Challenging Stereotypes-Projection of Queer Characters in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Indian cinema has come a long way from marginalising queer characters to placing them in the spotlight. Though queer-friendly trend has recently begun in Bollywood, past productions in Indian cinema had purposedly used queers as non-binary characters for entertainment purposes only. It inseminated into the minds of the people as certain odd traits which were associated with being queer, gay, lesbian and so on. Anyone or any action falling outside the category of heteronormativity was given an eccentric portrayal, a ridiculous make-over which became an accepted stereotype of what queer identity consisted of. With a purpose to dismantle the widely accepted gender stereotypes, this paper is an attempt to bring to light queer characters who challenged the widely propagated stereotype and to question the necessity of devising extreme means in the projection of queer characters in Indian cinema.

Keywords: Queer, stereotype, bollywood, cinema

Introduction

The Natyashastra, a collection of information on dramaturgy, notes how men assumed women's character and women assumed men's. Popularly known as 'Rupanusarini', this exchange of roles was looked upon as entertainment tactics. Regional folk theatres also witness this men/women impersonation of the opposite gender such as the Kathakali of Kerala, the Ram Lila of Uttar Pradesh and the Nupi Manbi of Manipur. As rural theatre culture vanished, cinematic space emerged as a plane for expression and representation of queers. It is significant to note that although folk theatres engaging in exchange of roles by both men and women were not scorned, the cinematic productions seem to have taken a different aspect when dealing with queer characters. Therefore, in most Bollywood films, queer characters firstly emerged in the represented form of the 'Hijra' who served no other purpose apart from comedic intervals in a bigger narrative. Kathryn Hansen (2002) opined that the cultural and folk theatres enabled acceptance of cross-gender role play and "theatrical transvestism not only enabled actors to transform their own gender identities but also sustained and eventually reworked viewing practices predicated on interest in transgender identification and the homoerotic gaze".

Bollywood movies in particular, play a great role in representing queer identities. However, upon proper analysis, it has been found that the projections of queer characters have been inadequate and misdirected. Also noteworthy in this aspect is the aftermath of the release of Deepa Mehta's movie 'Fire'(1996) which is

about a lesbian relationship. While some Bollywood movies like 'Dostana', 'Bol Bachan' and 'Kal Ho Na Ho' were widely appreciated by the audience for the comedic service of it's queer contents, 'Fire' had a different effect upon the people. Theatres were vandalised , the movie was boycotted and groups emerged who blamed western culture as the influencer of homosexuality in India. This drastic difference in the attitude of people towards queer representations onscreen raises questions about proper knowledge and education of queer.

Discussion

On carefully analysing Bollywood movies, it can be seen that movies such as 'Dostana'(2008) fixates upon two male straight characters who, in order to rent a flat together, portray themselves as gay. In exocitising gayness, Sameer and Kunal set out to create and engage in stereotyped actions that 'make' a person gay. With their sexual orientation hidden at bay, these men who set out on a gay make-over might have entertained the audience, but it raises serious questions to the confused audience about sexual orientation, identity and performance. Their actions are inconsiderately directed to an audience of heterosexuals. Because for the hetero-gaze being gay or queer was attached to conventional or stereotyped mannerisms. Writing in this context, for the Indian audience, being gay meant liking pink, dressing and talking funny, and at social spaces exhibiting 'feminine' traits. Hence the characters' plan to convince people that they were gay, served the purpose of hilarity aimed by Bollywood. In this context, Himadri Roy(2020) states: "Bollywood has been very cruel in depicting the reality about the gay men's world, and by portraying them as drags or transvestites, has confused the spectators . The

other categories are neglected and were not even talked about during this golden era of Bollywood cinema, especially during the 60s and 70s of the last century".

There are instances of Bollywood characters who adopt stereotyped gender performances instantaneously to prove their sexuality. In "Bol Bacchan" a scene displays Abhishek Bachan posing as queer for some moments, borrowing 'feminine traits' and dancing effeminately infront of Ajay Devgan. These scenes reduce the identity of gay and transvestites to mere performances such that the audience begins to cultivate the suggested notion that these identities are associated with simply performing 'feminine' or 'effeminate' mannerisms- a certain sort of bodily movement and a certain manner of speaking. Other movies like 'Student of the Year' portrays Rishi Kapoor who plays the role of a gay man. He constantly approaches the PT coach in a stereotyped gay manner. As noted by Himadri Roy(2020), effeminacy might be a part of a gay man's world but "it is not the entirety of the population of gay men. It is one of the complex matrixes that gay men exist in". Roy (2020) also states that "Bollywood has accepted this mass psychology. This attempt of Bollywood gave panache to the distinctive world and makes them exist and perish in a definite ghettoised world. The gay men in such strife lose the battle. The heterosexual world has always seen this gay world with awe, curiosity, abhorrence, and loathing".

Bollywood's introduction to gay and transvestites evokes a different level of emotion from the characters in the screen and the viewers offscreen. In ways, Bollywood films portray the popular reaction among masses- the homophobic response which characterizes

many individuals in society. Shohini Ghosh(2011) also notes that the homophobic 'sighting' can be seen in several other films such as 'Kal Ho Na Ho' by Nikhil Advani. The movie deals with a love triangle between two men and one woman: "the film plays self-consciously on the slippage between friendship and eroticism. However, it also retains ambivalence about homosexuality by introducing homophobia as a possible perhaps even legitimate response through the figure of Kantaben, a disapproving and paranoid housekeeper"(Ghosh).

With such movies simulating people's minds with represented images and ideas of what gay or queer identities are, it can be surmised that smaller factions of sexuality such as cross-dressers, butch-femme and dykes remain invisible in the representational narratives. Hence, gender identity has been rigidly limited to being male, female and the comedic element of transgender, gay or lesbian characters.

It can be further noted that lesser movies are produced upon lesbian identity and topic. When 'Margarita With a Straw' was released in 2014, Shonali Bose stated in her interview with Devarsi Ghosh that "many were put off by the fact that the heroine is both gay and disabled, and viacom18 wasn't actually wrong". Representations of gay and transvestites dominated the screen in Bollywood. When characters like Laila, played by Kalki Koechlin, dominates the screen, a larger number of viewers seemed unaccepting of the portrayal of a woman's sexuality- a woman who was a lesbian as well as a patient suffering from cerebral palsy.

To call movies like 'Dostana' only comic, would be an understatement because on a deeper level it questions identities, sexual orientation, preferences and performances. On one hand, the binaries of man-woman works mainstream while a subjective reading would perhaps point at straight-queer issues that bleakly move in the periphery of many Bollywood narrative. Nevertheless, Bollywood industry had unquestionably focused more on the exhibited traits of a character without considering or probing deeper into their sexual identity. Categorising or clubbing sexuality would end up limiting the diversity of various identities. To classify a person or a character as being gay or lesbian would probably and unquestionably lead to mapping out the performances of that person and putting him into a group: "the fact, about fixing a category for any sexuality, is in fact the pomo-eclecticism that leads Indian, the heteronormative men to even create a limited domain for gay men"(Roy).

The question thus arises as to how such inaccurate representations in Bollywood be overthrown. How would movies in a world of 3D or 2d screen, with only the viewers eyes be able to elaborate so much of what sexuality consists of ? It would be wrong to guess the sexuality of a character on their performances. Could there be in anyway a channel through which the true sexuality of a person could be conveyed to the viewer, is a question of much importance. With the limited knowledge of the viewer and the restricted representation of queers, how would Bollywood cinema then challenge or break this stereotype and be able to project the true sexuality of a character?

It is at this state that narratives come into the spotlight as a force that would truly and faithfully deliver the sexual identity of a person. Without the act of a person declaring his/her sexuality or elaborating his/her preference, it is only futile at the part of the viewers to derive in fact anything out of what they see and assume:

"As queer sexuality becomes impossible to elide or overlook at the start of the new millennium, two new currents begin to emerge. The first is the beginnings of a new queer cinema that displaces conventional cinematic codes of masculinity and femininity"(Ghosh, 2011). Recent queer interventions in cinema has further complicated the process of understanding queer identities. Ghosh (2011) opines that movies like 'My Brother Nikhil' breaks new grounds by featuring a queer protagonist "and reimagining new gender and sexual identities, plunging heterosexual masculinity into a state of profound flux, thereby reshaping conventional notions of manhood and male desire". The protagonist in 'Kapoor and Sons' for instance, does not perform the stereotyped role of a gay until the end when he comes out to his family. Other movies like 'My brother Nikhil' and 'Aligarh' represents the gay characters who dress, act and talk conforming to heterosexuality.

'Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga' keeps us captivated and fixed to the hero and the heroine's story. A viewer who had never heard or never watched the trailer of this movie would be taken aback by a sudden change in the narrative which distorts the usual progress of a Bollywood movie. Initially the viewers would believe the story to be about a love story between a man and a woman, and they must have waited for the next big event- for the heroine to fall in love with the ever pursuing hero. But things take a turn only upon the declaration of the heroine to the hero that she is in love with her own kind. This jolts the viewers for a moment with the least expected trajectory. The viewers are not prepared for this revelation. A gradual hint like seeing the heroine with short hair or wearing pants would have been enough.

The traditional approach of a viewer with a cue as to what is going to happen in the theatre is now at this point destroyed. In no way can he/she depend on what is being shown on the screen, because the truth might be right there behind a gossamer screen. Therefore, subtle queer representations need derivatory understanding of queer complexities and requires subversion of heteronormative gaze.

Devdutt Pattanaik offers the following lines in his book 'Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You'-

"I have a man's body, I accept this body. I offer it to everyone.

I have a woman's body. I accept this body. I offer it to everyone.

I have a man's body. I reject this body. I desire no one.

I have a woman's body. I reject this body. I desire no one.

I don't know if my body is a woman's or a man's . I feel I am a woman.

I don't know if my body is a man's or a woman's. I feel I am a man.

I have a man's body. It should be a woman's. I desire men.

I have a woman's body. It should be a man's. I desire women.

I have a man's body. I dress like a woman. I desire women.

I have a woman's body. I dress like a man. I desire men.

I have a man's body. I dress like a man. I desire both men and women.

I have a woman's body. I dress like a woman. I desire both women and men.

I have a man's body. I dress like a man. I desire men.

I have a woman's body. I dress like a woman. I desire women.

I have a man's body. I dress like a man. I desire women.

I have a woman's body. I dress like a woman. I desire men.

I am a man. I desire only one woman.

I am a woman. I desire only one woman.

I am neither male nor female.

I am both male and female.

I am firm and flexible.

I am aware and I am not.

To appreciate this fluidity of nature

And the shifting rigidities of culture

Is to appreciate queerness."

Like Devdutt Pattnaik's elaborate insight into various sexual identities quoted above, there could be more. Perhaps it would in fact, be folly on the part of the consumers and the viewers to classify and categorize them at all into the few restricted gender groups that we are aware of. And Bollywood movies had actually been, if at all, able to show only a miniscule of these various sexual identities.

Conclusion

It would be proper to state at this point that Bollywood has not been able to expansively incorporate all gender and sexuality at the present time. Perhaps a larger inclusivity could in the future be achieved by gradually breaking the stereotypes about gender and sexuality — such as the consistent representation of trans and gay men for comic purposes. The projection of queer characters would need a drastic update from one that is ignorantly misleading to something that probes deeper into knowledge about queer. This would prepare viewers and people to be accepting of queerness in any form it is presented. Another way of tackling the issue of queer representations could be best done by acknowledging that queerness exists in all cultures. Specifically in India, the inaccurate belief among the larger population that queer is an effect of colonial intervention needs to be resolved and the fact that queerness has been present since pre-colonial era in India requires to be disseminated in narratives.

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