ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC ELEMENTS IN INDIAN PARALLEL FILMS: A STUDY OF HOMOPHOBIA IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract. The paper attempts to study the presence of homophobia prevalent in Indian society and its representation onscreen through parallel films. It also studies the relevance of these films, which are comparable to ethnographic films in terms of selection of their content and the intent of the filmmakers, in attempting to affect a change in the society for the betterment of minority groups and victims. While doing so, the parallel Indian film *Aligarh* has been taken as a case study which is based on the life and mysterious death of Professor Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras. The public uproar and unofficial ban and violence against the film during its release provides us with useful anthropological insight into the mindset of a large number of people who resort to violence in the face of change from the accepted and widespread societal norms.

Keywords: gender roles, homosexuality, morals, culture, derogatory caricatures, censorship, societal pressure

1. Introduction

In few words, gender is an analytical concept that promotes the understanding of diverse phenomena from different fields in the context of human sciences (Madureira 2007). But in many societies across the world, especially where people are averse to same-sex relations, gender is increasingly emerging as a construct forced upon an individual by the norms of the society. The dimorphism found among species has spawned and reinforced the traditional notion of sexes by proposing and strengthening the roles attributed to sexes. So strong has been the identification of the male and female attributes with the biological gender that the

alternative sexualities have been completely ignored or looked at with derision throughout history. Homophobia or the fear of relations between individuals of the same sex stems from a strong identification with the accepted gender roles in a world where any deviation from convention is looked at with suspicion and derision. Only recently has the world opened to the rights of LGBTQ community and that too in fits and starts. Today, gender is not just the set of physical attributes one was born with, but how one feels inside. In the present times studies on gender are garnering a lot of interest, as evident from the numerous works focusing on this area. In opposition to abstract conceptions about human beings, gender and sexuality studies stress the centrality of culture and power in the processes of construction of multiple social identities (Madureira 2007).

Gender, in its early definitions meant the biological attributes which identified a person as male or female. The notion of gender by birth and psycho-social conditioning of individual in keeping with the accepted gender roles meant that an individual had to fit in within the traits visualized by the society as belonging to the male or female sex. There was no question of alternate sexualities and no space for people who felt trapped within the biological shell which they were not comfortable with. The association of behavioral attributes with the physical gender resulted in gender being seen as a synthesis of the mental and physical being and created fixed patterns of accepted gender roles. Over time they have become integral to our existence and any deviance from this norm unsettles us. Till a few decades ago, individuals had no choice but to struggle to fit in with their biological gender. Homosexuality had been a diagnostic category in the DSM since the manual's first edition in 1952, and its classification as a disease was rooted in a nineteenth century medical model (Bayer 1987, Chauncey 1982–1983). The people with alternate sexualities were considered as being mentally sick and were considered sociopaths for a long time.

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association Board of Directors voted to remove homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), declaring that a same-sex orientation is not inherently associated with psychopathology (Bayer 1987, Minton 2002). With this, a gradual change in the perception of homosexuality and homosexuals was initiated which slowly took other sexualities in its ambit. Today the world over, under the rainbow flag, gender identities are finding ways for expression of the self, hitherto hidden or masked behind the accepted gender identities. Learning to decode and recognize homophobia as a problem of oppression in society rather than as a deficit in the self is the focus of many group discussions on homophobia (…) (Herdt 1982).

The significance of parallel cinema for anthropological purposes and social change has been recognized by social scientists all over the world. For anthropological studies, films are not required to be   strictly in accordance with the principles and technical aspects of ethnographic films all the time. As statements (native statements, in fact) about culture, these films are important, and they could serve as raw data or documents in certain kinds of ethnographic research…more than just 'raw data'… as 'naive ethnography'. They have significant ethnographic

import without attempting to study the actual science of ethnography. They have good entertainment value, but at the same time they are also worthy of serious consideration (Heider 2006). Apart from the anthropological sources, films in terms of their wider reach have been an acceptable and effective tool for generating awareness and modifying opinion about sensitive issues.

In literature and cinema, forays have been made into the nebulous terrain dealing with LGBTQ rights and their acceptance or rejection by a society; thus opening a dialogue on the hushed-up subject. Films made on this subject have provided insight into the psyche of different societies and their reaction to the presence of LGBTQ community in their vicinity. Although the effort is still cautious and taking its faltering steps, it has definitely sensitized people towards the LGBTQ community despite protests from some quarters against the content. Even today, the Indian society and law do not sanction same-sex relationships. Homosexuality is despised as deviant behavior which goes against the funda-mental tenets of culture and religions even when LGBTQ rights have been accorded in many parts of the world. The fear of same-sex relationships having an adverse effect on the society also stems from the distorted images of homosexual individuals projected onscreen as also penalization of homosexuality by the Article 377 of the IPC.

2. Ethnographic significance of third world cinema and parallel films in India

A large chunk of conventional cinema in India comprises of commercial films which are made keeping in mind the acceptability of the content to the masses and censorship issues along with the target audience's sensibilities. The contentious issues are mostly left to the makers of parallel cinema. Like all other artistic mediums, the content of films is inspired by the people and society to a great extent. Films reflect the reality present around them in varying degrees since they are influenced by the society which sways and modifies the themes of films by its acceptance or rejection of the content conveyed in them. The Censor Board imposes cinematographic constraints on filmmakers, thereby limiting their freedom of expression as compared to artists employing personal mediums of expression such as literature and art. The sway is more in the case of commercial cinema as compared to parallel cinema which picks more unconventional topics for its subjects.

In terms of the selection and treatment of its themes, parallel cinema in the Indian context may be broadly compared to the Third Cinema,a Latin American film movement. The Third Cinema movement of the 1960s and 1970s was marked by a set of unconventional/ progressive ideals, films, and filmmakers. In contrast to the First and Second Cinema, which focused on entertainment value and individual expression respectively, the Third Cinema advocated the creation of, "an oppositional cinema – one that contributed to or even led the beyond liberation and cultural revolution movements that were taking place both in the "Third

World" and in Western countries as well" (Gordon 2010). In order to accomplish their goals, filmmakers of this genre made films on topics which the "mainstream society could not assimilate and explicitly create films to resist the status quo" (Gordon 2010). In the Indian context, morality and religions are sensitive issues which are not open to debate or questioning. People look at any digression from the clichéd representations of these issues with suspicion and consider assimilation of outlandish concepts in these matters perversion or blasphemy. Films such as *Fire* (1998), *1947 Earth* (1999), *Bandit Queen* (1995), *Kamasutra* (1997), *Water* (2005), *Bomgay* (1996), *PK* (2014), *Aligarh* (2015) etc. have dealt with controversial stances on these issues and faced apathy, protests and official and unofficial bans in our country; although it has not deterred filmmakers from depicting the bitter reality without sidestepping the real issues and challenges. In this regard the parallel cinema has followed Gordon's observation that "Third Cinema films had not only to depict a reality, but also serve to transform that reality" (Gordon 2010), which it has accomplished by presenting a microcosm of the society which anthropologists use to study the patterns of behavior and culture. Parallel cinema or alternative cinema in India significantly mirrors the third cinema in its attempts to change the reality that it encounters, which has long been there but is constantly hushed up owing to its non-conformist nature. Artists usually skirt around such issues because they are reluctant to rake up controversy owing to moral and legal constraints in their efforts to be dispassionate. Another point of contention while dealing with controversial gender issues is that the people who take up these topics in their films and the actors who render such characters are suspected to either belong to this category or harbor sympathies for them (which is considered akin to encouraging such tendencies) and face double jeopardy on this count. For this very reason, celebrated actors from the film community were hesitant to be a part of the films on alternate sexualities for a long time, although the barriers have gradually collapsed over time.

"Third cinema forayed beyond the imperialist tools – national or regional boundaries – to create international, class based, politicized films" (Gordon 2010). Similarly, Parallel cinema in India has made its mark with critically acclaimed films in this direction despite the spate of aggression which they had to face from various quarters apart from the limited viewership and box office collections of these subject-oriented films. Some of them made bold statements on national and international scene.

3. Objectives

The study aims to assess homophobia, prevalent and latent in Indian society in varying forms, its representation onscreen in parallel films and the response of audience to the content and treatment of the theme by the filmmakers. It also studies the relevance of these films, which can be likened to ethnographic films in terms of selection of their content and the intent of the filmmakers in attempting to

affect a change in the society for the betterment of marginal groups in general and the victims of social apathy in particular. The film *Aligarh,* based on the life and mysterious death of Professor Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, has been taken as a case study. Professor Siras' ousting from the university where he was working and the reason behind it remained a debatable matter among the intellectuals for a long time. The public uproar against the film and unofficial ban and violence against the film during its release provide anthropological insight into the mindset of people who resort to violence and mass hysteria when faced with an alternate view of the accepted and widespread societal norms.

4. Indifference and latent hatred: derogatory portrayal of queer characters

People in India are used to the presence of eunuchs in their societies. Ancient myths bestow them with special powers to propitiate luck and fertility. Despite this apparently sanctioned place in Indian culture, hijras face severe harassment and discrimination from mainstream people in society (Chatterji 2008). Their existence is permitted on the restricted peripheries and acknowledged only on special occasions.

LGBTQ characters have been a part of mainstream as well as parallel cinema throughout its history. These characters have shared screen space with mainstream characters since the Black and White era as eunuchs, crossdressers and transgenders; since the term LGBTQ came into existence much later. Their depiction, *per se*, on screen was not controversial as these characters have continued to be portrayed on a very narrow and construed canvas for a very long time. Apart from the sporadic comic scenes they characterized, they did not have any independent existence. They were never seen with their family members or in their homes. Overall, their portrayal was derogatory. Though there has been a gradual change in their treatment in films during the last decades, even today these stereotypes exist in the mainstream films.

In recent commercial hits like *Dostana* (2008), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003) and *Bol Bachchan* (2012), male characters were seen passing themselves off as gay for various reasons; using stereotyped mannerisms as depicted in popular cinema. The advances of such characters are met with derision from the other characters who try to maintain a distance from them. Homophobia can discourage intimacy between same-sex friends if it makes them fear being labeled as gay or lesbian (Madureira 2007).This explains the fear of the society in maintaining any contact with them. It also goes on to prove that as long as the gay community is being made fun of, the society has no objection to their sexual orientation or even the fact that they are occupying physical space near 'normal' people provided they do not highlight their queerness. The problem is when they are presented as normal human beings who look, dress, act, talk and behave like any other person in their day to day life; the only difference being in their sexual preferences. At this point,

their presence in our society is questioned; they are visualized as sexual predators and the society is scandalized.

Things get even more complicated when they are given a specific identity: religious, professional or otherwise. People do not want to be associated with them in any form. "In the controversy over the filming of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996), where the two female leads, neglected by their husbands, become romantically involved, one group of protesters indicated their distaste for seeing Hindu women's sexuality portrayed in such a way by suggesting that they would withdraw their objections if the main characters were given Muslim names instead" (Desai 2004). The same happened with the movie *Aligarh* (2016) where the protesters wanted to change the title of the movie to negate any association between the city of Aligarh and gay community.

5. Opening Pandora's box: realistic portrayal of LGBTQ community in films in India

In the past, some movies have definitely done their bit by highlighting the psychological and physical difficulties faced by the LGBTQ community despite the fact that the viewership of such movies has always been limited to the comparatively progressive regions and metropolitan areas of the country. Even in the urban areas, people do not openly and comfortably express their support for these films because of the projected concepts of masculinity. Even supporting them is considered to be a digression from the thin 'straight' line. A journalist confesses that when he recommended the film *Aligarh* to a filmmaker, the journalist was advised by him to stay away from such films as "those who make gay films are largely gay and those who appreciate them are also seen to be gay" (Jha 2016). The maker of the film *Aligarh*, Hansal Mehta also shares similar experience when he "reads out a message from a prominent filmmaker who praises the film and then writes optimistically. 'Hopefully we'll find a cure for homosexuality along with AIDS and cancer'" (Jha 2016).

In the 1990s, there was a change in the way LGBTQ community was portrayed onscreen. Films such as *Bombay Boys* (1998), *Split Wide Open* (1999), *Tamanna* (1997), *Darmiyan* (1997), *Sadak* (1991), and *Murder Two* (2011) treated them in diverse forms. The film *Na Jaane Kyon* (2010) even featured the first gay onscreen kiss in Indian cinema. *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), too, apart from its main theme of acceptance of HIV/AIDS victims, discussed such relationships in passing. *Darmiyan* (1997), *Fire* (1998), *Bomgay* (1996), *The Pink Mirror* (2003), *68 Pages* (2007), etc. are some other films which have dealt with similar themes. *Arekti Premer Golpo / Just Another Love Story* (2010 Bengali), *Pankh, Mitraa/Mitrachi Goshta* (2010 Marathi), *Sancharram* (2014 Malyalam), *Randu Penkuttikal /Two Girls* (1978 Malyalam), *Chitrangada (2012)* and *Yours Emotionally* (2006) are examples of films in Indian regional languages that have presented sensitive portraits of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters.

These films opened discussion on the hitherto hushed topics and put queer stories into the limelight. Some of these films boldly tackled the misuse of article 377 along with the Indian society's almost brutal prejudice against people failing to make it into the society's acceptable stereotypes, which in turn originate from a sense of strong cultural identity and conventions. With these films, the botched, caricatured and regressive portrayals of queer characters have been replaced with realistic ones which capture their struggle and longing to be accepted.

Because of the issues of morality, social stigma and laws associated with LGBT in our country, many of these films have faced antagonism in the form of censorship, official and unofficial bans, violence against the actors and vandalism. *Fire*, released in 1996, was one such film which faced violent protests from people because it tackled lesbianism. Although it was passed for adult viewing with an 'A' certificate from the censor board, people protested against it. They went up to extent of refusing to accept the presence of such a thing as lesbianism in India and called it a concept imported from the West. Indian cinema has since then come a long way in treating the subject and portrayal of queer characters. From the comic and derogatory representations, films now treat them as ordinary citizens. They do not consider their condition to be pathological and indeed advocate for them equality and dignity like any other human being. Despite all these efforts, however, these films have not helped much by way inducing progressiveness and tolerance in the society regarding these issues, as evident by the case of the film *Aligarh*.

6. *Aligarh*: a case study

The film *Aligarh* belongs to the genre of parallel films in India. The film is based on the events in the life of Professor Ramchandra Siras of a renowned Indian university who was filmed illegally by a group of people in a compromising position with another guy in his own house. He was ousted from his position as head of a department in the university. The professor fought a legal battle against all this and won the case. It was tragic however that soon after the court's verdict in his favor, he was found dead in his house, presumably poisoned, as the autopsy reports suggested. Section 377 of Indian Penal Code forbids sexual relationships among the people of the same sex; however all these incidents happened when homosexuality was not a crime in India. Surprisingly no action was taken against the people who barged into his house and filmed him with his male friend. The deceased professor had never made an attempt to disclose his sexuality, fully knowing the consequences of such discoveries in a conservative and homophobic society. The humiliation that he had to go through was a direct result of homophobia and the violence against LGBT community. India is home to a large population of eunuchs and people accept their existence in their society without much resistance. Things however take a different turn when such a person rises to a higher and respectable position in the society. The paranoia of normal

existence of people of alternate sexualities makes people uncomfortable around them.

The people who acted against professor Siras justified their actions with the argument that he had brought shame on the university and the city of Aligarh. Nobody from the university had reacted openly against the treatment meted out to the professor. However, many newspaper reports and some scenes in the film *Aligarh* indicate that there were some people who were empathic towards the professor and advocated his personal rights, but they chose to stay silent for fear of society. This incident highlights the role of perceived social values and morals which ignore even the violence against an innocent to preserve their sanctity. In other parts of the world we alsowitness such actions taken against the people/ victims to preserve the cultural purity of a society. For example, a study in a Palestinian society shows "the practice of femicide against female adolescents/ adults who were sexually abused, and were perceived as dishonour for their families" (Madureira 2007). Such practices however raise a very important question for the civilized world that "is it ethically acceptable the homicide of a young woman, because she "injured the honour" of her family group? Should we respect all kind of cultural practices" (Wikan 2002)?

It was due to the fear of association with LGBT community that the film *Aligarh* was not allowed to be released in many parts of Aligarh. Apart from the law against homosexuality in India, these protests were grounded in the moral stance of the population. Protesters argued that the film would give the city a bad name and may send across a message across the world that the place is populated with gay individuals. In a letter sent by a fringe group to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, it was mentioned that the "title of the film i.e. 'Aligarh' is offending as it sends a message (that) gay practice is common at Aligarh. The title is not suitable and proper by any means. It will desist (sic) people (from) send(ing) their children to Aligarh for studies. Further, as it is also an industrial center, the impression of city goes negative (sic) in foreign countries, which lowers the country's prestige" (D'souza 2016).

Advocating openly a sensitive issue which some people falsely associate with their culture and religion may not be a safer option. Filmmakers hence try to garb a sensitive issue under a less sensitive one so as to initiate a healthy dialogue among the people. Even before the release of *Aligarh*, there was a lot of controversy and the makers rejected the conjectures that the film was about gay/homosexual relations. They claimed that it was about an individual's rights to privacy which his constitution had provided. The film's trailer was given an A certificate for the content it was dealing with which gave rise to a lot of criticism from the people from the film industry. In India, 'A' certificate is given for a graphic content or obscenity which is not considered suitable for the young. Giving an A certificate, however, to a trailer and a film because it deals with a person who was homosexual, was a strange case as the film did not contain any adult content.

The makers of the films as well as the viewers are well aware that movies like *Aligarh* will not bring about revolutionary changes in the mindset of the society overnight. At the same time the power of media and films in initiating a change, however gradual and subtle, cannot be overlooked. Cinema is a product for entertainment which has the capacity to shape and reflect thoughts and feelings (Dyer 1984). Films like *Aligarh* aim at bringing about a social change through a gradual process of contemplation and reflection. The director of the film *Aligarh* himself accepts that, "I think this film reaching any number of people is a great thing. Even if it reaches a thousand people, and it touches them, and it moves them—it makes those thousand people think about their prejudices and look at the way they treat the world. And if it does that, then the film has achieved its goal. That is the intention with which the film is made. How far it goes in achieving those goals, does it make a positive impact on the society or even a few individuals are result oriented questions which will take some time to make a perceptible change" (Banerjee 2016).

7. Conclusion

Indian society claims to have progressed in every field over the past decades. The progressive mindset is evident in the acceptance and tolerance of live-in relationships, single motherhood, and a certain degree of sexual freedom. However, the society is not yet tolerant of people with alternate sexual orientations. Episodes like what happened with Professor Siras force us to rethink the definitions of progress and development when certain sections of people mindlessly hound victims of conflicting gender identity and deny them the right to live with dignity, due to the fear that they will taint the society and prey on vulnerable members of the society. All this despite the fact that historical and scriptural evidences prove the presence of homosexuality in every region of the universe including India and sociological studies tell us that certain areas in India rank high on the list of gay tourists and paedophiles, not to mention the fact that the maximum cases of abuse of young children take place within the family by 'straight' individuals.

Homosexuality and alternate gender identities are not openly accepted in the contemporary Indian society. It is not considered to be an appropriate topic for discussion by a vast majority of the population. Still, a few discussions on homosexuality are stirring our country. The surge in the films dealing with these issues in a sensible way is a proof of the changing times and sensibilities. These films are different in the sense that they are not using the theme or queer characters for comic relief. Despite this fact, the support these people have now started receiving remains limited mainly / please rephrase, a bit confusing to seminar rooms and intellectual discussions. It fails to translate into ground level acceptance of such people. People, who identify with the emotions and need for individuality of this section, feel uncomfortable when it comes to openly supporting them for fear of

social stigma even when they themselves have straight orientation because expressing support for LGBT people puts their own sexuality under the social scanner. The majority of people who understand their problems do not want to defend them openly for this very reason. In spite of the contribution of Indian cinema in this context, there are filmmakers who do not respect such films and filmmakers. The limited viewership of these movies is evidence regarding the attitude of society towards these issues. These films may get recognized at film festivals or among critics, but the real acceptance of LGBTQ community in our society remains a farfetched dream that is still waiting to actualize.

8. Limitations

The paper deals with the reception and response of people towards LGBTQ community and cinematic works in big cities, urban and semi-urban areas only. The response of people living in rural or less developed areas towards the depiction of LGBTQ problems may not be in agreement with their urban counterparts. Parallel films are released mostly in multiplexes and attract selective audiences while most of the people in the suburbs are guided by the construed images of the LGBTQ community projected in the commercial cinema. Even when such films are telecast on TV which has a nationwide reach, they are heavily edited. Movies with an 'A' certificate are not telecast on National TV and the offensive and incriminating words are muted or covered under a 'ping'. Thus most of the people do not get to understand the intent of such films and this is why protests arise about the acceptance of people belonging to the LGBTQ community.

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