Gender, Sexuality, and Indian Cinema

QUEER VISUALS

Edited by Srija Sanyal

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PREFACE

This book is intended for those who aim to have a comprehensive understanding of the queer representation in the visual media in India. The book encompasses essays that situate the queer existence within the gender discourse across languages, thus, in turn, reflecting upon the socio-cultural, and even the political dynamics and intersections of queer and the society. The volume attempts to establish an understanding of the queer space acquired in the visual media across various Indian languages over the years. Amassing films and cultural productions on digital platforms, it attempts to locate the negotiated spaces and the associated explorations critically investigated by the populace, across industries, ranging from pedestrians to artists.

One of the key offerings of the proposed title is the comprehensive understanding of rapidly transmuting scenario of queer representation in the visual media in a country where 'queer' existence is still awaiting mass acceptance. The book puts forth a sincere attempt in depicting plurality and complexity of the Indian scenario, which is a rare of its kind for a scholastic attempt. Moreover, attempts to study the webseries and other digital productions as an intensive review are only handful. In this sense this book aims to be one of its kind, allowing scholars some food for thought pertaining to the popular culture and proliferating digital mass media exhibition.

Transgressing beyond the rigid academic literature yet complementing it, the edited volume attempts to indulge in a discourse of gender and sexual representation in Indian visual media, especially at the crucial juncture when digitization has penetrated and metamorphosized the conventional cognizance of the way media content has been consumed thus far. The films and digital pieces discussed are primarily studied as cultural texts to decode the representation of the queer in society. This anthology thus strives to be the collection of essays that might serve as the foundation for further definition and revaluation of the queer discourse in the Indian context.

INTRODUCTION

SRIJA SANYAL

What is perceived as homosexuality in the popular culture is what defines, widely, the definition of what homosexuality is, especially in the Indian context. The diversity and multiplicity of the country, pertaining to religion, language, and culture, among various other aspects, brims with instances of gender fluidity (if not homosexuality in the strictest terms). Morbid sexual interactions among the members of same sex as a commonly manifested notion on the mass psyche is largely a product of the imperial might. While this widely accepted belief persisted in the society, it could not completely eradicate the strong presence of gender fluidity in the prevalent culture. Consequently, in parallel with continual cultural and social evolution, the representation of what is now deemed as queer found its way in various forms, such as visual and literary, including sources like images on temple walls and ancient texts and narratives. The cinematic world witnessed the very first ever allusion of queerness with the Dickson Experimental Sound Film in 1894 which was a rather poorly shot 17 second experimental film showing two men dancing, holding each other "awkwardly" (Sundar). Late 19th century, and the subsequent eras of 1930s and 40s witnessed the sissy looking man or hardboiled woman (Sundar) in the Hollywood lens. The Indian counterpart of Hollywood, however, was still confused about whether to breach the morality of its masses by venturing into the prohibited area of queerness. Rafoo Chakkar (1975) is widely believed to be the first reference to homosexuality in Bollywood. This was followed by Mast Kalander in 1981 that featured Pinku, a 'gay' character, who, when isn't plotting murders and kidnappings, is chasing men. Such portrayals, nevertheless, reaffirmed the aberration. Saadak (1991) starring Sanjay Dutt and Pooja Bhatt, for example, portrays a transgender character that is given a small screen time, and is depicted as completely evil (Joseph). While queer representation staggered in the mainstream Bollywood cinema, the portrayal of same-sex relationships was gearing up for an extensive journey in the regional cinema and theatrical arena. In 1981, Vijay Tendulkar wrote Mitrachi Gostha (A friend's story) which was made into a movie, following the story's success as a play. The next year, he wrote the Marathi film

Umbartha that hinted at a lesbian relationship between two inmates of a remand home released. Ligy J Pullappally's film Sancharram (2004), Buddhadev Dasgupta's Bengali film Uttara (2000) are other examples. The earliest reference to gay theme in Malayalam cinema is Randu Penkuttikal (1978), which follows the story of Kokila who loves, almost obsessively, the elegant and beautiful danseuse, Girija (Joseph). Bollywood, most of the time the characters, devoid of any significance or substance, were exploited solely for the purpose of evoking a derogatory level of humor in the audience. Govinda's portrayal of women in multiple films, Amitabh Bacchan's legendary song 'Mere Angane Me' from Lawaris (1981), and Kamal Hassan in Chachi 420 remain by and large some of the most popular crossdressing (may/may not be considered necessarily queer) examples of celluloid that fail to offer anything beyond the gender stereotypes. But the first wave of change came with Mahesh Bhatt's Tamanna (1998), followed by the Tamil film Appu (2000), Shabnam Mausi (2005), Shyam Benegal's Welcome to Sajjanpur (2008), and Marathi film Jogwa (2009), which were some of the first few movies that saw members of the third gender enjoy a longer screen time (Joseph). On the other hand, the regional cinema, for instance, in Bangla, Rituparno Ghosh's queer films arrived at a significant juncture in the cultural history of the LBGT movement in India. Arekti Premer Golpo (Ghosh), for example, went on floors and was released subsequent to the reading down of Sec. 377 of the IPC in a momentous verdict given by the Delhi High Court in July 2009 (Datta).

Despite its controversial and debatable existence in the minds of the masses, the queer representation in the Indian subcontinent has always found space in some way or the other. Be it on the celluloid or the inked pages, the presence of a queer personality has always intrigued the minds of intellectuals and laymen alike. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of queer-themed content and characters in Indian cinema. This has further received a boost with the advent and rapid popularity of OTT platforms that are still thriving somehow beyond the clutches of Censor Board of Film Certification in India.

The proposed volume is a sincere attempt to build upon and complement existing theories and literature associated with the discourse of gender and sexual representation in visual media, particularly in films and in the emerging digital space, across various Indian languages. Critical explorations construct the cynosure to establish a multicultural understanding of queer visuals and the consumerist ideals that dictate such mass media production.

The first chapter by Asma Rasheed and Akshay Kumar "Figuring out the subaltern case of consent, sexuality and romances of Indian gay lives: An exploration of *I Am"* investigates the working of consent in homosexual contexts, especially in gay communities, drawing on two segments from director Onir's national award-winning anthology film, *I am* (2010): the working of consent in homosexual contexts, especially in gay communities, drawing on two segments from Onir's national award-winning anthology film, *I am* (2010): "I am Abhimanyu" & "I am Omar".

Anagha Biju's chapter "Translating Verbal and Visual Languages in Tandem: The Indeterminate Position of Gendered Identity in the film *Vaisali"* attempts a critical exploration of the Malayalam film Vaisali through the translated lens while comprehending the socio-political nuances of the cultures, of which even the language is a part. The chapter further demonstrates how a narrative's underlying queer nuances remain unnoticed in popular imagination and discourse due to the manner in which the film and its visual language convey a heterosexual viewing of the narrative. Films in the Malayalam language are further investigated by Sony Jalarajan and Adith K Suresh in "Bodies That Need Queering: The Queer Hetero-topias in Malayalam Cinema" who argue that Malayalam cinema incorporate the queer into a heteronormative hostile space filled with patriarchal notions and hegemonic masculinities, representing bodies that occupy a submissive position in narratives that consume their subversiveness as "deviancies" to invoke laughter, disgust, and moral fear.

"'De-Closeting': Studying Moments of Queer Revelations in Indian Films and Web Series" by Aparna Shastri highlights the pivotal junctures of queer representation in and beyond films, taking into account the socio-political milieu and the conjectures that had its reflections on the visual media. The chapter deals primarily with the Hindi-language films and web series following the repeal of Section 377 of IPC, furthering its investigation to the penetration of digital media representation of queer and the subsequent evolution of the gender discourse as projected in Indian illustrated means.

Aryehi Bhushan in "'I don't play the back-foot': Spectatorship, Masculine Nationalisms, and Queer(ing) Cricket in Amazon Prime's *Inside Edge* (2017)" focuses exclusively on the digital media, its increasing penetration, and steady and constructive contribution to the continual evolution of queer as a part of not only gender and sexuality discourse in India but also the social discourse of a postcolonial entity.

"Interrogating Non-normativity: Transgender Embodiment in *Samantaral* and *Nagarkirtan"* by Jaya Sarkar explores the contemporary Bengali cinema and its stand on homosexuality. The chapter takes select Bangla films investigating the existing conceptualisation of the transgender not just as a disfigurement based on genital status but also as a disability while dealing with issues, such as the postmodern fantasy of heteronormativity, the social stigmas around the transgender body, and how that body is seen as non-normative, and how postcolonial sexuality has established the transgendered body as a site of freakery and disgust.

The Bengali cinema and the queer existence therein finds further explorations in Rounak Ghosh's "Of "Incomplete Buildings" and Transient Spaces: Queer Spatiotemporality in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012)", which attempts to do a critical exploration of the homological relation between the destabilization of spatio-temporality and gendered destabilization through the figure of transness in Rituparno Ghosh's Chitrangada: The Crowing Wish as the primary subject, while also touching upon Ghosh's works in general, which have otherwise been pivotal to the queer discourse in Bengali cinema and Indian socio-cultural landscape. Ghosh, a monumental figure of the queer movement in the country, not only through his works but his unapologetic expression of flambouyance and association with queer-themed films, serves a critical addition to this volume with the said film.

Nizara Hazarika brings forth the Assamese cinema for critical evaluation in Exploring the Silenced Zone: Contextualising Marginality and Queer Identity in *Fire Flies: Jonaki Porua.* The chapter deals the queer in relation to the subjects of marginalization, and more importantly, the politics of silence, that marginalized section is often subjected to. Taking into account the example of the select film, the chapter delves into the empowering nature of silence, often used by the marginalized as a tool of resistance towards the hegemonic heterosexual domination.

Pritha Sarkar in "Assertion of Women's Agency by Subverting the Heteronormativity in Bollywood Films: Locating *Fire* in Opposition to *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga"* attempts to disrupt the queer portrayal in mainstream Bollywood films by locating them at the opposite ends of the same spectrum, situating one as a foil to the other to show how they assert women's agency by subverting the heteronormativity. The chapter further explores how heteronormativity is interweaved in the family as a social structure through performativity, sexual division of labour, and paternalism

while being interdependent and integral to the heteronormative structure of gender and sexuality.

The volume also features a chapter on the queer explorations in the hill districts of Eastern India. Anil Pradhan and Pema Gyalchen Tamang in "Exploring Queer Visual Cultures in Nepali from the Darjeeling and Sikkim Hills: An Introductory Study" focus on the apparently sparse research from the geo-spatial areas of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal and the state of Sikkim, having the linguistic domination of the Nepali language. The chapter raises critical questions regarding the existing production of cinema and other forms of visual media by taking into account select examples from across the genres of short-film, music videos, and the rapidly emerging influencer culture in this highly digitized world.

The volume, therefore, weaves together to establish an understanding of the queer space acquired in the visual media across various Indian languages over the years. Amassing films and cultural productions on digital platforms, it locates the negotiated spaces and the associated explorations critically investigated by the populace, across industries, ranging from pedestrians to artists. Transgressing beyond the rigid academic literature yet complementing it, the volume indulges in a discourse of gender and sexual representation in Indian visual media, especially at the crucial juncture when digitization has penetrated and metamorphosized the conventional cognizance of the way media content has been consumed thus far. The films and digital pieces discussed attempts to decode the representation of the queer in society, from a linguistically multicultural perspective.

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CHAPTER ONE

FIGURING OUT THE SUBALTERN CASE OF CONSENT, SEXUALITY AND ROMANCES OF INDIAN GAY LIVES: AN EXPLORATION OF *I AM*

AKSHAY KUMAR AND ASMA RASHEED

Introduction

> I used to think I knew all the answers. Then I thought I knew maybe a few of the answers. Now I'm not even sure I understand the questions. Nobody knows anything.
>
> —Pete Nelson, *I Thought You Were Dead* (2010)

It is hardly surprising that the idea of consent remains unattended and unrealized most of the time in our fast-paced, largely unvarying, lives. The recent discussions and reports in mainstream conversations, thanks primarily to the #MeToo movement,[1] have attended to the concept of "consent" very closely, focussing on sexual or intimate encounters/incidents.[2]

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[1] The "me too" movement is a "global, and survivor-led movement against sexual violence" as well as abuse, harassment and rape culture. The use of the phrase is generally traced back to Tarana Burke, who used the hashtag on a social media platform in 2006 (#MeToo) in USA to draw attention to the experiences of women, particularly vulnerable women of colour, and to the magnitude of the problem. The movement spread virally across social media platforms and different sectors or industries, as well as countries with high-profile women coming out with their stories from 2017 onwards. The posts and discussions also initiated a new set of conversations around the concept of consent. https://metoomvmt.org/

[2] As is well known, the concept of consent operates in several domains, such as that of medicine where a patient's consent may be sought before a professional can begin to examine them or that of a government through representative democracy where citizens consent to legal rights and responsibilities. This is what is usually termed a 'permissive' idea of consent, that allows for a set of actions to take place and

These discussions have acknowledged the fuzzy contours of consent, and its emotive charge in relationships already fraught with issues of desire and sexuality. A lot of these discussions have also examined the history of consent in terms of the law and various shifts in definitions or lines of consent. This chapter proposes to examine consent in the context of homosexual-homosocial relationships, using two films that deal with this issue.

The "second coming" of deliberations around the "age of consent" in feminist discourse and queer theory in 2013 through movements and protests introduced some fresh perspectives, though these too appear to have faded away after some time.[3] Consent, in its now-familiar forms, had been operational in the fields of medical practice, politics, and law of most ancient societies. Today, however, it has extended its presence while simultaneously becoming more integral to these fields. But nascent kinds of consent – albeit often communal and recognised as having more *de facto* rather than *de jure* authority – were by no means absent. As O'Shea (2012) points out, consent-seeking became significant in several domains including relations of domination such as imperialism and deep-seated patriarchy and these are catching our attention only now.

Several contemporary theorists overt time have attempted to look at consent through various lenses. The philosopher John Plamenatzv is said to have laid the foundation around consent in his *Consent Freedom and Political Obligation* (1938). Later, John Simmons (1976) used a political lens to talk about how government by consent may be made a reality. Several other scholars also intervened through arguments that implicated consent in a fundamental fashion with sex and desire, emphasising sexual interests and attitudes to complicate the "yes-no debate." Boxill (1993) suggests that the several criticisms against consent theory are specious; they inflate the conditions for valid consent, ignore the differences between signs of express

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involves or interpellates the individuals or their selves. Such a notion of consent may be relatively recent in medicine, law, etc. but nonetheless is not the primary focus here. The liberal idea of individual consent that this paper proposes to explore has more to do with relationships of an intimate or erotic nature, particularly consent in same-sex relationships.

[3] The #MeToo movement in India against sexual harassment and assault is said to have begun around 2018 when women in media, entertainment, journalism, academics, etc. began to speak out publicly on facing sexual abuse, harassment, rape and misconduct by prominent and powerful men. The movement began new conversations about workplace conduct, victim-shaming and blaming, harassment and consent.

and tactical consent, and misconstrue the very meaning of consent (Boxill, 1993, 81-102).

The idea of sexuality too operates with a similar understanding of consent, as something implicit and rarely requiring acknowledgement. It sometimes garners attention as a "raging" topic, with some insights into the emotional and mental outlook as well as behaviour of individuals, societies and even nations. The emergence of "sexuality studies" as an area is a welcome foray into this domain, tentative as the field still seems to be in India.

It would be useful to unpack the notion a little more carefully here. For instance, is consent more than or apart from a simple yes-no, or gestures and verbal connotations? If yes, to what extent? Do consent and sexuality function along similar lines among cis-hetero and homosexual individuals? Does sexuality always mean queering desires and eventually consenting to/about them? Or is there a continuum of sexuality and consent? Questions such as these alert us to the importance of such concepts at work in our lives. Moreover, an exercise in unpacking also hints at how little we understand or seem to care about consent and sexuality. This could be because, given traditional mainstream socializations, we either feel they do not affect us or perhaps we do not realise their significance.

Heteronormativity, homosexuality, and consent

The relatively scant work available on consent and sexuality in relation to homosexual relationships could be due to a lack of awareness or care. Certainly, there has been a resurgence of interest in consent with respect to cis-hetero relationships after the #MeToo debates. Nonetheless, there are far and few conversations about consent in homosexual contexts. The little existing work does not, moreover, offer personal or individual understandings grounded in the lived realities of homosexual life-worlds. The discussions, minimal as they are, seem to be mired in issues of sexually-consenting (and non-consenting) behaviours and their legal implications. The following sections chart some of the existing work about "consent" operating in relation(s) with sexuality.

Sarah Beresford (2014) draws on the debates surrounding the age of consent to question the continued usefulness of Queer Theory. The debates have focused, directly or indirectly, on the age at which men and boys (whether gay or straight) have sexual intercourse, rather than during a relationship or an encounter. Therefore, she notes, the debate on the age of consent has ignored or given insufficient attention to this aspect. Drawing on the work

of Sheila Jeffries, Beresford notes that despite its counter-heteronormative claims, Queer Theory has come to signal gay male and has rendered lesbian women invisible. While Queer Theory claims to be inclusionary, it has failed to acknowledge and accommodate the lived experiences of lesbian women (759-779).

Scholars whose work has opened out complexities around sexual consent, attitudes and behaviours within same-sex relationships include Beres, Herold and Maitland (2020). They identify consent as a key issue in defining sexual coercion and have studied the behaviours which people exhibit/use to ask for and to indicate sexual consent with same-sex partner(s). Their research points to the fact that there are no significant differences in the behaviours to initiate sex among men who have sex with men (MSM) and women who have sex with women (WSW). However, MSM reported using significantly more nonverbal signals than did WSW, when responding to initiative behaviour (475-486).

Alok Gupta (2006) on the other hand, emphasizes how the proscription of "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" under Section 377 made criminals out of homosexuals. He argues that Section 377 is not a law about anal sex alone. The scope and application of Section 377 by the courts through an identification of sexual acts with specific persons, and the inclusion of different sexual acts between men within the scope of Section 377, applied it to homosexuality in general. He also highlights that the lack of a consent-based distinction in the offense had made homosexual sex synonymous with rape and equated homosexuality with sexual perversion. He substantiates this broader meaning of Section 377 by examining the increasingly creative ways in which Section 377 was being implemented in the Indian context.

More recently, Kathleen Ann Livingston (2015) delineates how most of the foundational work of queer theory has been careful to try and avoid identity politics and been attentive about locating it within mainstream (*sic*) critical theory, and in hetero-normative institutions and discursive spaces. She points out how, by deeming consent as rhetorical, we use our available languages, bodies, power, privilege, and desires in negotiations about relationships, whether we are conscious of it or not. Talking of consent in LGBTQ+ communities, or consent as queer community-based rhetoric, she points to the "the queer turn" in rhetoric and composition whereby LGBTQ+ lives, histories, and theories have slowly begun to be appropriated in the discipline. Livingstone claims that consent is fundamental in a queer theory of sexuality. It is here that the idea of no play without power is out

in the open, and individuals learn to negotiate power, desires, needs, boundaries, limits, disclosure, risk, access (and so on) by negotiating the terms of relationships openly. Examining the rhetoric of consent across contexts of sex-positive cultures, histories, and public debates, Livingstone notes there are elements of consent far beyond sexual pleasure and danger though they are rarely explored or talked about. Also, she argues for more work to learn of queer understandings of consent that can revise standard practices of informed consent, especially in community-based research. As the feminist and queer public discourse on consent has made clear, she says, consent is more than a momentary negotiation over access (to a site, a community space, people's lives).

Given the paucity of work in this area, as well as perhaps issues of accessing them, there is an urgent need to further explore the domain of consent and sexuality in homosexual relations and spaces, if we are to understand the dynamics of a man-man/ woman-woman/ transgender-transgender etc. consent with/for/around/by each other. The following sections will explore some of these issues by examining the play of consent and sexuality in homosexual contexts through a close reading of two short films — "I am Abhimanyu" and "I am Omar" from Onir's anthology film, *I Am* (2010).

I am Abhimanyu

This short film traces the "experiential" journey of a successful director (Abhimanyu) from childhood to his transformative years of being a "charming" man. The narrative begins in 2009 with Abhimanyu mentally mired in past memories related to identity, identification, child abuse and a struggle to be. As the film progresses, we learn how Abhimanyu was molested by his stepfather for many years while his mother was away at work. The narrative presents Abhimanyu revisiting his dark memories and his struggle(s), after he moves away, with sexual identity and identification. The narrative explores how consent and sexuality operate within an individual and in the world around him, in his various relationships as an adult and a professional.

Generally, narratives dealing with homosexual lives and worlds struggle to understand how such individuals operate in their worlds and have difficulty ascribing/allowing agency or voice to them. It is as if we can "know" an individual from the LGBTQ+ community only through those around them, rather than they themselves. "I am Abhimanyu" is amongst the very few films that invest into an inner self and everyday behaviour of a gay person and therefore it would be worth scrutinizing it through the lens of consent.

Dream-itising consent?

The film opens with a wide-angle trolly shot, the protagonist lost in thoughts about his unusually usual dream as he is driving a bike on the roads of Bangalore. The camera transports us to this dream, where Abhimanyu is a little girl driving a bicycle with help of his/her mother at their coffee plantation. The dream, a recurring leitmotif, seems to hint at a longing to revert to an undemanding parent-child relationship, full of uncomplicated joy and simple pleasures. The shifting shadows of nature in the dream also hint at the complexity of consent and its consequences. The sequence also serves, of course, to hint at the multiple layers of questions and arouse their curiosity.

The dream sequence (some of it as seen in *Visuals*, *1*, *2* and *3* below) also reappears just after Abhimanyu gets scolded by his stepfather. This time the girl along with her mother is transported further to an unfamiliar space: trees and greenery merges into an abandoned old building, with a small mysterious pond and cage-like wired areas around it. In one shot, the girl looks into the small pond and her mother too peers in such that their shadows appear to merge. The figure of the mother then disappears, and the girl is pursued by an unfamiliar, shadowy yet caged figure clad all in black. The grainy shot-sequence, with yet another shadow, this time a mature female figure, may be read as symbolic of an anxiety. It is almost as if the space is a personality, shifting and struggling, through several forms—the scary caged part (the unknown shadow), the free and happy part (the girl) and a calm and ultimately non-existent part (the mother). The sequence also seems to denote a play between all these elements, perhaps hinting at uncertainty of the protagonist.

Visual 1: Abhimanyu's dream sequence of him being a girl with his mother at an unusual place (adapted from Onir, 2010)

Visual 2: A ghost like spirit terrorising Abhimanyu at the unusual place in another sequence (adapted from Onir, 2010)

Visual 3: Abhimanyu's flashbacks from his childhood (adapted from Onir, 2010)

Abhimanyu's dream could of course be the suppressed feelings (and/or experiences) and serve a choral function in the narrative, as it shifts over its protagonist's mental preoccupations. It hints at Abhimanyu's lost yet ardently desired world of a happy childhood. The dream may also be read as a complex mechanism of identification, suppressing his sensitive or what is normatively seen as a feminine side, or a representation of a "lack" of attention and love from his mother. During his growing up years, Abhimanyu appears to have been consenting to the demands of others around him, being helpless to even permit himself to find a voice, especially in his formative years. He is a good boy who is all about saying yes to his mother and stepfather most of his life. Even if he wants to say no, it is as if an overpowering yes overcomes him.

There is also a prominent sequence in the film that creates a feeling of multiple imaginations of Abhimanyu in the dreams of different selves around him. The fade-in fade-out shots super-imposed on each other effect a feel of both memory and thought alike. Abhimanyu, sometimes sitting and sometimes lying down, "sees" his adolescent and childhood selves silently around him in these shots with dark lighting. The lighting and colours resemble a closed room with fragments of light in it. We can see read this as Abhimanyu's lost younger self looking at an adult Abhimanyu, mutely beseeching the latter to act today—conflicts and morality notwithstanding—in the "prohibited," past-yet-present moments. It is almost as if emotions and consent too powerful to deal with in the "real" world are conveyed through these dream sequences—dream-itising consent—so that Abhimanyu could make peace with his conflicted selves.

The knowingly unknown trickiness of consent

Abhimanyu's stepfather is presented as an almost ideal man, one who marries a divorced woman with a child and is an understanding husband and loving father. However, his relationship with the child is the actual ground for the adult Abhimanyu's silence and crushing sense of powerlessness. There are several sequences that can be read for the slippery nature of consent in their interactions, which begin of course with the stepfather's molestation of the child, including the adolescent Abhimanyu's tricky dynamics with his stepfather's abuse. To paraphrase Abhimanyu's thinking aloud in a conversation with a friend: it may sound strange, but it was possible he (Abhimanyu) began to draw comfort from, even felt love or whatever for the stepfather (*Shayad tumhe ajeeb saa lage lekin, kuch waqt baad, uske liye pyaar ya jo bhi tha, mujhe usse tasalli milne lagi*).

Abhimanyu's musings (represented through *Visual 4*) complicate a viewer's understanding of consent in that such responses are often perceived as triggers (mostly rationalization). It could be read as the actualizing/shaping of sexuality and sexual behaviour, or a defence mechanism while using sex to obtain material stuff, or perhaps exploring and validating same-sex attraction through the act. How do we read a narrative where a victim says he may have started finding "comfort" in the "abusive act" and even started leveraging it to get things done for himself? Is the narrative suggesting that a "victim" can find "comfort" in the abuse after a point of time? Is it a way of adapting to abuse in an inescapable situation for a child? Or do we understand this as a messy and complex exploration of consent and sexuality, even as the child moves through adolescence into adulthood?

Visual 4: Abhimanyu's musings and confrontations with Natasha
(adapted from Onir, 2010)

On the one hand, it is possible to claim that the abuse was a "phase" of molestation of a straight child. On the other hand, problematic as the idea may be, it could be said that Abhimanyu began to come to terms with his own sexuality because of his experience of sexual abuse as a child. Whichever be the reading, it is clear that the answers are hardly clear-cut. It is often stated, especially in conversations among individuals belonging to a sexual minority, that this debate over when does one realize gay or homosexual is now a rather exhausted one. In fact, such a "curiosity" may indicate a lack of awareness or sensitivity among cis heterosexuals towards non-normative orientations or desires. It is as if we want to think of consent as operating along similar lines for all of us. It is as if similar instances of child abuse can only be understood in tones of alarm or immoral behaviour.

It may be worthwhile to also examine the complex interweaving of consent, sexuality, and abuse through the #MeToo moments as well: most glaringly, almost all the conversations stayed with heterosexual encounters, particularly with respect to India. It is almost as if this highly visible and charged movement was premised on the experiences of cis individuals alone. Queer people/relationships simply never appeared on the horizon, forgotten it appears, which one may argue is worse than being ignored. One may very well ask: when will queer experiences appear in cis conversations? Following this, does it also imply that the concept of queer feminism is yet to "arrive" because feminism continues to be largely understood as for or about women and in opposition to men (cis or gay)? #MeToo, through a feminist lens, seems to add to the pressure of being queer, producing further anxieties about being visible or vocal when a queer person cannot even be out over their identity. It is almost as if, to add another dimension to this

concept, one requires consent to speak up since a cis-oriented feminism is grappling with larger (read, heteronormative) issues.

To add another layer to the messiness of consent, what if certain kinds of touch(es) function differently in homosexual and heterosexual relations which are largely unknown to most people? For example, it is hardly disputable that pulling somebody, grabbing or slapping body parts, etc. constitutes sexual harassment. However, this may not be read in a similar manner when it comes to a homosexual community. The differences in touch, gaze, handling of certain material such as bags, clothes, etc. are generally read as "too explicit" or "different" when it comes to homosexuals. Given this, how does one go along with a hetero normative perspective to comprehend and analyze, not to mention police, consent in homosexual relations too?

#MeToo was hailed as a revolutionary voice that bared the power dynamics in cis-hetero relationships and the exploitation and assault within them, along with a disregard of consent. The question we must ask ourselves here is: what happens when assault or abuse happens outside the ambit of this gender binary? How does one understand the power dynamics at play when sexual violence takes place between members of the same gender, or rather, between fluid gender and sexual identities? For example, if a woman files a complaint against another woman over sexual abuse, or even a man against another man, all that would probably result in is all of them being labelled, dismissively or worse, as gays and lesbians. The social and legal response, it seems painfully obvious, would be much greater if not criminal, in comparison to a similar instance involving a man and a woman. Speaking about such concerns to Nandita Singh (2019), queer activist Vikramaditya Sahai points out that the movement has completely overlooked the realities of class, caste, ability, sexuality, and age:

> There cannot be, in the frame of #MeToo, any conversation beyond the abuse that men inflict on women. By framing the #MeToo conversation as the most heterosexual conversation in the world — in which women are the subservient, sad, little victims and men are these dominant, abusive, harassing people — what you have done is made it impossible for any other frame of power to be acknowledged at all.

Similar emerging conversations around the mechanics of consent concerning sexuality call for a lot of nurturance and encouragement from us. As a rule, we take enormous pride in being sensitive to heterogenous classrooms, for instance, in schools and colleges. If so, how can we extend our sensitivity to go beyond this homogenous "social" lens? As a society,

perhaps it is high time we raise our voice if we wish to continue to speak for inclusivity as the heart of any discussion/movement.

Visual 5: Abhimanyu meeting his ex-boyfriend after lying to Natasha
(adapted from Onir, 2010)

Yet another dimension to exploring consent and sexuality is to ask: what acts of consent define who is homosexual and who is heterosexual? For instance, in the case of Abhimanyu, he "looks" the same as any other ordinary, desirable man (see, for example, *Visual 5* above). He is a hardworking professional who also parties and woos women — there is no visible "mark" of being a homosexual. A viewer may feel "suspicious" due to their ambiguous perceptions over the sexual abuse of a child, but this feeling may also disappear since Abhimanyu appears to be quite "normal." Things get a little murky in some instances: why does Abhimanyu insist on his friend Jai taking him to visit Jai's ex-boyfriend (Vishal)? Is it suppressed attraction, a sexual interest, or simply "normal" networking for work purposes? In another instance, Abhimanyu lies to his female friend Natasha about how Jai wants to join them with his boyfriend which seems rather his own desire to meet Vishal. How does one read such seemingly mundane (heterosexual) acts of everyday encounters? Or are such ambiguities enough to think of a self as homosexual? On another front, do we need to revisit "our" own framing of so-called attributes of how homosexuals appear or sound?

#I am Omar

This short film from the *I Am* anthology is about Jai Gawda, Abhimanyu's friend from the previous segment who is a managing director of a reputed company. Jai meets a struggling actor, Omar, in a café. They go out for

dinner followed by having sex in Jai's car parked on a road. Caught by a policeman, they are both asked to pay or get booked for their activities in a public place. A traumatized Jai is forced to hand over his bank card to Omar and share the PIN for it, whom the policeman takes away as "hostage" to withdraw fifty-five thousand rupees. Later, Jai finds out that the whole episode was a set up by Omar and the policeman. The film is set in 2009, when a landmark verdict by the Delhi High Court struck down portions of Section 377 with respect to gay sex and decriminalised homosexuality in India.[4] "I am Omar" offers an intimate account of a homosexual individual in suburban India from a social and personal perspective. It is yet another rare attempt at a "normal" yet "mundane" account(s) of gay people's lives and their interactions through cultures of their own.

Conversations and dates — Consenting towards the less-expressed

We are all aware how conversations with others operate at different levels of openness, with how much we "permit" them to know about ourselves even as we permit ourselves to express ourselves. Our conversations reflect our consent of the content as well as the interactional patterns, as well as that tricky parts of that which is yet to come. (There are several everyday examples one may use to illustrate this point: the fact that someone consented to have a cup of coffee with us today does not constitute an agreement to have a cup of coffee with us every day, or tea, or juice or even simply to meet up!) We cannot ignore the consequences of our consent in any given situation either, which makes the nature of consent even murkier. "I am Omar" revolves heavily around conversations that reflect on our everyday behaviours.

The film opens with a mid-shot of Jai talking over the phone with his friend, conveying his relief around the 2009 judgement which finally permits him to feel "free." Jai is traveling in a car moving from Marine Drive deeper into

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[4] The Supreme Court of India (SC), unfortunately, overturned the 2009 judgement in 2013, stating that amending or repealing section 377 was a matter for Parliament and not the judiciary. Curative petitions filed by the Naz Foundation and others led to a review by a constitutional bench. In 2017, in the *Puttaswamy* case, the SC upheld the right to privacy as a fundamental right, condemned discrimination and stated that protection of sexual orientation lay at the core of the fundamental rights of LGBT people. The SC revisited the 2013 judgement in 2018, and ruled unanimously on 06 September 2018 that Section 377 was unconstitutional "in so far as it criminalises consensual sexual conduct between adults of the same sex."

the city, from a relatively open space to more densely packed urban spaces. Similary, when Jai and Omar first converse at a café, their talk signals their interests. So, Omar says, '*Maine suna hai Milk acchi film hai, mai soch raha tha dekhne ki* [I've heard *Milk* is a good film; I was thinking about watching it]. Later, he judges Jai's readiness to engage with him further and speaks up: *Mujhe dinner ke liye jaana hai* [I need to go for dinner]. Omar's suggestions about the film and dinner, at the same moment as Jai is planning to do the same (indicated through his responses to a phone call he receives in between) are shrewd moves. He also gauges Jai's reactions and his consent as he tries to touch Jai's leg.

The moves to initiate, elicit, develop, or even manipulate consent to reach an apparently consensual interaction operate in our lives all the time. In a way, conversations can also be seen as guiding and deciding what comes next. In a later conversation with the policeman, we learn of many social prejudices, of an extremely limited awareness of sexuality, power, and pressure that suppresses voices. A question that could arise here is: do conversations around consent operate in a similar manner among homosexual people? The defining factor of course would be the outlook or perception towards these same conversations. For example, a heterosexual couple may receive a different, "suspicious" gaze from those around them than say two men or women talking to each other. However, this too is now changing as two men talking also attracts a suspicious gaze from those around them. This begs the question: do we think in terms of some attributes or the body language of an individual rather than the content of their conversation? Generally, most of us do practice something like this.

There are terms such "boy talk" and "girl talk" used to describe some aspects of various conversations that refer primarily to things that heterosexual boys and girls may feel hesitant about sharing with the opposite sex. Would there be a similar hesitance among conversations gay or lesbian couples? It is an area worth further investigation, since our limited acceptance and awareness of masculinities may come into play in such contexts. Perhaps, once again, we need to understand the socio-emotional aspects of sexuality in such interactions. Since we do try to unlearn and re-learn what constitutes masculinities around men and women, when would we be able to work through to such aspects in same-sex attractions? This is especially so in social spaces where men touching each other without it being sexual, hugging or being affectionate towards each other is yet to be accepted, even as it is culturally mediated. Therefore, how may we as individuals and communities know and "normalise" the conversations and concerns of homosexual individuals without making "misleading" assumptions?

"I am Omar" also foregrounds the gay dating culture: several scenes shot in a Point of View (POV) mode set the introductory scenes at the café in a realistically. The camera does not move too much or focus overtly on the several angles of the actors, which helps the scene appear more natural. All we see are two strangers meeting and talking with each other over an unplanned date. The concept of dating also points to how two individuals consent to meet and then decide their next steps about each other (as individuals and as a couple). Conversations in such planned and unplanned encounters may differ a little differently in homosexual contexts, since most homosexual people carry the trauma(s) of accepting themselves, getting accepted by friends and family, and eventually getting accepted by society in general. Hence, their conversations are rather more emotionally fraught. This is conveyed subtly when Jai confronts Omar with wanting someone who will like his real self rather than the things around him. During their interactions, we see Omar and Jai expressing a deep need for having someone who will make them feel secure emotionally. Interestingly, the calm music playing in the background during their interactions contrasts with the turmoil within, caused by their slightly different kinds of anxieties.

The film also draws a viewer's attention to intimate conversations between two men moving from a public area to private spaces. This portrayal of their mode of conversing, mannerisms, or behaviour towards each other varies perhaps from that between cis-heterosexual individuals when together. So, the conversation in the film acts as an indicator of the kinds of consent operating in several ways (reflected through *Visuals 6*, *7* and *8*):
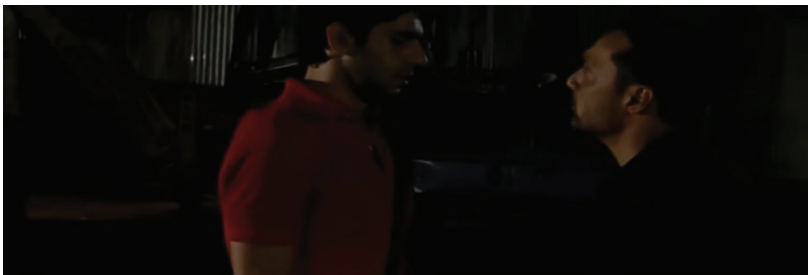
Visual 6: Interaction between Jai and Omar (adapted from Onir, 2010)

Visual 7: Interaction between Jai and his friend (adapted from Onir, 2010)

Visual 8: Interaction between Jai and the policeman (adapted from Onir, 2010)

- Between Jai and Omar (deep-seated anguish while awaiting someone else's consent, sexual and emotional desires, greed, adjusting to life in a metropolitan space, etc.)
- Between Jai and his friend on the phone call (suggesting how Jai finally consents to allow himself to feel free, without a fear of discrimination/marginalisation due to his sexual orientation)
- Between Jai and the policeman (implying rarely expressed desires in hierarchical, potentially exploitative, encounters and the consequences of not consenting to what is demanded from an individual.)

How fast to go? – Acting "timely"

It would be useful to look at consent in terms of a particular chain of events, especially their pace, in order to understand it further. For example, it would

be easy to ask whether it is possible to go for a long drive (eventually leading to making out) with a person one had just met barely an hour ago? Who decides and on what basis about how much time should be taken to prevent a mistreatment or erasure of consent? Would it be potentially less harmful if someone takes a week or a month to move beyond their first date? Also, do only homosexual people tend to follow up on these things this quickly (since, technically, they find it harder to find romantic partners around)? Do we even need to worry about this? One possibility is to accept that we need to focus on what leads to consent over certain things and decision-making in the respective scenarios. What allows an individual to consent towards certain acts/events? Here, we would argue, we need to think about what is operating in the mental makeup of individuals in such contexts. Thus, the possible reasons for a "hurried" encounter between Omar and Abhimanyu could be a lack of opportunities in comparison to heterosexual people to express desires (the limited and yet to be "normalised" options on the dating resources say it all), having no one to fall back (if Jai comes out to his parents, they might abandon him even if they accept his orientation, which is the usual case with most homosexual people), etc.

To re-turn to the pace at which events proceed, can we take a moral stance on this? Individuals, adults, are mature people who can make their decisions — how does it matter to anyone else? The pace at which a homosexual relationship "progresses," when compared to cis heterosexuals, may be more "visible." Nonetheless, this pace between two consenting adults over any sort of sexual, physical, emotional interaction should not attract social censure or carry any sort of moral charge to it. Indeed, if we need to, we may understand them as individuals—with their own personalities, ways of reacting and dealing with things — and once again remind ourselves how *we* need to understand sexuality and consent from a non-normative perspective.

Consenting spaces —from margins to hidden spaces

Any space that is occupied by individuals is organized to reflect themselves and to be used accordingly. The way human beings organize spaces generally reflects the limits of what and how we see ourselves utilizing them and for what purpose. We can be curious about why a bathroom cannot be a sleeping space or why a kitchen cannot become a reading space, though this is something most of us spare very little or no thought for. In fact, the organization of space is girded by rules and modes of making the most out of them and it is a transgression of these rules which illuminates their purposes. "I am Omar" subtly establishes these lines of transgression through

its first long shot of a car moving deep into the city from the suburban margins, slipping into mundane spaces that turn menacing in the night (shown through *Visuals 9* and *10*). Jai's car travels from the relatively up-market and appropriately lighted café to a restaurant followed by silent buildings and dark corners. It is almost as if the shift in space marks behaviour that moves from socially acceptable to taboo.

Visual 9: Jai and Omar's first meeting at a Café (adapted from Onir, 2010)

Visual 10: The darker area of a public space Omar and Jai eventually visit
(adapted from Onir, 2010)

It is tempting to condemn Jai and Omar for indulging in activities in these dark spaces, almost as if they too are darkening these spaces with their acts. The narrative is perhaps tempting the unthinking viewer to forget the idea that non-homosexual individuals too engage in similarly taboo activities, which after all are also open to questioning if not quite in the same manner as when two men are discovered together. At the same time, the narratorial gaze is also inviting us to consider if homosexual partners lack secure personal spaces which forces them to take recourse to unsafe public spaces?

Or are some of them are always searching for a safe, personal space away from the public eye and yet within the public sphere as a response to an unbelonging to society? The curiosity and excitement of Jai and Omar appear to suggest this, at least when Jai wants to be equal and use public spaces for personal needs given that patriarchal shades at his home appear to disallow his needs. Instances such as thus blur the line between representation and "reality," and compel us to think: do homosexual individuals too utilise such spaces with similar agendas and apprehensions as heterosexual individuals or are there additional fears and reservations involved? Also, what does this say about human behaviour and its dynamics? The shot moves the viewer's eye from the wide, gracefully curving, bedecked seafront of Marine Drive, across restaurants and abandoned buildings into shadowed lanes—symbolic perhaps of how we as individuals have a narrowed our understanding about sexuality and consent, and need to plumb its darker, unknown depths if we are to empower ourselves as well as others.

"Ankhen" and "Milk" – beyond the frames

"I am Omar" deploys several leitmotifs to effect multiple layers of consent. The song "Aankhen" [Eyes] plays in the background when Omar and Jai go for a drive. The lyrics perhaps express what they feel and seek, simultaneously negotiating an unspoken consent between them (reflected in *Visual 11*). The song suggests that eyes speak up and seek a space where individuals can be their "real" self, even as they look at strangers and glance away from anything that arouses their curiosity. As we travel on buses or metros, trains or even walk-through public places in our everyday lives, we occasionally encounter "unexplainably weird attractions" that we almost immediately suppress and/or forget. And when it comes to individuals attempting to negotiate their homosexual identities, the song is almost verbalizing their silences or inactivity even as they engage actively otherwise in society. Since the eyes also shows us visions, the song could also be implying that we need to change the visions we see around us.

Visual 11: Omar and Jai's consensual reactions while the song "Ankehn" plays
in the background (adapted from Onir, 2010)

Visual 12: The symbolism of *Milk* through a newspaper advertisement
(adapted from Onir, 2010)

In referring to *Milk* (2009), "I am Omar" makes several moves to convey its
message(s) forward (as seen in *Visual 12*). A much-acclaimed film that
traced Harvey Milk's struggles as a gay activist in the United States who
became California's first openly gay elected official, the film is mentioned
right after Jai's telephonic conversation about the decriminalisation
judgement. It is almost as if it is echoing a vibe of victory of gay rights.
Later, Jai and Omar express a willingness to watch this film which appears
to symbolise the need to "view" and validate the "production" of such films.
Films such as *Milk* that bring awareness of homosexual lives and worlds
through their autobiographical accounts may serve to overcome prejudices
shaped through a lack of knowledge. At the same time, they also serve to
reinforce gay movements both in cinema and in society to bring them into
the limelight.

Developing fears instead of cheers – a side to worry for!

I am offers several insights into consent that leads to the creation or development of varied kinds of fears. For example, the harassment Jai faces is generally not imposed on cis heterosexual people since they are not seen as "criminals" in quite the same way. A single policeman interested in men himself changes the scenario against Jai. Various surveys, reports and research reveals the high number of suicides homosexual people commit every year due to various kinds of trauma inflicted by those around them. Jai carries such a trauma, months after his humiliation and abuse by the policeman. That trauma is also expressed earlier when he bumps into Abhimanyu. It is as if individuals, especially homosexuals, consent to several decisions amidst apprehensions of being judged or looked down upon which results in fears, anxieties, and mistrust. Jai's breakdown at the end of the film shows his helplessness towards the actions he consented to and how the consequences have planted an abiding mistrust within him. This hint over mental health issues and challenges is alarming, given that the Omar-policeman con-job also hints at gangs blackmailing and abusing gay men within Indian gay culture. Various newspaper and other reports have carried exposes about gangs operating in several cities through popular dating apps. Such intimate experiences not only create fears among individuals but make them more vulnerable before their families and society, especially if they need to gain confidence in themselves before revealing such aspects of their identity. While the future of gay rights in India appears to be on a much-needed corrective path today, issues of mental health particularly in the queer community remain a lesser explored path.

Coming together

This paper attempted to examine the tricky and complex nature of consent, especially in homosexual contexts and pointed towards how feminist frames of thought have missed out on examining consent in homosexual contexts. Looking at the question of consent by way of an anthology movie, *I Am* from India, the paper noted the urgent need for conversations on consent and sexuality in homosexual encounters. It analysed two short films "I am Abhimanyu" and "I am Omar" to draw attention to many everyday issues on and around consent and sexuality, highlighting homosexual/homosocial paradigms. "I am Abhimanyu" foregrounds issues of psychological understanding(s) and consent through the protagonist's childhood, adolescence and adulthood. "I am Omar" presents a picture largely invisible, except to homosexual people. Reflections on many more films such as *I Am* will

hopefully make us think more on several key issues — consent, gay/queer lives, mental health, and so on. This would be essential to understanding consent better, especially in the aftermath of the reading down of Section 377 decriminalizing homosexuality in India. A richer and far more complex re-cognition of non-heteronormative lives would be immensely useful in creating awareness among future generations, as well as building a more just and equitable society for all of us.

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CHAPTER TWO

TRANSLATING VERBAL AND VISUAL
LANGUAGES IN TANDEM:
THE INDETERMINATE POSITION OF GENDERED
IDENTITY IN THE FILM *VAISALI*[1][2]

ANAGHA BIJU

As political as any text could be due to the socio-cultural elements it carries (and does not), the act of translation too can no longer be considered as the mere transfer of meanings from one language to another. As Walter Benjamin comments in "The Task of the Translator*",* translation becomes an act of interpretation and one that "recreates the values that accrued to the foreign text over time".[3] Thus, the act of translation can not only 'reconstitute' a text from one language and culture to another but also transform it by the manner in which it connects to the target culture. Here, the example of Gayatri Spivak's translation of Mahashweta Devi's *The Breast Story* can be referred to. The times and culture defined to a large extent by emerging feminist scholarship and especially Spivak's background of being a staunch feminist gives her translation a distinct feminist reading of the text which reveals several nuances and politics of the act of nursing, unlike another translation of the same work that bore '*The Wet Nurse'* as the translated title.

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[1] The paper is the outcome of a translation and subtitling exercise carried out for a Translation Studies course as part of the author's MA programme and the translation referred to here is done by her. The translation however has not been published anywhere and was purely done to meet the course requirements.
[2] The chapter was presented at the American Literature Comparative Association Conference in 2021 as a working paper.
[3] Walter Benjamin, "Task of the Translator," in *The Translation Studies Reader,* ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, Routledge, 2000), 11.

The process of translation thus is not merely to improve the knowledge of languages and cultures and establish a relation between them by translating a text between the two but also extends to understanding the socio-political and cultural nuances of the cultures, of which even the language is a part. This particular exercise of translating the Malayalam film *Vaisali* directed by Bharathan, to the target language in English has helped examine the differences, excesses, and limitations of the two languages in question apart from understanding the cultural signifiers that existed then and have either evolved or disappeared today. However, the most salient outcome has been the new ways of 'seeing' that have been enabled through translation that further extended the discourse on gender that the film initiated.

Spurlin explores how translation theory can be expanded by introducing queer theories in conjunction and "to what extent translation operates as a queer praxis".[4] The paper demonstrates how a narrative's underlying queer nuances remain unnoticed in popular imagination and discourse because of the manner in which the film and its visual language bring about a heterosexual viewing of the narrative and it is only the translation exercise that enables seeing and reading the presence of homosexuality and homosociality in the narrative.

The film, adapted from a tale from the Mahabharata, has at its core the male protagonist Rishyasringan who has been denied the experience and association of any human female, or any human apart from his father for that matter. The woman here thus becomes mere knowledge, as mystical as a Gandharva and other celestial beings, but unlike them, the women must attract his wrath and be despised. The film portrays the erosion of the female identity — a strategy that the eponymous protagonist is forced to employ, through skillful use of verbal language, and which is arrogantly warranted by the patriarchs in the narrative– the king Lomapadan and the head priest of the kingdom Rajaguru. The preliminary task of the translator had been to understand how the languages, source, and target, are able to accommodate the conscious undermining of the concept of gender and the distinction between the male and female body which gets to be played out in multiple sequences in the film.

However, a coupled reading of the audio (dialogues) and visual aspects (song sequences, clothing, gender roles enacted, etc), revealed how Vaisali

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[4] William J Spurlin, "Queering translation: rethinking gender and sexual politics in the spaces between languages and cultures," in *Queer in Translation,* ed. B.J. Epstein and Robert Gillett (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 172.

can topple the normative ways of seeing. Embodying ambiguity and fluidity in gender identity, Vaisali raises questions pertaining to the popular narrative and heteronormative visual standards. In his Introduction to the book *Straight: Constructions of Heterosexuality in the Cinema,* Dixon talks about how cinema since its inception has been "straight" and has been instrumental in reinforcing straightness as the norm for social discourse.[5] "In Hollywood cinema, these values are reinforced and inculcated in each new generation of cinemagoers as part of the overall social fabric of the moviegoing experience".[6] The same applies to most cinema industries, including Malayalam. Schuckmann affirms how the spectator was always assumed to be "exclusively male and heterosexual."[7]

Referring to Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Hole too emphasises how "the film apparatus caters to the male gaze so that woman occupies a to-be-looked-at position for the male spectator."[8] Women in cinema have been objectified and eroticised for male pleasure (evoking a desire to possess these alluring women). Women spectators aspire to be like the sexualised women on screen (in a bid to be considered desirable and win men's attention), thus implying that the spectators are heterosexual and entering heteronormative relationships.

"The state of non-straightness is essentially suspect; it is not seen as "right [or] correct." It is something different, something to be carefully examined and if at all possible, avoided. That which is not straight is seen as something that is not part of the supposedly normative system of values, something that is a potential threat to the family, to the dominant social system, something that needs to be erased."[9] As aforementioned, Vaisali's queerness too can be discerned only after the film has been 'closely examined'. The paper concerns itself with establishing how the normative visualisation clouds any way of seeing Vaisali as embodying gender fluidity- though that is what it is- revealed thanks to the translation but

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[5] Wheeler Winston Dixon, "Introduction," in *Straight: Constructions of Heterosexuality in the Cinema,* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 1.

[6] Dixon, 3.

[7] Patrick Schuckmann, "Masculinity, the Male Spectator and the Homoerotic Gaze," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 43, no. 4 (1998): 671.

[8] Kristin Lene Hole, Dijana Jelacˇa, E. Ann Kaplan, and Patrice Petro, "Introduction: Decentering Feminist Film Studies," in *Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender,* ed. Kristin Lene Hole, Dijana Jelacˇa, E. Ann Kaplan, and Patrice Petro (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 3.

[9] Dixon, *Straight*, 1.

would also not have been possible without the visuals.

This contrapuntal reading enabled through Translation Studies and Visual Culture helps construct a new, queered narrative of Vaisali who thereby becomes another iconic figure reinforcing how Indian past cultures have embraced non-binary identities, nuances of which have been erased or rewritten through popular representations and discourses.

Teresa Hubel's article "From Tawa'if to Wife? Making Sense of Bollywood's Courtesan Genre", offers remarkable insights into the shift in perception of the tawa'ifs or Muslim courtesans who were seen as epitomes of art and fashion and were held in high esteem in elite circles, until the advent of the British. Oldenburg too examines the criminalisation of the tawa'ifs[10] in the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857. Being a community of independent and powerful women, who resented any form of oppression, the tawa'ifs were an active threat to patriarchy and gender norms "who invariably shun marriage and prefer lesbian relationships"[11] and thereby conformity. And hence a threat to the British as well as the new Indian bourgeoise and their discourse of the traditional, cultured Indian woman who belonged to the private/spiritual realm of the nation, as theorised by Partha Chatterjee in "Whose Imagined Community?"

In a move to deprive the courtesans of the identity of being the authority over art and culture, and replace them with bourgeois individuals, "social reformers condemned them for being a backward remnant of a dead feudal era and defined them as prostitutes whose presence was a blight on the nation."[12] She further argues how the Bollywood genre of courtesan films always portrayed wrongly the courtesans as having an intense desire to have a husband, marry and settle down, unlike their lived realities of actually being independent and unwilling to enter establishments like a heteronormative family.

Vaisali is also a young alluring courtesan, proficient in singing and dancing, who has been entrusted with enticing Rishyasringan. Similar to Bollywood's courtesans, Vaisali's mother too expects her daughter to be married to Rishyasringan, the kingdom's saviour and thereby the most virtuous and powerful of men. Reeling from a severe drought, the kingdom

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[10] Teresa Hubel, "From Tawa'if to Wife? Making Sense of Bollywood's Courtesan Genre," Department of English Publications 137, (2012): 259.
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/englishpub/137
[11] Hubel, 214.
[12] Hubel 222.

hopes for redemption through the pious young sage and the rituals he would perform to bring showers to the parched place. The king Lomapadan and his high priest Rajaguru have tasked Vaisali with enticing Rishyasringan and bringing him to the kingdom without his father's knowledge.

It is interesting to note how the kingdom's fate depends on that of a young woman, especially a woman who is primarily not associated with the private realm. Being a courtesan, Vaisali is a woman of the public and thereby not respectable enough– implying she is not the ideal representative of the kingdom. Chatterjee explains the emergence of the modern and the spiritual realms in the nationalistic discourse and how the Indian men, having access to the public spaces and its discourses represent modernity and the new evolving nation. However, it was also crucial that the traditional and spiritual essence of India be preserved and mapped to distinguish it from the West. This spiritual essence was embodied by the women- belonging to the four walls of respectable houses, carrying out traditional roles of being a wife and mother in a heteronormative setup. Thus, the woman's primary contribution towards defining the nation was by practicing traditional gender roles assigned by patriarchy and enabling a strong private sphere. Concluding, neither are women expected to participate in modern and hence public enterprises nor are women active in the public, considered respectable, and hence a respectable citizen of the nation.

Vaisali, by virtue of being a courtesan, is already in a position where she is rupturing the predominant discourses around her gender. Even if we consider that the context here is a kingdom and not a nation, the principle continues to hold that the courtesans like Vaisali or her mother were not given the same respect and were deemed not worthy enough to marry someone as important as Rishyasringan. Thus, despite Vaisali's status as a public woman, she is called upon to be an active agent in helping secure the future of the kingdom.

The aim behind translating a film from 1988, whose diegetic narrative is set during the pre-Mahabharata period, to the current times was to examine how the film, and more importantly, the Vedic story dealt with the question of sex and gender and how it resonated with the modern times. The element of inexperience or lack of knowledge, especially of something as natural and common as gender and sex, is revealed through Rishyasringan. Lori Chamberlain by positing in *Gender And The Metaphorics Of Translation* how the act of translation is steeped with patriarchal references such as

considering the "translation as woman and the original as man"[13] and how the rules of translation are governed similarly to the patrilineal kinship system makes it evident that there are hardly any social activities that are immune from the concept of gender. Thereby it is this very obscurity of the otherwise prominent that makes the film *Vaisali* an interesting text to translate, not only from the point of view of the languages involved but also from the time periods in question.

Language is a crucial medium to express one's identity and experience and plays a major role in the construction of gender stereotypes.[14] The primary challenge faced during the exercise too was to resolve how the languages, source, and target, would be able to accommodate the absence of the concept of gender and the distinction between the male and female body which gets to be played out in multiple sequences in the film. As stated earlier, Vaisali has been entrusted by her king on a mission to bewitch the ascetic Rishyasringan but has to also ensure that her identity as a woman is not revealed to him and manages to do so by avoiding the usage of the word 'stree' - the word for woman in Indian languages like Hindi, Malayalam, and Sanskrit- for self-referential purposes until the very end. This task has to be undertaken by the translator too to ensure that the translation does not reveal the feminine identity of the protagonist which may have been difficult had not the target language been largely gender-neutral.

Translating the scenes of encounters between the titular Vaisali and Rhishyasringan was challenging because of the absence of pronouns and gender identification. In the first encounter, Vaisali introduces herself as a 'muni kumaran' or adolescent male sage. The trope of cross-dressing to save oneself or fool the other is common across narratives. However, in most instances, like Shakespeare's Rosalind in *As You Like It* or Portia in *The Merchant of Venice,* the woman crossdresser masks her female identity through name, clothing, mannerisms, and actions. Studying the actors who have to crossdress in Medieval plays (the same is with the classical performance of Kathakali from Kerala where male performers dressed as women), through a queer lens, Clark writes how "gendered identity can be readily acquired or exchanged whenever desired and hence is open to

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[13] Lori Chamberlain, "Gender And The Metaphorics Of Translation" in *The Translation Studies Reader,* ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, Routledge, 2000), 315.

[14] Janet Holmes, "Women, Language and Identity," *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol.1, no.2, (2002): 195.,
https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1467-9481.00012.

change at will."[15] "Cinema exploits our tried and true fascination with the human body's potential to transform"[16] writes Steinbock in her chapter on examining and promoting the concept of trans-cinema where she refers to multiple examples in cinema right from the Silent Era where women have crossdressed on screen and "demonstrate the longitudinal resilience of gender nonconformity and its celebration on-screen" (394). Steinbock's definition of 'trans' as a prefix to "to signify the experience, past or present, of a transitional state of sexed being" (395) can also be borrowed to understand Vaisali's position as she is continuously forced to transition from one gendered experience to another.

In *Vaisali*, it is interesting to see a gender fluidity whereby the woman assumes the identity of the other sex in name but continues to perform the gender roles of women while never acknowledging femaleness. The visual mis-en-scene, primarily the clothing, hair, and makeup continues to be that of the woman and is overtly sexualised as well, even though she claims to Rishyasringan to be a boy. The lack of knowledge of Rhishyasringan about who the woman is and what she looks like is what allows this fluid play of gender constructs. But it is also to be noted, how the film sexualises Vaisali and depicts her relationship and romance with her male counterpart while dismissing the queer identity of Vaisali that has been masked by the dominant heteronormative way of picturising the two individuals, especially through the song sequences. While attempting a queer analysis of films, Pauyo notes how the dominance of heterosexuality on screen "prevents homosexuality from being a form of sexuality that can be taken for granted, go unmarked, or 1seem right in the way that heterosexuality can."[17]

Translating *Vaisali* also became an apt exercise to understand Spivak's idea that "task of the feminist translator is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency"[18] as the film clearly portrayed the erosion of the female identity — a strategy that the female lead is forced to employ,

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[15] Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler, "Queer Play: The Cultural Work of Crossdressing in Medieval Drama," *New Literary History*, vol. 28, no. 2, (1997): 331.
[16] Eliza Steinbock, "Towards Trans Cinema," in *Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender,* ed. Kristin Lene Hole, Dijana Jelacˇa, E. Ann Kaplan, and Patrice Petro (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 369.
[17] Louise Abigail Payuyo, "The Portrayal of Gays in Popular Filipino Films, 2000 to 2010." Philippine Sociological Review, vol. 60, (2012): 317.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/43486348.
[18] Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation" in *The Translation Studies Reader,* ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, Routledge, 2000), 397.

and which is arrogantly enforced by the patriarchs in the narrative. However, the singularity of the narrative also requires that the ignorance of the male protagonist about the social construct called gender also be considered as it is his determined position to keep his counterpart away that has prompted the entire playing out of this gender narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the source and target language are largely gender neutral except for the pronouns used like her and him which is put to common use, unlike a language like Hindi where gender decides the way the language is spoken and whereby the male and female is clearly identifiable through the language used. Thus, it was relatively easy to translate the conversations between the two, and as much as Vaisali did not bring about femininity through her words, the translation too could keep the words referring to the feminine in the background, as long as the sentences were self-referential. But the sentences referring to the other always carry pronouns in English that identify the gender and do so in Malayalam too but the time period and context of the film helped avoid the pronouns in the source language which however posed a challenge to the translation process not because of the untranslatability but rather the political significance that the equivalent word in English has currently acquired.

Since the narrative is set in the pre-Vedic times and the characters all represent the superior classes of society, instead of references of he and she the word 'avar' is used in the source language which translates to 'they'. While 'avar' is used to address the person with respect, here in this case, it is ironic how the translation gives it another layer of meaning. "Language is (among other factors) a temporal phenomenon and thus subject to the conditions of the time"[19] notes Katherine Reiss in *Type, Kind, And Individuality Of Text: Decision Making in Translation,* implying how language evolves over time. The target language here, English, is in a decisive time period where the language has moved beyond the binary pronouns of 'he' and 'she' to include 'they' for those who do not accord to the gender binaries. In such times, translating a text, situated in a context where the notions of gender are fragile and twisted to make one dominant section non- existent, and the ambiguity in Vaisali's gender identity at this point- despite being a consciously taken decision- becomes significant.

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[19] Katherine Reiss, "Type, Kind And Individuality Of Text: Decision making in translation", in *The Translation Studies Reader,* ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, Routledge, 2000), 177.

Two important components of translation as noted in the "Introduction" to the *Translation Reader* is of equivalence and functionality. While equivalence is about making the accurate translation, it is the aspect of the functionality of "as the potentiality of the translated text to release diverse effects, beginning with the communication of information and the production of a response comparable to the one produced by the foreign text in its own culture"[20] that has prompted the translator here to not only attempt translating a text from one language to another but also read the text from decades earlier in a way that adds significance to the present times. The coupling of theory and translation as is practiced by Spivak and others encourages critical thought in translators whereby one attempts to not only provide the ideal equivalences, but the politically right equivalences as needed and thus bring instances of marginalization and other such overridden elements to the forefront as the occasion rises.

In the instance of translating the element of the undermining of gender in *Vaisali,* what demands attention is not the difficulty in translation in the absence of gender identification in language but rather the consequences that it bears for the times and our society. As stated earlier the literal translation was fairly uncomplicated as the only major challenge was in translating 'avar' or 'they'. 'Avar' refers to a single person and though using they may confuse the audience unaware of the practice, the ambiguous position of Vaisali's gender does not allow a justified use of either the he or she pronoun, and the use of it will also not reveal the precarious situation which reveals how language and gender is intertwined. Thus, the use of 'they' is a conscious decision and also the best, and justified, alternative pronoun to he or she in the present scenario where the pronoun 'they' has to become as natural as a part of the vocabulary as a 'he' or 'she'.

Although the basic premise of the paper is to understand the process of translation and not to dwell onto the thematic concepts of the film, it becomes impossible not to keep in mind it does become imperative to investigate the political ideas about gender that the film indirectly inspires. While on the surface level the audience sees Vaisali as a woman thanks to the dominant visual text, as a translator focusing on the dialogues prominently (as is naturally demanded by the exercise) I was drawn to the largely unobserved facet that from Rishyasringan's point of view, until the decisive revelation in the end by when he has already fallen in love with Vaisali, it is a homosexual bond that is implied as he identifies Vaisali to be

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[20] Lawrence Venuti, "Introduction" in *The Translation Studies Reader,* ed. Lawrence Venuti (London, Routledge, 2000), 5.

a man like himself. This underlying layer of significance can be an apt example to show how fluid notions of gender can be and that heteronormativity is a construct. Considering that it is a tale adapted from the age-old epic *Mahabharata* which has had queer characters like Shikhandi, it is not surprising to see a queer encounter here. This reveals the dominant influence that cinematic imagery and the concept of heteronormativity have on each other. Bharathan's camera lens has often sexualized the female body, and this is the case here as well, even when using verbal language to adopt a man's identity, which reveals the way cinema too creates perceptions about women and their bodies.

It was only through the translation of the erasure of Vaisali's female identity into English and in a manner that takes into account gender concerns was the queerness underlying the relationship with Rishysringan was 'seen'. Such a reading may not have happened, if the target language had been different or the word 'they' had not come to have associations with queer identities. It was not unsurprising to notice that even in his thesis that looks at Queer Malayalam cinema, Mathew mentions Bharathan as a pioneer in the state's film history, but Vaisali's queerness is not mentioned. This may be due to the stronger impact and influence that visuals have on our understanding and hence the very aesthetically and sexually charged scenes and songs prompt the audience to read the narrative as a heteronormative one and thus narratives of homosexuality remain invisible and marginalised.

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Chapter Three

Bodies That Need Queering: The Queer Hetero-topias in Malayalam Cinema

Sony Jalarajan and Adith K Suresh

During the past few decades, the idea of queerness has developed into becoming one of the most discussed topics in the academic world. The emerging consensus on perceptions of sexuality and gender reiterates the need to approach bodies and their expressions in societies and cultures with a sense of inclusion and acceptance. This liberal approach is often criticized by conservative camps, and the debate gets heated every time the queer is represented as a challenging notion that violates existing elements of what constitutes in the social consciousness as the normal state of affairs. Studies that focus on queerness are dominated by Western academia and they seldom expand their contextual analyses to spaces relatively unknown to a global audience. Since queerness is a universal phenomenon common to people from distinct social, cultural, and political contexts all over the world, the need to explore such unrecognized spaces is unavoidable, especially when the contemporary globalized digital age created new possibilities for such explorations. This gives a refreshed outlook to discourses on Indian society and its historical and contemporary representations of the queer in popular mediums like cinema.

Films are arguably the most provocative medium of communication in terms of their impact on large and different audiences across the world. The way the visual medium transnationally connects notions like queerness creates new meanings and interpretations among communities and individuals who were previously entrapped by the same system of settings that engender a limited point of view. Earlier films that used themes like homosexuality in a comically denigrating manner are now being rediscovered and criticized for their outright and unapologetic misrepresentations. Some

of the fundamental questions that emerge out of this context are the
following: Do criticisms of queer representations in cinema spark serious
debates that actually result in the progressive reforming of the cinematic
text of the queer? Do films that claim to be politically correct hide the
realities of sexual minorities under the guise of identity politics? How do
visual representations of the queer challenge this problem to become
authentic and appropriate for regional audiences? All such questions
ultimately lead to a point of convergence; a critical position that must
provide information about the extent to which cinema as a visual medium
is capable of dealing with the complexities of queerness as a whole.

This chapter aims to consolidate possible responses to the aforementioned
problems by examining the special context of one of South India's most
profound film industries: the Malayalam cinema from the state of Kerala. A
quick glance through Malayalam cinema's history with queer reveals that
there is an observable improvement in the approach, treatment, and
reception of queer bodies, especially in the last decade. However, what is
observed on the surface of films can be deceiving as they intend to *represent*
authentically or problematically the essence of queerness. The representation
of the somatic subjects invokes questions about the authentic identity in
terms of the match or mismatch between the inner self and the outer body
form (Heyes 2007). Gayle Salomon (2010), for instance, argues that the
difference between normative and non-normative bodies is not materiality
but the sense of feeling with which *being* is assumed against a subject's
corporeality. Therefore, films that deal with the subject of queerness tend to
enforce a model that self-consciously assumes queer identities and is
explicitly vocal about the need to expose and transform normatively
oppressed bodies in open social and cultural spaces to get validation and
normalization. The politics of queer in Malayalam cinema is shaped by the
historicized epistemology of the normative body and its genealogy.

However, such representations often become forced heteronormative
appropriations that are replete with cisgender male actors "performing"
queer roles. This chapter argues that the dominance of "masculinity"
appearing in the form of "masculine queers" in these narratives possibly
undermines other dimensions. The "masculine queers" have their own roles
to play that are transgressive of traditional masculine roles but at the same
time restricted within the cinematic narratives of "other-spaces" that
challenge fixed heterosexual cultural norms without normalizing queerness as
a "normal" state of gender performativity. This chapter closely analyzes
how Indian cinema's progressive brand of the Malayalam film industry
treats the concept of the queer in its narrative texts. It can be observed that

the visual medium of cinema that represents queerness is influenced by changing socio-cultural coordinates and such cinematic representations contribute to the cultural myth-making of queer bodies. Unlike previous attempts, new cinematic imaginations tend to use queer bodies as serious narrative texts that emulate the emerging paradigms of the new queer cinema.

The Indian Mythography of the Queer

Indian cultural landscape has a long history of bodies and identities that are a part of its complex and unstructured sociopolitical geography. It is known as a land of multiplicities that accommodates diversity in the most explicit and complex forms. This is often sanctioned through religious narratives and local myths that defined the regional spaces of the land from times before India came to have a national identity of its own. Notions of morality and sexuality in pre-Vedic times were comparatively liberal as the narratives that dictate them were not strictly defined by a structured metanarrative of religion. Before modernity and colonialism solidified new codes of identity and performance within well-defined boundaries, ancient India had imaginations and stories about same-sex bonding and love. Rohit Dasgupta (2011) observes that "one of the dominant tropes of same-sex love in ancient India is through friendship, often leading to a life of celibacy or the forming of some very intimate relationships" (652). The ancient Hindu epic *Mahabharata* is an important example that refers to the deep friendship between its central characters, Arjuna and Lord Krishna. Ruth Vanita and Kidwai Salim (2000) mention that: "Krishna clearly states that Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen- there can be many spouses and sons but there is only one Arjuna, without whom he cannot live" (5).

Similarly, one can find same-sex camaraderie in *Ramayana,* another important Indian epic, where the companionship between characters Rama and Lakshmana or Rama and Hanuman is narrated as divine. The concept of divinity, according to Dasgupta, is a trope that is used to justify queerness in Hindu mythology: "whilst normative heterosexuality and marriage still remains the cultural norm, the possibility of transgressive sexual and gender possibilities is also highlighted. However, this was legitimised only through divinity" (2011, 653). It is not only normal but necessary for divine subjects that appear in the form of deities to surpass the human normative functions to become gods. These are identities that dissolve gender binaries through appearance and narrative. The idolization of *Ardhanareeshwara* as the

picturization of the conjoined halves of Siva and Shakti, the appearance of *Mahavishnu* as Mohini, and the birth of Lord Ayyappa are such popular narratives that sanctify the holy communion of non-heteronormative bodies.

India has a unique visual culture of the queer embedded in its rich history, which is evidently recorded in eroticized temple sculptures, and celebrated classic texts like *Kamasutra* even prescribed "queer" sexual practices (Burton 1994, 70). The reproduction and reception of queerness through the religious imaginary became part of Orientalist practices where queered entities are signified with mysticism and spiritual bewilderment. The establishment of the Eastern queer forms a separate ideological ground way before Western discussions of the queer theory came into practice. The Western discourses of the queer identify the problem of deviance associated with bodies and practices that lie outside the boundary of heterosexuality. The emergence of colonization opened new channels of modernity to cultures and societies that were never familiar with moral principles based on organized religion and material ideologies centered around imperialist models. In India, this was a period that introduced an orthodox Western angle through which the queer was reinvented out of its natural mythical order to a new whole identity that cannot be understood without strict modalities of gender. Vanita (2005a) argues that the "desire to re-write India's past as one of normative purity, is in part, the result of defensiveness against Western attempts to exoticise that past as one of unbridled sensuality" (269). The Victorian fanaticism of the British Empire had its 'purity campaign' in the form of laws and regulations prescribed for controlling colonial sexuality (Bhaskaran 2002, 16).

Dasgupta argues that "colonialism acted as a device to obscure the queer identity, an unwillingness to 'come out' to the public. It signified ambivalence about revelation of queer identities" (2011, 660). Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya (2007) explain that: "questions of identity are complex to begin with, and they become even more so when one has to relate questions of sexual identities or preferences with questions of national specificity" (x). Marginalization of native subjects that expressed queerness was incorporated into the nationalist agenda which was predominantly a heteronormative masculine endeavor at its core. A continuation of this can be observed in the emergence of a single national identity and its later religious consolidation and political practice in the form of violent Hindu nationalism. This resulted in the nourishing of an extremely counterintuitive narrative of sexual and gender identity as the official statement of a nation that just arose from the debris of colonial oppression and Western knowledge. "The hetero-patriarchal ideology of nationalism created the

absence of visible queer spaces and in turn erasing queer sexuality out from the grand narrative of Indian nationalism" (Dasgupta 2011, 665). Spectacles of the queer were no longer suitable for a nation to express itself in a globalized stage that is filled with replicas of the same ideology-driven entities.

Visualizing the Queer Body

The formation of a nationalistic identity that replaced the mythologically and ritualistically historicized queer presence in India was also boosted by the religious reformation movements that appropriated the idea of secularism. The secularization of the Indian religious fabric emphasized the concept of "unity" among diverse religious beliefs, but majority of the religions like Hinduism were still corrupted with violent superstitions that promoted repressiveness in the form of casteism and other moral codifications sanctified by texts like *Manusmriti*. These texts started to reinterpret religious texts in accordance with the scope of the new political and cultural contexts. Queer theory, in this context, views that "sexuality is a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interacts to shape the ideas of what is deviant in any particular moment, and which then operate under the rubric of what is 'natural', 'essentialist', 'biological' or 'God-given'" (Mathew 2013, 26).

Teresa De Lauretis (2017) observes that technologies like cinema "produce, promote and 'implant' representations of gender" (719). When gender identity is structured around a single meaning, it becomes oppressive and one-sided, and the meanings that define a form of gender then fight for superiority over the body. The representation of gender is also associated with repeated performances of gender that increase the rigidity of its image and perception in social discourses. Judith Butler argues (2017) that:

> the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. Indeed, in its efforts to naturalize itself as the original, heterosexuality must be understood as compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the effect of its own originality; in other words, compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of 'man' and 'woman' are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real. (723)

The heterosexual bias normalized in the performance of gender is one of the reasons why queer gender performance is overlooked and undermined as unnatural and easily described as symptomatic of an illness that needs to be cured. As a consequence of this, cinematic performances that emulate a

queer identity are often ridiculed and parodied in the narrative. When Indian mainstream cinema allows actors to appear in drags, they use the technique of imitation to point out the 'unnatural' disposition with which these bodies intentionally present themselves to an audience who can immediately make fun of their 'acting' bodies. According to Butler, the queer gender performance using drag and camp can sometimes be used in exaggerated forms to satirize heterosexual acts; to subvert the patriarchal gender performativity and its heterosexist imitation by exposing and parodying the very ambiguity of gender identity (1990, 174-80). Transgressive cult films of American filmmaker John Waters using actor and drag queen Divine in films like *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Female Trouble* (1974) are early examples of this.

Indian cinema's understanding of the queer is fundamentally centered around the heterosexual male performances of the queer bodies. One of the shreds of evidence for this argument is the passive attitude to homosexuality in the form of lesbianism as it satisfies the visual pleasure of the collective male gaze and the outright rejection of gay and transgender identities. The idea of homophobia or transphobia then reveals the normalized hatred towards the deviation of male identities from their heterosexual order. The variation of the male body is preferred as a threat to the masculine signs that rule mainstream Indian cinema, and the culture industry of Bollywood. When films are replete with 'corrupted' female bodies that appear as *Veshya* — a term that signifies the female prostitute and has no linguistic male counterpart — and female actors get slut-shamed, heterosexual male bodies are seldom ill-treated for their male identities. However, the moment they transform into a queer body, they are perceived as non-normative 'other' bodies that belong to the category of the *Veshyas*. One of India's most socially visible transgender communities are *hijras*, who are stereotypically perceived as 'males appearing as females' and face social contempt and discrimination (Narrain 2003).

David Halperin (1995) defines queer as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence" (62). Since strategies of homophobia cannot be ratified by explanations about a particular sexual preference and its origin (Sedgwick 1990, 22–63), what queer bodies evade by becoming their preferred self is a matter of the very language that defines their identities. In Malayalam cinema, the exclusion of elements that define the masculine heteronormative gender performativity is both the identity and masquerade of the queer bodies.

Malayalam Cinema and the Representation of Queerness

Since queer is a discursive category that includes representations of a range of identities that vary from culture to culture, the medium of cinema has also reflected its perceptions in different forms. From early Malayalam cinema itself, queer personas were present in the narrative, however, they were mostly male actors appearing as cross-dressed females to invoke laughter in between major scenes of the narrative. For example, drag performances of Adoor Bhasi — veteran comedian and actor of the 1960s and 1970s — in films like *Cochin Express* (1967), *Taxi Car* (1972), *Rest House* (1969) and *Kalli Chellamma* (1969) popularized such 'acts' as suitable to commercial cinema. Later, more popular comedians reproduced the queer trope as one of the easiest and less creative acts of comedy, especially gained momentum in the emergence of Malayalam 'laughter films' in the 1990s — a series of films in which comic interludes play an important role in the reception of the film. A range of Malayalam mainstream comedy actors like Jagathy Sreekumar, Kalabhavan Mani, Harishree Ashokan, Indrans, Guinness Pakru, and Suraj Venjaramoodu had appeared in 'female' roles to fill narrative gaps in commercially successful films. The idea of transgenders was signified in these films through such appearances that presented queer bodies as ridiculed and hilarious characters to remind the viewer that 'something is wrong with them'.

The drag queer portrayals mostly disseminated a feminine gender stereotype through the visibility of the original male bodies that consciously make remarks about the female gender iconography by using props like sarees, bangles, lipstick, and fake breasts. They also add exaggerated erotic gestures, movements, and utterances to invoke sexual vulgarity on their bodies. The reception and success of such acts pushed mainstream stars with established masculinities to play cross-dressed roles. Mohanlal in *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu* (1998), Jayaram in *Naranathu Thampuran* (2001) and Dileep in *Mayamohini* (2012) are some of the most popular examples. Cross-dressing by masculine bodies dominates the narrative but feminine representations of the same type seldom contributed to this context. Films like *Ammayane Satyam* (1993) and *Rasathanthram* (2006) have female protagonists dressed as young boys to hide their female identity. However, such rare instances were momentary; they function like forced identities and impersonations that do not uphold a continuous certainty, rather they act as temporary appearances that later revoke the masked position to retain their normalized states of existence.

The function of comic relief attributed to such portrayals was extremely problematic in the sense that not only it was a misrepresentation of a category of identity but the very process of gender-switching added to the stereotyping of the queer in visual culture. Representations and imitations of the queer were restricted within the limits of dramatic effect and comedy and repeatedly reproduced in films, comedy shows, reality television, and even programs for children. The sexual identity of characters in South Indian films is shaped by the gendering process that models such cultural texts to legitimize heteronormative prototypes. According to Caroline Osella and Filippo Osella (2006), "the production of a normalized and naturalized compulsory heterosexuality is what we find to be crucial to successful gendering processes" (2). Malayalam cinema's most popular representation of queer as drag is therefore predominantly a masculine description that shuns the physical as well as psychological desires of an actual queer body, instead, it presupposes a set of visual stereotypes to construct a cultural popular text of the queer. This allows the popular imagination to continue sustaining a hostile ground for queer expressions. Malayalam cinema encourages an attitude of internal resistance among queer communities to overcome their natural desires and prepares them to settle for the sociocultural identity associated with their biological sex. Since these communities do not have the cultural value or political clout to resist misconstructions of the queer, film narratives continued to reproduce identities and expressions without facing real threats of criticism from the public sphere.

Masculinization of the Female Queer

Female-to-female romantic interactions depicted in Malayalam cinema do not conform to the connotation of lesbianism. Rather, they can be differentiated as intimate communications of 'womance'— homosocial female bonding involving non-sexual emotional intimacy—as an important characteristic of films. The earliest depictions of it appeared in Malayalam cinema through the 1978 movie *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls), directed by Mohan. The movie narrates the story of Kokila and Girija, two girls whose friendship exceeds the normal limits when one of the girls becomes possessive of the other. A story that has the potential to develop into the complexities of the lesbian realm of relationships, the film, instead, refuses to delve into further details. It intermittently stops its investigation by making the characters 'adjust' to the existing power structure of heteronormativity.

In terms of making subliminal homosexual references, Padmarajan's *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (1986) stands as one of the early pioneers of queer cinema in Malayalam. The film also deals with female bonding but in a more subtle and explicit way to refer to the problems of gender compatibility and sexual tensions suffered by queer bodies. The characterizations of Sally and Nimmy — two rebellious teenage girls with a strong friendship that defines the "partners in crime" trope — clearly establish a dominant-submissive power disruption in their relationship, which reaches tragic proportions when both of them are unable to continue in a social system that perceives the likes of their companionship with speculation and violence. Marked as outcasts in school for showing uncustomary deviant behaviors, they elope from the environment that they find hostile to their freedom. This escape, even though reasonably suggests an escape of queer bodies to freedom, cannot achieve its destination, either symbolically or materially. Here, Padmarajan reiterates the abstract of heterosexuality hidden in the portrayal of homosexual identities. For example, Sally, the dominant one in the relationship is represented as a masculine-like character with male behavioral stereotypes of boldness, dominance, and arrogance justified by her appearance as a body with bobbed hair and jeans. Nimmy, on the other hand, is presented as the submissive girl type, with traditional female attires, soft behavior, and romantic desires for a heterosexual man. Sally's hatred for other cisgender men and women in the film sheds light on the possessive and passionate companionship she has for her friend, but the narrative emphasizes the dominant male-submissive female dichotomy to rationalize the heterosexual dominance with which homosexual intentions are undermined. The climax of the film suggests the tragic suicide of both protagonists who have lost their homosocial identity when the world of heterosexuality intervenes in the form of other characters and the narrative mode itself reveals the impossibility. The film overcomes its homosexual undertones by replicating the heteronormative archetypal story of star-crossed lovers. Here, the lesbian side is made invisible precisely because the masculine mode is explicitly visible. Giti Thadani (1996) explains the notion of 'lesbian invisibility" that engenders 'othered' states of gender expressions in a complex body of identities:

> [The] technique of 'othering' functions as a form of exiling, rendering invisible and excommunicating anything which may be seen as representative of homosexual and homoerotic traditions…The ideology of heterosexuality is not merely limited to a sexual relationship between opposite genders, but is a very complex signifying system…The unquestioning of this ideological gaze renders invisible any articulations based on a plural gender self-

wherein both differences and sameness may coexist, providing myriad forms of same sex/gender identifications. (6-7)

Here, the technique of masculinization works as a driving force in controlling the narrative of films. It is more evident in the performance of strong female heroines in commercial cinema. Some films introduce the heroine as a hyperactive female figure only later to be transformed into a disciplined female identity under a hero's shadow. Noted actresses like Manju Warrier, Sobhana, and Divya Unni have appeared in films that describe their identity with stereotypically masculine traits; for example, wearing shirts, jeans, and shoes; using a loud and openly confronting body language, and engaging in traditionally masculine activities. Often, the narrative itself defines them with comments such as *thala thericha pennu* (good girl gone bad) or *aanatham ulla pennu* (a woman with masculine traits). They have their identities constructed around a "tomboy" figure to hide their fragile femininity, which is always revealed in the film later.

The connection between tomboyism and lesbianism is emphasized (Brown 1999), especially through Hollywood stereotyping that "offers us a vision of the adult tomboy as the predatory butch dyke" (Halberstam 1998, 193-196). The tomboy appearances often come as surrounded by a group of female accomplices — usually friends, cousins, or sisters — and a female homosocial space is created around the tomboy to threaten the masculine bodies around her. For instance, the characters of Manju Warrier in *Summer in Bethlehem* (1998) and Sobhana in *Hitler* (1996) create such contexts of 'annoyance' to male protagonists. Barbara Creed (1995) argues that the image of the tomboy is a "threatening figure" because it "undermines patriarchal gender boundaries that separate the sexes" (96). The song-dance sequences in such films depict a dominating female heroine accompanied by these 'girl groups' to establish a sense of alternate gender behavior that reflects both masculine and feminine traits. The type of bisexuality inscribed on their bodies simultaneously rejects traditional gender roles and conforms to gender stereotypes (Halberstam 1998). Therefore, the initial rejection of their feminine subjectivity through a tomboy disguise is always reclaimed in the narrative. "The narrative of the tomboy functions as a liminal journey of discovery in which feminine sexuality is put into crisis and finally recuperated into the dominant patriarchal order" (Creed 1995, 88). A tomboy's acceptance of heteronormativity is symptomatic of the social behaviors that stigmatize queer bodies through homophobia, sexism, and misogyny.

Apart from tomboy appearances, there are films that thematize lesbian romance in a sympathetic way. Lijy J. Pullappally's *Sancharam* (The Journey) (2004) is often cited as one of the foundational films of queer portrayal in Malayalam cinema. The film explicitly portrays the visibly romantic relationship between its two protagonists, Delilah and Kiran, with more focus on the "closeted" identities of the women and problems related to their "outing" (Vanita 2005b, 184). There is a clear statement about the physical and emotional attachment of the female bodies in the film that surpasses the subliminal mode of 'womance'. One of the most alluring scenes of the film reveals the characters confessing their mutual love and desire through close-up shots of physical intimacy. The film daringly depicts visuals of lesbian passion that allow the female characters to touch, embrace, and kiss each other in a strict queer context. Another groundbreaking aspect of the film is the multiple perspectives used in the narrative to give different versions of approaching queer identities. When patriarchal judgments and heterosexual interventions form a counternarrative, the lesbian love story of two innocent girls is narrated with tenderness and neutrality, thus when the film approaches its climax, it enters into the imagination of the audience to open interpretations regarding the fate of the characters.

Films that use the queer as a subtext are more common in Malayalam. The 2015 film *Rani Padmini* explores the lives of two female couples in the context of a road trip, which symbolically refers to the journey, escape, and self-discovery of the protagonists. Unlike *Sancharam,* the film has two mainstream actors with more commercial exposure and visibility to the concept of the film, however, the narrative is not expanded to the point of understanding queer as a major theme. Interestingly, the journey to self-discovery is also a return to the rediscovered boundaries of family and heterosexuality.

Penetrating the Homosocial Spaces

Mainstream films have strategically divided masculine and feminine narratives of sexuality in their heteronormatively modified texts. They barely cross each other to generate independent queer films that can claim authority over the narrative visual medium of cinema. There are films like *Papilio Buddha* (2013) that incorporated queer identities as subtexts to other serious themes like Dalit subalternity in India. The film provocatively analyzes and explicitly demonstrates the cultural violence ingrained in the stories of marginalized individuals. Alexander Doty (1993) opines that

"cultural texts offer the potential for queer readings that focus on
connotative rather than denotative meaning, that is, to find credible readings
hidden in text that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism bars us from
seeing" (17). However, due to the controversial content, such films are not
generally supported by the public, nor do they appeal to commercial
producers. Similar to films that depict female bonding, homosexuality of
the male body is also hidden behind the surface of heteronormativity. Films
such as *Harikrishnans* (1998), *Friends* (1999), and *Dhosth* (2001) center
around the strong male friendship between the lead characters played by
mainstream actors like Mohanlal, Mammootty, Jayaram, Mukesh, Dileep,
and Kunchako Bobban. Films like this intermix a range of emotions and
themes to maintain a balanced act of constructing male relationships in
accordance with the approval of the public. In *Salt 'N Pepper* (2011)*,* the
intimate relationship between the protagonist and his cook denotes a sense
of marital conjugality as the two share a deep understanding and
appreciation when it comes to cooking. An important feature of these films
is the use of comedy as an essential element to trivialize the seriousness of
their homosocial acts.

The concept of "gayness" and "transsexuality" is embedded within the
homosocial spaces of Malayalam cinema. Although the homosocial space
is characterized by same-sex relationships, their signification is understood
through the sexual hierarchies with which the value system of sexuality is
defined. Gayle Rubin's (1984) idea of the "Charmed Circle" can be applied
here. The "charmed circle" of sexuality theorizes that different social and
cultural communities have associated sexual behaviors with categories of
'good' and 'bad'. The "good, normal, natural, blessed' category that comes
inside the charmed circle includes "heterosexual, married, monogamous,
procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generation, in
private, no pornography, bodies only, vanilla" and the "bad, abnormal,
unnatural, damned" category that is outside the circle are "homosexual,
unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups,
casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured
objects, sadomasochistic" (Jones 2020, 1480). The relationship between big
superstars and their fans has created imaginary homosocial communities
that ritualistically celebrate hypermasculinity as one of the chief
characteristics of popular cinema. Sonja Thomas (2010) argues that the
nature of gender relations in Kerala is deeply associated with and shaped by
the predominant homosocial spaces of the land that valorize masculine
subjectivities. Fans who consciously and unconsciously endorse the
masculine stardom of actors set the context for identity constructions that
helps the 'Othering' of queer bodies in cinema. According to Janet Staiger

(2000), historically constructed "identities, interpretive strategies, and tactics" "create 'interpretive communities' or cultural groups such as fans who produce their own conventionalized modes of reception" (23).

The film *Chandupottu* (2005) deeply problematizes the notion of sexual identity and choice by portraying the main character Radha Krishnan (played by popular actor Dileep) in a comical manner. Radha Krishnan's confused sexual identity is described through heteronormative perspectives and gazes outside his body and such narratives unilaterally define the protagonist as *chandupottu* (A derogatory name for transgenders and bisexuals) or *aanum pennum kettavan* (neither man nor woman). The transformation of Dileep — one of the leading star comedy actors in Malayalam cinema — into the character is marked by a body language with exaggerated gestures and utterances that explicitly defames and challenges the transgender communities. In a critical reading of the film, Prabhakaran and Thomas Poovathinkal (2013) observe that the director "assumed that the audience would treat the text as natural, obvious and simply there to be enjoyed." Malayali filmmakers often take the audience's presumptions for granted and have no problem giving them what they want as the most traditional and generic form of cinema. T. Muraleedharan (2002) notes that:

> The sporadic sojourn to the domain of queer intimacies is immediately reiterated in most of the Malayalam films by quick re-establishment of a normative order. This is generally accomplished through a reinscription of the main character into the heterosexual matrix that, in most films, constitutes the final marriage of the hero and heroine. (79)

The construction of queer identities through masculine perspectives standardizes heteronormativity as the fundamental functional unit. Michael Scott Kimmel (1994) theorizes that men practice gender through homosocial enactments that define their masculine markers by seeking the approval of other men by comparison and identification (128-29). Michael Flood (2008) argues that "men's sexual storytelling is shaped by homosocial masculine cultures" (342). Since homophobia and transphobia are structural features of homosocial spaces, films that use queer sexuality as a narrative context need to overcome appropriations and assumptions beyond the normalized social and cultural discourses.

Towards the Cinema of the New Queer?

The idea of the New Queer Cinema 'eschewed "positive images" and "happy endings" in favor of more complexly queer musings on the nature

of gender and sexuality' (Daisies 2016). A term coined by B. Ruby Rich in 1992 to emphasize how a new wave of filmmaking has politicized the queer culture in cinema, the New Queer cinema is related to the emergence of a set of filmmakers who use "provocative subject matter – transgression, gender-bending, and rude activism – to create challenging visions of sexual identity" (Soehnlein 1990, 66). In the Malayalam film industry, a change of attitude towards the portrayal of queerness can be witnessed in the depictions of gay and transgender representations. In the film *Rithu* (2009), discussions about the gay-straight dichotomy are relevant even though it leans towards the criminalization of gayness as its ideological position. *My Life Partner* (2014) similarly demonstrates the emerging complexities of identity and self when a bisexual character's relationship with his male friend becomes a problem once he chooses a heterosexual female as his partner.

Rosshan Andrews's 2013 film *Mumbai Police* has generated discussions about the depiction of a homosexual hero. The character of Anthony Mosses, played by Prithviraj, is a violently masculine police officer whose gay identity is hidden in the narrative and only revealed at the end as a "shocking climax twist". While the film is widely appreciated for a mainstream actor's willingness to do a homosexual role, it has also been criticized for exploiting homosexuality for shock value. *Mumbai Police* explores the binary of homosexual and heterosexual by taking the macho male stereotype as a standard prototype of male identity and its signification. Expressions of shame, guilt, and aggression are incorporated into the body of the protagonist to describe the conflict between gender identities. Steven Seidman (2001) suggests that "symbolically degrading the homosexual contributes to creating dominated gay selves – that is, individuals for whom shame and guilt are at the core of their sense of self; public invisibility becomes in part self-enforced" (353). When the protagonist regains memories of his past that reveal his gay identity, he is confronted with extreme emotions of humiliation and agony, which the film uses as a self-analysis of homosexuality. The film clearly establishes the paranoia and cultural fear associated with homosexuality in Kerala, thus its shocking revelation deconstructs a much more shocking reality that engulfs the film's authentic approach to the theme of queer.

Jayan Cheriyan's *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016) can be observed as a new approach to queer cinema by its unforgiving and provocative criticism of a set of problems associated with the stigmatization of homosexuality in Kerala. Cherian's film celebrates male homosexuality with explicit portrayals of half-naked cuddling gay bodies. The film uses the queer text to touch on

topics of religious, moral, and political fundamentalism to put forth its rationale for queerness. *Moothon* (2019) by Geethu Mohandas is another film with homosexual and transgender characters portrayed with authenticity. The film visualizes a queer space by careful structuring of frames with color patterns and shots that construct a new parallel environment.

Malayalam cinema's recent approach to the theme of queer used mainstream actors to desensitize the taboo side of perceiving queer identities. Thilakan and Manoj. K. Jayan in *Ardhanaari* (2012), Nivin Pauly in *Moothon* (2019)*,* and Jayasurya in *Njaan Marykutty* (2018) are a few notable examples. Films like *Ardhanari* (2012) used a number of male actors in *hijra* roles to discuss the problems of the transgender communities but failed to go beyond the traditional symbolic and religious concept of the *Ardhanarishwara* (The Half-female Lord) identity. In *Njaan Marykutty* (2018)*,* Jayasurya plays the role of a transsexual who undergoes a sex change to become a woman. Instead of employing a confronting and realistic mode of queer filmmaking, the film uses a documentary style to educate the audience about various issues related to transgender communities. The film's smooth style and happy ending contradict the existing reality of transgenders in Kerala society and the institutional violence faced by them in situations of sex-change surgeries (Rajagopal 2021). New films like *Udalaazham* (Body Deep, 2018) and *Aalorukkam* (2018) have emerged as a part of the changing social and political attitude towards queerness. *Aalorukkam* is the story of an aged father's (played by Indrans) search for his missing son, who is later revealed to be queer. *Udalaazham* narrates the story of a transgender from the indigenous tribal community of Wayanad, Kerala. The film has used aboriginal tribal people from the forest and their original language to make the narrative more authentic and socioculturally relevant.

Conclusion

The lack of queer participation in Malayalam cinema questions the authenticity of the depiction of queerness as a major theme in its narrative visual text. Since alternate gender representations and external interventions can "fictionalize" gender (Halberstam 1994, 216), the medium of cinema faces real challenges in developing its discourse on the queer. Films from Kerala, despite the claimed progressive stands on social issues, generally use the standard heteronormative narrative of masculine heterosexuality to shape their queer visuals. The process of understanding gender from the margins, therefore, has to start from a point outside the heterosexual

junction; instead of using grand metanarratives, these attempts have to use "micro-political practices" to effectively capture "the 'local' level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation" (De Lauretis 2017, 719).

Sexuality and gender are complex notions when they go beyond the realm of the individual to attain their collectively negotiated meanings. The subjective naturality of their expressiveness in a social structure is therefore immediately problematic since heteronormativity — the standardized male-female binaries of heterosexuality — shrinks everything outside its definitive definition to deviancies of a standard model. To challenge this position, or to change it, one needs to dislocate the very fabric of its semiotics. The queer attempts to do this, and in order to achieve it, the positive and negative perceptions associated with the representation of bodies need to be overcome with a new identity that must not be comprehensible using the existing signs and patterns. In other words, the queer visuals require to *not* represent non-heterosexual bodies as opposed to heterosexual bodies because the way meaning is constructed and reproduced through binaries complements each other. The cinema of the queer is not about how the film medium 'authentically' represents the LGBTQ+ identities or bodies but about the way they transgress the rigidities of all meaning to deconstruct the very idea of authenticity. This forces the New Queer Cinema to explore the 'strange' world of the queer — it is strange in the sense that it does not cooperate with the existing ideology of sexuality — to visualize the inexplicable experiences and knowledge to understand alternate sexualities and gender expressions.

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CHAPTER FOUR

'DE-CLOSETING':
STUDYING MOMENTS OF QUEER
REVELATIONS IN INDIAN FILMS
AND WEB SERIES

APARNA SHASTRI

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code had always been contentious in Indian socio-cultural discourses. Brought into effect in India by British colonial rulers in the year 1861, this archaic British law criminalized any kind of homosexual activity and was never repealed entirely by the many Indian governing bodies since then, barring some arguments, Public Interest Litigations (PILs), or minor amendments that never amounted to major social change. As per Section 377, any kind of sexual activity which could be considered "against the order of nature"[1] was a punishable offence. In effect, media representations of queer people and experiences along with being openly or allusively queer in India remained under strict societal and legal scrutiny. The section was repealed by the right-wing-oriented Indian government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2017, a landmark move celebrated hugely all over the nation. The political motivations behind the move may or may not have been centred around securing an important and highly marginalized vote-bank in the Indian society, but of interest here is the manner in which this major legal move has translated into increased visual cultural representation of gay people, both in the stereotypical and exaggerated forms that were prevalent before in commercial Hindi cinema, but also more prominently in many social institutions like middle-class, small town Indian families, schools, urban settings etc. In this chapter, my attempt is to map out the evolving ways of representing queer characters in

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[1] "India Code: Section Details," accessed November 10, 2022, https://www.indiacode.nic.in/show-data?actid=AC_CEN_5_23_00037_186045 _1523266765688&orderno=434.

Hindi-language films and web-series following the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian penal code. Given the rather conservative social fabric of India, right-wing extremism on the rise, and the notorious censorship of visual media content exercised by the 'certification' board of the Information and Broadcasting ministry, this increased representation, I argue, is facilitated even more by the rise of Over-The-Top (OTT) or subscription-based television platforms in India, thus heralding a new age of web-based television, along with the new-found bravery of Indian content creators following the decriminalization of homosexuality. I use the term 'bravery' in this context, because India has had a history of politically affiliated extremist groups targeting filmmakers and actors in the past in violent ways for the portrayal of homosexual characters and queer intimacy. Moreover, with more representation in predominantly heteronormative settings on internet-distributed television and in many contemporary films, there is more public visibility and increased acceptance of queer people in civil and social settings, which may be considered to be a consequence of greater LGBTQIA+ driven storylines in visual media.

Therefore, using a visual studies approach and by closely examining specific scenes of revelation of the homosexual orientation in three visual texts from Indian visual media, I argue that these scenes mirror the attitude towards 'de-closeting' of LGBTQIA+ people in Indian society itself. I further posit that the bystanders or supporting characters in the film or television show are representative of the society's voyeuristic eyes that are aghast at non-normative, public show of love, and are intent and inflexible on making homosexual people conform to heteronormative, binary gender roles. I argue that the instances of voyeurism depicted in these scenes serve to be emblematic of the Indian society's voyeurism towards gay people and their private lived experiences. With the camera serving as a voyeuristic lens, these scenes situate audiences as voyeurs into queer experiences.

The role of heterosexual marriage as a way of remedying and subjugating homosexuality is crucial, especially in the Indian context, and I shall elaborate on the depiction of heterosexual marriage in my chosen visual products in the following sections. Ultimately, by dissecting the visual construction of these scenes, I explore how these scenes are representative of the current social conditions around queer life in India. I also elaborate on the latent goals of these films to initiate conversations around homophobia and reform social conditions by presenting those aspirations in storylines and characters.

Early Representations: Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

The representation of homosexuals on mainstream Indian celluloid was limited to the stereotypical fashion designer or their assistant, or the courtroom jester in historical tales, or the closeted gay friend of heterosexual protagonists. Few art films were made, and even fewer had gay representation of any kind. Hailed as India's first gay film, the 1971 release *Badnaam Basti (Infamous Neighborhood)* was quite literally 'lost', and "has emerged after 49 years of hiding in an archive in Berlin. It is one year short of celebrating half a century of obscurity"[2]. The film was obscure not just because it was thought to be lost, but because it never garnered an audience and was certified as 'adult' by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) of India.

The second and slightly more widely known gay film was the 1996 release, *Fire,* directed by Deepa Mehta and based loosely on the short story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt), written by one of India's most radical female personalities and freedom-activists, Ismat Chughtai (1915-1991). The story is set in a middle-class family in Delhi where two sisters-in law fulfil their sexual and emotional needs with each other unbeknownst of their husbands. They ultimately break their patriarchal bonds and move away from their family to live together. The title of the film signifies both desire and purity, as fire is an important religious motif in Hindu mythology, and a 'trial by fire' is considered the ultimate sign of female purity and fidelity. In the popular Hindu epic *Ramayana,* the main female character Goddess Sita "walks through the flames, unharmed"[3], signifying her purity before her husband, Lord Rama. Semiotically, the film also has recurring use of the fire motif, both in context of female desire and lesbianism, and as a catalyst in helping the film "cut against patriarchal codes"[4]. Examining the two female

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[2] "India's First Gay Film Badnam Basti Resurfaces after Nearly Half a Century's Hibernation in Berlin Archive-Entertainment News , Firstpost," Firstpost, May 29, 2020, https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/indias-first-gay-film-badnam-basti-resurfaces-after-nearly-half-a-centurys-hibernation-in-berlin-archive-8419921.html.

[3] "Sita's Fire Test," Text (http://www.bl.uk/copyrightstatement.html), accessed November 29, 2021,
https://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/inside/ramayanastories/sitatest/sitafiretest.html.

[4] Rahul Gairola, "Burning with Shame: Desire and South Asian Patriarchy, from Gayatri Spivak's 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' To Deepa Mehta's 'Fire,'" *Comparative Literature* 54, no. 4 (2002): 316, https://doi.org/10.2307/4125368.

protagonists of the film, Radha and Sita (both named after prominent Hindu goddesses) through a subaltern lens, Rahul Gairola writes:

> Mehta's heroines are subaltern, albeit represented, oddballs, for they are lesbians as well as Indian women caught in the constrictive web of familial commitments, arranged marriages, and notions of duty. Spivak notes in her famed essay that "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant" (82), a process that Mehta visually contests in her film.[5]

The contestation of gender codes and the gradual rise of female agency are intrinsic to the film's plot, along with an emphasis on sexual deprivation and repression in almost all characters. The film builds on by providing a crude and realistic portrayal of the Indian 'joint' family, where an elderly, invalid mother, her two sons and their wives, and a domestic help live together under one roof and conservative social codes, and each carry individual identity crises and repressions within them. There are two unhappy marriages in the same family: Radha's sexual relations in her marriage do not exist because of her husband's (Ashok) vow of celibacy due to religious affiliations. Sita's husband and Ashok's younger brother Jatin has been having an affair with a Chinese woman. These two loyal wives are tied eternally to their domestic chores and have no scope of sexual pleasure or even affection in their lives despite living in a 'normal', heteronormative, middle-class, North Indian family. However, this repression of sexuality is also exposed indirectly by Mehta in the details of the plot and screenplay: the selling of adult-rated videotapes in the family-owned video store by younger brother Jatin, without the knowledge of his older brother Ashok, the masturbating scenes of the family's domestic help, Mundu, and ultimately, the lead story of the film – the hidden lesbian relationship of the sisters-in law, Radha and Sita, both sexually deprived women who find and liberate each other of their sexual and moral confinement by shunning patriarchy and leaving their husbands to live together.

Towards the end of the film, there is the depiction of an intimate moment between Radha and Sita wherein they are caught by Ashok (he was informed by the servant about his wife's sexual encounters with Sita). The scene begins with a closeup intimate shots of the two women in bed, who are then walked in on by Ashok who rams the bedroom door open after first peeking in through the slit at the two naked women.

This element of voyeurism is accompanied by an exposure and immediate realization of the fact that his wife could get her sexual needs met elsewhere,

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[5] Gairola, 316.

thus deeply complicating and shattering his belief in his own masculinity and sexual abstinence. Gairola, using the lens of Rene Girard's mimetic desire concept explicates how Ashok is more intimidated by the idea that his wife is desired by another women. He writes,

> Whereas Ashok previously felt no sexual desire towards his wife, once he discovers that Radha is the consensual object of Sita's sexual desires, he is suddenly overcome by a mixture of desire and rage. Mehta highlights this by cross-cutting scenes of an enraged Ashok with close shots of both naked women making love.[6]

Fig 1. Radha and Sita are walked in on by Ashok in the climax, revelatory scene in *Fire*.

The scenes that follow are confrontational: Ashok violently tries to make love to Radha in the kitchen, and in the process her sari catches fire, causing her to undergo a literal 'trial by fire'. She survives, unharmed, and returns to Sita to begin a new life as the film ends. *Fire* leads us to question the hypocritical patriarchal codes governing women in India, ending with a liberatory message of feminist agency and breaking of marital shackles. It does not set out with a mission to undermine heterosexual unions but endeavors to make the audience rethink assumptions about middle-aged females in middle-class marriages, opening up conversations about female sexual needs, and the meaninglessness of heteronormative marriages for

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[6] Gairola, 319.

women in the absence of sexual intimacy. Thus, this explicit sequence of Radha and Sita' gay relationship and the gradual denouement of the film is indeed glaring and revelatory, not just for the film's characters, but also for the hypocritical, conservative, Indian audience member. Both the audience and Ashok serve as voyeurs into same-sex intimacy.

...there's no word in our language that can describe what we are.

Fig 2. Radha(right) and Sita(left) in conversation after being found in bed together.

'Coming out': Revelations and Reactions

In 2020, three years after the decriminalization of homosexuality, came a commercially-viable, ensemble family drama, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan*[7]. The film centers around a male gay couple (Aman and Kartik) trying to convince their conservative, homophobic family to accept their sexual identity. It opened to mixed reviews but is touted as the first commercial, mainstream Bollywood venture to talk openly about gay marriage, gay relationships, and the homophobic mindset of the average small town Indian parent. The film reimagines a lot of traditional Indian wedding rituals for homosexual couples, within the continuous backdrop of a wedding in the family and a host of extended family members present. In discussing the intersection of themes like heterosexual marriage as a foundational institution in India, Indian familial logics and antics, and the

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[7] n. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan,* directed by Hitesh Kewalya (2020; AA Films)

taboo of homosexuality, the film, despite its flaws and at times bizarre plot twists, carries a message of hope.

In her study of heteronormative representations in Bollywood, Saachi Bhatia has explored the "symbolic power of Bollywood to produce and maintain heteronormative representations"[8]. She describes how "representations of homosexuality are regulated by the dominant discourse of heteronormativity"[9]. In the case of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan*, India's first outspoken gay film, the exigency is Aman's parents pressuring him into marrying a girl of their choice (arranged marriage), fearing he has a girlfriend that they wouldn't approve of. The plot eventually moves on to the discovery of Aman's homosexual orientation and the fact that he lives with his partner, Kartik in another city. The revelation of his non-normative, homosexual orientation was the most unconceivable and intense shock his conservative, middle-class parents could possibly get, and therefore the scene of revelation is worth expanding on. The film has the backdrop of ongoing wedding celebrations, and the entire family is travelling via train, which is where Aman and Kartik are seen kissing by Aman's father. The shock of what he saw is vomit-inducing, and the director captures the intensity of the moment symbolically, as the train enters a dark tunnel at the very instant of disclosure. As flashes of white beams in the tunnel light up the dark section of the train where the kissing lovers are spotted by the shocked father, we see the latter turning to the door of the train and vomiting. Such is the image of heinousness associated with gay love in the minds of the average Indian parent, and the film poses it before the audiences in its exact intensity.

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[8] Saachi Bhatia, "What is the norm: A study of heteronormative representations in Bollywood." *Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science.* (2017):13 https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/msc-dissertations/2017/Saachi-Bhatia.pdf.

[9] Bhatia, 5.

Fig 3. [Aman(left) and Kartik(right) caught kissing in the train in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan*]

What follows is "the disarray his immediate and extended family are thrown into as each becomes privy to this 'information'"[10] In the mix of family drama, outrage, heterosexual marriage plans, forceful separation of the two lovers, and attempts to 'cleanse', or re-baptize Aman to cure him of his 'disease', there are numerous comic elements interspersed in the narrative to keep audiences engaged. The morning after the scene of discovery, Aman's father (who had fainted due to the shock) finds a high-pressure water pipe at the railway station and aims it directly at his son who was walking up to him to confront him with the truth. This reaction of cleansing his son of the 'unnatural', 'impure', 'incorrect' 'habit' that he had apparently acquired is descriptive of the middle-aged Indian parent's deep-rooted inflexibility, rigid mindsets, and the urge to take refuge in orthodoxy instead of coming to terms with the idea of homosexuality.

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[10] "Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan: How Gender Politics Helped India's First 'Mainstream Gay Film,'" *The Indian Express* (blog), February 27, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/shubh-mangal-zyada-saavdhan-how-gender-politics-helped-indias-first-mainstream-gay-film-hitesh-kewalya-ayushmann-khurrana-6287923/.

Fig 4. [Aman's father trying to 'cleanse' him of homosexuality with a high-
pressure water pipe in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan*]

A factor important to understanding the absolute abhorrence of gayness in
Indian society, is the Indian family's obsessions with procreation and
continuation of the 'family name'. The family as an institution is generally
considered to be the bearer of heterosexual procreative agency, which is
shattered at the very idea of a gay son, thus leading the parents to forcefully
get him married, or get a religious re-baptism performed for some sort of
'cleansing'.

Another confrontational scene where violence is the immediate reaction to
the discovery of gayness, is in the Indian web series *Made in Heaven
(2019)* [11], streamed on Amazon Prime Video. It is the story of a posh, New
Delhi-based wedding planning company, run by two friends and lead
protagonists, Tara and Karan. Karan is the gay character whose teenage past
is developed through flashback scenes in the show, depicting the time when
his mother found him showering with a male friend, she beat him violently
with a cricket bat to vent her anger at her son being gay, threatening him to
never touch another boy and never tell his father.

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[11] "Made in Heaven (TV Series 2019–) - IMDb," accessed February 3, 2023,
https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6494622/.

Fig 5. [A teenage Karan's mother hits him violently with a cricket bat when she finds him showering with a male friend. *Made in Heaven*, episode 6.]

It is later revealed that Karan's hand was severely injured after the incident, and she made him lie to his father that he had gotten injured at school playing basketball. Ironically, it was Karan's father who came out in support of his son being gay later in the series, and the hypocrisy of the mother who knew about her son's sexual orientation ever since his teenage and threatened him by making him fearful of his father's wrath is brought out in the open. The notion of a mother's role in the homosexual orientation of a child is another indirect theme in the scene – the subtle revelation of the reason why Karan's mother never let him disclose his homosexuality: the fear that it would reflect on her.

Fig 6. [Karan confronts his parents after having been bailed out from jail.
He apologizes to his father for never trusting him, and tells him about his mother's
violent reaction when she found he was gay.
Made in Heaven, Season 1, Episode 6.]

Entrapment in Heterosexual Marriage

The channeling of a young man's future into the heterosexual template despite his constant and honest assertion of his homosexuality becomes the crux of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan*, leading audiences to rethink how widespread the social taboo around homosexuality really is, despite its legal decriminalization. The film aims to advance a promise of a less-repressive future by ending with the parents coming to terms with their son's sexuality and accepting his relationship with another man. The very incorporation of such an ending is a testimony to the filmmakers' attempts at stimulating the conservative, middle-aged Indian parent in the audience, and of opening up a conversation around non-normative identities. Even though the film aims to project an image of gradual acceptance of homosexuality within the ideological framework of the Indian family, while highlighting the tensions between centuries-old belief systems of Indian parents and 'new-age' ideas of love, it interestingly still imagines how homosexual relationships could

fit into the institutionalized template of heteronormative marriages — that even after achieving inclusion or even a modicum of acceptance, the organization of homosexual relationships would still be governed by heteronormative ideals. The film uses recognizable tropes of typical Bollywood romance films and Indian wedding rituals modified for a gay wedding, possibly as a means to amplify the idea of acceptance and normalcy for the audiences who are so used to heteronormative weddings on screen and in real life. This reaffirms Bhatia's argument about the proliferation of binary cultural codes through the predominant heteronormative and binary-gender-norms-oriented plot lines in Bollywood. Given the very recent decriminalization of homosexuality in India, the idea of legalization of homosexual marriages seems like a very distant destination in the current political climate.

In *Made in Heaven,* there is another character that exemplifies the entrapment in heterosexual bonds by way of marriage, establishing how people live their lives like a lie without ever coming out due to fear of extreme reactions from family and ostracization from society. Karan's landlord in the show, Ramesh Gupta, is a gay man who is visibly a typical, middle-class straight man with a wife and teenage daughter. Sexual repression, sexual fulfilment through voyeurism, and the entrapment of a gay man in a heterosexual marriage for a lifetime, all coalesce in the character of Ramesh Gupta. Gupta deceitfully installed cameras in the room he rented out to Karan, and later watched Karan's sexual encounters with other men only to meet his own sexual needs. However, we later come to sympathize with him when we realize his entire existence is a lie, that he was never brave enough to confront his own homosexuality, that he had to live in a closet all his life due to fear of oppression and a lifetime of condemnation. A recurring theme, in *Fire*, *Made in Heaven*, and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, is the society's voyeuristic eye that gazes at homosexual lovemaking with either pure curiosity, rivalry of desire, or with the longing of unfulfilled homosexual fantasies.

Privacy and Voyeurism

Made in Heaven, similar to *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* also seeks to initiate dialogue about the taboo associated with homosexuality, as we see Karan's character becoming a vocal spokesperson for gay rights in the show. After violation of his privacy by his landlord, Karan's homosexuality is no more confined to his bedroom, it becomes a publicly discussed issue, he is arrested and mistreated by the police, the media covers the case, and within

the show itself we see a cultural conversation about gay rights opening up –
with television panel discussions and staged events by the youngsters led by
Karan in support of gay rights. The show first aired in 2019, two years after
the decriminalization of homosexuality, but it captures the horrors of living
in a society where any kind of homosexual conduct is against the law,
depicting the brutalities of the police officers who capture Karan and take
him in custody even without a proper First Information Report (FIR) against
him.

While *Made in Heaven* resorts to a more explicit depiction of homoeroticism,
Fire was more concerned with the aesthetics of lesbian lovemaking.
However, it is key here to note that in *Made in Heaven,* aesthetic is
compromised for a more authentic portrayal of the CCTV camera footage
of Karan's homosexual lovemaking. I evoke here Laura Mulvey's theory of
the male gaze[12], paralleling the surveillance eye of the CCTV camera with
her theorization of the voyeuristic male gaze on the female body. The only
difference in this case being that the landlord, and macrocosmically, the
audience watching the episode are all voyeurs of homosexual intimacy. The
deliberate construction of sequences in these films and web series where
homosexual encounters are being watched, looked at, and intruded upon,
speaks to the larger message of privacy and individual sexual choices that
filmmakers wish to convey. In all the three visual texts I discuss here, there
is a visual discovery of queerness, instead of a conversational 'coming out'
moment, which can be attributable to the affordances of the visual medium,
and also be seen as an effort from filmmakers to call out intrusions of
privacy.

The issue of privacy, especially in context of homosexuality in an intolerant
society like India is also discussed in the 2015 film *Aligarh*, a sincere and
realistic portrayal by director Hansal Mehta of the life of Prof. Ramachandra
Siras who taught languages at Aligarh Muslim University and was ousted
from the university for being gay. The film captures the legal struggle and
societal ostracization faced by Dr. Siras, how the court eventually rules in
his favor, and ends with him being found dead under mysterious
circumstances, even before he could return to work. The film raises issues
around criminalization of homosexuality, but also largely addresses the
rather sad fact that one's privacy is not sacred even in one's bedroom. Be it
Karan's landlord's breach of his privacy by putting hidden cameras in his
room, or the forceful entry in the silence of the night into Prof. Siras's house

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[12] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October
1, 1975): 6–18, https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

by two local television station crew members in *Aligarh,* the Indian society's voyeuristic preoccupations and breaches of privacy are important elements in distilling out gay representation on Indian cinema. Describing *Aligarh*, Namrata Joshi, film critic with *The Hindu*, writes,

> Despite the underlying violence, physical as well as psychological, of the situation there is a quietude, gentleness and sincerity of treatment which heightens the larger, central debate of the film: should we be bothered about a person's so-called immoral conduct or take up cudgels against society's uncalled-for intrusion into the privacy of an individual?[13]

Fig 7. [Aligarh movie poster. 2015.]

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[13] Namrata Joshi, "Aligarh: Autumn of Loneliness," *The Hindu*, February 26, 2016, sec. Bombay Showcase,
https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/entertainment/aligarh-an-autumn-of-loneliness/article8282914.ece.

Web Television – No Holds Barred

With the advent of OTT and subscription based video on demand (SVOD) digital visual content, the creative freedom exercised by filmmakers over the last few years has tremendously increased. Queer characters are a part of numerous storylines, many a times centrally, which is in sheer contrast to mainstream films or TV shows from even a few years ago. Major censorship of televisual and cinematic content could be done by the CBFC, and it now manifests in multiple ways like 'boycott' trends, cancel cultures, protests by extremist groups, trolling, and even outright bans. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* met with immense protests from Hindu fundamentalist group Shiv Sena on its release. The group claimed the film was offensive to Hindu religion as the lead characters were named after Hindu goddesses, and that no lesbians existed in Hindu culture (ironically, India's ancient history and Hindu temple sculptures suggest otherwise). Protests over the film had continued even after it was "cleared by the Indian censorship board and subsequently shown in cinemas under police protection"[14]. However, the conditions of today are entirely in contrast — the evolution of the culture of viewing television has caused the so-called 'profanity' of homosexuality to enter everyone's homes through their screen devices, be it their laptops, television screens, or their cellphones. With multiple technological devices under one roof, numerous subscription-based platforms, and multifarious web-series for people to choose from, there has never been more access to visual content, and never been more proliferation of gay representation, gay characterization, and homoeroticism on Indian screens.

Thus, combined with legal support to gay rights due to the repeal of Section 377, the boost that Over-The-Top (OTT) or web-based television has seen over the last few years has resulted in the initiation of a dialogue around queer acceptance in India. However, it will be interesting to see how long this freedom lasts, as the Indian Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has begun to strengthen its grip on content scanning processes for OTT platforms. In March 2021, a new set of guidelines have been introduced for content regulation on OTT platforms. According to Stuti Mishra:

> Under the new law, the regulation mechanism for OTT platforms like Netflix, YouTube, and others, will be divided into three levels. It will begin

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[14] "Deepa Mehta: A Director in Deep Water - All over Again," The Independent, May 18, 2006,
https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/deepa-mehta-a-director-in-deep-water-all-over-again-478731.html.

with self-regulation by the content platform and end with a government-appointed panel headed by a ministry official. It will also require them to self-classify their content into five categories based on age suitability.[15]

It is therefore again a tricky turf for filmmakers and television producers as the degree of governmental regulation on visual media products on digital platforms is going to be a ground for creative conflict, re-igniting debates on democratic ideals and freedom of speech and expression, something that has been a volatile zone in India for a long time.

Conclusion

I have argued in this chapter that the way in which film and new-age, web-television creators are treating the stigma surrounding homosexuality on screen is primarily centered around themes of a closeted heterosexual life, debates around privacy and voyeurism, and the gradual shift in belief systems of a rigid and conservative society. Numerous Indian web series other than *Made In Heaven,* like *A Married Woman*, *His Story*, *Four More Shots Please*, *Mismatched* etc. feature at least a supporting or a central queer character, that is not stereotypical but rooted to the story and authentically developed. These characters are as 'normal' as their heteronormative counterparts, belong to the traditional Indian family, struggle in a middle-class working economy, and strive to live freely as their true selves without being judged or hated by the society and their own families. This kind of representation is geared more towards digital content and is a major shift from the stereotypical representations of gay people as assistants of gossip-magazine editors, fashion designers, the best friend of the protagonist etc. in films from the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. Realism in both setting and characterization is therefore an integral part of the intended societal conversation these films and series try to reflect, and also ignite in the society. Short films like *Ajeeb Daastaanz* and *Bombay Talkies* in recent years also touch upon with the subtlety on bisexual and lesbian relationships, closeted couples in heteronormative marriages, and the manipulative use of those relationships for economic gains, depicting intricate intersections of love, desire, class, and caste.

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[15] "Streaming Platforms Must Be Accountable for Their Content, India Says, amid Netflix Censorship Row," The Independent, March 26, 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/india-ministry-ott-platforms-law-b1822797.html.

By mapping out themes around increasing queer representation and treatment of revelatory moments of queerness in these three Hindi-language media artefacts, I assert that the visual revelation of homosexuality and 'de-closeting' of gay people is indeed an attempt by filmmakers to break taboos surrounding open declaration of consensual homosexual love and physical intimacy in Indian society. However, due to new-formed laws that regulate web-distributed visual content as well, the foreseeable future holds both hope and potential tensions between authorities, media creators, and audiences in context of queer representation on screen.

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CHAPTER FIVE

"I DON'T PLAY THE BACK-FOOT": SPECTATORSHIP, MASCULINE NATIONALISMS, AND QUEER(ING) CRICKET IN AMAZON PRIME'S *INSIDE EDGE* (2017)

ARYEHI BHUSHAN

In 2012, American actor and comedian Jason Alexander faced significant backlash after describing cricket as a "gay game" during an episode of *The Late Late Show With Craig Ferguson.* "There's a lot of people wearing white [in cricket]," he riffed sardonically, "people wearing helmets for no discernable reason […] everybody breaks for tea in the middle, and when you hit [the ball], you just kind of run back and forth for no rhyme or reason. […] You know how I really know it's a gay game? It's the pitch [referring to the bowler throwing the ball]: it's a queer, British, gay pitch" ("Late Late Show Jason Alexander" 5:19-50). Though Alexander later apologized for and retracted his comments, I would argue that the segment nevertheless reflects a deep cultural preoccupation with issues of masculinity, emasculation, and queerness relating to cricket in particular and sport more generally. As historians have noted, cricket originated in rural England as a game played by commonfolk, but quickly evolved into "an activity that was cherished and appreciated by the landed gentry [and] embodied gentility of morals, ethics [and] manners" (Mondal and Rampersand 197). Cricket's role as an arbitrator of civilized and 'correct' morality through masculine athletic presentations crucially intersected with the developing British Empire, where which the game was exported to the colonies as a tool to "'civilize' [colonized populations] with the ethos of Anglo-Saxon values and ethics" (198). As anticolonial sentiments within these colonies grew, however, cricket became an avenue through which colonized players could assert their and their country's independence through "defeating the motherland" (198). For colonial India specifically, this anticolonial assertion involved an aggressive renegotiation and reclamation of masculinity within the cricketing

arena. Prashant Kidambi contends that Indian cricketers of the 40s, 50s and 60s were still bound to "colonial stereotypes about the effeminate […] educated Indian" (Kidambi 188), and India's establishment as a serious contender in the field of international cricket ran parallel to the Nawab of Pataudi's aggressive captaincy of the Indian team and fostering of an expanded, "masculine" spin bowling culture (Wagg 94). Broadly speaking, Indian cricketing culture has experienced an exponential growth in the normativity of aggressive, masculine athletic displays in the decades since; perhaps best exemplified by the incident where hotheaded captain Sourav Ganguly whipped off his shirt at Lord's to celebrate India's victory over England in the final match of the 2002 NatWest ODI Series (Tharakan). In a now iconic picture taken of the celebration, Ganguly's brown, bared, and muscular body becomes the site within which Indian cricket as a forthright, provocative and macho spectacle is situated: an India which was "ready to win [at cricket], ready to take on the world" (Adhikari) (see fig. 1).

Simultaneously to these development in the subcontinent, the body of cricket itself was undergoing an evolution. The traditional style of Test cricket — with the white uniforms, tea breaks and endless overs that Alexander characterized as inherently and inescapably "gay"—gave way in the nineties and noughties to the shorter and more intense T20 format, in which a game is played in 20 overs over the course of a single day. India's early successes in the T20 format proved promising enough for the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India) to launch the Indian Premier League, or IPL, an "amalgamation of global cricket superstars and the Indian film industry" (Mondal and Rampersand 200). In *Reading New India,* E. Dawson Varughese emphasizes the glamorous, capitalist trappings of the IPL as a franchise, writing that

> IPL and the appetite for the 'one-day game' is a motif of New India, emerging in the late, first decade of the noughties and very much in line with the economic boom that India has been enjoying. IPL talks directly to the growing middle classes of India, their desire for 'Indian cricket per se, consumerism and the advertising and celebrity hype that accompanies it (Varughese 58).

Figure 1: Sourav Ganguly celebrates India's win at Lord's, 2002.

I contend that the IPL as an era has ushered in a new manifestation of Indian cricketing masculinity, one in which the cricketer is no longer just a macho athlete but a celebrity in his own right; suspended somewhere between actor and player, independent consumer and consumable product, human and god. What Indian cricketers undeniably are — what they *must* undeniably be — however, is heterosexual. The specter of queerness has haunted the edges of Indian cricket through its many phases of development, from the homophobic connotations of the "effeminate" colonial cricketer to the swaggering heterosexuality of IPL stars like Hardik Pandya, who boasted on the celebrity talk show *Koffee with Karan* about his flings with multiple

women who he liked to watch "move" in nightclubs (Cyril). The aggressive assertion of heterosexuality within Indian cricketing culture can be interpreted in a number of different ways: as a residual response to the Orientalist feminization of imperialism; a conscious strategy to keep the 'brand' of the celebrity cricketer popular and marketable; or indeed a pragmatic reaction to Section 377, the "colonial antisodomy statute" introduced into the Indian Penal Code by Lord Macaulay in 1860 which had the effect of criminalizing homosexuality in India until it was repealed in 2018 (Bhaskaran 18).[1]

Perhaps as a byproduct of Bollywood's relationship to the IPL, cricket has enjoyed a privileged position as the subject of numerous mainstream films such as *Lagaan* (2001), a historical drama in which a group of Indian villagers compete against British imperial soldiers in a cricket game with the taxation of the village on the line; *The Zoya Factor* (2019), a romantic comedy in which a hapless advertising executive becomes the 'lucky charm' and team mascot for the Indian national cricket team; and *83* (2021)*,* a biopic following the Indian national cricket team as they became the unlikely champions of the 1983 World Cup. Though the three films differ in tone, structure, and outlook, they all notably contain heterosexual romance/s as a key narrative thread, be it *Lagaan's* love triangle between an Indian villager, his childhood sweetheart, and a colonial officer's younger sister, *Zoya's* central romance between the protagonist and the cricket team's captain, or *83's* off-crease interludes featuring the teams' wives and girlfriends. In many ways, this universal focus on normative, heterosexual relationships is unsurprising: the Indian Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) is notoriously censorious of cinematic depictions of sexual content, religion, women, and queerness in particular. In 2017, for example, the CBFC banned screenings of Jayan Cherian's *Ka Bodyscapes* on the basis of "glorifying homosexual relationships […] the film offends human sensibilities by vulgarity, obscenity or depravity" (Anasuya 2017, n.pag). Even beyond this legislative context, however, the presence of queer or non-normative sexualities in sports films are often considered illicit at best and violating at worst. In *The Arena of Masculinity,* Brian Pronger touches on this taboo when he notes that "because homosexuality and athletics express contradictory attitudes to masculinity, violation and compliance respectively, their coexistence in one [entity] is a paradox, the stuff of irony" (Pronger 13). As

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[1] Notably, both cricket and Section 377 are lingering remnants of a colonial rule whose influences have since penetrated deep into the fabric of Indian society—as such, any study of the intersections between the two must center the potent presence of colonial trauma and the related decolonizing work that is yet to be done.

Pronger goes on to identify, however, this seeming contradiction carries with it an allure of the forbidden, in that "sport […] presents some men with an archetypic mythic form for homoerotic desire: the sexy, muscular, *masculine* athlete. That desire is paradoxical" (22).

While issues of censorship and social conformity may have thus far prevented mainstream Indian cinema from addressing the "paradoxical desire" of queerness in cricket, the increasing presence of streaming and OTT (over-the-top content) platforms within the Indian market have created an avenue through which these desires can be articulated and visualized on screen. Indian divisions of major streaming services, such as Amazon Prime and Netflix, as well as domestic platforms like Hotstar, Jio and EORTV (the latter of which is India's first LGBT-focused video streaming service) are not currently "under the purview of India's censors […] this unfettered freedom to operate on the internet has made queer content blossom" (Farooqui, Nair). ZEE5's *377 AbNormal* (2019) and *The Married Woman* (2021); Netflix's *Sacred Games* (2019), *Call My Agent: Bollywood* (2021), *Chandigarh Kare Ashiqui* (2021) and *Badhaai Do* (2022); and Amazon Prime's *Made In Heaven* (2019) are just a handful of series to center queer and trans characters and grapple with issues of systemic homophobia and societal acceptance. Even among this cohort, however, only two series explore queerness in relation to the Indian cricketing world: Amazon Prime's *Inside Edge* (2017) and Netflix's *Selection Day* (2018). Both shows take as their context the glitzy, cutthroat, corrupt world of Mumbai T20 cricket, but while *Inside Edge* focuses on an adult cast of characters working in or in relation to a struggling IPL-esque team, *Selection Day* serves as a coming-of-age story for its teenage protagonists as they jostle to be selected for the national under-19 cricket team. While I believe that a study of *Selection Day's* queer storyline (and associated charges of queerbaiting and internal censorship) would be highly necessary to the existing discourse, I have chosen for the purposes of this chapter to focus on *Inside Edge* exclusively, on account of its wider popularity and critical acclaim both nationally and internationally (Sharma, IANS). Through a close analysis of the series third season, I aim to explore how *Inside Edge* tackles issues of heteronormativity, masculinity (particularly as it pertains to athleticism and aggression), spectatorship and nationality within Indian cricket.

Created by Karan Anshuman and directed by Kanishk Varma, Amazon Prime's *Inside Edge* is centered around a PPL (Power Play League, a loose equivalent to the IPL) team called the Mumbai Mavericks and follows its players and owners as they navigate the cutthroat commercialization of T20 cricket and the game's dark underbellies of corruption, match-fixing,

discrimination and violence. While the first two seasons of the series revolve around limited-over tournaments, season 3 shifts its focus to an impending Test match between India and Pakistan. As a result of this shift, viewers are introduced to new characters from the Indian national team, chief amongst them being the captain and golden boy Rohit Shanbagh (played by Akshay Oberoi). Rohit makes his official entrance in the episode "Devil's Number", during which members of the Indian Cricket Board (ICB) position him as a rival to *Inside Edge's* protagonist, Vayu Raghavan. During a meeting to discuss the captaincy of the national team, ICB members are torn between staying with Rohit or, as ICB President Yashvardhan "Bhaisaab" Patil suggests, replacing him with Vayu:

> UNNAMED ICB MEMBER [in Hindi]: Bhaisaab, what guarantee do we have that Vayu will be a better captain than Rohit?
>
> […]
>
> BHAISAAB [in English]: Fair enough. [in Hindi] Next week will be the final for the Wadia Cup. Vayu will captain one team, Rohit the other. [returning to English] Let the selectors evaluate their leadership. But I have a feeling… Vayu will dominate Rohit ("Devil's Number" 13:00-14:00).

The conversation here quickly but effectively places Rohit on equal footing to the hotblooded, talented, and aggressively heterosexual Vayu. Bhaisaab's smug assurance that "Vayu will dominate Rohit" carries connotations of both violence and sexuality, characteristic of the "language [of] sports page [which emphasize] the hostile nature of orthodox masculine relations […] teams and athletes are routinely said to be walloped, bashed, thumped, crushed, slaughtered, and annihilated. The paradoxical appreciation [of this language] on the other hand, views the games with ironic homoerotic[cism]" (Pronger 288). This linguistic conjoining of violence and sexuality is physicalized in the very next scene, in which a shirtless, sweaty Rohit pounds on a punching bag while flanked by two scantily dressed women (see fig. 2). In a clever bit of narrative misdirection, the camera pans out to reveal that the sequence was from one of Rohit's advertisements that his teammates were watching — nevertheless, when the "real" Rohit arrives, his bare, muscled chest and confident swagger along with the continued leitmotif from the advertisement, seem to suggest that he is a man who steps on and off the screen with equal, unfeigned ease (see fig. 3). Equally, however, it could be argued that *Inside Edge's* narrative and cinematographic centering of the screen calls to mind the dynamics performativity and marketability inherent to Indian celebrity cricket, within which cricketers such as Rohit must not only gesture to but fully embody

the aspirational standards of "looks, brain and talent" ("Devil's Number" 14:55), as his teammates teasingly summarize. Indeed, it is no coincidence that immediately after he leaves the changing room, Rohit is accosted by a crowd of female fans asking for photos and videos (see fig. 4). Unlike his appearance in the commercial as the embodiment of unapproachable masculinity, Rohit is friendly, humble and obliging in these interactions; nevertheless, both instances revolve around him quite literally performing heterosexuality for an audience of eager consumers.

Figure 2: Rohit's "on-screen" introduction. "Devil's Number".

Figure 3: Rohit's "real life" introduction. "Devil's Number".
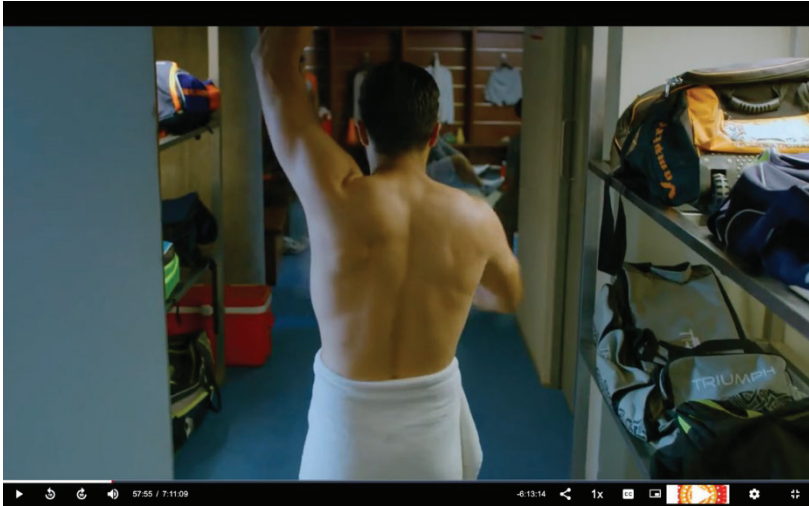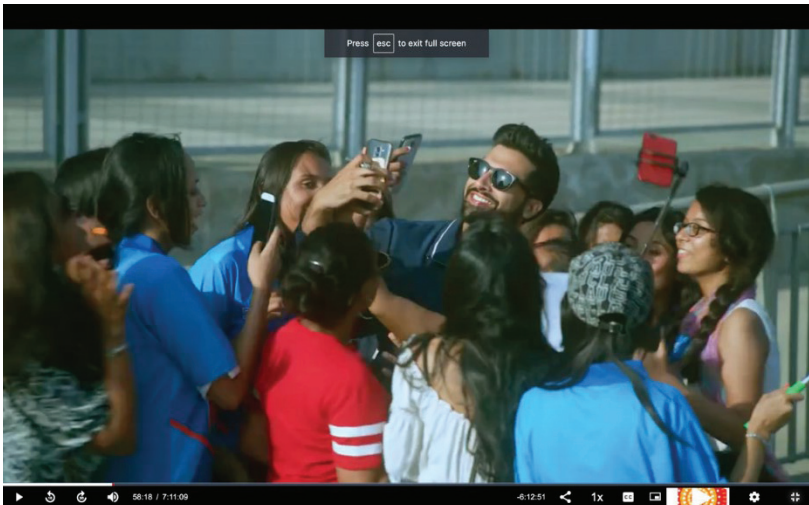

Figure 4: Rohit with a crowd of female fans. "Devil's Number".

The next time we see Rohit in "Devil's Number", he is walking into a spacious and brightly lit apartment. The sunglasses he was wearing while taking pictures are off, and a wide mirror set in the apartment wall reflects his unguarded, slightly hesitant expression as he calls out a name. It is within

this intensely private, domestic context that we are introduced to Rohit's partner, queer rights lawyer and activist Allen Manezes (played by Ankhur Rathee):

> ROHIT [in English]: You're back early.
>
> ALLEN [in English]: Is that a complaint? And here I was thinking that [in Hindi] you would smile at me, come and hug me like Shah Rukh Khan, look deep into my eyes and kiss me—
>
> ROHIT [in Hindi]: Stop, stop stop! [They kiss] You need to stop occasionally to take a breath.
>
> ALLEN [in Hindi]: How? You're so—
>
> ROHIT [in English]: No, no, don't say it!
>
> ALLEN [in English]: You're so breathtaking, Rohit!
>
> ROHIT [in English]: Ugh! ("Devil's Number 18:20-19:00)

The conversation between the two is teasing and intimate, gesturing towards years of shared history. Notably, Allen pokes fun at Rohit's subdued response by invoking the figure of iconic Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan, who rose to fame in the 1990s by playing a series of romantic heroes in box-office hits like *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995)*, Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998)* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham (2001).* The phrasing of "come and hug me" seems to refer to Khan's signature pose in such films, usually struck during the climax, where he stands with his arms outstretched and urges his love interest to run into his embrace (see fig. 5). The script's playful use of intertextuality in this moment, I would argue, performs a similar "framing" function to the screen in Rohit's introductory scene by drawing viewer's attention towards the broader social and textual contexts informing *Inside Edge's* narrative (Butler 6). Shah Rukh Khan's tenure as a romantic hero centered around a consistent reiteration of heterosexuality performed in public spaces. His characters beckon their lovers closer amidst wide fields, snowy mountains, and crowded bazaars, and in doing so reconfirms the sanctity of heterosexual romance through spectacle. In contrast, Rohit and Allen's expressions of love and intimacy can only occur when they are behind closed doors, alone (see fig. 6). Allen's reference to Khan thus gains its teasing edge precisely because of its implausibility for a queer couple — an implausibility that is further underscored when the two decided to go out to a restaurant for dinner. Wary of being seen with a male date, Rohit disguises himself with a black baseball cap and sunglasses, and

adopts a hunched, wary posture that jarringly contrasts with his assertive swagger through the changing room. Akshay Oberoi's wincing physicality emphasizes Rohit's discomfort over the possibility of not only being recognized, but being recognized specifically in relation to a queer relationship (see fig. 7). In a telling moment, he introduces himself as "Vishal" to a fellow customer who recognized Allen from the 377 PIL [public interest litigation] he filed in-universe. As the captain of the national cricket team, Rohit's public persona is so tied to a brand of masculine, aggressive, heterosexual athleticism that to be acknowledged as Allen's "beloved", he must cease to be himself entirely. *Inside Edge* acknowledges this tension explicitly when, moments later, Allen takes Rohit to task for his evasion:

> ALLEN [in English]: You know, "Vishal", [in Hindi] we talked about this in Delhi. [in English] Creating awareness, changing perception, normalizing us. [in Hindi] This fight isn't just for us lawyers. [in English] We need people in high places to also come out. You know, like… influencers, actors, singers... cricketers, even ("Devil's Number" 22:24).

Allen's grouping together of cricketers with influencers, actors and singers acknowledges the ways in which these positions are vulnerable to and benefit from the act of spectatorship. However, the emphasis the script places on the individual act of coming out fails to acknowledge the ways in which the spaces these individuals operate in are governed by majoritarian and often implicit rules of heteronormativity.

Figure 5: Shah Rukh Khan as Raj striking his signature pose. *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge.*
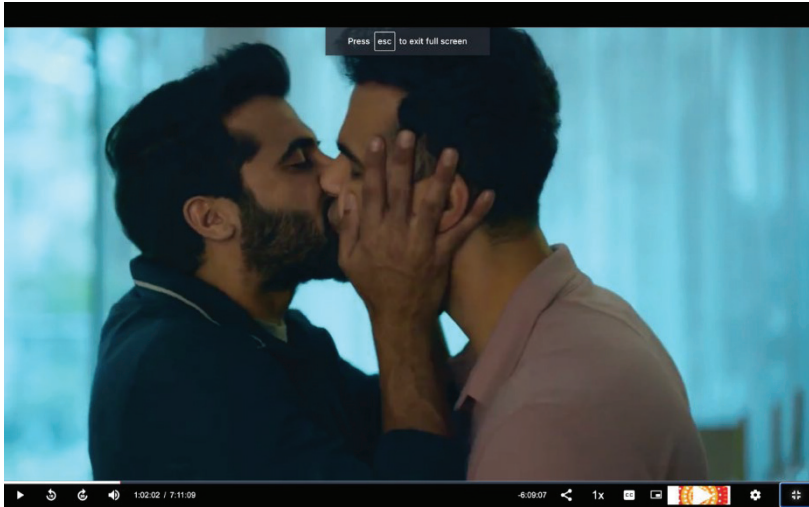
Figure 6: Rohit and Allen kiss in their apartment. "Devil's Number".
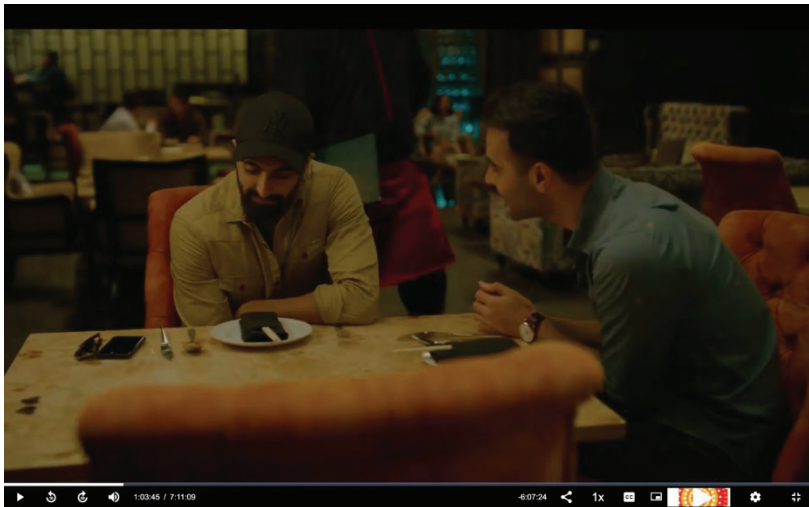

Figure 7: Rohit's uncomfortable physicality at the restaurant. "Devil's Number".

In her survey of queer athletes in competitive sport, Heidi Eng notes how athletic spaces "develop discourses [around them] saying that romantic love scripts or erotic, sexual scripts exist for heterosexuals only, or that sport is a non-homosexual space, or that homosexual desire is dirty and immoral in

a homosocial space of bodies and nakedness" (Eng 19). Drawing on Eng's observation, I contend that the cricket pitch in *Inside Edge* is, at least initially, presented as a highly erotic space for heterosexual individuals but a deliberately desexed void for queer ones. In "Powerplay", for instance, cricketer Vayu Raghavan is introduced to viewers halfway through a sex scene with a PPL cheerleader. As a *Firstpost* review points out, the intention of this scene is "not to titillate, [but] to add drama to a cricket match by juxtaposing the nail-biting final overs against the climax of a sexual act" (Sharma). The sharp cuts between the sex and the match, along with the mingled soundscape of grunts, shouts and screams, underscores the extent to which the fields of cricket and heterosexual coupling are inextricable from one another. This association is further heightened in the following scene, which sees Vayu slipping out of his clandestine encounter to snap a quick selfie with an arena employee and gear up to bat:

> VAYU'S TEAMMATE [in Hindi]: At least wear your helmet!
>
> VAYU [in Hindi]: I don't use protection, got it?
>
> CHEERLEADER [in English]: You came inside me again, you asshole! ("Powerplay" 5:20)

The double-entendre of "protection", which refers to both Vayu's helmet and a contraceptive, emphasizes how the cultural perceptions of both cricket and heterosexual sex are founded on strict dynamics of aggression, dominance, and subordination. Vayu, as a heterosexual cricketer, can move seamlessly from one act to another as he steps onto the crease to deliver a winning knock. Furthermore, Vayu's casual degradation of the cheerleader demonstrates how the fluid interplay between cricketing spaces and heterosexual sexuality encourages a similar normalization of misogyny and homophobia as an expression of athletic aggression. A moment when Vayu yells "bitch!", for example, could relate either to the emasculation of his teammate through his failure to stay on the pitch or the devaluing of the cheerleader as a convenient sexual object to use and discard. Indeed, throughout *Inside Edge* cricketers, even those who the narrative position as heroic, employ highly sexualized, misogynistic, and homophobic language to refer to opponents, spectators, or even the cricketing pitch itself. Rohit's silent, uncomfortable reaction in "Captain's Knock" to his teammate's graphically sexual and casually homophobic description of the pitch stands as a noteworthy exception:

> TEAMMATE 1 [in Hindi]: Are you seeing the crack on this pitch?

TEAMMATE 2 [in Hindi]: It's like your ass crack, that Nishikanth [opposing bowler] is going to fuck with his ball.

TEAMMATE 1 [in Hindi]: Listen, I do my fucking on the front-foot. I don't play the back-foot like some kind of deviant. Right, Rohit? ("Captain's Knock 9:25-40)

Though Amazon Prime's subtitles choose to translate Rohit's teammate's pejorative descriptor "nawabi shauk" as "deviant", its literal meaning is "the king's desire", a phrase commonly used to imply same-sex attraction in Hindi and Urdu literature (Jyoti 2018, n.pag). Much like Vayu's introductory scene, the conversation between Rohit's teammates reinforces the heteronormativity of cricketing spaces through metaphor, innuendo and sledge — the hypothetical emasculation of a powerful bowling attack is likened to being anally penetrated by another man, conventional "front-foot" footwork achieves the same unquestioned prevalence as heterosexual intercourse, and the rare and more technically difficult form of "back-foot" batting becomes as unusual and indeed even unthinkable as queer desire. In *The Arena of Masculinity,* Brian Pronger notes that "In [a sporting setting] where heterosexuality is assumed, homosexuality is more of an insult than a sexual disposition" (Pronger 42). Rohit's tight-lipped, pained smile in response to his teammate's prodding emphasizes that this is a fact he has come to learn the hard way.

Within this context of overwhelming heteronormativity, in which the possibility of queerness is so remote that it enters the world of the rhetorical entirely, *Inside Edge* depicts Rohit's survival strategy as one of silent compliance rather than active involvement. His efforts to maintain an unobtrusive — and therefore unquestioned — veneer of heterosexuality are challenged, however, when Allen comes to visit him in "Not Quite Cricket", prior to the first day of India's Test match against Pakistan. As with "Devil Number's" restaurant scene, Akshay Oberoi plays Rohit as defensive, mincing and retreating in contrast to Allen's exuberant physicality (see fig. 8). While the assumed heteronormativity of the locker room allowed Rohit to stride casually and confidently around his teammates while clad only in a towel, the physical presence of his partner in an extension of the athletic arena forces him to confront the disconnect between his identity as a queer man and as a cricketer. Much like the queer athletes in Heidi Eng's survey, who can fall in love "only when meeting someone outside the sport" (Eng 18), Rohit and Allen's relationship seems to work because it is so far removed from Rohit's life as a professional athlete. As a result, though Allen is eager to frame his visit as an "unexpected holiday" ("Not Quite Cricket" 8:26) unrelated to the Test match entirely, Rohit cannot ignore the

context of the hotel room as an extension of the cricketing space beholden to the same heteronormative rules:

> ALLEN [in Hindi]: By the way, where are the other cricketers? With their wives and girlfriends? Their WAGs? [in English] You know, I just hate this term… it's so sexist! [in Hindi] As if we all just have one same sexuality. [in English] No, you know, the correct term should be SAPs: spouses and partners. Gender neutral, right? [in Hindi] What's wrong, are you hungry? Should we order something? Or we can go down to the restaurant? [in English] Or, you know what, we could invite the boys to join us.
>
> ROHIT [in English]: No, no no. I… I really don't think that's a good idea. [in Hindi] You know that I skip meals on match days, so…
>
> ALLEN [in Hindi]: Really? Since when?
>
> ROHIT [in English]: I mean, I've been advised to. […] Allen, I need to get to training, alright? Why don't you go ahead and eat, order something ("Not Quite Cricket" 8:39-10:19).

Figure 8: Rohit shies away from Allen's embrace. "Not Quite Cricket".

Throughout the conversation, Rohit uses the mechanics of his training and pre-match routines as a shield to keep Allen at a distance while retreating into the persona of a cricketer — and therefore, by unspoken assumption, a heterosexual man — just as definitively as Allen attempts to explicate and deconstruct the compulsory heterosexuality of cricketing culture. I would

argue that Allen's suggestion to change the phrasing of "wives and girlfriends" to the more gender-inclusive "spouses and partners" can be read as an attempt to queer cricket and the discourses surrounding it. In 'Doing Sex/uality in Sports', Heidi Eng conceptualizes queering as:

> the description of a cultural and social process of change of a dominant practice in context—for example on how to act sexually, or how to behave as women or as men—away from strictly heteronormative expectations, to more multiple, diverse practices […] queering should be understood as working within the dominant discourses, destabilizing norms (the "law") from the inside (Eng 23).[2]

If one is to apply Eng's framework to *Inside Edge's* depiction of Indian cricketing culture, it becomes apparent that a true queering of the game can only take place once the heteronormative, homophobic, and misogynistic assumptions upon which cricket discourses are built are explicitly acknowledged; and in doing so, the pejorative hypothetical of queer desire is allowed to manifest as a material reality.

In "Cricket Is The Winner", the final episode of *Inside Edge's* third season, the conclusion of Rohit and Allen's season long arc also serves as an answer to the question of if, and how, the queering of cricket is possible. After his appearance at the hotel is rebuffed, a hurt Allen breaks up with Rohit, stating that he cannot live his life "as a secret, like some kind of criminal" ("Not Quite Cricket" 10:40). Rohit's guilt and hurt over the breakup manifests in his listless playing during the Test match, resulting in an early advantage for Pakistan. In the lead-up to the final day of the Test Rohit calls Allen — who appears to have started dating a comfortably out queer man — and asks him to come and watch him play. Rohit's overture is particularly significant given both the methodical separation which he and Allen had enacted with regards to their 'personal' and 'professional' lives and the wider culture of enforced heterosexuality within the Indian cricketing world. As the cinematography of *Inside Edge* has emphasized, heterosexuality for Rohit is inextricably tied to his status as a masculine, respected cricketer and an object of voyeurism and inspection. In much the same way as that the 'eye' of the camera shooting Rohit's advertisement in "Devil's Number" codified his heterosexuality through the act of witnessing, Rohit's request for Allen to come and *watch* his match represents his increasing openness to the idea

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[2] Sasha Roseneil's "Queer Frameworks and Queer Tendencies: Towards an Understanding of Postmodern Transformations of Sexuality" also provides a useful definition of queering, including a consideration of how analytical frameworks themselves are queered.

of queering the cricket field both metaphorically and materially.[3] Allen's response to Rohit's request is initially left ambiguous, so that during the final day of the Test match both Rohit and the viewers are kept on-edge wondering whether he will appear in the crowd or not. It is here at the association between ocular perception and queer potentialities within the cricket field is further strengthened, as the series' framing of the moment Allen does appear (see fig. 9) can be read as a deliberate parallel to Rohit's introduction in "Devil's Number". In both scenes, the characters are captured in a mise-en-abyme of the screen, sealed within an endlessly repeating loop of perception and visual reproduction. But while the screen-within-a-screen reveal of Rohit's introduction emphasized the performative nature of his aggressive, masculinized heterosexuality, the sight of Allen on the stadium big-screen represents a repudiation of this heterosexuality through joyful subversion (see fig. 10).

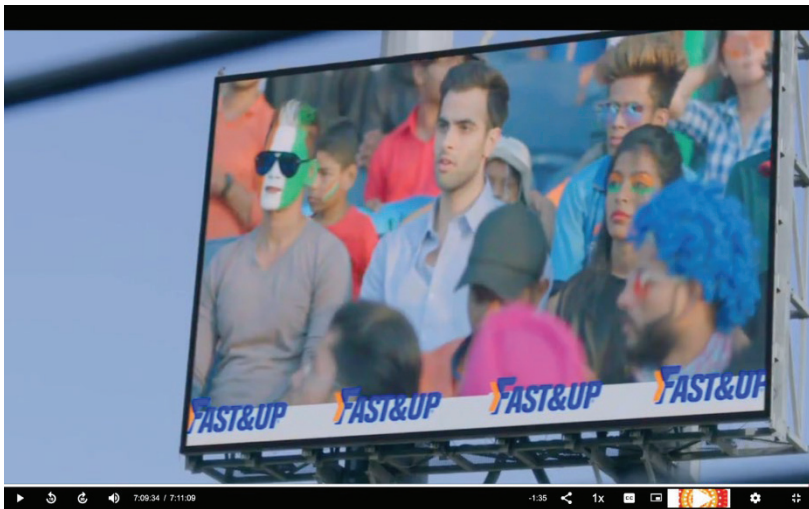Figure 9: Allen arrives to watch Rohit play. "Cricket Is The King".

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[3] My conceptualization of the "queer gaze", so to speak, in this chapter owes a great deal to Laura Mulvey's articulation of the "male gaze" in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". For more on the queer gaze in visual media, see Tim Wray's "The Queer Gaze" and *DAZED Digital's* "Photographers creating work through the queer gaze".

Figure 10: Rohit's smile after seeing Allen in the crowd. "Cricket Is The King".

I would argue, however, that Allen's appearance in the crowd is not just significant in terms of how it speaks to the *Inside Edge's* established visual language; but also represents a queering of visual motifs and narrative conventions within Indian cricketing media more generally. While the masculine space of the cricket pitch is one that women are not allowed — or able — to penetrate, its assumed heteronormative sanctity is maintained and enforced by the presence of respected and respectable heterosexual unions on its borders. Allen alludes to these unions when he mentions the term "WAG", used to refer to the wives and girlfriends of cricketers (and other sportsmen) who often accompany their partners to their matches to support them and watch them play. As Allen and other real-life journalists and activists have pointed out, "WAG" is an inherently sexist term for how it reduces the women who fall under its purview to their relationship with male athletes. Furthermore, this reduction is a unilateral one — there is, after all, no "male equivalent to the WAG, or a BAH (Boyfriend and Husband)" (Morse 2014, n.pag). The latter point is a significant one, in that it demonstrates how the demeaning specificity of the WAG is not only sexist, but *heterosexist* is nature. The absence of alternative conceptualizations of the athlete's significant other beyond "wife and girlfriend" means that the relationship between active male player and passive female supporter remains codified in social and cultural discourse, maintaining the heteronormative status quo of the sporting arena in much the same way as

the homophobic and sexist 'banter' discussed previously in the chapter. A prime example of how WAG heterosexism perpetuates the heteronormativity of Indian cricket can be found in Kabir Khan's biopic sports drama *83* (2021), a lightly fictionalized account of the Indian cricket team's victory at the 1983 Cricket World Cup. *83* has all the trappings of a polished, mainstream Bollywood blockbuster — A-List actor Ranveer Singh plays the role of team captain Kapil Dev, the soaring soundtrack was composed by renowned lyricist and musician Pritam, and though the film bombed in domestic box offices, it ended up becoming the highest grossing Hindi film of the year internationally (ETimes). While the majority of the narrative focuses on the camaraderie, roughhousing and teamwork within the all-male Indian national cricket team, several of the film's emotional beats draw from the presence of the cricketer's WAGs, who travel from India to England to support their partners during the final stages of the tournament. In one particularly significant scene, Kapil Dev (played by Singh), near-singlehandedly turns the tides during a tense match against Zimbabwe with an unbeaten 175-run knock (he finds out later that his performance has also set a new world record). *83's* cinematography and script frame this moment as a demonstration of Dev's composed, dominating athleticism that is inextricably tied to a nationalist, masculinist framework of self-determination; evocatively symbolized by a shot of the team's manager saluting Dev from the roof of the stadium while an Indian flag flutters proudly in the background (see fig. 11).[4] Dev's eyes, however, remain firmly fixed on his wife, Romi (played by Singh's real-life spouse Deepika Padukone) as she watches tearfully from the stands (see fig. 12 and 13). Within this formulation of masculine, athletic nationalism, Romi (and the other WAGs') role is thus firmly demarcated as one of silent, unwavering support through spectatorship. If the male cricketer's duty to the game and nation is performed through their performance on the field, then the female spouse's is that of witnessing from the stands. To do any less — as Romi's harsh response when a fellow WAG attempts to leave her spot in the stands implies — would be disloyal to the point of sedition. Within *83's* narrative, a dense nexus is thus woven between masculine athleticism, female spectatorship, and sport-as-nation, within which the heteronormative marriage unit forms the foundation upon which India's cricketing performance and reputation on an international stage is built.

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[4] Sikata Banerjee's research on the nexus of masculinity, athleticism/physical fitness and nationalism within an Indian context is particularly relevant here; see *Muscular Nationalism* (2012) and *Make Me A Man!* (2005).

Figure 11: The Indian team's manager salute's Kapil Dev's performance, as the Indian flag waves in the background. *83*.

Figure 12: Romi Dev watches her husband's winning knock with tearful pride. *83*.

Figure 13: Kapil Dev returns Romi's gaze. *83*.

To return, then, to *Inside Edge,* it is telling that the Test match around which
the third season is based is one between India and Pakistan; two countries
whose historical cricketing rivalry has often acted as a sublimation of
political tensions, nationalist posturing, and military aggressions (Richards
2005, n.pag). Cricket's role as a mediator and at times agitator of India-
Pakistan relations is explicitly acknowledged within series itself when a
commentator remarks that "it is always interesting to see sports being used
as soft diplomacy… let's just hope that [India's Prime Minister] doesn't
declare war on account of the thrashing that India's going to get here"
("Cricket Is The Winner" 20:28). The match-winning knock which Rohit
manages to deliver is thus directly comparable to Kapil Dev's world-record
in *83,* as in both cases the sanctity of the Indian nation-state is defended
against external 'aggression' through a display of powerful, masculine
athleticism. However, while Dev's performance was backed by the
heteronormativity represented by the silent, supportive spectatorship of his
wife, the caliber of Rohit's batting is directly dependent on the presence of
his male partner — and, by extension, the unambiguous visibility of their
queer relationship. Furthermore, Allen ultimately does not just conform to
but transcends the boundaries of the WAG role as they have been
traditionally understood within cricket. After the match concludes, he does
not remain silently in the stands but comes into the cricket pitch, where
Rohit kisses him in front of his teammates and thousands of spectators. It is

a moment straight out of one of the Shah Rukh Khan romcoms which Allen sardonically referred to earlier in the season, but it also represents the way in which *Inside Edge* doesn't stop at just allowing queerness into Indian cricket through the presence of a gay couple — rather, it *queers* Indian cricket entirely by undermining and reformulating the heterosexist and heteronormative frameworks upon which the game has been founded.

In his acclaimed memoir *Beyond A Boundary* (1963)*,* C.L.R. James passionately argues that "cricket is an art, not a bastard or a poor relation, but a full member of the community [...] cricket is first and foremost a dramatic spectacle, [belonging] with the theatre, ballet, opera and the dance" (James 196). James' phrasing here eloquently summarizes the two major elements of cricket which Amazon Prime's *Inside Edge* most preoccupies itself with — its ability to sublimate and articulate seemingly endless interpersonal, communitarian and national concerns, and its potentiality as a spectacle. As my reading has demonstrated, *Inside Edge* is a series that is sharply aware of how cricket in India is representative of and actively contributes to narratives of capitalist modernity, social mobility, and nationalist self-determination; narratives which contain at their root an assumed foundation of heterosexuality enforced by masculinist athletic posturing, misogyny, and homophobia. By leveraging the relative freedom from censorship brought about by its OTT platforming, season 3 of *Inside Edge* is able to speak directly to this foundation of heteronormativity through both Rohit and Allen's storyline, coupled with a careful interrogation of narrative tropes perpetuated by pop-culture juggernauts like Bollywood and the advertising industry which supplement the spectatorship of cricket within the nation. In doing so, *Inside Edge* is also able to imagine the radical potentialities within the sport — namely, the ways in which the community and spectacle of Indian cricket, and indeed India itself, can only be bettered if the game is both *queer* and *queered* throughout.

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CHAPTER SIX

INTERROGATING NON-NORMATIVITY: TRANSGENDER EMBODIMENT IN *SAMANTARAL* AND *NAGARKIRTAN*

JAYA SARKAR

Partha Chakraborty's *Samantaral* (2017) and Kaushik Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan* (2017), both released in the same year, represent the lived realities of transgenders born and brought up in Bengali households. These films portray the existing conceptualisation of the transgender, which treats it as a disfigurement based on genital status, and at the same time, rejects transgender individuals referring to them as non-normative. The films received great critical acclaim because of their treatment of several complicated issues, such as the postmodern fantasy of heteronormativity, the social stigmas around the transgender body, and how that body is seen as non-normative. While *Samantaral* portrays the struggle of a transgender in breaking the shackles of his home and coming out to the world with their true identity, *Nagarkirtan* represents the struggle of Puti to live a happy, fulfilling life on her own terms.

The post-war cinema in Bengal witnessed a New Wave which focused on the sensibility of the educated Bengalis. The New Wave Bengali cinema catered mainly to the educated urban audience. It merged through the films of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Ritwik Ghatak, and later Rituparno Ghosh and Aparna Sen. Realism became a recurrent theme in these films and the lack of make-up, non-professional actors, and the real-life setting became agents of disruption. The New Wave Bengali cinema witnessed radical experiments with editing, cinematography, visual style, choice of colours, setting, and narrative ambiguity. This new kind of cinema started portraying the marginalised, the unnoticed, and those who so far remained outside the mainstream. The sensitive issues were portrayed in an artistic light. *Samantaral* and *Nagarkirtan*, considered a part of the New Wave of the Bengali cinema, exhibits how gender expressions and social identities are

limitless and opportunities can be found for creativity, affirmation, community practices, and collective healing. These two films shy away from the cosmetic upgradations to the operatic picture dramas and instead represent critical enquiries through both their form and content. By bringing the wronged and the marginalised in the mainstream, these two films stand apart from their counterparts in the Bengali film industry.

The two films in the discussion are set in middle-class Bengali households. Sujan and Parimal, later Puti (played by Parambrata Chatterjee and Riddhi Sen, respectively) in *Samantaral* and *Nagarkirtan*, struggle with the complexities of the "wrong-body discourse" in their lives as transgenders living in Kolkata. Both Sujan and Parimal's fathers try to bring up their children with the identity of men. On resisting, they get humiliated and beaten up. As a result, Sujan and Parimal constantly feel that they were born with the wrong bodies. They realise that their bodies do not align with their gender identities, and they feel a disconnect from their family, friends, and their surroundings. In their early adolescence, their parents discover that they often dress up in sarees and put to question the normativity they are supposed to follow. Sujan's father beats him up and locks him in a room. To their utter dismay, both sets of parents could not stop their children from embracing the non-normative. Sujan's and Parimal's parents think that it is just a phase, and it will pass. Their parents are unable to comprehend how the children they dressed and groomed as boys could still feel and behave like a girl. Both Sujan and Parimal realise that they are women trapped in a man's body. Susan Stryker argues that transgender identities "wilfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels (like *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, and *heterosexual*) over the gender categories (like *man* and *woman*) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim" (2004, 212). Sujan and Parimal, two transgendered individuals, were denied their identity labels by their family, and as a result, they had a cocooned childhood in the Bengali households they were born into. Their transgender identities were constantly repressed, and they were forced to dress and behave like a man.

Christopher Shelley consistently uses the term "trans" but does assert that it "is a problematic term, an inadequate umbrella for transgenderists (TG), transsexuals (TS), transvestites (TV), cross-dressers, some Two-Spirit, some queer, and some intersex (IS) people (all of whom may interchange trans with other identities)" (2008, 16). He argues that often the term "transgender" refers to "various categories of identity and embodiment, as in the quest for 'transgender rights' and associated protections against discrimination sought through 'gender identity' provisions – a kind of

strategic essentialism" (Shelley 2008, 16). Susan Stryker argues that the term "transgender" has often been used "to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender" (2006, 1). Although Stryker does not offer a clearer understanding of the term, other theorists such as Christopher Shelley uses the term "trans" in connection with identity and embodiment, and the rights of transgender people. However, *Samantaral* and *Nagarkirtan* navigate different experiences of the concepts of sex and gender without having to define them strictly. Although positive changes have occurred with respect to the ways Bengali cinema view gender and gender roles, the concept of normativity continues to be a source of conflict. The term "transgender" itself is laced with certain debates as some theorists and some trans people distinguish between the terms "transgender," "transsexual," and simply "trans." Theorists like Viviane Namaste assert that "transgender" includes all kinds of people who do not fit into normative relations between sex and gender. Thus, those who identify themselves as transsexuals, drag kings and queens, intersexed individuals, transvestites, as well as non-binary people who do not identify with either of the categories "male" or "female." (Namaste 2005, 1). It should be considered that no single term cannot fully express the differences amongst these. In order to be more precise, Namaste offers a distinct definition of "transsexual": "individuals who are born in one sex — male or female — but who identify as members of the 'opposite' sex. They take hormones and undergo surgical intervention, usually including the genitals, to live as members of their chosen sex" (2005, 1).

In *Samantaral*, Sujan is constantly misunderstood by his family and his transgender identity is treated like a disability. This leads to his banishment to the attic of his household, where he is kept under lock and key for most of his life. Unable to deal with the fact that their child is transgender, Sujan's parents and his siblings dismiss him as being mentally disabled. Sujan's father, the representation of the dominant patriarch, constantly tries to correct Sujan — his identity, his behaviour, and his way of living. He completely disregards the fact that Sujan has a different gender and tries vainly to mould Sujan according to his own whims. During his school days, Sujan's transgender identity is discovered by his classmates in the boy's washroom. Finding this, the school guard takes Sujan to his room and molests him. These incidents traumatise him, and he stops going to school. This remains a repressed trauma, which Sujan was unable to share with anyone else. Over the years, Sujan develops a defence mechanism by blocking out all the tragic incidents that happened to him and imagining the world to be a happy and beautiful place. Sujan grows up reading, his only

resort to some sanity in the otherwise disordered environment he was growing up. When his nephew Arko returns to that house, he develops a friendship with Sujan and goes on to uncover the truth which the family has been hiding for so long. Sujan's father try to justify his behaviour by claiming that he did everything in order to keep up his family's prestige. Despite Arko's and his girlfriend Titli's efforts, Sujan cannot be saved from the clutches of the patriarchal domination as he commits suicide at the end. The film raises the Bengali consciousness about the everyday experiences of the third gender and paves the way for more films dealing with this subject.

Winner of the National Award, Kaushik Ganguly's *Nagarkirtan* stands in stark contrast to *Samantaral* with respect to the protagonist's freedom and agency to live her life on her own terms. Parimal brought up as a boy, goes on to fall in love with his tuition teacher but has his heart broken by him. While succumbing to societal pressures, Parimal's teacher agrees to marry Parimal's sister. Parimal's heartache raises different questions for him-–was he rejected because he fell in love with a man? Or was his transgender identity stand in the way of hope of love and acceptance? These questions are not conclusively answered and that is what keeps *Nagarkirtan* from falling into the trap of a typical portrayal of the hardships of the life of a transgender narrative. Parimal runs away from home and joins the community of the *hijras* in Kolkata and starts dressing up as them. The film portrays how the community functions and provides a glimpse of their lifestyle, struggle to earn livelihood, their internal relations, and their existence in a society that constantly marginalises them.

To some extent *Nagarkirtan* and *Samantaral* more so captures the particular Indian flavours of being born as a transgender in a middle-class family and home overly caring of their public image. Susan Stryker points out that transgender identity resonates with a disabled identity, and similar to disability, transgenderism is not an individual experience but appears to belong to a familial body. The daily lives of Sujan and Parimal's family members revolves around suppressing their child's transgender identity and forcing their desire on their child to dress, behave, and be a man. This need goes to such an extent that it transcends the limits of the emotional well-being of their children and results into the attempt to make them what society requires them to be. Trans relation to disability is not only of the phobic avoidance of stigma; the trans bodies are often recruited in tandem with other normative bodies and are consequently subjected to systemic exclusion. In this context, Jasbir Puar mentions:

> Historically and contemporaneously, the nexus of disability and trans has been fraught, especially for trans bodies that may resist alliances with people with disabilities in no small part because of long struggles against stigmatization and pathologization that may be reinvoked through such an affiliation (46).

Puar argues that the trans body is forced to be recreated into an abled body both in terms of gender and sexuality. By being labelled as disabled, trans bodies are often institutionalised and are subjected to stigma.

In *Samantaral,* Sujan never really gets an opportunity to break the shackles binding him and to be able to live with his transgender identity. He continues to play the role society imposed on him. However, in the absence of his family members, he often dressed up as a woman — wearing a saree and jewellery that belonged to his mother. On the contrary, in *Nagarkirtan*, Parimal manages to get out of his home and goes on to join a gang of *hijras* in Kolkata and starts identifying herself as Puti. Puti starts dreaming of getting a sex reassignment surgery so that she can get transformed into a woman's body and soul. She eventually falls in love with a young flute player named Madhu and their romance blossoms. Puti earns her livelihood as a *hijra* in the city of Kolkata by begging in traffic posts and singing and dancing at different events. Parimal's unfulfilled love for his tuition teacher now transforms into a beautiful love story between Madhu and Puti. Puti meets her lover in clandestine moments and has a sexual encounter with him. Together they travel to meet another trans individual who has done a sex reassignment surgery. Madhu and Puti dream of starting a family together and living happily ever after. As Jin Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton argue:

> It is necessary to interrogate how the uneven institutionalization of women's, gay, and trans politics produces a transnormative subject, whose universal trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection, and self-actualization largely remain uninterrogated in its complicities and convergences with biomedical, neoliberal, racist, and imperialist projects. (2013, 67)

Puti considers the reassignment procedure as something that will help her come out of the identity she is imposed with, and instead will give her some sort of individualism.

Puti's desire of getting the surgery done also comes with its own set of complexities. Medical procedures involving sex reassignment surgeries are often regarded as a person's attempt to conform to social expectations of body morphology. However, such surgeries are idealised and are considered

to be psychologically beneficial to trans individuals (Hausman 2001, 469). Following the premise of Sander Gilman's "creating beauty to cure the soul," such surgeries operate outside of the paradigm of diagnostic treatment. It redefines the lives of certain individuals and give them new hopes and beginnings. In *Nagarkirtan*, Puti also considers the procedure to be able to give her a new possibility of finally being a woman in woman's body. The surgery is a way for Puti to start her family with Madhu and live her life as she always wanted to. In *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, Jay Prosser argues that transsexual surgeries and hormone treatments are essential for creating an embodied "home" within the skin for individuals who are denied representation of their "true gender." He posits that elective plastic surgery procedures should not be devalued as merely cosmetic. He explains:

> Sex reassignment surgery may then be grasped as healing and changing the transsexual subject in that it serves as the antidote to both of these body image distortions [phantomization of sex and not knowing the real], simultaneously effecting the ablation of the disowned organs...and the realization of the already phantomized sexual parts. (Prosser 1998, 85)

Such surgeries have the potential to undo the 'distortion' that society imposes on a non-normative body. In the same context, Elliot and Roen argue that embodiment is the central issue of transsexuality, where embodiment is considered not as anatomical sex, nor gender, but an assumption of sexual difference, the "symbolic inscription of lack on the body," an unconscious process (Elliot and Roen 1998, 247).

During a conversation with Titli, Sujan moves his exploring hand up her arm to her face. This admiring touch replaces a man's desirous gaze and confuses Titli. She has always known such touch to be derisive, intrusive, and abusive. But she tells Arko that there was something different in Sujan's touch. While tracing Titli's face and neck, Sujan tried to identify what differentiates him from a woman. This is also the scene that problematises and blurs the presumed binaries, such as masculine/feminine, man/woman, and normative/non-normative. Sujan's touch is also indicative of his being unfamiliar with, or ignorant about what it means to have a woman's body. At a later point, we learn that Sujan has earlier visited the places where the idols of goddesses are made. There he touched the wet clay statues of the goddess Durga while the craftsmen made them. This moment is perhaps reflective of how Sujan thinks of his own body as imperfect in a way that stands in opposition to how the craftsmen beautifully and delicately shapes the goddess. This conflates the ideal feminine body with the non-feminine

one. The moment presents a young woman trapped in a man's body, yearning for the normative feminine body.

Since Parimal's teacher rejects him and agrees to marry his sister, he constantly feels shattered for desiring what appears to be a luxury of only the heteronormative. Parimal's desire to be with able-bodied friends and men has been thwarted earlier in his life. These lines of what is acceptable and what is not continue to blur Puti's experiences with Madhu later on, and create underlying tension throughout the film. *Nagarkirtan* sensitively frames the transsexual relationship, the experiences, the joys, and the sorrows within the circle of the non-normative romance. During an incident when Puti's cosmetic hair falls off, and the people present around her discovers her other identity, Puti runs away and realises that all her life she has been running away from society. No matter how hard she tries, how much Madhu convinces himself and Puti, the transphobic society won't accept Puti's identity and her love affair with a man. While trying to gather some money and food, Puti is humiliated and tortured by a gang of 'hijras', the very community to which she desperately wanted to belong earlier. Being completely shattered, Puti commits suicide in prison. *Samantaral* also ends in a similar manner. While the title sets it up as a film about parallel identities, the audience learns that the forced identity which Sujan lives with almost all his life, is the lie forced on him by his family and society. When his other identity comes to the front, and Arko is unable to look into his eyes, Sujan commits suicide.

These two films are about many transitions and make a case for the fluidity that marks growing up, moving out, and gaining an identity — all significant in the life of a transgender. Puti learns to live her life as one in constant transition between the protected life and the precariously lived one, between being a transgender but with a woman's soul, between knowing her needs and desiring to achieve them, and most importantly, between being a woman in love with a man in a world of normative familial bodies. *Nagarkirtan* and *Samantaral* offer scholarship on transsexualism in transnational contexts and an opportunity to explore the ways in which transgender identity and embodiment constitute each other in relation to different non-normative categories, in different cultural contexts. These films enable us to consider and reflect theoretically on living that is at the same time gendered, corporeally different, and sexualised as well as geographically and conceptually transnational. Although, the New Wave has reached late to the common mass film audience of Bengal and India, it has been successful in developing a small but sizeable audience for itself with an inclination toward films that are not mass produced to cater to the

entertainment needs only. At the same time the New Wave Bengali cinema also attempts to explore those grey areas and present questions that have often been eluded in mainstream commercial cinema. The success of *Samantaral* and *Nagarkirtan* have definitely paved the way to bolster experimental film making, including the transgender theme. This growing attention to the transgenders within the Bengali cinema is a result of two factors mainly, first, the "postmodern condition," and second, as Susan Stryker refers to it "the epistemological rift between gender signifiers and signifieds" (1998, 147). As a result, it disrupts and denaturalises the heteronormative portrayal of sexuality in Bengali cinema for the last century. The subject and issues taken up by Bengali New-Wave filmmakers had direct influence and acted as a source of inspiration on Indian New Wave film makers of later generation. Directors like Partha Chakraborty and Kaushik Ganguly attributed their scholarship in making this New Wave cinema indeed an agent of national awareness and consciousness. The inclusivity of the transgender embodiment in Bengali cinema portrays the realism and sensitiveness of this subject which has been long absent from the contemporary cinema.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

OF "INCOMPLETE BUILDINGS"
AND TRANSIENT SPACES:
QUEER SPATIOTEMPORALITY
IN RITUPARNO GHOSH'S *CHITRANGADA:
THE CROWNING WISH* (2012)

ROUNAK GHOSH

"Strange to be exiled from your own sex to borders that will never be home."

—Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993)

Introduction: "Twisted Times; Twisted Spaces"

The story of this moment of transition, like so many others, picks off on a rainy morning, *in medias res*, caught in between that which was and that which is about to be. A deep-focus shot frames the limits of a quaint but picturesque hospital cabin overlooking the urban landscape of Calcutta, its skyscrapers – a veritable wave of verticals – poking out at the spectator from the frame-within-the-frame: the window of the cabin. Our gaze is distracted from the protagonist of the film, Rudra, who is looking away from the camera, staring intensely into a photograph of an empty spiral case opposite their hospital bed, which gets visually transmuted into a cinematic portal – a window into another world, an alternate reality. In a purposeful destabilization of the spaces of the hospital cabin and the space being visually circumscribed by the frame of the photograph, two theatre curtains slide across the frame in opposite directions in graceful suspense as battle cries ring out, to disclose a third space – a theatre stage. An over-the-shoulder shot frames Rudra's head looking ahead into the photograph-turned-theatre, into their performative persona as Madan – the god of desire – in a performance of Rabindranath Tagore's dance-drama *Chitra* (originally composed in 1892). The arrangement of the objective point-of-view shots

and reverse field shots create a visual set-up that transcends the boundaries of both time and space; one version of Rudra's transgender body and another. Free from the vagaries of its heteronormative and material non-plasticity, their body becomes a costume – provisional, immaterial, tractable. Mired in perennial performance.

"Pleased by the devotion of the king of Manipur, Lord Shiva ordained that his royal line would bear nothing but valiant sons," goes the introductory voiceover of the dance-drama being performed as Rudra assumes their position in front of the stage as Madan. "Despite this, when Chitrangada was born a girl, the king decided to raise her as a son. Against codes of classical feminine conduct, she was taught how to bend the bow and engage in politics and the art of war,". In a seamless cut to the space of the stage and a rehearsal of the performance, the frame captures Rudra directing the play – an image that is subsequently juxtaposed on the image of their current self on the hospital bed recuperating from the first of their gender reassignment surgeries – looking critically into the space of the performance. The *mise-en-scène* is sparse, with the darkness of the proscenium stage and its occasional bursts of color overpowering every inch of the frame. The enduring intensity of the darkness affects our eyes. Our entire body, as spectator, is enmeshed within the dimly lit imagery and the innate identarian anxieties they symbolically bear the weight of. An undoing of a linear temporal framework of the past, present and the future, the shots cut irrationally through images of the performance and Rudra on their hospital bed. In line with queerness's intrinsic etymological association with the Latin word *torquere*, or *to twist*, it *twists* Rudra's queer/trans* experience of physical and temporal space. The past here does not lead to the present, but rather, in the words of Linda Anderson, signals at a "dissociation with the self" (Anderson 2000, 72) heralding a reflective act of critical engagement with a self that was, is, and holds within itself the possibilities of what can be. The sequence spirals to a dramatic end when Rudra stops the performance on stage as the director. "Chitrangada is conditioned to be a man. Whether you are wearing a saree or jeans is not the matter. You should appear manly even when you are in a saree!" they yell at Kasturi, the female dancer who plays Chitrangada in Rudra's rendition of Tagore's drama. "It is only later in life when she meets Arjuna in the forest and is besotted by him, that she wants to be a beautiful woman," they say. "*Chitrangada,*" says Rudra, "is a story of desire: the desire to be able to choose one's gender!". The screen cuts to black, dissolving the complicated series of irrationally strung cuts into nothingness.

Moving concurrently with their remarks in an interview with Shohini Ghosh in 2011, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* (hereon, *Chitrangada*) marks the Indian filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh's efforts at what they term as "making a transition in the *language* of cinema". "I want to make films that cannot be summed up by its story," they had said. "No one should be able to see the film and go home to tell the story, because the story lies in the telling of it – the viewing of the film should be an experience by itself" (Ghosh 2016, 238). Released in 2012, Ghosh's film *Chitrangada*, is an exercise in straddling the boundaries of spaces (both physical and psychic) and time to frame the concept of gender as a cultural construct caught in a state of perennial flux. The film morphs in and out of the defined temporalities of Rudra – as they navigate through their tumultuous relationship with the drug-addicted percussionist Partho and reckon with the question of identity itself. It visually constructs liminal spaces and ephemeral temporal moments informed by the protagonist Rudra's sovereign psychic spaces which consistently keep changing, driven as they are by the flush of their memories of their relationships and events leading up to, and from, their gender reassignment surgery. In *Chitrangada*, Ghosh's aesthetic mission statement is driven home by the film's explosion of linear conceptions of space and time which lends the film its quality of toeing the lines of the real and the unreal. It is my contention that the film's destabilization of space and time corresponds to its destabilization of a conventional (i.e., 'western') filmic "language" of representing trans*-ness. And while the (sparse) scholarship on the film, specifically that of Daisy Hasan, has been about locating the film within the Indian literary archive and placing it in contact with the original story from the Indian epic *Mahabharat* and Tagore's dance-drama, in this essay I want to focus on how the film's appropriation of Anne Cvetkovich's idea of a queer/trans* archive as full of spatiotemporal dissonances and its aestheticization of space and time as fundamentally unstable, frames queerness as constantly being in a state of flux. Through a close reading of the film, I want to explore the homological relation between the destabilization of spatiotemporality and gendered destabilization through the figure of transness, which I understand as operating beyond the co-ordinates of any given trans* body. By drawing on Jack Halberstam's idea of thinking about queerness as an outcome of unstable spatial and temporal configurations, I shall be exploring how the film signifies both its real and unreal spaces as mutable, representational spaces positioned on a marginality of queer/trans* existence that ultimately stands separately from a heterosexual "way of life" (Foucault 1996, 310).

"A Princess-in-Exile": The Framing of (a) Queer Spatiotemporality in *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish*

"Cinema is, simultaneously an art of space and time," wrote James S. Williams in his book *Space and Being in French Cinema*. "A moving body occupies space, yet these spaces are not fixed moments but acts of duration, or space-in-time, recorded and projected in the classic celluloid format at a speed of twenty-four frames per second. The moving body thus succeeds in 'being' (spatial) and 'becoming' (temporal) by expressing duration, with time and space collapsing together to form a moving present. Space functions as the common denominator of movement (across) and duration (within)," he had said (Williams 2013, 2). Williams contends that space can be felt in cinema, as viscerally as it is seen, offering its viewer's a "spatial freedom on a level at once perceptual, intellectual and affective" (Williams 2013, 3), affording us a sense of movement through multiple spatial axes and planes which also possess the capacity to exist simultaneously in different temporalities. This is not to say that such an idea of cinematic space is beyond limitations, for the "subversive illusion of unboundedness" (Williams 2013, 4) that is at once situated almost ontologically in the terrain of Williams's privileged and experiential explication of cinematic movement in relation to the vagaries of space, does indeed overlook instances of continuous space becoming discontinuous through editing: an idea that *Chitrangada* warps editorially in its recursive tactic of making motley, discontinuous spaces continuous. Ghosh's film emerges as their act of excavating a new cinematic register for framing queer spaces and timelines by making porous the boundaries between the film's engagement with the highly unstable spaces and temporal realities that its protagonist seems to be inhabiting; their method of adopting and simultaneously countering Williams' approach to cinematic spaces, by jumbling up spaces and disrupting linear timelines to articulate a definition of queerness as a state of being 'in flux'. In *Chitrangada*, sounds waft through the theatre stage into Rudra's living room across shots; hospital cabins visually morph into elegant bedrooms; and expansive beaches inexplicably but seamlessly lead into ramshackle photo-studios.

The spaces that aesthetically sculpt *Chitrangada*'s narrative, layer together the semantics of multiple cinematic spaces – all real and imaginary at the same time – so as to knit what I want to call a "poetics of disjunctive spatiality". Spaces start fraying as they encounter their own spatiotemporal dissonances and differences, pervaded that they are by the spirit of an impossible vision that fades away as soon as the film's spaces pass beyond

our vision. Discordantly and disparately, they bring together discontinuous spaces and blocks of time which fold a heteronormative logic of a linear chronological continuum. On the eve of their vaginal reconstruction surgery, towards the end of the film, on the shores of an unknown beach (itself a geographical boundary space between the land and water which Ghosh uses as an allegory for Rudra's transgender liminality), Rudra and their therapist Shubho conclude that the forthcoming surgery will be a symbolic death of Rudra's earlier self – indeed a "rebirth" (or a transgender reinvention) by effacing their older identity. A sea bench appears out of nowhere – a signification of the beach as an imagined space – upon which we see Rudra sitting, Shubho standing by his side. "How do you wish to be remembered?" Shubho asks, "as the talented, vivacious, eccentric, energetic dancer? Or as the beautiful, transformed *suroopa* Chitrangada?". "But even that is not permanent! Not immortal!" retorts Rudra pensively, as they receive an anonymous text – the last in a string of anonymously sent texts that Rudra has been receiving on their phone throughout the film: "Why is a building called a building even after its complete?". "Because no transition is ever complete. It is an ongoing process" – responds Shubho, making spaces become an allegory of the trans* body itself: mutable and pliable. The shots cut across the entire duration of the film and the montage finally ends with a shot of Rudra sitting on the bench looking out at the ocean as the waves recede. Shubho remains nowhere to be seen. Here, in surreptitiously adapting Williams' theorization of filmic space to Rudra's isolated trans* body, *Chitrangada*'s frame baits me into their body as a filmic space foiled by the vagaries of a temporal reality that exists not merely in the film's narrative space, but also in the space of Rudra's imagination. The (material/bodily and formal/physical) space(s) they occupy emerge as essentially fleeting and liminal, consolidating the gendered liminality of Rudra's transitioning body and undoing Williams' understanding of cinematic space as the "common denominator" – the unifier of the film's overall narrative and temporal structure. The seemingly disparate (physical) spatial arrangements of the film seamlessly meld into each other, and the narrative shoots off in different timelines of Rudra's past, demarcating space and time as forces that may not always be linearly coterminous. Time's arrow splinters, wrinkling through dream and fantasy. The present is inhabited not simply by the past but also the future. The film feels like an exercise in instability as what Deleuze had called "irrational" time-images pervade the body of the film and race through spaces when the narrative inches closer to its end, with even the dialogue being carried aurally from the images of one space to the next ("Do you want to go outside?" asks Rudra's mother from the theatre-stage while the camera fixates on a mirror-

image of them putting on their make-up in their bedroom). The irrational jump cuts often perceptually throw the spectator from the unusual and anomalous spaces of Rudra's room to a proxy staging of the room on the theatre stage itself, interrupting the normal linkage of the two sequences. Different from the continuity system of editing that ensures smoothness of the narrative by suturing together the cause-and-effect of diegetic relationships, the rapidity of the disjunctive cuts call into question what is 'real' and what is 'imagined'. They theoretically coalesce with and fit into Eliza Steinbock's idea of film itself as a medium rooted in the semantics of transitioning from one space to another, "eliciting modes of perceiving [spatiotemporal] disjunctions that are advantageous" (Steinbock 2019, 2) to the mutability ensconced by the innate liminality of transsexualism.

The liminal is a space where habitations and praxes of queerness are possible in the space of the threshold, transitioning or a space of waiting. Frequently understood as a crossing point or vacillation, it brings together "queer ways of thinking about spillage, fluidity, multiplicity and processes of contingent, non-linear becoming" (March 2021, 1), and references alternative time-spaces where multiple temporalities collide and destabilize place-identity. In *Chitrangada*, Rudra's repeated hesitation to occupy a stable cinematic/geographical/psychological space and identity, exemplify this destabilization. Spaces and timelines, in their marked dissociation from each other, are not permanent as they flit in and out of the storyline. "Queer time, as it flashes into view in the heart of a crisis, exploits the potential of what Charles-Pierre Baudelaire called in relation to modernism, 'The transient, the fleeting, the contingent'," writes Halberstam (2005, n.pag) in his seminal book on queer temporality, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. *Chitrangada*'s images flicker in and out of the spectator's sensorium, like celluloid that displays movement with the flicker of presence and absence. The film becomes an act of choreographing space-time queerly in ways that are 'fleeting' and 'transient'. *Chitrangada*'s spatial world disturbs the spectator, in its recurrent placing of the film's engagement with the framing of (queer) spaces on a plane of disorientation that ejects the viewer and the characters from a landscape of heterosexual linearity. A 'fleeting' shot, which makes visible the logic of an anomalous cinematic montage, places the spectator in a forest as Rudra and Shubho purvey an older version of Rudra as they slap Partho in a crowded station. The frame cuts to an image of Rudra's legs – a trace of the corporeal liminality of Rudra's transgender body – on the hospital bed as they tie their *ghungru* around their ankle effectuating "a temporal, narrative and [indeed] bodily change" (Steinbock 2019, 32). The image of the *ghungru* is a recurring leitmotif which resurfaces multiple times

fleetingly in different spaces (i.e., in their room, the theatre, the hospital cabin and finally at their ex-boyfriend's studio) during the film – the one common object that is spread across Rudra's highly transient and spatiotemporally fluctuating memoryscape[1], placing the film as one which is stuck in a state of perennial transit. This deliberate positioning of "transit itself as destination" (Chiang 2021, 4) by visual jumps between the boundaries between the past and the present; the real and the memoryscape, opens up the space to visually articulate Rudra's gender liminality and to highlight the innate fractures of what we can understand as the transgender archival space of their memory. In line with what Steinbock notes, the film provides a view of gender that is based on the anomalous qualities of montage and assembly, de-parting from a conventional naturalization of a body's heteronormative gender identity that exists without a noticeable, conspicuous cut (Steinbock 2019, 40). By turns deeply affective and intensely personal, the film's poetics of disjunctive spatiality place Rudra's "turn to the archive as a turn to the autobiographical itself" (Gopinath 2018, 10). Its problematization of (conventional, heterosexual, linear arrangements of) space-time in line with Rudra's unstable and dissonant experience of their liminal gender identity renders spaces in Rudra's personal archive, (such as the theatre and the hospital cabin), as "amalgamations of various [fleeting] fragments" (Brett 2018, 73) that are strewn across a queer continuum which is perennially mutable.

Ann Cvetkovich describes the queer archival project as a quest for forms of emotional and political preservation in a way that responds to the challenges posed by Jacques Derrida – according to whom the archive is the "commencement and commandment" tied to the precepts of law and government (1996, 10). Instead, she ideates queer archives as "composed of material conceptions of history and understand the quest for a [personal and political] history as a psychic need rather than a science" (Cvetkovich 2003, 268). "Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource," she says (2003, 268) demarcating the queer/trans* archive as fundamentally messy: an attribute that Ghosh foments in their exploration of Rudra's identity during the sex reassignment surgery.

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[1] Here, I am employing this term to refer to landscapes interpreted and imagined using an individual's memory.

Fig. 1 and 2 The recurring ghungru, signifying the erotohistoriographic possibilities of the corporeal queer body.

Chitrangada uses disjunctive temporalities as a way of queering the present *in* the past by contesting both the 'truth' of sexuality and the 'straight' line which leads *from the* past *to the* present. Frequently and intensely interjecting the vagaries of their current temporal reality into their past,

Rudra – throughout the duration of the film – keeps returning to the story of
Chitrangada even after the play has been staged, asking questions about
Chitrangada's transformation and the reactions of shock and censure this
must have evoked from her father – the King of Manipur – and his court.
Perhaps, Rudra says, the King derided Chitrangada, asking her if she was
one of his courtesans, asking her to name her price. Or maybe, filled with
abject horror, he could have sent her into exile. Rudra expresses a desire to
're-stage' Tagore's drama. They say, "the staged drama was just a glossy
spectacle, it had no soul, I don't know Chitrangada well enough,"–
grounding their project in a kind of marked futurity which derives its nuance
from Tagore's text. Ghosh's use of Chitrangada's tale and Tagore's
dramatization of it therefore becomes therapeutic, highlighting the past and
setting the stage for Rudra's future. Combined with Ghosh's persistent
usage of the irrational cut, it aids in a visual re-situation of moments from
Rudra's life as not just mundane incidents which lend meaning to the filmic
narrative but as incidents bearing within themselves the potential to "cross
defined temporalities by force" (Halberstam 2005, n.pag), in order to
highlight the essentially unstable nature of identity itself. Halberstam further
underlines this idea for he envisions a model for the relation between
temporality and ways of being. He summarizes these currents in terms of a
"moment," a "persistent present," or "a queer temporality that is at once
indefinite and virtual but also forceful, resilient, and undeniable" (2005,
n.pag). Breaking the illusion of spatiotemporal continuity, they defy a
conventional model of cinematic space and time wherein the past represents
the logic for the present, and the future represents the fruition of said logic
– and instead articulates a meaning of queerness as something that is wound
up in spatio-temporal and epistemological liminality. Jack Halberstam in *In
a Queer Time and Place*, claims that queer/trans* entities "inhabit time and
time-bound-narratives in necessarily different ways from straight people"
(2005, n.pag). In concurrence with Halberstam's argument, Ghosh situates
Rudra's narrative in the film as embroiled in a different "temporal scheme"
which functions outside the heteronormative logic of arranging and
perceiving time. Halberstam's conceptions of queer space and time are
systematically employed in conjunction with Deleuze's time-image to (de-
)structure Rudra's narrative: to make clear how respectability, and notions
of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld only by a forced middle-
class logic of reproductive temporality. The film posits "identity as a
journey taken by the unstable self in search for a place of belonging" (March
2021, 7).

When Partho makes his entrance for the first time into Rudra's theatre group
during their rehearsal of Tagore's drama – it prompts a temporally volatile

cinematic sequence that highlights the particularly agonizing aspect of what Deleuze calls "the pure event" in his discussion of the time-image: its capacity to always be something that *has already happened* and at the same time be something that is *about to happen*. "Kasturi had told me, that he (Partho) has a drug addiction. Apparently did rehab also a couple of times. Said he was clean now. But I saw nothing of the sort: he was literally a full-scale drug addict!" Rudra tells Shubho while recollecting the first time they formally met. The scene plunges into an alternate temporal landscape which chronologically stretches further into a past pre-dating Rudra's staging of Tagore's drama. A close-up shot captures Rudra in a car in a crowded street in Calcutta. Their bracelet falls off through the window, while they are speaking to someone on the phone. As subsequent shots frame the bracelet lying on the road, Rudra reaches out for it. Partho (then a stranger to Rudra) picks it up and walks away in a drug-induced haze. The scene shifts back to the temporal space of the theatre as Rudra recognizes Partho. "Do you know me?" they ask. "As in I know *of* you," responds Partho. The shots cut back to Rudra's relationship with their ex-boyfriend who had originally gifted them the bracelet – as he leaves Rudra standing in the wings of a theatre stage, a smile curled across their lips. It is a recurring editing strategy that Ghosh uses, which situates their style as one that does not 'clean up' the unpredictable and diffused queer/trans* archive. In doing so, they situate the affectivity of the moments they are visually chronicling as significant, thereby emphasizing on the necessity of a personal, archive-like memoryscape "that can maintain and generate feeling as well as knowledge" (Cvetkovich 2003, 241). The poetics of the film's disjunctive spatiality reach through a tear in the skin of time to re-situate the dynamism of the queer/trans* archive. The jump cuts, in my contention, designate the messiness of Rudra's [transgender] memoryscape as not just wound up with affect but also with a conception of material attachment. The bracelet (just like the usage of Tagore's text) is an index of the blossoming relationship that was and that can be. It stands to signify a 'queer moment', which as Eve Sedgwick puts it, is "defined … by the *twists* it gives on to a rack of other temporalities" (Gallop 2011, 50). It is an indexical trace of the promise of a queer attachment between these characters as it marks a relational matrix that queer [temporalities] seek to preserve and recreate. "Promises, after all, are unstable things, much as they might wish to declare otherwise; their terms may change or, they may end by fulfilling something other than what was initially envisioned," writes Dana Luciano (2011, 126). In the case of *Chitrangada*, the time of queer attachment charts the latter path, as the bracelet ultimately gets returned to Rudra by Partho, although he breaks the promise of his relationship and plans to adopt a child with Rudra after their

transition. Ghosh "develop[s] a vision of time itself as flux" (Luciano 2011, 126) and puts their film's multiple narrative temporalities fundamentally at odds with themselves - in turn, laying the affective groundwork for the imaginative sequences unfolding in an imagined theatre-space, wherein Rudra emulates Madan from Tagore's drama to reflect on the joys of their transition and enacts the eventual grief of Partho's romantic betrayal, the breaking of his promise.

If cinematic space and time are taken here as separate 'methods' of articulating the mutability of queerness rather than just simply a "moving present", *Chitrangada* also evokes Elizabeth Freeman's conception of "erotohistoriography" to render Rudra's queer/trans* body – which in the case of the film, is an incontrovertible part of its framing of (queer) cinematic space – as a method of performing the (spatiotemporal) transitionality of liminal (cinematic) spaces (Freeman 2010, 96). Freeman proposes the gendered body itself as a site of historical encounters – in and across time – and imagines the temporal volatility of subjective consciousness in terms of the mutability of (queer) sexual desire. In the process, Rudra's transitioning body thus becomes not just cinematic substance, but also a site of interpretation which then facilitates an erotohistorigraphic 'performance' of a confrontation between the past and the present by queering Tagore's 1892 text and being actively involved in the futurity of Rudra's gender transition at the same time. This temporally liminal porousness is showcased when Rudra, in their contemporary rendition of Tagore's drama plays the character of Madan, who transforms Chitrangada into a beautiful woman. In the play they are re-imagined as a cosmetic surgeon who holds scales above Chitrangada's body which lies motionless on an operation table, articulating a state of harmonious in-betweenness, a state of equilibrium in Rudra/Chitrangada's occupation of their gender and circuits of desire. It draws me into the space of the theatre as a site crucial to Rudra's destabilization of the gender binary and transition, embodying a "fully present past and future" (Freeman 2010, 95) that functions as a window into the film's other spaces and timelines (specifically, the hospital cabin and Rudra's home). This makes the space of Rudra's liminal body engage with the past and the future in unstable and mutable ways that invariably stem from the present. By choreographically situating their body and desire in a discourse of queering a heterosexist source-text (because Chitrangada, in the *Mahabharata*, by the end is brought back and re-situated in and under the norms of conventional heteropatriarchal structures), the erotohistoriographic possibilities of the theatre and performance space gets reframed as what T.L Cowen labels "embodification" – a process that draws on the performance of hybrid temporalities to stage resistance to historically oppressive hierarchies

(Campbell and Farrier 2016, 152). When Rudra contemplates their gender reassignment surgery – the wide shots of the Rudra's room accommodate not just the neatly choreographed bodies of Rudra and Partho, but also pull our attention to the body of an androgynous marble figurine in the background. One can think of it as a transgender articulation of a space pervaded by amorphous configurations of bodies and desires which shifts the focus away from one part of the pro-filmic space, namely, the foreground. It harks at the fundamental instability of images depicting spaces which are intrinsically attached to Rudra's transition. It queers all the components of the shot and completely counters heterosexist formulations of desire that the Mahabharatic text espouses. Informed by the aural space of a wedding taking place outside the space of Rudra's home – as is evidenced by the presence of the *shehnai*'s music – the sequence counters the heterosexuality of the institution of marriage and super-imposes a register of queer desire on top of it. The home in its emulation of the aesthetics of the stage becomes a liminal space that can be interpreted as ephemeral and fleeting. It is concealed within a different level of reality in its being both a space in the present where Rudra explores the possibilities of their gender transition through the choreography of Tagore's dance-drama and at the same time a space in the past filled with their conflicts with Partho and their parents.

Oliver Brett in his book *Performing Place in French and Italian Queer Documentary Film*, ideates queer "places" as being wrapped up in "artifice" since places in the queer imagination are often intersections of the "contemporaneous and the historical", of the "real and the imagined" (Brett 2018, 1). Concurrent with Halberstam's ideation of queer spatiotemporality, the fragmented nature of the film's spaces unsettles a normative correspondence between gender, sex, sexuality and desire (and how the hierarchies of these intersect with other hegemonic hierarchies). They disrupt the hegemony of heterosexual configurations of arranging space, the performance of the 'artifice' of 'place' being framed differently by the fundamental liminality of Rudra's experience of their gender. When the film starts edging towards its end, the 'artifice' of liminal places gets coded in and communicated by heterotopic spaces.[2] In a particularly moving sequence, Ghosh constructs the space of Rudra's room on the stage of the theatre itself – constructing therefore an altogether fictional site which is

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[2] In using the word 'heterotopia' here, I am appropriating K.T Knight's re-definition of Foucault's idea of the concept, as something that "refers not to real spaces but rather to fictional representations of these sites and their simultaneously mythic and real dimensions" (2016:15).

derived from both Rudra's reality, and the vagaries of their imagination. It also positions the theatre and Rudra's room at odds with one another and consolidates the film's signification of queer liminalities as internally conflicted and unstable (fig.4). Elsewhere, a wide-shot of the hospital cabin – which works with Foucault's conceptualization of hospitals as "heterotopias of deviation" (Foucault & Miskowiec 1986, 24) where people who violate normative behaviors are placed – draws our attention to two framed photographs of empty beds which seem to be illusively reflecting Rudra's reclined body on them post their breast-implant surgery. By visualizing heterotopic "worlds within worlds" that Rudra can and simultaneously cannot occupy, Ghosh consolidates the film's functioning in several spatial and temporal (non-)realities simultaneously – articulating a narrative of transition that establishes the essential liminality of gender by dissociating the arrangements of space and place from those of time (fig.5 and 6). *Chitrangada*, however, alongside in its visual and narrative engagement with liminal spaces and western theories of queer time and space, therein ends up embodying a cinematic praxis of what Howard Chiang defines as "transtopias". Signaling at the destabilization of the all too western framework of what defines the term "transgender", it is a concept whereby "local non-normative gender configurations are rendered legible in a global context" (Chiang 2021, 6). Chiang contends that 'transtopias' can cinematically and formally "conditions the plausibility of a transnational movement for wider recognitions" of [Indian] representations of queerness (Chiang 2021, 7). In the end, Rudra calls off their vaginal reconstruction surgery and chooses to not go through with the gender reassignment surgery, remaining suspended in a state of irrevocable flux.

Fig. 3 An androgynous statue in the back as accentuating the queerness of the space

Fig. 4 Intersecting spaces

Fig. 5 and 6 The photo-frame in the hospital cabin: a space that is and is not simultaneously occupied.

Conclusion: "A cinema of anomaly"

By the end of *Chitrangada*, Rudra's body, being locked in the poetics of disjunctive spatiality, acquires a transitional mutability. It "destabilizes

dominant configurations of time and puts forward a queer alternative, gesturing towards instability, fragmentation, and multiplicity – thereby ideating a time-space that is uniquely queer" (March 2021, 10) and locates trans*-ness as a kind of perennial crossing. In doing so, an alternate filmic language of visualizing gender transition is evoked, whereby time-space are fundamentally non-aligned with each other and thereby mirror the fractured nature of queer archive and experience.

In a dreamscape on the morning of Rudra's surgery, they walk into their ex-boyfriend Rahul's photo studio, having mistaken it for some house Partho wanted them to buy. When they walk into the studio, we notice that Rahul is developing photographs of Rudra from their future surgeries to get their breast implants removed – distorting temporality for the final time in the film and putting the present at odds with the future. As the camera holds an image of Rudra's *ghungru* 'developing' in Rahul's silver nitrate solution, Rahul tells them, "You can't live two lives at once Rudra. You have to cross over and give one up eventually." "No, I don't," responds Rudra while standing at the threshold of the photo studio's exit.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

EXPLORING THE SILENCED ZONE: CONTEXTUALISING MARGINALITY AND QUEER IDENTITY IN *FIRE FLIES: JONAKI PORUA*[1]

NIZARA HAZARIKA

Introduction

Silence has been an inevitable part in the lives of the marginalised people. The marginal position prevents these people from participating in the socio-cultural, economic and political spheres that is the privileged domain of the dominant strata of the society. As such marginality is a locus of exclusion, and the marginalised group of people face oppression and are made to maintain silence in the mainstream discourses. One of the main focuses of the academics and scholars has been to interrogate these silences and to expose the politics of silencing. Silence has been a complex and complicated cultural phenomenon. Earlier, silence was believed to mean compliance that is something passive which had no power. The contemporary theorists, however, render another niche to silence where they talk about the positive aspect of silence. They attribute silence as a subversive power and use it as a weapon to resist hegemonic domination. They valorize the empowering power of silence. "Silence" as a discourse has its roots in the epoch-making speech of Tillie Olsen in 1962, which was later published in a book *Silences: When Writers Don't Write* in 1978, where Olsen does not talk of natural silences but the unnatural silences that arise out of the circumstances of being born into the wrong class, race or sex. Olsen emphasizes on the silence of the marginal: "the writer of a class, sex,

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[1] The quotations from the movie have been taken from the film "*Fire Flies: Jonaki Porua*". Dir. Prakash Deka. Perf. Benjamin Daimary, Bitopi Dutta, Palash, Nibedita. Producer: Milin Dutta, Produced by, Vortex Films. 2019.

colour, still marginal in literature and whose coming to written voice at all against complex odds is exhaustive achievement" (2003: 9). Since the publication of Olsen's book, silence as a subject has been re-theorised, re-defined, expanded, modified and even contested at times. Feminist scholars from across the globe talk about multiple silences at work in relation to gender, sexuality, identity and so on. Further developing Olsen's concept, feminist scholars like Audre Lorde talks about women's sharing a war against tyrannies of silence and that 'there are [still] so many silences to be broken' ([1997] 2007:44).

Taking this discourse on silence forward, contemporary philosophers and thinkers have tried to theorise silence from multiple perspectives. Lisa Mazzei (2007) talks about the intentional and unintentional silences which could be a pause- the not-said, the reticent breath, the stark silence that transgresses the received notions of data and yet beckons one to identify it as something other than a lack or emptiness of meaning or simply a distraction on the way to something 'more important' (p27). For Derrida, silence is a strategic response (1992:18) that exposes the politics of representation. Focusing on the power of silence, Dauenhaur opines:

> Rather than being that which thwarts language, silence is that which opens the way for language's potency... speech is born from silence and seeks its conclusion in silence.... Silence, then, is required for the intelligibility both of what is said in discourse and of discourse itself as discourse. (1980: 119)

Thus, scholars have exposed the power of normative discourses that produce silence and how silence could be used as a trope to speak of oppression, resistance and also to articulate defiance. Schlant observes 'Silence is not a semantic void; like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions' (1999:7). Thus, silence, in its multiple modalities, reflects not only the oppression and suppression of certain sections of people, including the queers within the hegemonic patriarchal power structures, but also its empowering potential.

The Queers and The Realities

The term 'queer' has been used here as an umbrella term to cover the non-normative populace of the society. It is conceptualised as an alternative to the accepted notions of sexuality which is often disruptive and fluid in nature. The patriarchal ideology has valorised the gendered binary within a heterosexual structure and as such has pushed the non-binary population to the margins. The queers have always been silenced and relegated to the

periphery. With the emergence of multiple discourses on gender and sexuality, there has evolved newer dimensions through which the experiential realities of the queers could be viewed. For these silenced people, the very act of expressing or speaking is a liberating process. As bell hooks remarks, 'Moving from silence to speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible' (1989:9). The queers have to face the societal pressure and remain within the fixed, constrictive closeted space. The closeted space forces them to maintain silence as the perpetrators impose cultural hegemony upon them for not conforming to the prescribed norms. In their negotiation within the marginal space, the queers move towards the liminal space, which is an in-between space. Victor Turner (1967) established the notion of 'liminality' as a place of transition. This liminal space produces a new consciousness which is not restricted by the conventional patriarchal binaries. When the queers enter into the spaces structured by gender binary, they feel some kind of alienation and non-belongingness and hence they navigate their identity as well as spaces towards newer places. This movement into newer spaces provide them with new knowledge and new consciousness which empowers them. Thus the queer identity is dynamic and ever evolving. As Robertson opines,

> Because they are not incased in socially constructed norms of their gender, since their gender exists outside of socially recognized genders, they have the potential to create an identity that is outside of social constructs. This power lies within the potentiality of the liminal space, the access to knowledge in the borderlands, freedom from social constructs, and the multiple subjectivities that exist in the borderlands of the gender dichotomy. (2018:53)

Therefore, the complicity of the queer people in social silence can also be a coping strategy through which they try to deconstruct the notions that society always prescribes. They are socially ostracised, rejected and ridiculed due to their non-conformity and also due to the existence of a hierarchy of sexual values and power which enforces some kind of discrimination against these queer people. To bring such oppression and discrimination to the fore, visual media plays a significant role. Films can expose, investigate and even challenge the mechanisms through which the hegemonic heterosexualities are constructed.

The Queers in Visual Media of Films

Films, as a discourse, work as a medium of cultural and social construction of gendered and sexual identities. Being discursively constructed, the medium has the potentiality to deconstruct the patriarchal ideologies. As a powerful ideological apparatus, films can be used to negotiate subjectivities and sexualities. However, the significant aspect remains on the representation of the queer people in films. While such representations are increasing, the pertinent questions remain, are those representations accurate? Do they portray the experiential realities of a whole spectrum of people living in the margins? Do the films play some concrete role to resist homophobia? Do such films throw light on the oppression and discrimination of the queer people and the way queers can resist such oppression? Critics observe that media portrayal of queer characters is either stereotyped or overtly negative. Andre Cavalcante speaks of this as 'anxious displacement' which, on the one hand, produces the opportunity for legitimization and normalising; and on the other hand, it refers "to the overloading of negatively codified social differences and symbolic excess onto figures and relationships that surround LGBT characters" (2015:455). Thus, films can play a paradoxical role in the portrayal of queer folks. However, films can be used as a potent tool or a 'catalyst for resilience' to the queer youths to cope with discrimination and navigate their way ahead to be LGBTQ individuals (Craig et al., 2015: 269). Thus, films can have a positive influence in the lives of the queer individuals. By throwing light on the queer culture, the films can also play a pivotal role to normalise gender and sexual differences. Queer films have evolved over the years and project a thematic paradigm that reflects the awareness of the lived realities of the non-heteronormative people which have remained unacknowledged and invisible.

In the Indian context, till recently, the representations of the queers in the visual media have been stereotypical where they were ridiculed for their non-conformity. In the mainstream films the characters portrayed as queers were mostly the eunuchs. This erasure of the other categories of queer people in mainstream films has been critiqued by the scholars. Shohini Ghosh opines that in Hindi films "despite love and romance being persistent themes, homosexuality has rarely been directly represented" (2007:419), and if they portray characters of other sexual orientation, such portrayals are always constructed as unnatural and some kind of vice is attached to their very being that needs societal intervention. Thus, in their portrayal, the queer characters are weighed down by crude jokes and are usually portrayed as objects of ridicule. However, with the emergence of parallel cinema, even the mainstream cinema has started depicting queer issues from a serious

perspective. In their representation, the queer characters have gained some visibility, and this has had a huge impact in the queer communities. This kind of visibility has changed the traditional mindset of the people from the mainstream society, which has resulted in providing a sense of liberation to the queers. The queers have started claiming a visible space outside by coming out of the closet. In the process, the silences that engulfed their lives have also been broken. But the interesting thing is that in such films where they depict queer experiences, the queerness does not surface through their voices; rather it is depicted through silences, displacement and erasure. Thus, silence has been used as a trope to articulate the queer experiences.

Queer Film and *Fire Flies: Jonaki Porua*

Films, as a discourse, present and critically question the grand narrative of heteronormativity and identity. They serve as the medium that could be used to walk into the silenced zones located in the peripheries. They could also be the media of socio-cultural construction of realities. Although there has been a gradual emergence of queer narratives in the Assamese literature, queer discourses are yet to register a concrete space in the visual media. In Assamese literature, the heterosexual ideology dominates the hegemonic knowledge production spaces. The non-heteronormative people occupy the spaces in fissures and cannot claim a distinct positionality. Queer narratives from Assam are a timely intervention in this regard. They portray the lived realities of the queer people. These narratives reflect a new direction in the process of an all inclusive society (Hazarika 2022,4). However, queer visuals in the proper light are yet to make a distinct mark in the socio-cultural arena. It is heartening to note that *Fire Flies: Jonaki Porua*, has marked a noticiable beginning as the first Assamese film with a queer theme. This visual narrative throws light on the experiential realities of the queer people living in a homophobic society, the stigma and silences that are attached to their sexuality, and the repression that they are forced to maintain. Although the Article 377 has been repealed and homosexuality has been legalised, a majority of Indians are yet to come to terms with the sexual minorities and the very term 'homosexuality'. People still regard it as something unnatural. Taking a sensitive issue like homosexuality, Prakash Deka has made his directorial debut through the film *Fire Flies: Jonaki Porua* which is the first Assamese film with a queer theme. The film has attracted positive responses and gained recognition from all quarters and has brought laurels from across the world. The film has won a number of awards as well. Special Jury Mention for Acting has been accorded to this film at the 67th National Awards and also the protagonist won the Best Actor

Award in the South Asia's biggest queer film festival, Kashish MIQFF in 2020. The film is the journey of its protagonist Jahnu who goes through identity crisis and his transformation to Jahnabi. Through his character, the film portrays how amidst the darkness of life, he twinkles like a firefly, spreads light around and carves a niche to his life and his kind.

The film shows how in societies where same-sex desire is stigmatised and ridiculed, the queers have to search for an alternative space where they can explore their sexuality and identity. Queer space is such an alternative space which is collectively appropriated by non-heterosexuals as an alternative to heteronormative urban space (Oswin, 2008). The film begins with Jahnabi, a queer, reminiscing her bygone days where she was growing up as a boy in an interior village of Assam. Jahnu, an adolescent boy was going through an acute sense of loss and longing for acceptance. The narrative begins with the protagonist Jahnu having womanly traits and who walks by swaying his hips which makes people mock him and call him "ladies", "Madhuri Dixit" etc. Thus, the narrative exposes how the non-conforming body is defined by the mainstream society and for being nonconforming, it is ostracised. The film projects Jahnu's wish to become a girl and his final transformation to Jahnabi and his angst, suffering and non-acceptance in the whole process. The film projects the three stages that the queers have to go through to finally achieve their own identity. In the words of Mukul Sarma (2022), a Queer activist from Assam, these three stages are the stages of Desire, of Behaviour and of Identity formation. In the desire stage, the individual simply has a same sex desire and mostly remain closeted. The closet, both physical and metaphorical is a space of hiding, of darkness and of invisibility. Their understanding of relationships and love is superficial, and they don't have any societal approval. Thus, they suffer from anxiety, an identity crisis and at this stage they develop suicidal tendency too. This is precisely a marginal space. The second stage is marked by their own realisation of their sexuality. They sometimes accept it or at other times, deny their sexual orientation due to non-acceptance of the society. They go through a lot of inner turmoil to face the realities and come to a final acceptance. This stage is a long one in the lives of the queers in developing countries like India as the society at large is very critical about accepting the sexual minorities. At this stage they march towards the liminal stage, an in-between stage, where they are aware of their sexual identity and negotiate such identities within society. The third stage is marked by liberation where they return to visibility that constitutes the act of coming out and declare their sexual orientation without any inhibition. They raise their voice for their own cause and work for their own community. At this stage, they are sure of their identity and declare it boldly. They enter the centre space and

with their specific identity they subvert the gendered binary. Jahnu also goes through these stages and attain his subjectivity when he finally becomes Jahnabi. He transgresses the gender norms by overthrowing heteronormativity and accepts his queer identity though he has to go through the stages of oppression, struggle and liberation before finally living his life as Jahnabi in the urban space of the city. Jahnu's character is the representation of gay identity that is beyond the normative pressure of narratives of acceptance and inclusion. Thus, Jahnu's narrative shows how the marginalised queer body is in clear contestation with the hegemonic androcentric regime which creates a perennial struggle for the queers to move beyond the margins. The narrative of parallel sexuality challenges the false notion of compulsory heterosexuality and posits fluid possibilities of alternate gendered identity. Jahnu was always placed outside the societal ambit. He was made fun of by the boys and villagers, making nasty and condescending remarks without any sense of accountability. This experience speaks of the violence and injustices faced by the queer persons. Jahnabi's transformation and her straddling between Guwahati and Mumbai in the city space shows that even after entering the gendered spaces, the queers feel a sense of non-belonging to that space. The queers continually navigate their identities which results in non-attainment of a permanent space or home. This movement to new spaces provides some kind of new consciousness to the queers to resist the societal pressure. Jahnabi too feels happy and emancipated when she goes to the city space where she could reveal her true self. However, Jahnabi's flat, a physical space, in Guwahati, remains empty as she decides to rent it out and move to Mumbai.

The film projects the silences that surround the home space. Home is regarded by the non-heterosexual people as a secure and intimate space on the one hand, and also as a space where they experience exclusion, silences and homophobia. Home is a space where they are more vulnerable to societal pressure and find it difficult to negotiate within this space and transform it to a space of ontological security. Jahnu faces pressure from his brother in the home space. His only solace is the company of his sister, who understands his problems. His parents are caring, yet they fail to understand his inner turmoils. His brother keeps surveillance upon him which results in his discomforts. His home tutor exploits him sexually and yet it is only his sister Jumu who can understand him. Thus, the home space has a traumatising effect in Jahnu's interior landscape and when his brother finally throws him out of the house, he moves towards the city that proves to be a liberating space where he can perform his gendered identity and sexuality. He changes himself to Jahnabi, leads life of a prostitute and starts living in her own terms. This reflects his sense of resilience on his part which presents his

ability to withstand the challenging life experience of exclusion, alienation and rejection from his immediate society and very boldly he acquires his new identity. This notion of resilience is expressed by James Garbarino,

> Resilience generally refers to an individual's ability to bounce back from adverse experiences, to avoid long-term negative effects, or otherwise to overcome developmental threats. (2003:299)

Thus, Jahnu bounces back in his life and leaving behind his past, he moves on. He joins the *hijra* community who welcomes him to their space. They organise a Disciple Ordination Ceremony, bless him, welcome him with songs and dance as per their practice and turns him to Jahnabi. With this new identity of Jahnabi, a new life starts for her and there is no looking back. Although she leaves her home behind, she remains in touch with her sister and without the knowledge of her brother, she helps her family financially. She takes the responsibility for the treatment of her father in Mumbai and plans to take him there. But in between her father passes away and she rushes to home. Her mother breaks down and tells her how her father dies by going through the suffering after Jahnu leaves home. She requests Jahnabi to stay back. But the villagers ask her to leave as the village community may not accept Jahnabi and her family might be ostracised. Leaving some money for her mother, Jahnabi leaves for her abode in the city. The film thus offers an open ending while reflecting a world where the societies at large are yet to accept the sexual minorities. The narrative exposes the injustices incurred by the queer people from the society where they have to engage in a perennial struggle. This struggle is not just for their identity or existence; rather, it is a battle against the hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Under such a dominant regime, the sexual minorities resort to silences as does by Palash in the film and also the subversion of such regime as done by Jahnu.

Palash, Jahnu's lover in the film, lives in the outskirt of the village. He lives a lonely life, and the villagers regard him as insane since he reads a lot and lives without any relation with the society. He takes a marginal space in the societal structure. When Jahnu meets him for the first time, Jahnu is overjoyed as he finds someone like him. When Palash tells Jahnu, "I know you will understand me and that I know you", Jahnu innocently exclaims, "Even you are like me!" (00:30:54-00:30:57). Palash tells him,

> That I can't tell you; but our struggle is the same. Society will not accept us the way we are. And I don't have the courage to fight with the society. That's why I prefer staying alone. (00:31:06- 00:31:13)

In the conversation that ensues between Palash and Jahnu the narrative portrays that they share the same kind of feelings and experiences. Both face societal ridicule, humiliation and exclusion. It is at this space of the hut, Jahnu frequently visits Palash and they fall in love. Jahnu misses Palash when he is in his home or school. Thus, their love blooms in the marginal spaces of Palash's hut, or at the banks of the river or the boat. Palash transforms the marginal space of his secluded hut into a space of control by subverting the power equation. He and Jahnu perform their gender which is not possible within the spaces of heterosexual society. Their performances are visually coded, and the film showcases them beautifully by taking the shots from far above. Within the context of homoerotic desire played out in the marginal spaces of Palash's hut, or the bank of the river or the boat, the narrative presents those spaces as a locus for transaction. Through these radical practices both the lovers try to subvert the normative construction of gender and sexuality. But these homoerotic scenes have been endowed with silences as they are never acceptable by the mainstream society. These silences are not predictable. They contribute to a layered understanding of the characters that inhabit these performative sites. Silence is one of the film's structuring principles as the scenes are cut abruptly to enmesh the experiences and certain things remain unsaid and unanswered. The sexual encounters of Jahnu and Palash dissolve into silences or when they are in close proximity, the scenes are out of focus that leaves the viewers contemplate their inner lives. Thus, the film plays an active role to construct the reality it represents through silences rather than through voices.

The film carries multiple narratives through which it portrays gendered identity, sexual inclination, and homoerotic desire at the interstices of the socio-political realms. Jumu's (Jahnu's sister) narrative could be read against the grain of the unquestioned, and hence, in a sense, queer. Jumu does not exactly know what she is repressing. Though a girl, her whole gait is that of a boy as she does all the works of a boy. She represses her gender and sexuality. Her sexual orientation is both highly marked and yet highly invisible which is reflected in its lack of acknowledgement by herself or by her family. The film portrays her as repressing her sexuality while indulging in role playing according to the societal norms. Jumu does not overtly accept her female identity. As a girl she was called for Nibi's puberty rituals, but she avoids. Though finally she has to go and through this denial, she asserts her subtle resistance. Jahnu asks her why she hides her real self. Why she lives like a man and not like other girls (00:54:00-00:54:17). But Jumu retaliates and says, "I don't hide anything. I live the way I am" (00:54:22). Jahnu keeps telling her that he knows why she does not want to get married and that he is not going to hide himself (00:54:35). Jumu then reminds him

that he can do whatever he wants. But he shouldn't forget his parents (00:54:52). This dialogue throws ample light on the very notion of the restrictive sphere of home and society which make the queers remain closeted. Through Jahnu's questioning, the narrative presents the emergence of his awareness of sexual identity, and he understands that both he and his sister have non-normative sexual orientation. Their sexual orientation differs from their biological gender. Thus, the narrative problematizes the notion of compulsory heterosexuality and using Butlerian notion of gender performativity (1993), it posits that one must perform the specific gender to achieve it. But there is a total mismatch in their performativity which pushes them to the liminal space. Their body becomes a political artifice where their identities are negotiated. The film portrays the nuanced and sensitive renderings of discourses related to sexuality on the screen. Jumu's tale sheds light on the unspoken narrative of queerness. This is another silenced domain which is explored in the film. Talking about queerness and cinema, Schoonover and Galt opines,

> Cinema is always involved in world making, and queerness promises to knock off kilter conventional epistemologies. Thinking queerness together with cinema thus has a potential to reconfigure dominant modes of worlding. We use this term "worlding" to describe queer cinema's ongoing process of constructing worlds, a process that is active, incomplete, and contestatory and that does not presuppose a settled cartography. (2016:5)

Thus, through these marginalised queer characters the film creates a world of their own where they are fighting their own battles within a hegemonic societal structure.

Jahnu's love for Palash makes him ponder over the matter of sex reassignment surgery. In the film, Jahnu is not ready to accept his sexual identity and expresses his wish to go for a sex change. He further says that he wants to live with Palash at his hut. But Palash says that Jahnu's parents will not allow him. Then Jahnu proposes, "Let's get married then" (00:48:18). When Palash tells him that if they do so, they will be sent to jail, Jahnu retorts, "These days many people alter their sex. I want to get operated and become a girl" (00:48:32). But Palash tries to make Jahnu understand that he will have to fight a big battle against society to attain an identity for himself. Jahnu's parents and the society at large won't understand. Moreover, it will cost a huge amount of money and only then Jahnu can think about the sex change surgery (00:48:43-00:48:58). But Jahnu is adamant and says that he will go to the city, work hard and earn enough money for the surgery. When Palash says that the outside world is not as easy as Jahnu thinks, Jahnu gets emotional and says, "Anything is easier

than the ordeal of dying everyday" (00:49:09). Thus, the film presents the silences behind the romance of two male partners who indulge in sexual encounters and yet refuses to label their sexuality socially. Whereas Jahnu is ready to come out, Palash is reluctant and scared to come out and face the heterosexist society. Palash's reluctance highlights the expression of queer anxiety over opening closets. The harsh realities cross their path, when one day Jahnu is lying with Palash in the field and talking about their future. Jahnu is asking Palash why he doesn't have the courage to accept him even after he changes his sex? Palash tells him that he loves Jahnu the way he is. But he can't marry Jahnu. Jahnu is too young to understand how it feels to be socially an outcast. It's different in big cities. Palash is not ready to accept Jahnu socially as his partner since it is foolish to think that it's the same in a small village like theirs in Assam (01:06:11-01:06:40). But Jahnu retorts, "You can live outside a society, but you can't fight the society?" (01:06:41). After this the boy who follows Jahnu, make a hue and cry and shouts that he caught Jahnu and Palash red handed in indulging in sexual acts. Jahnu's brother thrashes him black and blue and throws him out of the house. On his journey towards an unknown destination, those boys follow him and molest him, rape him and threaten him not to divulge the truth. Jahnu is left with remorse, and he leaves his village and goes to the city. Through these narratives, the film exposes the pain and suffering of the non-normative people in a homophobic world. Jahnu and Palash love each other, but the homophobic patriarchal society cannot accept this. While Palash has no courage to resist such oppression and accepts his position in the periphery of the village, Jahnu is all set to challenge such hierarchical structure. He is ready to go for the sex change surgery and become a girl. Following Enders, Angella Okawa opines:

> In a world that prefers binary identity, those whose identity lives in this in between space feel pressure to claim one end of polarity and reject the other. Rather than being a transitional space, the liminal is, for these individuals, a permanent home. (2015: 3)

Thus, Jahnu prefers to change his sex and become a girl. When Palash negates Jahnu's move to change his sex and marry, Jahnu gets utterly disillusioned. He tells Palash that he will not put Palash in trouble and walks away. Once he becomes Jahnabi, he stops thinking about the surgery. Jahnabi understands that one can't have a fixed identity as identity is an ongoing process. Refusing to have a fixed heteronormative identity, Jahnabi decides to continue with her fluid gendered identity within the liminal space. For Jahnu, the urban space provides a liberated space where he could perform his sexuality and acquires an identity. He is accepted by the *hijra*

community and he feels a sense of belongingness. Again, being Jahnabi also, she faces different kinds of violence against her queer body. The police force her to take off her clothes to prove that she is a *hijra*. Such acts of physical violence become a part of the existential realities of the queers who lives in the periphery of the societal structure.

Conclusion

Prakash Deka, thus, projects the silences in the lives of the queer people who are pushed to the margins of the patriarchal society. The film throws light on the silenced and unspoken narratives of queerness. Through the nuanced space of visual media of films, the queers get the opportunity to articulate their struggles, and in the process, they develop a queer agenda through which they can construct their identity. Their marginality and liminality help them construct their fluid identity that has the potentiality to disrupt the heteronormative structure. Through Jahnu, the film portrays how the queer identity is shaped by sheer abjection, denial and heterosexual normative coding and how through queer performativity, such norms could be subverted. By depicting the harsh experiential realities of the non normative people in a heterosexist society, Deka, not only breaks the silences that surround their lives, but presents how they resist and move beyond those silences. The film is pathbreaking in the sense that it has brought a new dimension to the gender discourses in the Assamese society on the one hand and on introducing a queer theme in the film media on the other. The visual medium has never portrayed the nuances of queerness in a discernible way so far. This film has disrupted the hegemonic hetero-normative structure and posited a positive and realistic portrayal of queerness in society. Thus, the audience move beyond the silences that surround the experiential realities of the queers and accept the realities of life as diverse and multifaceted.

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Chapter Nine

Assertion of Women's Agency by Subverting the Heteronormativity in Bollywood Films: Locating *Fire* in Opposition to *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga*

Pritha Sarkar

This chapter engages with two mainstream Indian Bollywood films, *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta and *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* (2019) by Shelly Chopra Dhar, situating the latter as a foil to the former to show how they assert women's agency by subverting the heteronormativity. In the chapter, I argue that while the films attempt to subvert heteronormativity, they are located on the opposite ends of the spectrum. So, while in *Fire,* the women fight their battles, whereas, in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga,* the female protagonist remains the damsel in distress and is rescued by the male protagonist. Thus, in *Fire,* the relationship between the women acts as the source of resistance, whereas, in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga,* the heteronormativity is challenged within the patriarchal framework. For the purpose, the chapter first looks into the structure of the heteronormative families in the two films. It identifies how heteronormativity is interweaved in the family through performativity, sexual division of labour and paternalism, and how the three are interdependent, strengthening the heteronormative structure. This study explores how the films attempt to subvert these norms in their ways. It then analyses the assertion of women's agency that often challenges the patriarchal structure and its heterosexual norms. Finally, it shows how in the assertion of agency, the two films are on the opposite ends of the spectrum, where in one, the women assert their agency within the patriarchal constraints, while in the other, they break several layers of patriarchal structure to frame their identity on their own terms.

The Heteronormative Family

The term heteronormative precedes heterosexuality, that is, a relationship between a man, who always has to be a biological male and a woman, who is compulsorily a biological female. Heterosexual families are families born out of the union of heterosexual couples: "This privileging sexual value system creates a hierarchy of power and privilege, with nonnormative sexuality at the bottom of the hierarchy" (Salazar 4). Heteronormativity, therefore, implies making heterosexual the only norm in society, whereby heteronormative families are the only family model that can exist. Hence, heterosexuality is the dominating value in the sexual hierarchy. Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, Vaus and Pitts (2006) defines heteronormativity, "We have defined heteronormativity as the uncritical adoption of heterosexuality as an established norm or standard" (Perlesz, Brown 2006, 183). Heteronormativity also promotes and indeed stands on heterosexism, defined as, "Heterosexism is the system by which heterosexuality is assumed to be the only acceptable and viable life option and hence to be superior, more natural and dominant" (Perlesz, Brown, 2006, 183). Both the films chosen in this chapter follow the heteronormative family structure. In Indian society, families mostly proceed with a marriage that again stands on heteronormativity. In *What is Marriage,* Girgis, George and Anderson have defined marriage as "the union of two people (whether of the same sex or opposite sexes) who commit to romantically loving and caring for each other and to sharing the burdens and benefits of domestic life" (Girgis, George, Anderson 2016, 246). However, living in a heteronormative society assures that the couples are always of the opposite sex, such that heterosexism is possible. If we look around us, we find the heterosexual family models dominating. Heteronormativity, therefore, sustains the dominant norm of heterosexuality by rendering any other forms of relationship as marginal.

Since the primary engagement in this chapter is with *Fire*, it first chooses to discern the family structure of the film. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* was released in the year 1996. The film begins with the marriage of one of the female protagonists, Sita, played by Nandita Das, with Jatin, played by Javed Jaffri. Soon after marriage, and a short honeymoon to Agra, Sita moves to Delhi with her in-laws. Jatin has an elder brother named Ashok, played by Kulbhushan Kharbandha, who is the family's patriarch. Ashok is married to Radha, played by Shabana Nazmi. The family has an elderly woman, Biji, and a house-help, named Munoo. With time, a romantic relationship develops between Radha and Sita. As the structure reveals, the relationship between the family members is strictly within the heteronormative norms,

where Radha is expected to take care of Ashok's biji, Sita is expected to follow the traditions of the family, and the sexual division of labour is strictly maintained whereby both the brothers are the breadwinners, and the wives are into household chores.

However, when looked closely, the film subverts the sexual division of labour. According to Nivedita Menon, the labour is divided according to gender, following which it is the women who are primarily considered to look after the household, while the men become the breadwinners. (Menon 2001, 16-17). While this sexual division of labour is distinguishable as men's and women's work, *Fire* subverts it. The film shows how the men of the house have a limited role in the takeaway business, the only source of the family's income. Radha, later accompanied by Sita, prepares all the food items. Ashok, the family's patriarch, maintains the account while his brother hands over the packages to the customers. Thus, though women are confined indoors, the film shows how the main task of preparing food is done by them. It is interesting to note that despite remaining in extended *ghor* (Chatterjee), it is the women's tasks that earn the family's bread. As Partha Chatterjee argues, though post nineteenth century, women whose domain remained "*ghor*" (Chatterjee 165) started moving "*bahir*" (Chatterjee 1993, 165), "[there] always remained … [the] domain set by the differences between socially approved male and female conduct" (Chatterjee 1993, 165). Hence, though it is the women who prepare the food putting in unpaid labour, following the patriarchal structure, the monetary matters were regulated by Ashok. This unpaid labour can be read through the lens of Christine Delphy's *A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* where she argues marriage as a labour contract: "[The] services are furnished within the framework of a particular relationship to an individual (the husband). They are excluded from the realms of exchange and consequently have no value ... they are unpaid ... The husband's only obligation to the relationship, which is obviously for his own needs, is to provide for his wife's basic needs, in other words, to maintain her labour power" (Delphy 1984, 60). However, the film also decenters this authority of Ashok since both the women, particularly Sita, are aware of their unpaid labour and prime role in business. It is revealed when she says to Radha, "We will start our own takeaway" (Mehta 1996, 60:12 to 60:13).Through this, the film subverts not only the paternalism of Ashok over women but also shows that both Radha and Sita are aware of their prime roles in the breadwinning business of the family, and thus they subvert the sexual division of labour as well.

Paternalism is one of the significant factors in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga too*. Balbir Chowdhury, played by Anil Kapoor, the household's patriarch, maintains his authority following the paternalist norms. Paternalism, in the simplest sense, can be defined as mutual domination and subordination in marital relationships or between the head of the family and other members (Lerner 1987; Desai, 1977; Menon 2001, 2012). Gerda Lerner defines, "Paternalism or more accurately paternalistic dominance describes the relationship of a dominant group, considered superior, to a subordinate group, considered inferior, in which the dominance is mitigated by mutual obligations and reciprocal rights" (Lerner 1987, 239). It is well maintained in the family headed by Balbir Chowdhury, where the authority is maintained on the virtue of mutual subjugation. The family consists of Balbir, the father; Sweety, the daughter, played by Sonam Kapoor; the aunt of Balbir, called Biji; and Babloo, brother of Sweety. The film also has Sahil Mirza, played by Rajkumar Rao, the male protagonist, and Kuhu, Sweety's romantic partner, played by Regina Cassandra. In the Chowdhury family, all the decisions are taken by Balbir Chowdhury. He is portrayed as a father who loves his daughter and the family. Yet, when he hears that his daughter, Sweety, is having a relationship with a Muslim, which turns out to be a lie, he rejects the relationship. Even when Sweety is grounded by her brother, Babloo, the father accepts the decision and allows thwarting the mobility of an adult woman. Babloo, too claims his love for Sweety throughout the film. However, his ways of showering love on his sister are stalking her, intruding in her personal life, deciding whether she can study in Delhi or London, grounding her at home and disconnecting all modes of communication so that she cannot meet or contact her lover. All of these are portrayed lovingly in the film under the garb of paternalism. As Lerner mentions, paternalism thrives on mutual subjugation and dominance, and the relationship among the family members, especially between Sweety and his father and brother, abides by it.

Performativity and Its Subversion

The sexual division of labour and paternalism is largely dependent on gender performativity. Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, "Performativity must be understood not as a single or deliberate act, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names" (Butler 1993, 2). Butler has analysed how performativity plays a vital role in heteronormativity by promoting heterosexual behaviour, gender role division and heterosexism. It is shown in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* through the teenage life of Sweety when she witnessed her friend

being bullied by the school boys. Once Sweety's sexual choice was partially understood by her classmates when her diary accidentally fell, they chose to ostracise her. But soon, she found a friend, a boy, who did not discriminate against her on account of her sexual identity (Dhar 2019). However, Sweety once witnessed her friend being beaten by his classmates and seniors for not following the performative script, which exemplifies the theoretical argument, that is, in the social scenario, "[b]inaristic understanding of masculinity and femininity shape the ways we perceive gender ... the assumption of heterosexuality determines the ways in which we constitute that femininity and masculinity" (Francis 2003, x). Thus, one is compelled to follow the script with slight moderations but no alterations (Butler 1990, 67-69). So, when the boy refused to follow the script, his seniors and classmates ensured that he was compelled to perform as per the script. Butler, therefore, has argued that in a heteronormative society, a biological determination is more culturally dependent, "When the relevant culture that constructs gender is considered through law or a set of laws, then it seems that gender is as fixed and determined as it was under biology-in-destiny formulation. In such case, not biology but culture becomes the destiny" (Butler 1993, 11). Through this scene, the film showed the importance of performativity, depending on a person's gender that is culturally constituted, in asserting the heteronormativity in society.

As mentioned, this performativity is intricately related to the gendered division of labour where the man of the house following the gender performative script becomes the breadwinner and is supposed to have no interest in household chores. It followed the sexual division of labour grounded on biological essentialism (Beauvoir 1972, Showalter 2004). Menon (2012) has argued, "Only the actual process of pregnancy is biological, all the other work within the home that women do – cooking, cleaning and so on (the whole range of work which we may call domestic labour) can equally be done by men. But this work is called women's work" (Menon 2012, 11). While this pattern as far as the sexual division of labour is concerned is maintained in *Fire*, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* subverts this performativity by showing Balbir, the man of the house, having a deep interest in cooking. However, here he is thwarted by Biji, who strictly maintains the household and does not even let Balbir enter the kitchen. The line of the sexual division of labour is not entirely blurred since Balbir considers cooking as his hobby and maintains his role of breadwinner by maintaining the business. However, every time Balbir prepares some dishes, he blurs the gender performativity line. A closer reading shows that he prepares better food than his Biji, who maintains the household chores and cooking. This blurring of gender performativity maps a route to blur the

sexual division of labour. As one digresses from the prescribed gender performativity, there is always the option to interchange or mutually divide the labour irrespective of gender. Hence, both man and woman can overcome biological essentialism and subvert the gendered division of labour.

Blurring performativity is also one of the essential ways to challenge heteronormativity. So, *Fire* also adopts this method and chooses to subvert heteronormativity through cross-dressing. Sita cross-dresses at the beginning of the film after she enters her in-laws. On the following day of her arrival, she wears the full pant of her husband and dances to music. As she is called for immediate help, she appears before Radha and Biji in the same dress. This transgression of dressing is not always related to blurring the gender roles. But cross-dressing is one of the major ways to determine gender division on biological essentialism. Since the film explores the lesbian relationship and subverts heteronormativity, blurring the gender lines becomes necessary. The cross-dressing is further explored through a dance by Radha and Sita that is symbolic of the gradual change in the relationship between Radha and Sita. As the relationship between Radha and Sita gradually takes a romantic turn, there is a dance scene to a classic Bollywood number where Sita again cross-dresses. The dance also symbolises the bridge in the journey of Radha and Sita. Through this dance, the film endeavours to show the flux in the sexual identity of an individual that, in its turn, questions an individual's performative role. As Butler quotes, "Identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly constituted and as such subject to volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested and on occasion compelled to give away" (Butler 1993, 108). The dance's ending symbolises a sexual relationship that makes Biji dissatisfied, while the house-help Munu comment, "Too much electricity" (Mehta 1996, 60:08). As mentioned earlier, the dance also indicates the journey in the relationship between the two women, from sisters-in-law to lovers.

Subverting Heteronormativity Through Myths in *Fire*

Regarding subverting heteronormative structure, *Fire* is not limited to cross-dressing and gender roles. This chapter does not deal with the symbol of fire and its mythological discourse since it has been well studied. It takes on to subvert the myths that again form a significant trademark for heteronormativity and assert the secondary pedestal for women. First, the film subverts the traditions associated with the names, Radha and Sita.

Mythologically, Radha is the beloved of Krishna. She is not married to Krishna and desires his intimacy throughout her life. When we come to *Fire*, Radha is the wife of Ashok. However, she cannot have any intimate sexual relationship with her husband since the latter dedicated his life to celibacy after the couple realised that they would not be able to have kids since Radha does not have eggs in her ovaries (Mehta 1996). At times, Ashok wants to check if his penance is successful and if he can overcome his desire. During those times, at the demand of Ashok, she is compelled to lie naked beside him without having any sexual or non-sexual contact. Thus, similar to the mythological Radha, Radha in *Fire* is also unable to satiate her desire for intimacy. In mythology, too, Radha is close to Krishna but unable to be his sexual mate or wife. Similarly, in *Fire,* Radha is close to Ashok, but despite being his wife, she cannot consummate with him. However, unlike mythology, Radha in *Fire* does not crave Ashok's intimacy throughout her life. Instead, she develops a relationship with Sita and gradually fails to feel any sexual desire for Ashok. Unlike mythology, she does not wait her entire life to fulfil her desire, nor does she attempt to overcome her desire. In mythology, Sita is Rama's wife, who dedicates her entire life to her husband's wishes. She is compelled to stay away from her husband when he exiles her, yet she never fails to obey his commands and remains loyal to her husband throughout her life. Sita in *Fire* also tries to abide by her husband, Jatin. But soon, she learns about her husband's extramarital affair and realises he was not interested in her. Similar to mythology, she is also in exile, figuratively, since her husband is invested in an extramarital affair and does not care for her. But here, too, mythology is subverted, and Sita rejects to be the dutiful wife waiting for her husband's compassion. Instead, in her free spirit, she develops a relationship with Radha and ceases to be the dutiful wife. Unlike mythology, she exerts her own choice instead of remaining at the mercy of her husband's whims. In both the names, strong tradition is traced where women are supposed to remain loyal to one man irrespective of his attitude towards her. Heteronormativity promotes such mythological characters as means to strengthen heterosexism and heteronormative families. *Fire*, therefore, chooses to subvert these specific mythologies in an attempt to reveal the alternative female version where women exert their choice instead of remaining at the mercy of the male benefactor. Moreover, the names and subverting the heterosexual narratives associated with it also weakens the heteronormativity, opening options for alternatives and providing space for every kind of relationship.

Subversion of mythology does not take place only through names but directly as well. The film shows the festival of Karva Chauth, a Hindu custom where wives fast the entire day for their husbands' long life (Mehta

1996, 45:15 to47:10). The film explores the mythology attached to this custom through a story. According to the mythology, as told in the film, a king was pierced by a thousand needles and could not move. His wife removed all the needles one after another. While the last two remained, a maid informed that a saint demanded an immediate meeting with the queen. So, the queen instructed the maid to remove the last two needles pierced into the eye of the king while she went and met the saint. Once the needles were removed, the king woke and saw the maid and immediately was enchanted by her devotion. He made the maid his queen while demoting the queen to the maid's position. When the holy man heard the whole incident, he instructed the queen to fast the entire day and gave her holy water to drink while breaking the fast, only after the moon was full. The queen obeyed, and as she went to the king after breaking the fast, the enchantment broke, and the king immediately recognised her. Thus, the custom of Karva Chauth began to manifest the wives' loyalty toward their husbands and pray for their long lives.

This text chooses to subvert this established and flourishing custom in two steps: firstly, through the wives' conversation, and secondly, the method of breaking the fast. After Radha narrates the story, Sita's reaction is, "What a wimp, I mean the queen. And as for the king, I think he is a real jerk" (Mehta 1996, 47:14). She disagreed with the custom of the story where the wife is compelled to continue to love and prove it to her husband irrespective of the latter's action or attitude. She called the story a falsified narration that harps on the loyalty of only the woman where the man is free from any such obligation. Moreover, it denied any agency or choice to the wife, who was left at the husband's mercy and whims. The film further subverts the heterosexual narrative by the mode of breaking the fast. None of the husbands, Jatin and Ashok, are present when the wives are breaking the fast. Radha and Sita look at the moon, and Sita speaks of her desire to drink water. Though initially, Radha suggests that she can drink and eat only after attaining the blessing from Jatin, on second thought, she gives water to Sita. It subverts the heterosexual tradition associated with the mythological story and the custom. Firstly, according to the custom, as mentioned in the film, water can be taken only after the husband's blessing. This film disregards this custom, and water is taken without any husband's blessing. Secondly, water is fed by the husband to the wife. This film twists this tradition too, and water is instead fed by Radha, Sita's romantic partner. By doing this, the film also opens up the avenue of fasting not only for the male partner but also for the female partner or even in a homosexual relationship. While the film firstly subverts the entire narrative where only the wife is compelled to shower her loyalty to the husband and pray for his long life, on the

secondary level, it subverts the intricate heteronormativity attached to it through the scene where Sita is fed water by Radha. It also symbolises that the wives have given up waiting for their respective husbands and instead chose the company of one another. While certain studies of the film[1] have used this scene to symbolise that the women assert their choice and allow the manifestation of their desire, I use this scene to symbolise the solidarity of women where they reject the intrusion of their husbands and choose to heed to their choice. Since this chapter is not studying the film through the lens of desire, I do not delve into it. Instead, I use this scene to symbolise the subversion of myth and the deeply coated heteronormativity within it.

Subversion of Heteronormativity Through Plot in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga*

While *Fire* chooses to subvert the myths in an attempt to subvert the heteronormativity, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* chooses not to deal with any mythology. Instead, it subverts the traditional portrayal of heterosexual relations in Bollywood. The film initially shows the meeting of the male and female protagonist in the conventional Bollywood manner with background music as the two meet and part. The plot is also developed in such a manner that the family of Sweety, the female protagonist, thinks the male protagonist, Sahil Mirza, is her lover and opposes the relationship. Though the brother of Sweety, Babloo, is shown to know some hidden truth about her sister, it is not revealed to the audience until the second half of the film. The film subverts the heteronormative fashion when Sweety reveals her relationship with a woman, and the whole set-up of the film's heteronormativity through the background music, slow scenes, the search of Sahil for Sweety collapses. While *Fire* from the beginning harps on the homosexual relation where the audience realises that a relationship might build between the sisters-in-law, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* tries to bring a twist in the plot and structure with the revelation of Sweety's homosexual relationship. In this regard, this film proves to be a foil to *Fire* since, in *Fire,* the tension between the two females can be traced from the beginning of their interaction. As the following sections will compare, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* does not challenge the patriarchal structure but weaves the story within it. Instead, it tries to communicate the alternative options through the twist in the plot that subverts the heterosexual set-up of the film. Therefore, though the trailer and summary of the film promised to be about a lesbian relationship, there fails to be any hint of it in the film's first half. Only towards the end of the first half does Sweety reveals her sexual identity to Sahil. In the second half, the film opens

up on the relationship between Sweety and her female partner, the struggle of Sweety from her childhood to hide her sexual identity, and her compulsion to remain closeted. Unlike *Fire,* which traces the roots of heteronormativity in traditions, mythology and performances, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* deliberately chooses to refrain from delving into the depth of heteronormative or how heterosexism is injected among individuals but only deals with the impact of heteronormative culture on homosexuals.

Agency of Women and Assertion of Choices

By subverting heteronormativity in their own manners, both films open space for choice. While abiding by the traditions, conventions, and heteronormative structure are quite easily acceptable, following one's choice beyond the straightjacket is unpredictable and often results in ostracisation. Both films emphasise the importance of choice and women's agency. Indeed, the film *Fire* can be read as how the relationship between Sita and Radha enabled them to assert their voices. The assertion of independent choice irrespective of gender rules or traditions is discussed in the film through two conversations between Radha and Sita on the day of *karva-chauth*. In the morning, Sita is informed that she is not supposed to eat or drink the entire day. While sitting with Radha to talk about what the wives can do on this day, Radha says that they are free to do everything such as wear beautiful new clothes, wear makeup, gossip or anything they wish. To this, Sita says, "Do everything except eat and drink? What would I not give for a cool glass of water?" (Mehta 1996, 40:00). She also adds, "[w]e are so bound by customs and rituals, somebody just has to press my button, this button marked tradition, and I start responding like a trained monkey" (Mehta 1996, 41:00 to 42:1542). While this statement can be read not only through the lens of traditions and how they assert the secondary pedestal to women, in this chapter, it is read through the lens of Butler's performativity. Butler has argued how the performative model follows a particular script according to which men and women are asserted particular roles and compelled to follow them. Little modifications to the script at the individual level are allowed, and it is only within this limited scope that individual freedom is socially granted (Butler 1990, 1993). Similarly, in the *karvachauth,* too, the freedom to do anything is limited to dressing up or resting. As Sita mentions, they are not free to eat or drink. This can be extended to activities such as moving outdoors or having an extramarital affair. The assertion of the agency is again mentioned when the mythological story of *karvachauth* is told. Sita finds the king as a buffoon

to be fooled so easily, such as not understanding his wife's love. While Radha is pessimistic and says that the queen didn't have many choices, Sita speaks about finding choices, "We can find choices" (Mehta 1996, 47:40 to 47:50). Through the lens of subverting the heteronormativity, Sita here becomes an active agent who voices the necessity to seek choices beyond the heteronormative structure and assert one's agency to follow it.

This assertion of one's agency is followed by Radha through small steps. In the film, Radha is shown to care for Biji, Ashok's aunt, throughout the day. However, upon her interaction with Sita and recognising the importance of her personal space, such as having her meals in peace, she rejects to abide by this task that is supposed to be equally distributed. Instead, she finds the courage to tell Ashok, "Why don't you feed Biji tonight?" (Mehta 1996,57:00 to 57:20). By this action, she not only asserts the fact that she has every right to have her meal in peace but also that household chore is not only her job. Here, she tries to break the sexual division of labour. Earlier, the chapter explored how the film subverted the sexual division of labour, especially through Sita's assertive words that they would start their own takeaway business. But in this section, the chapter tries to assert how the relationship between the two women gives courage to Radha to gradually exert her agency over small but important matters. For instance, it seems to be a small step when Radha tells Ashok to feed Biji in her stead, but within the context, it must be noted that this was the first time she rejected to follow Ashok's orders. While Ashok and Jatin always eat their meal in peace being served by the women, Radha and Sita are expected to get up between meals to listen to Biji's demands. Furthermore, at the film's beginning, Radha is introduced as bathing Biji, that is, taking care of her. That she can reject her assigned job and tell Ashok that catering to Biji's needs is equally his responsibility while she can have her meal is a considerable exertion of the agency.

This exertion of agency happens again when Radha refuses to follow Ashok's commands to lie next to him nakedly so that the latter can overcome his sexual desire. When Radha asked Ashok what she gained from it, he thoughtfully answered that she was performing her duty as a wife. So, Radha rejecting to follow the order of Ashok also symbolises that she rejects to perform her duty as a wife and follows her choice as an individual. In the same scene, Ashok called out to Radha several times, but Radha did not pay any heed as she was having an intimate conversation with Sita on the roof. When Ashok asked why she did not come immediately, her truthful answer was that she was with Sita. Therefore, Radha gradually carves her space beyond the wife's role and asserts her agency. She chooses

to digress from her role as a wife and seeks her individual choice in an attempt to fashion her identity on her terms. In the process, she gradually finds her happiness, and instead of waiting for the family and obeying her husband's commands, she lives her life by her own choice.

Sweety voices about this exertion of one's agency in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* during her conversation with Sahil about her homosexuality. As mentioned earlier, this chapter locates *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* as a foil to *Fire*. While *Fire* portrays the gradual exertion of one's agency, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* lets the audience know the importance of one's choice and exerting one's agency. Through her short speech, Sweety challenges the asserted heterosexual roles for males and females. She mentions that she does not develop feelings for men while society limits itself to heterosexual thought. She rejects to follow the social norm since she develops sexual and romantic emotions only for females. Thus, by rejecting the normative compulsory path, Sweety chooses to seek her identity in a journey taken on her own terms. In this conversation, Sweety disagrees with the scripture and instead tries to find her path by exerting her agency. This exertion of the agency made her reject all the heterosexual scriptures. Thus, through this speech, the film situates the heteronormative social structure in opposition to one's agency. Hence, by exerting her agency, Sweety challenges heteronormativity. The film also asserts that not in all cases, the choice versus the heteronormativity needs to follow homosexual relations, such as in the case of Sweety's father, Balbir. However, even his choice of cooking food does not fall into the pattern of the ascertained script. Hence, when he exerts his choice, he challenges the script in a particular manner. Thus, while *Fire* projects exertion of one's agency, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* shows the limitation of the ascertained script and how exerting one's agency might often lead to moving in the opposite direction of the script.

Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga: A Foil to *Fire*

While both the films centre on lesbian relationships, as the chapter shows, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* can be seen as a foil to *Fire* in every aspect. However, this section explicitly explores how *Fire* breaks the patriarchal structure while *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* operates within it. Both the films end with the hope of a union between the couples. However, in *Fire*, the fight of Radha and Sita is not only against heteronormativity but also against the marital structure. It is because both of them are married, and hence their relationship is extramarital. Moreover, the battle of Radha and

Sita is not to convince either their parents or in-laws about their relationship; the women choose their own future beyond the paternalist territory of their in-laws or family. Since they move against heteronormativity and reject paternalism, their choices are opposed not only on the grounds of homosexual relationship but also because they reject the marital bond and choose to establish their identity beyond any paternalist guardian. Thus, they are not damsels in distress but choose to fight their own battles without the support of any male. On the other hand, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* operates within the structure where the women constantly need male figures, and it is only by their support that they can attain their relationship goal. While in the beginning, Sweety is grounded and needs the help of Sahil, in the later part, she needs to convince her father to help her come out of the closet. She continuously remains within the patriarchal structure and does not oppose the fact that her loving paternalist family illegally grounds her. Even the motive of the play within the film was not only to communicate her choice but to convince her family about it. It is illustrated in the play performed within the film wherein the young Sweety remains closeted in a glass room, and instead of attempting to break the glass, she pleads for her father's help. Her choice is accepted by her father, and it is only through his consent that the relationship progresses. The film's last scene also ends with Sweety's dialogue, who tells Sahil to spread his play to all the rural areas and rescue the girls who have a non-heteronormative choice. Thus, while *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* does not challenge the patriarchal structure but chooses to assert the individual choice while remaining within the structure, in *Fire,* the relationship acts as a medium for the women to find their individual identity. While in Fire, the women are not damsels in need of the protection and support of any male figure, *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* is a love story of two females in constant need of male rescuers. Thus, in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga,* following the patriarchal structure, the male comes to rescue the female even in a non-heteronormative relationship, and the women are constantly seeking approval of their relationship within the heteronormative patriarchal structure under the guidance of paternalist guardians. *Fire,* on the other hand, is a movie asserting the individual choice of women, where women assert their agency independent of any paternalist and breaks the heteronormative patriarchal traditions to frame their identity on their choice. Since *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga,* seeks approval from heteronormative society, the father supports her daughter, but in *Fire*, Ashok, who seeks moksha, lets her wife, Radha, burn for her audacity to make her independent choice beyond his supervision. Thus, in *Fire,* no man comes to rescue the woman, and Radha has to escape from the fire on her own accord. However, Radha

successfully escapes from the fire and can unite with Sita beyond the supervision of any man.

Conclusion

The chapter, therefore, subverts the patriarchal characteristics like paternalism and sexual division of labour while also challenging heteronormativity and the performative script. Through the chapter, it is realised how subversion of the performativity and performative script leads to the subversion of heteronormativity, which challenges the sexual division of labour and paternalism. However, in the two films, the subversions and exertion of agencies are also contradictory to each other. In *Fire,* women fight for themselves by breaking the patriarchal norms to materialise their choice, while in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* women materialise their choice while staying within the structural constraints of patriarchy. While in *Fire,* the women find emancipation only by subverting the heteronormative structure, the patriarchal conventions, and rejecting the heteronormative family, in the other, the women seek emancipation while remaining within the patriarchal society. Hence, in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga,* the heteronormativity is challenged while abiding by the paternalist structure; in *Fire,* decentering heteronormativity spontaneously challenges the paternalist structure that, on its course, challenges the heteronormative family. So, in *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga,* the women are still bound by the norms and traditions, but in *Fire,* the women protagonists break all the walls and fashion their choice with any degree of freedom.

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CHAPTER TEN

EXPLORING QUEER VISUAL CULTURES
IN NEPALI FROM THE DARJEELING
AND SIKKIM HILLS:
AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY

ANIL PRADHAN
AND PEMA GYALCHEN TAMANG

Introduction

Queer and sexuality studies in India has come quite a long way in bringing to the fore the multifarious aspects of LGBTQ+ lives, realities, and aspirations; though the cumulative output might seem to be less when compared with the research produced in the Global North. Nevertheless, queer and sexuality studies in the Indian context has resulted in important contributions in academia and beyond. However, there exists a gap in the field of queer literary and social research in the geo-social contexts of the hill-district of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal and of the hill-state of Sikkim. Research focused upon non-heteronormative sexuality and queerness in this particular geo-spatial periphery is shockingly sparse. Although some queer texts (literary, cinematic, etc.) have recently emerged from the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim, very little has been done to consider them vis-à-vis the discourses of queer studies.

Nepali language in the Hills[1] became a symbol of identity for the people of Darjeeling, who, in spite of being a vital part of its history and formation, were often considered foreigners by most of 'mainland' India. Nepali Literature, thus, in the twentieth century, helped form the idea of the 'Indian

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[1] Hereafter, unless otherwise specified, "the Hills" refers to geographical regions of Darjeeling and Sikkim in general.

Nepali Nation.'[2] The first half of the twentieth century saw writers like Rup Narayan Sinha showcase the social contexts within which the people of Darjeeling lived, and after Independence, Indian Nepali literature reached greater heights through writers like Indra Bahadur Rai who represented the social and political realities and experiences of the region.[3] In the context of sexuality, the focus on LGBTQ+ issues in the Hills has on recently received some attention. The existing research has provided preliminary overview of queer lived experiences in Gangtok,[4] primarily focused on literary texts in English[5] and in Nepali[6] from the region, highlighted the lack of in-depth research,[7] and only recently begun in-depth discussions and

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[2] Indra Bahadur Rai, "Indian Nepali Nationalism and Nepali Poetry," *Journal of South Asian Literature* 29, no. 1 (1994): 149,
https://www.jstor.org/stable/i25797462.

[3] Jiwan Namdung, *History of Modern Indian Nepali Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2019), 18; Pema Gyalchen Tamang, "Decolonizing Darjeeling: History and Identity in the Writings of Indra Bahadur Rai," *Himalaya* 41, no. 1 (2022): 16, https://doi.org/10.2218/himalaya.2022.7044.

[4] See Nikita Rai, Interrogating 'Queer' through Prajwal Parajuly's *Land Where I Flee*, MPhil dissertation, Sikkim University, 2018,
https://14.139.206.50:8080/jspui/bitstream/1/6129/1/Nikita%20Rai_MPhil_2018.pdf.

[5] See Anil Pradhan, "Queer Tales from the Hills: Reading Two Inaugural Texts from the Darjeeling Sikkim Himalaya," in *Gender and Sexual/Other Identities in the Eastern Himalaya*, ed. Mona Chettri, K Hima, and Nikita Rai (Gangtok: Rachna Books, 2022), 10-28; Rai, *Interrogating 'Queer.'*

[6] See Anil Pradhan and Pema Gyalchen Tamang, "Reading Queer Literature in Nepali from the Darjeeling and Sikkim Hills: An Introductory Study," in Unruly Intimacies: Queer Expressions, Experiences and Representations in Contemporary Indian Vernacular, ed. Kaustav Chakraborty and Anup Shekhar Chakraborty (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

[7] See Lhamu Tshering Dukpa, "Third Bodies: Examining Mental and Sexual Health Problems of the Hijras of North Bengal and Kolkata," *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 6, no. 2 (2019): 95-102,
https://www.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/hijras_transgender_in_india_hiv_human_rights_and_social_exclusion.pdf; Pradhan, "Queer Tales from the Hills"; Pema Gyalchen Tamang, "Living in the Hills: Visualising the Queer Perspective," *The Confluence Collective*, August 20, 2020,
https://www.theconfluencecollective.com/post/living-in-the-hills-visualising-the-queer-perspective.

analyses of queer texts[8] and lived experiences[9] in the Hills.[10] Unlike, literature in the Nepali language, production of cinema and other forms of visual media is in its nascent stage; consequently, research on such texts and media is non-existent. In an attempt to fill the research gap and keeping to this volume's focus, this chapter explores existing forms of visual representation of queerness and non-heteronormative sexualities in in the Hills, to initiate an earnest discussion on visual queer cultures in/of the Hills.

Specifically, the chapter interrogates how such visual texts are utilised by queer individuals from the Hills to challenge the heteronormative and heteropatriarchal societal and cultural strictures of the region, while refashioning queer visual culture in the Indian-Nepali context. The discussion in the chapter is divided into three main sections. The first one focuses on *Mohan ra Madan* (2022), the first queer-themed short film from Sikkim, and discusses how both the potential and threats of rurality impacts queer subjects and gay romance in the villages of Sikkim. The second section analyses *Āwāz* (2022), the first queer-themed music video from Darjeeling, and *Sānjh ko Pal* (2022), the first short film from Darjeeling with lesbian romance as the main plot. In the context of the music video, the focus is on the representation of discrimination of queer individuals at workspaces and the call for action against it, and with respect to the short film, the section explicates how same-sex romance set in rural spaces can be analysed to have a queer-positive message when looked at through the lens of a queer ecofeminist perspective. The third section focuses on Xorem Chen Tamang, a popular queer influencer from Darjeeling, and a couple of music videos starring Xorem to highlight how they have used such platforms to reimagine the 'normal' when it comes to popular visual media content and its consumption in the Hills.

Rural Queer Aspiration and Tragedy: A Sikkimese Tale in "Mohan ra Madan"

Sikkim-based director Bkey Agarwal's independent short film titled "Mohan ra Madan" (2022), produced by BR Production, is the first film

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[8] See Pradhan, "Queer Tales from the Hills"; Rai, *Interrogating 'Queer'*.
[9] See Nirvan Pradhan, "'Inharu Jastai': Gender Non-Performativity in Anglo Indian Schools," in *Gender/Sexual and Other Identities in the Eastern Himalaya*, ed. Mona Chettri, K Hima, and Nikita Rai (Gangtok: Rachna Books, 2022), 136-155; Tamang, "Living in the Hills".
[10] Hereafter, unless specified, the term "Hills" would refer to both the Darjeeling and Sikkim hill regions in general.

from Sikkim that deals with homosexuality and issues of queerness in the region. As a queer retelling of Laxmi Prasad Devkota's epic Nepali-language poem titled *Muna Madan* (1936), that narrates the story of Madan's travels in Lhasa and the subsequent tragedy of returning home too late, the Nepali-language film provides a narrative of love that could have fought against the odds of the society and the times, had the circumstances been more conducive and kinder. Similar to Devkota's story, Mohan and Madan suffer as lovers, making their separation more tragic and moving; however, unlike the heterosexual narrative in *Muna Madan*, the tragedy of the gay lovers in "Mohan ra Madan" is informed specifically by socio-cultural interference – one that is hypermasculine and homophobic to the extent of inhumane and violent crime, revealing how difficult it is for queer subjects to live, love, and laugh freely in a society that does not tolerate sexual non-heteronormativity.

"Mohan ra Madan" (2022) narrates the story of Mohan (Nilesh Rai) and Madan (Aadarsh Pradhan) set in the hills of Sikkim. Depicting the budding romance between Mohan and Madan, the short film reveals what it means to be queer in the rural spaces of contemporary India, especially when it comes to the oft-overlooked north east region. As two gay men in love, their story portrays not only lived realities of the working-class queer men in the village but also showcases the aspirations that such men have in terms of migrating to more 'liberal' towns and cities to live better lives as gay men – a life that is not possible in the rural hills. However, the context of the natural setting, especially the rural locale, plays an important role in this film; it provides a space of potential and possibilities for the queer characters, however restricted or closeted it might be. The queer potential of rural spaces in nature is explored in the film in a liberating manner such that it locates queer-ness of Mohan and Madan in the natural-ness of their existence; considering this aspect through a queer ecocritical lens reveals more than what is implied in the cinematic text.

Although the discourses of sexuality in the Global North, specifically the naturalisation of (hetero-)sexuality and sexual evolution, via Charles Darwin, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis, have been understood as a biologised view of sexual nature that must correlate to a natural given-ness of human sexual interactions, queer ecofeminist theorists and commentators have provided alternative, non-normative insights. Drawing, but distinct, from the ecofeminist approach, queer ecology has emerged, towards a discursive rethinking of how non-heteronormative sexualities and

the environment interrelate and intersect; Timothy Morton,[11] Catriona
Mortimer-Sandilands,[12] and Nicole Seymour[13] are some of the proponents
of queer ecology as an epistemological and ontological discourse. In
conceptualising the ambivalent idea of the 'natural', theorists and critics
have pointed out to the queer-positive agency of considering queer theory
vis-à-vis ruralism and ecocriticism; Gordon Brent Ingram's idea of queer
ruralism is an example.[14] In fact, Mortimer-Sandilands notes that
contemporary gay literature has emphasised that "natural settings have been
important sites for the exploration of male homosexuality as a natural
practice" where "rural spaces in particular have served […] as places of
freedom for male homoerotic encounters," putting forward, through the
"pastoral literary conventions," an argument for "the authenticity of
homosexuality," challenging "the very idea of the naturalness of
heterosexuality."[15]

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[11] Morton comments upon the bringing together of ecology and queer theory – both
non-essentialist in nature – through a discussion of their claims on and examples of
the non-authenticity of a fixed, universal given and a reality of diverse differences
and interdependences. See Timothy Morton, "Guest Column: Queer Ecology,"
PMLA 125, no. 2 (2010): 275-278,
https://www.jstor.org/stable/25704424.
[12] Mortimer-Sandilands states that the aim of the discourse of queer ecology is "a
rethinking of heterosexism and homophobia in environmental discourse." See
Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Whose There is There There? Queer Directions and
Ecocritical Orientations," *Ecozona* 1, no. 1, (2010): 63,
https://www.ecozona.eu/article/download/321/292.
[13] Seymour's concept of plural queer ecologies concerns an understanding that
"queerness might be progressively articulated through the 'natural'." See Nicole
Seymour, *Strange Natures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological
Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 4. Also, it can
potentially "combat the kinds of naturalizations and denaturalizations that enable
exploitation and discrimination." See Ibid. 5.
[14] 'Queer ruralism,' as Gordon Brent Ingram terms it, entails "the desire to demarcate
and transform 'new' space" – "the margins, the anti-ghetto where small networks
have functioned in a careful but often provisional combination of isolation and
cohesion." See Gordon Brent Ingram, "Queers in Space: Towards a Theory of
Landscape and Sexual Orientation," paper presented at the Queers in Space I Panel
of the Queer Sites Conference, University of Toronto, May, 1993, 7,
https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.458.7318&rep=rep1&t
ype=pdf.
[15] Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural Passions?: Notes Toward a Queer
Ecology," *InVisible Culture* 9 (2005): 20-21,
https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue_9/issue9_sandilands.pdf.

In the Indian context, such concepts and discourses have only recently been considered, albeit inadequately, by literary and cultural theorists and commentators.[16] However, no critical attempt has been made to consider, analyse, and rethink queer ecocriticism vis-à-vis the contemporary literary fictive perspectives, though the relation between nature spaces and erotic love abounds in existing literature and art. In this context, as I have explicated elsewhere, certain examples of contemporary gay romance fiction written in English, and one text set in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Hills – Salim Rai's novella *But It's Him I Love* (2019) – have taken up the responsibility and project to re-instate and re-infuse the importance of nature in love and romance.[17] There can be witnessed a trend of moving away from the chaotic urban in what can be called a queer 'return to nature' that taps in and celebrates same-sex love and romance in the potential of rural spaces and travels. "Mohan ra Madan" provides a cinematic example of this trend in contemporary India wherein the exploration and depiction of queerness in the natural locale has more strategic and discursive connotations. Mohan and Madan are shown exploring the natural locale of their village in each other's intimate company, and the rural, natural setting, in turn, provides them with a safe space for progressing in their romance, including experiences that include frolicking in the dense forests, playing by the cool waterfalls, and kissing in open fields of green grasses.

However, the cinematic gaze on the queer potential of the Indian village nestled in the hills of Sikkim also reveals the dangers that lurk in the shadows of the remoteness of such spaces, especially when it comes to social (non-)awareness of LGBTQ+ issues and rights. As the docile Mohan is harassed by a group of hypermasculine, homophobic men in one scene, it reveals how gender identity and sexuality are often misinterpreted and misplaced by the heteronorm – in the case of Mohan's harassment, the premise of the heteronorm's curious gaze is that all effeminate or non-hypermasculine men must be *chhakkās* (*chhakkā*, a derogatory term used against the *hijras*, often becomes the misnomer for all non-heteronormative, femme men). Madan's arrival at the scene leads to the rescue of Mohan

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[16] For example, Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta have recently provided a critical entry point into considering doing queer ecocriticism in India. While drawing from 'West'-centric ideas and understandings of what queer ecocriticism has considered and can explore, their chapter on the 'rural queer' provides examples and contexts of recent academic and ethnographic outputs surrounding issues specific to the Indian sub-continent. See Kaustav Bakshi and Rohit K. Dasgupta, *Queer Studies: Texts, Contexts, Praxis* (Chennai: Orient BlackSwan, 2019), 74-89.

[17] See Pradhan, "Queer Tales from the Hills," 23-25.

from the harassment, but it also initiates an altercation that reveals a peculiar narrative of the Hills: violence is so ingrained in the hypermasculine identity that the death threat that one of the aggressive men gives to Madan actually acts as an omen. After the incident, Mohan and Madan have a conversation where Mohan asserts how their society would never allow them to live peacefully (as queer men) and suggests that they migrate to the city, where they would supposedly find more educated and open-minded people, in order to create their own, new world and to be happy. To fulfil their dream of relocating to the city, Mohan and Madan start saving money to migrate.

However, the irony of rural queer lives and aspirations in India is depicted through the murder of Madan before he could elope with Mohan, on the very same day when Section 377 is read down by the Supreme Court on 6th September, 2018, effectively decriminalising homosexuality. The news, in the Nepali language, is broadcasted by a background voice, while an aerial view of a green valley with a brook, somewhere in Sikkim, is focused upon on the screen, as if referring to the natural-ness of homosexuality and queerness. However, the irony of violence perpetrated on queer subjects becomes evident in the juxtaposition of the realities bound within the four walls of human dwelling. In the ending scene, Mohan's father meets Madan in the latter's house to talk about the queer-positive Supreme Court ruling that day and to confess that he had been afraid of the criminal status of homosexuality when it came to his dislike for the relationship between his son and Madan. The cruel nature of the scene resides in the eventual murder of Madan by local goons – the same men who had earlier harassed Mohan for his queerness – hired by Mohan's father. The falsehood of the assurance provided to Madan by the father regarding the safety of the 'gay couple' in the village is revealed as a myth that is not only vicious in its reality but shuddering in its crude injustice, and in this process, the murder of Madan becomes a poignant metaphor that reminds the viewers about the dark reality of queer existence in the country(side). While in Devkota's *Muna Madan*, Madan returns home too late to find his wife Muna dead due to a heartbreak, in Agarwal's film, the tragic fate of the lovers is portrayed in Madan's own death due his attempt at leaving the village too late. The scene also exemplifies how, despite the legal backing of LGBTQ+ rights and queer-positive rhetoric by the courts, the lived reality of queer folx in the rural spaces of India is contrastingly unpalatable and even life-threatening, as has been depicted in the case of Madan – showcasing the long journey that socio-cultural changes have to cover before queer-positive assertions can be arrived at in the future.

The film ends with a poem that ask pertinent and urgent questions, revealing the aspirations of queer folx in the Hills – who still dream and wish for a better society to live in. The poem that is written and recited by Pujan Rai, during the credits of film, provides the crux of the short film's aim, as the director claims, in "break[ing] the barriers and the mind-set of people towards the LGBTQ community"[18] by presenting the tragic love story of Mohan and Madan that could help the society question itself. The poem voices the key concerns, reflections, and aspirations of the queer subject in the Hills as such:

पुरुष भएर पुरूषलाई मायागर्नु
पाप हो र?
मोहन र मदन भएर बाँचु
श्राप हो र?
हाम्रो मायालाई बुझ्ने समाज आखिर कहिले बन्ने हो?
"माया त यस्तो पनि होस्," भनेर आखिर कसले भन्ने हो?

(Is it a sin for a man to love a man?
Is it a curse to live as Mohan and Madan?
After all, when will there be a society that will understand our love?
"Let love be like this too," who will say this after all?)

…

ए समाज,
हामीलाई हाम्रै हालमा बाँच्न देऊ
हामीले बुझ्ने गीत हामी आफै रच्छौं
हामीलाई स्वतंत्र संग नाँच्न देऊ

(Oh society,
Let us live the way we are
We will ourselves create songs that we understand
Let us dance with freedom)

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[18] Isabella Gurung, "Nepali Short Film on LGBTQ Community 'Mohan ra Madan' Premiered," *Sikkim Express*, January 18, 2021,
https://www.sikkimexpress.com/news-details/nepali-short-film-on-lgbtq-community-mohan-ra-madan-premiered.

New Possibilities on YouTube: Queer(in)g Darjeeling in "Awaz" and "Sanjh ko Pal"

YouTube, as a platform for publishing, sharing, and consuming music videos and short films, has become an important part of the general viewership today, especially when it comes to providing readily available and free content. Research has revealed the potential of YouTube, and similar video/content sharing platforms, when it comes to queer narratives helping LGBTQ+ folx come out in Asia[19] and share queer-positive stories and even find solidarity in specific platform-based queer communities in India.[20] In the context of the Darjeeling Hills, Chandan Tamang's music video (with the song performed by Riko Lama) "Awaz" (2022) and Shreya Tamang's short film "Sanjh ko Pal" (2022) are the first examples of queer media content that has been created specifically focusing on LGBTQ+-centric issues and that are freely available on YouTube for public consumption. This section discusses the two texts in relation to how they initiate a conversation on queer-centric issues in the Darjeeling Hills.

Voicing Resistance against Discrimination in Darjeeling: Music and Awareness in Chandan Tamang and Riko Lama's "Awaz"

The music video "Awaz" (Voice), directed by Chandan Tamang, performed by Riko Lama, and produced by Mall Road Studios, was released in June, 2022 and portrays a narrative of a lower middle-class queer man who works at a restaurant in Darjeeling town. It is also the first music video from the Darjeeling Hills that focuses on the LGBTQ+ context. The unnamed protagonist (played by Arbin Sharma) dons a queer badge which says "इन्द्रेणी मन" (Rainbow Heart), making him a target of heteronormative and homophobic gaze at his workplace. Despite having earned a degree in hospitality management from a reputed institution, he is shown to face ridicule and discrimination at the hands of both male patrons and fellow employees. An altercation leads to the protagonist being fired from his job, following which he is depicted to go through dejection and social withdrawal

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[19] See John Wei, "Out on YouTube: Queer Youths and Coming Out Videos in Asia and America," *Feminist Media Studies* (2021): 1-16,
http://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1950797.

[20] See Rahul Mitra, "Resisting the Spectacle of Pride: Queer Indian Bloggers as Interpretive Communities," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 54, no. 1, (2010): 163-178, https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150903550485.

– represented through his confinement in his own room over a period of time – along with a dislike for himself – represented through his breaking the mirror. After an intervention by a female acquaintance, the matter is taken to the owner of the restaurant, which leads to a meeting with the employee guilty of discrimination and the reinstatement of the protagonist at his job. The video ends with a pertinent observation with respect to the present state of queer rights at workplaces, in a post-377 era. It informs: "Indian LGBTQ citizens still face social and legal difficulties not experienced by non-LGBTQ persons."

The core aim of the music video seems to be public awareness about the plight of queer folx in the Darjeeling Hills, especially when it comes to opportunities of employment and/or the lack of safe and queer-positive working spaces in the region. The music video begins by quoting the impactful queer author Audre Lorde: "My silence has not protected me. Your silence will not protect you." Through this reference, the music video makes it clear how the silence of the queer community on issues pertaining to LGBTQ+-related experiences and rights in the Hills, and that of the non-queer actors, is equally damaging for the upliftment and betterment of the lives of queer folx in the region. However, the lyrics of the song provide an optimistic take on the potential of queer-positive changes in the Hills: with the proclamation of "डराउने छुइन तिम्रो बाछा र बन्धन संग" (I am not going to fear your vows and restrictions), the song declares hope in the assertion of the queer subject: "फुल बनि तिम्रो काढ़ाझै त्यो मनमा बसौला" (I will reside, like a flower, in your thorn-like heart). Furthermore, the song reminds the viewers, "हेरी हेर यो संसार मेरो आँखाले / तिमि पनि छौ साथमा" (Look at this world through my eyes / You too are here with me) while also claiming, "आज एउटा आवाज़ बनि तिम्रो आँखा खोल्न खोजेछु" (Today, becoming a voice, I am trying to open your eyes) and reminding, "मा जे छु ठिकैछु, बदलिन नखोज मलाइ / थिचो मिछो हुने छैन अब म जस्तो हरुलाइ" (Whatever I am, I am fine; don't try to change me / The likes of us are not going to be oppressed anymore). This queer-positive assertion and awareness for the viewing public of the Hills is the core aim of the song and the music video. The production of the music video was crowd-funded through awareness drives on social media, and the responses to the video have been positive when the comments section is considered.

Queer Potential of the Rural Darjeeling Hills:
The Lesbian Affair in Shreya Tamang's "Sanjh ko Pal"

The short film "Sanjh ko Pal" (A Moment of Dusk), written and directed by
Shreya Tamang and produced by RS Films in association with Suru
Productions, was released in July, 2022 and portrays a narrative of cross-
class romance between two young, queer women in the rural Latpanchar
area of the Darjeeling district. It is also the first short film from the
Darjeeling Hills that focuses on the LGBTQ+ context, specifically
concerning lesbian subjecthood and relationship. Dimpal (Upashna Tamang),
a young girl from rural Latpanchar, gets a job at the Latpanchar Cinchona
Plantation's Divisional Office, but in addition to her work, the Divisional
Officer wishes Dimpal to befriend his daughter, Sānjh (Sagarika Balmiki),
who has arrived from the town, and explore the village. While the friendship
between them develops, they steal oranges from people's yards and run
down hillslopes in joy. In the first portrayal of intimacy between them,
Sānjh feeds an orange to Dimpal sitting on the ground, and later, Dimpal
returns the warmth by hugging Sānjh, when the latter reveals that she misses
her dead mother; this incident also reveals a tinge of desire between the two,
situating a female-centric connection. Sānjh starts loving the village, as
Dimpal shows her around; Dimpal also takes Sānjh to her house, where she
offers Sānjh her spare kurta, and the transformation is represented as
something that converts Sānjh into a rural beauty. Dimpal then claims that
there's one thing missing and puts on a small *bindi* on Sānjh's forehead,
representing the *shringāra* tradition of preparing the woman for the lover,
depicting the sentiment of love.[21]

As the romantic tension between them increases, Sānjh is shown passing
her time at her house in longing – resembling *viraha* or *vipralambha*
(separation), desiring to meet Dimpal again, while the latter is away from
the village to attend a wedding. Later, while waiting for Dimpal at a

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[21] In the *Nātyashāstra,* the theory of *Bhāva-Rāsa* establishes a relationship between
the performer and the spectator. The *rāsa* or the sentiment results from the *bhāva* or
the state. See *The Natyasastra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics:
Ascribed to Bharata-Muni Vol I. (Chapters I-XXVII)*, trans. Manomohan Ghosh
(Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951), 105-106. *Rati* – the state of love – is
one of the eight permanent *bhāvas*, and the *rāsa* that it evokes is *shringāra* – the
erotic romance/love. See Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "Introduction," in *The Dhvanyaloka
of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls,
Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, and M. V. Patwardhan (Cambridge: Harvard University
Press, 1990), 16.

restaurant, Sānjh falls asleep and dreams of having confessed about her developing affection and love for Dimpal, while also dreaming that Dimpal rejects her proposal. After waking up, Sānjh starts avoiding Dimpal. What makes Sānjh change her mind and seek Dimpal again is an optimistic post about taking chances that a queer-positive account on Instagram, (not so) coincidentally called 'Sānjhkopal' that can be translated to 'a moment of dusk' but also can represent a fusion of the names of the two young women. Sānjh finally finds Dimpal sitting at the edge of the hill, overlooking the sunset, and as the former tries to initiate a conversation, they kiss each other. They arrive at the *sambhoga* (union) of the *shringāra rāsa*,[22] as was earlier initiated by desire and intensified by love-in/despite-separation; overcoming their shyness and in utter joy, they embrace each other, as a romantic song plays in the background in a fashion typical of Indian cinema, with lyrics that depicts the natural-ness of their newfound love: "यो नीलो आकाशमा सेतो बादल उडे जस्तो" (like a white cloud flying in the blue sky). The song continues: "सुनौलो घामको किरणमा ति हरियालिबनहरु झै रंगिन्छ तिम्रो मेरो माया यो रंगीलो संसार झै" (our love will be coloured like this colourful world, like green forests are coloured by the golden rays of the sun). Comparing Sānjh and Dimpal's love for each other to such natural realities and beauty showcases a strategic and queer-positive use of nature-centric metaphors: white clouds, blue skies, green forests, and golden rays of the sun – all of which testify and celebrate the love between the two women.

In juxtaposition, the film ends with screenshots of homophobic responses to same-sex love and relations in order to show the other side of the queer story in the Darjeeling Hills, albeit in an attempt to counter queerphobia. Voiceovers repeat comments such as: यस्तो पनि कहिले हुन्छ? (Can such a thing even happen?), महिलाले महिलालाई या पुरुषले पुरुषलाई कहिले पनि जीवन साथि बनाउनु सक्देन (Two women or two men can never make each other their life partners), यो एकदम प्रकृतिको खिलाफ हो (This is completely against nature), and हाम्रो समाजमा एस्तो चल्देन (Such a thing does not happen in our society). To such forms of resistance and hatred, Dimpal poses her question: "यदि यो प्रकृतिको खिलाफ हो भने, प्रकृतिले हाम्रो मनभित्र किन यस्तो भावनाहरु श्रीष्टि गरि दिन्थ्यो होला?" (If this is against nature, why would nature create such emotions within us?). Dimpal's refutation to the homophobia prevalent

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[22] In the *Nātyashāstra, vipralambha* "relates to a condition of retaining optimism arising out of yearning and anxiety." See *The Natyasastra,* 108-109. Also, it is an important component (complementing *sambhoga*) that completes the *shringāra rasa*.

in the society in general and in the Darjeeling Hills in particular takes recourse to the discursive rhetoric of the natural-ness of homosexuality, as witnessed in nature. As discussed in the context of "Mohan ra Madan" in an earlier section, "Sānjh ko Pal" too makes use of its location in the rural setting of the hills and taps into the queer potential of nature.

Discussing the anti-nature and anti-erotic ideologies of hetero-patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, Greta Gaard has pointed out the ironic dualism that has existed within the heteronormative discourse that both otherises homosexuality and queerness as unnatural or against nature and proclaims the natural as inferior to the patriarchal-cultural.[23] As such, queer ecological investments entail critical analyses of locations and co-productions posited in an understanding that "ideas and practices of nature, including both bodies and landscapes, are located in particular productions of sexuality, and sex is […] located in particular formations of nature."[24] As discussed in an earlier section, conceptualising the ambivalent idea of the natural, theorists and critics have pointed out to the queer-positive agency of considering queer theory vis-à-vis ruralism and ecocriticism. Given that the general perception of queer space is an urban one in contemporary literary and cultural studies, it doesn't come as a surprise that "rural queer experiences are often made invisible, and when they are seen, it is as a deviation from the norm."[25] As such, according to Mortimer-Sandilands, queer ecology can help the LGBTQ+ community "challenge the destructive pairing of heterosexuality and nature by developing 'reverse discourses' oriented to challenging dominant understandings of our 'unnatural passions'."[26] When looked through this queer ecofeminist lens, the love story of Sānjh and Dimpal, set in the ruralness of Darjeeling Hills in the lap of nature's greenery, opposes the queerphobic taunts of their *unnatural-ness* in a heteronormative society and provides a powerful and queer-assertive

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[23] See Greta Gaard, "Toward a Queer Ecofeminism," *Hypatia* 12, no. 1 (1997): 119-120, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810254.
[24] Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, "Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 4-5.
[25] Lesley Marple, "Rural Queers?: The Loss of the Rural in Queer," *Canadian Woman Studies* 24, no. 2-3 (2005): 71,
https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.923.2115&rep=rep1&type=pdf.
[26] Mortimer-Sandilands, "Unnatural Passions?," 7.

narrative for the *natural-ness* of non-heteronormative sexualities and same-sex desires, love, and relations.

Queer and Popular in D-Town: A Brief Study of Xorem Chen Tamang's Music Videos

Queer assertive narrations can also be seen in the form of visual pieces of expression that have dominated social media content today. In contemporary times, the emergence of social media has provided queer individuals platforms to sort a space for themselves. In this section of the article, a brief study of Xorem Chen Tamang has been conducted. Xorem, from Darjeeling, has become one of the prominent queer figures of the region and beyond. Xorem's journey as a social media personality seems to have its beginnings in the short form video application, TikTok (formerly Musical.ly), before the platform was banned in India, that has provided a lucrative platform for varied queer expression in recent times. As Zoya Raza-Sheikh notes, "Too often TikTok is written off and reduced to nothing more than an app for cringeworthy [content] …but this platform has evolved into so much more. Now, TikTok has … [helped] to reclaim the queer experience online."[27] Xorem has utilised the potential of this platform and has become a trend-setter when it comes to popular queer Indian-Nepali social media content. Through his popularity on Tik Tok, Xorem has also ventured into crew-produced music videos that have been uploaded on YouTube. Xorem is currently the co-founder and a part of the YouTube channel called *D-Town Vibes* that makes music videos, vlogs, and other visual content set in the Darjeeling Hills.

The music videos, set in Darjeeling town, follow common tropes of the heterosexual romance story, but the presence and performance of the queer subjectivity of Xorem subverts the heteronormative expectations of this genre of visual media. For instance, in the Nepali-language music video "Maryo Hai" (2020) the trope of two friends dancing to an upbeat song while 'pursuing' a girl they are interested in, can be observed, while in the Hindi-language music video "Tabah" (2020) is presented as a short love story playing with the trope of bad-boy-meets-good-girl. However, cis-gendered men as protagonist are replaced by non-cis-gendered queer folx in

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[27] Zoya Raza-Sheikh, "It's Here and Queer: How TikTok became the Gen Z Tool of LGBTQ+Education," *Gay Times*, October 23, 2020,
https://www.gaytimes.co.uk/originals/its-here-and-queer-how-tiktok-became-the-gen-z-tool-of-lgbtq-education.

these videos. In the former, it two non-cis-gendered queer characters – Xorem and Xoyean Subba (another queer social media figure from the Hills) – who are seen dancing and pursuing the girl, and in the latter, it is Xorem who plays the 'bad boy' who falls for the female love interest. Though the music videos function within the heteronormative structure of popular romance narratives, music videos starring Xorem seem to be subverting tropes that generally imagine only cis-gendered people within the framework and rhetoric of popular social media content that focus on romance, as seen in the two music videos discussed. Though the aspect of class matters in the context of the acceptance of non-heteronormative folx in the society, the important takeaway from the music videos starring queer artists (and characters) like Xorem and Xoyean is that they are the centre of the narrative that always works out in the favour of their desires and aspirations.

The quality of the visual content (which include social media reels, music videos, dance videos, vlogs, etc.) on online platforms that Xorem has been a part of may not be the concern of most critical pieces, but what becomes important is the huge number of viewership that Xorem is able to attract and retain, in spite of belonging to a region where queerness still remains a taboo topic, as discussed in previous sections. "Maryo Hai" and "Tabah" have garnered 0.6 and 5.5 million views, respectively. The channel *D-Town Vibes* itself has 0.14 million subscribers, with more than 15 million views (as of January 20, 2023). Furthermore, it is also to be noted that the comment sections of the music videos are filled with positive appreciation of the channel's content. With almost 3 lakh followers on Instagram, Xorem seems to have created a space for themselves and for other queer individuals with the use of platforms like YouTube and Instagram. Notwithstanding Xorem's case being a singular one or not, it is at least a testimony to the fact that queer individuals and visual artists have been able to reimagine what was traditionally the domain of heteronormative visual content on social media created by cis-gendered creators for presumed heteronormative viewership.

Conclusion

The chapter, through its focus on the expression and representation of queerness in visual texts in Nepali language, has provided a preliminary analysis of the emerging queer visual cultures in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Hills in India. From the queer potential and aspirations that can be located in the rural spaces, surrounded by nature, to the limitations and dangers that such non-urban spaces can pose, the short films "Mohan ra Madan" and

"Sanjh ko Pal" provide peeks into the lives of gay and lesbian subjects in the Hills. On the other hand, the music video "Awaz" showcases the struggles that queer individuals have to negotiate in the urban spaces, especially when it comes to open expressions of non-heteronormative sexual identities in public and work spaces. Lastly, Xorem's example provides a positive narrative of inclusion of non-cis-gendered queer performers and visual artists in the Hills to the point of being able to make themselves popular on social media and major video sharing platforms.

Queer visual production from the Darjeeling Himalaya and Sikkim hills seems to be at its earlier stages in comparison to other South Asian and Indian regions; however, reading these visual texts bring forth fresh perspectives that present intersection of the Eastern Himalayan region and queerness vis-à-vis issues of non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities on screen. Though much needs to be done when it comes to LGBTQ+-centric progress and rights in India in general and in less-focused spaces such as the Darjeeling and Sikkim Hills, such positive developments in the context of queer visual cultures in the region bodes good news. As the first critical study to elicit subjective understanding of queerness and non-heteronormative sexualities specific to the Darjeeling and Sikkim Hills, it provides an entry point into doing queer visual culture studies in this under-represented and neglected region of India.

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