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Assertion of Queer Identities and Complexities within Family Relationships: An Analysis of Fire, Margarita with a Straw and Evening Shadows

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ABSTRACT

Queer characters have enriched the world cinema, and of late, Indian cinema is doing its bit by portraying characters such as sexually vulnerable Other, the outcast covert case, the transgender exile, the revealed woman and the bisexual refugee. Indian society is a heterosexual one, wherein contradictory sexual identities do not gain traction. A person's open assertion of his/her contrary sexual orientation is often pigeonholed or labeled as Western. This paper seeks to shed light on how assertion of queer identities creates complexities within relationships by taking up three movies for analysis. In Fire, the repressed feelings of two married women take shape in the form of a physical relationship, thereby drawing ire and condemnation from their families. On the other hand, Shonali Bose's Margarita with a Straw narrates the tale of a cerebral palsy afflicted woman, whose disclosure of her sexual identity creates strains in the ties between the mother and the daughter duo. Sridhar Rangayan's Evening Shadows highlights the tribulations faced by a conservative mother in South India, who finds it difficult to stand up to a rigid society because of her son's queer identity. The movie showcases the conflicts in the perception of sexual identities of two different generations. This paper attempts to discuss how explicit disclosure of queer identities dents family relationships.

1. Introduction

Saudi Indian society is a bisexual one wherein there are only two genders i.e. male and female. Any other gender is never even thought of, leave alone recognizing. Sexuality is considered to be a taboo subject and open discussions of sexuality are never encouraged be at home or elsewhere. What makes the upbringing of children in South Asia different from that of West is the role played by family in inculcating strong family values like bonding with family members,. While there is more individual freedom for people in the West to make their own choices, the choices are limited for people in South Asia because of its culture that is bound by tradition and ethos. Thus an LGBT identity, which goes against the established order on sexuality, is seen as an assault on conservative family set-up and values.

Queer Identities and complexities within Relationships

While individual freedom is nurtured in the West, South Asian culture does not offer much room for individuals to exercise their choices over their lives. It accords importance to family and parents in shaping the lives of individuals. Unquestioning acceptance of parental choices is an important feature of South Asian culture, and any act of defiance in this regard is always met with strong disapproval. The characteristic feature of Indian family is that it wields enormous influence over the individuals including their life choices. A case in point is that of *Evening Shadows* where the protagonist's father decides to get his son married much against his wishes.

With family acting as a binding force on individuals, any open assertion of one's queer identity results in the ripping apart of family relationships and snapping of family ties. When parental expectations clash with individual desires, cracks erupt and dent family relationships. Though scholars like Ruth Vanita have emphasized in their writings that homosexuality is not of a recent origin in India, and that same-sex relationships have existed in India since times of yore, modern Indian society views homosexuality to be unnatural, obscene, and ostracizes or stigmatizes people who have different sexual identities.

Impact of disclosure of Queer identities on the Family

Any act of explicitly proclaiming one's sexual identity which is not in consonance with the established ones is always met with stiff resistance in the family. People with contrary identities thus face outright rejection and discrimination at the hands of their kith and kin. In the words of Ranade (2016), "Initial responses of family members to 'coming out' or 'finding out' the same-sex sexual orientation of their children include disappointment, disapproval, shock, rejection, hostility and even violence..."

Commenting on the lesser number of individuals coming out to their families, Jeff Beeler and Vicky DiProva (1999) remark: "... familial/kinship control over individual's sexuality... violence from family members towards non-normative gender and sexuality, fewer lesbian and gay individuals may choose to come out to their families in India." The act of disclosing one's sexual identity to family is shaped by factors such as awareness about homosexuality, deep-rooted beliefs on sexuality, and the outlook of people towards same-sex

relationships. While traditional families frown upon and are less accepting homosexuality, families having a liberal outlook are more inclined towards accepting queer identities. The disclosure of sexual identities in the open is also conditioned by familial values and conventions.

From the viewpoint of Michael LaSala (2007), "... coming out' to family is not easy... there is considerable amount of antagonism, negativity and even disapproval towards same sex relationships from parents..." On learning about their children's sexual identity, parents try to figure out "now that I know my child is gay; in what ways will my child's sexuality manifest in his/her life?"(Ranade, 2016). It is this question that decides the relationships between the queers and their family members, and the acceptance or non-acceptance of their sexuality. The lack of social support coupled with non-acceptance by family members leads to the estrangement of queers from their families and in order to integrate them into the mainstream, "... families need a reorganization of their beliefs, values and expectations." (Goldfried, 2001).

Analysis of *Fire*, *Margarita with a Straw* and *Evening Shadows*

The three movies taken up for analysis depict the family backlash that ensues as a result of the protagonists' alternative sexuality. *Fire* narrates the coming together of Sita and Radha, whose unhappy and oppressive marriages lead to their physical relationship. When the spouses learn about their relationship, they are aghast and strongly disapprove of it, resulting in the women walking out of their spouses to live their lives on their own terms. *Margarita with a Straw* explores how a cerebral palsy afflicted woman's sexual orientation tears apart her relationship with her mother and weakens the bond between them. *Evening Shadows* showcases the conflict that a mother is subjected to over her son's gay identity. Her relationship with her son goes for a toss on learning the hidden secret, and widens the rift between them. The three chosen movies depict the far-reaching impact of the protagonists' assertion of their identities on family relationships.

Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

Fire portrays the lives of Radha and Sita, who are oppressed in their marriages and turn to each other for comfort. The indifference and neglect of their respective spouses make them to come closer and give vent to their pent-up feelings of dejection and frustration. The movie opens with Radha's mother telling her a story of a person who wished to see the ocean. The movie then moves forward to Sita, a newlywed woman, who is on a visit to TajMahal with her husband Jatin. Jatin takes no interest in Sita and continues his romantic liaison with his Chinese girlfriend, to which Sita does not object. Radha's situation is also similar to that of Sita. Having been influenced by the teachings of a local Swami, her husband Ashok has become an ascetic renouncing all worldly pleasures. One evening when their spouses spurn them, Radha and Sita have a physical union much to the shock and chagrin of Radha's husband Ashok.

Upon questioning her relationship with Sita, Radha angrily retorts to Ashok by saying that she desires to live with Sita. As her sari gets engulfed in fire, Radha recollects the words uttered by her mother and says that finally she can see the

ocean..The movie ends with an injured Radha leaving Ashok to meet Sita. Both the women meet, and are in each other's company finding warmth and happiness. *Fire* challenges the conventions expected of Indian women to resign themselves to their fate without an iota of questioning the patriarchy or patriarchal norms.

The house, where heterosexuality and patriarchy rule the roost, is the first barrier for queers to assert their sexual identities. In *Fire*, on learning about Radha's relationship with Sita, Radha's husband Ashok is infuriated and yells at her. He finds it difficult to digest the fact that two "women" can have a relationship of their own. The heated argument between Radha and Ashok culminates in Radha moving out of her matrimonial house in search of Sita. Talking about the social rigidity in accepting relationships women have with other women, Anjali Gopalan, an activist says: "... while male homosexuality has been accepted, lesbian relationships do not gain social acceptance..." and according to her, *Fire* "helped because a lot of people who were thinking of rights get together to...talk about inclusiveness."(www.indianexpress.com)

Applying Queer theory in *Fire*

The term "Queer" refers to the mismatch between one's biological sex and one's sexual desire. "Queer iswhatever at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. 'Queer' demarcates..... a positionality vis-à-vis the normative"(Halperin, 1997). The objective of Queer theory is to examine sexual identities that are gender non-conforming i.e. identities that go against the established norms of society. This theory emphasizes that sexual identities are constructed only based on social norms and beliefs, and that sexuality is not determined by any moral standards.

Judith Butler, a prominent queer theorist in *Gender Trouble* (2006) says: "... male and female behaviour roles are not the result of biology but are constructed and reinforced by our society through media and culture." Similarly Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in an interview to *The New York Times* remarks : "Queer theory is about trying to understand the different kinds of sexual desire... you can't understand relations between men and women unless you understand the relationship between people of the same gender, including the possibility of a sexual relationship between them." (<https://www.nytimes.com>)

Applying Queer theory to *Fire*, Namita Goswami remarks: "Radha and Sita are consumed as universally queer heroines because theirs is a timeless story of female love and desire at odds with nation, culture and history."(2008) *Fire* enables us to understand how "... masculinity deploys compulsory heterosexuality to keep women in their places..." (Goswami, 2008). Thus, the above mentioned lines reinforce how patriarchy exerts its power to control women, including their sexual desires. The fact that queer women have no power or control over their bodies is emphasized by Radhika Mohanram when she says: "Queer female bodies are out of place even as heterosexual women are symbolically over determined and hyper visible as boundary markers..." (1990).

Nivedita Menon in *Seeing like a Feminist* points out that men find it difficult to accept that women can have identities of their own: "... images of 'lesbianism' are still regularly appropriated by a male heterosexual pornographic imagination which cannot accept that this is one party...at which their presence is not necessary." (2012) Gayathri Gopinath in *Impossible Desires* expresses the view that female sexual desire is always unimaginable because women are always associated with unblemished chastity. ".....a nonheterosexual Indian woman is not only excluded from the various "home" spaces... but also cannot be imagined...A 'lesbian' can only exist outside the 'home'...whereas a 'woman' can only exist within it." (2005) "Female homoeroticism is caused by a denial of women's natural sexual desires – a sexually denied heterosexual female becomes a lesbian." (Naim, 1999). Thus when women's sexual desires are suppressed and controlled, they try to turn to each other, and in some instances, end up having physical relationship as in the case of Radha and Sita in *Fire*. Adding to the point of controlling female sexuality, Namita Goswami opines: "Radha and Sita are victims of an innately pathological Indian masculinity, which does not seem to change even in a modern and metropolitan India..."(2008).

Shonali Bose's *Margarita with a Straw*

The movie narrates the story of a cerebral palsy afflicted woman who moves from India to New York, discovers her sexual identity and finally becomes a woman of her own. The protagonist Laila Kapoor, a student of Delhi University develops an interest towards a Nima, a lead singer of the musical band of the university but feels dejected when he spurns her. Along with her mother Shubhangini Damle, Laila goes to Manhattan to pursue her higher studies. She meets a young man named Jared, to whom she is immediately drawn to. Laila also comes across a Pakistani- Bangladeshi visually impaired girl Khanum, and is taken in by her feisty personality. Soon she becomes confounded over her sexual identity – being attracted to a man, and at the same time having a relationship with a woman.

She struggles to tell her mother of her sexual identity. Finally when Laila musters the courage and tells her mother that she is a bisexual, and has a relationship with Khanum, her mother voices her strong condemnation and disapproval of her relationship. Meanwhile, Khanum leaves Laila on learning that she has betrayed her by simultaneously having a relationship with Jared. Soon Laila's mother falls sick, and her terminal illness reunites the estranged mother and daughter. The passing away of her mother leaves Laila shattered and the movie ends with Laila independently going to a restaurant and having a Margarita with a straw.

Applying Queer Theory in *Margarita with a Straw*

Movies tend to look down upon people with disabilities, and if they have a different sexual identity, they face even more ridicule and stigmatisation in the eyes of others. Their plight of being marginalized is expressed by McRuer in the following lines: "..... the constructed binaries have ostracized the marginal sexual identities, often generating stigma about those who are identified as

disabled and queer.” (McRuer, 2018). The difficulty in accepting the fact that people with disabilities also have their own sexual desires and need to be respected for their desires “...perpetuates disillusionment about sexual identity in their minds.” (McRuer, 2012)

Margarita with a Straw portrays how, we, as a society, “.....disregard the sexuality of disability...labeling them as asexual or hypersexual beings who do not deserve privacy or bodily integrity.” (Sinha, 2020) In India, sexuality is a taboo among people, and discussions revolving on sexuality are not allowed and always put down. Such being the case, it is hard to imagine the plight of queer women, who face disabilities because they are “.....denied privacy, bodily integrity and exposure to explore their own sexuality...” Thus Laila’s “...sexuality questioned morality and the sanctity of women... that is denied access to sexual cultures” (Sinha, 2020)

Queer women with disabilities are looked down upon by men, who do not consider them as individuals having their own desires and choices. “.... a man might see a disabled woman as a sexual being, yet he disassociates from her in public settings, despite their intimacy in private....” (Sinha, 2020). Laila in *Margarita with a Straw* is confounded over her two identities i.e., she is attracted to a heterosexual man on one hand, and on the other hand is drawn to Khanum, thus exhibiting “the dissonance of sexuality created due to the predominant gendered ideals...” (Sinha, 2020).

Sridhar Rangayan’s *Evening Shadows*

Set in Mumbai and in a small South Indian town in Karnataka, the movie begins with the arrival of Kartik from Mumbai for a puja. His conservative parents have found a match for him, but Kartik has something else in store for them. As his father Damodar, a strict person, cannot digest the fact that he is a photographer, Kartik turns to his mother Vasudha to disclose his sexual identity. When he comes out to her about being a gay she is shell-shocked and feels it would have been better had she not known the truth. As a woman caught in a tradition-bound society, Vasudha has to deal with the challenges arising out of her son’s gay identity in a conservative society, and her sense of discomfort in accepting the hard reality. The movie narrates the travails of a gay son who longs for familial acceptance, and his dilemma in choosing between his individual identity and deep-rooted cultural traditions. When children do not give in to the parental demands and decide to make their own choice/decision regarding their lives, cracks erupt in their relationship thereby causing estrangement in their ties. The movie thus depicts the fall-out on family relationships when children seek an identity of their own while belying the expectations of their parents.

Emphasizing that being gay does not refer to only having sexual relationships, Rangayan, the director of the movie says: “If I say I am gay, it doesn’t mean that I just have sex with a man... I have this whole desire to be with a man... being gay is about a larger connotation of identity...” (www.cinestaan.com) Articulating the idea that only when we give up the notions of having only two genders, “... more and more kinds of bodies and desires will come into view...” (2012), Nivedita Menon points out that

“one body may, in one lifetime, move through many identities and desires...”and that “queer suggests that all kinds of sexual desire and identifications are possible, and all these have socio-cultural and historical coordinates”(2012)

Conclusion

The three movies depict how complexities arise in family relationships because of the assertion of queer identities by individuals. In Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, Sita and Radha unfetter themselves from the domestic oppression and walk out of their spouses to be together. The relationship between Laila and her mother Shubhangini in *Margarita with a Straw* goes for a toss when Laila discloses her sexual orientation to her mother. The estranged Laila patches up with her mother only after her mother is diagnosed with terminal illness. In *Evening Shadows*, the dark secret of Kartik’s gay identity rips apart his relationship with his mother, who struggles to stand up to his father and the conservative society in which she lives. Time and again, society emphasizes that heterosexuality is only normal, leaving no room for people with different sexual orientation to coexist with others. An egalitarian society can be achieved only when people with different sexual identities are accepted and recognized for being ‘what they are’ without having to face stigma or ridicule from the members of the society. Hence it is imperative that families and communities develop an accommodative approach towards people who are not straight so that an all gender inclusive society becomes a reality.

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