming chapters.

Hence, the phrase ‘coming out of the closet’ signifies the difficult process of revealing one’s non-normative gender or sexual identity. It navigates the emotional and social complexities of disclosing one’s authentic identity to others and openly share one’s true self, often in the face of societal expectations. While addressing and proclaiming homosexuality in the advent of the AIDS epidemic, “‘coming out’ in the public was advocated as a necessary step in order to be seen and heard. . .The sexual revolution could acquire significant mileage only when queer people made themselves unapologetically visible everywhere, threatening compulsory heterosexuality” (Bakshi and Dasguptha 4).

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler, who is known for changing the way we think about gender and identity, introduces the idea of *performativity*, arguing that gender isn’t something we are born with, but it is something we do. Through repeated actions, behaviour and language, we create and reinforce what society sees as “male” or “female.” But because gender has to be continuously performed, it isn’t a fixed truth. Instead, it’s

fluid, evolving, and open to change. Identities and subjects are therefore ‘performative constructs’(xiv).

According to Butler, gender is not a rigid, natural category. Instead, it is a social construct that we can challenge. The idea of ‘performativity’ suggests that if gender is performed, then it can also be performed differently. This opens the possibility of disrupting norms and expanding our understanding of identity. This idea has been especially important for LGBTQ+ communities, for it provides a framework for resisting societal pressures and embracing fluidity. Butler’s work helps us see identity in a new way by questioning the traditional link between gender and biology, one that is flexible and self-determined rather than imposed. Butler encourages a more inclusive world where people have the freedom to define who they are, and her ideas continue to inspire activists and scholars.

The divisions in rigid categories of male and female, heterosexual and homosexual are not natural or innate as they seem, according to Butler, and she also questioned these categorisations imposed by societal norms. Queerness, for Butler, is a political act, a way of resisting the pressures to conform to traditional expectations of gender and sexuality. Butler encourages people to embrace fluidity and challenge the constraints placed upon them by exposing the instability of these categories. Butler’s ideas have shaped discussions on power and intersectionality beyond gender and the ways institutions strengthen norms that marginalise those who don’t fit in. Butler is an influential figure in non-binary activism, offering a framework to understand identity as something evolving rather than fixed. Her theories continue to inspire activists, scholars, and anyone questioning rigid

definitions of identity, encouraging a more inclusive and open world where people can define themselves on their own terms.

Cinema, as we know today, has served as a space where desire, identity and power relations are examined, making it significant for feminist and queer film analysis. Laura Mulvey's disruptive essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) introduced the concept of the "male gaze", arguing that mainstream cinema positions women as passive objects of heterosexual male desire. Laura Mulvey's essay was groundbreaking because it was the first of its kind to deconstruct subjectivities. Nevertheless, queer theorists have critically engaged with and expanded upon Mulvey's arguments, challenging their heteronormative assumptions. By examining queer subjectivities, desire, and gaze, these theorists complicate traditional understandings of cinematic pleasure and power.

Queer theory questions the rigidity of identities and challenges the foundations of homophobia. Homophobia often stems from the belief that heterosexuality is natural, thereby casting other sexual orientations as deviations. By deconstructing these binary oppositions, queer theory advocates a more inclusive understanding of human sexuality. Butler's theory of performativity is crucial for the study of coming out in Hindi movies.

If queer theory has anything to offer the identity politics of representation or the descriptive style of cultural studies, it is the rigorous questioning of the very concepts of correctness, identity, stereotyping, visibility and authenticity - not to render definition or political action impossible but rather to multiply our pleasures and our personalities and to interrogate more radically the critical presumptions we claim as our own. (Hanson 12)

Masculinity studies explore how male identities are formed by power, culture and history. Butler, in her idea of gender performativity, considers that masculinity is performed through behaviours, language and social expectations. R.W. Connell in *Masculinities* (1995) describes masculinity as a set of socially constructed behaviours, not a singular identity. Her notion of ‘subordinated masculinity’ refers to expressions of masculinity that are not dominant and authoritative. She questions how effeminate men and non- normative masculinities that are marginalised are often associated with homosexuality. Gay men are seen to fail to uphold traditional traits of masculinity and are discriminated against, derided and excluded for the same (78).

Masculinity is strongly linked to being straight in many societies, forcing gay men to adopt hypermasculine behaviours to blend in with the social structure. Gay individuals view this performance as a way to stay safe in their workplaces, religious spaces, and family settings where any deviation from “normal” masculinity invites judgment or rejection. The pressure to appear straight can feel suffocating, leading many to suppress parts of themselves just to be accepted. It’s not always a conscious choice but a learned survival instinct in a world that still sees gayness as something to hide rather than embrace.

Subordinated masculinity is also about refusing to be confined by the traditional ideas of masculinity. Through drag, androgynous fashion, or simply embracing gentleness, they challenge the belief that masculinity must be tough, dominant, or strictly heterosexual. By rejecting rigid norms, those who embrace subordinated masculinities create space for more diverse, authentic ways of

expressing gender, proving that strength comes in many forms. Michael S. Kimmel in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996) states:

Masculinity defined through homo-social interaction contains many parts, including camaraderie, fellowship and intimacy, often celebrated in male culture. It also includes homophobia. Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of homosexuals, more than the fear that we might be perceived as gay...Homophobia is the fear of other men - that other men will unmask us, emasculate us.... (5)

Many gay men, both before and after coming out, feel the need to conform to heteronormativity and masculinity to avoid judgment and rejection. The fear of being treated differently or facing harassment pushes them to hide parts of themselves, often pretending to be straight just to feel safe. It's not just about fitting in—it's about survival in a world that can be unkind to those who do not conform. Even after coming out, the habit of masking certain traits can linger, shaped by years of fear and the pressure to be accepted for who they truly are.

Homophobia is defined as an irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, and it is deeply embedded in society. Barry D. Adam in *Theorising Homophobia* explores contemporary theories on its origins and effects, arguing that homophobia is reinforced by cultural, political, and economic systems that sustain discrimination. *Queeristan* (2020) by Parmesh Shahani presents a powerful call for greater inclusivity and equity for queer individuals within corporate India. Shahani argues that queer inclusion is not just a moral imperative but a strategic advantage for businesses aiming to foster innovation and diversity in his work by blending memoir, activism, and organisational theory. "The US psychotherapist George

Weinberg coined this term in the 1960s to explain the discomfort many of his colleagues felt around and expressed about homosexuals. Weinberg defines homophobia as the dread of being close to homosexuals and self-aversion in the case of homosexuals themselves” (Shahani 86).

Psychologist Gregory Herek in his seminal work “The Social Psychology of Homophobia: Toward A Practical Theory”, has explored the complexities of homophobia, breaking it down into three key types:

- 1) Experiential homophobia
- 2) Symbolic homophobia
- 3) Defensive homophobia.

These different forms of homophobia demonstrate how prejudice against LGBTQ+ individuals operates in various ways. Some people are overtly homophobic; some are subtle, and yet others are deeply rooted in personal fears. Homophobia, in a way, leads to the formation of a closet because queer individuals fear the ridicule and harassment that they might face in a homophobic society.

Experiential homophobia is a result of one’s negative experiences with homosexual individuals. Homophobic attitudes may have developed because of the uncomfortable, challenging or threatening interactions with LGBTQ+ individuals. However, this type of homophobia isn’t always based on real harm or aggression. Sometimes, it stems from misunderstandings, cultural conditioning, or discomfort with things that don’t fit within traditional norms. At the same time, studies show that personal interactions with LGBTQ+ individuals can also reduce homophobia. When people get to know individuals from marginalised communities, they often realise that their fears or misconceptions are unfounded. Positive exposure can help replace prejudice with empathy and understanding.

Symbolic homophobia is as damaging as experiential homophobia but does not always involve direct hostility. This form of homophobia operates through everyday behaviour, language and cultural attitudes. Making jokes about queer identities, using slurs, or expressing discomfort with things perceived as “too gay” are all considered a part of symbolic homophobia. It can be unconscious, as most of the people who engage in this behaviour do not consider themselves homophobic; they might say things like, “*I do not have a problem with gay people, but...*” or “*It is just a joke*”. But these subtle messages reinforce the idea that being gay is different, undesirable, or something to be mocked. In *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, Narrain and Bhan make their introductory remark that “To speak of sexuality and of same-sex love in particular, in India today is simultaneously an act of political assertion, of celebration, of defiance and of fear” (2).

Symbolic homophobia aggravates the difficulty of the process of coming out. Symbolic homophobia is expressed in the awkward silence when gayness is mentioned, the offhand jokes, or the supposition that everyone is straight until proven otherwise. These everyday moments send a message that being gay is sometimes unwelcome and different. Even in spaces that claim to be accepting, this kind of homophobia lingers, making gay people hesitate, wonder if they truly belong, and question whether coming out will bring support or just quiet discomfort. Even in spaces that seem accepting, symbolic homophobia makes coming out feel risky. It is not always blatant discrimination, but it is also the casual slurs, the assumptions that everyone is straight, or the way the media treats gay people as the other. People internalise these messages, questioning their identity or fearing rejection even in places that claim to be inclusive. Coming out is not just about

external acceptance but it is also about overcoming the doubts and fears shaped by a world that still treats queerness as something outside the norm.

Defensive homophobia, perhaps the most complex, stems from a person's fear of their own potential homosexuality. It is mostly seen in people who grew up in a strict cultural and religious background that treated homosexuality as unacceptable or as a sin. This kind of homophobia in a person may lead to internal conflict, rejecting or suppressing any signs of gayness in themselves. Defensive homophobia may be overcompensated, as some of the most vocal homophobic individuals are struggling with their own sexual identity. The individuals convince themselves and others that they are unquestionably heterosexual by reacting violently and aggressively towards other gay people. This internal battle in queer individuals can cause significant emotional distress, sometimes leading to anger, shame, or extreme measures to suppress any non-heteronormative desires.

Defensive homophobia is common in religious spaces where rejection of gayness is both external and internal. Some individuals respond with hostility as they are struggling with their own suppressed gayness, thereby reinforcing exclusionary religious beliefs and policies. Conservative belief systems impose rigid ideas of gender and sexuality, making self-acceptance even harder. But this struggle is not limited to religious spaces. Even in progressive societies, internalised homophobia lingers. No matter how much exposure one has to queer inclusivity, growing up in conservative environments can make self-acceptance difficult. Many gay people wrestle with anxiety, shame, and the pressure to conform. Gay visibility remains a battle, shaped by the closet and fear of rejection. Overcoming these struggles takes both systemic change and deep personal resilience.

This form of homophobia also manifests in societal structures, such as policies that deny LGBTQ+ individuals equal rights, representations in media that reinforce stereotypes, or institutions that fail to provide inclusive spaces. Even when people don't express overt hatred, symbolic homophobia contributes to an environment where queer people feel unsafe or unaccepted.

Institutional homophobia is the systematic discrimination of homosexuality in institutions like the state, education, religion, law, healthcare and the workplace. Institutional homophobia is more dangerous because it is exhibited through discriminatory policies, marginalisation of queer individuals, hetero-normative workplace cultures, etc. Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), tries to describe institutional homophobia when he addresses how various institutions actively create acceptable and deviant sexualities. Institutional homophobia promotes compulsory heterosexuality by upholding traditional binaries of gender and thereby making it challenging for queer individuals. The work culture and policies create an environment where heterosexuality is reinforced as the natural order, and anything outside this environment is treated as abnormal and threatening.

Eve Sedgwick talks about the metaphorical closet that compels individuals to be secretive or closeted about their identity. Institutional homophobia operates through its silence, erasure and unstated rules. Employees are not terminated for being queer, but they are forced to remain closeted. This systemic fear and silence help to maintain institutional homophobia. Legal rights are also not accessible to everyone, and gay individuals mostly find their rights violated. Most of them become the victims of violence and gay bashing as a result of homophobia. In the workplace environment, they suffer from discrimination, wage gap and harassment.

Gay men were often defined primarily through the lens of their masculinity. “To be considered a real man, one had better make sure to always be walking around and acting ‘real masculine’” (Kimmel 69). Kimmel argues that manhood is not a static or inherent identity but rather a cultural performance, constantly defined in opposition to what it is not, femininity and homosexuality. He introduces the concept of "masculinity as a homosocial enactment," where men seek validation from other men rather than from women, suggesting that masculinity is less about what men do and more about how they are perceived by their male peers. The gay liberation movement strongly claimed that gay men were as real men as straight men. “Gay liberation signalled that gay men, too, could stake their claim for manhood” (185).

In *Gay Masculinities* (1999), an anthology that looks at the creation of identity through the everyday lives of gay men, Peter Nardi challenges dominant narratives of masculinity by centring the lived experiences and identities of gay men. Nardi argues that gay masculinities are not simply oppositional to heterosexual masculinities but are multifaceted, shaped by social, cultural, and racial contexts. Matt G Mutchler in “Seeking Sexual Lives: Gay Youth and Masculine Tensions” notes that “gay men in romantic relationships were largely absent from popular representations and public discussions” (18). J. Michael Cruz in “Gay Male Domestic Violence and Pursuit of Masculinity” observes about internalised homophobia that, “men tend to engage in constant assertion or construction of a masculine identity due to the very real repercussions of being mistaken for a homosexual” (75). Thomas J. Linneman explores the role that risk plays in gay men’s everyday lives and in the construction of their masculinities in his essay “Risk and Masculinity in the Everyday Lives of Gay Men”.

Ruth Vanitha observed in *Same-Sex Love in India* that homophobic attitudes are evident in the silence maintained by the Indian academy on the subject of homosexuality (205). Homophobia prevails across India, and there is little attempt being made to confront it. 'In 1994, Ashok Row Kavi organised a conference where Subhash Salunke, the then Director of the Department of Health, Bombay, said in his opening address, "it is wrong to say that 'homosexuality' is only a western phenomenon which many of our conservative interests claim to be..." (qtd. in Bakshi and Dasgupta 152). "The Indian queer diaspora in First World Nations constantly fought for their rights, formed organisations, wrote books, made films and conferred on the hostile atmosphere at home when it came to recognising queer rights" (154).

Sexuality studies in India have become an important space for questioning traditional ideas about gender and sexuality while engaging with the country's diverse social and cultural realities. The idea of coming out, which is often seen as a key part of queer identity, takes on a different shape in India compared to Western narratives. It is a deeply personal and ongoing process influenced by family, religion, and societal pressures. Coming out in India remains a challenging and deeply personal experience, but thanks to the work of activists, scholars, and organisations, more individuals now have access to the support, visibility, and encouragement they need to embrace who they are. While the journey is far from over, their contributions have made a significant impact in creating a future that is more inclusive and accepting for the LGBTQ+ community.

Herek describes homophobia as socially constructed and psychologically motivated. "Homophobia is not a monolithic, unified phenomenon" (924). Homophobic attitudes can be altered by the process of coming out. "Coming out is

likely to reduce individual homophobia that serves an experiential, value-expressive, or social-expressive function” (933). More people today are thinking about coming out as homosexual, whether to friends, family, or even on social media. The thought of being open about one’s sexuality is more comfortable than hiding it under the blankets. This growing visibility has helped create more awareness and acceptance, but coming out is still a deeply personal and sometimes challenging experience because of homophobia. For some individuals, coming out provides a profound sense of relief and authenticity, allowing them to embrace their true selves without fear or secrecy. It can strengthen relationships, foster self-acceptance, and create a deeper connection with supportive communities. But for others, the experience can be traumatic. Coming out may expose them to rejection from family, friends, or society, leading to feelings of isolation and emotional distress. Discrimination in workplaces, schools, and public spaces remains a reality for many, as does the risk of encountering homophobic attitudes or even violence. Since the stress and fear of negative consequences can cause worse outcomes, deciding to come out remains deeply personal and complex. While social acceptance of homosexual identities has grown over time, many individuals still find themselves in surroundings where being open about their identity comes with uncertainty. This highlights the need for continued efforts toward equality, understanding, and support.

Coming out will not always be easy, and it will not always have positive results. Coming out makes lesbians and gay men visible and consequently more vulnerable to homophobic attacks of all kinds. This means that lesbians and gay men must not only come out as individuals but also must create an environment in which others can be open about their sexual orientation.

Legislation and policies must be enacted that prohibit discrimination based

on sexual orientation. Lesbians, gay men, and heterosexual women and men must establish supportive atmospheres for people who are trying to come out. (Herek 933)

For those individuals who are forced to come out of the closet due to various circumstances, it is all the more difficult because forced coming out disrupts their agency. It is a coercive act that strengthens social control. Forced outing is a deeply traumatic experience and a violation of personal agency, which might lead to anxiety, stress, depression and even suicide. It might lead an individual to lose their job, family, friends, colleagues, and social life. Coming out should always be a voluntary choice that is deeply personal and highly emotional. Being visible as a gay persona and stressing your gay identity should always be a choice, not an obligation. “The problem of being invisible- culturally, politically, socially- is a feature of the everyday lives of all those who are described negatively as ‘not heterosexual’. . .public invisibility becomes in part self-enforced” (Nayar 118).

Coming out is different for different individuals based on other intersections like race, caste, class and religion. It is influenced by cultural, social and psychological factors, and the outcome may vary for each person. Butler’s idea of performativity suggests that queer individuals feel obliged to declare their identities repeatedly to be acknowledged within a hetero-normative family system, and this might reshape their family dynamics, reform interpersonal relationships and renegotiate family relations. Queer identities must be stressed and asserted to exist and to gain social validation while heterosexuality remains unquestioned and accepted. Sedgwick asserts that the closet is not an individual state, but a structure that is imposed by society. Coming out will not always dismantle the closet, as the denial and refusal to accept the identity can reinforce the closet. In intensely

homophobic environments, individuals remain closeted to protect themselves, while those who have been forced to come out go back to secrecy due to societal pressure. Coming out to family is not a singular event but a complex, ongoing negotiation of identity, power and belonging.

Iuliana E Molnar in “A Case Study on Coming Out: Theoretical and Practical Implications for Psychological Counseling” analyses theoretical aspects regarding coming out and studies its influence on family systems. “Coming out influences the social, psychological and sexual functioning of individuals” (qtd. in Molnar 52). For many individuals, coming out has been a journey of stress and anxiety where they have to face rejection and discrimination. Yet, for many others, living openly is an important step in embracing their identity and finding support. The emotional and mental well-being of those individuals is deeply influenced by how society treats them and how they face their utmost fear. While significant progress has been made, true acceptance lies in building a world where coming out is met with love, respect, and understanding.

This theoretical framework has enabled both scholars and cultural practitioners to critically engage with the heteronormative foundations of literature and cinema, fostering representations that transcend rigid binary constructs. Central to this evolving discourse are the interlinked themes of identity, fluidity, and the politics of coming out, which have reoriented how queerness is understood and articulated. Contemporary films and literary texts increasingly depict non-normative sexualities and gender identities, frequently employing strategies of ambiguity, subversion, and multiplicity to underscore the inherent fluidity and instability of queer subjectivity.

CHAPTER 3

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mainstream cinema has largely adhered to heteronormative frameworks, emphasising family values, arranged marriages, and binary gender roles, presenting heterosexuality as the natural, desirable, and socially acceptable norm. For many years, Hindi cinema either completely ignored queer identities or pushed them to the periphery, where non-heterosexual desires are sidelined and usually mocked. The censor board, strict moral codes and the fear of public backlash have kept expressions of non-heterosexual desires at the margins and gay characters were reduced to stereotypes, comic sidekicks, or deviant figures meant to evoke ridicule or sympathy. These portrayals reinforced the notion that queerness was something unnatural or morally questionable and contributed to the perpetuation of fear and misunderstanding among the audience. The earliest example of queer representation was the character of Shikandi in the silent film *Bhishma Pitamah* (1922), a transgender character in Hindu mythology. Himandri Roy notes that, “For decades, only eunuchs were taken to represent the entire gamut of the “queer people” in films. This trend continued till the turn of the century when such depictions began to be questioned” (131).

Bollywood has long struggled with authentic queer representation, often resorting to exaggerated stereotypes and humour at the expense of the LGBTQ+ community. For decades, it has relied on cross-dressing as a tool for comedy, often reducing gender nonconformity to mere humour. The trope of cross-dressing to

evoke laughter was a part of early cinema itself when the important actors of the time like Kishore Kumar, Biswajeet, Sashi Kapoor and Mehmood, frequently performed such roles. Kishore Kumar dances in a woman's dress, in a gypsy girl costume, to further the comedy of the situation in the song "Aake Sidhi Lagi Jaise" from the movie *Half Ticket* (1962) while Shammi Kapoor dons the drag performance in the film *Bluff Master* (1963) in the song "Oy Chali Chali Kaisi Hawa". Dara Singh dons a ghagra choli in the song "Patli Kamar Nazuk Umar" in the film *Lootera* (1965) whereas Sashi Kapoor wears costumes like lehenga and anarkali in the song "Sunò Sunò" from the movie *Haseena Maan Jayengi* (1968). Biswajeet dances in female clothes in "Kajra Mohabbat Wala" in the film *Kismet* (1969) and similarly, Mehmood gets in the female avataar with the song "Nathaniya Hale to Bada Maza" from the film *Johar Mahmood in Hong Kong* (1971). Prominent actors like Amitabh Bachchan, Rishi Kapoor, Shah Rukh Khan, and Aamir Khan have frequently donned women's clothing to advance the narrative or to elicit laughter from the audience. While these performances may have seemed light-hearted, they often reinforced harmful stereotypes, making queerness and gender fluidity appear unnatural and something to be laughed at rather than valid and authentic. Rishi Kapoor's cross-dressing in *Rafoo Chakkar* (1975), inspired by *Some Like It Hot* (1959), similarly played into the idea that dressing as a woman was inherently humorous. Amitabh Bachchan's saree-clad performance in *Laawaris* (1981), where he performs the song "Mere Aangan Mere Tere Kya Kaam Hai", is one notable example. The song portrays a man wearing a saree as amusing and entertaining, adding to the laughter, with no deeper engagement with gender identity. Salman Khan, too, in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* contributed to the idea that gender

nonconformity was something to be laughed at rather than to be understood. “The immensely popular 1994 movie *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* offers a moment of explicit female–female desire as comic relief in an otherwise staunchly conservative narrative. . .” (Gopinath 286). The dance sequence involves a cross-dressed woman as the hero and the character ‘Nisha’, played by Madhuri Dixit. “For much of the sequence, the cross-dressed woman and Dixit ‘engage in a teasing, sexualised exchange that parodies the trappings of the conventional middle- class Hindu family arrangements of marriage, heterosexuality and domesticity’” (Gopinath 286).

In Hindi cinema, the portrayal of homosexuality has undergone a long and uneven evolution, positioning gay characters in the margins as caricatures, comic relief, or deviant figures to be mocked or pitied. As Shohini Ghosh states in “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities”, “[p]opular cinema in Hindi enjoyed an iconic status among gay and lesbian subcultures, even though explicit references to homosexuality have been largely absent from mainstream commercial films” (417). Films like *Mast Kalander* (1991) and *Raja Hindustani* (1996), while not explicitly queer in narrative, contained moments of homoerotic tension or ambiguity that discerning viewers could read between the lines. Such coded representations kept alive the possibility of alternative readings and challenged the total erasure of queer existence. Pinko in *Mast Kalander* is the flamboyant, effeminate son of the film’s supervillain, unapologetically queer in his mannerisms and self-expression. His character isn’t given depth or humanity; instead, his queerness is exaggerated for comedic effect. Gayatri Gopinath points out that Bollywood often reduces male same-sex desire to a stereotype, preventing it from being taken seriously. “The Pinko character makes clear the ways in which male same-sex desire, when it is

consolidated into an identity in popular film, can exist only on the level of stereotype” (295). Yet, in one notable moment, he turns the tables on societal norms. When women mock him, he asks if they don’t have brothers at home. It’s a small but striking subversion, showing that even within exaggerated portrayals, moments of unexpected resistance can emerge. Thomas Waugh in “Queer Bollywood” describes Pinko as a character, “most associated with the modes of parody, excess and reversal...flouncing across the parking lot for his cabaret scene, irrepressible in his pink suit and jewellery, Pinko is already ‘singing the parody of a Bollywood torch song standard, reversing the pronouns” (295).

Before the 2000s, queer characters in Hindi cinema were often reduced to comic relief, rarely given depth or dignity. The ‘gay sidekick’ became a predictable trope, with actors like Bobby Darling, one of the first openly queer figures in Bollywood, often bearing the brunt of homophobic jokes on screen yet remaining unapologetically themselves. These portrayals reflected Bollywood’s long struggle with authentic and respectful LGBTQ+ representation. In *Raja Hindustani*, Kamal Pasha and Gulab Singh are the masculine woman and feminine man, whose exaggerated mannerisms and effeminate behaviour draw laughter from the audience. Their gender expressions are not explored with depth or empathy but are instead played for laughs. These portrayals reinforced them rather than challenging rigid gender norms, reducing queerness to a joke rather than a valid and complex human experience. Such portrayals contributed to the normalisation of queerphobic humour in mainstream cinema.

Bollywood has long celebrated male friendships through buddy films and bromances, portraying deep emotional connections between men as a central theme.

Such films portrayed physical closeness, intense loyalty and shared emotional world, sometimes even eclipsing romantic relationships with women. While mainstream cinema rarely acknowledged queerness outright, many of these films carried homoerotic undertones, whether through lingering glances, protective gestures, or the sheer depth of devotion between male protagonists. Movies like *Dosti* (1964), *Zanjeer* (1973), *Silsila* (1981), *Sholay*, *Andaaz Apna Apna* (1994), and the *Munnabhai* series (2003, 2006) are built on narratives around strong male bonding. These relationships were often marked by deep affection, mutual sacrifice, and an intense sense of belonging—elements that are central to both homosocial and, at times, homoerotic storytelling. Women in these narratives were frequently sidelined, playing roles that merely reinforced the central male relationship rather than existing as fully realised characters in their own right. The absence of strong heterosexual desire in some of these films, combined with the overt physical intimacy between male leads, left room for queer readings. In *Silsila*, a reflection of homosociality is seen in the scene when Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor are shown to take a shower together - dropping the soap, and bending halfway through to take it - all seen through the lens of queerness. Ashok Row Kavi in “The Changing Image of the Hero in Hindi Films”, notes that, “the gay construct in *Silsila* is of gay men as we recognise gay constructions in the West. There is no playing around with gender; it is a straightforward, clearcut sexual bonding held above the usual male bonding revealed in Hindi cinema through the decades” (311). *Sonu ke Titu ki Sweety* (2018) also portrays a bromance between Sonu and Titu, and the narrative reminds us of the friendship of Jai and Veeru in *Sholay*. Through these films, Bollywood both embraced and restrained queerness—allowing it to exist within male friendships but

never fully acknowledging it. These stories, whether intentionally or not, gave many queer viewers moments of recognition, even within a cultural space that was not yet ready to name or celebrate their identities openly.

Mainstream Bollywood films, despite being overwhelmingly heterosexual in narrative, have always contained spaces that queer audiences could identify with. Both Shohini Ghosh and Raj Rao, prominent queer critics, have extensively explored how tropes of homosexuality and homosociality are embedded within Bollywood storytelling, particularly through themes like *dosti* (friendship) and *yaarana* (companionship) in their works “Queer Pleasures for Queer People” and *Criminal Love*. Ashok Row Kavi, Hoshang Merchant, and Gayatri Gopinath have also highlighted these subtle queer spaces and gaps within Bollywood’s mainstream cinema in the book *Queer Asian Cinema*. The concept of *yaarana*—a bond deeper than mere friendship—became a defining element in buddy melodramas, offering queer-friendly spectators a way to see themselves reflected on screen. While *yaari* is often framed as non-sexual companionship, it has also provided an alibi for closeted queer men, allowing them to express affection and devotion to another man without raising suspicion. According to Madhava Prasad, *dosti* in Bollywood takes precedence over heterosexual love, and argues that:

[t]he code of *dosti* takes precedence over that of heterosexual love, and in the case of conflict, the latter must yield to the former. Thus, in a conflict over love between male friends, the woman remains out of the picture, while the two males decide between themselves who will have her. . . The bond of *dosti* is then a prototype of the compact among men that institutes the social contract. (Prasad 83–84)

Many early Amitabh Bachchan films, such as *Zanjeer*, *Anand*, and *Namak Haram*, centred on this theme, portraying relationships between male characters that sometimes carried emotional intensity exceeding that of heterosexual romances. Raj Ayyar captures this sentiment, stating:

A *yaar* is an individual with whom one feels a deep, almost tangible connection. Definitions of this term have varied through time—sometimes denoting a lover, at other times a friend. For me, a *yaar* embodies elements of both a friend and a lover, and I yearn for just such a connection with a man in my life.” (qtd. in Rao 305)

Similarly, B. Raj Rao in his work, “Memories Pierce the Heart” notes that in many of these films, “the conventional heroine was replaced by a male ‘best friend’” (300). Even Bollywood’s film songs from this era echo themes of *yaari*, reinforcing the deep emotional and sometimes ambiguous nature of these male friendships, offering queer audiences a way to find resonance in a largely heteronormative cinematic world. The “Yeh Dosthi” song from *Sholay* is considered the gay anthem for queer spectators and has been used in South Asian Queer marches. Jai (Amitabh Bachchan) sings with Veeru (Dharmendra) as they ride a motorbike:

“*Yeh dosti hum nahin thodenge*

Thodenge dum magar tera saath naa chodenge”

(We won’t break this friendship;

I may die, but I won’t abandon your company.) (*Sholay*, my trans. 00:20:59)

The song is about the promise of eternal companionship and has two *yaars*, Jai and Veeru, riding together on a motorbike to celebrate their *yaari*. The lines of the song, along with the physical bonding of Jai and Veeru, enhance the subtext of

homosexuality by the use of playful teasing, shared laughter and casual physical contact. The climax of the film is when the lover dies in the arms of the other, parted only by death. “One verse, openly sexual, says: “I will take anything from you” – “Tere Liye Lelenge”. “Lelenge” is Hindi Street slang for the phrase “getting fucked”” (Kavi 310). The song that Sher Khan (Pran) sings to Vijay (Amitabh Bachchan) in *Zanjeer* is as follows:

“Yaari hai imaan mera

Yaari mera zindagi

Jaan bhi jaye yaari mein

Yaari mein yaarom gham nahi...”

(“Friendship is my faith,

Friendship is my life.

Even if I lose my life for friendship,

I will have no regrets...” (*Zanjeer*, my trans. 1:46:48)

This is an example of a heartfelt declaration of *yaari*, suggesting that even dying for the sake of friendship is considered valuable. The willingness to sacrifice his life implies his commitment towards Vijay. “Pran dances joyfully for Amitabh and effusively proclaims how love has changed his life, and eventually envelops Amitabh in an embrace. . .Amitabh’s female love interest in *Zanjeer* is distinctly secondary to his friendship with Pran” (Gopinath 290).

The homosocial identity created by Bachchan is also seen in his later film *Shamitabh* (2015). Dhanush and Amitabh Bachchan get together under the pretext of Bachchan giving voice to the voice-impaired Dhanush. They meet in lonely places like a vanity van, a graveyard, and even in a washroom when no one is around. A

washroom is often a cruising space where the two can have a lover's rendezvous. The film ends tragically like *Sholay*, with one of the *yaars* losing his life. Such movies are also melodramatic, as they offer standard melodramatic plots. The plot begins with a classic conflict between good and bad. The plot is further set against the background of male friendships. In this structure, the plot further develops when there is a conflict between friends, such as both falling in love with the same woman. But by the end, the conflict is resolved as one male friend sacrifices himself so that the other can be one with his love interest. The idea of a sacrosanct heterosexual marriage and family is thus restored.

Bollywood had started taking small yet meaningful steps toward portraying non-binary characters with more depth and dignity after 1990. This shift was significant for an industry like Bollywood, which had long relied on stereotypes and was visible in the films after 1990. These films attempted to move beyond ridicule and offer more humanised, empathetic portrayals by exploring themes of survival, rejection, and the longing for acceptance. They captured the struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals navigating a world that often refused to see them. They provided a rare glimpse of authenticity to the narratives and allowed queer audiences to see themselves on screen as human beings worthy of love, dignity, and belonging.

The turning point was the movie *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta, which made same-sex desire the central theme rather than a hidden subtext. It depicted sisters-in-law Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Seetha (Nandita Das) falling in love with each other in the absence of their husbands. The portrayal of female same-sex desire, challenging conventional notions of family and heterosexuality, broke new ground. The screening of the film gave rise to social protests, public debate, and even acts of

vandalism, proving that cinema could no longer escape or ignore the realities of non-heterosexual identities in India. The uproar surrounding *Fire* also revealed the powerful role of cinema in shaping societal perception; by simply portraying a lesbian relationship on screen, the film forced audiences to confront their assumptions about family, morality, and desire. Shohini Ghosh remarks in “Queer Pleasures for Queer People”, “*Fire* is important because it is the first Indian film to bring women in love out of the margins into the mainstream and provide a body to the shadowlike subliminal lesbian of film narrative in India” (218). Gayatri Gopinath has noted in *Impossible Desires* that the film produces a complicated interplay between female homosociality and female homoerotic practices (171).

Hindi cinema slowly began to open up to LGBTQ+ stories during this time. New themes, including gay narratives and conversations about homosexuality, found a place in public discourse as filmmakers started exploring fresh stories. One of the most groundbreaking films of this era was *BOMgAY*, a film based on the poetry of R. Raj Rao, directed by Riyad Wadia. *BOMgAY* is a movie that captures the tormented urban homosexual and unfolds through six vignettes, each capturing the emotions, struggles, and hidden subcultures of same-sex love in Bombay. This film stood apart, embracing queerness in a way that resonated with global LGBTQ+ cinema at a time when Bollywood either ignored or mocked queer identities. Despite its significance, *BOMgAY* never made it to the theatres. Wadia, knowing the censor board would likely reject it, never even applied for certification. Instead, the film found its audience abroad at queer film festivals and in intimate, invite-only screenings back home. Though it never reached the mainstream, *BOMgAY* remains a landmark in Indian queer cinema—a bold, fearless expression of desire in a world

that refused to acknowledge it. Thomas Waugh in the article “I Sleep Behind You” notes that according to an interview in *Bombay Dost*, the film is “India’s first Gay Film... the first indigenously produced gay film from India...bringing the subject of homosexuality out in the open... the first film the gay community can call their own” (qtd. in Waugh 194). Prominent gay activist Ashok Row Kavi noted that *BOMgAY* presented South Bombay gay life and was not true to the realities faced by most gay men in the rest of India (Wadia 322). *BOMgAY* tries to portray the emergence of a small gay community in Bombay. Riyad Vinci Walia says, “The confluence of twenty-seven years of being in the closet, two years of being hedonistically out, and the confidence of regaining pride and self-worth all came together to shape a film that, while twelve minutes short in length, is very long in its evolution” (317).

Released in 1998, *Bombay Boys*, directed by Kaizad Gustad, was a comedy that followed the adventures of three young men navigating the chaos and charm of modern-day Bombay. Among its intertwining storylines, the film subtly depicts a same-sex relationship through the character of Xerxes Mistry, a young Parsi. *Bombay Boys* was praised for its bold and unconventional theme, and it marked an important moment in mainstream Hindi films by weaving queerness into its narrative, even if subtly. A year earlier, in 1997, *Sixth Happiness*, a British film directed by Waris Hussein, offered a deeply personal portrayal of self-discovery. The film starred Firdaus Kanga, a Bombay-born writer of Parsi Indian origin who used a wheelchair, playing a character inspired by his own life. Based on his autobiographical novel that is set in India, *Trying to Grow* (1990), the film explored the theme of disability, which was rare in gay cinema, while capturing his journey

into adulthood, including his sexual awakening, with warmth, humour, and honesty. The film tries to capture Indian sensibility and involves themes of India, Britain, race and sex. Riyad Vinci Wadia notes in “Long Life of a Short Film” that the film starring the wheelchair bound Firdaus Kanga, has “scenes of his homosexual awakening being playfully portrayed” (322). Both films, in their own way, broke new ground in representing LGBTQ+ experiences. *Bombay Boys* brought queerness into mainstream storytelling, while *Sixth Happiness* offered a rare and tender exploration of the intersectionality of both disability and queer identity. At a time when such narratives were still largely absent, these films dared to tell stories that needed to be heard.

Mango Souffle is a 2002 film directed by Mahesh Dattani, which showcases the life of a closeted fashion designer. It is adapted from Dattani’s play *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (2000). The film showcases the life of Kamalesh, who invites his friends over to make some special announcements. He is joined by his friends, Sharath, who was his partner earlier, along with Dipali, Ranveer and Bunny Singh. Sharath makes snide comments from the beginning, and we see Bunny cautioning Sharath to refrain from camp talk and flirting. Camp, characterised by exaggeration, irony and artifice, is an aesthetic style of expression and sensibility exaggerating seriousness to the point of parody. It celebrates flamboyance and excess and is significant in queer studies as a coded form of expression. Later, Kamalesh’s sister Kiran joins them, and she gets engaged to Edward Prakash, with whom Kamalesh was in a relationship that has just broken up. Soon, montages of Kamlesh’s and Prakash’s happy times are portrayed, including their kiss underwater. Kiran is acquainted with Prakash and falls in love with him. Kamalesh asks his friends not to

let Kiran know about his past with Prakash. But Kiran sees a photograph of Kamalesh and Prakash together. Prakash is inherently homophobic and wants to live in a marriage with Kiran while trying to make sexual advances towards Kamalesh. Finally, he accepts his identity and is ready to come out of the closet. He understands that he is in love with Kamalesh and Kiran, and admits his love before leaving. *Mango Souffle* was shot in 23 days in Bangalore as a low-budget venture that portrays a metrosexual love story. It talks about the freedom of sexual choice for an individual. The film journeys through the world of gays in upper middle-class India.

In the movie *Chameli* (2003), when Aman (Rahul Bose) asks Chameli (Kareena Kapoor) if there is anything wrong with two men falling in love, she replies that there is nothing wrong with being gay and that there should be love in all relationships. Later movies like *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2008) again stereotyped gay caricatures, but the effeminate gay characters were the main leads of the films. Madhavan Pillai asserts that these were guerrilla efforts to bring the unspeakable into the drawing room. But by the end, the narrative stresses that the characters are straight and the dominant heterosexual models are reasserted (2013).

Kal Ho Naa Ho, directed by Nikhil Advani, is a mainstream box office success that presents a queer subtext of buddy romance. The queer signifiers are embedded in a heterosexual love story so that the heterosexual audience and queer spectators are equally satisfied. Against the backdrop of immigrant life in the US, the film delves into the dynamics between Rohit, Aman, and Naina. The film explores the theme of *yaarana* between Aman and Rohit. The mid-shot scene of Aman and Rohit lying together on the bed is a playful yet significant moment that

engages queer spectators through its subtle homoerotic undertones. Aman suggestively asks for an apple and a banana for breakfast, with homoerotic connotations. As Aman gently strokes Rohit's hair, there's a tenderness in their dynamic that goes beyond simple friendship. When Aman asks for water, Rohit refuses, prompting Aman to lean over him to get it himself. Rohit jokingly exclaims, "Oh God, last night" (*Kal Ho Naa Ho*, 0:49:24), turning the moment into a light-hearted but suggestive exchange. The scene becomes more layered when Kantaben, the housekeeper, walks in on them. Her hands tremble as she carries a tray, visibly shocked and disturbed by what she assumes to be a romantic encounter. The playful background music adds to the humour, turning the moment into an affectionate parody of romantic intimacy. Remya M.L., in her thesis *Re-imagining Queer Identities: A Study of Select Hindi Films*, notes that "Kanta's display of homophobia is exaggerated and unnatural to the point of theatricality, which evokes laughter at the homophobic mindset, while naturalising homoeroticism, as playful and plausible" (69). Later, when Rohit goes on a dinner date with Camilla, his reluctance to get close to her suggests a lingering attachment to Aman. When Aman realises Rohit is out with someone else, he dramatically declares that he will never let Rohit belong to another girl. Kantaben, hearing this, faints once again, her exaggerated reactions mirroring society's deep-seated anxieties around queerness.

On another occasion, Rohit and Aman jokingly embrace and exchange "I love you," (*Kal Ho Naa Ho*, 1:09:26) playfully blowing kisses. Kantaben, witnessing this, reacts with shock and faints, while comic music plays, turning their display into a humorous misunderstanding. The scene reduces queerness to a source of laughter rather than a genuine representation. Later at the strip club, Rohit reassures his

father that he is in love with Naina, not Aman in response to his fear of Rohit having gay inclination. Throughout the film, double entendres and puns suggest sexual acts inviting laughter from the audience. A queer reading of the text is essential not so that it could adapt a seemingly heterosexual text into a homosexual one, but because there are queer gaps and homoerotic codes in the movies that need to be identified and studied. “The movie ends with the death of one of the heroes, who vows undying friendship and unites the other hero with the heroine. This ironic movie trope is employed in keeping with a heteronormative cultural ethos, while at the same time positing male bonding as eternal, which transcends and surpasses heterosexual love” (Remya 75). Reading the queer elements in the heteronormative text helps to understand the unnamed and silenced queer spaces in most of our texts. Mainstream films often use comedy to depict queer characters, making their presence more acceptable within the rigid structures of patriarchy and heterosexuality. Rather than allowing queer identities to exist openly, these films play with hints of homoeroticism or deep same-sex bonds, only to steer the story back toward a conventional heterosexual conclusion. “*Kal Ho Na Ho* is thus in many ways, a quintessential movie in the age-old tradition of *yaarana*, which maximises the scape and scope of the tradition and beautifully plays with homoeroticism and heterosexual romance” (Remya 61).

Tarun Mansukhani’s *Dostana* is a comedy that explores the relationship between the heroes Sameer (Abhishek Bachchan) and Kunal (John Abraham). They pretend to be a gay couple to rent an apartment and later to gain the friendship of Neha (Priyanka Chopra). The comedy in the film originates from the mistaken identities of the protagonists and the confusion and situations that arise out of it. The

film adopts camp aesthetics and exaggerated effeminacy to engage the unconventional theme of gay leads for a more orthodox audience. The hypermasculine shots of Kunal presented as an object of desire subvert the traditional close-up shots of the heroine presenting her as an object of desire. The over the top performance of Boman Irani and the visa officer, who are also gay, adds to the humour intended by depicting mock romantic gestures and flamboyant dancing. Kaustav Bakshi, drawing on this insight, explores how the film *Dostana*, “by making the male duo pose as a gay couple, unleashes, as it were, the homoerotic dimension” latent within male–male friendship (87). Ajay Gehlawat opines in his work *Reframing Bollywood* that “while *Dostana*’s homosexuality is neither subtextual nor actual, by ‘outing’ this subtext, the film simultaneously works to undermine the ostensibly heterosexual narrative of the film, drawing attention to what had previously only been alluded to” (107). The song “Maa ka Laadla Bigad Gaya” features a homophobic mother who is afraid of her son’s homosexuality and tries to cure the son. This song is played at South Asian queer spaces in UK and is understood as a queer text in spite of it being about someone who is corrupted by homosexuality. “It would be useful to point out that despite the homophobic and stereotypical visual accompaniment to the song, it is a very popular song for its affirmation of the male queer identity within popular Hindi cinema, and this recognition is part of a larger reclamation process in the absence of too many popular queer signifiers within Indian cinema” (Dasgupta 93). The song’s exaggerated performance style, bright visuals, and comic tone lend themselves to *camp aesthetics*—a key mode of queer expression that thrives on exaggeration, parody, and inversion. “The overall thrust of the film is a progressive one, featuring

a mother who overcomes her own initial homophobia to embrace her son and his ‘partner’ and bless their ‘queer’ relationship” (Gehlawat 106).

Ajay Gehlawat argues that old films like *Silsila* had a more prevalent homoerotic space than the new movies like *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana*. After the shower scene in *Silsila*, Amit, after bending to pick up the soap, suddenly stops and says that he does not want to pick up the soap as he knows what happened last time. This is a reference to a “penetrating” image of Amitabh Bachchan” (Kavi 311). In the films like *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana*, “most if not all of the allegedly ‘homosexual’ moments are those that are perceived by other characters, whereas in the scenes from these earlier films, the moments of homosocial bonding—both more prevalent and intimate in their encoding than that of recent fare—are almost always private” (Gehlawat 110).

These films reflect how mainstream cinema accommodates queerness in ways that do not challenge dominant norms. Queer moments often exist only disguised as jokes or fleeting subtexts. Having a queer reading is about recognising the subtle, often unspoken queer expressions woven into their narratives—the moments of intimacy, desire, or connection that do not fit neatly into a heteronormative framework. By paying attention to these quiet, coded instances, we begin to see the ways queer identities have always been present in cinema, even when left unnamed. Acknowledging these hidden spaces is important because it allows us to understand how queerness has been both subtly included and deliberately erased in popular storytelling.

Bollywood, for years, was reluctant to engage with queer narratives in a sensitive and humanising way. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, or *Bharatiya*

Nyaya Samhita which criminalised homosexuality, only reinforced this silence, making queer existence feel illegal not just in the courts but in everyday life. The presence of gender nonconforming individuals was often treated as an anomaly rather than as a part of society. Yet, despite being pushed to the margins, ridiculed, and misunderstood, the LGBTQ+ community has continued to fight for visibility. These individuals struggle with their legal rights as well as with their rights to be seen, respected, and represented as whole, complex human beings. Mainstream cinema gradually witnessed the evolution of sensitive and authentic representations of queer identities and alternate sexualities. Bollywood, since then, has seen empathetic, confident and empowered representation of the gay. Few films started to look into the actual struggles of LGBTQ individuals instead of relying solely on stereotypes. Films can play an educative and emancipatory role and contribute to broader struggles for sexual rights and recognition. These films articulate queer subjectivities and challenge cultural prejudices to depict their struggles sensitively and realistically. Bollywood's evolving depiction of homosexuality thus illustrates the complex interplay between cinema, society, and sexuality. In spite of this progress, these films were largely confined to independent and niche spaces, reaching audiences primarily through film festivals rather than mainstream theatrical releases. Film festivals played a crucial role in fostering and promoting queer cinema, providing a platform for stories that mainstream Bollywood largely overlooked.

68 Pages (2007) by Sridhar Rangayan depicts a gay couple struggling for acceptance who have come to meet a young HIV/AIDS counsellor, Mansi. The film is noteworthy for its commitment to portraying the pain, stigma and isolation faced

by queer people. In Reema Kagti's *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* (2007), a plethora of characters who come together for their honeymoon to Goa are portrayed. Madhu and Bunty are a newly married couple who met online. Bunty is a closeted homosexual, and his family wanted him to get married to the daughter of a family friend, Madhu, who had just broken up from a relationship. Bunty, not being able to consummate his marriage, confesses to Madhu about his sexuality, and they decide to live in a marriage of convenience. Pinky and Vicky are also a new couple who have joined the trip. Pinky is an extrovert, and Vicky is rather an introvert. Vicky, also being a closeted bisexual, is attracted to Bunty, but keeps it to himself. At one point, Vicky blurts out about his feelings to Bunty, and Bunty dismisses him, saying everything will be alright. As Himadiri Roy notes, while Reema Kagti's *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* focused on the concept of honeymoon among all classes and all ages in society, it also highlighted how the closeted sexuality of gay men impacted heterosexual marriages.

In *Life in a ... Metro* (2007), the lead character Shruthi falls in love with her boss, who turns out to be gay. The subplot signifies the silent existence of closeted gay men in the corporate sector. The boss's sexuality is not explored in depth, but it is an attempt to represent the gay character without ridicule. In *Ek Chalis ki Last Local* (2007), Deepak Shirke plays the role of a gay villain who evokes both fear and uneasiness. His overtly effeminate mannerisms, predatory glances and suggestive comments amplify the dark humour tinged with menace, using his sexuality to evoke discomfort and intimidation.

Fashion (2008) features the life of individuals in the realm of fashion, modelling and stardom. The film briefly portrays the lives of gay individuals as well,

who celebrate their sexuality and are confident and successful in their careers. It also depicts gay characters like Rahul, who is a successful fashion designer and prefers to be in a deceitful marriage rather than coming out and being authentic about his own sexuality. He conforms to societal expectations by asking his friend to enter into a marriage of convenience and finally finds the courage to confide in her about his sexuality. This scene offers a glimpse into the emotional burden of living a double life and the quiet resilience required to navigate a world that often demands people suppress their true selves. However, the film does not explore the inner conflict of the character or his invisible struggles.

I Am (2010), an anthology by Onir, dealt with different facets of gay life such as sexual abuse, blackmail and manhandling. The segment “Omar” sheds light on the situation faced by homosexuals through the story of Jai. It explores the challenges, fears, and emotional turmoil often associated with coming out and highlights the importance of self-acceptance as a significant aspect of queer experiences. Jai meets Omar in a restaurant, and they decide to go for a drive later. They flirt with each other and try to get intimate when they are interrupted by a policeman who manhandles them and threatens to take them to prison under section 377. In India, Section 377 has given the police a carte blanche to harass homosexuals, and the harassment can vary from blackmail to extortion to gay bashing that even leads to death (Rao 15). The policeman demands a bribe to let them go and molests Jai when Omar goes to get the cash. When Omar returns, he is taken to the station, which later turns out to be a scam by Omar and the policeman together to extort Jai’s money.

Bollywood has slowly begun to shift its approach. Not all depictions of cross-dressing today are meant to ridicule or objectify. Later films actively challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity. *Dream Girl* (2019) presents cross-dressing as a means of survival rather than comedy. *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020) subtly plays with gender expression without turning it into a joke.

Dunno Y... Na Jaane Kyom (2010) is a film by Sanjay Sharma, which depicts the relationship between Aryan and Ashley, two men in love in a conservative society. By challenging the heteronormative structure of Bollywood romances, the film discusses the repercussions of being gay in India. Aryan's struggle to come out of a heterosexual marriage is met with rejection and familial conflict, reflecting the real-life difficulties faced by queer individuals in Indian culture. The eventual acceptance of his identity in the film is also a significant moment that highlights the importance of resilience. In Gauri Shinde's *English Vinglish* (2012), Sreedevi as Shashi Godbole says that every person should be respected for who they are when everyone was joking about David Fischer's sexuality. Shashi hence appears to be a brave and empathetic heterosexual who is helpful and tolerant towards others. It is also the first moment when the young African-Caribbean man, Udumbke (Damian Thompson), feels comfortable with the group, as he too is gay. The symbolic homophobia inside the group was making him uncomfortable about coming out. The film uses a casual moment in the narrative to stress the importance of acceptance, respect and inclusivity. Karan Johar's *Student of the Year* (2012) features a gay Dean Yoginder Vasisht, played by Rishi Kapoor, as a tool for comedy. But, through the camp and effeminate Dean, Karan Johar also brings attention to the social isolation that comes with his closeted homosexuality.

Dedh Ishqiya (2014) shows the story of Begum Para and Muniya, who share a deep emotional and personal connection throughout the narrative. The most poignant queer moment comes at the end when they choose to leave together, turning away from the male protagonists and embracing each other. It's a gentle yet powerful moment of self-liberation, almost like a "coming out" without words.

Loev (2015) by Sudhanshu Saria narrates the story of two friends, Sahil and Jai, on a weekend trip, focusing on their emotional and sexual relationship when Sahil accuses Jai of being scared to come out. It is a subtle exploration of same-sex desire with sensitivity and emotional depth. The film focuses on the internal struggle faced by Sahil, a young musician and Jai, a successful businessman. The everyday life of the characters is depicted without dramatising the aspect of being a homosexual.

Shakun Batra's *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) introduced a closeted gay hero, without making the main plot about queerness, as he embraces his sexuality as just another aspect of his private life. The coming out of Rahul Kapoor to his mother is groundbreaking and original, as the movie seamlessly weaves Rahul's sexuality into the story as an essential yet organic aspect of his character. Rahul does not showcase any stereotypical effeminate gestures. The acceptance that Rahul finds in society has to do with the fact that he lives in progressive London, not in a semi-urban town. Rahul has a steady and serious relationship with another man. He lies to his mother about a girlfriend. He avoids questions about his plans for a wedding and settling down. Despite being modern, Sunita struggles to accept her son's homosexuality. It is she who treated her son as "*mera perfect bachcha*" ("my perfect kid.") (*Kapoor & Sons*, my trans., 0:12:54). She favours Rahul over Arjun. She informs Rahul when his grandfather is not well, she keeps his things and his room unchanged and cooks

his favourite food, but is not able to accept her son for who he is when she confronts it. At last, when he comes out, he openly says, “*Perfect bachcha bante bante main thak gaya hoon ... Thak gaya hoon main aapne aap se bhaag ke, aapse dur bhaag ke ... logon ke darr se*” (“I am tired of being perfect, ... tired of running, from myself, from you. ... I am tired of being afraid of what people will say”). In London, he lives freely without any judgments. But when he is at home, he is aware of the homophobia and is closeted. “*My whole life has been a lie and mujhe nehi lagta ki kabhi koi iss baat ko iss ghar mein accept karega*” (“My whole life has been a lie and I think no one in this house will ever accept the truth”). His anxiety, as well as salvation from that, lies in the acceptance of his family: “*Main jo hoon who hoon Maa, and I just want you to love me for who I am*” (“I am what I am Maa, and I just want you to love me for who I am”) [*Kapoor & Sons*, my trans., 1:51:01 - 1:51:20]. Interestingly, just as Siras in *Aligarh* resists labelling his experience, the film also never labels Rahul as ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’.

Malik Kafur in *Padmavat* (2018) is a queer-coded character whose coming out to Khilji is a subtle subverting of heteronormativity. Faruk Kabir’s 377 *Abnormal* (2019) is a film where he portrays the coming out sequence in two different homes. Shalmalee, a college student, comes out to her mother, who is a social worker, and her mother accepts her identity, but is affected by the fact that her daughter could not confide in her for four years. Simultaneously, Pallav Shiroodkar is outed to his family on the day he turns 18 and is ridiculed and battered by his father. 377 *Abnormal* depicts the lives of multiple petitioners whose experiences were profoundly shaped by Section 377 as it narrates the legal battle that led to the decriminalisation of Section 377. The film depicts the oppression faced by queer individuals, where homosexuality was considered criminal and amoral. It also

stresses the significance of allies who supported the cause and the role they played in the eventual victory. *Ek Ladki ko Dekha toh aisa laga* (2019) features the struggles of the coming out of a lesbian portrayed in an empathetic light. The film is a stepping stone to more inclusive storytelling by featuring a lesbian character as the lead in the mainstream. The film addresses issues such as internalised homophobia, societal ostracism, and the fear of rejection. As Manish Mathur in the article in *Talk Film Society* notes, “*Ek Ladki ko Dekha toh Aisa Laga* resonated with many queer South Asians who struggled with coming out of the closet and learning to accept themselves. . . It is already a victory for representation with its onscreen queer representation, female director, and the screenwriter being a trans woman” (Mathur).

Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2021), directed by Abhishek Kapoor, is a bold and original narrative within mainstream by addressing gender identity and queer love. While the film follows the love story between Manu (Ayushmann Khurrana), a heterosexual gym trainer and Maanvi Brar (Vaani Kapoor), a transgender woman, the narrative focuses on the theme of the struggle of the main characters to come out of the social stigma around queer relationships. When Manu overcomes his sense of shame after being ready to accept Maanvi’s identity, the film stresses that love can transcend traditional gender binaries. Hence, the film subverts the idea of romance by depicting the love between a cisgender man and a transgender woman. *Sheer Qorma* (2021) portrays a lesbian couple seeking acceptance from their family. The narrative addresses the challenges of coming out and the yearning for familial approval. “Geeli Pucchi” is a short film by Neeraj Ghaywan from the anthology *Ajeeb Daastaans* (2021) that explores intersectionality, focusing on the overlapping identities of caste, gender, and sexuality in contemporary Indian society. The act of coming out is portrayed as a multifaceted and deeply personal journey in the film,

influenced by intersecting identities. *Cobalt Blue* (2022), directed by Sachin Kundalkar, is the story of a brother and sister who fall in love with the same man, leading to an intricate study of sexuality, subtleties of family dynamics, and the weight of societal expectations.

Badhai Do (2022) portrays a lavender marriage or a marriage of convenience between Shardul, a gay police officer and Sumi, a lesbian physical education teacher. A lavender marriage is a heterosexual marriage where one or both partners are LGBTQ+ and marry a person of the opposite sex to appear heterosexual and avoid societal stigma or discrimination. The movie has a realistic and empathetic portrayal of queer individuals who are trapped between social acceptance and individual freedom. The film explores the possibility of adopting a kid into the framework of a family by Shardul and Sumi with their respective partners.

According to Onir, the most beautiful part of *Badhaai Do* was when the two same-sex couples, one played by Rajkummar Rao and Gulshan Devaiah and the other by Bhumi Pednekar and Chum Darang, participated in the Pride March. *Maaja Maa* (2022) is a film by Anand Tiwari that portrays the coming out of Pallavi Patel, a devoted housewife within a traditional Indian family setting. Pallavi's coming out is thrust upon her by external circumstances, and this unintentional disclosure compels her to confront her suppressed identity and forces her family to reevaluate their understanding of love and acceptance.

Tahira Kashyap in her film *Sharmaji ke Beti* (2024) depicts a scene where a school-going student comes out to her mother, who, in turn, hugs and gives her a gift for confiding in her. Lesbian movies were fewer in number and depicted a distinct realm of femininity, contrasting with the predominantly masculine world portrayed in the larger body of gay films. "In popular cinema, love between women has not

enjoyed the same narrative centrality as love between men. Female bonding, while appearing around the margins, has almost always lacked the vitality of male bonding. Female homoeroticism appeared fleetingly in films like *Razia Sultan* (1983), *Mere Mehboob* (1963), *Humjoli* (1970), and *Yeh Aag Kab Bujhegi* (1991) ...women never enjoyed the same central significance that male protagonists did” (Ghosh 210).

Bollywood films began to delve into a more serious kind of representation by challenging stereotypes and advocating acceptance. The portrayal of gay characters must evolve to make a more complex depiction by including the intersections of class, caste, religion and region. The rise of digital platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hotstar has created opportunities for more diverse stories. Web series such as *Romil and Jugal* (2017), *Made in Heaven* (2019), and *Four More Shots Please!* (2019) and *The Married Woman* (2021) have brought queer characters to Indian screens and featured narratives of acceptance, challenging traditional norms and reaching global audiences. It gives the filmmakers a broader canvas to experiment with gay themes and allows unconventional stories that reflect the lives of LGBTQ people.

There is a visible growth in the way queer stories are told in the mainstream today, and the narratives include the theme of acceptance and normalisation instead of struggle and rejection. The future demands stories of understanding and empowerment, inclusive and empathetic.

CHAPTER 4

MY BROTHER... NIKHIL

New queer cinema is the name given to a group of films that were critically applauded in the 1990s and is characterised by the gay and lesbian images on the silver screen that defy the homophobic representations of the past. Queer was re-appropriated in the 1990s as a defying means of empowerment. It represents the resistance of the marginalised communities to normative codes of gender. New queer cinema was instrumental in bringing the queer out of the closet. After 1990, different aspects of queer narratives were explored and represented. New Queer Cinema was made during the AIDS crisis. New queer cinema cannot be removed from the context of the AIDS epidemic. NQC often uses AIDS activist history to comprehend queerness. AIDS hastened its urgency and inspired new forms of expression.

Coming out was facilitated during the period partly because of the new queer cinema and the AIDS crisis. Discourses on AIDS confirmed that the transmission of the virus was higher in sexual relationships with multiple partners and through male homosexual partners (Nag 293). This facilitated an imminent need to discuss sexuality without discomfort. Individuals suffering from AIDS were often ostracised even by progressive and educated people. Misinformation and fear fueled this, leading to the isolation and marginalisation of the individuals. There was a need for the matter to be addressed scientifically and to sensitise the public. Media advocacy was an important part of the sensitisation program, and mainstream media began to represent the crisis with the help of feature films and videos to draw visual attention

during the late 1990s. These films and videos gave voice to silenced communities and their sufferings during the AIDS crisis. Though the videos were meant to sensitise, they did more than educate; they spoke about how to stand up for one's rights.

New Queer Cinema made considerable cultural and critical gains for the queer and especially the gay community. Gay themes and gay characters were increasingly represented in literature and cinema. Gay movies, in fact, 'came out of the closet'. Stereotypes were rejected, and there was a steady increase in LGBTQ narratives. India was also witnessing changes in its mainstream culture. Kolkata became the first city to hold a gay pride march in 1999. India's biggest film Industry, Bollywood, was trying to showcase sensitive representation in its movies, though it was highly limited.

The AIDS crisis acted as a looking glass through which homosexuality in India became visible. Gays could come out to the world outside because of the onset of the crisis. Gays were not the only community that was affected, but prostitutes and truck drivers were affected in large numbers. Oliver Ross in *Same Sex Desire in Indian Culture* (2016) describes how "the proliferation of HIV/AIDS in India...created a discursive space in which previously marginalised practices and identities of same-sex desire and gender nonnormativity [were] discussed" (137). The crisis catalyzed for many gay individuals to come out of the closet. During the late 1980s and 1990s, numerous celebrities, including Rock Hudson, Magic Johnson, Greg Louganis, Pedro Zamora and others, openly used their platforms to come out. They emerged in the public eye to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS. The heightened scrutiny and blaming of gay men led to a collective realisation that

remaining closeted perpetuated the stigma and their ability to advocate for their rights. Discourses on HIV not only opened up spaces for discussion on certain sexualities which were hitherto ostracised, but also helped in forming different collectives. Dennis Altman argued that, “There was a gradual shift toward conceptualising sexuality as a central basis for identity in most parts of the world in which HIV programs have played a significant role” (69). Coming out became a way for gay people to challenge prejudices and demand better healthcare. The fear of unknown terrain was addressed. In India, being HIV positive and having AIDS were on par. By the mid-1990s, AIDS began to fall because of the advent of retro viral drugs.

My Brother... Nikhil is a 2005 Onir film which acted as a transitional film that contributed towards the sensitisation of homosexuality and the AIDS crisis. Onir is one of the very few gay filmmakers in India. He is known as a filmmaker, TV director, editor, screenwriter and producer. He was born into a Bengali family in Bhutan. The family moved to Kolkata in 1990. He graduated from Jadavpur University and learned film editing in Berlin. Later, he came back to India to become a director and a scriptwriter. Before assisting Kalpana Lajmi for her film, *Daman* (2001), he directed a documentary called *Fallen Hero* (1992). After working on another documentary about the Goan swimming champion, Dominic D’Souza, he made his feature film debut with *My Brother... Nikhil*, which was based on the life of the swimmer.

The sensitive portrayal of homosexuality in *My Brother...Nikhil* deftly avoided the stereotypes and crude caricatures often associated with Bollywood. It is a low-budget film made in the form of a docudrama, where the characters mostly

converse with the audience through a camera. The camera becomes a strong character to whom everyone confides. It is made in such a way that each character shares their fragmented memories. The film is also narrated in a nonlinear structure, presenting different points of view of the same situation. Varied perspectives are incorporated and this technique helps the audience to look at the same story from different angles. Shohini Ghosh has analysed these aspects of *My Brother... Nikhil*'s documentary style:

By making this documentary trope central to the narrative, the film builds a stylistic affinity to an entire tradition of subaltern narratives. Just as the documentary itself is a marginal province of the cinematic universe, *My Brother... Nikhil* locates the marginal protagonist of Bombay cinema—the homosexual man—at the centre of the narrative. (Ghosh 432)

It is a story inspired by the life of Dominic d'souza who was the first Indian AIDS activist. Dominic was a frequent blood donor and worked with the World Wildlife Fund. After he was found infected with HIV, he was forcibly quarantined. He was released after a long legal battle and founded the NGO 'People Positive' in 1992. Initially, Onir could not find any producer for the film as it was based on a topic like HIV and AIDS. It was later produced under the banner of Four Front Productions, a joint venture by Onir, Sanjay Suri, Vicky Tejwani and Raj Kaushal. The film was distributed under the banner of Yash Raj Films by Karan Johar. Ruth Vanitha calls *My Brother... Nikhil* a transitional film that took the portrayals of gays from 1990 cameos to fully fledged protagonists. It brought an embryonic acceptance in public with the trope of AIDS (qtd in Ross 135). As Shohini Ghosh argues, "The

emergence of new sexualities and a diversity of desires in cinema are clearly a response to many years of feminist and queer rights movements” (435).

My Brother... *Nikhil* narrates the story of an Anglo-Indian family settled in Goa, the Kapoor family, who share their lives in retrospect. The protagonist, Nikhil (Sanjay Suri), is a national swimming champion who strives to live up to the expectations of his father, Navin Kapoor (Victor Banerjee), who owns an antique furniture shop. Mr. Kapoor attempts to realise his unfulfilled dreams through Nikhil. Nikhil often finds his desires crushed by his father’s dream of making him the finest sportsperson in the land. Nikhil admires his father, but often his father’s dictatorial nature leaves Nikhil helpless. He describes his dad’s expectations as a ‘frustrating experience.’

The dominant culture defines homosexual men as effeminate. This definition is obviously wrong... men, who mostly do ‘act like a man’. The masculinity of their object-choice subverts the masculinity of their character and social presence. This subversion is a structural feature of homosexuality in a patriarchal society where hegemonic masculinity is defined as exclusively heterosexual, and its hegemony extends to the rearing of boys. (Connell 161-162)

His father makes him turn away from painting, a more effeminate hobby and towards more masculine pursuits of sports. Navin Kapoor is a North Indian whose family is settled in Goa, and his wife, Anita Rosario Kapoor (Lillete Dubey) is a Goan who is proud of her Portuguese ancestry.

Goa becomes a site of ethnographic hybridity and cultural syncretism in the film. As Benedetto Ferrao notes “Goa is itself portrayed in an ambivalent fashion,

reinforcing its otherness to the rest of India. In so doing, Goa in its marginality becomes the representational threshold between the experience of alienation faced by gay men in India and the foregrounding of their identity as emergent from a globalised, rights-based perspective” (142). *My Brother... Nikhil* talks about the gay rights in a global and universal perspective rather than an Indian one. It identifies the problems and struggles of Indian gays on a global platform. This large-scale representation is possible because of their being in Goa, a place that carries diverse cultural, religious and historical traces. “The inter-ethnic and inter-racial marriage of Kapoors is presumed to act as an explanation of the cultural hybridity that is the basis of Goanness, therein creating a binary of what is and is not Indian enough” (Ferraio 142). Gayatri Gopinath in her analysis of *Sancharam* (2004), a Malayalam movie on lesbian couples, refers to ‘tracing the regional’ through Kerala, “[r]egionality can be a useful concept through which to explore the particularities of gender and sexual logics in spaces that exist in a tangential relation to the nation, but that is simultaneously and irreducibly marked by complex national and global processes” (343). In the film, Goa becomes this hybrid region where the sexuality and queer space of Nikhil is situated.

At the beginning of the film, there is a standard disclaimer stating that the film is fictitious. Onir, in an interview, stated that “So strong is AIDS discrimination and anti-gay bias in India today that even local Goan churches refused the use of their buildings to film” (Urban 2005). Onir wanted to state that the film is based on a real story, but in an interview, he stated that the censor board would not allow it. The recognition accorded on a fictitious base was needed to be able to be branded safe in

a homophobic society. The movie was not promoted as a gay film or an HIV film, for there was a fear of controversy, as in the case of *Fire* and *Girlfriend*.

One of the central themes of the film is a gay theme, but I knew if this was perceived as a gay film, people would not come and see the film. Therefore, for me, it was very, very important that the people in India see the film. And that was one reason why the film was called *My Brother...Nikhil* and not *My Lover...Nikhil*, because it was telling a story of a brother from the point of view of a sister, which is again a very special relationship in India and how the audience start loving this character till they discover that he is gay and by then they already are liking the character so they do not easily reject it, so it is a very careful positioning because I wanted it to be released in mainstream theatres where people get to see the film. (“*Gay India: Onir director of My Brother... Nikhil*” 0:02:28-0:03:14).

The documentary about Nikhil that coincides with the film is shot a year after Nikhil’s death. Nikhil is the enigma that is unravelled through the memories shared by his family and friends. Nikhil’s dreams, desires, memories and sufferings are presented through multiple interpretations.

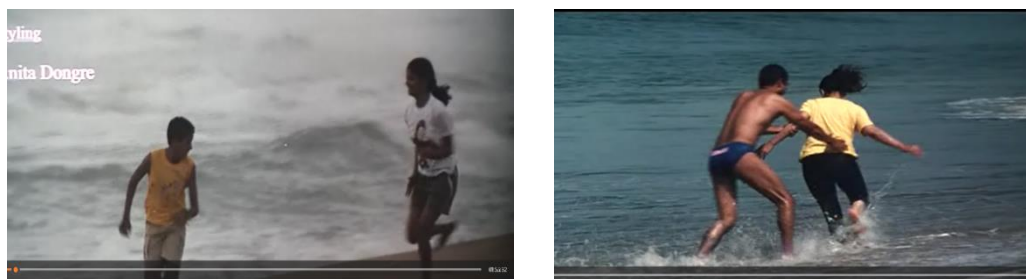


Figure 4.1 – Shots of Nikhil and Anamika playing together on the seashore that signify freedom and happiness in contrast to the isolation that later characterises Nikhil’s life.

The film opens with shots of Nikhil and his sister Anamika (Juhi Chawla) playing together at a beachside (Fig. 4.1). The song, “le chalein...le chalen..” is playing in the background. These scenes that show happy times are the staple family drama trope that is situated in history. Throughout the sequence, the relationship between the siblings and their love for each other is portrayed poignantly. Soon after the credits, we find Anamika talking to the camera, describing her dad’s concern over Nikhil and how Mr. Kapoor hated Nikhil being called ‘little boy’ by his mother. He associates this expression with unmanliness. This becomes apparent in one of the scenes where he scolds Nikhil for not concentrating on his training.

Ms. Kapoor: *Now stop it. Don't harass my little boy anymore.*

Mr. Kapoor: *“My little boy”, you are making a sissy out of him (Onir 16).*

Anita and Naveen join in to share their anguish over the homosexuality of their son. The homophobic tendency of society is shared in the thoughts and opinions of his parents. The film portrays the difficulties and challenges of Nikhil to come out of the closet. He was forced to come out to his family and friends because of his HIV test. The film explores the intricacies of familial relationships and how they intersect with gay experiences. The role of families in accepting and negotiating perspectives in gay narratives is a common approach in gay cinema. The film delves into Nikhil’s relationship with his family, particularly his sister, Anamika, and their parents. It portrays the initial struggles and eventual acceptance that occur within the family as they confront their own biases and stereotypes. Nikhil’s inability to come out of the closet is all the more profound because coming out of the closet is equated with coming out of the family. Nikhil cannot come out of the closet because of the expectations of his family. The film is an anthology of family relationships and by

depicting the transformative power of familial love and support, the film contributes to queer discourses by challenging the notion that gay individuals are inherently at odds with their families. Since the documentary that is shot within the film takes place after the death of Nikhil, his dreams, desires, and ambitions are voiced through Anamika. Even the delicate love story between Nikhil and Nigel is described through her.

“*My Brother... Nikhil* poses a variety of challenges to not just the representation of gay sexuality, but to notions of masculinity, social normativity, family ties and universal morality” (Ghosh 432). When he sits in a pub, he is surrounded by women and passes off as a heterosexual. Nigel says that when he first met Nikhil, Nikhil was surrounded by women all the time: “*Har waqt woh ladkiyon se gira rahtha tha. Patha nahi kyon mujhe lagtha dha ki who unke saath hei tho sahi, but not really interested. You know what I mean?*” (“He was always surrounded by girls...but I always felt that though he was with them he was not really interested”) (Onir 53).

Gayatri Gopinath in her essay, “Queering Bollywood” talks about the ‘Queer diasporic viewing practice’. The diasporic element is brought in with the return of Nigel De Costa (Purab Kohli). Nigel’s frankness has more to do with his having lived abroad. He confronts Nikhil for being inside the closet. Nigel is also characterised by his financial security and non-resident parents, which makes him the antithesis to the middle-class, closeted Nikhil, and this frankness helps Nikhil to embrace modernity and come out of the closet. Nigel’s Christian identity in Goa enunciates “liberated modern subjectivity” (Ferrao 143). Nigel symbolises the

articulation of a global view of gay rights and becomes a spokesperson for global activism.

The film sheds light on the relationship between Nikhil and Nigel in a very subtle way using various tools of signification. They first meet at a pub and Nikhil is seen singing “Le Chalein...Le Chalein...” for his sister. He steals a few glances at Nigel in the midst of singing and Nigel is seen reciprocating to the gaze. There is a quick moment of understanding between the two when he sings about companionship, which one might easily fail to notice. It is only then, when Nigel’s point of view is unfolded, that we connect to the various instances of Nigel in the background. It is to be noted that Nigel does not describe his being gay or the problems of being gay in a homophobic society. According to Sachin Ramesh in his thesis *A Semiotic Investigation of Positioning of the Queer in Indian Film Narrative*, “This very absence of the “identity” crisis sets the narrative apart from the usual metropolitan narrative of sexual identity” (175).

Nikhil’s parents want him to get married to Leena, his childhood friend. Nikhil is not interested in marriage. When he says that he does not want to get married or become a father, Mr. Kapoor asks him if he has any problem. It is to be noted that this is the only instance in the film when his father is prepared to face the problems of his sexuality, if any. Nikhil’s father is shown to have an underlying fear about his son’s sexuality. When he speaks to the documentary crew later, he asks why they want to tarnish his son’s name, now that he is no more. He talks about Nikhil’s many girlfriends and the marriage proposal to Leena,, “*He was a perfectly normal boy*” (Onir 49). Mr Kapoor’s inability to accept the sexuality of his son and the stigma in society that is attached to homosexuality is made evident in this

response. The parents' refusal to accept their son's sexuality even after he has come out to them is vividly portrayed in the movie.

When Nigel talks later to the camera, it is evident that he was jealous of Leena. When Anu teases Nikhil for kissing Leena, Nigel is visibly upset. Later, when Nikhil confronts Nigel, he slaps him. Fidelity is one major motif of the film, unlike many other films dealing with same sex love. Nigel has always taunted Nikhil for his double standards. Gays are always in fear of the societal pressure of getting married. Nigel is in constant fear of losing Nikhil if he succumbs to his familial pressure to get married. There are instances of tension between family love from his stubborn father and outside love from Nigel, which Nikhil has to confront. Nikhil, after learning about his blood test results, asks Nigel if he had ever slept with anyone other than him, and Nigel snaps back.

The narrative progresses when Nikhil is confronted by his doctor. Nikhil comes home distraught. The ethics of the doctor are in question as he doesn't tell Nikhil about being HIV positive, but the whole world knows about it. The doctor reassures Nikhil that whatever he says will remain confidential, but his coach and fellow swimmers happen to know about his condition. In a scene where Nikhil is entering the pool, all other swimmers are getting out in fear (Fig. 4.2), and now Nikhil is left alone to fight the prejudices. The pool is now transformed to a site of exclusion and loneliness.



Figure 4.2 – Swimmers getting out of the pool as Nikhil comes in articulates fear and discrimination that surrounds HIV/AIDS.

The scene is shot in dim light, illustrating Nikhil's confused and flustered state of mind. We see Nikhil crying in a child-like pose in the lap of Anu in fig. 4.3, the only strong pillar in his life. The shot captures Nikhil at his weakest moment. "This infantile self-positioning of Nikhil demonstrates that Anu is playing the necessary, nurturing role of a sister and mother, especially given the absence of real maternal and paternal sympathy" (Ross 141).

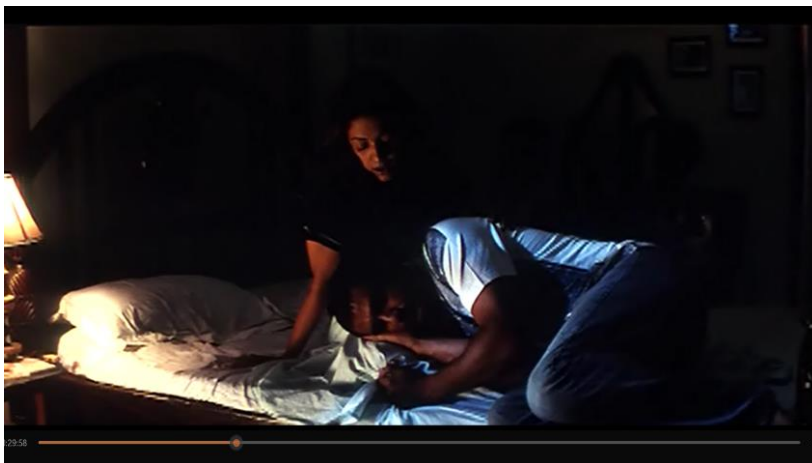


Figure 4.3 – Nikhil breaking down and seeks solace in the presence of Anamika highlighting the theme of isolation and stigma.

The scene extends to the shot where Nikhil looks at his body in the mirror. He is in a devastated state when the real and the unreal come together in a perplexed

condition. Nikhil is not able to confront the truth. The news spreads among the people, and Nikhil breaks down. Navin and Anita are asked to leave the club they were visiting on account of Nikhil. His family and friends abandon him. AIDS during the 1990s was known as a 'gay disease'. Gay men were held responsible for the spreading of AIDS, and it was called 'the gay plague' or 'gay cancer' during that period (Institut Pasteur). AIDS could not be kept apart from the gay rights movement in the 1980s. Mostly, gay men led different awareness programmes related to AIDS. "In the movie, Nikhil establishes an organisation called People Positive, mirroring D'souza's own work in creating a non-profit called Positive People, which was the first Goan organisation of its kind and one that still exists since its inception in 1992" (Ferraio 149).

Nikhil takes refuge in Nigel's home, but the police arrest him there, and he is kept in isolation. Even the Government machinery, including the doctors, nurses and policemen, are biased in their approaches and treat him as the other. The police ridicule him. One constable remarked: "*Kis ke sath masti ki? Ladaka tha ya ladaki? Ya Dono? Kya jamana aa gaya?*" ("Who did you have fun with? Was it a man or a woman...or both? ... What times we live in...!") (Onir 46). It is depressing to realise that for the police and responsible state machinery, the sexual act is seen as frivolous and a privilege of the rich and urban class society. The Inspector says to the documentary crew that they washed the whole station and things around with Dettol after he left. They repeatedly refer to getting infected as his mistake. In the hospital, doctors and nurses discuss homosexuality as a fad that celebrities follow. They instruct the staff to handle him wearing gloves and to be careful. A doctor suggests sending him to Bombay, which was then considered the gay capital of the

country. The police who escort him to the hospital listen to the conversations, and they keep him at a distance. The doctors ask the police to take him away and lock him in a sanatorium. On the way to the sanatorium, the policemen crudely remark that: *“he looks healthy... absolutely normal. We should kill you off. You’ve had enough fun, now why are you wasting government money?”* (Onir 46). He is stripped of his dignity by the police, the doctors, his friends and his family. It is painstaking to note that the brutal questions from the police also resonated with the audience. The increasingly homophobic society inflicts violence, human rights violations, stigma and discrimination. The intersectionality of AIDS and homosexuality makes it all the more difficult for Nikhil. According to Raj Rao in his work ‘Criminal Love’:

Medicine, with its overemphasis on biology has always pathologised homosexuality, taking it to be a disorder. . . It took a great deal of brainwashing by gay activists to get the American Psychiatric Association to knock off homosexuality from the list of mental disorders. . . Doctors saw AIDS as a gay disease. Some of them even went on to suggest that AIDS with its painful symptoms was the punishment meted out to homosexuals for perverse sexual behaviour. (15)

Nikhil himself feels that the mention of having AIDS was a degrading experience. Anamika feels the humiliation that he underwent when she reads his diary. It is the diary that helps Anu to understand Nikhil better. She is even surprised at how beautifully he writes. The movie is radically different from earlier Bollywood treatments of homosexuality as it is a poignant and emotional narrative of a man’s

fight for dignity. It journeys through Nikhil's fears and helplessness. Nikhil tells Anu that he doesn't know what is happening and no one is telling him anything.

There is graffiti in the background of Nigel's home.

"Now summer is gone

Might never have been

In the sunshine, it is warm

But there has to be more."

These lines echo the condition of Nikhil's life. He misses the warmth and love he used to have and, at the same time, recognises that it might never have been his, as he is well aware of the fact that he would not be acceptable in society if he were known to be a homosexual earlier. He also wants more acceptance and compassion from the society in which he lives. He was living in a society where homosexuality is shunned, and the homosexual is treated as a criminal. Mr Kapoor says, "*Samaj mein nahin aata, galti kahaan hui, itni achi samskaar dee dhi.*" ("I don't understand where we went wrong, he had such good values...") (Onir 08). Mr Kapoor recounts the experience in the club from where he came to know that Nikhil is infected with AIDS, "*Everything seemed perfectly normal... Then the waiter came and asked us to leave... Everyone except us knew that Nikhil had got AIDS.... The same club where I used to go with my head held high... I was asked to leave from there*" (Onir 39-40). He lashes out at Nikhil after that, shouting: "*Jab tum paidha hua dha, apne maa ko kharib maar dhiya tha. Ab kya, hum subko maarna chatein hei?*" ("You nearly killed your mother when you were born. Now you want to kill us all of us?") (Onir 40). And then his own mother tells him she wishes he had died as a

newborn. Later, she admits to the camera that she had actually killed him on the very day she said it.

The narrative of the family and their tale of suffering are central to a traditional Indian film. Onir doesn't want to experiment with an unfamiliar Western storyline as in a similar movie, *Philadelphia* (1993). It is the story of Andrew Bennet (Tom Hanks), who is infected with HIV and is fired from his job, wrongly accused of negligence. He challenges his office and fights for his rights and dignity. This film is the theme of the movie *Phir Milenge* (2004) directed by Revathi, which tells the story of Tamanna Sahni (Shilpa Shetty), who loses her job when the people at the office come to know that she is infected with HIV. But while Jonathan Demme in *Philadelphia* narrated the story of a homosexual and the stigma and shame associated with it, Revathi preferred to stick to a heterosexual narrative. Onir, in the interview 'Gay India ', says:

[...] the language of the film, the codes... that are used in very traditional Indian cinema... like there is music... there are songs...the film centres around the family which is very important in India. And I wanted to do it like that because I didn't want my film to be just going to the festivals and people for whom it [is] meant for, don't see it. ("*Gay India: Onir director of My Brother... Nikhil*" 0:03:25 - 0:03:46).



Figure 4.4 – Nikhil is isolated in a dilapidated sanatorium highlighting the institutional stigma and isolation leading to a dehumanising treatment

Anu breaks the news of Nikhil being HIV positive to Nigel and asks him to go to Bombay and get tested. She reassures Nigel that she knows of the relationship between the two and that she loves him. Anu, Nigel and Sam reach the sanatorium where Nikhil is quarantined. It is a dirty place that has not been occupied for the past few years and was used to keep TB patients before. Nikhil is locked up in the room where there is hardly any light, signifying the absence of hope as shown in Fig. 4.4. Nigel and Nikhil share a beautiful and poignant moment in the sanatorium. In an emotional scene, Nigel is seen to be deeply hurt by the fact that Nikhil didn't tell him about his condition. It is an intimate scene in which the midshot captures the love and concern of the lovers for each other. The scene is complemented by the instrumental rendition of "Le Chalein... Le Chalein".

Nikhil: *You are really upset with me, aren't you?*

Nigel: *Of course, I am upset... you hid such a big thing from me Nikhil.*

Nikhil: *I did not wish to hide it from you... but I myself did not know what was happening to me, I just suspected...*

Nigel: *You could have told me...*

Nikhil: *I was scared Nigel... scared to face the truth...* (Onir 48)

The scene is designed in the style of most Bollywood heterosexual love stories, and the emotional outburst helps the audience to empathise with the characters. In the final days of Nikhil, they both spend many days together, and the space for showing the growing bond between the two increases. Subsequent scenes show the bonding of the couple with touching poignancy.

Kelly, Nikhil's friend and his swimming competitor, represents the public consciousness when he says, "*This is what happens when you go against nature, against God*" (Onir 49). He is afraid to position himself as a friend of Nikhil and describes him as a bit strange: "*He was a little strange, you know... I wasn't really a part of his friend circle*" (Onir 52). It is a dilemma how dominant societal beliefs are shaped by religion and other patriarchal institutions. He asserts his superiority, positioning himself as a judge over Nikhil.

Nigel is actively involved in a legal battle for Nikhil when he recounts, "*the press here is treating him (Nikhil) like a pervert...*" (Onir 51). When Nigel returns from the 'Free Nikhil' campaign, he finds his house ransacked and everything destroyed, along with the graffiti on his wall, 'faggot'. The low-angle shot in which Nigel is captured in the midst of the devastating reality shows the utter helplessness he feels (*My Brother... Nikhil*, 1:09:15). His feeling of shock is emphasised with the help of the background score:

What the narrative effectively does is assemble the point of views of people which echo common perceptions informed by dominant homophobic discourses, with which a Western audience or one who has exposure to the

Western discourse can easily associate. The linguistic expressions ‘sissy’, ‘masti’, ‘against god’, ‘against nature’, ‘perversion’ and ‘faggot’ refer more to the Western paradigm of homophobic discourse. (Labade 170)

The homophobic society becomes more and more violent towards Nigel and Anamika. Anu doesn’t get anyone to help around at her home and at school, and finds random voices threatening and banging doors at night. The fear psychosis created by a violent homophobic mob is produced to emphasise the depth of hatred in the minds of the people.

The apprehensions of Leena are typical of the homophobic society when she says she was terrified and got herself checked because she had kissed Nikhil, and they were considered a couple. The ignorance of society regarding HIV is clear in her words. Even when it’s clear that HIV spreads through body fluids, society is terrified of HIV patients and keeps them at bay. Leena says that it was difficult for her to live in Goa, “*Log hamein ghoor ghoorkein dekthein dhe as if I was some dirty thing.*” (“People stare at me as if I am a dirty thing”) (Onir 50). Even the doctors who should know better and who should be sensitising society treated him like an *achoot* (untouchable). It is interesting to note that when Nigel says that his blood tests were clear and that their relationship had nothing to do with the disease, there is a church in the background. Religion is instrumental in condemning homosexuality as abnormal and evil, and religious texts forbid homosexuality. The cross on the church serves as a paradox when it is framed against the close-up shot of Nigel trying to validate that their homosexual relationship was not the reason why Nikhil contracted HIV.

When Nigel and Anu meet Advocate Anjali Menezes, who agrees to take up Nikhil's case, Anjali expresses her desire to meet Nikhil. Nikhil conveys his wish to work for people like him who are infected with the virus. He wants Anjali to fight for all those people like him who have the right to live happily and to live with dignity. He expresses his helplessness and the hopeless condition to which he is doomed, and how he is constantly ignored by the people concerned. Anjali begins a public appeal and awareness campaign along with Anu, Nigel and Sam to sensitise people about HIV and the inhuman treatment of people infected. They speak to people one on one and also hold awareness camps where they speak about the violation of human rights in keeping Nikhil isolated and how he cannot be kept so indefinitely. As a result of their efforts and representations to the ministry, they get the ministry to review the AIDS Act, and Nikhil is released after three months.

After coming back, Nikhil wants to rejoin the bank where he was working. He is lamenting his own condition, where he could not get out of his own house without the permission of the court. He might incite fear in society if he gets out, so he is kept away from the mainstream. Despite his having a court order that allows him to continue working there, he is told that his colleagues are afraid to work with him. He decides to resign from the bank and begins to pursue his interest in teaching music and painting.

Nikhil's parents decide to leave Goa and go to Bombay as they fear people's harassment and mental torture. They refuse to stay back and take care of Nikhil. His own family doesn't want him. Anamika is the only one who stays back for Nikhil. She refuses to leave despite her father's threats. This is when Anamika takes up a considerate, thoughtful and liberal stand. The homosexual relationship of Nikhil is

not something that embarrasses her. She accepts the news compassionately. Her acceptance does not arise from compulsion, but from understanding. As Sachin Ramesh notes, “Anamika becomes a validating authority and protector of the relation between Nigel and Nikhil. Her acceptance does not come out of compulsion but an understanding of the relationship” (171). Their parents return for Anamika’s marriage to Sam and meet Nikhil. His father chooses to ignore him and his mother is not able to converse with him. Nikhil feels distressed that even after so many days his father would not speak with him. During a conversation, Nikhil asks Nigel why he hasn’t asked about how Nikhil got the virus. Nigel replies that it doesn’t matter as he will not be able to leave him. Nigel speaks to the camera, “*How did Nikhil get infected? There can be various possibilities, but I don’t want to discuss those with you. Because it’s not important to know how he got AIDS, what is important is to know how he was treated after he had it*” (Onir 76). Oliver Ross comments on *My Brother... Nikhil* that:

The refusal to divulge how Nikhil became infected can partly be interpreted as a demurral to expound on identities and practices of homosexuality. By focusing on the culpability of those who mistreated Nikhil because of his HIV-positive status, Nigel diverts attention away from the moral implications of contracting the virus through male–male sex, which has the paradoxical effects of vindicating this practice and returning it to the realm of the unspoken. (145)

The public campaigns and sensitisation programmes they started give rise to an NGO, ‘People Positive’, that helps people like Nikhil. Nigel and Anamika work for ‘People Positive’ and collect information from all over the world regarding HIV

positive people. Dominic D'Souza, on whose life the movie is based, founded 'Positive People' in 1992. It is an NGO that works for people living with AIDS and people who are at risk of contracting it. AIDS activist organisations were a central part of the new queer cinema. The cinematic genre itself was a response to the crisis. Indianising new queer ideologies, Onir has brought an emerging representation of alternate sexualities onscreen in a conventionally Indian heterosexual cultural background.

Popular cinema talked about the outreach and awareness that could be brought among the educated and the uneducated. Later in 2007, possibly influenced by Onir, a film like Sridhar Rangayan's *68 Pages* was produced by Humsafar Trust and was made as part of the National AIDS Control Programme. It talked about a counsellor and her patients, ranging from a transsexual bar dancer, an intravenous drug user, a sex worker, to a gay man. The film was screened all over the country to transform people's outlook towards HIV infected people. According to Vikram Phukan, *68 Pages* "plays out as a melodrama rather than merely a public awareness infomercial about AIDS and safe sex" (40). "Resembling *My Brother... Nikhil* in its 'entertainment-education' strategy, *68 Pages* has also been central in national programs of HIV/AIDS counselling and prevention" (Ross 147).

In *My Brother... Nikhil*, Nikhil tries to explore his artistic side during his final days. In the first few shots, Anita is showing a painting that Nikhil had made when he was eight years old. He could not do much about his singing and painting skills as his parents wanted him to become a sportsman. There is also tension between the artistic and athletic sensibilities of Nikhil. "The realms in which masculine solidarity networks are constructed that guarantee access to networks of influence, alliances,

and support are reproduced through a masculine culture of sports” (Connell 263). In *My Brother... Nikhil*, masculinity is portrayed as a site of negotiation, conflict, and eventual transformation. Nikhil’s upbringing is marked by his father’s rigid expectations of traditional masculinity, emphasising discipline, athleticism, and emotional restraint. The father’s insistence on "masculine" pursuits, such as competitive sports, becomes a mechanism of control, demanding conformity to a heteronormative ideal of manhood. Nikhil, in an attempt to gain his father’s approval, internalises and performs this prescribed masculinity, suppressing other facets of his identity in the process. However, his HIV diagnosis and subsequent outing catalyse a rupture in this carefully curated performance. Expelled from his home and alienated by his family, Nikhil is no longer bound by the imperative to uphold the image of the ideal son. This estrangement paradoxically becomes a space of liberation, allowing him to embrace dimensions of his selfhood previously deemed unacceptable, particularly his artistic inclinations and his queerness. The film subtly associates these reclaimed aspects with an alternative, often subordinated, form of masculinity—one that is more fluid, expressive, and emotionally vulnerable, and often culturally coded as effeminate. In forming relationships with others on the margins—friends, queer allies, and HIV-positive individuals—Nikhil not only comes to terms with his identity but also reconstructs a masculinity that resists domination and embraces care, creativity, and solidarity. His eventual act of coming out to those around him signifies not just a personal revelation but a broader challenge to the hegemonic model of masculinity that the film critiques throughout.

Nikhil's father consistently emphasised traditionally masculine traits, especially those tied to athleticism and physical discipline. To meet these expectations and gain approval, Nikhil immersed himself in sports like swimming, adopting a version of masculinity that aligned with his father's ideals. It is only after being disowned by his father that Nikhil finds the space to engage with his creative impulses. Freed from the need to perform a dominant, heteronormative masculinity, he begins to explore aspects of himself that are often associated with softer, marginalised expressions of manhood. Nikhil pursued creative arts like painting, which he always wanted to pursue, but could not due to the influence of his father.

Ashish, Anamika's son, is born, and Nikhil enjoys spending time with him. Nigel is shown handing over the baby to Nikhil in the shot in fig 4.5 that symbolically resembles a family. Anamika is positioned in the centre as a validating authority. Homosexual couples often think of adopting a child to become parents and to add value and depth to their relationships. Later, Nikhil's health worsens, and the film explores the relationship between him and Nigel in its poignancy. Nigel grows into a committed, care-giving partner, and the pair resembles one in a conventional heterosexual love story, making it easier for the audience to feel empathetic. The film emphasises the politics of acceptability more than the politics of identity.



Figure 4.5 – The scene where Nigel gives the baby to Nikhil symbolising a family, in the presence of Anamika emphasising the joy of acceptance and emotional fulfillment.

Anamika requests her mother to call Nikhil back home and that he is waiting to come back home. Mr Kapoor considers this and meets Nikhil to ask him to come home. He tells Nikhil that they will celebrate the New Year together. Nikhil returns home, and Nigel is happy for Nikhil even though he knows that Nikhil will never return to his place. The shots showing the happy times they spend together are shown with the song “Le Chalein...” that Nigel sings for Nikhil. Nikhil is shown as playing with Aashish, looking at old photographs with Nigel, Anu and Sam, and spending time with Nigel (fig 4.6).



Figure 4.6 – The shot of Nikhil’s homecoming emphasises the final reconciliation of the family and Nikhil

The film focuses on the nurturing companionship and intimacy of Nikhil and Nigel and it takes homosexual relationships as much more than desire for sex.

During his last moments, Nikhil bids goodbye to Anu and Sam. He asks Nigel not to feel alone in life. By morning, when Nikhil asks about the time and when Nigel replies that it is 5.30 in the morning, Nikhil says that it will be another day in half an hour. Nikhil dies, and true to his words, it becomes another significant day in their life. Nigel later talks to the camera about his favourite moments with Nikhil. Nikhil always liked this time after night and before sunrise. Nigel says that he feels lonely at times, but waits for another sunrise. Sunrise could be metaphorical here because we see Nikhil's school principal arranging a prayer meeting for his first death anniversary, which is something very uncommon in Goa. That gesture was uncommon due to the stigma surrounding AIDS and the circumstances of Nikhil's death. However, the future holds promise, marked by emerging hope and progress.

Nikhil's parents meet Nigel after the memorial service and feel sorry for keeping him away even after knowing that he gave so much love to Nikhil. Earlier, he was mostly addressed as Nikhil's good-for-nothing friend. They were not ready to accept Nigel as Nikhil's partner. Nigel says that his parents want him to go back to Dubai, but Nikhil's parents ask him not to leave them as Nikhil did. Nigel goes to Dubai and returns after one month. Nigel and Anamika work for People Positive, and Nikhil's parents accept Nigel as their own son. The movie ends with a last rendition of the song "Le Chalein... Le Chalein".

The song is very significant to the theme of the movie. The song enhances the narrative of love at just the right moments. There are three versions of the song sung by KK, Sunidhi Chauhan and Shaan. The song is played six times in the movie.

It is first heard at the beginning when the shots of Nikhil growing up with Anu are shown, and then Nikhil sings the song when Anu and Sam are dancing at a party. Later on, it is sung by Anu on Nikhil's release from the sanatorium, and then when Nigel and Nikhil spend time together in his final days. After that, Nigel sings the song when Nikhil was dying and finally, during the end credits, when again Anamika and Nikhil are shown swimming together.

The sea plays a prominent role in the movie, serving as a powerful symbol. All the romantic encounters between Nikhil and Nigel take place by the seaside, heightening the significance of this setting. Anamika expresses her insecurities to Sam regarding being neglected by her parents in comparison to Nikhil by the seaside, thereby highlighting the vulnerability and honesty associated with water as a reflective space (Fig. 4.7). She confesses her love to Sam at the shore. Anamika playfully teases Nikhil about Leena, which causes a fight between Nikhil and Nigel at the seaside. Nikhil speaks to Leena about his inability to love her by the sea. Throughout Nikhil's journey, the sea stands as a significant spectator of all the important moments of Nikhil's life. Nikhil, being a swimmer, is closely associated with water. It represents his freedom, passion and a source of solace. His house is near the sea. Water is his element. Water becomes his world of individual achievement. The recurring presence of water symbolises various emotions, themes and character dynamics throughout the movie.



Figure 4.7 – Confessions and opening up of heart always happen with the sea as the background as in this scene where Nikhil opens up to Anamika

The film's concentration on AIDS rather than the seeming underbelly of a gay culture shows how 'respectable' individuals with a gay secret life were brutally thrown into the spotlight. Although it is obvious that Nikhil must have contracted HIV through an anonymous contact that was common in the gay community, the movie does not reveal how Nikhil could have contracted the virus. The film locates the story of individual tragedy within the moral panic of this epidemic. "The film entirely disengages from the obsession with 'innocent victims' that mainstream media messages on HIV/AIDS in India have displayed. Instead, the film does locate this story of individual tragedy within the moral panic that grip the early years of the epidemic" (Ghosh 433). The protagonist's sexuality and subjectivity are not prominently highlighted, resulting in their invisibility. As a result, *My Brother... Nikhil* transforms into a familiar family drama, where the narrative's depiction of happiness is abruptly interrupted by a moral dilemma rather than a medical issue. The film is a gay love story in the template of a family drama. By not concentrating on the gay world (Nikhil and Nigel are the only gays in the entire movie) and by concentrating on family and social relationships in the 'normal' world, the film gives

a sense of how difficult it is for anyone to come out of the closet. It is a closet out of which an individual can be thrown only with the brutal revelation of a horrifying illness.

My Brother... Nikhil met with genuine concern and applause for it portrayed its characters with sympathy and subtlety. Onir, in a later interview, remarked that many gay people have used this movie to come out to their family and that his social media is cluttered with thank you messages from these people (Gay India). During his screening in San Francisco, many in the audience were seen to be sobbing. The movie, dealing with two taboo topics - HIV and homosexuality, became a beacon of hope for many. The audience in general could also connect with the theme of hope and love. The film was one of the first defiant queer voices in Hindi cinema.

My Brother... Nikhil is a powerful coming-out narrative that sheds light on the struggles of forbidden love and the harsh stigmatisation faced by AIDS patients. At its core, the film explores the trauma of its protagonist, Nikhil, as he grapples not only with his diagnosis but also with the societal rejection that follows his truth. His journey of coming out—both as a gay man and as someone living with HIV—exposes the deep-seated prejudices of a homophobic and biased society. The film sensitises viewers to the injustice inflicted by discriminatory public health laws while emphasising the importance of love, acceptance, and family support. By humanising gay characters and portraying their lived realities with sensitivity, *My Brother... Nikhil* challenges prevailing stereotypes and makes a compelling appeal for dignity, justice, and equality.

My Brother... Nikhil is also about the inability of the protagonist to come out of the closet. Coming out is an intensely personal and painful experience. The film

showcased the societal prejudice against homosexuality as well as HIV. The film interrogates the difficulties in family dynamics while acknowledging and embracing diverse identities. The film marks the journey of Nikhil towards self-acceptance and freedom from internalised shame and fear.

CHAPTER 5

BOMBAY TALKIES

Homophobia circulates the idea of ‘shame culture’, which gains significance in the context of family relations. Homophobia isn’t just about how people treat others; it can also be something people struggle with internally. Closeted homosexuals, if they try to come out to family, are emotionally blackmailed to remain closeted and engage in a heterosexual marriage. The family threaten to commit suicide or become critically ill if the person refuses to do so.

When homophobia is internal, the subject and the object are one, and the guilt and the shame experienced by the person are intensified. Psychoanalytic theories state that:

[a]nxiety about the possibility of being or becoming a homosexual may be a major factor in homophobia. For example, de Kuiper (1993) has asserted that homophobia is the result of the remnants of homosexuality in the heterosexual resolution of the Oedipal conflict. Whereas these notions are vague, psychoanalytic theories usually postulate that homophobia is a result of repressed homosexual urges or a form of latent homosexuality. *Latent homosexuality* can be defined as homosexual arousal which the individual is unaware of. (Adams et al 442)

The idea of homophobia in such instances takes a defensive function, that is, the homophobic attitude is internalised within. It is a psychological construct in an individual who internalises even the negative attitudes conflicting with the self-

regard of the person. This will lead to self-denigration or identification with heterosexual beliefs as theorised by Allport (29). The internalised homophobia sprouts from fear of one's latent homosexuality, or insecurity about one's sense of identity as a man or woman. There is internal conflict arising from the fact of who they think they should be and who they are. There is pressure to show exaggerated heterosexism to make his latent homosexual element within himself invisible. "One strategy for avoiding anxiety is to deny that the unacceptable feeling or characteristic is part of oneself and to project it outward onto some convenient person or object in the environment. The person can then hate or fear that external object (which symbolises some part of the self) without hating or fearing herself" (Herek 931).

Bombay Talkies, an anthology film by Karan Johar, was released on the eve of the celebrations of 100 years of Indian cinema. The film was also screened at the 2013 Cannes Festival. "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", a part of the anthology, features the life of a closeted gay person. "It is a short film which is a sensitive portrayal of a complex gay identity which uses a gay relationship to explore the complexity of the relationship" (Bhugra et al. 458).

"Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" is set against the urban backdrop of Mumbai and the narrative explores themes of love, longing, and acceptance. The film sensitively captures the pulse of the city, bringing its energy and cultural diversity to life. It is the story of three people, Avinash, Dev and Gayatri, whose lives intersect in unexpected ways, revealing the complications of human relationships. Above all, it is a film that deals with the admission of homosexuality to oneself and of the trauma of coming out to one's long-suffering wife. Coming out to one's parents is not a

betrayal of the parent, but coming out to one's wife is a betrayal of the promises of marriage.

The film begins with Avinash (Saqib Saleem), a gay youngster, bursting into his house and shouting at his father. He yells, "*Chakka nahin hoon main. Homosexual hoon. Itna farq jaanta hain na baba, Professor hain na.*" ("I am not a eunuch. I am a homosexual. You know the difference, right, Baba? You are a professor, after all"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:00:28). He shouts at his father that it is neither wrong to be a eunuch or a homosexual. But it is the mentality of people like his father that is wrong. Avinash leaves his home. "Avinash may not be the prototype of "goodness" or likability, but considered from another, markedly queer perspective, he opens up, for himself and those around him, radical possibilities of re-negotiating subjectivity, identity and space" (Chopra 179). The plot pictures him as an aggressive and difficult character who does not adjust to his family. His outburst is focused as much on his father as the discourse of family itself, recognised here as the institution "that...naturalises compulsory heterosexuality, delegitimising potential flows of desire along innumerable and unpredictable dimensions" (Menon 36).

Avinash disrupts the stereotypes of masculinity upheld in mainstream Bollywood cinema. His demeanour is intentionally stylised; his speech is laced with sarcasm and irony, and his emotional expressiveness borders on the melodramatic, traits that align with Susan Sontag's understanding of camp as an aesthetic of excess and artifice. Sontag, in her "Notes on Camp" (1964), defines camp as an aesthetic sensibility that favors exaggeration, theatricality, and a conscious embrace of stylisation and irony. Within queer cultural contexts, it often serves as a subversive

mode of expression that challenges and destabilises dominant norms of taste, seriousness, and gender conformity (2). The character of Avinash serves as a compelling embodiment of camp through his flamboyant performance, exaggerated physicality, and self-aware, witty demeanour. His sartorial choices and expressive mannerisms deliberately deviate from heteronormative conventions, asserting a form of queer visibility that is both defiant and celebratory. Avinash's character, imbued with irony and performative affectation, transcends mere entertainment; he becomes a site of queer resistance, reclaiming narrative space within a cinematic tradition that has historically marginalised LGBTQ+ identities.

Avinash openly expresses his sexuality in a way that both affirms his identity and challenges the dominant heterosexual norms. Rather than hiding or softening his behaviour, as queer individuals are often expected to do, Avinash is bold and expressive. This makes people around him uncomfortable, as they are used to seeing only heterosexual expressions of desire in public. His use of camp is not just a personal style but also a way to reflect and exaggerate heterosexual flirting, revealing how normalised it is. By acting in ways typically associated with heterosexual desire, Avinash unsettles social expectations and exposes their double standards. His character is like a figurative slap to a society that reacts with outrage when homosexual desire mirrors heterosexual visibility. His character highlights a different side of homophobia; the discomfort society feels when queer people not only exist but express themselves as freely as heterosexuals do.

Avinash's first encounter with Gayatri (Rani Mukherjee) in their office is another sequence that reveals the campiness of his character. Gayatri, the Associate Editor of the newspaper, reaches the office and greets everyone while casting an eye

at her new co-worker, Avinash, who has now joined for an internship at Gayatri's office and he chides her, "*Gale mein mangalsutra, aankom mein Kamasutra*" ("mangalsutra on the neck, desire in the eyes"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:03:35). When Avinash introduces himself to Gayatri later as the new intern, "*waise to intern hoon. Agar aapne recommend kar diya to teen mahine baad permanent ho jayenga.*" ("I am an intern. If you recommend me, I will become permanent after three months"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:03:40). She replies, "*Let's see if you last that long.*" He replies in a pun, "*Trust me I last very long*" ("Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:03:48). Avinash's sharp, quick-witted dialogues, rich with double entendres and playful linguistic turns, actively disrupt conventional forms of communication, enabling him to undermine heteronormative discourse through layers of humour and suggestive wordplay.

He attempts to have a conversation with Gayatri, but she does not acknowledge him. He says, "*Mujhe bhi bold gym trainer types ache lagthe hei.. rough, tough, puff*" ("I too like these strong men...rough, tough and puff"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:04:02). He goes on to say that he is gay. He becomes astonished and sad when she doesn't look surprised. "*I am gay, by the way. Kya madam, itna flat reaction. Is line mein tho over reaction bantha hai*" ("You are reacting very toned down. You should overreact for this matter"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:04:11). Being a person who has come out of the closet, Avinash is free of judgements. Avinash, having openly accepted his identity, anticipates a strong emotional response to his coming out, shaped by past experiences of shock, rejection, or judgment. His dismay at Gayatri's calm and unaffected reaction highlights a key paradox of queer visibility, although queer individuals are

frequently subjected to stigma and discrimination, they can also feel overlooked or dismissed when their identity is met with indifference. Gayatri hardly looks at him, when she responds, “*Kyom gay ho, terrorist nahi.*” (“You are gay, not a terrorist”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:04:14). This challenges the sensationalism often attached to homosexuality in mainstream discourse, positioning queerness as ordinary rather than deviant. Avinash is taken aback by her reply as until now everyone treated him differently after knowing about his sexuality. He humorously replies that she should tell that to his father. He goes on to say, “*Kasab hota tho chod dethe. Gay ho, tho phasi pe chadana chahtha hai*” (“Kasab would have been free to go, but since I am gay, I will be hanged till death”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:04:22). This response is not merely a joke, but a stark commentary on how queerness is criminalised and morally condemned, often more harshly than actual acts of violence.

Gayatri and Avinash become friends very fast. During one of their conversations, Avinash introduces the cultural codes through which queer identities are often recognised and related to one another. When Gayatri asks Avinash, “*I always wanted to know, tumhe kaise patha chaltha hai ki koi gay he ya nahi?*” (“How do you understand if a person is gay or not?”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:05:40). Avinash replies, “*Simple hain. Usse jaake pooch, are you a Sreedevi fan or Madhuri fan? Sreedevi hai tho definitely gay. She is high camp dude. All gay men love her.*” (“Just ask them if they are a Sreedevi fan or Madhuri fan. If they prefer Sreedevi, they are gay”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:05:51). His response reveals the significance of gay iconography within queer subcultures. Sreedevi is undoubtedly a gay icon. By declaring Sridevi as “high camp,” Avinash not only

reaffirms her status as a gay icon but also aligns her exaggerated performance style with his camp sensibility. Her campiness, which is rooted in over-the-top fashion, expressive dance sequences, and emotionally charged acting, mirrors Avinash's rejection of subtlety in favour of unapologetic visibility.

Gayatri shares a natural warmth and emotional closeness with Avinash, which is in contrast with the distant and formal nature of her relationship with her husband, Dev. Her interactions with Avinash are open, relaxed, and filled with genuine conversation and laughter, indicating a sense of comfort and mutual understanding. In comparison, her exchanges with Dev appear detached and emotionally restrained, pointing to a lack of intimacy in their marriage. The difference between these relationships emphasises how conventional marital roles can sometimes lack emotional depth, while unexpected connections can offer a more authentic sense of companionship.

Dev, played by Randeep Hooda, is a closeted gay man trying to fit into the mould of a conventional life with his wife. From the start, the film quietly reveals the absence of love and passion in their marriage. Small, everyday moments speak volumes, like the way they sleep on opposite edges of the bed, separated by an invisible yet undeniable distance. In Figure 5.1, this physical gap between them becomes a visual metaphor for their emotional disconnect. For Dev, the marriage is not a reflection of love but a carefully crafted facade, his way of blending in, of conforming to societal norms while keeping his true self hidden. His fear of getting societal acceptance compels him to stay in a heterosexual marriage. Raj Rao in his work, *Criminal Love* notes that, "Marriage and the creation of a family do not automatically put a stop to their same-sex sexual activity" (4). Dev and Gayatri's

strained relationship sheds light on the quiet struggles of those who feel pressured to live a life that doesn't truly belong to them, highlighting the emotional cost of hiding who they are.



Figure 5.1 - scene that shows the symbolic and visual disconnect between Dev and Gayatri

Daryl J Higgins in her study “Gay Men in Heterosexual Marriages” states that high levels of self-loathing and negative views of homosexuality lead gay men to a heterosexual lifestyle (17). Dev is putting up with the heterosexual marriage with Gayatri for the sake of society and never acknowledges his gayness, rather, showing a repulsion towards it. The close-up shots highlight Gayatri’s sensuousness, but her husband, Dev, remains indifferent, making her allure feel unnoticed and unappreciated.

The closeted homosexual in a heterosexual marriage is in an ordinary plight in a country like India. Families and individuals are pressured into ‘living a lie’, a happy facade in the heterosexual culture, engaging in a heterosexual marriage and procreation. The heterosexual culture promotes heteronormativity and further offers the vision of heterosexual marriage to have a good life. Heterosexual marriage also

becomes a vehicle to accumulate and transfer capital, and it also imparts a space for intimacy, making sex personal and irrelevant. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner state that ‘heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures (193).

Gayatri invites Avinash home for dinner on his birthday. When Gayatri says, “*He is mad, he is gay*” (“Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:08:09), it resonates the notion of how homosexuality was often equated with madness. When Dev learns that Avinash is gay, he becomes visibly uncomfortable. This could be read as an instance of internalised homophobia. As Meyer opines, this leads individuals who identify as homosexuals to internalise cultural anti-homosexual views, leading to internalised homophobia, long before they become aware of their sexuality (2009). The film vividly depicts the position of homosexuals in Indian society, where they confront exclusion if they express their sexuality and internal stress if they remain in a closet (Prasitha and Bhuvaneswari, 2024).

Avinash looks at Dev during dinner and talks about how he wanted to meet a newsreader for a long time. Dev’s demeanor shifts, and he initiates an argument with Gayatri, prompting Avinash to step in. When he comments about ‘make-up sex’ to Gayatri, she simply smirks. Before Dev can escalate the disagreement, Gayatri interjects, casually revealing that it is Avinash’s birthday. Dev wishes Avinash ‘Happy Birthday’ to which he responds, “*Thank you. Par aap mujhe dekhe kyun nahi baath kar rahe hai? ... I am gay, but I don’t bite unless koi chahe*” (“Why don’t you look at me when you talk. I am gay and I don’t bite unless you want me to”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:09:23). Avinash’s remarks are laced with sexual

innuendos, reinforcing his portrayal as a hypersexualised character. Sensing that Dev might be gay, he begins to flirt with him, leaning into familiar stereotypes.

Dev treats Avinash with indifference and scolds him that overfamiliarity is a problem with the younger generation. Dev's indifference can be interpreted as a manifestation of Dev's internal conflict, rooted in his concealed sexuality. Avinash explains that he doesn't belong to his generation and that he likes older people, old memories, and old songs. Gayatri notes that Dev too likes old songs. Avinash reminisces his love for old classics like Madan Mohan's song "Lag Jaa Gale...", from the 1964 movie *Woh Kaun Thi*. When Gayatri asks Dev to take Avinash to his special room, Avinash flirtatiously comments, "*Special kya, mein tho inke saath koi bhi room mein jaane ke liye thayyar hoom.*" ("Why special, I am willing to go to any room with him"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:10:04). Avinash's playful and exaggerated comment, shaped by his camp sensibility, introduces humour while subtly challenging the conventional norms of behaviour within the household. Gayatri, in a quick attempt to reassert her marital boundaries, asks him to shut up, "*Shut up! He is my husband*" ("Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:10:10).

They go into his record room where the song "Lag Jaa Gale..." is played in the background. Avinash exclaims, "*Boss, kya kamara hai. It's even better than sex.*" ("What a room"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:10:20). When Avinash asks Dev whether he spends his time too often in the room, he responds, "*Yes. Mein aur mere tanhayi.*" ("My loneliness and I"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:10:35) subtly revealing his emotional isolation. This scene is significant as it highlights the contrast between Avinash's vibrant, camp persona and Dev's quiet, inward sadness, reflecting the broader conflict between hidden desire and open self-expression. The

record room, filled with nostalgic music and personal memories, serves as a symbolic space where Dev's concealed emotions and loneliness briefly come to the surface. Avinash becomes interested and asks him why he listens to music when he is lonely. Dev replies that music has the power to change one's thoughts. Avinash retorts that sometimes people don't even get time to think about their thoughts. Avinash comes close to Dev in the guise of taking the CD and says as if he is reading the titles, "*Tum itna jo muskura rahe ho... Kya gham hai jo chupa rahe ho?*" ("When you smile so much, what is the distress that you are hiding"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:10:50)? He soon adds, "*Yeh sawal tha by the way*" ("That was a question"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:11:09). Avinash transforms a casual interaction into a moment of emotional confrontation.

Music plays a significant role in the movie as an emotional undercurrent that conveys what characters often cannot express in words. In Indian cinema, music has been a powerful storytelling tool that is used to heighten emotions, deepen inner conflicts, and give voice to unspoken feelings. The emotionally charged moments in the movies are conveyed with the help of music. It amplifies silences, fills emotional gaps, and links the audience to the character's inner life with a depth that cannot be achieved through dialogue. The songs in *Bombay Talkies* echo a sense of loss and unfulfilled desire that defines the central character's inner world. The film attempts to reappropriate iconic Bollywood songs that is originally set against heterosexual romances and uses them to highlight a queer love story. Songs like "Lag Ja Gale" and "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" are not incidental. These songs carry the emotional weight of the narrative and serve as tools of expression for the inner turmoil and unspoken desires of the characters. These songs are associated with heterosexual

longing, and in the film, they are recontextualised to reflect the emotional mentality of Dev and Avinash, giving their relationship the kind of cinematic gravity traditionally associated with straight couples. The street singer functions almost like a one-person Greek chorus reflecting the emotions of Dev, Avinash, and Dev's wife. Each musical moment corresponds with key points in the movie, serving as a crystallisation of feelings that the characters themselves strive to articulate.

Avinash is convinced that Dev is a closeted gay person. To confirm his thoughts, Avinash asks Gayatri, "*How often do you have sex with your husband?*" "*Ek, ya do baar... mahine mein... sex is overrated. Shadi ke kayi saal baad, kabhi kabhad hi hotha hai.*" ("Once or twice in a month. Sex is overrated. After so many years of marriage, it happens only once in a while"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:12:06). Her composed reaction reveals a sense of emotional resignation, as well as an acceptance of a traditional idea of marriage. This exchange underscores Gayatri's silent perseverance in a relationship defined by emotional detachment and lack of intimacy, shedding light on the quiet disillusionment she has had to maintain the facade of a stable marital life. We see Avinash gifting the book *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011) to Gayatri. It is an erotic fiction that involves romance and other themes such as sexuality, power and desire. It is a story of sexuality that began dialogues about female sexuality in the public sphere. The film takes on a bedroom shot where both husband and wife are aloof and in two different worlds. In figure 5.2, Dev is doing something on his laptop, while Gayatri is reading the book and looks at Dev, who is unaware of her emotions. She has to sublimate her longings in reading that book. The lack of intimacy and passion in their marital life is portrayed in that single shot.



Figure 5.2 - Gayatri looking at Dev longingly depicts the lack of physical intimacy between Dev and Gayatri in their bedroom

Avinash goes to meet Dev, who has a guest at his place. When Dev answers the door, a person is shown going up the stairs. The director is signifying that it could be Dev's sexual partner, as he had earlier called Gayatri to confirm that she would be late coming home. Higgins opines that after suppressing sexual desires for other men over a long period of time, 'married men increasingly seek out sexual contact with other men' (5). Married gay men achieve congruence through (a) identification and participation in the gay world and (b) disclosure of gay identity to others. This usually leads to the breakdown of the marriage relationship or a significant redefinition of relationship, such as an open relationship (qtd. in Latham and White, 1978).

When Dev invites Avinash inside, Avinash playfully responds, "*You want to come out?*" ("Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:12:50) (fig 5.3). The seemingly casual remark catches Dev off guard, as he momentarily processes the deeper, symbolic meaning behind the phrase. The words 'coming out' resonate beyond their literal context, alluding to the personal and often challenging journey of openly

acknowledging one's queer identity. Avinash's remark, whether intentional or not, forces Dev to confront an unspoken reality, creating a moment of tension and introspection.



Figure 5.3 - Avinash asking Dev to come out literally and symbolically is significant as he is one who encourages Dev to accept his truth

Avinash takes Dev to the railway station to meet a girl who sings for a living. When promised money, she sings “Lag Jaa Gale...”. Dev struggles with his thoughts to restrain his emotions while Avinash continues to gaze at Dev hopefully, silently urging him to acknowledge his truth. When the girl says that she doesn’t lie and it’s bad to lie, Dev is uncomfortable because his whole life has been a lie. For Avinash, this moment is filled with anticipation, as he hopes that Dev will find the courage to “come out” and embrace his true self. However, Dev is trapped in a battle with his own fear, shame, and internalised homophobia, which prevents him from confronting his sexuality. This scene foregrounds the emotional complexity of coming out, particularly for those who are conditioned to hide their identity out of fear of rejection or shame.

The Zoo Story (1959) is one of Edward Albee’s most famous plays built around the existential theme of an authentic life. In the play, Jerry is a character who

nudges Peter out of a meaningless life into a consciousness of what an authentic life is. Jerry continuously taunts Peter, pushing him out of his comfortable and controlled existence, where he has constructed a life based on societal expectations and personal repression. Jerry's relentless probing of Peter's life strips away the socially imposed norms and superficialities he clings to, ridiculing his orderly suburban existence and urging him to confront the existential emptiness beneath the surface. Similarly, in *Bombay Talkies*, Avinash serves as a catalyst for Dev's confrontation with his true identity. Avinash, much like Jerry, is unafraid to challenge the facades that others hide behind, particularly the one Dev has built around his sexuality. Throughout their interactions, Avinash taunts and provokes Dev, pushing him to confront the reality of his existence as a closeted gay man. Dev, like many closeted individuals, is terrified not only of his internalised shame but also of the repercussions he will face from the society around him once he steps out of the closet.

The next day, when Gayatri informs Avinash that Dev had been in an unusually cheerful mood and that they had sex, he is distressed to hear it as he knows that he is the reason for it. Avinash visits Dev at his workplace, where Dev is visibly taken aback by his unexpected presence. Avinash grasps Dev's hand and confronts him, and Dev angrily demands that he leave. Avinash insists he will say goodbye, but in an unexpected and provocative gesture, sensually nuzzles Dev's neck in front of his colleagues, an act that unsettles Dev by exposing his sexuality to public scrutiny and potential judgment.

Dev reacts with anger and physically assaults Avinash in response to the public display of affection. Bigner in his article, "Working with Gay Fathers", notes

that “married gay men may have a high level of internalised homophobia due to their difficulty in accepting their erotic attraction to other men” (1996). Avinash says, “*Maarna चाहते हो. Maaro naa, I find it sexy.*” (“If you want to beat me, do it. I find it sexy”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:17:48). Dev asks him to leave and thrashes him. “Dev’s visceral outrage can be considered a reaction to being stalked by another man in a decidedly non-privatised, “official” setting, the substratum of his patriarchal prestige, social standing and “manliness” (Chopra 179).

Avinash had breached the understanding of the differences between private and public spaces. While Avinash is visibly upset by the exchange and chooses to leave, Dev’s sharp rebuke evokes memories of his own father’s harsh judgment. His father had boasted of his masculinity and disdainfully claimed that he could never produce a eunuch. He was utterly ashamed of his son. Both reactions are a result of homophobia. Dev has internalised homophobia and does not want to admit to himself that he is gay. On the other hand, Avinash’s father embodies a more overt form of homophobia. His outright rejection of Avinash, coupled with his refusal to accept his son’s sexuality, showcases the harmful societal norms that not only shape but also invalidate queer identities.

Dev arrives at Avinash’s place to offer an apology for his earlier actions. Although he expressed a wish to make amends, Avinash, still emotionally wounded, asks him to leave. Dev, however, refuses to leave and conveys his remorse. The tension between them stays in the air, and in a moment of frustration, Dev slaps Avinash but immediately regrets it. In Hindi cinema, the slap has long functioned as a complex narrative device used to signify intense emotional conflict, moral confrontation, or the threshold of romantic realisation. The slap operates within the

larger melodramatic fabric as a prelude to emotional clarity or the raw unveiling of desire. Avinash, rather than reacting with anger, simply admits that he is sad. Something shifts between them in that moment, a vulnerability that neither had openly acknowledged before. Dev leans in and kisses Avinash. The kiss is more than an expression of desire; it is a moment of raw connection, of emotions finally surfacing. Dev's kiss, shown in figure 5.4, does not simply imitate heterosexual love; instead, it queers a familiar cinematic gesture to explore themes of shame, repression, and desire. It is one of Bollywood's first and longest on-screen same-sex kisses, marking a rare and important moment of intimacy between two men in mainstream cinema. It is perhaps the longest lip lock between men in Bollywood.



Figure 5.4 - The kiss between Dev and Avinash is an act of reappropriating heterosexual romance

Soon after, Dev reacts violently by assaulting Avinash. This violence is the expression of self-hate. It is a desperate attempt to silence a part of himself that he has for so long suppressed. Disillusioned, Avinash asks Dev to leave, “*Get the hell out of here, bloody lunatic!*” (“Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:20:38) and pushes him out. This sequence underscores Dev's emotional turmoil and highlights his profound

difficulty in sustaining or engaging in intimate relationships. Regarding romantic relationships, Meyer and Dean opined that gay men with higher levels of internalised homophobia were less likely to be in intimate relationships (169). When they were in relationships, they were more likely to report problems with their partners than gay men with lower levels of internalised homophobia. A homophobic person will be guilty and full of self-hatred even when they are in a relationship. Dev leaves, and Avinash screams in despair. The following day, he goes to the office to inform Gayatri that her husband had kissed him last night. She was in the middle of a meeting, and later when Avinash tried to talk with her, she interrupted him stating, “*I heard you*” (“Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:21:35).

The film also explores the complexities of coming out, particularly in the workplace and within intimate relationships. The film portrays coming out in romantic relationships as fraught with tension and betrayal. Avinash’s decision to reveal Dev’s sexuality to Gayatri results in an involuntary outing, demonstrating the risks of trust and disclosure in a heteronormative world. Rather than an empowering act, coming out becomes a weapon—one that strips Dev of control over his own identity. The film critiques the way societal pressures and personal betrayals can force someone into the open in ways they did not choose. *Bombay Talkies* presents a stark portrayal of homophobia in contemporary India, revealing how systemic discrimination continues to shape queer experiences. While the film makes significant strides in representing gay narratives, it also highlights the enduring barriers to true acceptance. The narrative illustrates that despite increased visibility; queer individuals still struggle for autonomy over their identities and face discrimination in both personal and professional spheres. By addressing the ethical

dilemmas surrounding coming out, the film challenges viewers to consider the impact of forced disclosure and the lingering consequences of societal prejudice.

When Dev reaches home, he tries to act normal by engaging Gayatri in casual conversation, asking about her day and seeking physical intimacy. However, she resists his advances and moves away from him, signaling a rupture in their already fragile relationship. She goes to the mirror and wipes off the makeup from her face, symbolic of wiping off all that was false in her marriage. She confesses, *“Hamesha sochti dhi, ki mein hi kuch ghalat kar rahi hoon..ki mujme kuch kami thi..isliye hum....par...problem tum mein thi.. all these years... all we did was... live a lie. I just hate lies.* (“I always thought I did something wrong or something was wrong with me. So, we could not... But... the problem is with you”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:23:40). Her realisation not only discloses the emotional void and deception that have underpinned their marriage but it also asserts her agency in confronting that truth. As she removes her earrings and stands barefaced, she symbolically discards the societal expectations and performative femininity that have bound her to a loveless relationship. She shatters and finally says, *“I feel happy now... I feel free”* (“Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”, 0:25:05) (fig 5.5). The music elevates, and she says that it’s over. Now free from a loveless marriage, Gayatri embraces the freedom and self-respect that come with this emotional release. But it also grants Dev freedom to live as he chooses with self-respect.



Figure 5.5 – Dev confronting his truth and Gayatri walking out of a false relationship

The film tries to present the difficulty in coming out. After Avinash comes out to his family, he faces severe emotional abuse and rejection from his father. Rather than offering support or understanding, he responds with hostility, mocking and humiliating his son. Coming out to one's partner is often considered the most emotionally difficult form of coming out, as it involves revealing a deeply personal truth within a relationship built on intimacy, trust, and emotional interdependence. Dev is now lonely after he comes out to his wife. Coming out from within the confines of a heterosexual marriage presents one of the most emotionally complex experiences of a gay man's life. Often, the wife, in such a situation, feels a profound sense of betrayal because the marriage itself begins to appear as a deception. Coming out in a marriage reveals how emotionally damaging it is to live a lie for so long and shows how hard it is to find truth and self-acceptance in a relationship shaped more by social pressure than real emotional connection. In an effort to meet heteronormative expectations, the husband enters a marriage that requires him to suppress his true emotions and sexual identity, compelling him to adopt a role that

increasingly harms his sense of self. Each act of pretending gradually erodes his authenticity, leading to intense inner turmoil and emotional fatigue.

Unlike disclosures in other social contexts, like coming out to one's parents, this act carries the added risk of altering the fundamental dynamics of the relationship. The fear of rejection, disappointment, or emotional distance can be overwhelming, making the process intensely vulnerable. It requires not only the courage to be honest about one's identity but also the strength to potentially face the loss or transformation of a significant emotional bond.

The shot of Gayatri putting on makeup is contrasted with both the scene of removing makeup and the final scene of her putting on red lipstick. In the initial shot, Gayatri is adorning herself to get the attention of Dev, while in the later shots, she is first removing everything that is false in her marriage and in the last shot, she is being beautiful for herself. She is by then liberated from the shackles of her marriage. Her emotional and sexual freedom is hinted at with a red tone and close-up shots. "The parting shots of the film enact her metamorphosis into an assertive, self-assured and, above all, sensual individual. Provocatively dressed, pleasuring herself longingly, even narcissistically, Gayatri reconnects with her erotic self" (Chopra 180).

When Gayatri talks about living a lie, it doesn't just expose the cracks in a seemingly happy marriage; it also reflects Karan Johar's complicated and often unspoken relationship with his queer audience. Karan Johar has often alluded to his sexuality without ever directly confirming it, preserving a deliberately crafted public image. His connection with the queer community is both affectionate and fraught, as he incorporates queer-coded elements and characters into his films but remains

guarded about his personal identity. This ambiguity, combined with his use of camp humour in public appearances, highlights the complex and uneasy balance he maintains between being part of a marginalised group and seeking mainstream acceptance. Though he never came out and accepted his identity, he remains coy about it in his interviews. “Ajeeb Daastaan Hai Yeh” feels like an honest attempt from Johar to portray a queer character with sensitivity, something that was missing from many of his earlier films. Johar takes a step in a different direction, offering a more thoughtful and empathetic take on queer identity—perhaps signaling a change in how he tells these stories.

The dichotomy of truth and lie is a central thematic axis that structures both narrative tension and character development. Avinash functions as a bringer of truth in a society that often prefers the comfort of denial. Through his openness about his sexuality and his candid references to sex, he challenges the deeply ingrained norms that encourage dishonesty. In contrast, Dev embodies the life of a lie, and he consistently avoids confronting his true self, hiding behind the facade of a conventional marriage. While Dev clings to silence and conformity, Avinash insists on visibility and honesty. The film critiques a social order that punishes authenticity and rewards repression, exposing the emotional and psychological toll this dichotomy inflicts on those forced to live within it.

One of the most striking moments in the movie is when a young girl sings, with glimpses of people from different walks of life woven into the scene. In the shot that shows the girl singing, “Ajeeb dastaan hai yeh”, a song from the old film *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parayi* (1960), life in an urban city with people from different walks of life hustling along in the morning is shown. It is also the title of the short

film. The girl singing at the railway station is symbolic of the dreams and aspirations of all the people who gathered around there. The railway station functions as a profoundly symbolic space, capturing the essence of human transience, loneliness, and longing. It is a site where infinite lives intersect briefly before continuing on their separate paths. The railway station thus represents more than physical movement; it represents the emotional journey people take on in life. In this space between arrival and departure, the station becomes a meeting point of past memories and future possibilities. In the crowd, each person is alone, making their own journey and creating their own story. As the film unfolds, the song takes on a deeper meaning, shifting from the city's vibrancy to more personal struggles. Karan Johar is also trying to pay homage to the grand music industry in Bollywood in his movie, which is dedicated to the legacy of Hindi cinema.

The song is the backdrop of the shots of Avinash, Dev and Gayatri. The lyrics go,

“Mubarakein tume ki tum,

kisike noor hog aye,

kisi ke itne paas hoon,

Ki sabse door ho gaye.”

(“Congratulations to you

For now, you are dear to someone

You are so close to someone now

That you have grown distant from others.”; “Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh”,

0:25:25).

Dev goes to meet the girl at the station. She sings for him, and when she asks for money, he says he doesn't have any money. She says, "*Aap joot bol rahe ho.*" ("You are telling a lie"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:26:29). He replies then, "*Jhoot bolna bhuri bhaat hain na.*" ("Telling lies is bad, isn't it?"; "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh", 0:26:34). This conversation marks a subtle yet profound acknowledgement of the life of deceit he has led. This moment signals a significant shift in Dev's character, as now he is no longer telling lies and evading the truth. His life is authentic, though lonely. The film ends with an aerial shot of the railway station. Dev is small and isolated in a vast society, revealing his loneliness. The railway station, often associated with departures and arrivals, with endings and beginnings, becomes a liminal space where Dev's journey of self-denial concludes and a new journey of self-acceptance begins. This solitude, while deeply melancholic, is also redemptive; it is no longer rooted in repression but in the honesty of his emotional and sexual reality. Thus, the railway station becomes not just a physical location but a symbolic site of transformation.



Figure 5.6 - The colour scheme used in the movie where Gayatri is associated with warm colours and Dev and Avinash with darker and cooler tones.

Colour plays a key role in expressing emotion throughout the film. The colour scheme used in the film is important because it foreshadows the emotions of the characters. Most of the frames are cast in blue and orange shadows, as unhappiness and passion are the two emotions that are foregrounded. The scenes featuring Avinash and Dev are tinged with blue, a colour that seems to bind them together emotionally. Meanwhile, Gayatri is associated with warm tones of orange and red, setting her apart (fig 5.6). Dev's closet is full of shades of blue and grey, the colours that symbolise unhappiness. The closet here can be taken as the symbolic closet where Dev is hiding and unhappy. Gayatri's closet is full of yellow, orange and pink, the colours that represent energy, passion and femininity. The colours provide an insight into their personalities. Dev is trying to cover up his sexuality for fear of society. Gayatri is an energetic and passionate person trying to make her marriage work.

Sanjay Sharma's 2010 film *Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom* presents a striking contrast to *Bombay Talkies* in its depiction of a closeted gay character who is unable to openly acknowledge his sexuality to his wife. While *Bombay Talkies* portrays a moment of revelation and confrontation within a marriage, *Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom* explores the painful realities of silence and quiet understanding. It emphasises the persistence of bonds that are shaped by shared history, emotional dependence, and social pressure. Despite his lies, his wife understands his sexuality and, without any confrontation, decides to continue living with him. This suggests a deeper form of empathy and resilience, but also a life of falsehood.

Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom is a bilingual film that explores queer identity within a socio-cultural framework. It portrays a couple, Ashley, a closeted gay man

trapped within a conventional heterosexual marriage to Jenny, and his emotional and romantic awakening through his relationship with Aryan, an aspiring model and actor. Aryan feels that his relationship with Ashley is special when he comments, “*He seems the guy one can settle with*” (*Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom*, 1:12:43). Ashley confesses his fear of losing his father to cancer with Aryan as they meet, and Aryan reminisces about his memories of his mother, who died of cancer. He takes Ashley to a church where he believes all his prayers for others come true. Ashley and Aryan take a trip to Goa, a space symbolically distanced from the strictures of their everyday urban existence, where they share many close moments. They share closeness, intimacy, laughter, and a sense of emotional safety in Goa. For Aryan, this trip feels like a turning point, a glimpse of what life could look like if Ashley chose love over fear. The semi-nude shots and liplock between Aryan and Ashley normalise physical intimacy between gay men, which for a long time was treated as taboo.

Aryan, in a later scene, is found confessing to his friend that Ashley accepted him as his boyfriend knowing that he was a hooker, “*I don’t want him to leave his family...You still think I will ever stop loving him in my life?*” (*Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom*, 1:31:50). The film also has an instance where the police harass the gay couple under Section 377. Ashley and Aryan share an intimate moment inside their car when the policeman taps the window and ridicules them for being gay. Aryan “*Shut up Aryan. You don’t have a family. Tere ko koi pharak nahi padne wala. But I have a family. Mein expose ho jawonga. I will be screwed.*” (*Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom*, 1:41:39). Ashley apologises to the police and gives him some money to let them free. After the police leave, Aryan ruminates about their status in society.

Aryan's subsequent reflection poignantly articulates the collective suffering of the LGBTQ+ community and he laments how their lives are continually subject to public ridicule, their identities dismissed as little more than fodder for humour and contempt, "*If we cannot express our love like any other people, why were we born...if a man loves a man, he is abnormal.*" (Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom, 1:43:26).

Aryan informs Ashley that they cannot be together as Ashley is married and has a daughter. Ashley wanted to continue his relationship with Aryan in secret so that his standing in the world would not be compromised, and he confessed that he didn't want to get married. He, being the eldest in the family, was forced to get married. Unlike Dev, Ashley goes back to his heterosexual marriage. This decision reflects not only personal weakness but also the immense societal pressure that prevents many queer individuals from living openly and authentically. Aryan when convincing Ashley to go back, says, "*I cannot live a life of guilt. I don't want a relationship of which we will be ashamed of*" (Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom, 1:46:11). Aryan's words reflect his desire for an authentic life where he can be true to himself and his partner without feeling constant embarrassment or fear of social judgment. Instead of showing a moment where Ashley openly accepts and shares his true identity, the film highlights how he is forced to keep his sexuality hidden to survive. Aryan's life is more authentic than Ashley's, as Aryan can live his truth. But it comes with the pain of losing someone he loves and the realisation that living authentically can be a lonely and difficult path. Ashley continues to pretend to be part of a traditional, straight marriage because he cannot match his real feelings with what society expects from him. He expresses fear that his family will never

understand his situation. When Aryan asks him, “*Will you be able to tell your family about us?*” (*Dunno Y Naa Jaane Kyom*, 1:46:20), Ashley replies that they will never understand. Coming out could lead to severe consequences, including social ostracisation, loss of financial support, emotional abandonment, or even physical violence. By choosing to return to Jenny, Ashley suppresses his true self, sacrificing personal happiness for the illusion of normalcy and respectability. Aryan chooses to end his relationship with Ashley.

Later, Ashley confides in Aryan that he is going to come out to his family, as he wants to give respect to their relationship, to which Aryan warns him about the consequences of coming out as a married man. Aryan highlights the very real dangers of public ridicule, social ostracisation, and moral condemnation that could follow such a revelation. He advises that coming out could end up not only in personal humiliation for Ashley but also in severe embarrassment and disgrace that would affect his wife and daughter. He would be exposing his wife and daughter to harassment and public shame. Aryan, though deeply in love with Ashley and yearning for a shared life together, ultimately sacrifices his love because he knows the brutal cost of truth in a society that refuses to accept it. His request to Ashley to stay closeted is an act of protection. His relationship with Ashley becomes heartbreakingly layered as it is about two men who are honest with each other, yet required to hide that truth from the world, trapped in a love that cannot be lived openly.

Ashley confesses to his wife that he has been cheating on her and that it is all over. He asks for her forgiveness and promises to love her more from then on. He did not disclose his sexuality or with whom he was cheating. Instead of confronting

his full truth, he ambiguously states that the affair is over, asks her forgiveness, and assures her to love her more henceforth. Ashley's silence about his sexuality highlights the invisibility and internalised shame queer individuals undergo, especially in societies where homosexuality is stigmatised or marginalised.

After the death of Ashley, his wife meets Aryan, now a famous actor, on a train journey. Their encounter not only offers a sense of personal closure but also highlights the quiet, enduring pain experienced by everyone affected when individuals are forced to suppress their true selves and sacrifice their authenticity to conform to societal norms. During their conversation, Ashley's wife reveals that she had long been aware of the relationship between Ashley and Aryan despite Ashley's decision never to formally disclose his sexuality to her, and she admits that she felt jealous of their love as she recognised the depth and sincerity in their relationship. Their love was in stark contrast to the emotional void that increasingly characterised her own marriage. Her confession reveals how the painful knowledge of her husband's true self was never really acknowledged between them.

Ashley's decision to withhold the truth about his sexuality from his wife reveals the complex interplay of personal fear, familial responsibility, and societal judgement. Throughout his life, he remained trapped within the confines of heteronormative expectations, forced to maintain the outward appearance of a devoted husband and father, even as it conflicted with his inner identity. His silence functioned as a means of protection for his wife and daughter from the disgrace and mistreatment that he believed would result from coming out. However, this protective silence ultimately deprived both Ashley and his wife of the opportunity to build a relationship founded on honesty and mutual understanding.

Aryan wanted to know whether Ashley knew if he had become an actor. Jenny tells him that he was very excited and showed Aryan's first film to all his staff. But he could never watch it. She informs Aryan about the death of Ashley in a car accident the previous year. She recounts that Ashley often missed Aryan deeply, suggesting that the love he had tried to suppress was important to him even after he returned to his marital life. He hid his sorrows. She admits that there were moments when she wished for Ashley and Aryan to be reunited, recognising that the happiness Ashley found with Aryan was genuine in a way that her marriage to him had perhaps never fully been. Unlike Gayatri, she could never escape from her marriage; instead, she complies with it. Like Ashley, she is a victim of a social order that prioritises appearances and propriety over individual happiness and truth. She states that the love she received during his last years will remain with her forever, and only that would help her to continue living. This complex statement exposes her profound emotional resilience. Even though the love she experienced was complicated and shadowed by Ashley's internal conflict, she cherishes it as something real and sustaining. When Jenny asks him whether he found love after Ashley, Aryan replies that "*he was and he will be, only my love.*" (*Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom*, 2:03:59).

Towards the end of the film, Aryan visits Ashley's parents when he comes to know the loss of his love and asks them to call him their son. Ashley's father responds that his son is not dead and lives in all who love him. His mother adds that Ashley would have been so happy knowing they were meeting his best friend. He goes to Ashley's room, and beside the bed, he finds a small figurine of two boys standing together, an intimate, symbolic gift he had given Ashley during their painful parting. He remembers his words while gifting it: "*This is us. Hope it always*

makes you smile.” (*Dunno Y Naa Jaane Kyom*, 2:07:50). The figurine is a symbol of love that was real, even if the world never gave it room to grow. As Aryan picks it up and holds it close, he’s not just remembering Ashley; he’s holding on to the little piece of them that no one could take away. When he presses a kiss to it, it is like a silent farewell wrapped in tenderness, regret, and enduring affection, a farewell that he never got to give.

The film shows that the tragedy of Ashley’s life was not solely his inability to be with Aryan, but also his inability to live authentically with those closest to him. Choosing silence to protect his wife, family, and social standing eventually isolates him and deprives him of love and authenticity. His choice to remain closeted not only cost him the relationship with Aryan but also denied him a chance to be seen, known, and perhaps even accepted by those who loved him. Ashley’s wife’s awareness of his true self, despite his silence, indicates that truth often exists even where it is never openly named.

While *Bombay Talkies* presents a moment of confrontation and exposure, where the husband’s hidden sexuality leads to an inevitable rupture in the marital relationship, *Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom* portrays a far more subdued and tragic depiction of concealment and silent endurance. In *Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom*, the husband’s inability to come out and the wife’s quiet acceptance of his truth reveal the deep emotional compromises demanded by societal norms. Both films underscore the profound impact that compulsory heteronormativity has on individuals and relationships.

Coming out to one’s wife can be one of the most heartbreaking and emotionally complex moments in a gay man’s life. The two movies reveal two

different facets of gay life - when one shows the positive result of coming out, the other shows the cost of choosing not to come out. In *Bombay Talkies*, the act of coming out is explored through small silences, emotional confrontations and painful betrayals. The act itself brings a sort of clarity amidst the discomfort it provides. The film doesn't promise a happy ending, but it gestures toward a kind of healing that becomes possible only through truth. In *Dunno Y... Naa Jaane Kyom*, Ashley chooses not to come out to his wife by leading a life of dishonesty and emotional suppression. Opportunities for love, happiness and even a sense of meaningful existence are lost in the fear of rejection and societal stigma. The film looks at missed chances in love, the absence of genuine companionship, and the denial of the basic joy of being loved and understood as a result of choosing not to come out.

CHAPTER 6

ALIGARH

Hansal Mehta's 2015 film *Aligarh* tells the real-life story of Professor Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a Marathi professor teaching at the Aligarh Muslim University. The film follows Professor Siras, who was unjustly suspended from his job after his private life was exposed. The unjust suspension of Professor Siras due to the exposure of his private life becomes the central axis around which the film explores the ethical implications of state surveillance, institutional homophobia and societal regulations. It is a devastating story of how a person can be brutally outed by state agencies, academic institutions and the fourth estate, all generally seen as institutions whose role is to protect an individual citizen's right to live in freedom and self-respect. The film exposes how institutions collaborate in the forced outing and marginalisation of queer individuals and focuses on Siras's trauma and the broader critique of institutional betrayal.

Aligarh interrogates the complex intersections between personal privacy, societal morality, and criminal identity, sparking critical discussions about human rights, dignity and institutional accountability. It marks an important moment in popular Hindi cinema with its sensitive portrayal of queer identity and brings out a brave new 'queer' subject on the Indian commercial screen. Mehta takes the story of Professor Siras with such subtlety that the narrative interrogates the concepts regarding the right to privacy, morality, and criminalisation of sexual preferences. *Aligarh* criticises the discriminatory application of law and emphasises the dangers

of moral policing by state and media institutions by placing Siras's experience within the legal framework.

The main plot is a simple one that made headlines in 2010. On 8th February 2010, two reporters broke into the bedroom of Professor Siras and recorded a video on camera soon after beating him and a rickshaw puller for being together in the bedroom. Siras's privacy in his own house is intruded upon by two people associated with the local TV channel, and they insult, abuse and beat him and his partner for being gay. The allegation against Professor Siras of his 'unnatural' relationship with a rickshaw puller cost him his job, and he was evicted from his home at Medical Colony at the Aligarh Muslim University campus.

Aligarh critiques the broader implications of prejudice and discrimination. It highlights how moral policing extends beyond law enforcement to institutions that should ideally protect academic and personal freedom. The film portrays the loneliness and alienation experienced by Siras, making his story not just an individual tragedy but a reflection of the larger struggles faced by queer individuals in conservative societies.

The protagonist, Professor Siras, is portrayed with extraordinary depth and empathy as extremely introspective and reserved. Though the film places its protagonist within the contemporary discourse around section 377 and a 'coming out' frame, it nowhere plays a reductionist card in constructing the queer subjectivity of Siras. His sexuality is neither overtly declared nor dramatically performed, making him a deeply compelling representation of a gay man in Indian society. This representation challenges the rigid categories of identity, adding complexity to the discourse on queerness. As Sucheta M. Choudhuri states, "[t]he inscription of the

queer male body in *Aligarh* is both a visual and an ideological departure from the carefully aestheticised masculinity seen in queer Indian cinema” (2). Siras does not actively engage in activism or seek to challenge societal norms, yet his very existence and persecution become a symbol of the larger struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in India. Samyamoy Khutia and Kavya Krishna K.R in their work ‘Streaming Sexualities’ note that “Professor Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras (Manoj Bajpayee) in *Aligarh* does not reflect subordinated masculinity in the sense that he neither exhibits traits which are (hegemonic) masculine nor is he identifiable by the stereotypical markers of gay men in Hindi films” (30). His very existence, marked by dignity, emotional vulnerability, and the desire for privacy, becomes emblematic of the broader struggle for LGBTQ+ rights in India. The storytelling does not sensationalise Siras’s life but instead highlights the injustice he faces, making the audience reflect on the institutional and cultural mechanisms that criminalise queerness. Through his lens, Mehta interrogates the concept of the right to privacy and the criminalisation of alternate sexuality, raising crucial questions about personal freedoms in society. The film illustrates how Siras’s private life is invaded under the pretext of upholding societal morality, exposing the hypocrisy and cruelty of a system that punishes individuals for their personal choices. The film serves as a critical intervention in exposing these injustices and contributes to the discourse surrounding sexuality, human rights, and the role of the state in regulating intimate lives.

Professor Siras is a lonely man who was made the Chair of the Linguistics department. He is an outsider in many ways, a man who teaches Marathi in a city where everyone speaks Urdu, a man from the south in a traditional northern city, a

Hindu Brahmin in a dominant Muslim milieu, a man who has sexual relations with a working-class person in a place steeped in aristocratic class consciousness, a bachelor in a community of conservative families. He loves old Hindi songs by Lata Mangeshkar and takes comfort in alcohol. The close-up shots and long takes of him drinking and listening to the songs of Lata Mangeshkar show the intensity of his loneliness and solitude. Old Hindi film songs, wine and poetry acquire meaning amid the existential absurdity. “Professor Siras proudly resists labelling his desire and experience. His masculinity lies in his gentleness, prowess in his field, love for arts, and unique take on life and relationships, which make him an exceptional character on screen as well as in life” (Khutia and Krishna 31).

Journalist Deepu Sebastian, played by Rajkummar Rao, adds narrative complexity, acting as both ally and observer in Siras’s pursuit of justice. As a young, committed reporter, Deepu approaches Siras’s story with genuine curiosity and sympathy, offering a counterpoint to the voyeuristic media that violated Siras’s privacy. His evolving relationship with Siras facilitates a deeper exploration of themes such as trust, solidarity, and the ethics of representation. Through Deepu, the film underscores the potential of journalism to bear witness, challenge injustice, and affirm marginalised voices.

Siras also has problems with being addressed as gay. He does not understand the word, although obviously he knows its literal meaning. He asks, “*Mujhe yeh shabdh ka mathlab samaj nahi aatha, baba.*” (“I don’t understand the meaning of the word, dear”; *Aligarh*, 0:38:57). “*Koi mere feeling ko teen akshoram mein kaise samajh saktha hai*” (“How can someone understand my feelings in just three letters”; *Aligarh*, 0:39:30).

Siras: *Last January, a colleague had threatened that he would not let me remain as the Linguistics department chairman for too long. And a week later this incident took place.*

Deepu: *Is it because you are gay?*

Siras: *I do not understand this word.*

Deepu: *So, you are not gay?*

Siras: *How can someone describe my feelings in three letters? It is like poetry that is deep within. A burning desire that cannot be controlled, an uncountable urge... Poetry is found in-between the words...in the silences... the pauses. People can interpret it in different ways according to their age, their maturity.” (Aligarh; 0:40:32).*

As Choudhuri observes:

One wonders, with Sebastian, if Siras’s rejection of labels constitute a strategic disavowal of both his queerness and his liaison with a working-class man. But Siras’s objections stem from his ideological position on the limit of labels. He insists on the capacity of words to pin down, describe and sully ‘feelings,’ thereby erasing their emotional content. (3)

Professor Siras was engaging in intimacy with his partner Irfan, an auto-rickshaw driver, when his house was broken into by the journalists who filmed them. Following the sting operation and the newspaper reports covering it, he was suspended. After the incident, protesters at Aligarh University took up slogans and protests against Professor Siras. The crowd claim that the gay professor Siras should be evicted from the campus. Siras also feels that he is persecuted by his colleagues who are jealous of him. One of his colleagues had threatened him that he would not

remain in the post of Chairman for long, “*January last mein University ke ek Professor ne mujhe dhamki dhi di ki zyada din tak mujhe Chairman ke padh par nahin tikne dega*” (“In last January, I was threatened by a Professor in the University that he would not let me remain as the Chairman for long”) (*Aligarh*, 0:39:01). The distressed mind of the professor becomes evident when he starts hearing sounds around him at night and peeks out of his window. The experience of Professor Siras of being followed and hunted in his locality, in the courtroom, in the university and in society in general is the crux of the movie.

In the shot (fig 6.1) that pictures him after the attack, he is shown as a weak, vulnerable man who is pitted against a ruthless society. He is exhausted after his forced outing. It depicts a life that has been leached of all its colour. The dim, yellow-green lighting creates a melancholic and claustrophobic atmosphere, emphasising his loneliness and despair.



Figure 6.1 – Professor Siras in a moment of silent despair, embodying the emotional cost of societal rejection and institutional betrayal.

Isolated by the people around him, Siras seeks consultation to check his BP, but the doctor makes him wait until night and then refuses to meet him. Siras is forced to leave the clinic, causing him severe agitation and exhaustion that leads to his collapsing on the way back home. As he is about to fall, Deepu supports him and accompanies him home. Meanwhile, Aligarh University officials call a press meet where they announce that they will file a chargesheet against Siras as his immoral conduct is unbecoming of a professor of Aligarh University. During the press meet, when Deepu questions about the lack of accountability for those who forcibly entered Siras's quarters and recorded him without permission, he is told that no action was taken as the individuals in question were not employees of the institution. On further inquiries into the ethical and legal implications of this intrusion, officials justify it by claiming that journalists routinely enter spaces with their cameras. This response reflects a broader institutional apathy towards privacy violations and reveals the extent to which systems of power deflect responsibility in cases involving marginalised individuals. Later, Deepu records that "*this story has got nothing to do with his being gay or straight. The question is che log unka permission ke bina unke ghar pe ghusa kyom?*" ("The question is why did six people enter his house without his permission"; *Aligarh*, 0:48:09). Professor Siras receives a formal legal notice demanding that he vacate his university accommodation.

When Deepu meets Professor Sreedharan, who is a friend of Professor Siras, he refuses to be of any help and also requests Deepu to leave Siras alone. Sreedharan's refusal to help is characteristic of the prevalent culture of fear and homophobia that defines the institutional and social landscape surrounding the case. He is reluctant to be associated with someone caught up in a homosexual scandal,

for fear of reputational damage, professional consequences, and social alienation. His reluctance to stand by Siras is not rooted in malice, but in fear. This moment highlights the theme that institutional and social neglect of queer individuals does not always manifest through hostility; instead, it often occurs through silence, withdrawal, and the refusal to act, even from those who are close.

Deepu: *But, Sir, there was no action taken against the two who conducted the sting operation. Don't you think he is being victimised?*

Sridharan: *I request you, please don't pursue him... otherwise he won't have any place to even hide. Please understand... excuse me, sorry.*" (Aligarh, 0:22:35 - 0:22:47)

During the press meet, Deepu encounters Dr. Thahir Islam, a colleague and friend of Professor Siras, who expresses both concern and a willingness to offer support for Siras. Dr. Islam suspects that Siras may have been deliberately framed by his colleagues, but admits that he would not be able to rock the boat too much. He is acutely aware of the institutional constraints that limit his ability to act. This mirrors Professor Sreedharan's earlier refusal to help, showing a consistent pattern—those who might wish to support are constrained by institutional pressures, societal stigma, and legal uncertainties. The film shows how systemic homophobia is endorsed by a widespread fear of association and the subsequent silence, which renders even potential allies ineffective.

At the centre of the film, there is also a movement to repeal section 377 so that the fight for Siras' dignity becomes a cause célèbre in India's gay liberation movement. The legal fight at the centre of the film is not only to regain dignity and self-respect, but to release Siras as a gay person from the stigma of criminality. As

long as section 377 remains, even if he has public sympathy, he would still, in the eyes of the law, be a criminal; that is why, both in real life and in the film, the life of Professor Siras was closely associated with the movement to repeal section 377. Social activists and Gay sympathisers show their support for his cause, and the advocate Vijay Grower agrees to represent him in court. Advocate Grower comments that *“the problem with 377 was that nobody could speak up. If you say you are gay, then you are directly seen as a criminal.”* He congratulates Siras, *“I applaud your courage. Mein jaantha hu yahan aana aasan nahi raha hoga.”* (“I know that it would have been difficult for you to come here”; *Aligarh*, 0:54:03 - 0:54:13)

According to Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which was introduced in 1861 by the British:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. (indiankanoon)

Sexual performances other than heterosexuality, which did not lead to procreation, were frowned upon. Even after a century, no considerable changes were made to the law, as no consistent efforts were made to amend or repeal the article. “One should strive to get rid of the law, and nothing could be done till it was repealed,” said Arun Kumar Mishra, the Chairman, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), in an interview while he was commenting on Section 377 (qtd. in Narrain 256). Section 377 must be understood within the context of the consolidation of the British Empire in India. The British rulers advocated that their

rule was necessary to further the proposed civilising mission, which propounded cultural and moral purification. The British reform movement also had a major impact on social reform movements. As Vanitha and Kidwai observe, “while doing laudable work for women’s education and against women’s oppression, social reformers tried to form an ideal Indian man, woman, and child family largely on the model of the Victorian nuclear family. Monogamous heterosexual marriage came to be idealised as the only acceptable form of sexual coupling” (196). The sodomy law was repealed in Britain in 1967; however, it appeared to have a stronghold in India. As section 377 emphasised homosexuality as a criminal act, heterosexuality was accepted as normal and part of social life, while homosexuality was regarded as deviant and perverse. This colonial law was first challenged by the NAZ Foundation and AIDS Bedhbav Virodhi Andolan, a non-governmental organisation, in 2001 by filing a public interest litigation. They believed that the law was illegal, void and should be repealed. In 2003, they were dismissed by the Delhi High Court. Naz foundation appealed to the Supreme Court and the SC directed the PIL back to the High Court. Subsequently, there were also significant interventions from support groups and activists like ‘Voices Against 377’.

The law constitutes a form of social reality that legitimises violence against sexual minorities. (Narain 256). The violence and brutality by the law-enforcing system and the general public toward queer people are legitimised internally and externally. The panopticon principle by Foucault stresses the idea that law is not external but internal. You behave in a certain way because you have internalised the law. The panoptic watchtower constantly watches and observes the lives of gays and

lesbians, pressuring them further into the closet. Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) says, “He becomes the principle of his own subjection” (203).

In 2008, Additional Solicitor General PP Malhotra said, "Homosexuality is a social vice, and the state has the power to contain it. [Decriminalising homosexuality] may create [a] breach of peace. If it is allowed, then [the] evil of AIDS and HIV would further spread and harm the people. It would lead to a big health hazard and degrade the moral values of society" (brainfreezer 2018).

In the important judgement on 2nd July 2009, the Delhi High Court overturned a 150-year-old section stating that section 377 of the IPC violated Article 14 and 21 of the Indian Constitution and decriminalised consensual sex between two adults of the same gender. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, and Article 21 guarantees citizens’ right to personal liberty and their right to privacy, both of which were violated by this section. This legal development is central to the movie, as it provides the foundation for Professor Siras’s legal vindication. Professor Siras is vindicated when the high court, article 377 and he is allowed by the court to rejoin the university. But, in a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions, he is found dead two days before he was to join the department. When the legal system starts to confirm Professor Siras’s fundamental rights and recognise his dignity as an individual, his life abruptly ends. The irony in the situation is deeply unsettling. The film positions the reading down of Section 377 not merely as a legal milestone, but as a critical narrative and symbolic device that emphasises the trajectory of justice in a society still rooted in prejudice and normative exclusion.

Aligarh critiques institutional homophobia, particularly as it is perpetuated by educational institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University. LGBTQ+ individuals

are often subjected to exclusion, disciplinary actions, and social ostracism, often under the semblance of upholding moral standards and societal norms. An example from the film to illustrate this systemic prejudice is a scene that portrays a televised newsroom debate, where Professor Siras is invited to speak about his suspension. However, rather than being provided with a genuine platform to express his perspective, he is repeatedly interrupted by other panelists. His voice is silenced, and his concerns are disregarded. His voice is literally cut off, and he is denied the opportunity to articulate his experience. It is a revelation of how even in situations devoted to the rights of gay persons, there is no real concern for them and how very often they are rendered voiceless. The inability or unwillingness of the media to allow Siras to speak reflects a subtler, yet no less damaging, form of homophobia—one that invalidates queer experiences by denying them the right to narrate their own stories. Through this, the film reveals the persistent structures of power that silence queer voices under the pretense of dialogue and inclusion.

Anchor: (o/s) Good evening and welcome to India Fights Back. A professor of Aligarh University on the verge of retirement has been fired for being gay. This new controversy has reignited the homosexuality debate on the university campus. Both students and teachers stand divided... Professor Siras, were you sacked because you are gay?

Siras: I am very disturbed, because after years of service. The University decided to take such a step. I am very much upset. Those people entered my house without... (Aligarh, 0:57:45 - 0:58:27)

Visibly uneasy with the way of the discussion, Professor Siras attempts to say his perspective, yet his words are abruptly interrupted, denying him the

opportunity to express his grievances. This moment illustrates the erasure of queer voices, even in forums supposedly dedicated to their rights and representation.

The film also explores the relationship between Deepu Sebastian and Professor Siras. From their first meeting, Deepu demonstrates a genuine concern for Siras as a person who is unjustly wronged. It is Deepu who challenges the unethical and unauthorised intrusion into Siras's private life by reporters. Siras develops an intimate, sympathetic and emotional bond with Deepu and gifts his poetry collection to him. Siras opens up about extremely personal aspects of his life—his childhood, early marriage, familial estrangement, and the quiet struggles surrounding his sexuality. These scenes are characterised by intimacy and vulnerability, as Siras finds in Deepu, a friend who listens without judgment. This bond between Siras and Deepu becomes tragic when Deepu is revealed to be the last person Siras spoke to before his unfortunate and suspicious death by poisoning. They had planned to meet at Deepu's office to celebrate Siras's legal victory and reinstatement at the university, a meeting that tragically never took place. This unfulfilled meeting deepens the sense of loss that pervades the film's conclusion and heightens the emotional resonance of their bond. Deepu's empathetic gaze helps the understanding of Siras not merely as a victim of institutional violence, but as a complex, dignified individual deserving of empathy, justice, and remembrance.

In figure 6.2, there is a layered examination of the emotional and ideological contrasts between Professor Siras and Deepu Sebastian. Deepu's posture and expression is marked by a relaxed body language and a youthful smile which embody vitality, optimism, and a sense of belonging to a contemporary, media-savvy world. His act of taking a selfie emphasises his ease with technology and modern

modes of self-expression and signals his participation in a cultural moment in which identity can be asserted and shared more freely. Siras, in contrast, is smiling, though it reveals a sense of melancholy. Siras appears to be more reflective, almost hesitant, a man who is broken and has accepted his fate. His body language is suggestive of a man deeply rooted in a world that no longer seems to accommodate him. He represents an earlier generation of queer individuals who had to conceal their identities and negotiate their existence within oppressive social frameworks that afforded minimal acceptance or public acknowledgment. The comparison of their expressions, the uninhibited delight of Deepu and the mild sorrow in Siras's eyes, highlights the emotional and political differences in their experiences of queerness. The image is symbolic of a bridge between the man shaped by secrecy and stigma, and the other by openness and activism.

Figure 6.3 further magnifies this contradiction through its symbolic use of space. The boat ride shared by Siras and Deepu implies a literal and metaphorical journey through shifting landscapes of identity, criminality, and human connection. While the boat ride is suggestive of movement and transition, the subdued colour palette and muted tones of the shot evoke uncertainty and isolation, signifying the state of the protagonist. The calmness of the water is contrasted with the emotional turmoil of the characters. For Siras, this journey ends in a hollow triumph where he is legally reinstated, but he remains a broken man emotionally and spiritually. His retreats back into solitude, music, and alcohol are characteristic of an older generation long criminalised and marginalised under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Deepu represents a younger generation marked by resistance, anger, and a belief in change. He refuses to accept silence, which suggests a wider transformation

marked by growing queer visibility, activism, and digital engagement. By juxtaposing these two characters, the film not only represents a generational shift in the experience of queer identity in India but also underlines the trauma of those left behind in an older regime of shame and criminalisation.

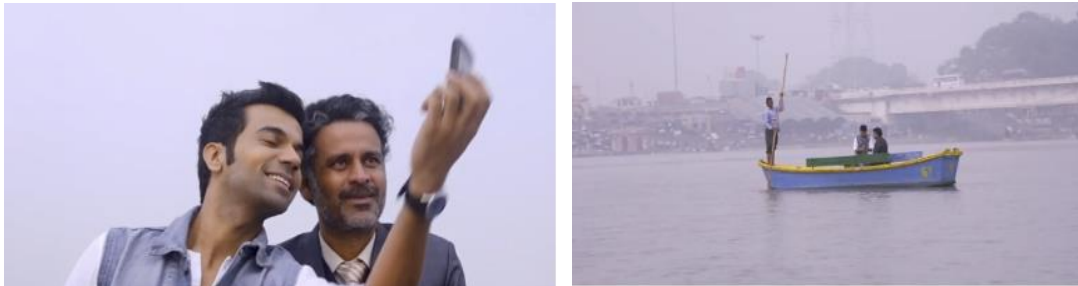


Figure 6.2 – The shot captures a fleeting moment of joy between Deepu and Siras

Figure 6.3 – A quiet boat ride amid the chaos outside is symbolic of the journey of Deepu and Siras

Deepu is emotionally invested in the struggle of Professor Siras for justice and dignity. He is desperate to give a voice to Siras's story. Deepu recognises that Siras is not just a victim of institutional oppression but also of a society that refuses to accept difference. At first, Siras is hesitant to trust Deepu, wary of the media that has already vilified him. But Deepu's sincerity and unwavering support gradually break through Siras's defenses, leading to moments of rare connection and mutual respect.

The courtroom scenes in the film are integral to the narrative, as it is through the legal battle that Professor Siras tries to claim his dignity and identity. In the court, the opposition's advocate plays moral police when she accuses Siras of violating the rules of the University and the moral code of its employees. She claims that Siras has tarnished the name of the University by engaging in a homosexual

relationship within the premises of the University. She argues that the University has only done what is right by suspending Professor Siras. Advocate Grower replies that, *“Aapne kaha ki AU ne apne niyam ka paalan kiya hai, apna niyam. Bharat ke samvidhan ka niyam nahi... Article 21 clearly states that every citizen of the country is entitled to privacy and dignity. 8 February ke raath par mere client se yeh samvidhanik hak cheena gaya, kuch log balpoorvak uske ghar par ghuse aur uske private moments mein unhein film kiya.”* (“You said that the University abided by its own rules, but not the laws and constitution of the country. Article 21 clearly states that every citizen of the country is entitled to privacy and dignity. When the journalists entered Siras’ home on 8th February and filmed him without his consent in his private moments, it was his constitutional right that was violated”; *Aligarh*, 0:56:23). The reporters, who associated themselves with News 100, attacked Siras and Irfan with a heavy cane without even allowing them to wear their clothes, while they informed Siras that they had received a complaint stating that there is something immoral happening in the society. He continues, *“Aur phir unhone alag kone mein le jaake kada karke ajeeb ajeeb pose mein humare photo nikhale. Mein haath jodke unse request kartha raha ki wo log rukh jaaye. Tabhi darwaaja khola aur University ke char colleagues’ bedroom mein guss aaye.”* (“They took us to a corner and made us stand in awkward poses for photos. I pleaded with them to stop when four of my colleagues from the University came to my bedroom”; *Aligarh*, 1:23:36). Four University officials – Proctor Dr Zuber Khan, Deputy Proctor Dr Feroz Majid, PRO Dr Shadab Qureshi and Media Advisor Professor AK Murtuza, had reached the scene. *“I was shocked to see them as I did not phone them or ask them for any help,”* (*Aligarh*, 1:24:18) Siras remarked, referring to the sudden arrival

of the university officials, who soon after accompanied the reporters to another room. Instead of reprimanding the reporters for filming on the campus without their consent, they harassed and persecuted Professor Siras. Despite Dr. Shihab Qureshi's guarantee that the tape would remain confidential, the story was extensively reported in local newspapers the next day. Just three months away from his retirement, he was suspended without an enquiry or an opportunity to appeal and was given only seven days to vacate his house, with his electric supply cut off.

In another courtroom session, the University's Public Relations Officer, Dr Qureshi, testifies in court that after arriving at the place, he happened to see the tape and witnessed the in immoral activity of Professor Siras with the rickshaw-wala. He was embarrassed about the situation and accused Siras of violating the moral and social codes of the university by practising homosexuality in its premises. He ascertained that it is against the rules of the University, and hence, the suspension is also according to the rules of the University. The courtroom makes it clear that the whole thing was preplanned and was orchestrated by the university authorities, as later confirmed by the rickshaw puller himself in a confession. In his statement, the rickshaw puller admitted that he was coerced into participating in the entrapment of Professor Siras by the university officials. R. Raj Rao and Dibyajyoti Sarma in their book *Whistling in the Dark* (2024), published an interview with the rickshaw puller where he says, "*I knew that some people were going to storm into the room to catch us red-handed...I was part of the plan to trap the professor*" (273). He states that he was offered good money, but he didn't ask how much. But after the incident took place, they didn't meet him, and he didn't know their whereabouts either. The interview reveals that the entire incident was plotted and staged to create a scandal

that would justify Siras' suspension. This reaction reflects the systemic homophobia within the institution. The unravelling of this conspiracy in the court underlines the deliberate and unethical actions taken by the authorities under the guise of defending institutional morality to target and humiliate Professor Siras.

When Adv. Grower asked whether Professor Siras appeared to be frightened by the aggressiveness of the reporters. Qureshi replied with a smirk that it was the reason why he demanded to see the tape and that he did not appear frightened in the video. This response reduces the trauma of the night to a mere matter of appearance, undermining the emotional and psychological violation Siras endured. When asked about the need to call the reporters to another room and the need to have a private conversation there, Mr. Qureshi replied that he had personally requested them not to air the tape and not to tarnish the name of the university.

Adv. Grower: Really, Times, Herald, Daily...Is ghanta ke do din baadh hi aap har akbar ko apne interview de rehe the. Kya us daruan aapko University ke reputation ka chinta nahi the? ("You were giving interviews to every other newspaper, two days after the incident. Didn't you think about the reputation of the University then?"; Aligarh, 1:03:14).

This scene exposes the performative nature of Qureshi's former claims and emphasises a deeper hypocrisy. It is evident now in the court that the concern for the university's moral conduct was selectively invoked to rationalise the victimisation of Siras, because in reality, the administration seemed more interested in controlling the narrative than in defending institutional integrity. The dishonesty in Qureshi's testimony points out how institutions disguise prejudice in the name of moral and reputational concern, instigating public discourse to silence marginalised voices.

Grower's cross-questioning thus not only discredits Qureshi's testimony but also exposes the institutional homophobia embedded in the conduct of the case.

The opposing advocate interrupts to accuse Adv. Grower for misleading the court by portraying Professor Siras as innocent when he has already accepted his mistake. She presents a letter, allegedly written and signed by Professor Siras and addressed to the Vice Chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University, in which he supposedly admits that he has acted wrongly. This letter becomes crucial in the trial, as it is used to cast doubt on his moral integrity and undermine his legal claims. When Adv. Grower asks Siras why he wrote that letter, Siras reveals that it was due to the request of his colleague and long-time friend, Professor Sreedharan from the Malayalam department. According to Siras, Sreedharan had attempted to negotiate with the Vice Chancellor on his behalf in confidence and believed that a written apology from Siras might help de-escalate the situation. Grower asks Siras to meet Sreedharan again and persuade him to testify in court. Siras goes to meet Sreedharan, who distances himself from the matter, firmly refusing to involve himself further. He says that no one in his family has gone to the police station or court, and asks Siras not to drag his name into all the mess. When Siras says that the University is trying to use the letter against him, Sreedharan chastises Siras for making the issue into a legal battle, reminding him that he had advised Siras to wait patiently, as he believed the controversy would subside in a couple of months. He says that now it is a matter in the public arena, and Siras would have to bear all the brunt by himself. This conversation illustrates the isolating effects of institutional and societal homophobia, where even those who are close retreat out of fear for their reputations, unwilling to be connected with a scandal involving homosexuality. It

also stresses how the individuals who attempt to seek justice for violations of their rights are often left alone to navigate hostile legal and social environments.

The opposing advocate tries to defame Professor Siras by asking him all kinds of twisted questions about the nature of his relationship with Irfan and his morality. When he refuses to speak about it, she irritates him by saying that he is liable to answer these questions as he had dared to accuse a reputed University. She even asks who among them was the man in their relationship. When Siras narrated in the court that the reporters on that night had mentioned receiving complaints from other residents, the opposing lawyer tries to argue for the rights of the residential group to filter their members so that their children are not influenced by the fringe elements. *“Har society har sanstha ka hak bantha he ki woh apne members ko filter kare. Jahan apne bache bade ho rahe hai, kya wahan har tarah ke logom ko rehne denge...nahi.”* (“Every society has the right to filter their members. They would not allow any type of person to live among their children”; *Aligarh*, 1:30:01). This statement is a clear example of how institutionalised homophobia masked as social responsibility, reinforces the marginalisation of queer identities as inherently deviant, criminal and dangerous to the sociocultural fabric. It echoes the broader tendency to discriminate against homosexuality and exclude LGBTQ+ individuals from spaces believed to be ‘respectable’ or ‘family-friendly’.

To this argument, adv. Grower replies:

Kya Professor Siras apna business bahar khel ke maidan me conduct kar rahe the. Yeh log inke ghar mein kyom chaak rehe the? What business do neighbours have looking into someone’s bedroom? Aur hum kiske naithiktha ke baath kar rahe hai, your lordship? Kyomki naithiktha ke paribhasha har

ek ke liye alag hote hai. Jo log shakahaari hai, who mas khane waale ko anaithik samajthe ho. Jho log shadishuda hai who divorce lene waale ko anaithik samajth sakthe hai. Naithiktha ki seema kya hai? Agar koi kisike naithik daayre ke baahar chala jaaye, tho kya usse saza milne chahiye. Kyomki agar aisa hai tho desh ke har ek shaks ko kisi na kisi ke naithik daayre ki ullanghan ke julm mein jail mein hone chahiye.”

Was Professor Siras doing his business in the playground? Why were they peeping into his house? What business do neighbours have looking into someone's bedroom? Whose morality are we discussing in the courtroom now? Your lordship? Everyone has their version of morality. Vegetarians think that non-vegetarians are immoral. Married people think that divorced people are immoral. So, what is the limit of being moral? If someone crosses their limits, should he be punished? If it is so, everyone in this country should be jailed for crossing the moral boundaries of one or the other.

(Aligarh, 1:31:02)

Grower's argument deconstructs the binary of morality and immorality when he asserts that morality is a subjective construct shaped by personal, cultural, and religious values. Being subjective in legal matters runs the risk that everyone, at some point, is guilty of violating someone else's moral framework. The scene illustrates the film's larger critique of social surveillance and institutional discrimination.

The opposing advocate does not want to talk about individual morality; instead, she addresses the collective morality of the 150-year-old Aligarh University. It is then that Adv. Grower refers to the historic judgement of the Delhi High Court

in July 2019. In the Naz Foundation versus the Government of Delhi case, the high court had decriminalised homosexuality. Grower notes that even during that time, opposers had raised questions and concerns about morality. Grower argues for the need for constitutional limitations. If the law is left unclear, people may misuse it for their selfish reasons. Grower says, “*10 saal lage, magar us ladayi ko humne jeeth liya. Homosexuality ko decriminalise karthe hue division bench ne kaha da – If there is one constitutional tenet that could be seen as the underlying theme of the Indian Constitution, it is that of inclusiveness.*” (“It’s been 10 years, but we have won that fight. On decriminalising homosexuality, the division bench had stated that – If there is one constitutional tenet that could be seen as the underlying theme of the Indian Constitution, it is that of inclusiveness”; *Aligarh*, 1:32:13).

As the courtroom fills up with heated legal arguments and impassioned debates, Professor Siras sits quietly, detached from the proceedings, seemingly untouched by the intensity around him. He is not defiant or anxious—just tired, his fatigue is caused by a deeper emotional and psychological exhaustion. Occasionally, he dozes off, uninterested in the proceedings of the court. Other times, he turns his attention to something more intimate and personal—translating his poetry, carefully preparing a copy for Deepu. This seemingly minor act is, in fact, deeply revealing. It signals his quiet retreat from the larger public battle, a tacit acknowledgement that it is a small but meaningful act, a glimpse into the fact that he has given up the big fight and tacitly acknowledges the fact that he does not have the will to confront the institutional structures that have wronged him. He concentrates on small things like a man broken by relentless humiliation and systemic violence. While others fight over his fate, Siras finds comfort in his words, his poetry, and the rare connection he

has found with Deepu, the one man who has shown him compassion. In this light, Siras symbolises those on the margins who, worn down by persistent discrimination, choose to withdraw from the struggle from emotional exhaustion. His quiet withdrawal is a way to hold on to his dignity and peace when the world around him has denied him both.

It is interesting to note that even when Mr Siras is excluded, objectified and marginalised for being gay, he cannot come out of matters such as discrimination of caste. He refuses to eat *daal* from the plate touched by Deepu. He says he cannot eat that; he is a Brahmin. This scene explores the intersectionality of identity and prejudice and demonstrates that marginalisation and discrimination in one domain do not exclude the perpetuation of other forms of social hierarchy. Although he himself has been a victim of homophobia, Professor Siras upholds caste-based discrimination, reminding that oppressed individuals can be agents of exclusion. Deepu says he does not understand this concept of Dharam. Siras replies that Dharam is not a concept to be understood, “*Jahan dimag lagaya, aastha gayi.*” (“If you put your intellect into it, faith vanishes”; *Aligarh*, 1:12:23). “The queer male subject has become increasingly visible in popular culture in the past decade, but the politics of class, language and location informs these representations” (Choudhuri 2).

When Deepu asks him if he is married, the professor reveals that he was once married and that his wife had even accompanied him to Aligarh; however, the relationship did not work. On Deepu asking if it has to do with his sexuality, he answers that he used to be absorbed in his books and the melodies of Lata Mangeshkar, which bored his wife, and she eventually left. Then Siras notices the

bruises on Deepu's face and asks about them, to which Deepu replies that he had attempted to visit Irfan, Siras' partner, but he could not meet him. He heard that Irfan ran away because the police ruthlessly beat him, a revelation that leaves Siras visibly anguished. Deepu, expresses his suspicion that Irfan may have been involved in the sting operation, noting that there was no damage to the door at Siras's house, suggesting that it had been intentionally left open. When Siras says that he would have forgotten to lock it and may not have closed the door properly, Deepu points out that there are three locks on the door, and it seems unlikely that someone could forget to close all three of them. The rickshaw puller states in the interview, "I did not latch the door from inside, which the professor did not notice" (273). He recounts that they met each other near the university campus and hired his services to take Siras to the market everyday. He reminisces his intimate moments with Siras, "He told me I was very chikna. He recited a love poem to me which was about how all love is the same, no matter whom we love" (271). Both of them thought that their friendship is odd and that is why they never made it public. In one of the film's most poignant moments, Deepu asks whether Irfan was his lover, Siras responds with philosophical depth, "*Tum log yeh shabdh ke peeche kyon pade jaathe ho. Kabhi love ko samajne ki koshish kiya karo. It is a beautiful word. You are making it sound like a dirty word. I have a problem with it.*" ("Why do you have a name for everything? Try to understand love"; *Aligarh*, 1:18:10). Siras' response echoes a desire for a more nuanced understanding of love and rejects the instinct to categorise human relationships through narrow terminologies. It is also a subtle critique of how society can unintentionally perpetuate the very frameworks of control that queer individuals seek to escape.

His words push back against society's need to put love into boxes, questioning why every emotion must be labelled and categorised. When he says, *"Try to understand love. It is a beautiful word,"* (Aligarh, 1:18:11). There is a quiet plea in his voice—an urge for people to see love for what it truly is, rather than reducing it to something forbidden or shameful. For Siras, love is not about rules or definitions; it is a deeply personal, intimate feeling that does not need validation from the world. He believes love should be felt, not judged, and his words reflect the quiet pain of someone whose own love has been turned into a scandal.

Professor Siras wins the case as the Allahabad High Court rules in favour of Siras, ordering Aligarh University to reinstate him in his former designation and to allow him to return to his quarters. Queer people and their allies celebrate the victory as they pour into the streets to participate in a queer pride march. Deepu calls Siras to congratulate him on his victory and fixes an interview with him for 2 days later, when he will be back in his department. During the call, Siras expresses his desire that he wants to leave for America after retirement, as people like him are treated with respect there. Outwardly, the victory in the court appears to be a moment of triumph, a legal acknowledgement of his rights and a rebuke to the institutional injustice he faced. Although the judiciary sided with him, the wounds inflicted by the university, the media, and society remain raw and unhealed. His desire to live somewhere else reflects a sense of alienation and defeat, the victory is legal, not emotional or cultural.

On April 7th 2010, a day before rejoining the university following a favourable court verdict, Deepu receives a call notifying him of Siras's death, and subsequent reports confirm the presence of poison in Siras's bloodstream. In spite of

having evidence that hints at foul play in his death, the police officially ruled it out calling the incident a suicide. The court order to reinstate Siras reached Aligarh University on 9th April 2010, one day after he was found dead. Deepu remembers Siras' words about wanting to go to America for a life of respect, freedom and dignity. The climax of the film is particularly suggestive in terms of *mise-en-scène* and narrative function. As Siras tries to sleep, he is startled by a sound inside his house and sits up, calling out "*Kaun?*" ("Who?"; *Aligarh*, 1:54:18). This moment is a repetition of an earlier intrusion when the journalists broke into his home and filmed him without his consent. The repetition of this action points towards the recurring violence imposed on queer bodies, particularly those who are vulnerable, solitary, and fragile. The film does not give a verdict on Siras's death, but it leaves the viewers with the unmistakable impression that the situations of his life and the systemic pressures he faced made suicide utterly plausible. The fear, the intrusion, and the ensuing silence in the final moments add to the ambiguity in his death and subtly point to the fact that, despite appearances, justice has not truly been served.

"Without any preaching, the film presents the life of a gay man, and the realistic portrayal makes the audience question the social hypocrisy and media stereotypes." (Khutia and Krishna 31). Professor Siras does not conform to the dominant binaries of gay masculinity; he is neither flamboyantly effeminate nor hyper masculine. Instead, *Aligarh* offers the portrayal of a man whose queerness is intertwined with his solitude, intellectual pursuits, and emotional vulnerability, presenting a character who cannot be reduced to his sexuality. His queerness is not politicised or performed but exists subtly, privately, and with a deep sense of longing. The film does not define Siras's identity through external markers of

masculinity and instead emphasises his yearning for companionship, his quiet dignity, and his attachment to poetry and music. This layered depiction resists the flamboyant or hyper masculine tropes often connected with queer characters in mainstream cinema, instead presenting an intensely humanised portrayal that requests empathy and reflection. Hence, *Aligarh* not only challenges cinematic stereotypes but also reclaims queer identity as complex, dignified, and deserving of critical attention.

Anna MM Vetticad, in her review of the movie, remarks that:

This is very much about the invasion of privacy, the fluid definition of privacy in a conservative society, loneliness and the right to dignity. It is about marginalisation that results from social prejudice and a potential victim's fear of ostracism. This is a story of a reticent man who balked at labels, was rudely shoved under the spotlight and became a reluctant poster boy for India's LGBT rights movement though all he wanted was to be left alone with his books, his Lata Mangeshkar and his self-respect. (2016)

Aligarh is important both as a movie and biography as it is a statement on how institutions participate in the regulation and violation of queer lives. The film represents institutional outing, an act orchestrated by the state mechanisms with the academia and the press. Unlike other coming-out stories in mainstream cinema, where disclosure is either involuntary or occurs within intimate relationships, the narrative in this case does not include instances of interpersonal betrayal. Siras's sexual identity is weaponised against him by the very institutions responsible for safeguarding his rights and dignity. This form of outing is more brutal and violent, where powerful institutions uphold moral and social codes under the pretext of

legality and public interest. Professor Siras is not merely outed, but he is deliberately and forcibly exposed by a conspiracy between the university administration and local journalists, whose breaking into his house is both literal and symbolic. This creates a systemic abuse of power, where legal and academic authorities function as agents of surveillance and the fact that it is disguised as an administrative procedure is all the more brutal. The suspension, eviction, and public humiliation of Siras are presented as policy enforcement, disguising the intention behind the disciplinary measures. Therefore, the argument that Siras violated the moral and ethical standards of the university is only a guise to cover up the arbitrary and discriminatory nature of institutional codes that deny queer individuals the right to privacy, freedom of expression, and professional dignity. Deepu Sebastian, as a journalist, identifies the human rights violation in the case rather than framing it as a mere scandal, and as a friend, he brings in emotional depth to the story, demonstrating how understanding and compassion can challenge dominant narratives of institutional oppression. His interactions with Siras allow the audience to see Siras as a human being, a poet, a teacher, and a quiet lover of music who wants nothing more than dignity and self-respect. Through Deepu's empathy and advocacy, *Aligarh* positions the legal fight for Siras's reinstatement as part of the broader queer liberation movement in India, especially in the context of the legal battle against Section 377.

CHAPTER 7

DEAR DAD

Coming out is not a single act, but a series of acts. Joanne Winning defines coming out of the closet as “an honest articulation of one’s sexuality” (Abelove et al, 309). As Judith Butler argues, “being out must produce the closet again and again” (320). Each time someone comes out, they step into a new space of visibility, only to face the need to do it again. Coming out to one’s child is not a singular event but an ongoing dialogue that requires sensitivity, patience, and support. Coming out to your child is one of the most emotionally complex and vulnerable experiences a parent can face. This disclosure often entails navigating fears of rejection, altering familial dynamics, and confronting societal stigma.

When gay and lesbian parents come out after they have established families in a heterosexual relationship, the coming out process affects the entire family. For the gay or lesbian parents, disclosing their sexual identity to their children presents significant challenges. Gay and lesbian parents may believe that coming out could cause their children to be stigmatised, but not coming out could also create a distance in the parent-child relationship.

(Lytle et al, 2012)

The decision to come out comes from a place of love and a desire to live authentically, especially in a relationship as intimate and essential as that between a parent and child.

Dear Dad (2016), directed by Thanuj Bhramar, is a coming-of-age road movie about love, identity, and acceptance. The narrative centres on Nitin

Swaminathan (Aravind Swamy), a middle-aged father who embarks on a road trip with his 14-year-old son, Shivam (Himanshu Sharma) from Delhi to Mussoorie to drop him off at the boarding school. Nitin decides to come out as gay to his son during the trip, and this act of coming out deeply affects their relationship and challenges their perceptions of family and self. The film portrays Shivam's emotional turmoil, confronting his feelings about his father's revelation. Nitin grapples with the fear of losing his son's love and the courage required to live authentically, while Shivam confronts feelings of betrayal, confusion, and the need to reconcile his father's revelation with his understanding of masculinity and family dynamics. Despite unspoken emotions and difficult conversations, there is a renewed understanding in familial bonds.

Fiona Tasker and Erin Lavender Stott, in their work *LGBTQ Parenting Post Heterosexual Relationship Dissolution* (2020) argue that the children indicated that after the coming out of a parent, the most difficult aspect is the breaking up of family rather than the discovery that their parent is gay or lesbian. "Adult children of lesbian or gay parents have emphasised that feelings about their parent's sexual identity are complicated by their feelings about the ending of their parents' relationship" (qtd. in tasker and Lavender Stott, 21). According to the study, gay fathers reported a lack of social acceptance, and external threat, along with the internal homophobia they suffered. The relationship of the children with their gay fathers were complicated after coming out and the children were critical about the feelings of gay parents after coming out.

Fatherhood nowadays is growing beyond traditional notions of masculinity that emphasise stoicism and emotional restraint. Modern fathers accept emotional

openness, recognising that expressing vulnerability and affection reinforces bonds with their children and supports healthy emotional development. The shift to fatherhood often brings a spectrum of emotions, from happiness and pride to anxiety and self-doubt. Fathers are not able to acknowledge and share these emotions due to societal expectations that dishearten male vulnerability. By redefining masculinity so as to include emotional availability, fathers not only enhance their own well-being but also contribute to the emotional intelligence of their children. This transition towards an emotional masculinity promotes deeper familial connections and supports the growth of empathetic, emotionally healthy individuals. Nitin's embodiment of emotional masculinity threatens traditional patriarchal norms by highlighting vulnerability, care, and emotional expressiveness as intrinsic features of male identity, thereby contributing to a redefinition of masculinity within the familial and social context.

Nitin's wife, Nupur, is already aware of his homosexuality, a disclosure that has led to their decision to divorce. Having come to terms with Nitin's sexual orientation, Nupur navigates the intricacies of their relationship with maturity and composure. Her acceptance is not depicted as a temporary reaction but is considered as a process, reflecting the emotional depth and resilience required to support a partner through such revelations. Recognising the importance of honesty, Nupur urges Nitin to disclose his sexual orientation to Shivam, emphasising the need for transparency. She is not just a companion to Nitin but also a source of strength, encouraging him to be honest about his identity. She stands by him as he overcomes his fears and takes the brave step of sharing his truth, reinforcing the idea that acceptance begins with honesty and the courage to be oneself. This sets the stage for

a pivotal journey, both literal and emotional, as Nitin embarks on a road trip with Shivam to his boarding school in Mussoorie, intending to have this difficult conversation along the way. This moment reflects a broader reality of coming out, which, as Kristy Jagiello in the work, “It Can Never Be Just One Thing: Constructing a Grounded Theory of Coming Out” notes, “Coming out was often described as something participants ‘had to’ or ‘need to’ do, or in some cases, something they were ‘forced’ to do, either by a person or by a situation” (39). The film delicately depicts this tension, highlighting the weight of expectations and the emotional complexity of revealing one’s truth. As Nitin grapples with the decision, the story explores the nuances of coming out and how it affects family dynamics and relationships.

The physical act of travelling from Delhi to Mussoorie parallels the internal journey of the characters, particularly Nitin’s impending disclosure of his sexual orientation to his son. This motif aligns with the conventions of the road movie genre, where the journey often symbolises a quest for self-discovery and personal growth. Road movies traditionally employ the journey as a metaphor for characters confronting internal conflicts and societal expectations. The open road provides a liminal space, free from the constraints of daily life, allowing for introspection and transformation. In *Dear Dad*, the journey facilitates a series of interactions and revelations that challenge and ultimately reshape the father-son relationship. This narrative structure reflects the broader themes of the genre, emphasising the transformative potential of travel. Hence, the road journey in *Dear Dad* is both a literal and symbolic pathway to understanding and acceptance. As Nitin drives Shivam to his hostel, he anticipates the long journey will give him the right moment

to share his truth. But the words don't come easily, he hesitates, fumbling through small talk, struggling to find the courage to reveal his truth. Shivam is indifferent during the trip, unaware of the emotional weight his father is carrying. The weight of coming out to his teenage son hangs heavy in the air. The structure of the journey is important as it has included a series of brief stops, disclosures, and reconciliations that reflects the non-linear quality of emotional processing, particularly in the context of grief. Throughout the drive, the camera repeatedly lingers on a small figurine of Jim Parsons, who played Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*. Parsons, a gay actor who came out in 2012, adds a poignant yet unspoken layer to the story. And just like Sheldon, who is known for his quirks, Nitin too is navigating his complexities, struggling to be understood, to be seen, and most of all, to be accepted.

During a stopover to meet his parents, his mother reveals to him that she finds comfort in the simple, everyday sound made by her husband because it reassures her that he is alive. This intimate disclosure highlights her deep-seated feelings of loneliness and emotional detachment, despite being physically close to her ailing spouse. Nitin goes up to his father, who is sitting out on the lawn, gazing into the distance. In a moment of vulnerability, Nitin discloses his homosexuality to his father, "*I was never attracted to women. I am gay. I just thought I will tell you that*" (*Dear Dad*, 0:20:32). This moment, planned as a private confession, is unintentionally overheard by his teenage son, Shivam. As a result of it, the act of coming out, intended as an intimate and private activity, turns accidental and uncontrolled. This unintended revelation increases Shivam's sense of shock and betrayal, as it strips him of the emotional preparation and trust that an intentional,

personal revelation might have offered. Nitin's confession is thus both an act of agency and an act of vulnerability. The inadvertent revelation disrupts Nitin's deliberate approach of coming out to his son, leading to immediate emotional turmoil for both father and son. Shivam's reaction is marked by feelings of confusion and betrayal as he is now aware of his father's sexuality, and this feeling of distrust stems not only from the content of the disclosure but also from how he learns of it.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross describes a widely recognised model of the five stages of grief, namely denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance as the psychological defense mechanism individuals employ when confronted with a profound loss or trauma. Denial, as the first of the five stages of grief, is not merely a refusal to accept the truth, but a necessary psychological response that allows the mind time to begin processing a reality that feels too overwhelming to confront all at once. For Shivam, learning the truth about his father is like the ground shifting beneath his feet. Denial comes not from cruelty or ignorance, but from fear, confusion, and heartbreak. He wants things to go back to the way they were—not because he's incapable of change, but because he's overwhelmed by it. In this way, denial is deeply human. It reveals the vulnerability behind the anger, the love behind the resistance, and the hope that maybe, somehow, things can still be the same.

For Shivam, Nitin who has functioned not just as a father, but as a touchstone for normalcy, masculinity, and structure, now has become something different, altogether, queer. He struggles to accept that someone he's looked up to could be different from what he's always believed. Shivam's initial silence, emotional withdrawal, and eventual outburst indicate the need to hold onto what has

been lost or altered. He does not hate his father; rather, he grieves the loss of a particular version of him. His hurt comes out as blame, questioning why he was sent away to the hostel, why their family feels like it's falling apart. Deep down, he's trying to make sense of a truth that feels too big and too painful to hold all at once. Denial, for Shivam, becomes a way to protect himself from the heartbreak of losing the version of his father he thought he knew.

Although Shivam is now aware of his father's homosexuality, he is not prepared to accept this aspect of Nitin's identity. This disclosure disturbs Shivam's perception of his family which leads him to feel betrayed and lost, and everything around him seems falling apart. The film depicts this emotional upheaval as part of the larger narrative of familial relationships and the difficulties of the journey towards acceptance. Shivam, feeling hurt and betrayed, is not sure how to react to his father's sexuality. "Coming out is an interactive process" (Evans & Broido, 664). The reaction of the individuals to whom the LGBTQ individual comes out, greatly influences the process of coming out. The reaction determines the "extent to which they will chose to come out in future" (665). Shivam's yearning for things to remain the same is a desire for stability, clarity, and the comfort of the known. Yet, it is precisely this disturbance that enables Shivam to reorient himself emotionally, and ultimately assume a new position, the one marked by empathy, and, eventually, by pride in his father's truth.

During their journey, Nitin offers a ride to Aadithya Taneja, a television celebrity whom he had earlier refused to give a lift as he planned on having a personal conversation with Shivam. This decision to take him along now provokes Shivam's suspicions and jealousy, fearing a romance that is likely to happen

between the two men. When Shivam says that he does not want to travel with his dad and wants to join his friends who are nearby, Nitin feels rejected by his son. When a landslide blocks their path, Shivam continues to prefer to stay with his friends nearby, but Nitin insists that he spend the night with him. Shivam agrees but ends up sharing a room with his friends, leaving Nitin to share the room with Aadithya. Shivam grew troubled and asked his father if he should leave, accusing him of wanting to stay with Aadithya instead. In response, Nitin, visibly frustrated, said he had been observing Shivam's behaviour since morning and would no longer tolerate it. When Shivam questioned why he was staying with Aadithya, Nitin explained that only two rooms had been available, and since Shivam had chosen to stay with his friends, he had no other option. He also reminded Shivam that it was he who had insisted on bringing Aadithya along in the first place.

Shivam: "*Mein sab samjtha hoon. Mein bachcha nahi hoom.*" ("I understand everything. I am not a kid"; *Dear Dad*, 0:37:28)

However, later scenes reveal that his understanding is not complete, as he struggles to see his father as a different individual, not as his father. Over time, as he grapples with his feelings of betrayal and confusion, he begins to realise that his initial reaction was rooted in his own lack of understanding, and he must confront a more nuanced, painful truth about himself and his family. Nitin's helplessness is the central thread of the film and the emotional impact it has on his family is explored thoroughly. After coming out to his son, Nitin feels a deep sense of uncertainty and fear. He knew this conversation would not be easy, but Shivam's anger and confusion cut deeper than he expected. Shivam, instead of reacting empathetically as Nitin expected, is unable to immediately accept his father's sexuality. This tension

between Nitin's expectation and Shivam's reaction underscores a recurring stress in queer family narratives. As a father, all he wants is to be honest with his son, to live his truth without losing his place in Shivam's life. The belief that truth alone is enough to dissolve prejudice is shattered. The distance between them grows, and every look of resentment, every unspoken word, feels like a wound. Shivam is struggling to cope with the big change happening in the family, especially since there is a divorce involved. Nitin understands this and all he can do now is hope that, in time, Shivam will find his way back to him.

Shivam is upset by Nitin's words about preferring Adithya over him. His discomfort with his father's sexuality is no longer subtle—it shows clearly in his expression of disgust. Overwhelmed by a whirlwind of anger, confusion, and disbelief, he says nothing, simply grabs the car keys and storms out. In the scene in which he drives the car, the intensity of his emotions mirrors the speed and aggression with which he handles the car. The roaring engine, the abrupt gear shifts, and his clenched hands on the steering wheel reflect the chaos within him. Shivam feels a deep sense of frustration, disappointment, and betrayal. He is unsure whether his anger is directed at his father or at himself. His reaction is a reminder that understanding and acceptance is not immediate, but is a result of a difficult process of emotional unlearning.

The film approaches homophobia with a quiet, understated touch, showing how deeply ingrained biases surface in everyday interactions. When Aadithya learns about Nitin's sexuality, his reaction is one of discomfort and unease. It's not outright hostility, but a moment of hesitation, a reflection of the unconscious fears people hold about queerness. Nitin, sensing this, immediately reassures him, making it clear

that his sexuality doesn't change who he is or how he interacts with others. It is a simple yet powerful moment, challenging the assumption that being gay is something to be wary of. Beyond individual prejudices, the film also explores how coming out disrupts the traditional idea of marriage. Marriage is often seen as a foundation of stability, and queerness is perceived as something that threatens that structure. When a parent comes out, children are left struggling with feelings of confusion, betrayal, and fear. They fear the social stigma and the change that will be initiated in their family dynamics. Shivam is expressing his anxiety to his friend, *"Mujhe bas apne bachpan wale family wapas chahiye. Yeh gay way hona, yeh nahi chahiye."* ("I just need my childhood family back. Being gay and so on...I do not need it"; *Dear Dad*, 0:44:12). His response is not just about homophobia but about the fear of change, the loss of familiarity, and the struggle to process something he never expected. His use of 'gay-way' in an indifferent tone mirrors his confusion and resistance—he does not fully understand what his father's identity means, but he knows it makes him uncomfortable.

Having moved beyond the initial stage of denial, Shivam now enters into the second phase characterised by anger which he expresses as emotional unpredictability and displaced rage. His anger is not strictly reactionary but is deeply tangled with the grief of losing the familial narrative he had unconsciously relied upon. This anger is in sight, in Shivam's reaction to his father's attitude towards Adithya where he expresses it through aggression and blame. Shivam's reckless driving, tight fists, and stony silence all points to his transition into the stage of anger while his inability to voice the origin of his pain underscores the depth of his

confusion. His anger is a passage through which he must travel in order to eventually arrive at a more empathetic, reconciled relationship with his father.

Shivam, struggling with his father's startling disclosure of his sexual orientation, tries to find clarity through online searches, only to find the information inadequate to ease his confusion and distress. Scared and misinformed, he even visits a dubious Baba who promises to cure his father's homosexuality, when he is convinced that his father has an 'illness' that needs to be cured. Shivam and his friend visit Baba Bandari, a symbol of conservative society's deep-rooted homophobia, who describes being gay as a deadly disease worse than AIDS, corrupting culture, body, and mind, and blames it on Western influence.

Baba Bandari: "*Gay? ... Bahuth katharnak bhimari hai. AIDS se bhi zyada. Sanskriti ki, tann ki, mann ki durgandh. Pashchimi deshomb ki dhen hai.*" ("Gay?... It is a very dreadful disease. Dangerous than AIDS. It pollutes the culture, body, and mind. It is a gift from the western countries"; *Dear Dad*, 1:49:36).

Baba Bandari's words reflect the deep-rooted homophobia that exists in conservative societies, where homosexuality is not just misunderstood but actively demonised. By dismissing homosexuality as a foreign affliction, Baba erases its place in Indian traditions and reinforces harmful stereotypes. The Baba gives Shivam a powder which he was supposed to administer to his father, resulting in Nitin's severe discomfort, highlighting the dangers of misinformation. This act highlights Shivam's internal dilemma and his struggle to understand his father's identity with his preconceived notions.

Anand Tiwari's *Maja Maa* (2022) looks into the trope of forced outing through the character of Pallavi, whose coming-out moment is filmed in secret and

shared without her consent. The video exposes her to her entire neighborhood and family, emphasising the violation of privacy queer individuals face. Pallavi struggles to contain her emotions, especially with her daughter Tara, who tries to support her in the overwhelming time. In the film, Tejas, her son is a highly educated young man who idolises his mother and like Shivam, finds it difficult to accept her identity.

Even when he knows that:

homosexuality is not a clinical condition to be treated with psychotherapy or medicine. But the “unbelievability” or the “impossibility” of his mother being a lesbian makes him take her to quack sages for treatment. This segment throws light onto the social stigma and ignorance that Indians subscribe to when it comes to non-normative sexual orientations. (Karthika 2023)

Desperate to “fix” what he observes as a problem, he takes her to Jharasar to see a baba who claims to cure homosexuality. Upon arrival, they observe an upsetting scene where a young boy is being beaten for having the so-called ‘gay disease.’ Pallavi is shocked and her expression moves from disbelief to anger as she realises the extent of Thejus’s denial when he says, *“I just want my mom back.”* (*Maja Maa*, 1:28:49). His words reveal his internal struggle as he still sees his mother through the lens of his expectations, incapable of admitting that she has always been the same person. The moment highlights the pain of unspoken truths, rejection, and the struggle of embracing change within one’s own family.

The movie explores the dynamics of an ideal Indian woman and how she is idolised inside her house. This idolisation makes it difficult for her to accept her

sexuality and come out of her family. The film also explores how she finally successfully humanises her identity, though within her family.

In both these films, a similar pattern is visible, where a child confronted with his parent's queerness, responds in disbelief, denial and anger. In *Maja Maa*, Tejus is unable to accept the truth of Pallavi and takes her to a baba to fix her and in *Dear Dad*, Shivam seeks help from Baba Bhandari to cure his father's illness. These actions reflect their inability to accept their parent's identities, resorting instead to superstitious or regressive solutions rooted in denial. The reliance on such figures underscores the societal pressure to conform and the sons' desperate attempts to "fix" what is seen as a disruption of traditional family and gender norms. In both cases, the son's reaction is shaped by societal norms and internalised homophobia, leading them to restore the image of the parent they once knew. In *Dear Dad*, Shivam's reaction from denial to anger illustrates how masculinity is retained by relying on silence, secrecy, and emotional repression. The instant queerness enters the family discourse, the appearance of masculinity collapses, and what emerges is the vulnerable, emotional, and complex father figure. In *Maja Maa* the narrative focuses primarily on Pallavi, but the film subtly maps the reactions of the men around her, her husband Manohar and son Tejas. whose responses range from discomfort and shame to eventual reluctant acceptance. Pallavi's revelation is not merely a threat to her identity, but to the entire patriarchal order of the household. Both the films interrogate the notion of normative Indian masculinity by exposing its deep-seated fragility when confronted with queer truths.

Shivam's subsequent withdrawal and refusal to communicate deepen the emotional chasm between father and son. Set against the backdrop of Dehradun's

landscapes, the narrative uses the physical journey as a metaphor for the tumultuous path toward understanding and acceptance within familial relationships. The journey in *Dear Dad* acts as an encounter with Shivam's fears and Nitin's truth. The film internalises its conflict, marked with discomfort and redefinition.



Figure 7.1 - Two shot of Nitin and Shivam, where the father and son are caught in the quiet aftermath of a truth too heavy for words.

A crucial aspect of Nitin and Shivam's diverging emotions during their journey lies in how each character processes the falling out of their familial bond. Nitin, having acknowledged his truth after years of subjugation, wants understanding and empathy. In contrast, Shivam is caught in a whirlpool of emotions - denial, anger, and grief and is therefore, unable to reconcile the image of his father with the reality of his sexual identity. Their road trip becomes a metaphorical passage through pain, misunderstanding, and the slow, uneven movement toward possible empathy and reconciliation. The two-shot of Nitin and Shivam sitting on a pillar stone in Figure 7.1, facing opposite directions, visually represents the emotional positions they are in. The vast, open landscape they are in represents the emotional vastness and uncertainty of their journey, symbolising the uncharted

emotional territory they are navigating. Nitin is placed in an arid setting where the vegetation and life are blurred in the background. He is facing the barren stretch of road and a hazy, distant horizon. The blurring of the background and the lack of visible life around him symbolise his emotional exhaustion and isolation. He has reached a place of acceptance, but it is a lonely space—one that lacks the immediate emotional warmth or understanding he longs for from his son. In contrast, Shivam is placed amid plants and life. He is surrounded by greenery which is often associated with youth, growth and vitality. The untamed nature of plants near him suggests the emotional transformation that he has to undergo. Shivam is placed in an opposite world from Nitin as Shivam is not able to empathise with his father. Shivam interrogates Nitin about destroying his family and he asks whether his mother is aware of it. Nitin reveals that his wife, Nupur, is aware of his sexuality and that their decision to separate was mutual. Shivam, upset at being left out of such an important matter, is told that the purpose of the journey was to share this truth with him. When he expresses concern for his younger sister, Vidhi, Nitin reassures him that she may not fully grasp the situation yet as she is very small and that he and Nupur will handle the situation appropriately. This exchange highlights the complexities of communicating personal and familial transitions within a traditional Indian family.

In this turmoil, Shivam's inability or refusal to understand his father's inner world or see him as a person with his own identity and emotional needs is notable. Instead, he views the situation through the narrow lens of how it affects him. This emotionally charged exchange between Shivam and Nitin reveals the depth of emotional conflict rooted in the father's queerness and the son's inability to accept it. Shivam's outburst is laced with resentment, shame, and confusion, stemming

from his perception of abandonment, being sent to a hostel, left out of family decisions, and now facing a reality that challenges his understanding of masculinity, fatherhood, and social norms. By stating, *"This is who I am... I would have killed myself a long time ago if you and Vidhi were not in my life,"* (Dear Dad, 0:39:47) he exposes the immense emotional burden of living inauthentically. His refusal to change is not defiance but a declaration of survival. Shivam's final response, *"You should have"* (Dear Dad, 0:39:51) is a brutal rejection, marking the peak of his emotional crisis and signaling the extent of his internalised homophobia. It is a devastating comment that underscores how the revelation has ruptured his perception of family, shamefully echoing society's rejection of queer identities. This scene ultimately lays bare how queerness in patriarchal, conservative settings is not just a personal struggle but a familial and cultural rupture, bringing masculinity, fatherhood, and emotional repression into direct confrontation.

When Nitin finally says, *"I can't change myself,"* (Dear Dad, 0:39:37) it is not just a statement of fact, it is a quiet plea for acceptance. It reflects a man who has spent years suppressing who he is, and who now refuses to go back into hiding just to make others comfortable. For Nitin, this journey begins with his wife by confiding in her about his sexuality and by deciding to live by his truth. But coming out is never just once, it's a series of moments, each with its challenges. He then decides to come out to his son, a moment filled with fear and uncertainty. Later, he comes out to Aadhyta, *"Nothing much. I am gay."* (Dear Dad, 0:41:56). Each conversation forces him to navigate new emotions, reactions, and vulnerabilities. Nitin reassures Aadhyta that he's not even attracted to him and that he need not be afraid of other sexualities.

Shivam, still angry and unwilling to accept the changes in his family wishes to have everything back as it was earlier. Nitin's feelings are not reciprocated and not reacted to. Desperate and misled by Baba Bandari's so-called 'cure', Shivam secretly mixes the powder into Nitin's water flask. Unaware of this, Nitin drinks it and soon experiences intense stomach pain. He rushes to the bathroom, clutching his stomach in agony. Inside, he is confronted by a disturbing sight—nude and semi-nude photos of women plastered across the wall. They serve as tools of correction, reflecting the belief that queerness can be undone through exposure to a heterosexual environment. The bathroom, a typically private and vulnerable space, becomes a site of humiliation. The imagery feels invasive, almost mocking his identity, forcing him into a space that does not reflect who he truly is. The shame shifts outside when Aadhyta follows him to check on his pain and sees the pictures on the wall. The scene critiques not only individual denial but also the broader cultural mechanisms that enforce heteronormativity through fear, shame, and coercion. David Halperin states:

To come out is precisely to expose oneself to a different set of dangers and constraints, to make oneself into a convenient screen onto which straight people can project all the fantasies they routinely entertain about gay people, and to suffer one's every gesture, statement, expression and opinion to be totally and irrevocably marked by the overwhelming social significance of one's openly acknowledged homosexual identity. (30)

Later, Nitin tries to talk to Shivam about his fear of living a life of loneliness and boredom. Nitin gently apologises to Shivam, acknowledging that while it was hard for his son to hear the truth, it had taken him even more strength to finally say

it. He opened up about the years he spent confused and scared, not understanding what he was feeling or why he did not fit into the life expected of him. In college, he genuinely enjoyed Nupur's company and mistook that deep friendship for love, thinking marriage would bring clarity or change. But nothing inside him really changed. He did not want to hurt Nupur by confessing something he himself had not fully understood, so he stayed silent. When Shivam was born and later Vidhi, he felt a joy he had not known before, and for a while, he truly believed that their presence might be enough to help him hold everything together. In sharing this, Nitin asks for understanding as he tries to show that he was not deceitful, instead, his coming out was a quiet, painful attempt to be authentic to himself. He says:

People saw us as a perfect family. Me as a good husband. Par mein andhar hi andhar toot raha tha. Mein tumhe batha nahi saktha ki har ek din ek joot jeena kaise hota hai. I just wanted you to know ki hum donom ke beech mein kuch nahi badla hai. I am still your father. Ab mujhe isse koi farak nahi padtha hi log mere bhaare mein kya sochenge. What matters to me is tum mere bhaare me kya sochte ho.

But I was broken inside. I cannot even tell you how it is to live a lie every day. I just wanted to tell you that nothing has changed between us. I am still your father. Now it does not bother me what people think of me.

What matters to me is what you think of me. (*Dear Dad*, 0:54:33)

Nitin's monologue is a deeply emotional and vulnerable moment in the film, where he finally gets the chance to share his truth with Shivam. His words reveal not only his struggle with his sexuality but also the immense pressure he faced to conform to societal expectations. He speaks about his confusion—how he mistook

friendship for love, hoping that marriage and family life would suppress his true identity. His desperation to maintain a 'normal' life led him to silence, suffering, and self-denial. He was not only hiding from society but from himself, and now that he has come out, the only judgment that truly matters to him is Shivam's. This highlights a universal struggle for LGBTQ+ individuals, seeking acceptance not just from the world but, more importantly, from the people they love. This moment is Nitin's plea to his son that he is still the same father, the same man who loves him, and he hopes that Shivam can see that beyond his sexuality.

At night, Shivam goes to a creek nearby, all by himself, seeking comfort and clarity of thought. Bathed in deep blue hues, the scene creates an atmosphere of introspection, loneliness, and emotional vulnerability. Shivam stands alone by the river, his posture reflecting contemplation or inner conflict. This moment represents a turning point for Shivam as he struggles with his feelings, torn between past perceptions and the reality of his father's identity. The motif of movement in the form of a flowing river functions as a potent metaphor for the slow transformation of Shivam's emotional landscape towards acceptance. The changing terrains they flow in reflect the internal shifts within Shivam, who begins to soften as the journey unfolds. His eyes, filled with tears, communicate an emotional intensity that words cannot express. Drawing on Heraclitus's concept of flux, the idea that everything is in constant change, is reflected in the statement, "no man ever steps in the same river twice", Shivam appears by the end of the film as a changed person. He is not the same person who began the journey with his father, overwhelmed by his father's disclosure, but another person shaped by experience, understanding and empathy. The journey becomes both literal and symbolic, denoting his slow but undeniable

progress toward empathy, maturity, and a redefined understanding of love and masculinity. Shivam is overwhelmed with guilt over what he has done, yet he still struggles to accept his father. Now, he has been consumed by anger and denial, emotions that protected him from facing the painful truth of his father's identity. This moment is critical in Shivam's psychological journey, where the anger in him has begun to subside, giving way to the heavy stillness of depression, the third stage in Kübler-Ross's model of grief. Shivam is no longer fighting or refuting his father's truth; instead, he is absorbed in a state of quiet mourning for the father he thought he knew, for the unspoken hurt he has instilled in himself and for the falling out of his family that he believed to be happy. A visual montage depicting transformation and the passage of life is constructed through evocative shots of swaying trees, raindrops trickling from leaves, two birds chirping on electric wires, crystal-clear water flowing over rocks, and the gentle ascent of the morning sun. The next morning, as he travels to the hostel with his friends, he takes out a family photograph. His fingers hover over his father's image, intending to tear it away, erasing Nitin from the picture, from his life. But as he holds the edge, something stops him. The memories, the love, and the years they shared hold him back. The journey becomes both literal and symbolic, denoting his slow but undeniable progress toward empathy, maturity, and a redefined understanding of masculinity. His anger and confusion remain, but in that moment, he realises that separating his father from the photograph would not make his emotions disappear.

The first phase, initial denial and emotional withdrawal, occurs shortly after Nitin's quiet confession that Shivam overheard. Shivam did not want to engage with his father, and his emotions oscillate between anger, disappointment, and confusion.

Subsequent segments of the journey deepen this conflict. Shivam wavers between anger, emotional turmoil and shame, refusing to articulate his emotions yet unable to suppress their intensity. It is only by the final segment of their journey that a form of reconciliation begins to emerge, and the silence between them begins to soften.

Shivam undergoes a significant emotional and psychological transformation by the climax, gradually responding to his father with empathy, understanding, acceptance and even pride. Finally, he begins to see Nitin not merely as a father, but as a human being weighed down by years of suppression and finally choosing honesty.

Shivam finally tops the mathematics exams. Overjoyed, his mother calls him to congratulate him and informs him that she will come for the felicitation ceremony. She mentions that she'll be coming with her close friend, Ayush and that he is longing to meet Shivam. Shivam pauses before asking, "*Aur Appa?*" ("What about Dad?"; *Dear Dad*, 1:07:15). During the ceremony, the auditorium erupts in applause as Shivam receives his award. He notices Nitin cheering for him and a soft smile on his lips as he waves back. Shivam now understands and acknowledges his father. When he approaches after the ceremony, Nitin looks at the cup and Shivam hugs him tight. Shivam feels a warmth he had not realised he was missing. "*I am so proud of you,*"(1:08:34) Nitin murmurs to Shivam. Nitin meets Nupur and, noticing Ayush, smirks, "*Tumhare liye thoda buda hai na*" ("Isn't he a little old for you"; *Dear Dad*, 1:10:08), he teases. Nupur raises an eyebrow and shoots back, "*Kum se kum straight tho hai, abhi tak*" ("At least he's straight... for now"; *Dear Dad*, 1:10:15). Ayush talks with Shivam and invites him to stay at his place. He wants to celebrate the victory of Shivam. He calls Nupur 'Nups'. Shivam shifts uncomfortably. He avoids the situation by saying that Nitin wants to take him out for

dinner. Then Ayush suggests that they can meet the next day, which is again dodged by Shivam saying that he has classes then and he is allowed to go out only on weekends. There is an unspoken tension between all of them. Ayush, unwilling to let the moment slip, tries one last time. “*Sunday, then?*” (*Dear Dad*, 1:10:54). Nitin then remarks sharply to Ayush that he doesn’t want to come. Nupur gets angry at Nitin’s remarks when she asks,

Nupur: “*Why does it always have to be about the choices you have made?*” (*Dear Dad*, 1:11:34)

Nitin, having come out as gay later in life, has made choices that disrupted the stability of his family. While his decision to live authentically is valid and necessary for his happiness, it inevitably impacts others, including his ex-wife and son. Nupur’s comment suggests that she feels that her life has always revolved around Nitin’s choices and what happens with her life is the consequences of his actions. Later Nitin confesses to her that he still feels protective of her. This brief yet emotional exchange between Nupur and Nitin reveals a pivotal shift in their relationship. Shivam’s question to Nitin asking the reason for his behaviour resonates a friendly bond between the father and son. Nitin’s response that he felt uneasy when he saw Nupur with someone else, is heavy with emotion. Shivam’s response marks a subtle but profound shift when he says, “*It’s okay. We will deal with this also*” (*Dear Dad*, 1:12:25). His words suggest a willingness to accept whatever might come in his way, and a willingness to move forward, to fix and to stand beside his father through this shared unraveling. The scene suggests growth in the character of Shivam, from denial to acceptance and support, from resentment to understanding. Even if Shivam does not completely understand it yet, he’s beginning

to choose empathy over judgment. It also indicates a reversal of roles as the son now offers comfort to the father, suggesting a newfound emotional maturity.

The bond between Nitin and Shivam grows. The tension between them eases, replaced by a quiet acknowledgement of each other's struggles. As their bond strengthens, Nitin and Shivam find themselves conversing about love and relationships more openly in a bar. Shivam asks his father, innocently, "*Do you find all guys attractive? (Dear Dad, 1:12:57)*". To this Nitin asks him whether he finds all girls attractive. Nitin agrees with Shivam's response when he says, not all, "*Same here, not all*" (*Dear Dad, 1:13:06*). Noticeably, it is the first time, Shivam listens to his father's experiences without judgment, and in return, he shares his feelings about his love interest. In an impulsive moment, Nitin agrees to accompany Shivam to the girls' hostel late at night so he can confess his feelings to the girl. The next day, Shivam defends his father when his Principal shouts at Nitin for getting inside the girls' hostel at 11 p.m. Shivam reveals to the principal that his father is gay. The public acknowledgement of his father's sexuality highlights the importance of the transformation in Shivam as the scene implies that acceptance should not be always passive, but it requires action, voice and authority.

Shivam: *How I wish he was interested in women. But he is not. He is gay. (Dear Dad, 1:19:14)*

The principal, in disbelief asks if he was joking. The look on Shivam's face, unwavering and resolute, tells her that he is serious. He lets her know that it is because he wanted to meet someone, his father went with him and that he will always be proud of his father. Shivam's response is a strong articulation of acceptance, loyalty, and defiance in the face of social judgement. He promises

permanent unconditional support to his father suggesting the significance of familial love that transcends social norms.

Shivam: *Yes ma'am. My father is gay and I am proud of him. No matter what, always will be. (Dear Dad, 1:19:41)*

This comment from Sivam reflects his journey from confusion and resistance to acceptance and pride. This moment is significant as it highlights the deepening bond between father and son. Shivam's public declaration of pride serves as a turning point, showcasing his emotional growth and his willingness to stand up for his father, regardless of judgment. Shivam is suspended for a week for his reckless behaviour, and the principal demands a written explanation from Nitin. Shivam remains unshaken despite the setback. From despising his father for being gay, Shivam reaches a place where he is proud of his dad. He is now able to talk about the sexuality of his dad without embarrassment, which is a remarkable change. At the heart of the film is Shivam's transformation—from struggling with anger and denial over his father's sexuality to reaching a place of acceptance and even pride.

The emotional turmoil experienced by the teenage son upon learning about his father's homosexuality is not just a response to the disclosure itself, but also of a deep psychological trauma. During adolescence, a boy's sense of masculinity is still in the process of being shaped and is often modelled on the image of his father. The father figure typically functions as a model of stability, authority and normative masculinity. Discovering his father's homosexuality, Shivam feels betrayed, and this sense of betrayal leads to a sense of confusion, anger, and loss. The emotional growth of Shivam reflects not only a journey of understanding his father, but also of shaping his own identity. The film shows how queerness in the domestic space,

particularly between father and son, disrupts the negotiation of traditional masculinity.

Dear Dad narrates the story of coming out, but it talks only about coming out of father to his son, not about being gay. The extent of the story is limited to the emotional and psychological result of a father's coming out. The film does not explore gay identity, relationships, or lived queer experience, but rather depicts the trauma that such a disclosure introduces inside the heteronormative family structure. The film does not depict Nitin's sexual history, romance, or even his emotional life beyond the act of coming out. This narrative choice makes his queerness invisible beyond the moment of disclosure, thereby limiting the viewer's access to his humanity as a gay man. It centres on the pain of coming out and the familial reconciliation it demands, but it leaves unexamined the fuller life of the queer subject. The narrative of the film remains intimate and personal, exploring the act of coming out and its aftermath on the father-son relationship. The film not only portrays the pain of the father, but also depicts the trauma experienced by the son who is confronted with the knowledge that his father is gay. It characterises the emotional journey of the character from denial to acceptance, and from anger to pride as Shivam travels from ignorance to knowledge. As Rashmi Raja, in her work "An Analysis on the Representation of LGBTQ Community in Hindi Cinema", notes that the film *Dear Dad* does not explore the father's queer identity. The film neither shows his initial realisation of being gay nor his gay partners (2018).

The climax of *Dear Dad* is subtle yet deeply moving, offering a quiet moment of transformation that differs from the practices often seen in queer cinema. The final scenes present a reconciliation between Nitin and Shivam, which comes

not only from a quiet acceptance of Nitin's sexuality but also from a deeper, more instinctive emotional recognition. The final acceptance, the fifth stage of grief as explained by Elizabeth Kubler Ross, comes in final journey that Nitin and Shivam take to Manali. The mutual understanding between the father and son is evident in the final scenes when Nitin goes to meet Shivam at his school. They recount the coming out narrative within the context of Indian familial dynamics, showing that acceptance is attainable through patience, presence, and vulnerability. Traditionally, Indian masculinity is built around dominance, heterosexuality, and emotional detachment, where the father is supposed to stand for authority, control, and moral certainty. However, *Dear Dad* challenges this by presenting a father who not only confesses to being gay but also openly expresses emotional vulnerability in doing so. Shivam's ultimate acceptance of his father depicts his divergence from traditional masculine norms. It overturns the dominant patriarchal script and opens a space for queer, emotionally honest masculinities within the Indian familial context.

The climax of the film *Maja Maa* depicts a nuanced and restrained portrayal of coming out, where Pallavi does not make a breakaway from her family or fully embrace a public queer identity. Instead, she quietly admits her same-sex desires, preferring honesty without disrupting the social and familial order. Pallavi, rather than leaving her marriage, redefines her relationship with Manohar, her husband as friends who share mutual respect and understanding. This subtle transformation makes a significant change in the family and in the emotional scene of the film. Pallavi's choice to stay in the family unit indicates not a denial of her identity, but a culturally specific negotiation of authenticity within the constraints of conventional social expectations. The film averts a liberatory narrative of queerness and offers a

space where intimate private truth coexists with social stability. Pallavi's journey involves courage and self-assertion, but it is also a compromise when her coming out is not complete and carefully managed, designed to preserve familial bonds rather than sever them. The ending is also a powerful commentary on the limitations on women in a patriarchal society. Pallavi is outed in front of all, and after that she makes a quiet assertion of her identity, in spite of which she remains within the structure of her heterosexual family. Unlike the male homosexual characters in Hindi cinema, who pursue an authentic life after being outed, Pallavi's life is affected by her duties as a wife and mother. The film, by addressing the tropes of roles of women and mothers in a traditional Indian society, is attempting to critique the binaries of masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, etc. As Adrienne Rich (1980) points out, "[o]ne of the many means of [heterosexual] enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly into view from time to time only to become submerged again" (620). Her choice to stay in the family after acknowledging her same-sex desire accounts for how social expectations require women to carry on their familial duties. This gendered disparity is not new. In *Dunno Y... Na Jaane Kyom*, the wife of a closeted gay man, finds herself trapped in a marriage she cannot leave, despite being aware of her husband's sexuality, bound by social expectations and a sense of duty.

In both *Dear Dad* and *Maja Maa*, the female characters carry the emotional and social burden of keeping the family together. While Nitin's coming-out journey allows for a degree of personal freedom, Pallavi's journey is laden with compromise and sacrifice. In both cases, the climaxes bring out a striking gender asymmetry in

how queer disclosures affect family structures. These contrasting endings emphasises how queer identity intersects with gender, suggestive of the unequal emotional expectations placed on women within the Indian family.

Dear Dad deals with coming out as a personal and intimate experience, and explores the psychological and emotional aftermath of it. For Nitin, coming out is an act of self-assertion, and for Shivam, it becomes an act of re-evaluating masculinity, parenthood and family. The narrative of the film is confined to the father-son bond, and by keeping it so, the film emphasises the deeply personal nature of coming out. *Dear Dad* is a poignant and emotional exploration of truth and silent acceptance within the framework of the family.

CHAPTER 8

SHUBH MANGAL ZYADA SAAVDHAN

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan, directed by Hitesh Kewalya, emerges as an unconventional attempt to normalise same-sex love by harnessing the power of slapstick comedy. The film tries to place its gay protagonists within the conventions of classic Bollywood romcoms and subverts the genre with the use of humour. Humour becomes the key device through which the story critiques homophobia and rigid family structures, without alienating its audience. This strategy does not diminish the seriousness of their struggle but employs comedy to foster empathy and broader social acceptance. It allows the narrative to confront serious social issues without becoming didactic or alienating its mainstream audience. By doing so, the film reimagines the act of ‘coming out’ not as a moment of rupture and trauma but as a messy, humorous, and emotionally resonant familial drama.

The film narrates the love story of Karthik Singh (Ayushmann Khurrana) and Aman Tripathi (Jitendra Kumar), a gay couple living together in Delhi. Karthik, the son of a blacksmith, comes from a very conservative family, while Aman comes from an educated family that upholds traditional values and societal expectations. They work in a shopping mall wearing superhero-like costumes, trying to sell toothpaste, saying, “*Kya aapke toothpaste mein pyaar hai?*” (“Does your toothpaste celebrate love?”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:04:23). This parodies a popular slogan of an advertisement for a toothpaste, “*Kya aapke toothpaste mein namak hein?*” (“Does your toothpaste have salt?”). The slogan becomes a commentary on love. Love, like salt, is commodified in the film, and its meaning is moulded by

public perception, cultural expectations, and economic worth. The superhero costumes worn by the protagonists are an undercutting of traditional heroism. The film satirises the trope of a conventional male hero who initially defies his community only to later convince the community to back him.

Aman's father, Shankar Tripathi (Gaj Raj Rao), a rigid traditionalist and an eccentric agricultural scientist obsessed with a bizarre invention of making a cauliflower without any worms referred to as 'kaali gopi', serves as a satirical representation of scientific temper. His family and the villagers are tired of his kaali gopi, ridicule him and the villagers even protest against Tripathi in the streets leading to a curfew. Through such absurdities, the scientific pursuits of Tripathi are mocked and the film also parodies the rigidity of heteronormative traditions. The heterosexual marriage between Shankar Tripathi and Sunaina (Neena Gupta), Aman's mother, is marked by emotional discontent as both parents reminisce about their past love. Their bond is more of a social conformity than marital harmony. Sunaina fixes Aman's marriage with Kusum, their neighbour's daughter, believing he is romantically involved with another girl in the city. But Kusum wants to marry another person and plans to continue her relationship after marrying Aman. The film makes heteronormativity appear not threatening, but out of touch and ridiculous.

Karthik and Aman decide to go to the wedding of Goggle, Aman's cousin, in Allahabad. They join the wedding celebrations of Aman's family on the train.

In boarding the train, Karthik also enters the Tripathi family, unbeknown to him or the family. The train seems to be moving towards heterosexual matrimony (it is the Vivah Special Express and carries the number 0337!), but is leading heteronormativity into a queer future. (Chatterjee 2)

Soon after, when they are in a lonely corner of the train's vestibule, they hug and kiss each other. Shankar Tripathi happens to see them in a liplock and is disgusted and pukes. The train is passing through a tunnel, and snippets of Aman and Karthik kissing, Shankar Tripathi's shocked face after seeing them and Aman and Karthik's guilty faces after they are caught, are shown to portray the horror of the act Tripathi just saw. The train, therefore, becomes:

a stridently heterosexual space and a matrimonial space. For Karthik and Aman to find a few metres of space within this space to perform their love for each other, which is neither heterosexual nor destined for matrimonial sanction, is subversion. But this subversion is still a tentative one because when they kiss, they do so in the belief that no one is watching them.

(Chatterjee 3)

The shocked look of Tripathi and the culpable faces of Aman and Karthik are shown in the darkness of the tunnel. When the train has passed the tunnel and the light comes in, the entire setting of the film has changed. Aman is outed to his father and later to the public by the act of kissing. The first outing happens when the train is passing through a tunnel and the darkness in the scene symbolically refers to the shame and guilt associated with gayness.

The relationship between Aman and Karthik becomes public soon after, during the wedding ceremony, a traditional family gathering, due to another public kiss, setting off a chain of dramatic, comical, and emotional confrontations. As Aman kisses Karthik in front of his relatives to show his protest to his father, Chaman, Aman's uncle attempts to cover the couple by putting his coat over them and chanting some mantras while he asks everyone to pray. Ironically, he calls it

“*saakshath prakarthi ka roop hai yeh.*” (“This is an absolute form of nature, we are blessed”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:39:30), voicing a truth that the family refuses to accept. The scene exposes the hypocrisy of traditional values when confronted with unacceptable realities, the customs that are deemed ‘natural’ when suppressing the authentic expressions of love. The film reflects the tension between modernity and tradition, addressing the complexities of love that defy societal norms. The film makes use of this public outing to challenge and demonstrate the absurdity of many rituals and traditions. The politics of kissing is important in the film as it showcases two homosexual kisses, both of them happening in public, once on the train and then again at the wedding. The act of kissing reclaims the public place for gay love and celebrates it as something that deserves recognition.

Karthik was asked to leave by Shankar Tripathi, and as he was escorted to the railway station, Chaman asked Karthik when he decided to be gay. Karthik replies with a counter-question to Chaman Chacha, enquiring when he decided not to be gay. Karthik’s question highlights the idea that being gay is not a choice but an essential part of a person’s identity, just like being heterosexual. Chaman Chacha replies, “*Are isme decide karne ki kya baath hai, yeh tho janam se hi aisa hai, mathlab*” (“What is there to decide? I’m born this way”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:44:11). It is only then that Chaman understands the absurdity of his question, realising that being gay is only natural. Karthik bids goodbye to Chaman and warns him that if something happens to Aman, he will hunt them all. They will all be held accountable. Karthik also asks Chaman to convey his message to Shankar Tripathi, “*Agar woh Shiv hai, tho mein Shiv aur Shakthi, donom hai.*” (“If he wants to play god, I can exert my powers as well”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*,

0:45:07). Karthik alludes to mythology to validate queer existence and uses the symbol of masculine and feminine divine forces to assert completeness.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan normalises gay love in three distinct domains - romantic, biological/ natural and legal. Firstly, in the romantic sphere, the film attempts to overturn the conventions of classic Bollywood romances like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999), *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*, *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (1999), etc, by placing a gay relationship at the centre of the narrative. It treats the romance between Aman and Karthik with the same warmth, playfulness, and passion typically reserved for heterosexual couples in Bollywood romances. They have their moments of joy, jealousy, conflict, and reconciliation, like any other couple, which stresses the idea of normalcy. From a biological and scientific point of view, the film shows gay love as natural as heterosexual love, a love that is not unnatural or a disease, a love that cannot be 'queered'. The movie is set during the period when Article 377 was finally removed from the statutes, so that gay love is no longer seen as criminal and gay lovers have every right to lead the life of their choice with self-respect and dignity. The film is heavily intertextual for it reinvents the familiar romantic tropes like a close-knit joint family, the overbearing father, the family's disapproval of a wrong romantic match, the runaway bride, the wedding climax, etc and redefines those tropes with gay love. Though at times the film relies on common tropes and caricatures, it nonetheless has an indispensable role in changing the cinematic representation of LGBTQ+ characters. Even Shankar's awkward eventual acceptance signals a broader cultural movement that is shaped by understanding and change. The inter-textual elements of

the film are bought out by subverting the cliches in conventional Bollywood romances.

Bollywood romances like *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (2001), *Mujhse Dosti Karonge!* (2002) and *Jab We Met* (2007) begin with a happy tone, where an overindulgent family showers their love on their children but meddles with their romantic love. Rather than portraying the family as overtly oppressive or antagonistic, the film leans into farcical exaggeration and absurd generational clashes. In the film, the Tripathi family is caricatured with exaggerated humour as a happy family who interferes in their son's life. The joint family has two brothers, their wives, and their children living under one roof, caught in a constant performance of tradition. Chaman Tripathi, the younger brother who failed to become an advocate, keeps seeking validation from his older brother by acknowledging his brother's authority.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan does not explore the underlying fractures within the Tripathi family. Instead, it frames familial conflict through a tone of light-hearted comedy and farce. Resistance to Aman and Karthik's relationship is depicted through over-the-top reactions and absurd schemes, making the family's opposition more laughable than threatening. This approach allows the film to critique homophobia and traditional values without becoming overly dramatic or alienating. Characters like Shankar and Chaman Tripathi are not developed as layered antagonists but as exaggerated symbols of outdated patriarchy.

The most enduring archetype in classic Bollywood romances is the conflict that breaks out within a joint family when a son or daughter falls in love with someone considered 'unsuitable' by familial and societal standards. Such films often

begin by portraying the family as a harmonious, happy and tightly knit unit where tradition, culture, and emotional bonds are deeply revered. However, the peace within this joint family is shattered when the element of ‘undesirable’ love comes in. The disapproval of the family stems from differences in class, caste, religion, economic status, or national and cultural identity—factors seen as threats to family honour and cultural continuity. Different films like *Taal* (1999), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, *Devdas* (2002), and *Veer Zara* (2004) deploy this archetype effectively. In *Veer-Zaara*, the conflict arises due to the cross-border romance between an Indian Hindu man and a Pakistani Muslim woman, foregrounding political and religious divides. *Devdas* explores the tension between romantic love and marital duty within a conservative household, while *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* revolves around the tension between the father and the son caused by the son’s determination to get married to a woman from a lower socio-economic background and *Taal* highlights class differences as the main barrier to the union of lovers.

These films use the trope of the ‘unsuitable match’ not only to generate conflict but also to explore larger themes of generational divide, cultural rigidity, and the emotional toll of conformity. In each of these narratives, the joint family becomes both the obstacle and the emotional anchor, as despite protecting traditions and upholding social expectations, it also eventually accepts love. The climax usually involves reconciliation and the mending of the conflicts in familial unity, but only after the lovers have proven the genuineness of their bond. This archetype functions to dramatise the tension between personal desire and collective values, making romance a site of negotiation between the old and the new, the individual and the family, and tradition and change.

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, the Tripathi family protests against the love story between Aman and Karthik, as they are unable to understand the concept of gay love. Their understanding of romance and love is confined within the heterosexual matrix. They try to ‘cure’ Aman’s homosexuality and also manipulate, blackmail and force him to marry a girl. Towards the climax, Karthik says that they would not understand the love between two men as they have not heard of homosexual love stories. His words state the mainstream culture in India where heterosexual love stories are celebrated, but homosexual love stories are invisible, and treated as deviant and taboo. They are not represented enough in media, art and literature so that the popular culture does not validate their existence.

Karthik: *Nahi samjenge. Bikul nahi samjenge. Inko idea hi nahi hai. Are, Laila Majnu, Shirin Farhad, Romeo and Juliet ke kahaaniyan padi he, suni he, par yeh jo hamara pyaar hain na, koi example nahi hai inke paas. Aur jo pyaar inke dimaag mein fit nahi baittha na, usko daba dethe hai, par koi dikath nahi hai. Humari ladayi hai papa, hum lad lenge. Chal Aman.* (“They won’t understand. They will never understand. They have read and heard of Laila Majnu, Shirin Farhad and Romeo and Juliet. But our love story is unique. They don’t have examples of it. And if they don’t understand a love story, they try to sabotage it. But it is fine. This is our battle; we will fight it. Let’s go, Aman”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:39:10)

The film challenges traditional narratives around love and relationships in India. The film explores the aspect of familial acceptance while highlighting the struggles and conflicts that arise in the process. The film depicts a nuanced narrative of coming out within the complex social structure of Indian family dynamics. The film is a milestone “because of its desire to normalise homosexuality” (Chatterjee

1). It tries to pit proud homosexual love against the social morality of traditional, middle-class, heteronormative cultural norms.

The grand Indian wedding is a recurring narrative framework in Bollywood romances, offering a vibrant, emotionally charged setting in which love stories unfold. More than a ceremonial event, the wedding becomes a dramatic space filled with tradition, celebration, and interpersonal tensions as a vibrant place for exploring themes of love, family, and societal expectations. Several films use this backdrop to frame their entire narrative, like *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*, *Monsoon Weddings* (2001), *Vivah* (2006), *Shaandar* (2015) and *Veere di Wedding* (2018), with its rich cinematic canvas, often doubling the celebration and a crucible of emotional transformation. In these films, weddings are not mere plot devices; it is layered with rich cinematic landscapes where love is tested, hidden truths are revealed, and traditions are challenged. In *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*, the film revolves around a grand Indian wedding where the rituals, bonding and traditions are foregrounded, whereas in *Monsoon Weddings*, the narrative is about an arranged Punjabi wedding, in the course of which multiple subplots intersect. *Vivah* is a quintessential wedding film where the story revolves around an arranged marriage whereas in *Veere di Wedding*, the plot unfolds featuring celebrations and relationship dilemmas when friends reunite for the wedding and in *Shaandar*, the narrative features a romantic comedy when two families come together for a destination wedding.

The setting of the wedding, the rituals, traditions, music, and festive chaos become narrative tools to explore gender roles, generational conflicts, and the struggle between personal desires and familial obligations in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*. The conventional setting of marriage is re-imagined to fit a homosexual

wedding, making a traditional space into one that negotiates between tradition and modernity. Amitabh Bachchan and the film *Sholay* are referred to when Aman and Karthik do the pheras at their wedding. Aman warns his mother that such marriages will be more visible in the coming years. They decide to go around the fire when Panditji refuses to read the auspicious chanting for a homosexual wedding. Instead, Karthik sings the song from *Sholay*, “*Yeh dosti, hum nahin thodenge, Thodenge dhum magar, Tera saath na chodenge...*” (“We won’t break this friendship; I may die, but I won’t abandon your company”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:40:33). *Sholay* is a film that is much discussed for its queer subtext. The film is interpreted as having homosocial friendship and love between the protagonists, Jai (Amitabh Bachchan) and Veeru (Dharmendra). Their friendship carries layers of intimacy and emotional depth to elicit a queer reading. In the song, we see two *yaars*, Jai and Veeru ride together on a motorbike, “. . . the line ‘*Khana peena saath hai, Marna jeena saath hai*’ in the song implies marriage because it sounds exactly like a marriage vow” (Rao 69). The song is treated as a queer anthem where the lyrics and visuals of the song exist in a celebratory plane and the imagery in the song feels symbolic and intimate.



Figure 8.1 - a. Prem and Nisha take the pheras in *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*. b. Aman and Karthik take the pheras in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*.

One of the most iconic tropes in Bollywood romances is the expression of love through romantic duets and bike rides. The symbolic gestures like resting one's head on a lover's shoulder, a bike ride in the rain or in the background of a romantic duet are acts that publicly assert intimacy and commitment. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* uses this familiar cinematic language by placing the gay couple at the centre of this visual grammar. In a prominent sequence, the film cuts from a reference to marriage to a duet of Aman and Karthik featuring the couple glued to each other on a motorbike, riding in the night in their superhero costumes. They meet a heterosexual couple in the traffic where the girl sits at the back of the bike and lies on the shoulder of her lover. Karthik is sitting in the same way as the girl, echoing the same gesture of comfort and belonging. Homosexual romance is treated the same way as Bollywood has treated heterosexual romance over the years. The couple live a life of constant struggle and conflict, as mentioned by Karthik in a later scene, and yet they own their sexuality in their life. Even the song lyrics, "*Mujhe har pal tere saath rehna hai...mere liye tum kaafi ho*" ("I want to be with you every moment, you are enough for me"; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:11:11) reflect the ethos of heterosexual love and marriage.

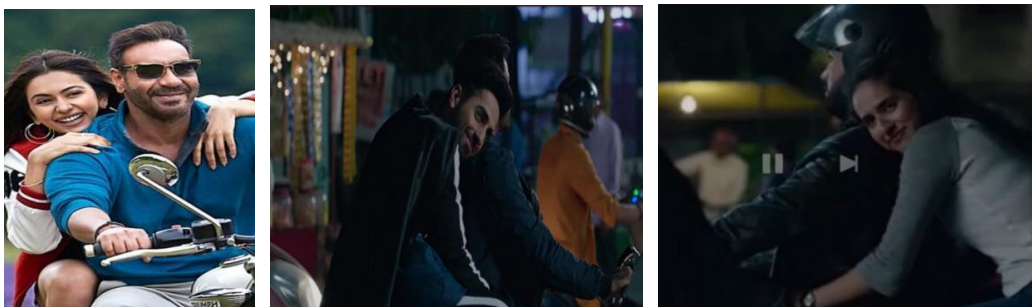


Figure 8.2 - a. Ayisha on a bike with Ashish cuddling him in 'De De Pyaar De' b. Karthik leans on Aman by cuddling him c. another heterosexual couple does the same while they are in traffic\

Another popular trope in wedding movies is a song performed very often by the heroine as a bridesmaid, at a friend's wedding. These songs, usually a part of the pre-wedding festivities, are flirtatious and allow the heroine to woo and tease the hero under the guise of celebration. These songs are noted for their playful gestures and their subtextual longing, like the songs, "Mere haathon mein" from *Chandini* (1989), "Didi tera dewar deewana" from *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun!*, the wedding medley song from *Mujhse Dosti Karonge* (2002), "Dilliwali girlfriend" from *Yeh Jawani Hai Deewani* (2013) and "Iski uski" from *2 states* (2014). The song "Pyar tenu karda Gabru" from *Shubh Mangal Zyada saavdhan* is an expression of gay romance in the aesthetic of Bollywood cinema, and the song subverts the conventional Bollywood wedding song to a space that celebrates gay love by validating it through their performance. It is a wedding song featuring the romantic fantasy of Aman and Karthik by subverting the trope of heterosexual love stories. Karthik is dressed in a vibrant, campy and over-the-top Punjabi costume and tries to woo Aman, who dances with him openly. It is a remake of a Punjabi song by J Star and Honey Singh. Shankar Tripathi tries to keep them separate unsuccessfully, and this leads to a face-off between Tripathi and Karthik, which ends in a public kiss between Karthik and Aman. The song blends energetic choreography, double meanings in lyrics and festive costumes to express feelings that would otherwise be suppressed by society and family. Thus, the wedding becomes a safe space for courtship when direct romantic expression is not yet possible.

Another recurring trope in Hindi cinema is the moment when the bride or groom is replaced by their true love by dressing as the bride or groom. This is deeply symbolic as it marks love's victory over duty, societal pressure, and other

commitments. True love reclaims the partner and the narrative by stepping in as a bride or groom, asserting the authenticity of their love. In *Aaina* (1993), younger sister Reema (Juhi Chawla) becomes the bride instead of her elder sister Roma (Amrutha Singh) when Roma runs away to act in films. A similar trope plays out in *Mujhse Dosti Karogi*, where the switch happens at the last moment when Tina (Kareena Kapoor) steps away and Pooja (Rani Mukherjee), the true love, becomes the bride. In the film '*Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*', the groom is replaced by his younger brother (Salman Khan), when the truth of his true love with Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) comes to the knowledge of everyone. In *Hulchul* (2004), Jai (Akshay Khanna) replaces the groom and takes his place in the ceremony to win his true love Anjali (Kareena Kapoor). In *3 Idiots* (2009), this trope is parodied when the groom is replaced by the hero's friend in order to take the heroine to the hero.

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, this trope is queered and subverted as Karthik replaces Kusum, Aman's runaway bride, in the wedding mandap. Dressed in full bridal attire, Karthik disrupts the heteronormative wedding and earns his rightful place near his love. In the bridal attire, Karthik parodies traditional gender roles and, at the same time, subverts a deeply gendered visual trope. This act transforms the wedding into a statement of queer love and resistance, using humour and spectacle to challenge tradition and normalise same-sex love. The wedding mandap is symbolic of traditions and heterosexual union and by queering this mandap, Karthik repositions homosexuality. Karthik's relationship with Aman is validated and portrayed as authentic.

The metaphor of the train is repeated in Hindi cinema, where it is not merely a vehicle of transport but also a symbol of escape, change, and modernity in the

lives of characters. Hindi cinema has repetitively used the train as a narrative device to portray moments of journey, signifying change, separation or reunion. The most iconic uses of this trope appear in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, where the last scene on the railway platform has become a sort of cultural touchstone. The train symbolises liberation and Simran's love away from the constraints of her conservative family. Raj stretching his hand from the moving train and Simran's desperate run towards it to hold his hand captures the tension between tradition and modernity, familial duty and individual desire. In *Jab We Met*, the train sets the entire narrative of the film into motion. The meeting of Geet and Aditya on the train becomes the catalyst for their personal growth and emotional healing. The train in this movie signifies the unpredictability of life, a place where strangers cross paths and start on life-changing journeys. Aadithya also stands on the footboard to drag Geet inside to take her back to her home and his life as she shares her nightmare of not being able to catch her train. In *Chennai Express* (2013), as a parody of DDLJ, Rahul gives his hand to Meenamamma to drag her inside the train.

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, Aman is standing on the footboard and drags in Karthik who is running towards him to get inside. The film poster is also designed based on a direct reference to the iconic train scene from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ). Karthik is standing on the footboard waiting for Aman, dressed in his wedding costume. Aman is being physically held back by his family, preventing him from boarding the train with Karthik. This visual encapsulates the central conflict of the film, symbolising love, societal constraints, and the struggle for acceptance. The poster reinterprets the well-known cinematic trope where the train represents both an escape and a turning point in love stories, but through a

queer lens. The train here becomes the site of the first kiss between Aman and Karthik and thereby represents progress, hinting at the breaking of heteronormative barriers and the broader movement of societal change.



Figure 8.3 - Kajol running towards Shahrukh in DDLJ is recreated when Aman runs toward Karthik in Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan

The railway station is always characteristic of queer discourses as a metaphorical space of connection, reflection and fluidity. Railway stations are also treated as thresholds for mobility and freedom. They are public and intimate spaces at the same time, where different people meet and converse on diverse topics. For queer persons, it has also been a space to find communities and new identities.

“Many authors, regardless of their non-heteronormative identities or expressions, have drawn from transport and railways as a source of metaphorical and symbolic power. The dynamic mobility ...[is] undoubtedly an attractive device for writers of any kind even to this day” (Robinson). The railway station has played an important site where the narrative shifts in many movies like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kal Ho Na Ho*, *Jab We Met*, *Chennai Express*, *Saathiya* (2002), etc.

In the movie *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, the railway station becomes a site of presence in the pivotal moments. Karthik and Aman join Aman’s family, Karthik is convinced by Goggle not to leave Aman, and Karthik and Aman go back

together to live a life of joy and love with the blessings of their family – all happen in the site of railways.

At the railway station, Karthik hears a child reciting the nursery rhyme ‘Jack and Jill’ and becomes disappointed with its hetero-normativity in it. He asks why it always has to be Jill with whom Jack climbs the hill and why Jack could not go with Johnny instead. Karthik recites his version of the poem, emphasising love and acceptance: “*Jack and Johnny went up to the hill, To live in love and laughter. Jack ke le li Papa ne, Johnny chip gaya bhagke*” (“Jack got thrashed by his dad, and Johnny hid soon after”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:46:38). Karthik when questioned by the child’s father, replies to him that had anyone asked Jack, with whom he wanted to go. “*Has anyone ever asked Jack whom he wants to go with? Jill or Johnny?*” (*Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:47:02). The film tries to address the concern that, through stories and rhymes, heterosexuality is normalised at a very young age. This film shows the challenges faced by non-heterosexual relationships in India’s heteronormative society and suggests that heterosexual love is not the only valid form of love.

Emotional blackmail and violence by parents are cliches that are present in numerous Hindi films. In such films, whenever children attempt to do something based on their desire, that is quite the opposite of familial expectations or societal demands, parents are shown as defending family honour, culture, and social status, and they resort to manipulation, guilt-tripping, and even physical violence when their children’s romantic choices threaten to disrupt the established social order. Films like *Laapatha Ladies* (2023), *Dil Dhadkane Do* (2015), *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989), *2 States*, *3 Idiots* and *Rocky Aur Rani Ki Prem Kahani* (2023) portray the

emotional blackmail inflicted by the family, usually fathers, on their children to prevent them from marrying the love of their life. Feigning illness, a sudden heart attack or false suicide attempts are also considered as attempts by the parents to emotionally blackmail their children. The films *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960), *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), *Dhadak* (2018) etc used violence as a means to curtail the love affair.

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, when Karthik comes back for Aman, the trope of violence is taken further with the portrayal of physical violence. Aman's father, Shankar Tripathi, not only emotionally disapproves but also brutally assaults Karthik with a cane which acts as a corrective tool in the movie that is used to discipline the character by thrashing him, seeing homosexuality as an unacceptable deviation from social norms. This moment of violence lays bare the deep-seated prejudices against queer love in conservative Indian households. The beating is not just personal; it is framed as moral retribution, an attempt to restore perceived family honour tarnished by the public presence of homosexuality. Homosexuality, if made public, shames the entire extended family comprising parents, children, siblings and relatives. Hence, in fear, homosexuals were bashed in a misplaced sense of morality. Karthik falls face down, unable to bear the assault anymore. His last words before passing out are: "*My sexuality is my sexuality. It is none of your sexuality*" (*Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:14:50). The statement acts as political and thereby reclaims the autonomy of desire against a culture that polices identity through shame and fear.



Figure 8.4 - Sanjay is beaten with an iron rod in Ghajini and similarly, Karthik is beaten by Shankar Tripathi in Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan

Aman's parents try to convince him to marry Kusum, the girl they chose for him to marry. Shankar Tripathi acts as if he is going to commit suicide to blackmail him emotionally. According to Raj Rao in his work, *Criminal Love*, homophobia manifests itself in the form of physical and psychological persecution of the homosexual. His family may psychologically blackmail him by refusing to speak to him, by feigning illness or by threatening to commit suicide to convince him to marry and bring home a wife (77).

Another frequently employed visual motif in Bollywood romances is the dramatic public declaration of love. In *Sholay*, Veeru gets on top of the water tank to profess his love for Basanthi and to get Aunt's permission to marry her, threatening to jump down. In *Zindagi Na Milengi Doobara* (2011), Laila comes riding a bike to confess her love for Arjun and kisses him publicly. In *Humpty Sharma Ki Dulhania*, Kavya climbs on top of a truck with a loudspeaker in her hand to come back to her love. These gestures not only capture the intensity of the lover's emotions but also signify their bold defiance of societal or familial expectations.



Figure 8.5- a. Kavya climbs on top of a decorated truck to woo her love in *Humpty Sharma ki Dulhaniya*.

b. Karthik climbs on the terrace to call out Tripathi's homophobia and to woo his love in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*

Similarly in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, one of the most noteworthy scenes occur when Karthik stands on the terrace of Tripathi house with the rainbow colour flag as a cape around his neck. The trope of lovers declaring their love from a rooftop is subverted in the scene because the lovers are two men. The rainbow flag Karthik wears assert his identity and make him a gay hero. He calls out the homophobia of Shankar Tripathi as an illness that needs to be treated. This again is a subversion when instead of accepting gayness as a disease that can be treated, the refusal to accept gayness and a hatred towards it is the real illness that cannot be cured. Homophobia is the disease that effects your mind and instead of killing you, it makes you attack others.

Doston, Shankar Tripathi bhimar hai, bahuth bimar. Dhumrepan ke ad mein jho ladka aata hain na, usse bhi zyada bhimar...Shankar Tripathi ke peppdon, gurdomein, dil, dimaag mein ek khatharnak bhimaari ne gharkar rekha hai. Bhimaari ke naam hai homophobia... yeh bhimari ka konom illaaj

nahi hai... Yeh bhimaari na chune se phailthe hai, na thookne se. Na ki shaukh ki bhimaari hai, balki yeh soch ki bhimaari hai. Unfortunately, isse insaan martha nahi hai, maartha hain.

Friends, Shankar Tripathi is ill. Very ill. The man who is featured in the ‘smoking kills’ ad, he is way more sick than that man is... Shankar Tripathi’s lungs, liver, heart and brain has been taken over by a dangerous disease. This disease is called homophobia...And this disease has no cure. This disease is not contagious. This disease only affects the mind. Unfortunately, this is not a killer disease. But the diseased man becomes the killer. (*Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:10:00 - 1:10:58)

The archetype of the happily ever after with the blessings of the parents has been a trademark of mainstream Bollywood romances, expressing the deep-rooted cultural emphasis on family approval as indispensable for a legitimate love story. In a conventional Indian society, love and marriage are not matters entirely based on personal choice; but they are also validated by the consent of the family. Bollywood films frequently resort to the idea of resolving a romantic conflict by having elders’ blessings, for the personal happiness of the protagonists and for restoring familial harmony. The films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*, *Taal*, *Dil Hai Tumhara* (2002), *Yaadein* (2001), and *Maine Pyaar Kiya* stress the importance of parental consent and blessings signifying that true love can coexist with traditional values.

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, this trope is queered when Aman and Karthik’s gay relationship is finally accepted by Aman’s father. This provides a feel-good resolution to the film in addition to normalising gay love within the framework

of Bollywood narratives. The happily ever after with the family's approval is always a comforting compromise, hinting that even love that resists norms can be embraced by the society. In the climax, Shankar Tripathi says to Aman, "*Humhe nahi patha beta ki hum yeh sab samaj payenge ya nahi. Lekhin humare samaj ke wajah se tumhe aadhi adhuri zindagi jeene ki koi zaroorat nahi.*" ("I donot know if I will ever understand this thing. But do not let me stop you from living your life to the fullest"; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:48:57). He leaves the hand of Aman and says to him, "*Jaa, beta... jee le apne zindagi... jaa Simran jaa*" ("Go, live your life. Go, Simran, go"; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:49:08). This again is a cross-reference from the film *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*, where Simran's father Chaudery Baldev Singh leaves her hand to let her go with Raj before she runs to the train. He says to her, "*Jaa Simran jaa, jee le apni zindagi. Jaa beta jaa*" ("Go, Simran, go. Go, live your life."; *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, 3:07:49). "Simran's run to catch up with Raj after her father permits her to join him has now become an iconic image that recurs in many films as a subtext...the conflict between traditional values and modern conditions is clearly visible in this encounter" (Mukherjee 41).

Karthik bids adieu to Shankar Tripathi by calling him Papa. After Tripathi sends Aman to live his life freely, Karthik comes and hugs him. Karthik and Aman run to board the train. Ironically, it was a train journey in the Vivah Express that took over their life by the world of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, and it is another train journey that is going to take them towards their goal and life of romance. The commentary on the life of 'Laila -Juliet', 'Majnu -Romeo', 'Simran - Anjali', 'Veeru-Jai', by converting heterosexual romances into same sex romance is a documentation to normalise the life of homosexuality and homosexual romance.

The characters of *Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge*, *Kuch Kuch Hota hai* (1998) and *Sholay* are brought in along with the evergreen names of romantic tales like Romeo and Juliet, Laila Majnu etc. *Sholay*, being a film that portrayed unconventional masculinity and heterosexuality, is widely celebrated for its homosociality. This is evident in the song “*Yeh dosti...*”, where Jai and Veeru ride together on a motorbike singing of their eternal friendship.

The physicality and body language displayed by Veeru and Jai contribute to the homoerotic interpretation of their relationship....Lines such as "Dost milte hain bichhadne ke liye" (Friends meet to be separated) and "Dosti ka yeh silsila, badlega nahin" (This cycle of friendship will never change) take on a layered meaning when viewed through a homoerotic lens. . . One of the most iconic moments in *Sholay* is the hand-holding scene between Veeru and Jai. In this scene, Jai is injured and unable to use his hands, while Veeru takes the responsibility of firing a gun on Jai's behalf. As Veeru shoots, Jai holds Veeru's hand, symbolising their unbreakable connection and mutual trust. (Banerjea 721-722)

The story of Jai and Veeru acts as a symbolic parallel to the bond between Aman and Karthik reinterpreting traditional notions of masculinity and friendship.

The film skilfully weaves together comedy and drama, using humour to address the deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes surrounding homosexuality in Indian society. It explores the struggles faced by Karthik and Aman, as they navigate societal taboos, confront their families, and fight for their love and acceptance. (Bala and Gupta, 17)

Karthik wears a metal nose ring and the triangle tattooed beneath his ear immediately evokes the pink triangle, which was deployed in Nazi prison camps to identify and persecute homosexuals. During holocaust, the pink triangle functioned as a tool for dehumanising violence and stigma. The triangle which was a symbol of oppression and hostility is now a mark of resistance and pride. His appearance is carefully created as a strong visual and political statement. He has a tattoo of Lord Shiva, a deity of unconventional masculinity on his right arm. “He wears the LGBTQ+ flag as a cape, a symbol of heroism and overwhelming pride; he argues that parental rejection of consenting same-sex love is an illness. This film became the first commercial film to show its leading men kissing on the screen” (Bala and Gupta 17). Filmmaker Hitesh Kewalya says in an interview that when we are saying that everyone is the same, the references we have of a hetero couple showing intimacy must be equally applicable in a same-sex relationship. “My idea was to appropriate as many popular heteronormative cultural icons I could find from our cinema and relocate them to a story about a same-sex couple. So, we have Vijay-Ravi, Jai-Veeru, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, ‘Yaar Bina Chain Kaha Re’.” (Ghosh 2020)

Another trope found in Bollywood is the final celebratory dance sequence, where all characters come together to dance in unison. All characters in the film including the hero, heroine, their family, and even villains in the narrative become a part of it. This extravagant sequence serves as a visual spectacle and a narrative conclusion, offering a sense of closure for the audience through dance and music. It strengthens the traditional ideal of a happy ending where relationships are fixed and love succeeds with the blessing of everyone. The song “Sooraj ki baahom mein” from *Zindagi Na Milengi Dobara* is based on theme of wedding while the ‘BnB’

song in *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005) is rap in its nature. The song “Ainvayi ainvayi” from *Band, Baja, Bharaat* (2010) picturises the marriage of the protagonists whereas the title track “Dil dhadkane do” from *Dil Dhadkane Do* gives a retro vibe. While “Dard-e-disco” from the film *Om Shanti Om* (2007) presents all the cast and crew from the film, “Sharabi” song from *Happy New Year* (2014) introduces all the crew in the film in the guise of a dance competition.

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, where the final song “Arey Pyaar Kar Le” shows not just the gay couple dancing joyfully, but also their family members joining in. The film brings in Bappi Lahiri, who is known for his camp fashion and flamboyant dressing, both of which subvert conventional masculinity. The song “Yaar bina chain kahan re...” is played before the end credits. Lines from another song are often added to the song, like “Mein aadmi hoon, aadmi se pyaar kartha hoon...”. By showing the characters’ journey towards acceptance, the film helps in the empowerment of queer audiences, promoting the message that love is valid regardless of gender.

A recurring pattern in Hindi popular cinema is the bride who elopes with her true love, leaving her family who symbolically ‘comes out’ against societal expectations. The function of this motif is a literal act of escape reflecting shifting attitudes towards individual agency, gender roles, and social conformity. An early example of such a movie is the 1974 film *Ajnabee*, in which the wealthy heroine Rashmi (Zeenat Aman) runs away with Rohit (Rajesh Khanna), a modest guy, to Bombay and get married to him. Another classic film *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988) narrates the love story of Raj (Aamir Khan) and Rashmi (Juhi Chawla) who elopes together seeking an idyllic life. An iconic example is from *Raja Hindustani*, where Aarti (Karisma Kapoor) goes against her wealthy, controlling father to marry

a humble taxi driver, Raja (Aamir Khan). Similarly, *Saathiya* explores the trope of elopement through the story of Suhani (Rani Mukerji) and Aditya (Vivek Oberoi), who secretly marry against the wishes of their middle-class families. A notable variation appears in *Akele Hum Akele Tum* (1995), where Kiran (Manisha Koirala) ‘elopes’ from her marriage to pursue a music career. This coming out from her family, abandoning her husband and child, was radical for its time. In *Chalte Chalte* (2003), Priya (Rani Mukerji) is engaged to marry someone from her class, but instead, chooses to marry Raj (Shah Rukh Khan), a struggling truck owner, against the wishes of her family. In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) leaves his home and marries Anjali (Kajol) against his father’s wish. In *Rishtey* (2002), Komal (Kareeshma Kapoor) marries Sooraj (Anil Kapoor), who is a lower middle-class boxer by going against her father. In all these instances, the ‘eloping bride’ or the woman who ‘comes out’ of the familial structure emerges as a powerful symbol of personal freedom.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan also subverts the cliched idea of the conflict between love marriage and arranged marriage. Here, the resistance is not just about love outside of arranged norms, but love outside of heterosexual norms. The film reimagines the familiar trope by metaphorically imagining the act of coming out as an act of escape. Breaking free from conventional heteronormative expectations is symbolically leaving the idea of family behind. The film also mocks the traditional ‘girl-next-door’ bride archetype through Kusum, who later escapes the forced marriage, paving the way for Karthik to take her place in the wedding mandap.

The film’s narrative has numerous references to Amitabh Bachchan and his films. Hitesh Kewalya says in an interview that Amitabh Bachchan ascended as the Angry Young Man for the youth and there would have been a queer group who

would have looked at him as a queer icon. According to Raj Rao, Amitabh Bachchan is the uncrowned prince of homosociality. He changed the grammar of Hindi cinema from romantic to homosocial (68). In the film, when Aman's father finds him to be homosexual, Karthik asks Aman to go and talk to him. Karthik asks him to be courageous like Vijay. Karthik alludes to the character Vijay played by Bachchan in the film '*Deewar*' (1975).

Karthik: *Ja batha de usko ki tum mujhse bahuth pyaar karta hoon aur duniya mein koi paida nahi hua jo humhe alag kar sake... Ek tho tera Amitabh Bachchan banne ka time hai aur tu dar raha hai. Thu Vijay hai Vijay, aur Vijay kabhi haar nahi maanthe.* ("Tell your dad that you love me and nothing can keep us apart... This is the time. Be an angry young man, like Vijay in *Deewar*. Be a man. Be like Vijay, the one who stays undefeated"; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:27:15).

The reference to Amitabh Bachchan and Vijay is repeated in the film, making it more emphatic.

The homosocial bond that Amitabh Bachchan formed with other male actors on the screen was intensified by the presence of an all-male audience that had gathered to watch him. It engendered a sort of homoeroticism in the darkness of the movie hall...If Amitabh Bachchan could express undying love for other men on the screen, all in the name of yaari, why couldn't they indulge in a little masti? (Rao 72)

Towards the climax, when Karthik wants Aman to be courageous and take a stand for himself, he urges Aman to be Amitabh Bachchan, "*Zindagi bar bar na Amitabh Bachchan banne ka mauka nahi detha. Ab tu decide kar, tujhe kya banana hai, Amitabh Bachchan ya Rahim chacha*" ("It is not often that you get a chance to

be a hero. Now you decide, who you want to be - the hero or a bystander in this story”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:25:12).

Coming out in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* is different from the previous films of the same theme as it tries to normalise same-sex relationships and, on many occasions, parallels them with heterosexual relationships. The comic portrayal of the theme is also effective since humour is used to fight social stigma. Using humour is a non-threatening approach that exposes the absurdity of traditional relationships. Using comedy as a narrative tool is predominantly significant – the film employs humour as a subversive device to make LGBTQ+ themes more accessible to a mainstream Indian audience, effectively challenging deep-rooted social prejudices. The element of satire used by Kewalya heightens the drama and makes the viewers ask self-reflexive questions. The traditional heterosexual marriages between the parents are depicted as the reason that killed the romantic relationships they had when they were young. The film brings marginalised narratives into the mainstream (Singh 396).

Secondly, the film stresses the scientific aspect of gay love as the theme of science versus nature becomes central to the narrative of the film. Karthik’s witty retorts and the family’s comic attempt to ‘cure’ Aman through rituals by holding his fake *kriyakaram* (funeral rites) and *naamkaran* (naming ceremony) to cleanse him of his homosexuality expose the absurdity of the traditional and pseudo scientific rituals in treating homosexuality as a disease. Science always acknowledges and regards the complexity of the natural identity of humans. In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, the theme of science versus nature is significant in the central conflict around the discourse of queer identity and family acceptance. This is brought out in the character of Shankar Tripathi, who is a scientist working on genetically modified

black cauliflowers, 'kaali gopi'. His attempt to interfere with the natural vegetable shows his belief that anything that does not fit the 'normal' pattern must be corrected or fixed. It is the nature of vegetables to go bad and to have worms in them, but Tripathi tries to interfere with it as something that can be fixed. Tripathi understands Aman's queerness as unnatural, as a defect that can be repaired in the same way as he tampered with the natural vegetable. In an attempt to change nature, he tried to make the *kaali gopi* worm free and hence, in the same way, he treats the homosexuality of his son as a disease that science or society can cure. This approach represents false science when we seek to control and alter nature, rather than understanding it. This belief is a result of a larger social discomfort where non-heteronormative identities are treated as deviations rather than natural expressions of human existence.

In contrast to Shankar Tripathi, who manipulates and corrects nature, Karthik and Aman symbolise nature that is instinctive, resistant to control and free. Their relationship is pictured as natural, emotional and unchangeable. Their love opposes all rigid binaries of society, like natural and unnatural, scientific and unscientific etc. It is Karthik who confronts Tripathi and exposes his hypocrisy in using science as a tool of correction. The film implies that sexuality, like nature itself, cannot be modified to fit the expectations of society. It should not be treated as a disorder to be cured, but celebrated as natural and honest.

The *kaali gopi* becomes a clever metaphor in this debate. While Tripathi's scientific creation interferes with nature and is also rejected by society, ironically, he accuses his own son of being unnatural on account of his homosexuality. This contradiction discloses the flawed thinking that 'science' can override the truth of nature. The conflict between true science that accepts and understands nature and

false science that changes nature is not just metaphorical, but ideological. The scientist who engineered *kaali gopi* is also part of the rigid and intolerant patriarchy that attempts to correct what seemed deviant. He sees his son's homosexuality as an aberration of nature. But the cauliflower infested with worms is a setback to his ideology. Karthik shows the worms inside the cauliflower by ripping it, "*yeh aapki science, aur yeh kiden aapki nature. Mein bhi dekhtha hoon ki duniya mein kaunsi science mein itni thakath hai ki aapke beteke nature ko badal sake.*" ("This is your science and these worms are your nature. Let me see if there is any science that can change your son's nature"; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:30:55). By the film's end, Tripathi's scientific ambitions fall apart as he is now abreast with the truth of worms in his *kaali gopi*, and burns a huge pile of his creation. This is a moment of symbolic defeat for Tripathi as his attempt to control nature ends up in vain. Tripathi tried to conquer nature with the help of 'science'. Like cauliflower, the attempt to control one's children would also be disastrous as it would evoke trauma and alienation. When Aman and Karthik's relationship survives and is gradually accepted, it also suggests that nature will always prevail.

Aman's cousin Keshav acts as a chorus when he approaches Shankar Tripathi with an explanation of sexuality. He "is our conscience that we keep pushing aside" (Ghosh 2020). Conversations are happening around sexuality: "*Sexuality andhar ki feeling hote hai. Woh alag bhi hota hai....sirf sthreeeling aur puhling nahi hote. Inke beech aapke sexuality kahi bhi ho sakthe hai.*" ("Sexuality is what you feel from within. That can be different from gender...Gender is not merely male or female. Your sexuality can lie anywhere on this spectrum"; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:16:05). He intervenes several times amidst the film to share the knowledge he acquired through Google.

True science is rooted in empathy and understanding. When Aman confides his true love for Karthik to his parents in the language of science, he understands and explains the science of the human body from the point of view of love. Aman explains to his parents what happens to someone when he falls in love. When someone falls in love, the heart races, surging the level of serotonin and dopamine and forming attachments in the brain. Nature, like love, is inclusive and non-discriminatory as it does not change whether it is heterosexual or homosexual love. He says that when he saw Karthik, “*Meri badi ho gayi thi*” (“Mine grew big”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:49:42). His parents look scandalised. He quickly reads their minds and corrects them, “*Ankhon ki putli badi ho gayi thi! Hotha hai pyaar mein. Science hain.*” (“My eyes grew big. It happens when you are in love. There is Science behind this”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:50:05). He goes on to say to his parents, “*Itna sa haath chu gaya tha, poore shareer mein dopamine ke vispod hua tha...Papa, jab Karthik ko pehle baar humne kiss kiya tha na, pure body mein cortisol ke fuvvare phoote the.*” (“At his mere touch, there was an explosion of dopamine in my body...Papa, the first time I kissed Karthik, there was a burst of cortisol in my body”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:50:46). First time in mainstream cinema someone is openly coming out to one’s parents and talking about sexuality and love. Tripathi equates science with control, authority and order while Aman demands a scientific temperament from his parents to understand, learn and accept him. The film not just queers wedding and family, but science as well.

Aman’s parents try to counsel Aman by telling him that the notion of his identity is all a misunderstanding. Aman reminds his mother and father of their past loves whom they have left behind to marry each other. Shankar Tripathi tries to tell his son how sex is just for reproduction and that sex for pleasure is considered a sin.

Here, two contrasting points of view are elaborated. Aman's parents, his mother in particular, embrace modernity and science superficially. She represents what is known as convenient science when she talks about taking Aman to the doctors. Aman replies how he will make his hypothalamus understand that he and Karthik are boys? And that this should not make a difference to anyone else. He tries to explain his situation scientifically. Aman's mother tells him, "*Hum tera ilaaj karayenge. Medical science ne bahuth tharakki kar liye, hai na? Thu teek ho jayenga, beta.*" ("We will get you treated. There is nothing medical science cannot do nowadays. You will be fine."; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 0:52:00). Aman replies that how is it that her 'oxytocin' signals love and his signals a disease? Aman reclaims science and tries to explain the relationship between the feeling and its reason. He compares his love to his parents' as involuntary and natural. Karthik's version of science is more liberating. When he rips the cauliflower to reveal the worms, he is symbolically exposing the decay in the thoughts of Tripati. Karthik understands science as intuitive as well as informed. The film tries to convey the absurdity of treating homosexuality as a disease.

Thirdly, the theme of legality is also important in the film, especially in the context of decriminalisation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Although Article 377 is not addressed directly in the film by focusing on legal battles or activism, the climax of the film, when the police come to arrest Aman and Karthik, initiates a discussion on the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India and the historic repeal of Section 377.

Section 377 criminalised same-sex relations, framing LGBTQ people in the realm of illegality. Even after the Supreme Court struck it down, the stigma and social prejudice associated with it did not vanish. This gap between legal progress

and social acceptance is important in the film. Aman and Karthik are no longer criminals under the law, yet their love remains objectionable in the eyes of family and society. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* reveals this difference between what the law permits and what society still resists through the use of humour and family drama. The film hints that legal reforms like the repeal of Section 377 are only a beginning and the real change lies in transforming social values and family structures. The film presents a comic version of earlier how gays were treated as criminals. The movie is set at the very junction when section 377 was repealed and homosexuals are no longer criminals under the law. The temporal setting of the movie is significant in capturing the stress between constitutional recognition and lived realities. Traditionally, the state acts through police and before the repeal of section 377, police used to intimidate and harass gay couples from parks, beaches and parked cars; arrested them under section 377. The trauma and terror associated with the police required gay men to remain in the closet. The gay people were coerced to pay huge bribes to avoid arrests, as they did not want their families to know. The fear of being ‘outed’ to one’s own family, of being shamed, disgraced and disowned, compelled many to choose silence and compliance.

In the movie *I am*, Jai is caught in intimate moments with Omar by the Police. The policeman attacks and abuses them, threatening to arrest them. He says, “*Saala, Culture karaab kartha hai... khada nahi hotha tera...ladki ke saath khada nahi hotha hai..*” (“You are spoiling our culture. Why cannot you do it with girls?”; *I am*, 1:33:30). Later we find him asking Jai, “*Aur yeh kaun hai? Tera bhaand?*” (“And who is this? Your lover?”; *I am*, 1:34:07). Jai and Omar try to make peace with the policeman while he blackmails for a bribe of 1 lakh. He asks Omar to take Jai’s ATM card and get the money. Meanwhile, he says to Jai, “*Mein tera ghaand*

nahi maar saktha. Par mangtha hai tho tera dhoda madath kar saktha hai.” (“I can’t help you fuck. But I can do you a favour”; *I am*, 1:38:59). He unzips his pants and rapes Jai. The policeman warns Jai not to tell anyone about the rape as he threatens to take him to the station where he will have to give sexual favours to everyone. Omar returns with 50,000 rupees, and the policeman takes the money and their cell phones. He takes Omar along as they are still short of money. Jai is cautious as the policeman takes Omar along and goes to the station with a lawyer to free Omar, but he was not there. He met the policeman who refused to identify him. The others in the station were laughing at him. It was at that moment he understood that it was all a ruse to extort money.

Gay men have been reporting to Gay Bombay, a local community group in Mumbai, about their personal experiences with blackmailers regularly for the past few years. These tales usually centre on police entrapments, in which gullible gay men who merely want to have a social compact are tricked into parting with a large sum of money under the threat of having their sexual orientation revealed. The majority of gay people are, in fact, utterly silent, lack confidence, and are completely closed off to the reality of their queer desires. Police blackmailers are well aware that gay men are too scared and consumed by fear of the law to report the officer. The obvious fact is that none of the crime victims has been able to come forward and file a complaint because they are afraid that Section 377 may apply to them, limiting all of Gay Bombay's efforts (Gupta, 4821).

Sanjay Sharma’s *Dunno Y Naa Jaane Kyom* also has an instance where the gay couple was harassed by Police under Section 377. In the film, Ashley and Aryan share an intimate moment inside their car when the policeman taps the window and ridicules them for being gay. He later says that Gays spread the dirt around and

chides them for not being ashamed of being gay. Ashey tries to say sorry and hush up the matter when the police threaten them to charge IPC377 on them. Aryan retorts back at the police that they will never be able to arrest terrorists and others threatening the security of the nation, so all they can do is arrest the homosexuals. Policeman slaps him, but Ashley apologises to the police and gives them some money to let them free. After the police left, Aryan ruminates about their status in society. He feels their constant humiliation and embarrassment are deplorable, and society always considers them abnormal. Ashley also says that society thinks of them as a cheap joke on which everyone can laugh as if they were some diseases.

In contrast to these earlier representations, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, brings about a shift in representation. The scenes where the police come to arrest the gay couple is steeped in comedy. The inspector declares that being gay is criminal according to section 377, and they have to arrest Aman and Karthik. Aman's mother gives a long emotional speech about how her husband cannot do anything other than sulk. She also criticises her son, who wants them to change their beliefs overnight. She asks the police to take them and let their family break. Shankar Tripathi interferes and requests the police not to arrest them.

Chaman Chacha asks the police how they could assume that the boys were gay. Then the police bring in Kusum, who tried to run off with Sunaina's jewellery. She had confided to the police that Aman and Karthik were gay. Chaman Chacha argues whether the police have caught them doing anything in public that made them believe that they are gay. He asks them how they will prove themselves in court. He argues, "*Agar do balik ladke ek dusre ke haath pakadthe hai ya apne ghar ke kamare ke andhar who kuch bhi karthe hai, tho isme mujhe, aapko, ya kisi ko bhi koi bhi aitrav nahi hona chahiye.*" ("If two consenting adult men hold hands or do

anything in the confines of their bedroom, then me, you or anyone for that matter, should not have any objection”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:43:27). Shankar tries to convince the police, “*Inspector saab, yeh jo kar rahe hai, yeh inki choice hai. Inke choice mein bolne ke adhikar abhi tak hume nahin mila hai, tho aap kaun hote hai?*” (“Inspector Saab, what they are doing, it is their choice and when we do not have the right to question their choice, who are you to interfere?”; *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, 1:43:52). Police decided to wait for the legal status of Section 377 and the police waits at their home accepting their hospitality. Supreme Court passed its landmark judgement the next day. Supreme Court reads down Section 377, observing that same-gender, private relationships between two consenting adults in private will not be considered a crime and are legal. Everyone in the Tripathi family is happy with the judgement and accepts Aman and Karthik for who they are. Shankar Tripathi is completely taken over by remorse and decides to accept his son and his love. He burns his pile of *kaali gopi* and comes on his motorbike to give Karthik and Aman a lift to the railway station. Karthik refuses to go on the bike unless he is allowed to drive it. Tripathi halfheartedly allowing Karthik to drive his bike is a symbolic representation of Tripathi reluctantly accepting him into his family. The movie mainly focuses on Aman’s journey of coming out to his family, a common theme in queer theory that explores the struggles of accepting and expressing one’s sexual identity (Anagha 22).

Harshavardhan Kulkarni’s 2022 film *Badhai Do*, deals with the theme of same-sex love sensitively, making it one of the few mainstream Hindi films to explore the want for acceptance and the fulfillment of family life among queer individuals. It caricatures a gay man and a lesbian woman as the lead engaged in a lavender marriage, i.e. gay man and lesbian woman get into a marriage of

convenience. They both continue to be in the marriage after coming out to their family and society. They adopt a child and live together along with their respective partners and with the support of their families. The crew of the film was interviewing homosexual people to narrate the coming out sequences in the film. One of the queer persons told them, “You don’t come out of the closet. The closet gets bigger and your friends and family get inside your closet” (Mehta).

The film begins when the police catch a gay couple from a park, but Shardul Thakur (Rajkummar Rao), a closeted gay police officer, lets them go, telling that these people have ruined the culture of the country. Shardul meets Suman (Bhumi Padnekar), a closeted lesbian physical education teacher, when she comes to make a complaint in the station. Shardul and Sumi enter into a lavender marriage to hide their true sexual orientations from their conventional families. This arrangement was initially made to satisfy societal expectations, but it soon transformed into a shared space where both characters could offer support to each other to negotiate their journeys of self-acceptance. Shardul confides in Sumi that he fears police more than thieves and criminals and that he thinks he is a ‘homocop’.

Gradually, they find their romantic partners: Shardul meets Guru, and Sumi finds Rimjhim. Together, they begin to confront the rigid norms of Indian society that reject the rights of people to live a full and open life. Sumi shares her fears with Rimjhim that no one understands them because they are different, and people think that they are perverts. A significant development in the film is Sumi’s decision to adopt a child and build a family with Rimjhim. This challenges the orthodox understanding of family, which is bound by the ideas of bloodline, gender roles, and marriage between a man and a woman. However, the film hopes for a future where these barriers can be overcome. Sumi is rebuked and criticised when she is outed,

and Shardul supports her by saying homosexuals are also humans, not animals. He comes out to his family and confronts his truth in front of everyone. In the closing scenes, both Shardul and Sumi, together with their respective partners, create an extended, non-traditional family unit. They adopt and raise a child as two queer couples who co-parent and attend the child. This alternative redefined structure of the family represents a radical yet deeply compassionate reimagining of family in modern India.

Moreover, *Badhaai Do* does not simplify the challenges faced by its protagonists. The film openly admits the societal prejudices, familial opposition, and institutional barriers that queer individuals face in India like the legal right to adopt, even after the decriminalisation of Section 377. The narrative asserts that queer people, like their heterosexual counterparts, have the right to seek love, companionship, and the joy of raising children within a family structure of their own making. What sets *Badhaai Do* apart is how it queers the very institution of marriage. The lavender marriage between Shardul and Sumi, which initially was a survival strategy, gradually evolves into a bond of friendship, mutual respect, and support. This reimagined version of marriage becomes a stepping stone for both of them to embrace their authentic selves and form a meaningful relationship with their partners. The final image of two queer couples raising a child together suggests that the concept of an “ideal” Indian family can evolve, expand, and include those once excluded. Through this quiet but bold narrative, the film argues that queer relationships are not incomplete or unnatural but equally capable of nurturing loving, secure, and complete families.

While *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saaavdhan* utilises humour and exaggeration to address deep-rooted prejudices, making the theme of queerness more accessible to a

mainstream audience, *Badhaai Do* offers an empathetic and layered narrative of everyday negotiations of queer lives. Both the films challenge hetero-patriarchal institutions and highlight the resistance queer individuals face from their loved ones; one offers it in a pattern of Bollywood masala, while the other deals with the theme in a more realistic canvas. Both of these films contribute to the ongoing discourse of queer rights and representation in Indian cinema.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan is a revolutionary film for its radical normalisation of gay love and for its bold treatment of gayness as normal as heterosexuality. The film emphasises that gay marriage is as natural as heterosexual marriage, and treating gayness as a disease is a flawed thought. The film marks a powerful transition from fear and invisibility to affirmation and pride. The film incorporates the real life context of the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India, and by bringing together the themes of normalisation, resistance to oppression, and the significance of legal transformation, the film highlights the importance of visibility, equality, and human dignity in the evolving narrative of queer rights in India.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Cinema is a dominant ideological apparatus that negotiates with subjectivities and pleasures. Over the years, there have been significant changes in the representation of the LGBTQ community in popular cinema and mainstream Hindi cinema has evolved in its portrayal of gay narratives. Socio-political and cultural changes in India have caused a shift in representations of gay identity as a subtext to explicit coming out narratives. This study has examined the history and significance of identity revelation arcs in popular Hindi films. The depiction of disclosure narratives in popular Hindi cinema has influenced the historical trajectory and popular discourse in conversations about homosexuality. This study has also analysed how different gay subjectivities and desires are positioned in the popular cultural spaces.

An enquiry into coming-out narratives in mainstream Hindi cinema exposed a complex interplay of representation, visibility, and socio-cultural conversations. Bollywood has shifted from a standpoint of silence and subtext to a space where gay identities are increasingly represented and recognised. However, this shift is not consistent or free from limitations. While the presence of gay characters in films signifies a broader cultural shift, the narratives that frame their experiences continue to be moulded by heteronormative anxieties, melodramatic tropes, and market-driven considerations.

Coming out of the closet is a profoundly personal experience often influenced by familial, cultural, and social expectations. Traditional beliefs and rigid

standards prescribe personal identity in India, and therefore, the experience of coming out can trigger anxiety and fear, as it can be met with resistance, misapprehension, and hatred. The coming-out narratives in Bollywood tend to emphasise familial acceptance over individual agency. This tendency reinforces the importance of the family in Indian society, making gayness acceptable only when it can be incorporated into the existing social fabric rather than challenging it.

The thesis explored the portrayal of coming out narratives in mainstream Hindi films, focusing on how these narratives represent gayness within India's socio-cultural context. It examined how Hindi cinema frames coming-out moments, negotiates gay identities and positions gay cinema in the mainstream. This research project looked into how the depiction of coming out reflected broader attitudes toward gayness in Indian society. The study described the trajectory of coming out narratives, emphasising the progression from familial and social rejection to eventual acceptance and acknowledgement of gay relationships in the private and public spheres.

The research project used a theoretical framework of gay studies and the concept of homophobia to have a deeper understanding of the coming out narratives. It focuses on the basic tenets of queer theory and discovered how homophobia was central to the coming out narratives. The act of coming out is not a mere personal revelation, but something that is influenced by social, cultural and political forces. The theoretical aspects and coming-out studies challenge traditional understandings of identity, visibility, and acceptance, highlighting how homophobia continues to shape these narratives.

Homophobia complicates the process of coming out by making its visibility unsafe through stigma, discrimination and often violence. Societal norms frequently influence how queerness is expressed, guiding individuals towards narratives of acceptance that remain deeply rooted in heteronormative structures. In many cases, coming out functions not solely as an expression of individual truth but as a negotiation with systems that seek to regulate and define gay identities. Queer theory advocates a rethinking of the discourse of coming out—not as a path to assimilation, but as a space for fluidity, resistance, and alternative ways of being. By challenging the limits of visibility and identity politics, one can create a more inclusive understanding of gayness, one that moves beyond rigid expectations and embraces the full complexity of who we are.

The history of Indian cinema shows that there is an absence of explicit coming out narratives in mainstream Hindi cinema before the 2000s. Queer characters did exist in Bollywood cinema during this time, but their identities were rarely acknowledged outright. They were often reduced to exaggerated tropes that reinforced stereotypes. During this time, Bollywood often portrayed queerness through humour, cross-dressing, and exaggerated characters. Coming-out stories were almost non-existent, showing a reluctance to engage with gay identities as real, complex experiences. This study has explored how Bollywood's take on coming-out stories is still influenced by deeper cultural anxieties.

The turning point in disclosure narratives was *My Brother... Nikhil*, directed by Onir. It stands as a landmark film in Hindi cinema, shedding light on the struggles of coming out and living openly as a queer individual within an unforgiving society. While AIDS becomes the focal point of his social ostracisation,

the underlying theme of his queerness and the stigma surrounding it remains central to his struggles. Nikhil, the protagonist is outed forcefully as a consequence of his illness and the narrative of the film focuses on navigating the prejudices of his own family and society. The diagnosis of his illness as HIV-positive, strips him of the choice to keep his sexuality private, and this revelation leaves him exposed to isolation, stigma and discrimination. It crushes his dreams, aspirations and career leaving him in a state of loneliness and abandonment, where the only support and strength that he finds are from his sister, Anamika and his partner, Nigel.

One of the most significant aspects of *My Brother... Nikhil* is the portrayal of his family's reaction. This mirrors the experiences of countless gay individuals who, upon coming out, find themselves battling not only societal discrimination but also alienation from those closest to them. For many gay individuals, coming out is less about seeking validation from society and more about finding their own community of acceptance and understanding. *My Brother... Nikhil* also critiques the systemic discrimination faced by queer individuals, particularly those living with HIV. The film reflects the harsh realities of the late 1980s and early 1990s when HIV/AIDS was heavily stigmatised, and those diagnosed were often cast out by their communities. Nikhil's experience highlights how coming out is not merely a declaration of identity but a confrontation with deeply entrenched prejudices. Moreover, the narrative is more inclined towards the politics of acceptability over the politics of identity. The narrative progresses when Nikhil is finally accepted by his parents, not because they have accepted his sexuality, but only because he is dying.

Karan Johar's "Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" in the anthology film *Bombay Talkies* explores the aspect of coming out to one's wife and highlights how homophobia is not just subtle but overt and aggressive. Through its depiction of coming out, the film reveals both the personal struggles of queer individuals and the unspoken trauma that they undergo daily. The film also explores the complexities of coming out, particularly in the workplace and within intimate relationships. The protagonist Avinash openly embraces his sexuality and confidently navigates his professional environment without fear or concealment. However, his coming out is not met with acceptance in his family, where his father disapproves of his identity, reflecting the persistent stigma that exists in Indian society. The film presents coming out within romantic relationships and in marriage as a moment of tension and betrayal. Avinash becomes attracted to Dev, a closeted man who is also the husband of his colleague Gayathri. Avinash's decision to confide in Gayathri about Dev's sexuality leads to an involuntary outing, exposing the dangers of trust and disclosure in a heteronormative world. Instead of being a liberating act, coming out becomes a weapon, used against Dev in a way that strips him of agency over his own identity, making him vulnerable. In the marital institution, the act of coming out of the closet is also an act of breaking trust and being unfaithful. This moment serves as a crucial commentary on the ethics of outings and the consequences of forcing someone's truth into the open before they are ready. It highlights the power dynamics involved in queer visibility, where one's personal journey can be exploited or weaponised by others. The film critiques societal homophobia and reflects on the boundaries of trust in a society shaped by silence and stigma.

"Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh" offers a stark portrayal of homophobia in contemporary India, revealing how systemic discrimination continues to shape queer

experiences. The film tries to portray the vulnerability of Dev as he is now more authentic to himself and the people around him. While the film takes significant strides in representing gay narratives, it also underscores the persistent societal barriers that prevent true acceptance.

Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* is a poignant exploration of the struggles of the coming out of Prof. Siras of the Aligarh Muslim University, particularly in a conservative society where legal and social frameworks often fail to protect queer individuals. The film captures the pain and injustice of being forcibly outed in a society, by intrusive journalists who film his intimate moments, where both the legal system and social norms offer little protection to queer individuals. Prof. Siras did not get to come out on his own terms. His privacy was invaded when a sting operation secretly recorded his most personal moments and exposed his sexuality without his consent, turning his life into a public spectacle. The consequences were devastating—he lost his job, faced rejection from his academic community, and became an outsider in the very society he had been a part of for years. This incident reveals the danger that queer individuals face when their privacy is breached and they are outed forcefully, causing trauma, pain and social ostracisation. *Aligarh* portrays the emotional toll of such an experience, showing how outing someone against their will is not just a violation of privacy but an act of cruelty that strips away their dignity and sense of security.

Despite these hardships, Prof. Siras's journey is not one of shame but of quiet resilience. He chooses to fight a legal battle to reclaim his dignity and job, setting a powerful example of resistance against systemic discrimination. His legal struggle brings attention to the broader issues of privacy, human rights, and the necessity of legal protections for queer individuals in India. Prof. Siras's case

became a crucial moment in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, contributing to conversations that would eventually lead to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India in 2018. *Aligarh* presents coming out as an experience deeply intertwined with legal and societal frameworks. The film exposes the harsh reality that, in many contexts, coming out is not just a personal journey but a battle against institutionalised oppression. Yet, it also offers a perspective of quiet defiance—Prof. Siras does not seek public approval but rather demands the right to live with dignity. His fight is not just about employment but about the fundamental right to exist without fear or shame. He dies the day after the court rules in his favour of ordering him to be reinstated. While Prof. Siras’s story ends in tragedy, his courage in facing legal and social injustice leaves an indelible mark on the movement for queer rights in India. His journey underscores the need for legal reforms, greater societal acceptance, and a world where coming out is a choice, not a forced revelation that leads to persecution. *Aligarh* reminds us that the fight for queer dignity is far from over, but every act of resistance, whether in the courtroom or in everyday life, pushes the world toward greater inclusivity and justice.

Tanuj Bhramar’s *Dear Dad* explores one of the most personal and challenging aspects of coming out—telling one’s own child. While many films about coming out focus on the fear of societal rejection, *Dear Dad* shifts the conversation to something even more intimate - the fear of losing the love and trust of a child. The story follows Nitin, a middle-aged father, as he shares his truth with his teenage son, Shivam, knowing that this revelation could change their relationship forever. Coming out to one’s child is uniquely difficult because it challenges the child’s understanding of who their parent is. Parents are often seen as unshakable figures of guidance and stability, and any revelation that disrupts this image can be met with

confusion, frustration, or even anger. Nitin's decision to come out to his son is not just about himself—it is about creating a relationship with his son that is built on truth. Shivam's reaction is raw and honest. He is caught off guard, struggling to process the news with a mixture of disbelief, anger, and embarrassment. The film does not rush his journey toward understanding. Instead, it allows space for his emotions to unfold naturally, portraying the complexity of what it means to suddenly see a parent in a new light. His initial reaction is not one of instant acceptance, but one of struggle—something most children of queer parents may relate to.

The film portrays the unspoken fears and quiet moments of reconciliation between a parent and child, showing that love, though tested, does not disappear. Nitin's journey reminds one that coming out is not just about seeking validation—it is about choosing to live authentically, even in the face of uncertainty. The study analyses Shivam's response in accordance with Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's concept of the five stages of grieving. The study highlights Shivam's emotional journey from initial denial of his father's reality, to the eventual acceptance of his father's truth and identity.

Hitesh Kewalya's *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* brings warmth and humour to the experience of coming out. Aman's decision to be open about his relationship with Karthik is met with resistance, disbelief, and desperate attempts by his family to "fix" him. His father refuses to accept reality, his mother reacts with melodramatic horror, and the entire family treats his sexuality as if it is a problem to be solved. These responses reflect the real-life struggles many queer individuals face, where being true to oneself can sometimes feel like an act of defiance. However, rather than dwelling on sadness, the film uses humour to expose the absurdity of homophobia. It turns deeply ingrained prejudices into moments of

satire, allowing the audience to laugh while also reflecting on the irrational fears that often surround queerness. The film captures the generational shift in attitudes toward gay identities. While Aman's parents initially struggle with his sexuality, younger characters, like his cousin Goggle, show a more open-minded perspective. This contrast reflects the evolving conversations around queerness in Indian society, where acceptance is slowly but steadily growing. Towards the climax, the parodying of the heterosexual marriage ceremony in a queer space serves as a powerful subversion of traditional norms by reclaiming the ritual on their own terms. The film does not portray coming out as an act of rebellion but rather as an opportunity for families to grow, learn, and embrace their loved ones for who they truly are.

The film is analysed from three key perspectives - its intertextual approach, the theme of science and nature and the discourse of legality and criminality. The film queers the classic romantic cliches in iconic Hindi movies and subverts them as an intertextual film. The film also emphasises the theme of natural and unnatural in the context of scientific discourse. Shankar Tripathi is a representative of a science that seeks to control and authorise everything exemplified in his genetically modified 'kaali gopi' whereas Karthik and Aman represent a science that is explanatory and inclusive. Karthik exposes the futility of Tripathi's attempts to change and correct nature. The film ends with a direct reference to the Supreme Court's repeal of section 377, emphasising the transition from criminalisation to legality. The film goes beyond the boundaries of the personal and the familial to align with the larger struggles for dignity and constitutional recognition.

This study has been an attempt to show how the trajectory of coming out narratives in mainstream Hindi cinema has evolved and how different films approach the theme from diverse perspectives. Coming out and acceptance are the

two-fold central struggles of queer cinema. Many films use these themes to validate queer desire within a society that often resists non-heteronormative identities. In Hindi cinema, the portrayal of coming out is seldom represented as an act of agency; instead, it is constructed through the trope of forced outing where a character's identity is exposed against their will. The trajectory of the study begins with the film *My Brother... Nikhil*, where the coming out is a forced outing, and the protagonist gets ostracised by family and society. Nikhil is not only outed but also affected by institutional discrimination due to his HIV-positive status, highlighting the intersection of queerness and health stigma. The inevitability of the disclosure of his identity because of an illness that cannot be hidden from the world makes queerness visible in a society that is determined to punish it.

‘Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh ’ represents the violent repercussions of forced outing, demonstrating how revealing one's sexuality, especially to one's wife, can be a way of betrayal and harm. The film demonstrates coming out, not as a liberating process but one that is fraught both with betraying and being betrayed. By placing queerness in the realm of secrecy, the film shows the precariousness of living a double life in a society that refuses to accept non-heteronormative identities. These films show that the initial trajectory of queer visibility was shaped through external forces like illness or betrayal.

As these narratives evolve, *Aligarh* marks a significant shift, where the protagonist, Professor Siras, fights a legal battle against Section 377 after being unlawfully outed. Unlike earlier films where queerness is met with absolute rejection, *Aligarh* changes the discourse to the domain of rights and justice, marking the intersection between personal identity and institutional oppression. Though the

film does not have a happy ending, it serves as a painful reminder of the challenging and extended battle for dignity and recognition.

Later films like *Dear Dad* and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* introduce a more nuanced and hopeful trajectory for coming-out narratives. *Dear Dad* takes an intimate and unfamiliar approach, focusing on a father coming out to his son, fostering understanding rather than alienation. This narrative reflects the changing social landscape, where personal acceptance within family structures is gradually being explored with more sensitivity. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, on the other hand, takes a comic and radical approach, using humour to challenge societal norms and shows a same-sex couple, Aman and Karthik, fighting with their family to live together openly. Unlike earlier films where queer love is met with tragedy or legal battles, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* embraces a more mainstream, comprehensible narrative where queerness is not just tolerated but is celebrated.

In the twenty-first century, Hindi cinema has witnessed a gradual but significant shift in the portrayal of queer identities and their coming out narratives. The evolution of coming-out narratives in Hindi cinema reflects a transition from tales of suffering and rejection to stories of resistance, legal battles, and eventual acceptance. Earlier films depicted coming out as involuntary exposure or forced outing, where the protagonists suffered stigma and rejection. The trajectory suggests a gradual shift towards a more inclusive point of view, where queer identities are not only acknowledged but also celebrated. This change is an important step toward normalising queerness within mainstream Bollywood. As representation expands, contemporary films move beyond depicting queerness solely through the lens of struggle and societal validation. They portray stories in which acceptance, love and personal fulfillment are achievable for queer characters. The on-screen portrayal of a

gay marriage with its joyful “happily ever after” represents a change from earlier narratives that focused on tragedy and social marginalisation. These depictions not only normalise same-sex relationships but also reflect a broader cultural transformation, suggesting that Hindi cinema is gradually embracing stories that celebrate dignity, legal recognition, and emotional fulfillment for LGBTQ+ individuals.

The future of mainstream cinema dealing with gay themes holds promising possibilities if the industry comes up with more authentic and inclusive stories. Bollywood has the potential to challenge all kinds of stereotypes and celebrate the multiplicities of love. By embracing the vast spectrum of queer experiences, cinema can highlight the beauty of normalising and accepting gay lives irrespective of class, caste and religion. The hope is that Bollywood continues to expand these narratives, portraying queerness in all its complexity, beyond just struggle and validation, toward a future where queer love and existence are seen as ordinary, natural, and worthy of joy. By sharing more genuine and diverse queer stories, Bollywood can not only reflect the world as it is but also help shape a future where everyone feels seen, accepted, and celebrated for who they truly are.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The representation of coming out narratives in Bollywood has evolved significantly, reflecting the changing societal attitudes toward LGBTQ+ identities in India. While these films have helped push the boundaries of mainstream storytelling, the industry still has a long way to go in portraying a more diverse and nuanced spectrum of queer experiences.

The mainstreaming of coming-out narratives raises questions about the politics of respectability and class privilege. Queer experiences in India are shaped by a complex web of intersecting identities, including caste, religion, class, and regional diversity. Many of the queer protagonists in Bollywood's contemporary films belong to urban, upper-middle-class backgrounds, which allows them a degree of mobility and access to support structures like therapies, queer-friendly workplaces and cosmopolitan friend structures that are not available to a majority of queer individuals in India. Hence, queerness is often depicted as an urban elite phenomenon disconnected from the intersectionalities of class, caste and religion. By preferring a sanitised version of queerness, Bollywood represents an aesthetically pleasing, commercially viable and socially palatable version of queerness.

This marginalises the experiences of queer people from rural, lower-caste, or minority religious backgrounds. This selective visibility creates an illusion of progress that does not necessarily translate into lived realities for queer people from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds. The absence of Dalit, working-class, and non-metro queer experiences in these films underscores the limitations of

mainstream Hindi cinema's engagement with queerness. When they are represented, their identities are frequently reduced to token representations or are overshadowed by class privilege.

The scope of this research can be expanded in the future by exploring how lesbian and other queer identities are portrayed in Hindi cinema, as these voices have often remained on the margins of representation. While there is a steady increase in the portrayal of gay identities, the experiences and narratives of lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders and other non-binary identities continue to be underrepresented. Such an inquiry could reveal how questions of visibility, desire, and identity take on different meanings across gendered experiences within queer storytelling. Moreover, it could also examine how intersections such as caste, class and religion are factors in the process of marginalisation.

Another promising direction is to study audience reception, examining how people from varied social and cultural backgrounds understand and respond to queer narratives on screen. This would offer a richer understanding of how queer cinema influences public perception and contributes to broader conversations about LGBTQ+ acceptance and visibility in India. Audience studies would provide insights into the ways in which people negotiate, resist and internalise the ways in which queerness is represented in cinema. Audiences generate meanings from their lived experience, moral frameworks and socioeconomic positions. For instance, a younger audience might be more affirmative towards same sex relationships, whereas the older generation might feel differently. Furthermore, the role of social media and digital platforms in initiating discussions on queer representations can be studied to understand the politics of acceptance. Overall, such research would

deepen our understanding of the cultural impact of queer cinema and its potential to transform public attitudes toward LGBTQ+ identities in contemporary India.

The act of casting plays a crucial role in shaping how queerness is represented in Bollywood. Casting in a film not only determines its reception and marketability, but also determines its visibility and the extent to which the film can challenge or conform to mainstream expectations. Mainstream queer-themed films often rely on popular male stars to attract audiences, but the presence or absence of major actors in queer roles often defines the tone, depth, and authenticity of queer storytelling. This reliance on a star cast leads to compromises in storytelling by narratives being softened or altered to suit the hero's image. For instance, in *Kapoor & Sons*, the gay character played by Fawad Khan, a top rung star, is celebrated for normalising queer, but it noticeably avoids scenes of romance and intimacy. On the other hand, actors without star status like Manoj Bajpayee, Rahul Bose and Sanjay Suri demonstrate a greater commitment to authenticity. Such a study that deals with the politics of casting has prospects in the field of academic study.

The scope of research on queer Indian cinema in general and queer Bollywood cinema in particular is vast and diverse.

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