

Research Articles

Reimagining Representations: Transformative Genderness and LGBTQ+ Visibility in Contemporary Bollywood

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Abstract

Indian popular cinema has long been critiqued for advancing a postcolonial bourgeois nationalism through its moral and affective regimes. In the current political climate, where an emerging Hindu nationalist state increasingly tightens control over narratives, new forms of socially engaged and entrepreneurial efforts in filmmaking have begun to emerge. Enabled by global over-the-top (OTT) platforms like Netflix and Prime Video, this wave of films invests in inclusive representations and socially relevant storytelling that challenge hegemonic discourses on gender, sexuality, and nationhood.

Through close readings of popular hits such as *Bala* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), *Badhaai Do* (2022), and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), this article examines how contemporary Hindi films act as cultural entrepreneurial efforts, negotiating aesthetic, political, and market risk. It argues that these films employ humor, genre hybridity, and melodrama to radically queer traditional institutions such as marriage and family, foregrounding emotional vulnerability, female agency, and LGBTQ+ visibility within the mainstream. While these films remain entangled within neoliberal circuits of production and consumption, they nonetheless produce counter-hegemonic imaginaries that unsettle both patriarchal and nationalist orthodoxy. Ultimately, the article situates this emergent cinematic practice as a form of visual entrepreneurship, where storytelling becomes a site of speculative

politics, enabling new ways of imagining social change and representations in contemporary India.

Keywords: Bollywood/Hindi cinema; cultural entrepreneurship; gender and sexuality; queer representation; Hindu nationalism

Screening the Forbidden: Indian and Lesbian

In 1998, Deepa Mehta's Indo-Canadian film *Fire* (1998) was released in Indian cinemas, having been cleared by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC), commonly known as the censor board, without any suggested cuts. After a couple of weeks of running in the theaters, the screenings were disrupted by violent protests led by the obstreperous Shiv Sena,¹ a right-wing group claiming to be the upholders of Hindu tradition and morality. More than two hundred Shiv Sena members trashed cinema halls and burned posters of the film that portrayed a homoerotic relationship between two women from a traditional Hindu family.

Fire explores the complexities of female desire and societal constraints within a traditional Indian Hindu family structure. The film is situated in a patriarchal household of Ashok and his younger brother Jatin who run a takeaway and a VHS store in contemporary Delhi. It interweaves the stories of a newlywed Sita (Nandita Das) married to Jatin and infertile wife of the older brother Ashok, Radha (Shabana Azmi). Sita, in her unhappy arranged marriage, finds herself stifled by expectations of motherhood and wifely obedience while her husband continues to spend his time with his Chinese girlfriend. Radha, Ashok's wife, on the other hand, is trapped in a

1. Shiv Sena, which translates to "Army of Shivaji," is a right-wing political party in India that is rooted in Marathi regionalism and Hindutva ideology. It was founded in 1966 by Bal Thackeray and was later succeeded by his son Uddhav Thackeray. The party has been associated with various controversies, including incidents of hooliganism, criminal behaviour, promoting religious intolerance, and engaging in moral policing.

loveless marriage defined by her husband's ritualistic testing of his celibacy. The film contrasts the women's experiences with the hypocrisy of the men, where one is trapped in religious dogmas while the other is indulging in infidelity. Their lives have been made meaningless by husbands who view them solely as reproductive vessels or unpaid domestic servants. The crucial relationship between Sita and Radha develops as a form of rebellion against these oppressive constraints, leading up to their sexual intimacy and eventually their escape from the oppressive environment.

The women's departure from the enforced societal norms and repressed sexuality and their newfound sense of agency make the viewer contemplate the broader implications of their defiance and somehow scared the moral police. The protests by Shiv Sena workers prompted the cultural minister, Pramod Navalkar, a Shiv Sena leader, to request the CBFC to review its decision on the film's certification. However, the CBFC maintained its integrity and reaffirmed its earlier decision, allowing the film to continue screening without any cuts.

The anxieties and moral policing surrounding *Fire* reveal two significant insights. Firstly, it highlights the threat posed by women's agency and autonomy, particularly their sexuality, to the patriarchal Hindu order. Secondly, it highlights the intersection of sexuality and religion, made evident in the statements made by Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray. He questioned why lesbians were depicted in a Hindu family and agreed to withdraw Shiv Sena's opposition and allow the screenings of the film if the protagonist Sita and Radha's names were changed to Muslim names (Shabana and Saira).² His rhetoric suggests that the objection was not solely to the portrayal of a same-sex relationship but rather to the fact that it was depicted within a traditional Hindu family. Gayatri Gopinath has argued that the film and its ensuing controversy necessitate a deeper examination to understand how the

2. "India: Thackeray's Terms for Screening of 'Fire,'" (*Chennai*) *Hindu*, December 14, 1998.

challenges to “state-sanctioned sexual subjectivities”³ are managed within dominant community and national narratives and how these challenges simultaneously threaten the stability of those narratives. The violent backlash from Hindu nationalists requires recognizing the interconnectedness of heteronormativity and contemporary nationalism as systems of oppression. Therefore, it becomes important to understand notions that both reinforce and challenge these nationalisms.⁴

An unintended outcome of moral policing was the counter demonstrations outside Delhi’s Regal Cinema. A few days after Shiv Sena’s attack, more than three hundred people gathered outside the cinema holding signs and posters.⁵ One that caught attention and was reproduced in dozens of newspapers⁶ the following day read “Indian and Lesbian.” This marked one of the first instances in which lesbians in India publicly asserted their visibility at a protest. In her extensive work on queer activism in India, anthropologist Naisargi Davé has highlighted the importance of the “Indian and Lesbian” sign in positioning Indian lesbians as subjects of national politics. She argues that before this moment, lesbians and their political concerns existed within what she describes in Deleuzian terms as a “field of immanence.”⁷

This essay examines how gender and sexual politics have evolved in mainstream Hindi cinema. Beginning with the post-liberalization era when globalization brought diverse TV content to Indian audiences, it traces how the subsequent arrival of Netflix and other global OTT platforms have fostered new socially conscious entrepreneurial filmmaking focused on inclusive representation and pressing social issues. Among a few films and OTT shows that are mentioned, this paper looks closely at *Badhai Do* (Give

3. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires, Queer Diasporas, and South Asian Public Cultures* (Duke University Press, 2005), 139.

4. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires, Queer Diasporas, and South Asian Public Cultures*.

5. Ashwini Sukthankar, “The Invisible Women Become Less So,” *Times of (Mumbai) India*, January 3, 1999.

6. Naisargi N. Davé, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Duke University Press, 2012).

7. Davé, *Queer Activism in India*, 139.

congratulations, 2022), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Be extra careful of marriage, 2020), *Bala* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Savdhan* (Let the marriage be fruitful, 2017), and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (How I felt when I saw that girl, 2019). These films, that were blockbuster hits, introduce a discourse on gender politics through subverting traditional masculinities and femininities or queering traditional rituals through LGBTQ+ representations. The emerging films analyzed in this study are marked as an entrepreneurial endeavor because they actively challenge dominant narratives and traditions within India's current right-wing Hindu nationalist environment. Furthermore, the emergence of these films is situated as responses to legal shifts (like Section 377 decriminalization) and new distribution technologies (OTT platforms). Filmmakers had essentially invested in unproven narrative territories with uncertain market returns.

This emerging body of socially conscious, gender-subversive films may also be understood through the lens of cultural entrepreneurship. Rather than simply riding the wave of decriminalization or OTT access, these filmmakers operate within a field of aesthetic and symbolic risk. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital,⁸ their investments in narratives that challenge gender norms and nationalist orthodoxy mark a strategic deviation from Bollywood's mainstream, majoritarian scripts. As Devasundaram argues in his work on hybrid Indian cinema, these ventures reflect a new entrepreneurial orientation—one that blends independent ethos with commercial ambition.⁹ Gopal, too, situates New Bollywood's affective and formal shifts within the broader transformations in media financing and audience segmentation.¹⁰ Rather than treating cultural entrepreneurship as a separate analytic thread, this study embeds it within the representational

8. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Polity Press, 1993).

9. Ashvin Immanuel Devasundaram, *India's New Independent Cinema: Rise of the Hybrid* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

10. Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

politics of risk, allowing us to see how these films subvert market orthodoxy and state-sanctioned norms in tandem.

Criminalization to Recognition: The New Sexual Politics

Twenty years after the *Fire* controversy, in 2018, the Indian Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality by abolishing a portion of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial-era law that had criminalized consensual homosexual acts. This coincided with a significant shift in media consumption patterns: First, the arrival of global OTT platforms like Netflix and Prime Video in 2016, followed by sporadic growth during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Indian media landscape transformed as OTT platforms transitioned from a luxury to a daily commodity, experiencing a surge in subscribers and viewership, particularly during the pandemic-induced closure of cinema halls.¹¹ Kulkarni, focusing specifically on women viewers, reveals how women navigated the relocation inherent in experiencing cinema on digital screens.¹² She contextualizes her findings within the broader precarious migrations and displacements experienced during the pandemic. The lockdowns and eventual partial openings of the cinema left many film viewers dependent on OTTs to watch films from the safety of their homes. The confluence of legal reform and evolving media consumption patterns created fertile ground for exploring and representing LGBTQ+ narratives in new and accessible ways. This shift is perhaps exemplified by the release

11. Divya Madnani, Semila Fernandes, and Nidhi Madnani, "Analysing the Impact of COVID-19 on Over-the-Top Media Platforms in India," *International Journal of Pervasive Computing and Communications* 16, no. 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPC-07-2020-0083>.

12. Damini Kulkarni, "Screening Bodies: Women Watching Cinema in Post-Pandemic India," *Interactive Film & Media Journal* 2, no. 3 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.32920/ifmj.v2i3.1507>.

of films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Be extra careful of marriage, 2020) directly on OTT platforms, indicating a growing acceptance and normalization of LGBTQ+ themes in mainstream Indian media.

Before proceeding into an analysis of *Shubh* or other similar films borne out of this conflux, it is crucial to clarify that LGBTQ+ representation in Indian cinema, while perhaps limited or marginalized, was not entirely absent prior to it. A thorough review of literature by Arora and Sylvia notes that a growing body of scholarship in Indian film studies examines queer representations in Bollywood since the 1990s, mirroring the rise of the LGBTQ+ movement in India.¹³ Their work, as well as that of other scholars, has noted that the prevalent discourse surrounding nonconforming gender and sexualities in popular Hindi cinema are limited in the sense that queer-coded characters are often relegated to stereotypical roles: comic relief, villainous caricatures,¹⁴ or “pathologized as scheming, predatory, or deranged.”¹⁵

However, a few scholars have done an against-the-grain, queer reading of Hindi cinema.¹⁶ Shohini Ghosh employs an exercise called “retrospective queering” to reveal that although explicit representations of homosexuality were infrequent, many films contain subtle yet discernible markers suggestive of queer themes and identities. She evokes the homosocial relationships between men as the plotline for many Hindi films. She argues that even though explicit depictions of homoeroticism were largely absent from mainstream popular cinema until the 1990s, Hindi cinema nonetheless exhibits a

13. Anupama Arora and Nikki P. Sylvia, “‘Just like Everyone Else’: Queer Representation in Postmillennial Bollywood,” *Feminist Media Studies* 24, no. 3 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2201398>.

14. Shohini Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities: The Phobic and the Erotic in Bombay Cinema’s Queer Vision,” in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. Subhabrata Bhattacharyya and Brinda Bose (Seagull, 2007).

15. Arora and Sylvia, “‘Just like Everyone Else,’” 544.

16. Dinah Holtzman, “Between Yaars: The Queering of Dosti in Contemporary Bollywood Films,” in *Bollywood and Globalization*, ed. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (Anthem Press, 2010); Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities”; Shohini Ghosh, “Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities,” in *Queer Theory: Law, Culture, Empire*, ed. Robert Leckey and Kim Brooks (Taylor & Francis, 2010).

persistent preoccupation with the theme of friendship and the intense emotional bonds between male friends. This sustained focus on intense, often emotionally charged same-sex relationships, even in the absence of explicitly sexualized representation, offers a fertile ground for queer readings and interpretations.¹⁷ Gopinath also indulges in similar queer readings; however, her work focuses primarily on diasporic cultural production located between the context of nationalism and globalization.¹⁸ Furthermore, since Hindi cinema abstains from representing (even heterosexual) love or romance through sexual explicitness, the coded friendship of Hindi cinema may have enduring possibilities for queer readings. Ghosh points out blockbuster Hindi films such as *Sholay* (Embers, 1975), *Namak Haram* (The traitor, 1973), and *Anand* (Joy, 1970) for their homoerotic subtexts buried under the texts of friendship and platonic love.¹⁹ Meheli Sen has also done a queer reading of Shah Rukh Khan, the star of *Paheli* (Riddle, 2005), which is a remake of Mani Kaul's esoteric art film *Duvidha* (Dilemma 1973).²⁰ However, instead of decoding the homoerotic, she analyzes how the film challenges traditional heterosexual norms by presenting an inherently unconventional romance between a woman and a male ghost. The film narrates the story of a wife (Rani Mukerji) whose husband (Shah Rukh Khan) is away on a business trip. During his absence, she is visited by a ghost (also played by Shah Rukh Khan) who has assumed the husband's appearance and is romantically interested in her, effectively supplanting the absent husband. Sen interprets that the use of doppelgängers serves to critique the heteropatriarchy as the ghost's presence complicates the traditional family structure and legitimizes female sexual desire. However, at the same time as *Paheli*, there was another wave

17. Ghosh, "False Appearances and Mistaken Identities."

18. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*.

19. Ghosh, "False Appearances and Mistaken Identities"; Ghosh, "Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities."

20. Meheli Sen, "The Mirror of Desire: Queerness, Fan and the Riddles of Paheli," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 58, no. 1–2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.13110>.

of films that did not shy away from dealing with queerness rather directly and not just metaphorically.

Changing Channels, Changing Representations

The 1990s marked by liberalization and globalization of the Indian economy were a significant turning point in the country's socioeconomic landscape. This period saw the introduction of new economic policies that opened up the Indian market to global influences, leading to profound changes in various sectors. One of the most notable consequences of the new policies was the emergence of transnational communication, which enabled the transmission of information across national borders via satellite broadcasting technology. The liberalization policies allowed private and foreign broadcasters to operate in India, leading to a rapid expansion of television channels. The entry of foreign channels such as Star TV and domestic channels such as Zee TV and Sun TV marked the beginning of a new era in Indian television that characterized a more diverse range of content compared to the one previously offered by state-owned Doordarshan. It was challenged by more than forty private channels in the 1990s,²¹ which sporadically grew to eight hundred channels catering to 740 million viewers by 2013.²² This development marked a significant shift in the way information was disseminated, allowing for the global exchange of ideas and cultures. The impact of liberalization on Indian television has been extensively studied by scholars, who have identified a wide range of effects on the country's media landscape.

Mathai has done an extensive comparative study between pre- and post-liberalization periods to understand how the evolution of television in

21. Sudhansubala Sahu, "Revisiting Television in India: Mapping the Portrayal of Women in Soap Operas," *Sociological Bulletin* 67, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038022918775502>.

22. Vanita Kohli-Khandekar, *The Indian Media Business*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2013).

India has been marked by a significant expansion of its functions over time.²³ Her analysis reveals a strong correlation between Indian broadcast media's evolution and government policies, superseding the influence of global technological advancements. She observes that television has undergone various stages of development, with each era adding new roles and responsibilities to its repertoire. This gradual transformation has not only reflected the changing social, political, economic, and cultural landscape of independent India but has also played a crucial role in shaping it. Fernandes focuses on the social and cultural upheavals concerted through a redefinition of the relationship between the national and the global, with the effect of liberalization policies on Indian TV.²⁴ The material conditions of globalization that were a consequence of these policies gave rise to a national political culture that she believes was increasingly defined by a "culture of consumption."²⁵ For her, the anxieties generated by the prospect of globalization are frequently redirected onto the terrain of gender politics.

The trepidation of globalization being projected on gender politics has also been addressed by other scholars. Mankekar examines consumerism in the post-liberalization TV era. However, she looks at it with the interplay of the erotic. She discusses how TV and advertisements had eroticized consumer goods, linking sexual desires with consumer aspirations.²⁶ An interesting intervention Mankekar offers is a reading of the erotic (coded as post-liberalized, modern lifestyles) and the validation of family values as a

23. Shanthi Mathai, "Indian Television in the Eras of Pre-Liberalisation and Liberalisation," *Media Watch* 6, no. 2 (2015).

24. Leela Fernandes, "Nationalizing 'the Global': Media Images, Cultural Politics and the Middle Class in India," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 5 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1177/016344300022005005>.

25. Fernandes, "Nationalizing 'the Global,'" 613.

26. Purnima Mankekar, "Dangerous Desires: Television and Erotics in Late Twentieth-Century India," *Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0021911804001020>.

synthesized phenomenon of the “westernisation and globalization of Indian Culture.”²⁷

Sahu on the other hand has directly examined the representation of women in Indian television soap operas across three different historical phases.²⁸ The first phase (1959–1983) focused on education and information, with limited reach and representation of women. The second phase (1983–1991) was dominated by Doordarshan (the state-owned TV channel), where narratives began to include women but often reinforced traditional roles and stereotypes. And finally, the third phase (post-1991), marked by liberalization, led to a proliferation of private channels and a shift toward entertainment, where soap operas became the dominant genre. She argues that even though the post-liberalization era saw more intricate representations of women, with some soaps portraying women as empowered, they still reflected and perpetuated patriarchal societal norms rather than challenged them. Contrastingly, Agarwal and Patnaik have tried to map the literature on “masculinities” in Indian TV soap operas.²⁹ Even though their indistinct work fluctuates between understanding masculinity in the Indian context and its evolution over time, they realize that the research on masculinity in the realm of Indian TV might be quite limited. Nonetheless, by briefly examining the trajectory of male characters in television soap operas, their research contributes to a better understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of masculinity in contemporary India.

The supplanting of state-sponsored, didactic entertainment on Doordarshan by globalized, transnational broadcasting on an array of TV channels transformed the cultural practices of the urban middle class, eliciting both anxiety and enthusiasm. Television, with its vast reach and psychological presence, became a space of quotidian negotiation and reconstruction of

27. Mankekar, “Dangerous Desires,” 403.

28. Sahu, “Revisiting Television in India.”

29. Mehul Agarwal and Pranta Pratik Patnaik, “(Re)Visiting Masculinities in Indian Television Soap Operas,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2023.2259264>.

Indian cultural values—in the context of globalization—without exonerating “tradition.” The globalization of content opened new discourses and representations on the erotic, (female) desires, masculinities, and more importantly an emergence of queer spaces in electronic (as well as print) media, challenging conventional family values and sexual normativity.

While scholars have examined the emergence of new cultural values in Indian television, insufficient attention has been paid to parallel developments in the film industry. These cinematic transformations are equally—if not more—significant when analyzing emerging initiatives and their impact on India’s evolving film landscape. Ghosh has attributed the proliferation of queer representations in TV sitcoms of the 1990s to the rise of a wave of queer films³⁰ such as *Daayra* (The square hole, 1997),³¹ *Darmiyaan* (In between, 1997), and *Tamanna* (Desire, 1997). She employs the word *queer* as a strategic and provisional label to disrupt the dominant sex-gender binary. She recognizes that the traditional categories like “gay” and “lesbian” often reinforce binary oppositions between masculinity and femininity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, whereas queer for her “embraces desires that are transgendered and transsexual.”³² Even though I thoroughly agree with her deliberation to disrupt the binaries, her allusion to the term *queer* does not hold true for these specific films.

Interestingly all the three films deal with *hijras*. Unlike Western critics’ blatant gaffe about homosexuality or lesbianism “so outside the experience of these Hindus . . . that their language even lacks a word for it,”³³ the word *hijras* and *hijras*³⁴ within themselves are a community that has existed for a long time. There are various terms used to describe the hijra community

30. Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities.”

31. However, Ghosh forgets to mention that the film that follows the story of a transvestite and a rape survivor was not allowed a theatrical release in India due to its sensitive nature.

32. Ghosh, “False Appearances and Mistaken Identities,” 435.

33. Roger Ebert, “Fire Strikes at Indian Repression,” *Chicago Sun Times*, September 17, 1997.

34. For a proper and more nuanced approach to it, please see Giti Thadani, *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* (Bloomsbury, 1996). She delves deep into language and the complexities of lesbian identities. She finds words for homosexuals,

such as hermaphrodites and transgendered individuals,³⁵ considered the “third sex”³⁶ or “eunuch-transvestites.”³⁷ Lal notes that the hijras challenge conventional categories of gender and sexuality, embodying a unique position within Indian society that resists the rigid classifications often imposed by modern knowledge systems.³⁸ The hijra community is recognized for its complex identity, which includes elements of castration, asceticism, hermaphroditism, bisexuality, and street performance, all contributing to their self-definition.³⁹ Hijras are often seen at births, weddings, and other important ritualistic ceremonies, where it is considered important to receive their blessings. They also have a significant presence in the political sphere. In 1998, Shabnam Bano (popularly known as Shabnam *Mausi* [Aunt]) became the first hijra to become a member of the Legislative Assembly. Reddy has noted that contemporary Indian politics has witnessed a growing visibility and empowerment of hijras, who are now being acknowledged as a vital and dynamic force in the country’s social and political landscape.⁴⁰ She observed that hijras are perceived as more approachable and effective than usual politicians, with some hijras taking their political responsibilities seriously and improving civic amenities in their areas. Therefore, with the hijras being such a visible and vital part of the sociocultural fabric of

peculiarly lesbians from *shaktic* traditions who do not need to contextualize themselves through the West.

35. Vinay Lal, “Not This, Not That: The Hijras of India and the Cultural Politics of Sexuality,” *Social Text*, no. 61 (1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488683>.
36. Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, 2nd ed. (Wadsworth, 1999). She explores this from the aspect of ancient Hinduism. She notes that the “third sex” was itself further “divided into four categories: the male eunuch, called the ‘water-less’ because he had desiccated testes; the ‘testicle voided,’ so called because he had been castrated; the hermaphrodite; and the ‘not woman’” (22). Nanda also explores the existence of these phenomenon in Islam.
37. M. D. Vyas and Yogesh Shingala, *The Life Style of the Eunuchs* (Anmol, 1987).
38. Lal, “Not This, Not That.”
39. Lal; Takeshi Ishikawa, “Hijras,” *Indian Literature* 55, no. 6 (2011): 266, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23348755>.
40. Gayatri Reddy, “‘Men’ Who Would Be Kings: Celibacy, Emasculation, and the Re-Production of ‘Hijras’ in Contemporary Indian Politics,” *Social Research* 70, no. 1 (2003), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971610>.

Indian traditions, their growing representation in films cannot merely be a consequence of globalized broadcasts of transnational communication and deviations from normative gender/sexuality roles portrayed in them. While the positive representation of hijras in mainstream Hindi films is a remarkable achievement, it is essential to concede that it does not necessarily subvert the dominant patriarchal Hindu nationalist ideology. Hijras have been effectively absorbed and assimilated into the Hindu (as well as Islamic) cultural and religious order, making their presence a familiar and nonthreatening sight. However, the more radical and marginalized aspects of the queer spectrum, including homosexuality and homoeroticism, remain a source of anxiety, contestation, and repression for the Hindu nationalist order. This was evident in the discussion above about the film *Fire* and the subsequent protest by Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena workers.

Nonetheless, queer representations in films in the new millennium coming out of the liberalization era became more frequent. Scholars have noted films like *My Brother Nikil* (2005) being born out of the conundrum of liberalization, changing sexual politics, new funding sources, and the influence of independent documentaries dealing with LGBTQ representations.⁴¹ While these films kept distressing the Shiv Sena, other moral police films such as *Girlfriend* (2005) became a curious case for agitating the Hindu fundamentalists as well as women and queer rights activists. The film follows a complex relationship between a lesbian, Tanya; a closeted bisexual (who is reformed into heterosexuality by the end), Sapna; and a heterosexual man, Rahul. Tanya and Sapna share a deep and intimate bond, which is initially portrayed as a close friendship but later revealed to be a romantic and physical relationship. However, Sapna's perception of their relationship is ambivalent, and she does not reciprocate Tanya's romantic feelings. The arrival of Rahul, a male love interest, disrupts the dynamics of their relationship, and Tanya's unrequited love for Sapna is exacerbated by her growing

41. Devasundaram, *India's New Independent Cinema*; Shohini Ghosh, "Queer," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749276211028975>.

jealousy toward Rahul. The film vilifies the lesbian as a jealous, murderous schemer and ends with her death. At the end of the film, Rahul and Sapna pay their respects to Tanya's grave, serving a piteous reminder of closeted Sapna's reformation into the heterosexual order. The film includes two intimate lesbian scenes, bordering on the edge of soft pornography. While these agitated fundamentalists, such as blatant serving to the male gaze and abhorrent representation of the lesbian as a vengeful maniac annoyed women and queer rights activists. Therefore, while there were new discourses on gender and sexual politics, mainstream Hindi films were still conferring positive queer representations.

From Broadcast to Broadband

If liberalization-induced transnational communication opened the possibilities of discourse on sexual politics and a growing visibility of queer representation in film and media, then the arrival of global streaming services provided new liberties to explore these representations as well as possibilities to dismantle the conventional mainstream codes of masculinity and femininity. In 2018, Anurag Kashyap, who had already been a victim of the censor board several times, codirected India's first Netflix original series called *Sacred Games*, based on the homonymous novel by Vikram Chandra. The series cast popular Bollywood actors in lead roles. It revolves around a distressed cop, Sartaj Singh (Saif Ali Khan), who struggles to find his place in the midst of a corrupt and dysfunctional police force. His life turns upside down when he receives a cryptic phone call from Ganesh Gaitonde (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), a notorious crime lord who has been missing for sixteen years. Gaitonde's ominous warning to save the city within twenty-five days sets off a chain reaction of events that delves deep into India's dark underbelly. Through a series of flashbacks, the narrative explores Gaitonde's origins and his rise to power as Mumbai's crime lord. The series is an important break-away from conventional narrative structures of Bollywood. The result was a

refreshingly authentic portrayal of characters who were not alienated from the public sphere. The trajectory of Gaitonde's life is intimately tied to the volatile vicissitudes of Indian politics, with his rise to power mirroring the nation's own periods of turmoil and transformation. The Emergency, the Bofors scandal, the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the demolition of the Babri mosque, and other political upheavals in India influenced his personal, professional, or even spiritual developments on his path to become a crime lord. The public sphere that had been missing in Bollywood since liberalization was compellingly reinstated through this intricate weaving of personal and political.

Furthermore, characters in *Sacred Games* were complex and multidimensional, engaging in natural and spontaneous interactions, cursing and swearing profanely. They discussed politics, intimacy, and relationships and indulged in actual sexual acts rather than the formulaic soft pornographic or metaphorical depictions. The relationships were also nuanced and beyond the mimetic heterosexual depictions. In the first season, Gaitonde falls in love and has an intimate relationship with a transgendered person named Kukoo. In the second season he develops a sexual relationship with a man, Guruji. *Sacred Games* was a breakthrough. It marked a significant turning point in the Indian streaming landscape, which till then was merely a platform for international content and light entertainment. *Sacred Games* opened the possibilities for it to become a medium for impactful and socially relevant storytelling. In an interview, the codirector Kashyap said that streaming platforms represented a promise of liberty.⁴²

In their edited volume, Waugh and Arroyo discuss the significance of sexual revolutions and how the internet and digital culture have influenced sexual expression and identity.⁴³ Situating confession as a cultural practice of self-referential storytelling, they make it a crucial aspect of contemporary

42. Sonia Faleiro, "Netflix v Modi and the Battle for Indian Cinema's Soul," *MIT Technology Review*, March 24, 2021.

43. Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo, "Introduction," in *I Confess!*, ed. Thomas Waugh and Brandon Arroyo (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

sexual discourse. They have argued that the advent of the internet and digital platforms has heralded a “third sexual revolution.” This section of the paper reads the queering of the mainstream in the advent of digital platforms as a challenge to the discourse on traditional gendering. Furthermore, queer cinema here is not just something focused specifically on sexuality but also, as bell hooks put in one of her talks, queer here is “being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and it has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.”⁴⁴ This might be an exaggeration in the sense that these films perhaps do not radically challenge the status quo, but it holds true because some of the films discussed can be read as queer in the sense that they displace the conventional cinematic codes of masculinity and femininity and subvert traditional, cultural, or fratricidal institutions employed in contemporary mainstream Bollywood. While the majority of current Bollywood films construct a linear masculine male protagonist to be the flag-bearer of a new muscular nationalism, these films show men, albeit sometimes heterosexual, as vulnerable, emotionally aware, and riddled with real issues. These men possess a distinctive combination of resilience and pliability, enabling them to resist the constraints of the heteropatriarchal framework or find ways to subvert or redefine it.

The 2019 film *Bala* is an apt example of such representation. It offers a scathing critique of societal beauty standards in India, especially the expectations of fairness and shame around baldness. The film starts with a young, popular fourteen-year-old student named Bala (Ayushman Khurrana) and his rather dark-skinned classmate and friend Latika (Bhumika Pednekar). Bala mocks his bald teacher in the classroom by drawing his caricature on the blackboard, triggering the whole class into a laughing frenzy. In the following scenes he also ridicules Latika for being dark skinned and calls her demeaning slurs (that are unfortunately common in Indian vernacular).

44. bell hooks, “Are You Still a Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body,” talk presented at the New School, YouTube, May 8, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs>.

These incidents set the tone for the rest of the film, which delves into the complexities of social standards of beauty, identity, and self-acceptance.

Bala grows into a young man struggling with premature baldness, a condition that becomes an obstacle to his personal and professional growth. His profession as a fairness cream salesman and him being replaced for becoming bald becomes another evident commentary on the societal pressure to conform to traditional beauty standards. While Latika grows up to become a lawyer, she is repeatedly rejected by prospective suitors because of her dark skin. Even though the film relies heavily on the heteronormative institution of marriage, it critiques it by showing how societal expectations in these practices can lead to commodification and objectification of individuals and how societal pressure to conform to beauty standards can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem. In a curious departure from mimetic representations, the male hero in this film is vulnerable and insecure and battles these emotions throughout his daily life. Remarkably, the patriarchal, standardized constructs of male and female beauty, for the first time, become the source of anxiety of the male hero. Having tried hundreds of remedies—from dubious quackeries to legitimate medical options—Bala ultimately relents and agrees to wear a toupee. His reluctant acceptance shows his resigned wedging into the social construct of presenting a perfect exterior. However, with his renewed confidence, Bala courts and decides to marry his crush, a beautiful, fair-skinned online influencer named Pari (Yami Gautam). Pari, who seems to be an obtuse social media personality, is surprisingly self-aware. She understands her status in society is mostly because of her beauty (read: fairness).

Bala's conscience is conflicted and he reveals the truth about his baldness and the toupee to Pari. When she finally finds out the morning after their wedding, Pari furiously walks out on him, subsequently sending a court notice to annul their marriage. With his childhood friend Latika as his lawyer, Bala finally seeks to save his marriage but ends up having a self-realization. Another notable departure from mainstream narratives is the film's courtroom scenes, which reveal a nuanced presentation, refraining

from vilifying any of the parties involved. While it could have been easy to belittle Pari for leaving her husband for something as shallow as physical appearance and hair, the film takes a thoughtful approach without shifting blame on individuals and their obsession with physical beauty. As Latika defends Bala in the court, she makes Pari admit that her initial attraction to Bala stemmed from his charm and intelligence and not merely his looks. However, Pari also contends that Bala's failure to disclose his baldness indicates a lack of self-acceptance, which can affect the viability of any relationship. Bala ultimately concedes that Pari has that right to seek annulment as love cannot be mandated by law and that a relationship lacking genuine affection is destined to fail.

Back at his job at a fairness cream promotional event, Bala has an epiphany about the superficial beauty constructs being perpetuated in society as well through his sales campaigns. As a symbolic act of self-acceptance, he removes his toupee, making a statement and bravely facing the laughter that had haunted him till then. His publicly accepting himself marks another interesting departure, as it makes the film and its climax inherently about self-love rather than stereotypical heterosexual love. At the point where the hero usually gets together with the heroine in mainstream films, Bala gets himself. He resolves the conflict of societal constructs and pressure that had been pushing him away from accepting himself. This is further established in the final scenes where Bala, who now has feelings for Latika for supporting his journey of self-acceptance, rushes to propose to her. Interestingly, swaying away from the standard Bollywood narratives, Latika rejects his proposal. Instead of being a bitter scene about rejection, Latika and Bala's friendship reimagines heterointimacy through displacing the heteronormative, monogamous marriage in favor of a passionate friendship.

Ayushmann Khurana's characters in other contemporary films have been part of a broader dialectic of contemporary masculinity in Bollywood. His characters in other films such as *Vicky Donor* (2012) and *Dream Girl* (2019) showcase a shift from traditional hypermasculine portrayals to more nuanced and emotionally aware male characters. In *Shubh Mangal*

Savdhan, Khurana and Pednekar appear together again. Khurana plays the role of a young marketing professional named Mudit. The story unfolds as Mudit, characterized by his inherent shyness, struggles to initiate a conversation with his crush Sugandha (Pednekar) despite his numerous attempts. Finally, he musters up the courage to send her an online marriage proposal. Sugandha, unhappy with this approach, takes her time to contemplate the proposal, ultimately framing her decision as a significant and independent choice in her life.

The plot thickens when Sugandha's parents are away, allowing Mudit and Sugandha the opportunity to get intimate. However, as things heat up, Mudit, feeling visibly uncomfortable, unexpectedly decides to leave. When Sugandha expresses concern over this abrupt change of plans, Mudit claims to have a "gents' problem." He cleverly alludes to his predicament using a limp biscuit, which leads Sugandha to deduce that he is experiencing erectile dysfunction. What follows is the same plot as *Bala*, of comical trials and errors, quackeries, and medical advice for Mudit to find a solution to his erectile dysfunction.

However, this time his love interest and soon-to-be-wife Sugandha is by his side. Once again, even though centered around the heteronormative institution of marriage, the film explores the sexual and emotional vulnerability of men and displaces conventional gender roles. As the various attempts fail, Mudit and Sugandha's family suggest calling off the wedding. Sugandha stays adamant about her decision to marry Mudit, who she has now fallen in love with. Sugandha's character evokes a strong sense of female agency, a departure from the usual mainstream narrative. The film also subverts the dominant cultural narrative of marriage, where women are often shown to be passive recipients of male desire rather than active participants in the relationship. The protagonist's struggles with erectile dysfunction and his emotional vulnerability subvert the traditional notions of masculinity that are commonly perpetuated, not just in mainstream Hindi cinema but in popular media in general. Masculinity, which is often constructed around the ideals of physical perfection such as chiseled muscular bodies, aggression,



Image 2.1: Mudit metaphorically establishes his erectile dysfunction through a limp biscuit.

Source: R. S. Prasanna, dir., *Shubh Mangal Savdhan* (Colour Yellow Productions/Eros International, 2017), screen grab.

and sexual prowess, is replaced in this film with a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of the male experience. The film's depiction of Mudit as a sensitive and vulnerable individual is notable for its refusal to reduce him to a docile or powerless character who can be coerced out of his will. When Mudit's future father-in-law takes him to a veterinarian to find a solution for his "problem," he threatens to call off the wedding if the issue remains unresolved. Mudit refuses to be intimidated and instead stands his ground, insisting that he will marry Sugandha regardless of her father's approval. In this sense both Mudit and Sugandha assert their autonomy and agency throughout the film to break through the oppressive familial structure. Finally, much against the will of their families and breaking a lot of gendered stereotypes, they finally get married. Once again, like *Bala*, even though the film is headed for an inevitable end to the heteronormative institution of marriage, without the promise of typical heterosexual intercourse and procreation, their marriage

subverts the institution and reimagines heterointimacy, displacing sexual intimacy through (platonic) love.

Together *Bala* and *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* offer a departure from conventional gender portrayals in Bollywood. These films present female characters with agency and autonomy, actively shaping their lives rather than passively responding to male desires. Concurrently, the male protagonists exhibit emotional vulnerability and awareness, deviating from stereotypical macho masculinity. Even though both the films start with a wedding, their ends can be read as a subtle subversion to the traditional cultural institution. In this context, marriage is not just a heteronormative, procreative partnership but also a site of social and cultural negotiation, where the male protagonist's insecurities and anxieties about his (im)potency, masculinity, and social status are worked through and resolved. These resolutions are often asymmetrical (in a nontraditional way), with the female protagonist being more educated, independent, and confident than the male protagonist. This asymmetry marks an interesting representation of the changing social and economic dynamics of contemporary India, where women are increasingly taking on more prominent roles in the workforce and society.

Queering the Rituals

The film noted in the section above, starting with marriages and weddings, also marks an engaging evolution from Sangita Gopal's observations in her seminal work dedicated to marriages and conjugations in popular Hindi cinema.⁴⁵ The core inquiry of her study revolves around understanding the implications of the couple form in New Bollywood cinema,⁴⁶ exploring its

45. Gopal, *Conjugations*.

46. For Gopal, New Bollywood distinguishes itself from its predecessor through significant industrial changes, including increased capitalization, professionalization of production processes, adoption of advanced technology, and a shift in audience demographics. The cinematic landscape of New Bollywood showcases a diverse range of genres, from grand

connections to themes of conjugality, film form, cinematic institutions, and societal dynamics. She argues that New Bollywood represents a new cinematic order emerging from the socioeconomic changes following India's economic liberalization in the early 1990s. This transition is characterized by a focus on postnuptial couples who are depicted as already conjugated at the narrative's outset, contrasting with classic cinema that centered on courtship leading to marriage. Through the analysis of films featuring postnuptial couples, she illustrates how these portrayals of marriage and domestic life reflect significant cinematic transformations in the postmillennial era, marking the evolution from classic Hindi cinema to New Bollywood. If Gopal's post-liberalization, postnuptial pair indicates that the traditional couple is being utilized in a manner distinct from the romantic pairs typically depicted in classic cinema, then these films mark another significant shift from that. The evolution here from the post-liberalization subject introduces a new subject characterized by altered gender power dynamics, which navigates the courtship process but, unlike its classical counterparts, does not necessarily culminate in marriage. The neoliberal individual now grapples with anxieties and challenges that come from within (impotency and balding). The neoliberal subject becomes the architect of the tribulations that it ultimately seeks to overcome. Unlike the post-liberalization subject of Gopal, the neoliberal subject is not outside the influence of the social sphere (of the extended family, the clan, and the community) and is not necessarily individuated. Furthermore, these films subvert conventional representations of weddings and marriages, effectively queering them. Another film serves as a compelling illustration of a rather more direct queering of matrimonial institution as well the neoliberal subject not individuated from the influence of extended family.

spectacles to socially conscious narratives, reflecting a departure from the homogeneity of classic Hindi cinema. This cinematic diversity is exemplified by the works of filmmakers like Karan Johar, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, and a variety of genres spanning from romantic comedies to socially relevant dramas and experimental indie films.

In a spiritual successor to *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan*, Ayushman Khurana appears again in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Be extra careful of marriage, 2020) that was released directly on OTT. Like the other two films, this one also starts with a wedding. However, this film queers mainstream Hindi cinema and perhaps even weddings and marriages. Based in the pre-Section 377 era, the film centers around Aman (Jitendra Kumar) and his boyfriend Kartik (Ayushman Khurana) who, unbeknownst to their families, live and work together in Delhi. The narrative unfolds as Aman's mother invites him to attend the wedding of his cousin, with the ulterior motive of arranging a "normal" heterosexual marriage between him and a family friend's daughter. Therefore, the film's main storyline is woven around weddings and marriages accentuating the ironies around them. The plot thickens when Aman and Kartik ironically travel on the Vivah Express (Wedding Express) for Aman's cousin's wedding. On the Wedding Express, surrounded by the frenzy of celebrations and family members, Aman and Kartik have a private, passionate moment, and a spontaneous kiss between them is witnessed by Aman's father, Shankar. Aghast and agape by the sight of his son kissing another man, Shankar retches and pukes. This marks the shaking of the hilarious but otherwise traditional patriarchal order.⁴⁷ This incident prompts Kartik to suggest that Aman disclose his sexuality to his father. Shankar's efforts to separate the gay couple at the cousin's wedding fail, ending in a public display of affection that shocks the extended family and the guests. The repercussions of Aman's revelation of his sexuality and his affection for Karthik sends ripples through the family, leading to confrontations and a refusal from the cousin's fiancé to proceed with the marriage due to Aman's sexuality.

What follows is an exploration of the conflicting demands and negotiations of romantic (homosexual) and familial love. Aman seeks his father's validation and acceptance while declaring his love for Kartik. Ironically, while Aman's father pressures him toward a "normal" heterosexual marriage,

47. Notably, this is also India's first on-screen gay kiss.

the very institution of heteronormative marriage crumbles and collapses. A heated exchange between Aman and his parents reveals the inherited pressures and traditions that forced them into their own arranged marriage. Admitting their prior love interests and lingering feelings, they acknowledge living a “half-life” in their arranged marriage. They recognize that they are imposing the same unfulfilling existence onto their son.

Vergheese⁴⁸ has used Jasbir Puar’s seminal work on assimilation of certain queer subjects⁴⁹ to provide a rather Western, reader-oriented interpretation of the film. The term *homonationalism* that Puar created refers to a form of nationalism that incorporates certain queer subjects into the discourse of the nation-state while excluding others. It’s relevant to note here that Puar was writing specifically in the context of the United States.⁵⁰ Vergheese applies a postcolonial context—a concept where a nation-state presents itself as progressive and modern by accepting and promoting the rights of certain queer individuals, typically those who are upper caste, upper class, and cisgender, while continuing to marginalize and exclude more vulnerable queer communities. Through this she argues that “because Aman and Kartik are both upper-caste, upper-class Hindus, they are palatable queer subjects,”⁵¹ This interpretation suggests a lack of familiarity with either the film itself or with the Indian caste system, or a mere misapplication of Western contextualized, homonationalist theory to Bollywood. While, Aman and Kartik are definitely Hindus, Kartik is not upper caste. His explicit mention of his father’s occupation as a *lauhar* (ironworker) juxtaposed against Aman’s father’s profession as a scientist (biologist) underscores a clear caste and class distinction. Furthermore, even though there is a class difference, Aman’s

48. Namrata Vergheese, “‘Jack and Johnny Went up the Hill’: Emergent Homonationalism and the Construction of a Palatable Queer Subject in Post-Section 377 Bollywood Cinema,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 60, no. 5 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2024.2375507>.

49. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, 2nd edition (Duke University Press, 2017).

50. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

51. Vergheese, “‘Jack and Johnny Went up the Hill,’” 679.

upper-class status is debatable. Both Aman and Kartik hailing from small towns and residing in the capital city on modest salaries (evident from Aman's mother's frequent taunts about his financial situation) suggests a different socioeconomic reality.

Beyond Representations

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan is heavily reliant on the themes of weddings and marriages. This pronounced focus on matrimonial rituals can be interpreted as an attempt to assimilate the queer narrative into the broader framework of Hindu nationalism as argued by some scholars.⁵² However, a nuanced analysis of the final wedding scene presents an alternative perspective, challenging this seemingly straightforward alignment.

In a subversive turn of events, the heteronormative marriage arranged by Aman's parents is disrupted when the prospective bride absconds with the family jewels. Seizing this opportunity, Kartik assumes the role of the bride, cross-dressing in traditional attire to participate in the wedding ceremony with Aman. The ritual progresses precariously until Aman's father finds out. This fiasco prompts the priest to refuse to officiate the ceremony, calling it unnatural. Undeterred, Aman and Kartik co-opt and queer the ritual, appropriating an iconic Bollywood song from the film *Sholay* (1975). The 1975 film had been central in the discussion on retrospective queering of mainstream Hindi films by Shohini Ghosh⁵³ and queer readings by other scholars⁵⁴ where the preoccupation with friendship and the intense emotional bonds between male friends is read as homoerotic. Kartik and Aman

52. Verghese,; Sohini Chatterjee, "The 'Good Indian Queer Woman' and the Family: Politics of Normativity and Travails of (Queer) Representation," *South Asian Popular Culture* 19, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2021.1940549>.

53. Ghosh, "Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities."

54. Holtzman, "Between Yaars"; Gopinath, *Impossible Desires, Queer Diasporas, and South Asian Public Cultures*.



Image 2.2: Kartik cross-dressing in the traditional bridal outfit.
 Source: Hitesh Kewalya, dir., *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Colour Yellow Productions/T-Series, 2020), screen grab.

performing the traditional wedding ritual while singing the iconic song “Ye Dosti Hum Nahi Todenge” (We will not break this bond/friendship) from *Sholay* instead of the priest’s sermons constitutes a profound queering of the rituals, traditions, and institution of wedding and marriage. “Ye Dosti Hum Nahi Todenge,” a song that has even been referred to as a “a gay male anthem”⁵⁵ in the context of *Sholay*’s homoeroticism, cyclically adds to the layer of retrospective queering as well. Arora and Sylvia have further argued that this song’s rendition, especially in the context of the film’s comedic tone, subverts traditional sex/gender roles through its campy and queer/transgressive performance.⁵⁶ They also observe the fact that this whole ritual plays out in the family’s ancestral home makes it more subversive to the heteropatriarchal order.

55. Gopinath, 101.

56. Arora and Sylvia, “Just like everyone else.”



Image 2.3: Aman and Kartik carrying out the wedding ritual. As the priest stands shocked in the back refusing to say the sermons, the couple sing an old Bollywood queer anthem to complete the ritual.

Source: Hitesh Kewalya, dir., *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Colour Yellow Productions/T-Series, 2020), screen grab.

The 2022 film *Badhai Do* (Give congratulations) also essentially queers the heteronormative marriage discourse and remarkably also the fratricidal order. The film depicts a lavender marriage between a closeted gay cop and a closeted lesbian school teacher. Forced to hide their queer identities and desires from their family, Shardul (Rajkumar Rao) and Suman enter into a marriage of convenience to maintain the façade of traditional legitimacy and social respectability while pursuing their individual interests and desires in private. Therefore, the film’s portrayal of queer subjectivities is constructed through the disruption of the privileged centrality of the heteropatriarchal family and the ambiguous practice of sexuality in everyday life. This dynamic is further emphasized by their heteronormative performances. In a particular scene where Shardul’s senior visits their home, he adopts the role of a chauvinistic husband who has effectively “domesticated” his wife.

This ostensibly humorous portrayal not only acts as a semblance for their lavender marriage but also highlights the underlying imbalances of power that exist within the context of gender relations in heteronormative marriages. The portrayal of parenthood within heteronormative discourses is similarly subjected to satire. When Suman is persistently pressured by Shardul's family to conceive, the same family members simultaneously lament the challenges of parenthood, expressing how it disrupts personal life and consumes one's time.

The film also presents queer identities with greater finesse than most films before it. In a poignant scene, Suman reveals her arranged marriage to her swain Rimjhim—whose character is noteworthy for representing a northeastern identity. This moment emphasizes the persistent taboo surrounding homosexuality in post-Section 377 India. On one hand, Suman, who has concealed her true identity from her family, deals with the complexities of a lavender marriage, yet her situation appears comparatively better than Rimjhim's, who has been ostracized by her own family. Interestingly, Suman asserts that their sexual identities constitute a part of their lives rather than defining their entire existence. Furthermore, when Rimjhim begins to live with Suman and Shardul, this arrangement further subverts the traditional heteronormative household structure. In a departure from the often-romanticized and sanitized portrayals of queer relationships, this film presents a more grounded and realistic depiction of queer domestic life, replete with the everyday conflicts and challenges that arise in any intimate partnership. Amid the ups and downs of their queer domestic life, Shardul also finds a partner, intriguingly with a lawyer.

Of course eventually the charade of their marriage is exposed to the family and their sexualities are outed. The familial revelation notwithstanding, the protagonists still opt to maintain their arrangement, although with another motivation. Initially the arrangement was necessitated by familial expectations whereas now it is driven by the imperative to conform to state-sanctioned norms, specifically the requirement for a heteronormative family structure in order to facilitate the adoption of a child. The film's

denouement is characterized by a nuanced exploration of the tensions between tradition and nonnormative familial configurations. Despite the family's initial reservations, they come to accept and even celebrate their nontraditional arrangement, as evidenced by the reconfigured ritual welcoming the new baby. Suman's partner Rimjhim is participating in the rituals where traditionally it should have been the parents. The momentary interruption, occasioned by the arrival of Shardul's senior, serves to reinstate the tension between tradition and nonnormative familial configurations. As Rimjhim unhappily and unwillingly leaves the ritual to not offend the guests (Shardul's senior and his wife), the screen fades to black, signaling the end. However, the ending takes a bold turn when Suman's father invites Rimjhim to rejoin the ritual, emphasizing the importance of the mother's presence in the ceremony. This gesture not only underscores the family's glad acceptance of their nontraditional arrangement but also visibly discomforts the visiting guests. In a remarkable display of agency and courage, Shardul seizes this opportunity to challenge the status quo, inviting his own partner to join the ritual, thereby reconstituting the traditional familial structure. Like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan's* final scene that queered the traditional ritual of weddings, *Badhaai Do* ends with the four queer individuals participating in the ceremony together. This image serves as a powerful testament to the possibility of queer familial formations and the reimagining of traditional rituals to accommodate nonnormative relationships.

Nonetheless, there have been films dealing with queer subjectivities such as *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (How I felt when I saw that girl, 2019) that have been accused of normalizing the Hindu familial and patriarchal order.⁵⁷ These critiques suggest that, rather than subverting or challenging existing power structures, these films may inadvertently perpetuate the very norms and values that have historically marginalized queer subjects.

57. Arora and Sylvia; Deepanwita Dey and Sonal Jha, "Disrupting Heteronormativity: Queer Subjectivities and the Family in *Badhaai Do*," *South Asian Popular Culture* 22, no. 2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2024.2429031>; Chatterjee, "The 'Good Indian Queer Woman' and the Family."



Image 2.4: The ceremony for the baby traditionally done by parents is also attended by Suman's partner Rimjhim. Finally, Shardul's partner also joins the ceremony, challenging traditional familial notions.

Source: Harshavardhan Kulkarni, dir., *Badhaai Do* (Junglee Pictures, 2022), screen grab.

The opening sequence of *Ek Ladki Ko* unfolds as a seemingly conventional heteronormative narrative, punctuated by elements of magical realism. A struggling playwright named Sahil (Rajkumar Rao), notably portrayed as Muslim, falls in love with Sweety. Eventually, the narrative reveals the protagonist's identity as a closeted lesbian. While it's true that the narrative revolves around Sweety's internal struggle with her queer identity and her desire for patriarchal acceptance, analyzing the film solely through a more Western, contextualized reading⁵⁸ limits whatever subversive capacity the film could hold. There is no doubt that Sweety's queerness is sanitized

58. Her assertion that the film implies the patriarch's preference for a lesbian daughter over a daughter married to a Muslim man is a thorough misreading. This interpretation is refuted by a single viewing of the film, highlighting a significant gap in her comprehension of the film's actual thematic concerns.

and disciplined through her deference to the family. This is reinforced multiple times in the film and perhaps epitomized in her agreement to marry Sahil or any other boy for the sake of her family's honor, reconfiguring her as a sacrificial good daughter and sister despite her queer transgression.

However, the film's suggestion of a potential heterosexual marriage between Hindu Sweety and Muslim Sahil, juxtaposed with Sweety's lesbian identity, presents a complex scenario that excludes it from the heteronormative Hindu nationalist fold. The film's engagement with these themes within a specific sociocultural milieu requires a more nuanced understanding than afforded by a simplistic, isolated application of Western theoretical frameworks.

In 2020, a popular Indian jewelry brand, Tanishq, had to withdraw its advertisement after a right-wing orchestrated backlash on social media.⁵⁹ The ad for a new collection called Ekatvam (unity) depicts a baby shower organized by Muslim in-laws for the Hindu bride. The ad and the brand were attacked for promoting *love jihad*—a term used by right-wing Hindu groups claiming that Muslim men are luring Hindu women to convert to Islam through deceitful romantic relationships.⁶⁰ Often centered around forced conversion to Islam,⁶¹ the *love jihad* conspiracy theory, a prominent feature of Hindu nationalist discourse, exemplifies a broader pattern of Islamophobic narratives within India. The proliferation of such narratives, amplified by the near-total dominance of right-wing media outlets, has led to the appropriation of *jihad* terminology as a pejorative suffix applied indiscriminately to baseless accusations against the Muslim community.⁶²

59. BBC, "Tanishq: Jewellery Ad on Interfaith Couple Withdrawn After Outrage," BBC, October 13, 2020.

60. Charu Gupta, "Hindu Women, Muslim Men: Love Jihad and Conversions," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 51 (2009), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25663907>.

61. Jyoti Punwani, "Myths and Prejudices About 'Love Jihad'," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 42 (2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24480870>.

62. There have been countless Islamophobic conspiracies such as "thook jihad" (spit jihad), alleging that workers in Muslim eateries spit in the food they cook. Alishan Jafri, "'Thook Jihad' Is the Latest Weapon in Hindutva's Arsenal of Islamophobia," *Wire*, November 20,

In 2021, one of the oldest wellness and consumer goods brands in India, Dabur, found itself in similar predicament. Dabur launched an ad for its skin care range a day before the (North Indian) Hindu festival Karva Chauth. Rooted in matrimonial contexts, Karva Chauth is a traditional celebration where women fast from sunrise to moonrise for the safety and longevity of their husbands. The ad depicts two women preparing for the Karva Chauth ritual. In a departure from traditional expectations, the women perform the ritual for each other instead of their husbands, subtly establishing them as a lesbian couple. This act significantly queers the tradition, imbuing it with new meaning and challenging established heteronormative associations. Needless to mention, the ad faced significant backlash, attracting condemnation not only from fringe Hindu nationalist groups but also from mainstream political figures. Dabur was forced to apologize and took the ad down.⁶³

Such controversies are not isolated incidents but rather symptomatic of a recurring pattern wherein marginalized groups, including Muslims and LGBTQ+ individuals, are seen as threats to the established Hindu nationalist order. In analyzing the Hindu nationalist backlash against the film *Fire*, discussed in detail in the previous sections, Kumar has argued that for the “Hindutva world-view, India is for Hindus, and should not accommodate homosexuals, Muslims, Pakistanis, lesbians or art that troubles these national definitions or constructs alternate subject positions.”⁶⁴ Therefore, while *Ek Ladki Ko* does unarguably represent sanitized and disciplined queerness through a deference to the fratricidal and patriarchal order, its reading as a complete assimilation into the heteronormative Hindu nationalist fold

2021. These conspiracies are a part of bigger marginalization of Muslims through economic boycotting following the social boycotting that the Hindu right has seemingly achieved.

63. Ratna Bhushan, “Dabur Apologises for Fem Ad,” *Economic Times*, October 25 2021.

64. Sanjeev Kumar, “Constructing the Nation’s Enemy: Hindutva, Popular Culture and the Muslim ‘Other’ in Bollywood Cinema,” *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013): 462, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2013.785340>.

appears overstated. This assertion is validated by the documented backlash from Hindu right-wing groups and political figures against any perceived subversion of Hindu identity. While existing scholarship has focused on *Sweetie's* preoccupation with patriarchal approval,⁶⁵ a close reading of her widowed father Balbir's narrative arc reveals a crucial yet overlooked dimension. Balbir, a clothing factory owner, harbors an unfulfilled passion for cooking, constantly seeking solace in the kitchen despite his mother's persistent disapproval. This running gag in the film about his mother catching him cooking and watching cooking shows the mother's adherence to traditional gender roles, wherein cooking is relegated to the feminine sphere. Consequently, Balbir, the patriarch himself, becomes a victim of the very system he embodies, subtly challenging the frequent portrayal of women as the sole victims of patriarchy. This nuanced portrayal shows the often-unacknowledged ways in which patriarchal structures that enforce traditional gender roles often constrain men, preventing them from pursuing passions deemed feminine. Although the film's conclusion adopts a didactic and melodramatic tone where Balbir finally comes to accept her daughter's sexuality, it simultaneously liberates Balbir from the restrictive gender roles. In the epilogue of the film, he finally musters the courage to pursue his romantic interest and fulfil his lifelong dream of opening a restaurant. This act signifies the patriarch's emancipation from the oppressive system that confined both him and his daughter, perhaps offering a more complex and multifaceted understanding of the pervasive impact of patriarchal norms.

Conclusions

The transformation of gender and sexuality represented in the films discussed above fundamentally challenges deeply entrenched heteropatriarchal norms.

65. Chatterjee, "The 'Good Indian Queer Woman' and the Family"; Verghese, "'Jack and Johnny Went up the Hill'"; Dey and Jha, "Disrupting Heteronormativity."

Traditional Bollywood has long reinforced patriarchal structures through hero-centric narratives, where male protagonists embodied strength, stoicism, and authority while female characters served primarily as romantic interests or familial supporters. The emergence of emotionally vulnerable male characters and empowered female and queer perspectives represents a direct confrontation with these normative structures. Nonetheless, it is important to note that queer representations in these films often remain somewhat superficial, as they tend not to deeply engage with the intersections of caste, class, and other dimensions of queer existence pervasive in Indian society.

These films function as sites of resistance against right-wing Hindu nationalist narratives that often promote traditional gender roles and heteronormativity as essential components of an “authentic” Indian culture. By presenting alternative portrayals of masculinity, family, and sexuality, these films implicitly challenge the cultural homogeneity projected by nationalist discourse. They represent a social commentary that operates outside formal political structures. In particular, the challenging fratricidal representations in these films, more peculiarly highlighted in *Badhai Do* and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, play a crucial role in challenging the current Hindu nationalist order. Bollywood, through its depiction of familial relationships and national identity, serves as a platform for imagining the nation.⁶⁶ Sen argues that Bollywood’s representation of the family, particularly the figure of the father, can be seen as a way to negotiate and reflect the evolving notions of nationhood and identity in contemporary India.⁶⁷ In her cleverly titled book *Cinematic ImagiNation*, Viridi argues that Hindi cinema constructs a “fictional nation,” resolving internal tensions through moral conflicts

66. Meheli Sen, “‘It’s All About Loving Your Parents’ Liberalization: Hindutva and Bollywood’s New Fathers,” in *Bollywood and Globalization*, ed. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande (Anthem Press, 2010).

67. Sen, “‘It’s All About Loving Your Parents’ Liberalization.”

presented within a deliberately generalized spatiotemporal setting.⁶⁸ She argues that the homogenization of diverse ideological viewpoints establishes cultural hegemony, naturalizing a particular cultural formation and repressing internal differences based on class, gender, ethnicity, religion, and community. She recollects the recurring motif of the “nation and/as family”⁶⁹ in Hindi films that is frequently challenged yet ultimately resolved through devotion to the fiction of “nation.” Therefore, the contestation of familial and patriarchal orders in these films offers a counternarrative to the hegemonic discourse on nation-building and the construction of national identity. By challenging traditional family structures, these films position the family as a site of negotiation and creation of new identities rather than their assimilation into the nationalist discourse. Consequently, this paper has emphasized the significance of these portrayals, as they provide a critical perspective to examine the interplay between refiguring familial dynamics and nationhood. Though Hindi cinema still has considerable ground to cover in fully challenging gender and sexual politics—particularly in offering truly liberating queer perspectives that break free from traditional monogamy and other cultural institutions—it remains important to observe, acknowledge, and perhaps even celebrate these emerging departures. Even if these steps appear modest, they represent meaningful shifts in cinematic representation that gradually expand the boundaries of what can be imagined and portrayed. These incremental changes, occurring within the constraints of commercial cinema and societal expectations, lay important groundwork for more profound transformations in how Indian film engages with gender, sexuality, and tradition in the years to come.

68. Jyotika Viridi, *Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Film as Social History* (Rutgers University Press, 2003).

69. Viridi, *Cinematic ImagiNation*, 34.

Acknowledgments

This article draws from my doctoral research *Narrating Against the Nation: Mainstream Cinema, Violence, and the Decolonial Imagination*, completed at Hong Kong Baptist University under the supervision of Professor Kenneth Paul Tan. I am deeply grateful for his intellectual guidance and generous mentorship throughout this project. This paper benefited from feedback from colleagues in the Department of Communication and the Academy of Film. I also thank the reviewers and editors of *Global Storytelling* for their thoughtful engagement with this work.

