



Streaming Sexualities: The Changing Face of Gay Masculinity in Hindi Media.

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Abstract: *The paper analyses the changed sensibility in representing gay men, their masculinity and sexuality in recent Hindi films/series. It closely reads the visual texts Aligarh (2016), Kapoor & Sons (2016), Made in Heaven (2019), and Badhaai Do (2022) to see the shifts in the portrayal of gay masculinity and sexuality in the popular/mainstream Hindi media. It analyses the role of decriminalisation of homosexuality together with exposure to global visual content through improved internet access and coming in of Over The Top (OTT) platforms behind the break away from stereotypes to a realistic portrayal of gay masculinity in Hindi films. It does a detailed textual analysis of select films to show the new sensitivity in representing gay masculinity and sexuality in contemporary films and highlights the possibilities for an egalitarian existence the films as political texts open up for the gay community in India.*

Keywords: *Masculinity, Gay Masculinity, Homosexuality, Hindi Cinema, OTT*

Introduction

This year, Jane Campion has won the Best Director awards at the Oscars, BAFTA, Golden Globes, and Venice International Film Festival (among others) for the film *The Power of the Dog* (2021). These honours not only recognise a great film and the art of craftsmanship behind it but also indicate the changing landscape

of media consumption—the power of streaming platforms and the globalisation of the notions regarding masculinity. The film is a vivid and nuanced look at toxic masculinity through the eyes of the female auteur, and it was released on Netflix. The globalisation of cultural content after the easy availability of the internet and the decriminalisation of homosexuality has flourished refreshingly on the Indian cultural front. The changed consumption patterns and awareness about different identities are visible in the Indian media too.

Hollywood was for quite some time delving into the spectrum of masculinities, many of which focus on the masculinity of gay men. There were celebrated gay representations in *Moonlight* (2016), *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), *Love, Simon* (2018), and *The Power of the Dog* (2021), among others. Previously, in Indian films, masculinity was represented only by the hegemonic masculine figures and their allies; subordinated and marginalised masculine characters were there, but mostly for the sake of comic relief or as a foil to the hegemonic protagonist. In the last decade, a number of optimistic and fresher takes on masculinity are visible in the Indian cultural sphere with the boom of Over The Top (OTT) services, which provided exposure to content of the world and also produced content on contested subjects like masculinity and homosexuality. OTT created a new set of a young generation of audiences in India who have global exposure and thus are open to different gender and sexual identities. In a significant sense it was also a response to the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Following the Supreme Court judgement of 2018, Bollywood celebrated with *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* in 2019 and

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan in 2020, both of which were publicised as the first open romance between homosexuals—lesbians and gays respectively. Homosexual representations of women are also recognisable in recent times, but in the context of India, that is quite different from that of gay men and needs a detailed discussion which is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper only focuses on the construction of gay masculinity in recent Indian films/series by pointing out the changes in depictions of gay men on screen; and how these changes became possible with the globalisation of screen content and the reading down of Section 377 of the IPC. The paper looks into the representations of four visual contents in Hindi—of which three are popular feature films and one is a web series, namely *Aligarh* (2015), *Kapoor & Sons* (2016), *Made in Heaven* (2019) (series), and *Badhaai Do* (2022) to highlight how the new representations of gay men are constructing and deconstructing the notions regarding homosexuality as well as masculinity. In the selected films, unlike earlier ones, representations of gay masculinities can be identified as points of departure that blur the boundaries of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities. The paper will analyse the shifts in the portrayal of gay sexuality and masculinity in the films. It also argues that these texts problematise the mere labelling of gender/sexual categories instead of understanding them within the larger context of human love, emotion and desire.

Homosexuality, History, and Cinematic Conventions in India

Historically it can be said that there was much fluidity regarding the notions of gender, sexual identities and body in India (see for e.g. Vanita and Kidwai 2021). Nivedita Menon claims:

“Neither prior to the sixteenth century in Europe, nor until the early nineteenth century in India, was it self-evident that bodies are naturally entirely one sex or another, that hermaphroditism is a disease, or that desire naturally flows only between different sexes” (Menon 2011). This is also evident in mythologies, scriptures, and classical literature. The categorisation and discrimination against LGBTQ came with the “civilizing mission” of the British and later enforced with their Victorian morality (Nandy 2001). The provision regarding homosexuality was introduced by the British Raj in 1862 as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. It functioned as the legal impetus behind the criminalisation of what was referred to as “unnatural offences” throughout the various colonies, in several cases with the same section number. On 6th September 2018, the Supreme Court’s decision to decriminalise all sexual conduct between consensual adults was, therefore, a historical moment for India and human rights.

On the other hand, films, or moving images, are invented and popularised in the Western world first; then, they are imported to the colonies. After the Independence, in India films became the instrument to depict the national conscience as well as the future trajectory of the nation. There were, and still are, regional films in Indian languages other than Hindi, but it is Bollywood—the fancy name of the Bombay film industry—that was used to connect with the nationwide audience in the rise of nationalism for a long time. Ruth Vanita writes, “Bombay cinema, although in Hindi, represents perhaps the closest thing to an all-India cultural language that exists today” (Vanita 2005). Bollywood got not only the name but also some modular forms for plots, stereotypes of characters, filming

techniques and camera angles influenced by the big brother Hollywood. But the handling of the story was done with keeping in mind Indian sensibilities and national political ambitions, and thereby, to some extent, the “all-India cultural language” was maintained (Vanita 2005). But, this cultural production machinery also could not escape the claws of capitalism. Like every other capitalist venture, with the aim of maximising profit, Bollywood also started to mould the available cinematic forms and narrative techniques. One can say that for a long period of time, the film industry was catering to Indian middle class or upper middle class moral sensibility and existing belief system. For box office success, it represented gender and sexuality in such a way that will not challenge or disturb the stereotypical assumptions regarding it among the middle class family audience. This resulted in cinematic discrimination of non-heteronormative identities, which, in turn, influenced the social marginalisation of them to a great extent. They were represented monotonously as the ‘other’ only to satisfy the social heteronormativity and the hypermasculine gaze.

Gay Masculinity and Bollywood

The concept of masculinities is postulated in the works of R.W. Connell. Connell mingles the findings of Gilbert Herdt and Kimmel & Messner to propose that at any point in time, in any given society, there are multiple masculinities. Among these multiple masculinities, the place of gay men is generally at the bottom with their subordinated masculinity (Connell 1992). This subordinate masculinity is the form of masculinity ascribed to men who exhibit qualities that are opposite to those valued in hegemonic masculinity. These men are marked by their sensitiveness,

expression of emotions, vulnerability, physical weakness, etc. Gay men or others with effeminate traits fall under this category. “To many people, homosexuality is a negation of masculinity, and homosexual men must be effeminate” (Connell 1992). But this masculinity also has the flip side in the way in which gay men view their own masculinity. As Vasu Reddy puts it, “Gay masculinity hints at a collection of ideas, attitudes, and assumptions which culturally determine the way gay men view themselves as men” (Reddy 1998). In the context of India and the cultural production in Hindi, this gay masculinity is changing with recent takes where they are not in others’ narratives; rather others are in their narratives.

The Indian film industry is the highest producer of films in the world per year. Yet not a significant portion of that mentions gay characters. The stereotypes of characters—heroes, anti-heroes, heroines, villains—modified with time except that for the LGBTQ. From the advent of Indian films, or Bollywood in particular, till now, queer Indians have been represented in the same way, with some exceptions, most of which are Indian but not Bollywood in terms of production. There are instances of homosocial love and male-bonding in the 1970s and 1980s’ Bollywood. Films like *Dosti* (1964), *Anand* (1971), *Sholay* (1975), *Dostana* (1980), and *Main Khiladi, Tu Anari* (1994), among others, are definitive proof of that; but never was a gay hero or protagonist. Even in iconic Hindi movies such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), the only purpose of Kanta Bai was to show homophobia over the slight insinuation that Rohit (Saif Ali Khan) was gay. Some sympathetic depiction was there, for instance, *Bomgay* (1996), *Bombay Boys* (1998), *Mango Soufflé*

(2002) etc., but those are very early attempts, and most of them cannot be called products of mainstream Bollywood. The contribution of film director Onir (1969-) to Indian queer films must be noted. Anna MM Vetticad, the author of *The Adventures of an Intrepid Film Critic*, tells BBC Culture: “From historically, routinely using LGBT+ characters as targets of contempt or sources of amusement, Bollywood has come to a stage when, although there are very few representations, those that we do get are usually less othered and less caricatured than in earlier times” (Mirza 2020). She points to Onir’s *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) and *I Am* (2011) as examples of films that have treated the subject sensitively (Mirza 2020). These films were critical successes but commercial failures, and they were not released in the number of theatres as a mainstream Bollywood film would get. Some films by director Madhur Bhandarkar (1968-) also include gay characters in the subplots. But these are ambiguous characters with no arc. Like Rahul Arora (Samir Soni) in *Fashion* (2008), they all are deviant, deprived, and depressed underneath.

Gays in Hindi films were primarily used for comic relief, where the humour aroused with either their peculiar effeminate gestures or their getting slapped, kicked, and mocked. In the 1990s, they were represented with feminine traits only to compare and contrast the hyper-masculine hero—the laughingstock and the standard of society. Their masculinity lay on their non-muscular physique and effeminacy. This is also because the people associated with the films and the audience were also casual in imagining the ‘other,’ here the subordinated masculinities of gay men. “The stereotypes portrayed on-screen were then perpetuated by the people

watching it (Lakhani 2022).” The typical swing-in-the-hip walk; lip biting; heavy eyes; dresses of pink, floral, or vibrant rainbow; accessories; the distinct and apparent gay accent; over-emotional in the little things—all these mannerisms constructed the image of a gay man in films. They are offered the same old jobs, mostly dance teachers and fashion designers. Gayatri Gopinath takes the character Pinkoo (Anupam Kher) from the film *Mast Kalandar* (1991) to elaborate on this stereotype: “the Pinkoo 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” (Gopinath 2000). From these stereotypes to the appearance of gay men as the lead role—or the hero—the journey is an endeavour that is the cumulation of legal, social, cultural, and technological involvements.

The male hero in Bollywood has a complex historical construction which is never static. With his physique, attitude and ideology, the hero is presented normatively as the ideal which is “symbolically aligned with the changing aspirations of the nation” (Mubarki 2018). There was no space for gay masculinities in Bollywood except for comic relief. In November 2008, *Dostana* became the first commercial Bollywood movie with a plotcentred on gay masculinity. After *Dostana* (2008), the mainstreamisation of gays started in Bollywood, but “while mainstream films are now able to foreground homosexual desire, they do this through an erasure of the female” (Srinivasan 2014). There were shortcomings and just a few representations of gay men in Bollywood during this period until the internet and OTT boom. *Dostana* “did more damage than good” (Lakhani 2022); all the good is that it made

way for big studios to invest in LGBTQ narratives a little smoother. There was nothing radical about *Dostana*: two young men pretend to be gay in order to live with a young woman reluctant to let out rooms to men (Srinivasan 2014). They carry on the act until the very end, even become “officially” gay to get residency permits in the state of Florida, USA. In contrast, *Straight: Pinu Patel ki Tedhi Medhi Love Story* (2009) “seriously considers the possibility of a homosexual relationship—complete with sexual arousal and bitter jealousy” (Srinivasan 2014). The film lays bare “the anxiety, tension, curiosity, social pressure, and the existential crisis one goes through when one is realising that one is gay” (Bansal 2018). Srinivasan discusses in detail how *Dostana* marks a cynical appropriation of an increasingly public discourse on sexuality for comic purpose, while *Straight* is a brave exploration of what it means to be gay, who is really gay or, more accurately, who is not? (Srinivasan 2014). But, ultimately, in a kind of anti-climax, Pinu (Vinay Pathak) finds out that he is not gay, which proves that though attempts were being made, Bollywood was not brave yet to show a homosexual ending. *Dostana* also concretises the gay stereotype with the character of M (Boman Irani), who is the only homosexual character in the film; Sam (Abhishek Bachchan) also carries the typical signifiers like pink apparel, a rainbow coloured gloves (in Miami summer) and other accessories just for the sake of presenting as gay. This is the prevailed stereotype that is evident in the films of this period: several characters by Suresh Menon, like in *Partner* (2007), *Mastizaade* (2016) etc.; Rishi Kapoor in *Student of the Year* (2012); Abhishek Bachchan in *Bol Bachchan* (2016); Akshay Kumar in *Dishoom* (2016) etc. carry the pieces of evidence.

In one telling scene in *Dostana*, when Sam's mother (Kirron Kher) tries to imagine her son in a relationship, she sees Sam and Kunal dressed as bride and groom, and bursts into tears. This scene is significant because here the mother is unable to imagine both of them as grooms in *sherwanis*. Instead, she draws up one dressed up as a man and another as a woman in a *lehenga*. This scene indicates how the social psyche struggled to accept a homosexual relationship and also how Bollywood has struggled to put a faithful representation on screen. What *Dostana* actually did was that it brought the gay narratives into mainstream Bollywood. Pramesh Sahani, author of *Queeristan* (2020), sums up the effect of *Dostana*, which is "... at a text level, is obviously homophobic, and had a lot of issues. On the other hand, the mother, Kirron Kher's journey was a masterful stroke; it was a fully fleshed-out narrative. Importantly, the film was used by the queer community to come out to our families—we didn't have the language for it before that" (Mirza 2020). From *Dostana* (2008) to *Badhaai Do* (2022), the journey was an impactful one which witnessed the decriminalisation of homosexuality, and the role of OTT behind it is undeniable.

OTT Boom and Exposure to Global Contents on Sexualities

In recent years homosexuality received unprecedented visibility in the global cultural arena and production. Hollywood and other film industries worldwide have produced celebrated and nuanced looks at non-heteronormative relationships. From the French period piece *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) to the children's animated *The Mitchells vs. the Machines* (2021), queer characters are getting positive recognition which normalises their

presence on screen as well as in society. The big film festivals and award ceremonies, to some extent, are also responsible for this outcome by recognising both LGBTQ characters and LGBTQ actors. But, Bollywood is absent in these global arenas of recognition and the mass audience also does not follow the international festivals like Cannes or Venice. Here comes the role of the smartphone revolution, the internet and globalisation in the means to access global content. The free internet facility at a comparatively affordable rate for the middle class in India was a game-changer in terms of accessing global video contents. YouTube became freely available for most mobile phone users. Hotstar launched in India in 2015 with the primary aim of streaming live sports, and evolved to include other contents and release of films. After Jio's launch (of internet and broadband services) in 2016, India saw the quick coming in of streaming giants like Netflix and Amazon Prime within the next few months. These platforms connected the young Indian audience with the global cultural productions. The more they consumed global content, the more they got acquainted with the contemporary global attitude towards notions regarding gender and sexuality. This resulted in the liberal outlook towards non-heteronormativity in at least a small section of the society and the subsequent reflection of the same in screen contents produced within India. In November 2015, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) censored the kissing scenes from *Spectre* (2015), a film of the James Bond franchise. Just a few months later, streaming platforms like Amazon Prime made a bunch of uncensored content available to audiences which were previously handled by the CBFC in a ruthless manner. An OTT platform does not require a CBFC approval and the provisions of the

Cinematograph Act, 1952. The provisions of the Act are primarily applicable to those films that are shown in theatres and not applicable to the ones which are transmitted through the medium of the internet. Any certifications of a film by CBFC do not apply to the contents streamed on OTT platforms. Recently, the Government of India has released Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, which will restrict and censor content on the OTT platforms, but the effect that is already there is irreversible.

For the last few years, the successful Hollywood trope has been to foreground the counter-discourses. Since 2015, the queer counter-discourse has flourished in *Carol* (2015), *Tangerine* (2015), *The Danish Girl* (2015), *Moonlight* (2016), *Battle of the Sexes* (2017), *Call Me by Your Name* (2017), *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *Boy Erased* (2018), *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018), *Love, Simon* (2018), *The Favourite* (2019), *Happiest Season* (2020), *Uncle Frank* (2020), and others. This is also visible in the numerous original series that are available to the world through OTT streaming. Be it the fluid ideas about sexuality and sexual orientation in *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), depiction of queer women of colour in *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-2019), questioning of sexuality through humour in *Schitt's Creek* (2015-2020), the sensibility of queer identity in *Glow* (2017-2019), the drag subculture in *Pose* (2018-2021), the lesbian literary icon in *Dickinson* (2019-2021), spy romance from a lesbian perspective in *Killing Eve* (2018-2022), or straightforward contemporary teenage problems in *Sex Education* (2019-2021)—all bring the queer characters in their main plot and treat them with

empathy which provide a counter-narrative to the hegemonic heteronormativity. In the light of OTT, India's LGBTQ struggle and people who identify themselves among this minority spectrum got a new scope to relate to and express themselves and their desires. The Indian youth also got these afore-mentioned contents to consume, which look more modern, authentic, aesthetically made, sensibly presented, and often assign the question regarding sexuality to the fundamental question of privacy and human rights. The new creators and directors are also using the universal and raw approach of the Hollywood productions while keeping the Indian peculiarities in mind.

Changing Face of Gay Masculinity in Hindi Media

With the coming of OTT streaming platforms and a broader approach among the audience, a space for LGBTQ narratives flourished. Representations of Gay men became more frequent on screen without stereotyping and as human characters with their own existential struggles. The previous modes changed into a new perspective that focuses on their life struggle as a fight for fundamental human rights. This section of the paper will analyse the films/series *Aligarh* (2016), *Kapoor & Sons* (2016), *Made in Heaven* (2019) and *Badhaai Do* (2022) as representative visual cultural contents which show the changed sensibility in representing gay masculinity in Hindi cinema.

Director Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* (2016) is one of the milestone movies in Bollywood to depict homophobia. The film opens with the statutory: "Based on life events, modified by related media reports and legal proceedings." (The film was inspired by

the life events of Prof. Ramachandra Siras (1948-2010).) It is set in Aligarh in 2010. Therefore, it also mentions Section 377 of the IPC and the Delhi High Court judgement of 2009 which decriminalised homosexuality. Mehta handles both the story and the characters with such delicacy that the narrative questions the notions regarding the right to privacy, morality, and sexual preferences. 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. He is a simple man, aged, physically not strong; he does not get young generation man Dipu's (Rajkumar Rao) jokes. He loves Lata Mangeshkar and sings the old songs himself. He drinks alone, and when Dipu is there, he politely asks if he seems to be drunk. Only after Dipu's confirmation does he say that he will have another glass. He feels difficult to express his emotions both publicly and privately, which is perhaps because of the violation of his privacy by the homophobic society. To some extent, he feels embarrassed about his existence: "*Shadi shuda logon ke beech akela rehta hoon*" ("I am a bachelor amongst married people"). When he was made the chair of the Linguistics department of his university, some of his colleagues were jealous of him. He was threatened that he would not be in the position for long, and one week after that, he was filmed in his bedroom. This is proof that when they could not take him down in the public sphere, they made his private life public which reanimated the homophobic discrimination. Once his identity is exposed, he has to face a series of discriminations and humiliations. He thought of suicide when his electricity was cut down (to only four hours) by

the authority. At hospital the doctor refused to check him; the nurse and the compounder ignored him. During the court sessions, he often wanders on his own—thinking, translating his poem from Marathi into English for Dipu, and at times falls asleep. When every bigotry failed, his enemies within the university system poisoned him to death; he died one day before the court order reached his university to reinstate him.

The true inspiration behind the narrative (biography of Prof. Siras), Hansal Mehta's masterful directing, and Manoj Bajpayee's exquisite methodical portrayal ground the film as a cultural piece of strange reality. 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—here the film makes itself exceptional. In the film, the moment Bajpayee wins the empathy of the audience can be said to be when he is asked whether he is gay, and he replies: "*Koi mere feeling ko teen aksharo mein kaise samajh sakta hai?*" ("How can someone describe my feelings in three letters?") 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. The film is also not diffident to show human intimacy, but that never feels like scenes were inserted there; rather they are spontaneous. This type of realistic characterisation of gay masculinity, which earned Bajpayee the Filmfare Critics Awards for Best Actor, was not there in mainstream Hindi cinema.

In a contrasting way, Rahul (Fawad Khan) in *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) shows his masculinity by embracing life—his

privileged life. Like Siras, Rahul does not showcase any stereotypical effeminate gestures or caricatures. But, unlike Siras, his experience is not that of a semi-urban town. He lives in progressive London, whose colonial laws regarding sexuality are still in force in India (at the time of the film's release), but the British themselves have already gotten ahead by legalising intercourse between consenting adults irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender. In London, Rahul has a steady relationship with a man. For his mother, he creates a narrative—which comes easily to him being a writer himself—of having a girlfriend. Hence, Nick becomes Nicky. When asked about his plan of wedding and settling down, he completely avoids it. Even though somebody encountered modernity, Sunita struggles to accept her son's homosexuality. It is she who treated her son as “*mera perfect bachcha*.” Rahul is informed when Dadu gets sick, not Arjun; his room remains unchanged as he left it, not Arjun's; when they come home from abroad, Sunita makes *sokra* which Rahul loves but Arjun cannot stand. This parental favouritism made him on the one hand responsible and serious, and on the other hand, closeted. 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”). He can live with his partner freely in London, they can go to Hawaii on vacation, but when he comes to his roots, he knows about the homophobia even in his educated English-speaking family: “*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”).

Interestingly, as Siras resists labelling his experience, the film also never labels Rahul as ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual.’ Still, *Kapoor & Sons* is cannot be said to be a realistic portrayal of gay characterisation like *Aligarh*; it has its own shortcomings—Rahul’s (for long unrevealed) sexual identity is used for the sake of heightened tension and melodrama, and we also never come to know anything about his partner (except four photos in his laptop and that his name is probably Nick). Director Shakun Batra here focused on homophobia and anxiety resulting from that as a plot device, yet it presents a young urban experience in a humane way. The characterisation and masculinity of Rahul subvert previous iterations of gay men in commercial and mainstream Hindi films. He is out-and-out a serious character with good looks, education, and a successful carrier. The film is produced by the big banner of Dharma Productions and presented as a family drama with vibrant cinematography. With people-pulling artists like Fawad Khan, Siddharth Malhotra, Alia Bhatt, Rishi Kapoor, Rajat Kapoor, and Ratna Pathak, this family drama commercially succeeded and became a conversation-starter. What started with *Dostana*—mainstreamisation of homosexuality on screen—gets a more wholesome treatment here.

Representation of homosexual life of privilege can be seen in the series *Made in Heaven* (2019), created by Zoya Akhtar and

Reema Kagti and released on Amazon Prime. Here, the character of Karan Mehra (Arjun Mathur) is an urban and outgoing gay man who is closeted to his family. Like Siras and Rahul, Karan also does not showcase any of the tropes of gay men that are stereotypical on screen. He is sexually liberated, navigates the upper-middle-class gay circles of Delhi easily, and casually engages in one-night stands. He works as a wedding planner; thereby, he knows the society's standards to some extent; his privileged background also makes it possible to know about the legal boundaries (the show is set in 2016-17—before the reading down of Section 377). Still, the anxiety of homophobia is clearly seen in Karan despite his easy and confident access to partners. In one scene, there is a mention of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912) which is “*about this older man who gets so obsessed by the beauty of this young boy that it destroys him.*” When Mitali, the landlord's daughter, says this to Karan, he is already concerned, and when she says that he will love the novella, Karan is already trying to hide the anxiety. The series also avoids the ‘gay best-friend’ trope: “Karan and Tara share an incredibly nuanced relationship. They're both best friends and business partners, and throughout the series, we watch their relationship develop and evolve in countless ways” (Shukla 2019).

Made in Heaven uses its scope as a series to present a more nuanced look at gay men's lives. Karan's teenage years are shown in flashbacks—his basketball team, his relationship with Nawab, and also his betrayal. He betrays and exposes Nawab to come out as a straight himself, to save himself from the impending discrimination for being a “homo” by his teammates. But this

anxiety is instilled in him by Devyani, his mother, to whom homosexuality is a disease, a “*bimari*.” When they were caught by Devyani while taking a bath together, she beat him up ruthlessly with a cricket bat and broke his hand so that he could not play basketball anymore. It was also she who instructed him to not tell his father about this or he would kill him. But surprisingly, Karan’s father, who does not have so smooth a relationship with him (for financial reasons), supports Karan in the media: “*Karan is my son. No matter what you people think, no matter what the law thinks, he has done no wrong in my eyes.*” After that acceptance from his father, he opens up about his struggle and how his mother has a significant role in internalising and implementing the homophobia in him. Just like Rahul, he also breaks down and says he cannot keep up the acting anymore. Homophobia is presented through the figure of the landlady Renu Gupta too. When she accidentally saw Karan intimate with a man (through the secret CCTV her husband installed in his bedroom), she washes her hands like a maniac as if it is some virus that can be spread by even witnessing it. She pushes her husband Ramesh to sue Karan: “*Who toh ek number ka homo hain na, jail to usko honi hi chahiye*” (“He’s such a homo, I’m glad he’s finally behind the bars”).

Much like Siras’ incident in *Aligarh*, in a private moment, Karan is too filmed by his landlord. In both incidents, their privacy is violated despite their well to do education, class background, living place and livelihood. Like Siras’ small town Aligarh, Karan’s liberal metro city Delhi too becomes discriminatory, abusive, and conservative. Ramesh Gupta (Vinay Pathak), the landlord, is a closeted gay man with a wife and a daughter. After he suspects

Karan of being gay, he secretly installs a CCTV camera in Karan's bedroom and keeps watching him voyeuristically until he is caught by his wife. In one scene, he is also seen masturbating while watching Karan's intimacy. To get himself out of the embarrassing situation and his wife's suspicions, Ramesh takes the footage to the police. Afterwards, he apologises to Karan and comes out to him by saying that not everyone is as brave, modern, and lucky as Karan to live with their own choices. Just like the closeted landlord, another male character, who was one among Karan's numerous one-night-stand partners later on in the narrative gets married to Karan's friend. Even after his engagement, he tries to be intimate again with Karan. These male characters thus represent a number of closeted gays who choose to or have to live their heterosexual lives just to avoid social and familial discrimination.

Karan has to face social, physical and sexual abuse for his sexual orientation; the police arrest him forcefully under Section 377. In 2017, homosexuality was a non-bailable offence in India. In jail, Karan is asked to sexually satisfy one drunk police officer. When he rejects his advances, the officer abuses him physically and makes the news public and scandalous. Afterwards, Karan files a Public Interest Litigation against Section 377 and becomes vocal about the concerns of privacy and equality for the homosexual population. Karan's masculinity lies in his confidence, his handling of situations, his respect for others' emotions, and his clear conscience. He can never forgive himself for the wrong he has done to Nawab, and that is the sole reason he is not happy with anyone else. When one of his friends requests Karan to come to America with him for there they can be free from the social stigmas, he respectfully denies it. He knows his reality is rooted here; he

cannot escape that, and also, he cannot believe that he will not hurt his partner after what he has done to Nawab. Thus, *Made in Heaven* “constantly challenges the norms of love, relationships and marriage, but they seal the deal with their conversations on sexuality. The coming-out sequences are as gut-wrenching as they are heart-warming, and while his small talk with his various paramours makes for great television, it’s Karan’s final conversation with his closeted landlord that steals the (wedding) cake” (Mahale 2019).

Badhaai Do (2022), directed by Harshvardhan Kulkarni, presents the contemporary situation of homosexuals in India more dramatically by making the gay hero a policeman and placing his family in one of the most conservative locations in India. However, the traditional Hindu family even considers allowing their son to knot ties with a Muslim family as he is not accepting any of the marriage proposals given continuously by the family. This is significant because, on one hand, the family is progressive enough to allow an inter-community marriage in a state where honour killings are a reality, while on the other, it shows that discrimination on the basis of sexuality sometimes cuts deeper than that of caste and class. Starring Rajkumar Rao in his third film about homosexual experiences (after *Aligarh* and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*) and Bhumi Pandekar, this film is unique in showing how the social stigma and familial hypocrisy can push a gay and a lesbian into a *lavender marriage*—(It is a marriage of convenience between man and woman with mixed sexual orientation done to hide the socially stigmatised sexual orientation (usually homosexuality) of one or both partners.) just to get their families

off their back, and that too is well presented in the comedy-drama package. While some audiences feel that showing lavender marriage feels a bit dated already in post-377 India, for some it is an empathetic, sensitive and realistic portrayal of the contemporary situation of homosexuals in India (Rampal 2022).

The character of Shardul (Rajkummar Rao), like previously discussed instances of Siras, Rahul, and Karan, also does not showcase any stereotypical gay traits. His masculinity is clearly not subordinate like Siras, but rather hypermasculine which challenges the stereotypes of gay men as weak and effeminate. He is a realist; he is aware that he is not a gay man in the eyes of the outside world. He is muscular and maintains an identity in society not based on his sexual orientation; no one can even guess anything from his appearance, gestures, or attitude. But his physique and identity as a law enforcer cannot help him in finding a suitable and faithful partner for a long time. Being a policeman, along with his conservative family makes it difficult for him to come out of the closet. But by making the gay hero a policeman, the film made it possible to show “the inherent role privilege plays even within the queer community” (Mishra 2022). In a heart-wrenching scene, Shardul becomes vulnerable in front of Suman to tell his story and struggle. He mentions how bodybuilding has always been an inherent ingredient in shaping his identity. He also admits that he’s more scared of the police than most criminals are. But he enacts a totally different view towards homosexuality in public when he is wearing his uniform. This indicates how he has embodied social heteronormativity and the anxiety of homophobia is instilled in him too. One reviewer of the film correctly points out that an “... aspect

of Shardul's hypermasculinity is seemingly a manifestation of internalised homophobia" (Mishra 2022). Homophobia is presented through some of the members of the Thakur family as well as the Singh family. The coming out scenes can be said to be portrayed realistically. Like Siras, Shardul is also not spontaneous in labelling his desire and sexuality: "... *Gay, homo, samalaingik jo bhi bulaana hain aapko, hum bhi who hain*" ("... Gay, homo, homosexual whatever you want to call it, I'm that as well"). In this way, Shardul portrays a masculinity that is outwardly hypermasculine and inwardly closeted.

In the last decade, Bollywood embraced the rainbow flag in its own way. In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), Kartik (Ayushmann Khurrana) wears the rainbow flag and shouts into a megaphone that his partner's father (Gajraj Rao) suffers from homophobia, in *Aligarh* and *Made in Heaven* too footages of pride marches are used. But perhaps the most significant sequence with the rainbow flag in the history of Bollywood is the pride parade in *Badhaai Do*, which is also a pivotal point in the plot. It contrasts the queer liberty and the police hypervigilance; also in this scene, Shardul gathers the courage to show his happiness to the world and embrace the community—to come out of the closet. The pride parade, accompanied by the fitting song, ends with a long shot of a placard in focus: "Legalise adoption for gays and lesbians." Thus, the film, in a sense shows the courage to plunge deeper into futuristic questions like parenthood for homosexuals. It is true that without an *Aligarh* or a *Kapoor & Sons*, a film like *Badhaai Do* which can engage its viewers with the notions of marriage and parenthood of gay men would have taken much more time to come to the Hindi mainstream cinema.

Conclusion

In an interview to the Reuters, Hitesh Kewalya, director of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, said that “The point was not being apologetic about [gay love]; not depicting it as a problem, not taking it as a disease, ... Our industry, unfortunately, has survived on stereotypes ... and I didn’t want to do that. That was my biggest responsibility” (Banerji 2020). This is true for all the directors and writers involved in these films and series. In all the films/series discussed in this paper, the characters come out of the closet only when there is some violation of their privacy, whether deliberately or accidentally. Their struggle and anxiety about their sexual identity are more concerned with the acceptance from the close ones—the family more than the society at large. One can say that the exposure to international media content and global film viewing practices, especially after the OTT boom from 2015 onwards, created at least a section of young Hindi audience who are open to or evolved enough to watch faithful homosexual representations where the narrative treats such experiences as the main plot and not a comic relief or cameo. The decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018 also pushed positive and open representations of gay men in mainstream Bollywood. As discussed, the Hindi films and series of contemporary India began to highlight the new signifiers of gay masculinity that often resist labels. These new gay characters have no traces of the previous stereotypes that prevailed in Bollywood; even they take chances to challenge and subvert those. The directors and producers of the visual cultural content discussed here, following the footsteps of Hollywood and other productions around the world, also involved queer script and screen consultants (who

have previously worked on queer narratives) to be more authentic in the portrayal (Sharma2022). Manish Gaekwad is the consultant for *Badhaai Do*, Apurva Asrani has overseen *Made in Heaven* and is the writer and editor of *Aligarh*. In this way, with the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the internet and OTT boom and subsequent globalisation of visual cultural content, representation of gay masculinity is changing for good, and such representations are influencing the social perception about gay men and making their way into the mainstream discourse smoother than before.

Bionote

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Filmography

Aligarh. Directed by Hansal Mehta, performances by Manoj Bajpayee, and Rajkummar Rao. Eros Entertainment, 2016.

Anand. Directed by Hrishikesh Mukherjee, performances by Rajesh Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan, and Sumita Sanyal. Rupam Chitra, 1971.

Badhaai Do. Directed by Harshvardhan Kulkarni, performances by Rajkummar Rao, and Bhumi Pandekar. Junglee Pictures, 2022.

Battle of the Sexes. Directed by Jonathan Dayton, and Valerie Faris, performances by Emma Stone, Steve Carrell, and Andrea Riseborough. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

- Bohemian Rhapsody*. Directed by Brian Singer, performances by Rami Malek, Gwilym Lee, Ben Hardy, and Joseph Mazzello. 20th Century Fox, 2018.
- Bol Bachchan*. Directed by Rohit Shetty, performances by Ajay Devgn, Abhishek Bachchan, Asin Thottumkal, and Prachi Desai. Ajay Devgn FFilms, 2012.
- Bombay Boys*. Directed by Kaizad Gustad, performances by Rahul Bose, Naveen Andrews, Alexander Gifford, and Naseeruddin Shah. Kismet Talkies, 1998.
- Bomgay*. Directed by Riyad Vinci Wadia, performances by Rahul Bose, Kushal Punjabi, and R. Raj Rao. Wadia Movietone, 1996.
- Boy Erased*. Directed by Joel Edgerton, performances by Lucas Hedges, Nicole Kidman, Russell Crowe, and Joel Edgerton. Focus Features, 2018.
- Call Me by Your Name*. Directed by Luca Guadagnino, performances by Armie Hammer, and Timothée Chalamet. Sony Pictures Classics, 2017.
- Can You Ever Forgive Me?* Directed by Marielle Heller, performances by Melissa McCarthy, and Richard E. Grant. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.
- Carol*. Directed by Todd Haynes, performances by Cate Blanchett, Rooney Mara, and Sarah Paulson. StudioCanal, 2015.
- Dickinson*. Created by Alena Smith, performances by Hailee Steinfeld, Adrian Enscoe, Anna Baryshnikov, and Jane Krakowski. Anonymous Content, 2019–2021.

Dishoom. Directed by Rohit Dhawan, performances by John Abraham, Varun Dhawan, Jacqueline Fernandez, and Saqib Saleem. Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment, 2016.

Dostana. Directed by Raj Khosla, performances by Amitabh Bachchan, Shatrughan Sinha, Zeenat Aman, and Amrish Puri. Dharma Productions, 1980.

Dostana. Directed by Tarun Mansukhani, performances by Abhishek Bachchan, John Abraham, and Priyanka Chopra. Dharma Productions, 2008.

Dosti. Directed by Satyen Bose, performances by Sudhir Kumar, Sushil Kumar, and Sanjay Khan. Rajshri Productions, 1964.

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga. Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar, performances by Sonam Kapoor, Rajkummar Rao, and Anil Kapoor. Vinod Chopra Films, 2019.

Fashion. Directed by Madhur Bhandarkar, performances by Priyanka Chopra, Kangana Ranaut, Mugdha Godse, and Samir Soni. UTV Motion Pictures, 2008.

Game of Thrones. Created by David Benioff, and D.B. Weiss, performances by Emilia Clarke, Peter Dinklage, Kit Harrington, and Lena Heady. HBO, 2011–2019.

Glow. Created by Liz Flahive, and Carly Mensch, performances by Alison Brie, Marc Maron, Britt Baron, and Betty Gilpin. Tilted Productions, 2017–2019.

Happiest Season. Directed by Clea DuVall, performances by Kristen Stuart, Mackenzie Davis, Alison Brie, Dan Levy, and Aubrey Plaza. TriStar Pictures, 2020.

I Am. Directed by Onir, performances by Arjun Mathur, Rahul Bose, Sanjay Suri, and Radhika Apte. Anticlock Films, 2010.

Kal Ho Naa Ho. Directed by Nikhil Advani, performances by Shah Rukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan, Preity Zinta, and Jaya Bachchan. Dharma Productions, 2003.

Kapoor & Sons. Directed by Shakun Batra, performances by Fawad Khan, Siddharth Malhotra, Rishi Kapoor, Rajat Kapoor, and Ratna Pathak Shah. Dharma Productions, 2016.

Killing Eve. Created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, performances by Jodie Comer, Sandra Oh, Fiona Shaw, and Kim Bodnia. BBC America, 2018–2022.

Love, Simon. Directed by Greg Barlanti, performances by Nick Robinson, Josh Duhamel, and Jennifer Garner. 20th Century Fox, 2018.

Made in Heaven. Created by Zoya Akhtar, and Reema Kagti, performances by Arjun Mathur, Sobhita Dhulipala, Jim Sarbh, Vinay Pathak, and Ayesha Raza. Excel Entertainment, Amazon Prime Release, 2019. (Web Series)

Main Khiladi, Tu Anari. Directed by Sameer Malkan, performances by Akshay Kumar, Saif Ali Khan, Shilpa Shetty, and Shakti Kapoor. Venus Movies, 1994.

Mango Soufflé. Directed by Mahesh Dattani, performances by Rinke Khanna, Ankur Vikal, and Atul Kulkarni. Lotus Piktures, 2002.

Mast Kalandar. Directed by Rahul Rawail. Performances by Dharmendra, Dimple Kapadia, Shammi Kapoor, Amrish Puri, and Anupam Kher. Rahul Theatre, 1991.

Mastizaade. Directed by Milap Milan Zaveri, performances by Tusshar Kapoor, Vir Das, Sunny Leone, and Suresh Menon. PNC Productions, 2016.

Moonlight. Directed by Barry Jenkins, performances by Trevante Rhodes, Ashton Sanders, Jharrel Jerome, Naomie Harris, and Mahershala Ali. A24, 2016.

My Brother Nikhil. Directed by Onir, performances by Sanjay Suri, Juhi Chawla, Victor Banerjee, and Lilette Dubey. Yash Raj Films, 2005.

Orange is the New Black. Created by Jenji Kohan, performances by Taylor Schilling, Danielle Brooks, Taryn Manning, and Kate Mulgrew. Tilted Productions, 2013–2019.

Partner. Directed by David Dhawan, performances by Salman Khan, Govinda, Lara Dutta, and Katrina Kaif. K Sera Sera Private Limited, 2007.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire. Directed by Céline Sciamma, performances by Noémie Merlant, and Adèle Haenel. Arte, 2019.

Pose. Created by Steven Canals, Brad Falchuk, and Ryan Murphy, performances by MJ Rodriguez, Dominique Jackson, and Billy Porter. Color Force, 2018–2021.

Schitt's Creek. Created by Dan Levy, and Eugene Levy, performances by Eugene Levy, Catherine O'Hara, Dan Levy, and Annie Murphy. CBC, 2015–2020.

Sex Education. Created by Laurie Nunn, performances by Asa Butterfield, Gillian Anderson, Emma Mackey, and Ncuti Gatwa. Eleven, 2019–2020.

Sholay. Directed by Ramesh Sippy, performances by Sanjeev Kumar, Dharmendra, Amitabh Bachchan, Amjad Khan, and Hema Malini. Sippy Films, 1975.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan. Directed by Hitesh Kewalya, performances by Ayushmann Khurrana, Jitendra Kumar, and Gajraj Rao. T-Series, 2020.

Spectre. Directed by Sam Mendes, performances by Daniel Craig, Christoph Waltz, Léa Seydoux, Ben Whishaw, and Naomie Harris. Columbia Pictures, 2015.

Straight: Pinu Patel Ki Tedhi Medhi Love Story. Directed by Parvati Balagopalan, performances by Vinay Pathak, Gul Panag, and Anuj Chowdhury. iDream Productions, 2009.

Student of the Year. Directed by Karan Johar, performances by Sidharth Malhotra, Varun Dhawan, Alia Bhatt, and Rishi Kapoor. Dharma Productions, 2012.

Tangerine. Directed by Sean Baker, performances by Kitana Kiki Rodriguez, and Mya Taylor. Magnolia Pictures, 2015.

The Danish Girl. Directed by Tom Hooper, performances by Eddie Redmayne, Alicia Vikander, and Ben Whishaw. Focus Features, 2015.

The Favourite. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, performances by Olivia Colman, Rachel Weisz, and Emma Stone. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2018.

The Mitchells vs. the Machines. Directed by Mike Rianda, performances by Abbi Jacobson, Danny McBride, Mike Rianda, and Olivia Colman. Columbia Pictures, 2021.

The Power of the Dog. Directed by Jane Campion, performances by Benedict Cumberbatch, Kodi Smit-McPhee, Kirsten Dunst, and Jesse Plemons. BBC Films, 2021.

Uncle Frank. Directed by Alan Ball, performances by Paul Bettany, Sophia Lillis, and Peter Macdissi. Miramax, 2020.

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