

LOCALISING QUEER DISCOURSE: A STUDY OF THE POLITICS OF DESIRE AND IDENTITY IN INDIAN REGIONAL CINEMA

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Abstract

From being treated as a 'western' import, queer culture in India has evolved into an alternate model of cultural reclamation that reimagines queer discourse. Indian cinema, at home and in diasporic contexts, alongside vibrant queer subcultures in India, has consistently been (re)defining public imagination to incorporate (or perhaps rediscover) a new aesthetic and sensibility. Our quarry in this paper is these unique configurations of queer identities and desires in regional cinematic presentation. The analysis is pinned primarily in the Marathi films Umbartha (1984) and 'Mitrachi Goshta' (2014), the Malayalam film Sancharram (2004) and the Bengali film Arekti Premer Golpo (2010). We argue that Indian regional cinema codes the queer body and its desire with a cultural context that disrupts the dominant conservative myth of homosexuality as a western import. The queer is placed within its narrative or in redeployed conventional cinematic tropes.

Keywords: Queer, regional cinema, space, desire

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an exploration of queer identities and desires in the regional cinema of India with an end to find if these films present any unique configurations of these identities and desires. The terms 'queer' and 'regional cinema' are both highly contested, and arriving at a singular meaning for them would defeat the purpose of the playfulness that characterises them. This underlines the need for a working definition when approaching these notions. In the present paper, our usage of the label 'Queer film' is not in the sense that western critics such as B Ruby Rich (1992) or Thomas Waugh (2001) deploy it. It is more of an umbrella term that encompasses films articulating non-heteronormative sensibilities. As for regional cinema, our usage of the term is not to mean the binary opposite of 'National Cinema'. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan, in his article on 'Regional Cinema', asserts that the term 'regional cinema' is used as a marker of difference from Hindi cinema (popularly known as Bollywood); the plural, 'regional cinemas' indicates a diversity of national cinema (162). Generally, there is a tendency to use the term Bollywood synonymously with Indian Cinema. As a result, we believe that regional cinema gets pushed to the margins, if not left out entirely, when it comes to discussing National Cinema or Indian Cinema. Moreover, regional cinema exercises a kind of autonomy when it comes to storytelling and catering to a speech community-specific audience. Given this, it is worthwhile to interrogate precisely *what* about the queer and the regional has so fully captured popular imagination.

The queer in regional cinema stands in contrast to the post-liberalisation Hindi films made through the 1990s and after, which often restrained the queer in one stand-alone character, responsible for much of the comic relief in the film. Such characters include 'Pinkoo', played by Anupam Kher in the Hindi film *Mast Kalandar* (1991), and nearly every character played by Bollywood's first recognisably queer actor Pakhee Sharma, famously known as Bobby Darling. Other films that make restrained or passing references to queerness include *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), *Page 3* (2005), *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* (2007), *Dostana* (2008), *Fashion* (2008), leading up to the more recent and more openly queer *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020) and *Badhaai Do* (2022). Many of these films offer either effeminate or hyper-sexualized comic sidekicks or cosmopolitan, English-speaking, mostly upper-middle-class (and probable upper-caste), either wholly or partly out-of-closet male characters. However, some worthwhile attempts made by filmmakers like Mahesh Bhatt, Amol Palekar, Kalpana Lajmi, Onir Ban and Hansal Mehta must also be acknowledged as part of this lineage. This brings us to our original question- Is regional cinema's portrayal of queer identities and desires *different*, and if so, how? To this end, we propose that:

1. Regional cinema codes the queer body and its desire by positioning it within a specific cultural context and by presenting the queer either within its narrative or redeploying/reappropriating the conventional cinematic tropes
2. In doing so it disrupts the dominant conservative myth of non-normative sexuality as a western import.

The trajectory of queer discourse has begun with an implicit encoding over a period of time that has now become explicit, thus making a shift in the gaze or the point of view from queer-phobic to queer-sensitive if not homo/transphobic.

Nevertheless, this paper does not attempt an extensive overview of regional cinema, but rather pinpoints its argument in select Marathi, Bengali and Malayalam cinema. We take Marathi films *Umbartha* (1984) and 'Mitrachi Goshta' (2014) and the character of Nachya donned by the Marathi veteran actor Ganpat Patil, Malayalam film *Sancharram* (2004) and Bengali film *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) for our discussion, while also making passing references to other films.

CODING THE PERIPHERAL BODY AND THRESHOLD-CROSSING IN MARATHI CINEMA

One of the most constant transgressive images which has had a screen presence in Marathi Cinema is that of a Nachya. The Nachya is a male dancer in Tamasha, a folk art form largely performed in Maharashtra; he may also be referred to as 'Mavashi', which is a Marathi word for aunt/aunty. The Nautanki famous in the north of India would be the Hindi provisional equivalent of it. The character has an exaggeratedly effeminate appearance, gestures and high-pitched singing voice. It is this Nachya who is coded as homosexual in Marathi cinema. He traditionally functions as a comic, 'wrong' body by emphasizing the difference between 'real' and 'fake' femininity. However, he also accrues subversive value and serves as a queer, cultural point of identification.

One actor who has donned this role for more than a decade is Ganpat Patil. His role as a Nachya became a regular trope in Marathi films such as *Sangate Aika* (1959), *Ashi Rangali Raat* (1970) among others. The Marathi director Govind Kulkarni offered a lead role to Ganpat Patil in his film *Sakhya Sajana* in 1972 which was scripted by the veteran film-maker Bhalji Pendharkar. This was the first film, which within its heteronormative understanding, attempted to address the 'queer' male sexuality. The story shows how while working as Nachya in films he feels diffident about his male sexuality and he has to get some treatment with Ayurvedic medicines after which he regains confidence and succeeds in his love and married life.

More recently, Sanjay Patil made the film *Natrang* (2010), which was an instant box-office hit. The main narrative revolves around a male protagonist who embarks on a career as a Nachya. The film, while it is seen as a tribute to Ganpat Patil's career and his contribution to Tamasha as a form of art, subtly addresses the sexual politics and transgressive desires associated with Tamasha and regional masculinities. It has been argued that the Nachya's representation, which is normative in the context of the film's production and target mainstream audience, can be reclaimed and re-coded through the lens of what could be termed a dynamic, queer, regional viewing practice. A similar point has been made by T. Muraleedharan (2005) with reference to Malayalam Cinema and the regional viewing practice of Kathakali.

The film that became a significant milestone in regional cinema in engaging with sex and gender is Jabbar Patel's 1984 film *Umbartha*. 'Umbaratha', which means threshold in English, is based on a Marathi novel titled *Beghar* (Homeless) by Shanta Nisal. The film tells the story of a woman's dream to step outside her four-walled home and bring change in the society. Within its broad feminist outlook, this is probably the first Marathi film to depict female same-sex desire and relation with explicit articulation through two minor characters, Heera and Jangam, the inmates of a women's reformatory home. The film narrative actually spells out the English word 'lesbian' to refer to these two characters.

The film adopts an ambivalent point of view on queer politics by offering two disparate tones. On the one hand, Heera and Jangam are 'outed' by the other inmates and then, receive the sympathy of the protagonist Savitri Mahajan (played by the veteran Indian actress Smita Patil) on 'pathological' grounds, who expresses her willingness to help them out with psychological treatment; on the other hand, the camera lens offers a few visual moments where it sensitively captures the tender feelings of the characters for each other. There are two incisive instances in the film: The first is in a song where the two characters playfully exchange gazes to express their feelings for each other. (00:58 to 01:10) The second is when one of the lovers (Heera) suffers an injury at the hands of a mischievous inmate. The camera follows Jangam to record the pain that she feels; moreover, the extra-diegetic sound of the background score too adds a sympathizing tone. The film places their love in the midst of an oppressive and homophobic yet homosocial space.

Marathi cinema brought female same-sex desire and sensibilities back into the mainstream industry through Sanjay Jadhav's short narrative 'Mitrachi Gosht' in 2014. The short was part of the Marathi anthology film *Bioscope* which inaugurated the celebrations of 100 years of Indian Cinema along with *Bombay Talkies* (2013) based on Vijay Tendulkar's book "Mitraachi Gosht" (the story of Mitraa) is an unapologetically told story of female same-sex desire set in the urban spaces of the city of Pune in pre-Independence India, much before the era of sexual liberation in the West. The retrospective stance of the film by way of the 'black and white technique' is not just about the 'pastness' of the fictional narrative. It underlines the life of the writer whose story the film is inspired, recorded somewhere as the story based on certain real-life incidents that took place back in the 1940s (Nilekani 2013). It is almost a tongue-in-cheek response to those, who in their exclusively heteronormative version of Indian nationalism, dismiss non-heteronormative sexuality by labelling it as a Western import.

We would like to close the discussion on Marathi cinema with the mention of Nishant Roy Bombarde's short film *Daaravtha* (2015). With this film, we are tempted to think of it as Marathi cinema's coming of age moment. It

seems to follow the way a queer narrative shapes when you hold the camera to tell your story. The film is about a young boy who struggles between his own desires and the confines of a strictly patriarchal society. He is mesmerized by the beautiful costume and dance of the female character in his school's play, and is determined to play the role. Besides, this is his chance to finally get closer to the older boy on whom he has been harbouring a secret crush. The film in many ways challenges heteronormative assumptions by giving agency to its characters to freely articulate their desires.

MALAYALAM CINEMA: INAUGURATING ON-SCREEN FEMALE HOMOROMANTICISM

One of the earliest films to screen female same-sex desires or homoromanticism in Malayalam was *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1978), directed by veteran director Mohan. The film was based on V.T. Nand Kumar's novel *Randu Penkuttikalude Katha* (The Tale of Two Girls, 1974). Even before Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire* fractured conservative sexual discourse in India, this film brought the first 'lesbian' characters on the Indian screen. Due to the implicit/obliquely coded treatment of the theme and the regional medium, the film has not been noticed by many. The film tells the story of Kokila (Shobha) and a high-school senior who is almost insanely and possessively in love with her beautiful junior Girija (Anupama Mohan). Though bold for its time, the film ends with both the girls returning to the heteronormative mould dismissing the relationship as just a phase.

Nandakumar writes in the foreword to the second edition of this story, "this passion is likely to be widespread among the young women of Kerala who, by nature, are extremely sensitive. Such relationships have some healthy and positive potential, and are hence important" (Vanita and Kidwai 312).

What is important to notice is that the author felt that lesbianism – which was at the heart of his piece of work, was missing from the film. Another Malayalam film that used a similar trope of young school girls was *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (The Migratory Bird Never Cries, 1986), by Padmarajan which hints at a lesbian angle to the relationship between two teenage school girls, Shaari and Karthika thus making homosexuality just an under-current. The film that succeeded in bringing to the surface the lesbian undercurrents taking the same trope forward was Ligy Pullapalli's *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004). Thus, Malayalam cinema made a significant contribution to the development of a canon of Queer Indian cinema.

Sancharram (2004) despite being a narrative of female same-sex desire, conceives queer subjectivities differently and positions its queer protagonists in regional spaces. The film falsifies claims of same-sex desire as alien to Indian culture and a product of 'Westernization'. It does so by positioning its protagonists Kiran and Delilah in the regional register where urban influences are at a minimum. The regional register is apparent not only in the conscious choice of making the film in Malayalam but also in positioning the narrative in the seemingly matrilineal but dominantly patriarchal rural spaces of Kerala. Secondly, the film strikes a chord with regional spaces by alluding not only to the alarming evil of young women's suicides in the state but also to similar narratives, both fictional and cinematic. In doing so, the narrative of *Sancharram* counterposes a model of the "global gay" subject, who is imagined as always and everywhere male, elite, urban and cosmopolitan. One of the strategies that the narrative uses to firmly establish same-sex desire / romantic love within the cultural and regional spaces is the positioning of the Kakathi. This deployment of a culturally-rooted image of Kakathi serves as a subversion of dominant hetero-patriarchal claims of same-sex desire's foreignness.

The film does not deploy any overt signifiers of 'butch / dyke' and 'femme' or 'lipstick lesbians' recognizable in the Western idiom in defining its Indian queer female protagonists. More than any other corporeal markers, it is the passionate attraction of each other that becomes the signifier of the queerness of the characters.

The film is able to construct the subjectivities of its queer protagonists by deploying focalization and point of view. The camera assumes Kiran's point of view, giving her agency of gaze in which Delilah is framed. Kiran's dream sequence also gives insights into the inner world of Kiran and her feelings for Delilah.

Sexual intimacy has been the most recurrent signifier in Queer cinema Western and Indian alike. A usual romantic film may not have scenes involving sexual intimacy but many queer films do give screentime to physical intimacy between the characters. However, the economy with which the physical intimacy is designed on-screen, suggests that the regional sexualities may, in fact, elude the discourses of visibility and modernity that so mark dominant nationalist narratives.

Further, *Sancharram* is marked by the conscious presence of social surveillance through gaze and discourse of shame. The film offers a peculiar signification by positioning the queer sexualities of the main characters within the larger discourse of shame and familial (dis)honour. The film uses the technique of parallelism by drawing similarities between Kiran and Delilah's experiences and of other heterosexual couples. It successfully demonstrates how society privileges heterosexual couple formation over a same-sex union. The film brings out the agency of social surveillance through the discourse of 'shame'/dishonor, 'fun' and 'sin' and 'unnatural/sick'. In spite of the restraints deployed by this surveillance, the film appropriates dominantly heterosexual/homosocial spaces, by positioning queer desires in these spaces.

BENGALI FILM: IMPERSONATION, IMITATION, AND FLUIDITY

Kaushik Ganguly's *Arekti Premer Golpo* (2010) was the first Indian film on queer sexuality to be shot after the decriminalization of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code by the Delhi High Court in 2009. Ganguly co-scripted the film with Rituparno Ghosh who was a film director and lyricist. The film was also Ghosh's acting debut, in which he essayed the role of a transvestite filmmaker. Kaustuv Bakshi (2012) mentions the film faced moral policing by the CEO of a reputed film theatre under the name of 'aesthetic value' due to its content (111).

One of the central characters is based on and played by Chapal Kumar Bhaduri, the Jatra actor and the last living female impersonator of the open-air Bengali theatre tradition. The production of this film has an interesting history. In 1999, Naveen Kishore made a documentary film titled *The Chapal Bhaduri Story: Performing the Goddess*, following which Kaushik Ganguly made a Bengali telefilm titled *Ushnotaar Jonyo* (2002) for ETV Bangla, which explored the same-sex relationship with Chapal Bhaduri, playing himself as both man and woman on stage as the backdrop, with a lesbian love story in the foreground.

The film uses the docudrama trope. Within the film narrative, a self-identifying gay filmmaker, Abhiroop Sen (played by Rituparno Ghosh), wishes to make a documentary film on Chapal Bhaduri. It begins as a documentation of a stage actor, however, gradually it moves towards the sexual and love life of the actor. This documentation can be seen as an instance of the international discourse of the Queer visibility. The aspect of sexuality seems to isolate the actor from the rest of the world. However, the same sexuality is re-signified when it is rendered useful in the sense that it has a 'documentary value' in the brave new world of queer discourse.

The onscreen construction of fluid, transgender identities is a crucial aspect of the film. Chapal Bhaduri appears on screen in two forms: a female impersonator, in his on-stage life and a 'man' in his off-stage social life. His continuous transition from 'man' to 'woman' and 'woman' to 'man' is space governed. Ironically, his theatre performance which is conceived as a mimetic act by society becomes the space in which Chapal can express a supposedly suppressed desire to be a 'woman'. On the other hand, his 'being male' becomes a mimetic act, which he performs merely out of societal pressure. Chapal, thus manages to subvert the very idea of impersonation. This impersonation is not unlike the imitation that Judith Butler famously uses to discuss drag performance:

Drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalised, worn and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself...what they imitate is a phantasmic ideal of heterosexual identity...gay identities work neither to copy nor emulate heterosexuality, but rather, to expose heterosexuality as an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization. That heterosexuality is always in the act of elaborating itself is evidence that it is perpetually at risk, that it, that it 'knows' its own possibility of becoming undone. (313)

The film complicates the overt and monolithic understanding of the fluid sexualities of its characters. The most radical shift in the construction of transgendered bodies in the narrative is the absence of the culturally loaded hijra idiom. In doing so, the narrative reimagines and reimages the effeminate 'male body' in the language, without routing it through 'hijra / kothi' lexicon.

The film positions queer desires and romances within the discourse of 'theatre' and 'cinema'. Both become signs of queer license and nomadic spaces in which the characters are able to harbour their homoerotic and romantic relationships. Thus, these forms of performing arts, which are professional domains, become sites of seeking pleasure and pursuing desire. Moreover, in the case of Bhaduri, the stage creates the space where he is able to performatively construct the identity, with which he associates himself, while the camera is to Abhiroop what the stage is to Chapal.

The film introduces a new language to articulate and also to perceive queer sexualities, especially the androgynous ones. The film alludes to cultural icons and myths and redeploys them as signifiers of rootedness, of the transgendered and bisexual subjects. One of the strong imagery is the folksong and the Vaishnav Kirtan 'Banamali...' For the film, it becomes necessary to articulate the concept of liberation by routing it through their own cultural imagery, rather than borrowing from the Western discourses of liberation.

The usual effeminate/masculine man dichotomy that attributes being in control, in power, being desirable to a 'masculine' man and being powerless and vulnerable to an effeminate is revisited in the film. The film, in a significant way, subverts this equation. Basu's physical and social masculinity does not translate into his emotional strength. This paradigmatic shift in queer iconography is certainly radical and unique.

The above discussion, though not extensive, does help us reiterate that Indian regional films do have a unique way of dealing with the queer identities and desires on screen. The films use local stories the local contexts and redeploy cinematic apparatus ridding it of the phobic gaze. The narratives of these films offer a culture bound rhetoric of presenting the queer desire and relationship. Moreover, the films do not completely dismiss the globalized western constructs of sexual identity. This combination of the local and the globalized western discourse does problematize a monolithic view of sexual desire/relation and its presentation. Thus, the films in one way or the other encode queer bodies and desires by positioning them within the cultural context whether it is art, religion or social reality and in doing so make a point that the regional cinema disrupts the dominant conservative myth that homosexuality is a western import. Hence, in our understanding of the Indian cinema's

engagement with Queer, regional films play an important role and the study of the regional cinema would be imperative in any attempts of documentation or archival reconstruction of the Indian Queer Cinema.

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