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CASTE, COLOUR AND SEXUALITY- AN ANALYSIS OF MAINSTREAM BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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Film to be accessed via Google Drive Link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rN7EIaF2t-7yHYKBf5ve1VFqioNSxiLD/view?usp=sharing

DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores representational strategies and ideas around caste, colourism and sexuality in mainstream Bollywood cinema. This is done so through the textual analysis of my case studies *Dostana* (Tarun Mansukhani,2008), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aida Laga* (Shelly Chopra Dhar,2019) and *Kala Shah Kala* (Amarjit Singh,2019). India has had a complex past with effects of colonialism that still continues today. These effects and influences brought on by colonial power, societal ideals and cultural norms have shaped the manner in which characters are constructed and represented in mainstream Bollywood cinema. Many of these characters are formed based on stereotypes and have thus established a norm as to how these marginalised groups have been represented. As India tackles colonial laws, it enables a shift in the manner in which these groups are represented. Through the textual analysis of my case studies the effects of colonial ideals around sexuality, caste and colourism can be drawn, and with the abolishment of laws such as section 377, character constructions and narratives are becoming more inclusive. In response to this, I will be making use of my practice as a filmmaker to explore in a short experimental film form these particular ideas. The film explores my personal identity, as a South African Indian and the blurred lines between masculinity and femininity in Hindu practices and Indian culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Bollywood cinema has grown to become one of the largest film industries in the world, appealing to audiences from all different walks of life. These films have become a product to the diaspora in which diasporic Indians are able to feel some sense of relation to their identity as South Asian individuals. When I make use of the term diaspora, it is with reference to Indians that are across the world and how they related to media forms created in India and how these forms are presented to them outside of India, this includes myself a South African Indian. Through my research analysis, I will be drawing on the representations of Indian society and how this is portrayed to the viewer and those of the diaspora who look to films from India as a manner in which to feel a sense of inclusion in mainstream media including myself. Film often reflects society through its narrative and constructions of characters, these representations are sometimes stereotypical given various factors such as politics in the specific region and cultural norms. Bollywood cinema has recently embarked on a journey in which to move away from stereotypical representations of individuals in the mainstream media, this sudden change is due to factors and the opinions of Bollywood's audience members (Trends Desk, 2019). The groups of people that are often stereotyped in Bollywood are queer individuals, those with a darker skin complexion, those of a lower caste and women. This is often because India has to an extent normalised hate towards these individuals and thus the representations on screen often portray these individuals in a negative light (Rakhi Bose, 2018).

In 2019 mainstream Bollywood cinema began to challenge these representations when the film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Tho Aisa Laga* (Shelly Chopra Dhar, 2019) was released, the film features a prominent Bollywood actress Sonam Kapoor play a lesbian character who comes to terms with her sexuality. The film was met with much praise and criticism in the manner in which it handles the subject of homosexuality in India (Saibal Chatterjee, 2019). The film was a major change from stereotypical representation of queer individuals in earlier Bollywood films such as *Dostana* (Tarun Mansukhani, 2008). Dostana (Tarun Mansukhani, 2008) is one of several films released that did not fully explore sexuality as a theme in a film, this may be because of specific laws that the Indian government has against homosexual Indian citizens such as the law, Section 377 of the Indian penal code. *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Tho Aisa Laga* (Shelly Chopra Dhar, 2019) was released during trials for the abolishment of Section 377 which thus evoked

an interest in how queer characters are offered to Indian audiences and around how discriminatory the laws of Section 377 are in modern day India (Hinchy 1997).

Bollywood may make slow strides in its challenging representations however, it has a long way to go to break stereotypical representations of queer and lower caste individuals. In 2019 *Kala Shah Kala* (Amarjit Singh, 2019) was released, the film featured a narrative surrounding a dark skin male character who falls in love with a fair skinned character and thus relies on methods in which to make himself more appealing to the female character. The dark-skinned character builds around stereotypes that a person with a darker skin is lower in society in terms of education and economic class, this refers to India's caste systems views on particular individuals in society.

These three films will be forming the base of my study which will investigate the representational choices with reference to the character's sexuality and skin colour through stereotypes, this will be framed with an analysis of *Kala Shah Kala* (Amarjit Singh, 2019), Ek *Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (Shelly Chopra Dhar, 2019) and *Dostana* (Tarun Mansukhani, 2008). Analysing more specifically the construction of particular characters in the film, the narrative of the film and the marketing leading up to the release of these films. The analysis will consider the social and poltical issues in India during the time of release. In order to fully understand these films strategies of representation, a contextualization is required to draw on the influences that lead up to the representations that are offered to the audiences of these films. Thus, this paper will look at historical representations of these marginalised groups and how they have been represented in Indian media as well as in ancient Indian society and texts. Through the use of theories of stereotyping and construction of the other, I am able to form a relationship between the theory offered, and how representations in media have been constructed. In response to the representations offered I will work within the experimental form to construct a film in response to the manner in which these marginalised groups have historically been represented.

HISTORY OF BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

The contextualisation of Bollywood cinema in relation to my research offers an insight in the manner in which representation has been formed in media over time. This including influences from other film industries, and how cinema in general makes use of the publics views about a certain group of individuals and thus chooses to represent them in this manner on screen.

When one hears the term Bollywood, immediate thoughts of elaborate sets, costume and carefully choreographed dance numbers comes to mind. Bollywood has grown to appeal to various audiences across the globe. Bollywood began in Bombay, now Mumbai, as a term used to describe films of the Hindi Language from the Indian press (Ganti,2013).
Bollywood and Hollywood are quite different if you think of the two film industries, from the manner in which films are produced to how actors are cast to star in these films. The difference I refer to, is to the manner in which casting took place in early Bollywood cinema which continues today. Those of a specific family or a higher caste are given a role to represent those of a lower cast, and this is typically done so by casting a fair skinned character to play a darker complexioned character. This example refers to my analysis on colourism and caste in Bollywood cinema and how this continues in present day India. It will be analysed in my analysis of the film *Kala Shah Kala* (2019) which makes use of this complexion-based casting for a character.

Cinema in India offers to audiences a reflection of society in its narratives played on screens. Through these offerings come a vast array of narratives, with some earlier instances building on stereotypical ideals that enabled a sense of cultural hegemony. Bollywood cinema is one of the most easily accessible forms of mass entertainment for the Indian public.

> *"film has borne, often unconsciously, several large burdens, such as the provision of influential paradigms for notions of "indianess", "collectively" (in the generation of unprecedented nationwide, mass-audience) and key terms of reference for the prevailing cultural hegemony"* (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 2014:10).

Bollywood began as a form of theatre, offering public audience's re-enactments of folk talks and Hindu mythology. Bollywood borrowed aspects from traditional epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Folk Theatre has been used in India to address social, cultural issues and to create a sense of awareness in the community through theatre. Bollywood's take on humour and mix of realism and fantasy in its films emerge from Parsi theatre. That has aspects of dramatic theatre, this form of theatre was primarily in the Hindi, Guajarati, Mahrati and even English (Gupt, 2001).

Hollywood also influenced Bollywood cinema, in terms of the magnitude and manner in which a production runs and is conceptualized, this did adjust overtime with Bollywood cinema developing its own take on the production process. Bollywood has a large amount of well-known families that are part of the production process. The star system is also very heavily reliant on the western notions of beauty and how beauty is presented to the Indian audiences. These beauty standards that are being referred to are again, casting a fair complexion actor to play the role of a person from a marginalised group. The system in which characters are cast also provide a repetition of the norm in media, by using the same actors and actresses it indirectly creates the notion of who is considered appealing to the audience consuming the film. In my case studies that will be analysed in detail, later on in this paper, the presence of the star system can be noticed in actors who have been chosen to represent queer characters and those of a lower caste.

The first commercial film titled *Raja Harishchandra (1913)* was released in the year 1913 by filmmaker Dadasaheb Phalke. The film is based on the legend of Harishchandra, a king who made appearances in several epic tales including the epic Mahabharata. Phalke played a female in his film, as did several men as during this period as females were not cast to play these roles. The use of male actors at this stage seemed to begin a normalisation of males playing females in films, it seemed to be accepted by the public as it was for narrative purposes. The use of male actors to play females developed into an element of comedy which is discussed later on in this paper. It is important to note the early presence of cross dressing in Bollywood cinema in relation to the analysis of stereotypical representation in Bollywood and how this use of male actors as female characters has developed over time. Thus, over time enabling certain tropes or stereotypes that have become associated with transgender people in Bollywood cinema.

The 60s gave birth to a new era of Bollywood films, filled with romance and a more westernized way of life to what was portrayed on screen before. This included adding English to dialogue on screen, adding a mixture of both Hindi and English, as Bollywood began to embrace western culture (Jha, 2014). The 1960s gave birth to modern day Bollywood cinema as it is known today, pushing towards a global outreach outside of India.

The 2000s started with Bollywood having larger budgets for its films, and a large amount of female leads, which is a stark difference to early Bollywood cinema. Females started to get roles in which they were portrayed more prominently on screen and are more empowered through the film's narrative. Female characters were offered to audiences as multi-dimensional characters, not shying away from taboo topics. (Ahmed and Kakar, 2017). Films featuring women as main characters started to have commercial success in Bollywood with this representation, it enabled a change in Bollywood cinema moving away from stereotypical representations of the Indian women portrayed on screen. Colourism still does affect the manner in which someone is cast. Roles were often offered to those of a lighter skin complexion and even the caste of the actor influences the choice made by the casting director and director. Although Bollywood tries to move towards inclusive narratives and casting, there are still aspects that are questionable.

QUEER REPRESENTATION AND QUEER AS PERFORMANCE IN BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

Two of my three case studies, namely *Dostana* (2008) and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) offer representation of queer characters in Bollywood cinema, one film makes use of stereotypes while the other tries to offer a more complex queer narrative to what mainstream Bollywood cinema has seen in the past. Through a historical analysis of queer representation that is to be discussed, one is able to draw on the influences that effect the representations that are offered in present day India, and how these may or may not have affected the above-mentioned case studies. This contextualisation assists in the further analysis of my case studies and how the filmmaker may have borrowed aspects of previous offering of queer characters and incorporated that into the film. These can be aspects of cross dressing and making use of a queer character for comedic relief rather than as a complex character offering.

Bollywood cinema has rarely explored ideas of a character's sexuality on screen. If these characters are portrayed on screen they are typically shown in a negative form and are offered to audiences as a comedic element to the film. In the early 1980s and 90s Bollywood films featured heterosexual male characters that dressed up as females. Cross dressing in Bollywood is not something that is considered different, filmmakers have normalised this for comedy in several films (Varia 2013). Garber (1997) offers that

> *"cross-dressing allows for heterosexual characters to further their cause through progressive narratives. The narrative allows for the heterosexual character to subvert the character's sexuality to reinstate their position"*(Varia,1997:336).

Cross dressing occurred very early in Bollywood cinema, with male characters having to play female characters as females were hesitant and rarely available to star in films, women started to act in films from the 1930s.

Arguably the first offering of a queer character was the film *Mast Kalandar* (1991) which featured a male character named Pinkoo who is flamboyant character that was put into the film as an element of comedy for the audience. However, the first Bollywood film that featured narratives and characters that dealt with homosexuality was Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1996). The film tells the story of two lesbian women who fall in love with each other, both of these women have issues with their spouses which lead them to finding love with one another. *Fire*

was met with protest from groups during promotion for the film leading up to its release. The film also sparked interest about India's law against homosexual individuals (The News Minute 2016).

In 2005 the film *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) *was* released. The film explored issues around HIV and featured a character who had to deal with being HIV positive and his family not accepting this. *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) offer more complex narratives about the lives and struggles of those who are homosexual. Many of these films have been met with criticism before their release as all these films have to be passed by the film certification board of India. The subject matter of these films, homosexuality is going against the law in India, however this didn't stop filmmakers from further exploring the lives of the LGBTQIA + community.

The transgender community in India have been represented on screen with negative connotations as well. The community has been represented as Individuals who are typically sex workers who are effeminate characters for comedy. Filmmakers like Mahesh Bhatt attempted offering Bollywood audiences narratives about the transgender community in India but did little to move away from stereotypes that already existed. His first film that explored narratives around the transgender community was *Sadak* (1991). The film did little to portray the trans community in a positive light, but rather continue to build around stereotypes. *Sadak* (1991) features a transgender women who is framed as a villain in the film. The character named Maharani runs a brothel in Mumbai and employs several girls which include the main character, Pooja. It makes use of stereotype that majority of transgender women in India are in sex work and are with sexually transmitted diseases.

In Bollywood cinema representations of the LGTBQIA+ community have almost for the most part have been categorised into different forms. The Hijra, as a form of comedic relief, a character that has a mental illness and an intricate offering of the struggles and life of the queer character. Bhugra, Kalra and Ventriglo (2015) argue that there are four specific forms of queer characters that usually can be seen in Bollywood cinema. These are, the laughing stock, villain, hero or heroine and caring sensitive individual. These offerings also apply to the representations of a transgender character in Bollywood cinema. The laughing stock is typically the gay character that is utilised as a manner in which to get the audience to laugh as a product of comedic relief.

Bhugra, Kalra and Ventriglo (2015) second offering of a queer character is *the villan.* This is the construction of a character with the intention of being different or constructed as the other in the film. These characters can be easily identified and critiqued, the villain character is often a character that dresses up as the opposite sex to trick the main character in the film, sometimes for malicious intent. The *sensitive* character is a character that offers a more complex queer character and moves away from stereotypes associated with homosexual individuals. These characters face issues and struggles that queer people in India face such as coming to terms with their sexuality.

The emergence of streaming services has enabled complex narratives around the lives and struggles of the queer community in India. *Made in Heaven* (2019) is an Amazon Prime original series directed by Zoya Akhtar, the series features a homosexual male character that finds himself being arrested due to the law that criminalises homosexual intercourse. The series brings queer culture and rights to the forefront of the narrative. Netflix has also seen some diverse offerings of queer narratives such as *Paava Kadhaigal* (2020), although the film is in the Tamil language, it is important to note the impact the narrative has on the mainstream Bollywood audience. The first episode titled *Thangam* explores the life of a transgender male who lives in a village as he tries to save enough money to receive gender reassignment surgery. It shows his struggles within the village, the bias and hatred towards him, and the issue around dishonour amongst a family name. The influx of diverse character and narrative offering on streaming platforms are due to the fact that the Indian censorship board has no interference with what is being shown on these streaming sites as they are international streaming platforms. There is a sense of hope that diversity will continue to last on these streaming platforms. These series and films offer an insight to audiences about the lives of the queer community and the laws that harm them.

BEING QUEER IN INDIA, HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY AND SECTION 377

Dostana (2008) and *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) both include narratives and characters that feature aspects of homosexuality and homosexual relationships. *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) was released during the court proceedings for the abolishment of section 377, thus it can be argued that this influenced the narrative as well as when the film was decided to be released. The presence of queer relationships in ancient India helps offer insight into the effects of colonialism and how with the presence of the British, existing ideas around homosexuality were changed thus, adding negative connotations to those who are homosexual in India. Section 377 is an example of the presence of the British empire in independent countries that were previous colonies of the British. Through my analysis of *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), I will draw on the court proceedings around section 377's influence in the marketing of the film as well as how the film reflects new societal thoughts around homosexual relationships in modern India. *Dostana* (2009) will be analysed in relation to stereotypes that have been associated with homosexuals throughout Bollywood cinema, as well as how the film aims to still fit a heteronormative narrative.

The concept of homosexuality and homosexual relationships can be identified in ancient Indian texts and mythology. In early mythological texts there are several references to same sex relationships and were never seen as inferior until around the 18th century with the arrival of the British. Typically, the term homosexual and homosexuality were not used, rather poetic metaphors were used to refer to same sex relations (Tiwari, 2010).

In ancient India, Hindu temples had sculptures with motifs of same sex people embracing each other, an example of this is the Khajuraho temples located in Madhya Pradesh. The Khajuraho temple carvings are a vast variety, depicting everyday life with 10% of the carvings being erotic. During the end of the Mughal empire in ancient India, Nawabs[1] in the court of Awadh[2], would dress up as women on specific holy days. This subverted notions of masculinity with Indo-persians at the time (Vanita and Kidwai 2000: 194).

[1] Royal title, similar to that of the title "king"
[2] Region in the state of Uttar Pradesh

Poetry in the 1800s have references to homosexual references in the works of Insha and Rageen. They both openly wrote about female on female intercourse and relationships. This poetry that relates to the female is referred to as *Rekhti* poetry. These are poems written by male poets using a female voice. Many of these poets took on female writing personas and dressed up as women during mushairas. *Rekhti* poetry has been recognised for its manner in which it uses specific terms to denote sexual activity that occurs between women (Vanita and Kidwai 2000:227).

The transgender community in India has always been embedded in religious and cultural traditions, and the ancient texts prove that the Hijra community have existed for several decades with evidence of the presence of the Hijra community alongside ancient Hinduism. Hijra are typically referred to as the third sex in India. The term Hijra is used commonly across India, it is the Hindi word for the term Eunuch or Hermaphrodite. The term transgender in India can be seen as an umbrella term, as Hijra is its own community. The term Kinnar is also widely used to refer to Eunuchs in India. In precolonial India, the Hijra community were considered demi gods and held high social status but this was until colonialism when privilege and social status were taken away, and the community became oppressed. It is believed that Hijra have the power to bless or curse and individual, hijras typically offer blessings at celebrations like at the birth of a child (Michelraj, 2015).

During the Mughal empire and the Delhi sultanate, Hijra were trusted guards of chambers and imperial harems. The Hijra during Akbar's regime was treated with much respect and were of high regard. Hijras would serve as political advisors, administrators, generals and in Islamic religious institutions, Hijras would guard holy places (Michelraj, 2015). This view on Hijras and the views on homosexuality began to change with the arrival of the British. In 1860 the view on homosexuality changed with Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay introducing section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Section 377 of the Indian Penal code states

> *"Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, women or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years and shall be liable to fine. Explanation-penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section" (Misra,2009:21).*

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code is modelled from the Buggary Act of 1533 passed by the parliament of England which King Henry VIII was in power. The Buggary Act was punishable by death, and the act was defined as "unnatural sexual act against the will of god and man" this included sexual intercourse with the same sex and sexual intercourse with an animal. The term Buggary was used to refer to anal intercourse and barbaric behaviour (Han and O'Mahoney,2018). Section 377 was applied to several British colonies which included Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Jamaica. The law has stayed with some of these countries till present day.

Several studies had been done on homosexuality in India, but one of the most notable studies on homosexuality was done by Shakuntala Devi in 1977. Her study entitled *The World of Homosexuals* featured many interviews with homosexuals in India and abroad. Her book called for the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India. Devi expressed the need for the Indian society to be more accepting of homosexuals,

> *"The time is overdue now, when rather than pretending that homosexuals don't exist, or hoping to eradicate them by the sheer disapproval or prison sentences we face the facts squarely in the eye and find room for them" (Devi, 1977:149).*

Her book is one of the most prominent and earliest examples of a public figure calling for the abolishment of section 377.

The fight to decriminalise Section 377 has been a long and laborious one in India. The first challenge against section 377 was in the form of a petition by the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan. The AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan is an HIV and AIDS activism movement that was founded in the early 1990s by a group of individuals from various backgrounds. They advocated for the rights of HIV positive people in India and wanted to dismantle stigmas around the queer community and sex workers with regards to HIV.

The most notable report published by the AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan was entitled "*Less than gay"* it is seen as one of the first attempt to change laws and demand rights for the LGBTQIA+ community. The report called for the decriminalization of section 377, the report

also detailed the terms in which to refer to the community and how members of the community identify. Unfortunately, the petition that was submitted to the Indian government was dismissed. This was the beginning of the fight to decriminalize Section 377 of the Indian penal code.

In the year 2001 another organisation called the NAZ foundation filed a public interest litigation to challenge Section 377 at the Delhi High Court. Three years later after the NAZ foundation filed the litigation, the Delhi high court dismissed the petition saying it was not affected by Section 377 and the foundation does not have the right to appear in court to challenge the law. In 2009 the Delhi High Court found section 377 a violation of the Indian constitution. This decriminalised homosexual intercourse between two consenting adults, this meant that Section 377 was decriminalised but not legalised. In 2013 India's Supreme Court did not agree with the judgment made by the Delhi High Court (Misra, 2009). The parliament of India in the year 2015 rejected a bill to decriminalise Section 377 of the Indian penal code (Naik,2017). In early 2018 the Indian Supreme Court decided to reconsider the litigation filed by the NAZ foundation and concluded on September 6th and ruled that intercourse between two of the same sex may be legal in private (Hinchy,2019).

Although consensual sex between same sex individuals was made legal, marriage was not made legal in India, so the fight continues to provide the LGBTQIA+ community with rights. Section 377 is one of long-lasting legacies of British rule on colonies. India was a country prior to colonialization that was open to homosexuality and was influenced by the British into a new way of thinking. The Victorian rule made India believe that the country was backwards in its thinking because of its views on Homosexuality. Homosexuality was decriminalised in England in the year 1967, while colonies of the British continued to have Section 377 in place long after independence (Wolf, 2019).

In *British colonialism and criminalizing homosexuality* by Enze Han and Joseph O'Mahoney (2018) they discuss if colonial rule is responsible for the criminalization of same sex relationships across the world. One of the points made by Han and O'Mahoney is that Thomas Macaulay's reasoning to put section 377 of the Indian penal code was that it would be the greatest blessing on India by the British and that laws like section 377 would act as a way in which to modernise India. Han and O'Mahoney (2018:48) conducted a research study in which the aim of the study was to find out the prevalence of laws that criminalize homosexual acts

and British legal origin. In the research it was found that the association between British legal origin and having a law that criminalizes homosexual acts states that have such a law in place 57 percent have a British origin and almost 70 percent of these states continue to criminalize homosexuality. It was noted that then prime minister of the United Kingdom Theresa May at a Commonwealth meeting of governments on April 17 2018, said that she regretted the British's long legacy of homophobic laws, and that she is aware that these were put in place by her country and that they were wrong then and are still wrong, and that the legacy of discrimination, death and violence still continues today across the commonwealth (Westcott, 2018).

Sexuality is one of the many issues of discrimination that citizens in India face, and it is making slow progress in changing stereotypical views of marginalised groups in India with the public and NGOs expressing concerns to the Indian government there seems to be some hope for these groups who have been previously discriminated against.

CASTE, COLOURISM AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Notions of caste and colourism are relevant to my analysis of *Kala Shah Kala* (2019), the film makes use of stereotypes around people with a darker complexion in India and this is overtly displayed through the manner in which the narrative is presented to the audience. These stereotypes have a long history embedded in caste systems and colonial laws and ideals, that established a norm for beauty and creating a notion of othering. These notions of beauty and class have broken out of India and have found their way to those who are of the diaspora outside of India. These are through mainstream media's notions of beauty and the emergency of a cosmetic industry whose focus is on altering skin tones to fit Eurocentric notions of beauty.

India has an ancient system in which society is grouped and differentiated based on religion, region, tribe, gender and language. The caste system is a closed system of classification, this means that a person is born into a caste and has no say as to how they are classified. According to British anthropologist, Sir Herbert Hope Risley caste is defined as

> *"a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming a common descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give an opinion as forming a single homogeneous community" (Hutton, 1986:16).*

It is believed that the origins of the system are from the Arayans that invaded India in 1500BC. It is said that the Aryans used this system to control and organise the population, then later the system evolved and became associated with ancient Hinduism (Smith,1994). The caste system is divided into four major social classes or Varnas. These social classes are the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra. These social classes are said to represent the Hindu god Brahma, the creator, each of these classes represent a part of the body of Brahma. Brahmins represent the brain of Brahma, those who are Brahmin are typically priests and scholars and are at the top of the class pyramid they have high social status. Kshatriya represent the shoulders of lord Brahma, representing strength. These individuals are typically warriors and those involved in politics. Kshatriya's typically work with the Brahmins and assist them with their reign over kingdoms, a king needs to protect his subjects and to do this he must learn ways in which to protect the people, thus the Vaisya educates the Brahmin on physical strength (Ghurye,1969). Vaishya refers to the stomach of lord Brahma, Vaishya's are merchants, farmers and artisans

in the community. At the bottom of the pyramid are the Shudra's these are people who are typically servants, labourers and peasants, Shudra's represent the feet of lord Brahma. Shudras were said to not have any contributions to society and their purpose was to serve as slaves to those of the upper caste, Shudra's did not have any rights or privileges that those of the upper caste had (Hutton 1986).

One group are completely left out of the social hierarchy and these are the Dalits, they are also known as the untouchables. They perform occupations that the other castes would not perform as those occupations were considered to be unclean such as killing pests like rats. Dalits were considered to be impure individuals thus they do not belong in the caste hierarchy and exist on their own.

Panchants are governing bodies for castes, they deal with offences between castes, some of these offences are socialising with the opposite caste, and even eating in the presence of another caste or sub caste. Those of another caste were not allowed to marry, change profession or trade and if one keeps a women of another caste it is said to go against customs of trade to that particular caste. Different regions in India would define their own laws and punishments for particular castes of that region (Riser-Kositsky, 2009). During the British Raj, from 1757 the caste system was used by the British to exploit India, as a means of social control over the state. The British sought to become allies with those of the brahmin caste giving them privileges that were lost when Muslim rulers were in power in the state. The British believed that in order to "preserve the fabric of the Indian tradition, India was to be governed according to Indian experience and tradition" (Riser-Kositsky, 2009:33). Race and fair skin colour had become a basis in which to identify a caste difference. During colonialism India requested that the British start positive discrimination by keep a certain amount of government jobs for those that were from a lower caste, but after India had gained its independence, the policy of caste-based reservation of jobs was formalised (Fonseca, Bandyopadhyay, Louçã and Manjaly, 2019).

The British viewed some of the thoughts around lower castes as discriminatory and got rid of laws with regards to these castes. In the late 1930s Britain put laws in place to protect those who are of a lower caste in India. Towards the 19th and 20th century there was a call for a change in the perception of those who are of the lower caste, more specifically the untouchables. The independence of India in the year 1947, resulted in a new legislature which reflected the new India. Laws were introduced to properly insure the protection of those that

are from the lower caste and to enable them to be given opportunities that would have not been given to them previously (Riser-Kositsky, 2009).

The new laws enabled a new quota system in which people of lower castes are able to get into educational institutions and be considered for particular job posts. The law, article 15 of the constitution of India states that

> *"(1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them" (Constitutionofindia.net, 2017).*

Even though article 15 of the Indian constitution is in place, discrimination is still prevalent in Indian society. The relationship between caste and colourism is one that stems from before becoming a colony of the British, with references to skin colour in ancient texts. The arrival of the British further intensified ideas of prejudice based on skin tone.

> *"Hindu religious texts are full of what we would now recognize as racial stereotypes: lower caste figures as dark and ugly... To be dark is to be a manual labourer, working in the sun. Fair skin is also a mark of class." (CNN.com, 2020).*

In ancient India connotations of negativity associated by skin colour were not present as Hindu texts had references to gods whom were of a darker skin tone, "Hindu ancient texts show that Krishna was the dark hero of Yadava tribe. Krishna, who is considered to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, has dark skin tone" (Mishra, 2015:729).

The emergence of influences from countries within the Arabic and Persian belt, lead to an increase of individuals of a fair complexion, but there is no evidence that at the time of the Arab invaders that there was prejudice based on skin tone. Skin tone prejudice was clearly evident at the time of the British empire in India, as those of a lighter skin tone became allies with the British, while those of a darker skin tone did not receive the same type of advantages that the light skinned allies did.

Indians were referred to as "Black Indians" and were often associated with animals and denied entry into particular public spaces on the bases of their skin tone, as they could not pass to look like British with their fair skin and so-called superiority. "Entry to restaurants and educational

institutions was prohibited for “Black Indians” with entry boards clearly stating, “Indians and dogs not allowed” (Mishra, 2015:731). These signs that were put up were seen at the Pahartali European Club, and often seen in European clubs to create a sense of racial exclusiveness and prejudice amongst the Anglo-Indian society (Hinduwisdom.info, 2021). The British ruled India for over 100 years and thus shaped the Indian public’s perception around white coloured skin, associating this skin tone with the ruling class and the elite. This perception became the basis for attaching power to those of a fairer skin regardless of the persons gender, these thoughts shaped the idea of whom is considered desirable (Mishra,2015). The desire for a person who fits the westernised idea of beauty is still prevalent in Indian society and including those of the diaspora. The legacy of colonialism sustained a national identity of inferior Indians which still today is expressed through images of whiteness that is superior to darkness (Chakravarty,1989). The legacy of colonialism has directly informed the way in which Indian women view themselves in present day India.

In modern day India ideas around beauty are all controlled by how the media offers concepts of beauty and what fits notions of westernised beauty standards. India makes use of lighter skinned models and even European models to advertise predominantly Indian traditional products such as Saris and Indian traditional wear. These European models started to also make appearances in Bollywood films during dance sequences replacing previously Indian back up dancers as it was believed that these fair skinned individuals are more appealing to the wider audience. The influx of these portrayal of beauty increased the public interest for cosmetic products that alter one’s skin complexion in order to be more appealing to mass society. Bollywood actors and actresses have been advertising fairness creams in India for several years promoting these products to the Indian public, selling unrealistic ideas of how these stars achieved their complexion.

These mainstream marketing campaigns further push narratives of colourism amongst the Indian society and the diaspora to whom these products are becoming readily available. The notions of beauty amongst the Indian society is now crossing borders with a growing demand for Indian skin lightning products in countries with a large population of Indians who form part of the diaspora.

Although arguments suggest that caste can be associated with colourism in India, some argue that caste and colourism have not been affected by each other. Neha Misha in her Journal article

entitled *India and Colorism: The Finer Nuances* (2015), addresses the notion of colourism in India and how colourism to an extent is not shaped on the general perception of caste. She notes that India did not discriminate on the basis of a person's skin colour and that Indians today are diverse and are of a combination of different skin tones and races. Misha notes that the view that many have taken is that caste is related to skin colour and that lower castes such as Dalits are darker skinned is an inaccurate view. She goes on to offer that skin colour in India is more location specific than caste specific because India has a variation of temperatures and geographical conditions. However, Misha does note that there is some truth to referring caste to colourism as those who are of a lower caste work jobs in direct sunlight and poverty being a factor in the changes in skin complexion, and that notions around colourism have been further advanced with the arrival of colonial power in India.

It is apparent with scholars and historical notes that colonialism has had an impact on how the common Indian citizen views themselves with regards to their caste and skin colour. Although there is some progress constitutionally, these stereotypical notions of caste and colour are present in society and even through the media's representation of these two concepts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Stuart Hall, in his work *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997) discusses the manner in which we choose to represent, and the relationship between culture and representation. Hall's work on stereotyping as representation is particularly relevant towards the analysis of my above-mentioned cased studies, as these case studies are heavily reliant on stereotypes that are of a result of societal, political and religious influences in the Indian society.

Hall (1997) offers three theoretical approaches to representations namely reflective, intentional and constructionist approaches to representation. The reflective approach of how representation through language works is sometimes referred to as a mimetic approach as it typically reflects or mimic what has already been fixed in the world. The intentional approach to representation, looks at the opposite of the reflective approach. Representations are filled with the intent of the producers who have created it. the constructionist approach is a combination of both the reflective and intentional approach. This concept refers to the act of creating meaning using representational systems hence the term constructionist. The use of the intentional approach can be seen in my case studies, that build on the norm as to how these marginalised groups have been historically represented on screen and presenting them to the public as different and not normal. The historical manner in which marginalised groups have been represented can influence the various approaches to representation as the creator of the media form may have various influences and intentions to the manner in which queer characters and darker complexion characters are offered to audiences.

Barthes examined the methods in which signs operate on two levels that create a more complex meaning. These levels are the denotative and connotative level. The Denotative level refers to the literal meaning of something, "a simple basic descriptive level (Hall 1997:38), seeing what you see as it is. Connotation is the thought or feeling that is produced after the primary meaning. The manner in which Barthes offers images are read, will be applied in my analysis. The case studies will be analysed first at a denotative level and thereafter at a connotative level. Barthe's method of analysis allows me to explore complex ideas that may be embedded in the films.

Michel Focault's discursive approach is a method of discourse analysis. Foucault looked at representations as constantly creating and constructing knowledge and viewed them as a source

for the production of social knowledge (Hall 1997:42). He looked a discourse rather than language (Hall 1997). He was interested in how knowledge relates to power, Focault refers to the term the regime of truth in which people assume to create the truth about something and thus society accepts this as the factual truth and the only true meaning or explanation of something taking place.

The regime of truth displays how the public has been given the power in which to establish what is the truth and what is not the truth. These arguments that have been presented around, the regime of truth are relevant to the ideas around homosexuality and colourism that were presented to the Indian society when they were colonised by the British. The arrival of the British and changes in laws because of this created a 'regime of truth' as to how people that are homosexual and of a lower societal caste are to be perceived.

The spectacle of otherness is what Hall describes as a difference that attracts others, meaning that people tend to pay attention to what is considered different or what is considered as not normal. By analysing one's difference, it results in a further analysis of other differences that thus create a spectacle of otherness. Hall discusses four different theoretical accounts of difference, linguistics, language as an objective system, anthropological and psychoanalytical. Of these four theoretical accounts two are important to note when considering the stereotypes in my case studies. These are Saussure's account in which meaning is derived from the difference between opposites, or rather what is offered as binary oppositions. Binary oppositions display that there is only a two-way structure and no grey area, or anything in-between, with binary oppositions one tends to have more power over the other.

The notion of binary oppositions relates to my arguments around the manner in which the LGBTQIA + community has been represented historically in Indian media, more specifically mainstream Bollywood cinema. Historically there have been narratives around heteronormative relationships, Man and Women but rarely that of same sex relationships on screen. If these same sex relationships are ever offered they tend to make use of stereotypes which was discussed earlier. As Hall argues Binary oppositions do not seen an in between, this also relates to notions around gender in India. Bollywood cinema tends to represent Man and Women but with the transgender community they are scrutinised on screen and are rarely added to a narrative as a progressive offering as complex individuals. The transgender community has been presented to audiences as different and heavily reliant on stereotypes.

The other theoretical account that is beneficial to my analysis is anthropological, anthropological, has to do with culture and with whatever does not fit into culture is considered as not normal or different.

Hall offers that stereotyping makes use of a strategy called splitting. Splitting refers to excluding people who do not fit into the norm of society, or what is considered by the masses as normal. The splitting of stereotypes enabled society to maintain the norm and establishing differences. Through the power enabled by stereotyping a hegemony is established. The hegemony that is established in relation to the ideas of same sex relationships, gender and colourism have been the effect of pre-existing ideas present in India but have been altered and influenced by colonial power and European ideas of colour, gender and sexuality in society.

These regimes of representation can be seen with the manner in which colonial European countries represented individuals and countries outside of the west. This was through media, such as advertisements featuring exaggerated stereotypes. My case studies will look at aspects of Hall's arguments around regimes of representation within the Indian community and how marginalised groups within the community are represented. When one makes use of Hall's arguments of stereotyping and difference created by media, it is also beneficial to look at the work of Edward Said and the representation of the Orient.

Edward Said in his text *Orientalism* (1979) explores ideas around othering that took place in the east by Europeans. The Orient refers to those from Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. The orient, according to Said helped define Europe and the west, it acted as a distinction to Europe's image and experience. Said argued that Europeans had divided the world into two parts, the east and the west, or rather the occident. Orientalism can be also used to define particularly biased views through which the west views culture, lifestyle and the overall attitude of the east and the people from that region.

Said argues that the notion of othering is a device that defines the west according to that which is not. The west used the orient to define themselves by defining the orient by associating qualities such as uncivilised and irrational to the orient while using terms like civilised and sophisticated to define Europeans. The misrepresentation of those who were considered Orientals in the mind of the Europeans produced stereotypes about the orient and those who are from the orient. This argument made by Said is particularly relevant to the presence of the

British colonial power in India. As discussed earlier, ancient India has had evidence to prove the presence of homosexual relationships and the third gender in Indian society and mythology. The British believed that the Indian society was backwards and thus viewed themselves as a saviour to the Indians changing ideas around same sex relationships and gender bringing in laws such as section 377 to not only India but majority of the British colonies (Misra,2009). Post colonialism in India, these ideas about homosexuality and gender being constructed as the other by colonial power have now been instilled in India that same sex relationships do not fit into the norm of society.

Latent Orientalism refers to the differences in culture that could not be identified with ease by Europeans or the west (Said,1979). The way of speaking and thoughts are at the core in stereotyping and representing or constructing the orient as underdeveloped, inferior and not interested in development in the region as those from the west. These notions of latent orientalism can again be related to India's acceptance of the transgender community in society prior to the colonial rule. Manifest Orientalism is relevant to the stereotyping around queer characters that are present in my case studies. Manifest Orientalism refers to the prominent aspects of eastern culture, be it clothing and architecture but also things that the west would view as not normal to western culture thus finding it strange (Said,1979). The issue of section 377 of the Indian penal code can be argued to be a product of manifest Orientalism, as British colonial power, modelled the act from the buggery act to make India better and more civilised. Manifest orientalism can also be seen through the manner in which the transgender community has been treated post colonialism, as prior they held high social class in the Indian society.

Said's argument is still relevant to the manner in which those outside of Europe have been represented in media. Even though colonialism may be over, the systems, or manners of thinking and representing are still largely at play. Section 377 and notions of beauty and fair skin are still very present in Indian society and are effects of the European influence and power. Orientalism is an example of how the structures of colonialism are present in systems of representation and knowledge and even post colonialism how these continue to exist in society.

With Said's arguments about the orient and orientalism and the idea of postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha offers a more complex understanding of the other with reference to Said in the text *The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse* (Bhabha,1983). Bhabha begins his essay with the notion of fixity, as an important feature of colonial discourse.

> *"Fixity, as a sign of the cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repetition." (Bhabha,1983:21).*

Fixity is the outcome of the stereotyping process and is important part of the ideological construction of otherness. It is making the other the norm, or rather at a point where difference becomes the norm in representation. Bhabha argues that the constant repetition of the other in a stereotypical manner makes the other something that is known and not something that is unfamiliar thus it has presented the different as a norm. This is what Bhabha calls a state of ambivalence.

Ambivalence refers to the ambiguous ways that the colonizer and colonized view each other. The colonizer typically sees the colonized as the other and inferior to the colonizer. The colonized views the colonizer as admirable and also untrustworthy. The arguments made by Bhabha with regards to the creation, are relevant to the representation of queer characters in Bollywood cinema and how segregation is created through the caste systems and views on skin colour. These representations have become the norm because of colonialism views on these issues. The idea of ambivalence can be drawn towards the attitude towards skin colour in Bollywood films, with fair skinned actors being cast because they look more attractive and are closer to what Europeans look like, thus these attitudes towards skin colour can be seen as what Bhabha calls ambivalence.

Bhabha refers to the idea that it is difficult to address the source of power that creates the colonized in such a comprehensible manner. He also offers that discourse seems to fix the identity of people who are involved be it the colonizer or colonized. Through this argument around the fact that discourse fixes the identity of those involved similarities to this can be drawn in the manner in which the other is presented in Bollywood cinema. The discourse fixes the identity of those who are othered, homosexuals and lower caste individuals due to the repetition of the manner in which these groups of people have been treated and represented. The notions around skin colour that Bhabha argues about relates to colourism in India and how people of a darker skin tone are also treated and represented, as discussed earlier Bhabha offers that skin is an obvious example of a sign that is embedded in power, and there are certain connotations associated with skin colour.

Given my analysis of a case study that features a narrative around skin colour, and with the previous discussion of the relationship of skin colour and the caste system in India in the earlier chapter of this paper the work of Gaytri Chakravorty Spivak, more specifically her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) is an interesting offering on post colonialism in India and Spivak offers a discussion around those of a lower caste in India and how they are represented.

Spivak in her essay looks at how western cultures study and investigate other cultures and if postcolonialism was able to provide the colonised with a voice and how well was this achieved. The term Subaltern as used by Spivak refers to those who of a lower social, political or hierarchical ranking or a group or person who has been oppressed or marginalised. The Subaltern can be those of the untouchable caste in India, those who do not fit into the caste system and are left out. The subaltern is a person who fits into oppression and has been marginalised to the extent as to not even have a voice of their own (Spivak, 1988). When I refer to a voice of their own, I am referring to the manner in which they are presented in society and represented, be it in media forms or a general societal view on this particular group of people who have been marginalised. The voice is also literal, in the fact that those of a lower caste do not have the same opportunities of those of a higher caste and are unable to voice an opinion with regards to the manner in which they are treated. Spivak offers that this manner in which the subaltern is not given a voice is because of epistemic violence of hegemonic discourse (Spivak, 1988).

Spivak argues that western academics thinking is created to support European economic interest, and that the knowledge is embedded with the intention of the producer (Spivak 1988). She offers that they have committed 'epistemic violence', this is the act of projecting Eurocentric knowledge on third world countries. Spivak says that the subaltern cannot speak, and if they are provided with the opportunity to speak they become the other. This argument around providing the subaltern with the chance to speak can be seen through the act of the colonialization of the British in India. Individuals such as the untouchables and those who are of a lower caste, Hijra's, those who are transgender, temple dancers have been othered by the British and the upper caste Indians. Spivak argues that this has been further instilled because of the effects of colonial power in India. Her arguments around the effects of colonialism on the Indian society are particularly relevant given the subject matter that is being dealt with in my case studies. Notions of what skin colour is considerd appealing or even how skin colour

has been associated with caste and that those with a fairer skin tone are considered higher in social classes are still present in Indian. This will still be the thoughts around skin colour if these ideas are repeated time and time again in mainstream media, and this is because colonial power added more pressure on these ideas of skin colour and sexuality. Spivak makes use of the example of the practice of Sati to explain how truth is constructed. When the British arrived in India, they banned the practice of Sati, this helped British secure the rule over India. Spivak says the outlawing shows that females had an absent voice in this and the British believed that they were saviours to brown women saving them from Indian men at the time (Spivak, 1988)

These comments made by the British created the notion that Indians are uncivilised and barbaric while the colonizer, the British are viewed as civilised and educated and thus the rules that the colonial power establish were justified over that of the Indians. Spivak offers that the human conscious is constructed and it is written for us and we are unable to construct our own identities. This offering by Spivak can be drawn to the act of section 377 and the British's involvement with this and is a perfect example of how the British viewed the society as backwards by embracing same sex relationships.

Spivak concludes her argument by saying that the subaltern cannot speak, as it is difficult to reclaim history and change history that has been written within a western framework that has established this as the truth for society. Spivak's arguments are interesting to note in relation to the manner in which characters have been historically offered to audiences, the colonial influences can be drawn on these representations. As these representations are a product of society's views on these particular groups of people and these views have been influenced by the colonial presence in India. If filmmakers offer more diverse character offerings and narratives that explore these marginalised groups they are often met with unrest from Indian audiences. An example of this type of unrest is the protests by poltical parties in India after the release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996). Mehta's film was one of the first mainstream Bollywood films to offer a homosexual relationship on screen, and thus poltical parties believed it went against what the country stands for (Nath,2016).

ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDIES

DOSTANA (2008)

Dostana (2008) directed by Tarun Mansukhani, translated as 'friendship' tells the story of two male characters, Sam Kapoor and Kunal Chopra who are apartment hunting in Miami and seem to settle on the same apartment that is owned by the female character Neha Melwani. Neha's aunty who stays in the apartment complex does not want any males renting the apartment next door to Neha and would prefer if they leased out the apartment to two female roommates. When Sam and Kunal find this out, they decide to lie that they are in an intimate relationship.

I will begin my analysis by looking at the marketing of the film, the film's poster as well as the trailer promoting the release of the film. Then discussing selections of the narrative and the manner in which characters are offered to the audience.

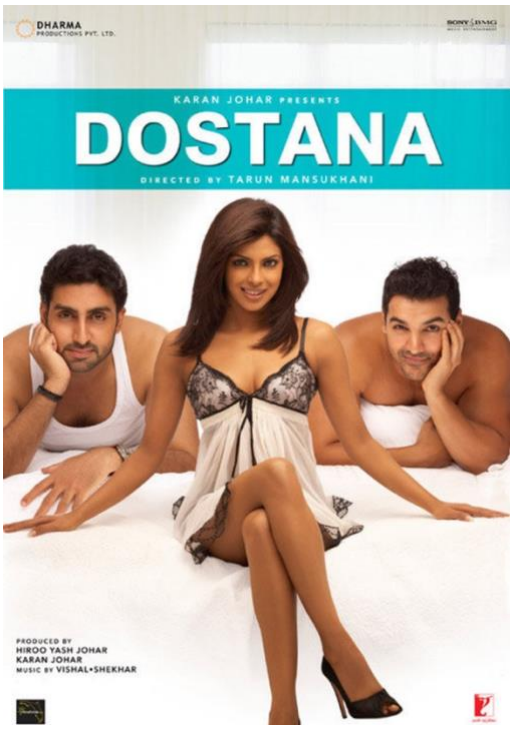

Figure 1 Dostana (2008) film poster, Directed by Tarun Mansukhani.

In Figure 1, there are two male characters, Sam and Kunal who seems to be in little clothing with a female character, Neha, placed in the middle of the two men. Neha is wearing a night dress that looks like lingerie and has her hands placed a bed, that the two male characters are also lying in. If one is to take a look at this poster without any previous knowledge it is presented as though it is a narrative that follows a female caught in a love triangle with two men, the poster does not seem to offer any visual references that may evoke the thought of a faux same sex relationship between the two male characters. To an extent the poster is an example of the intentional approach to representation as well as the constructionist approach offered by Hall. The poster is presented as with an intention to create the idea that the narrative is a heteronormative one, however the audience has to construct this meaning through looking at the signs that evoke the thought of an intimate relationship with the three characters. These signs discussed earlier with relation to Saussure's approach can be seen as follows. In the case of the poster the signifier can be seen as the lingerie worn by Neha, the fact that they are placed on a bed and that the male characters are almost shirtless. Thus, the signified can be the sense of intimacy or a sexual relationship being on show to the audience.

The trailer for the film was released in mid-August 2008 with stills from the film emerging earlier in the year. It is also important to note the presence of section 377 during the promotion leading up to the release. As discussed earlier, in 2009 when the Naz foundation appealed the dismissal from the High Court and later the court had made changes to the law but not fully legalising same sex relationships and intercourse (Chaitanya Kediyal, 2018). So, during this time the offerings of homosexual characters in media have always for the most part been stereotyped and would have welcomed a more diverse narrative around same sex relationships to bring awareness to the very long fight to abolish section 377 of the Indian penal code.

The trailer for the film opens with a song from the film entitled '*Jaane Kyun*' translated into English as '*I don't know why'* as a bird's eye view on an ocean with a view of the Miami skyline in the view of the camera. Out of the ocean emerges a fair skinned male, shirtless with a well-defined body, Kunal. The scene is then cut with a title card that reads 'the perfect city' and cuts to Kunal under a shower at the beach, shirtless as a group of American women admire him, and in response he throws his wet shirt at them. Sam stands by an open top pink car as females on roller-skates surround him and one female places her hand on his chest while he smirks with a cigar in his mouth. The male body has so far been set up as a source of visual pleasure to the audience and has constructed the male characters as desirable. The scene that

follows is a scene of Sam on a lunch break next to a male patient when a white American lady calls to him saying ‘oh nurse, I’m ready for my sponge bath’ (0:16) as she turns around flirtatiously revealing an open back gown. Sam looks at the male patient and smirks, the scene is followed by a transition cut to a photoshoot occurring on the beach as a white American women in a bikini models for Kunal as he continues to snap photographs of her. The scene is followed by another title card that reads ‘the perfect bachelor pad’ and cuts to a panning shot of the apartment in Miami and the reactions of Kunal and Sam. A title card reads ‘just one problem’ and pans over to Neha’s aunt who is wearing a leopard print top, Karan and Sam both get shocked and she says to them ‘no male tenants allowed! I only want girls in the remaining two rooms’ (0:37).

Sam then says that there are only two rooms in that apartment and that they should pretend to be gay in order to get the apartment, and then goes on to tell Kunal ‘what is the big deal?’ (0:52). The text ‘a girl’ appears on screen, and cuts to the male characters sitting on either side of Neha’s aunt as she says, “Actually I don’t live here, my niece Neha does’ (0:54), the camera then cuts to a vertical pan of Neha, introducing her and Kunal and Sam are stunned by her beauty. Another subtitle screen appears reading ‘one tiny lie’ while the soundtrack changes to ‘*Maa da laadla’* translated in English reads as ‘*mommy’s boy’*. The scene that follows shows Kunal and Sam arguing from a medium close up in which Kunal says that he cannot be gay in front of a girl that is as beautiful as Neha, to which Sam says don’t be gay rather just be homeless (1:08). The scene then cuts to Kunal telling Neha’s aunt that Sam is his boyfriend and that they are gay, to which Neha’s aunt gives them a hug and says, “welcome to the family” (1:13). The scene then cuts to Neha opening the door of the apartment for Kunal and Sam, and they bring in their luggage into the two opposite rooms while Neha stands in the middle of the lounge area and Neha seems to be confused why they are going into two separate rooms, given that they are a couple (1:17). A text appears again and reads ‘the heat is on’ and cuts to various dance sequences with Neha, Kunal and Sam until a scene appears with Kunal and Sam dancing with another gay couple and Sam’s mother arrives at the door and is shocked. Sam tells the man he is dancing with that, that is his mother in shock he realises that it is indeed his mother. The scene cuts to another male character telling Sam’s mother “Auntie, look at me! your son is gay!” and that he likes men and she should wake up, to which she replies to him with a slap across the face while telling him to shut up (1:42).

The trailer is presented in the manner that majority of the queer characters have been traditionally offered as, which are elements of comedic relief however what is different with *Dostana* (2008) the trailer makes use of the term 'gay' overtly several times throughout the trailer, letting the audience know that same sex relationships do exist. Previous films that have offered queer narratives or narratives of same sex have always never used the term gay in their marketing or narrative, it is almost set up so that the audience must make the distinction between a heterosexual relationship and a homosexual relationship. The trailer for the film sets up Kunal and Sam as queer characters that form part of one of the archetypes argued by Bhugra, Kalra and Ventriglo (2015) known as '*the laughing stock'*. These are queer characters that are offered towards the comedic narrative in the film, thus the genre of the film can be said to be a romantic comedy genre film. In the trailer the audience is offered that the world of the story takes place in Miami in the United States. I argue that by the film taking in place in Miami and the inclusion of a homosexual relationship of a US marine that evokes the idea that Kunal and Sam should forge a fake same sex relationship, is to an extent a bit of an issue.

The reason I see this as an issue is because historically, as mentioned in the earlier chapter of this paper relating to the representation of queer characters in Bollywood cinema. Queer characters are often represented to the audience as characters that speak mostly English, that creates the thought that homosexual relationships are a product of the west, something that does not fit into the Indian society. Miami is presented as a place that has normalised same sex relationships and acts as a backdrop to showcase differences between the west and India through the use of the characters of Neha's aunt, a modern Indian women from Miami and Sam's mother a strict traditional Punjabi women. The two characters are offered as a contest between two views on homosexual relationships in society, although Sam's mother is shocked with the fact that she sees her son with another man the filmmaker uses her as a source of comedy for the narrative she is not framed as an overtly homophobic character but is rather offered as a character that is willing to understand as the narrative of the film progresses. Spivak (1988) speaks about *epistemic violence*, when Eurocentric knowledge has been projected in third world countries. Notions of sexuality and lines between homosexual and heterosexual were blurred in ancient India. Ancient Indian texts and temples have reference to homosexual relationships. Through the arrival of the British and colonialization views on sexuality started to change as it was viewed as something 'different' as it didn't fit into the Eurocentric notions of sexuality and culture. Thus, enabling notions of otherness to homosexuality in India. This *epistemic violence* that Spivak (1988) talks about, has effects on

these third world countries, *Dostana (2009)* uses stereotypes surrounding homosexuality and same sex relationships, these stereotypes can be linked back to the notions of *epistemic violence* that Spivak (1988) offers. It is the notion that colonialist has saved the colonised from its backwards thinking, acting as a sort of saviour.

One can easily point out the use of stereotypes presented in the film, aspects of what Hall (1997) called the reductionist approach to stereotyping, defining the character based on these essential characteristics. Sam is presented with a limp wrist and wears a handkerchief around his neck, whenever Sam has to act gay he exaggerates his movements battering his eyelashes trying to mimic feminine movements whenever he has to prove to another character that he is gay and not a heterosexual man. *Dostana* (2009) is an example of a product of what Bhabha (1983) called a notion of fixity, when there is a repetition in the manner that the other has been represented thus it has created a norm as to how one chooses to represent.

There are issues in terms of the manner in which the characters present homosexuality and the manner in which they deal with the representation of what a homosexual person is like. However, the director, Tarun Mansukhani uses the idea of mistaken sexual identity to challenge the manner in which society views sexuality, and he does this through the manner in which the homosexual characters interact with the other characters. These characters being Neha's aunt. Sam's mom and Neha's boss and how these characters interact in terms of their views on homosexual relationships. More specifically I wish to use the character of Sam's mother to showcase how stereotypical views on homosexuality are offered and how it is 'othered' through the narrative more specifically the song sequence '*Maa Da Laadla' (52:44).* Before the musical interlude occurs, Sam's mother has walked in to Sam and Kunal dancing with

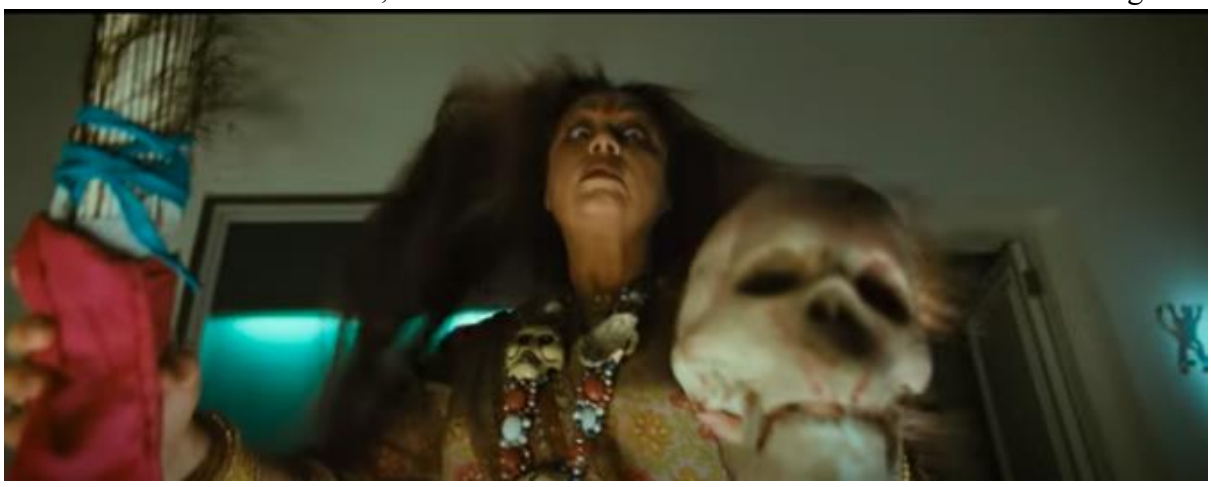

Figure 2 Still from the song sequence Maa Da Laadla in Dostana (2008). Directed by Tarun Mansukhani

Neha's gay boss and she is shocked and begins to cry. Neha tells Sam that he can't hide anymore and that he should tell his mom (52:01). Sam's mother starts to hit him across the face and says that she blames herself for this behaviour that he has and that she should have never sent him to America and kept him with her, then he wouldn't have fallen for a man (52:15) Neha says to Sams mom that "love is not a mistake, love is blind isn't it?" to which Mrs Archarya replies "but love is not that blind that it can't differentiate between a girl and a boy" (52:23).

The song sequence opens with Sam's mother, Mrs Acharya crying on her bed as she looks at a picture frame with Sam and Kunal and it constantly changes showing them in traditional marriage attire and she continues to cry. The scene that follows is Mrs Acharya following Sam and Kunal as they do basic activities such as playing football on the beach and tackling each other as Mrs Acharya is angered by this. She begins crying but in a manner that is offered to the audience as light hearted. The scene that follows is a traditional Indian wedding procession that features Sam in a traditional wedding Lengha and he blows a kiss to Kunal as the proceed to walk around his mother as she cries and dances at the same time (53:20). The scene that follows is Kunal and Sam working out at the gym while they admire Neha as she does yoga. His mother is running on a treadmill and starts to cry again (53:41).

In the next scene Sam's mother is wearing skulls around her neck and has a skull in her hand, while she has peacock feathers in the other hand and she performs and overly exaggerated Hindu like ritual while Sam is asleep (54:10). This scene is particularly problematic, I argue that this scene is an example of how othering is occurring within a culture and related to the orientalism theory offered by Said (1979), more specifically latent orientalism as the ritual that Sam's mother is performing is fictional and overly exaggerated and constructed to be



Figure 3 Still from the song sequence Maa Da Laadla in Dostana (2008). Directed by Tarun Mansukhani

something outside of the norm of typical Hindu religious practices, thus othering occurs within the community. It also makes a commentary on how the colonialist viewed countries within the orient, seeing them as backwards and uneducated and even seeing aspects of religious difference as backwards thinking. Sam's mother throws holy ash all over Sam, this is offered as a way to 'cleanse' him from this homosexuality that he is experiencing, and she turns holy ash around him repeatedly till Kunal arrives to save him and his mother begins to cry again. The scene then draws to an end with Sams's mother walking in Miami and seeing Kunal and Sam's face reflected in all the male gay couples she encounters, and she continues to cry, and the scene ends with her falling onto the ground (55:29). The song's lyrics describe the fact that Sam is gay as a result of the fact that he couldn't find a women and there must be something wrong with his heart and that may be the reason why he cannot fall in love with a women and her dream to see her son get married to a lady will now never come true. The lyrics then go on to discuss the process of apply Henna, and that now his mother would need to apply Henna on his hands on his wedding day and not his female brides' hands, and he is forever cursed and that is the reason why he acts in the manner that he does. The song explicitly details that a man is fond of another man, what is wrong with him? Is he cursed, the chorus repeatedly sings "Mothers boy has lost his mind" and he has a disease of the heart (53:20).

The film relies heavily on the notion that these same sex relationships are a product of the west and makes use of stereotypes to make it known that the male characters are pretending to be gay. Although the film can be critiqued on its heavily reliance on stereotypes it does make some sort of progress to offer the struggles of the lives of those who are homosexual, this being the acceptance of family members. The film makes use of comedy to address societal views and to an extent makes a stride towards more diverse queer offerings as Sam's mother has a journey of her own showing her eventual acceptance around the fake same sex relationship between her son and Kunal.

> *"The notion of being gay is initially framed as something absurd. Subsequently, as the idea becomes accepted, it is the mother who is then depicted in an absurd manner for not accepting the sexuality of her son. Finally, whilst surrounded by traditional Indian signifiers the mother figure demonstrates her acceptance through a combination of Indianess and religion" (Dasgupta,2012:4)*

The film is an interesting example of how a society that had a presence of same sex relationships in ancient texts have had their thought processes changed and influenced due to colonial interference. As a result of this colonial influences a norm has been established as to how to represent marginalised groups in society, but as the Indian society moves towards a process of decolonisation slow and small steps to making changes to stereotypical characters and narratives are being made. *Dostana* (2008) has been referred to as the first mainstream Bollywood film to have dealt with a homosexual relationship and has been applauded for featuring a narrative that explores this, but also has been criticised for the use of stereotypes as mentioned. The film makes the anxiety of sexuality and queer identity that has been evoked by the heteronormative gaze known. *Dostana* (2008) also acknowledges the fact that the difference from the homosexual and heteronormative is present within the societal structure and there is a demand for social order to queer itself or queer its gaze (George, 2015).

Given the highly publicised trial of the abolishment of section 377 of the Indian penal code there was a sudden rise in an exploration of queer narratives in Bollywood cinema and online televisual forms. One of the most notable films with regards to when it was released is the film Ek Ladki *Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar. Word around the film started surfacing in 2018 during the media attention that was brought because of the section 377 case, and the eventual reading down of section 377 in September of 2018.

EK LADKI KO DEKHA TOH AISA LAGA (2019)

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019), translated *"How I Felt When I Saw That Girl"* is a romance genre film released on the 1st of February 2019 and was directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar. The film follows a young female named Sweety Chaudhary as she questions her sexuality and has to come to terms with it and is afraid to reveal her sexuality to her father. Her father wishes to set up her marriage to a Punjabi man but Sweety does not want to get married. Sweety meets a young playwright named Sahil Mizra who eventually grows fond of Sweety as they become friends. The staff at the manor at which Sweety's family stays at believes that Sahil is Sweety's Muslim boyfriend, but this is not true they are just friends, Sweety decides to marry Sahil but he opposes this as he knows that Sweety is in love with another women and he wishes to support her. Sahil proposes to present a play to the community that explores the notion of same sex relationships and thus Sweety hopes with the play she will be able to revel her sexuality to her father and he will be accepting of this.

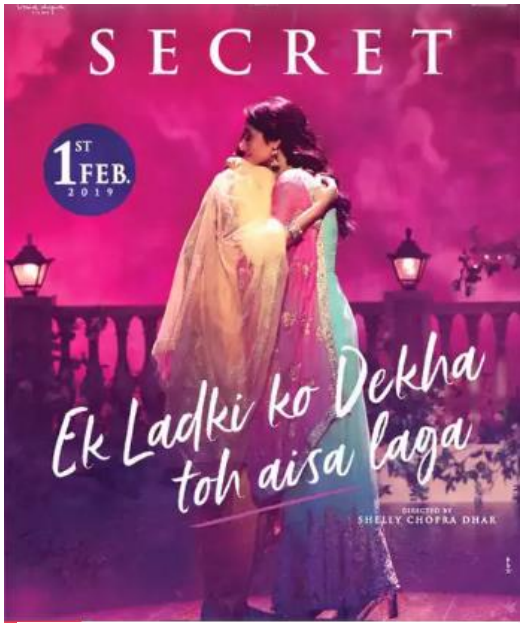

Figure 4- Promotional poster for Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar.

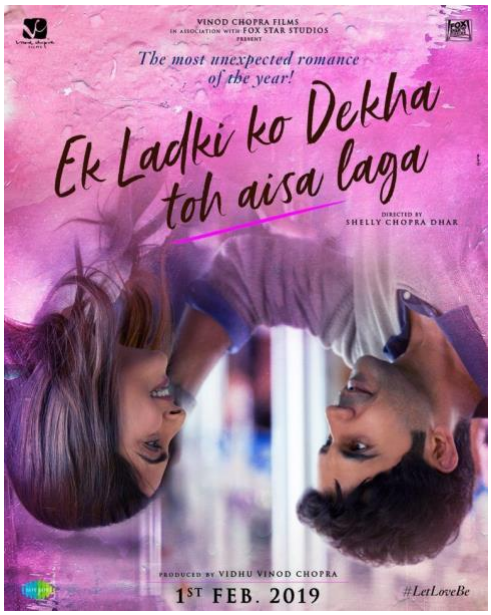

Figure 5 - Alternative promotional poster for Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar.

The promotional material similar to that of *Dostana* (2008), as it does not fully offer an explicit reference to a homosexual relationship in its promotional material. Figure 4 is the first promotional poster for the film that features Sweety hugging another female whose face is away from the audience. The two female characters seem to be on a balcony with a pink sky in the background. The word secret is placed in the top centre of the poster and almost

immediately stands out to the viewer. The term secret seems to take preference in this promotion of the film, immediately notifying the audience that there is some secret or something being hidden that forms part of the main narrative of the film. If one is viewing the poster with the subconscious bias of typical heteronormative Bollywood films, you would not assume that there may be a romantic relationship between the two characters being featured on the poster. In Figure 5, an alternate poster used to promote this film features the lead female alongside a male character who is touching her face, but rather facing right side up the image is turned around, this could be also seen as a commentary on the narrative being different to the typical romance genre films from Bollywood. Just above the title of the film a sentence reads "the most unexpected romance of the year" again alluding to the fact that the narrative is moves away from how romance has been portrayed in Bollywood cinema.

The teaser trailer for the film was released in June 2018, while section 377 was abolished in September of the same year. The official trailer of the film opens with the character Sahil in the community theatre where he asks the audience to not watch the play he is about to present but rather feel it (FoxStarHindi,2018). The scene that follows features a young girl with placed centre frame, outside on a day bed drawing and then the scene transitions into showing the young girl in front of a television screen as she grows older with a voice over saying, "Someday I'll fall in love, I'll be a bride" (0.25). The next scene reveals present day Sweety in traditional attire, she is on right of frame and seems to be at a wedding, the scene is interrupted when her brother visits her father to tell him that they need to get Sweety married as soon as possible. Sweety is then running with Sahil and he meets her on a train, this scene is then intercut with the initial scene of the community theatre. Sahil then says, "When I first saw this girl I knew that I couldn't live without her" (0.38). The next scene that follows shows Sweety at a wedding ceremony dancing with the guests and a female voice over says, "Reza is intelligent, he has a job in London and he makes a lot of money" (0:48) while a fair skinned green eyed man plays a guitar next to Sweety at this wedding ceremony. Sahil runs into Sweety's caretaker from her home, and he tells Sahil that Sweety is in love with him. The next scene shows the family seated at a table talking about Sweety's possible marriage to Sahil, Sweety looks to Sahil and shakes her head in disagreement. Sahil asks Sweety if she has every experienced true love, while the visuals of silhouettes of two groups of people, on either side of the frame, are pulling two females away from each other (1:19). An L cut introduces a voice over of a crying Sweety saying "Marry Pankraj, marry the Muslim boy, that guy from the matrimonial website. Why does everyone force me into one direction?" (1:35). Sweety is crying on her bed while Sahil is

on the floor right of frame listening to her. A text then appears on screen saying, “the most unexpected romance of the year” (1:39). A young Sweety is then shown on screen ripping pages in a diary as she sits on a bed, Sweety’s voice then begins a narration in which she says that the day she knew, she had to hide her truth forever (1:41). The scene that follows is an altercation between Sweety, and her family, her brother asks her father if he thinks that Sweety is having an affair with Sahil, and then the clip cuts to an over the shoulder shot of Sweety, left of screen, with her father in focus as he says that he is ashamed of her. The cut that follows shows Sweety centre frame telling her father that she is not proud of him either (1:55). The montage sequence that follows shows Sweety drifting apart from her family, crying and eventually sitting with Sahil at a place of worship where she says to him that he is the first person that she shared her truth with. The voice over is carries over to the next scene, the camera is at a low angle showing two female characters holding hands while the title song plays while the film title is revealed. The final scene shows a silhouette of a female couple, with Sweety’s voice over saying, “On the path to true love there is always complications, after all where is the magic in a simple love story?” and ends off with #LetLoveBe (2:30).

The trailer is first presented as a film that is of a heteronormative romance genre film, where it differs from that of *Dostana* (2009) is that the film does not rely heavily on stereotypes surrounding homosexuality and the homosexual character. The film also does not use the term Gay or Lesbian in the promotional material for the film, while *Dostana* (2009) repeatedly made use of the term in its dialogue in the trailer and narrative. I argue that the reason why *Dostana* (2009) comfortably made use of the term, was because the narrative still fit the notions of a heteronormative society as it used queerness for comedy, thus enabling the othering to continue. Whereas *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), seemed to try and disembark from the stereotypical queer character and present the queer character in the same manner in which a heterosexual character would be presented on screen. It breaks away from the notion of binary oppositions as offered by Hall (1997), breaking away from the male, female romance.

To an extent the trailer doesn't directly and explicitly say that the film is about a same sex relationship, but rather presents these images that would allow the audience to allude to the fact that she is in love with a female. The trailer features a community theatre that is the backdrop of this narrative. I see the theatre as a reference to the community theatres that where discussed earlier in the paper, these theatres where one of the first places where male actors



Figure 6 Still from Ek Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar

played females and narratives around same sex relationships were told. The narrative in the trailer around Sweety being forced into one specific way of marriage and she refers to being told to get married to a Muslim man, this is a reference to societal pressures and the issues around Hindu and Muslim marriages in India after the partitioning of India and Pakistan. The



Figure 7 Still from Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar

film validates queer love; however, it uses ambiguity to portray lesbian love. The film is set in a small town, rather than a big city this is to showcase a normalisation with regards to identity in these smaller towns and that these notions of sexuality are present in non-urban areas

(Rangeen Khidki, 2020). The film has made use of star casting for the film, the use of these big-name actors and actresses who have a large following is strategic by the filmmaker. The casting of Sonam Kapoor and Anil Kapoor is so that they can garner more audience members in theatres and by showcasing such a narrative it assists in educating a conservative society on same sex relationships.

The narrative of the film explores notions of internalised homophobia and how Sweety has to overcome this and fully accept herself before she can let her family know about her sexuality. One of the most crucial scenes of the film, is when Sweety confronts Sahil about her sexuality (57:02) Sahil is at a party at Sweety's house and the cook at Sweety's house lets Sahil into Sweety's room to meet her. Sahil is drunk and he tells Sweety that they do not have time, and that her cook saw him trying to find her and that he doesn't know much about her and he wants to tell her a story. He goes on to tell her that he has always been unlucky with love, and it feels like that luck is changing, and that he is so pleased that he is the Muslim boy that she has chosen (55:36). Sweety is confused and attempts to tell Sahil that there is a misunderstanding, but Sahil keeps interrupting her confessing his love while he is seated on the floor right of frame looking up towards Sweety. Sweety in a close up shot, starts to cry and tells Sahil that it is enough she keeps getting told who to marry and love (56:15). Sweety then says "Brother Babloo lied to everyone that I have a Muslim boyfriend. I have no Muslim boyfriend, I have no boyfriend whatsoever, why everyone has a one-track mind? why is loving a guy my only option?" (56:35). She then confesses to Sahil "I…. love…a girl." (56:45).



Figure 8 Still from Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar



Figure 9 Still from Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar

To which Sahil replied "what?." and begins laughing hysterically as Sweety cries as the camera tracks away eventually cutting to a black screen to transition to the next day. This moment is when the audience is to make their own assumption as to if Sweety is joking to which the audience responds in the same manner as the character Sahil, in laughter or the audience is in shock. This is the first time that a narrative in mainstream Bollywood cinema refers to the notion of same sex relations and thus may evoke different responses in audience members. This part of the narrative and the narrative surrounding Sweety and her sexuality is what Bhugra, Kalra and Ventriglo (2015) call *the sensitive* character archetype offered in Indian cinema. The sensitive is a character that is faces issues that the queer community faces, offering a reflecting of the struggles of those in the queer community. This in relation to *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), is the exploration of the protagonist coming to terms with her sexuality.

Another prominent scene that is important when offering Chopra's film *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) as a film that explores a complex narrative around same sex relationships is the scenes that explore Sweety at a young age exploring her sexuality. Sahil meets Sweety to apologise about laughing at her (01:04:16), this sequence of the film shows Sweety from a young age understanding her sexuality and how she met the girl that she loves. Sahil says to her "what they don't understand. A guy with a girl is natural, but girl and girl?" (01:04:36) Sweety then says that she often asks herself and questions why god made her the way she is, as she continues her voice over the scene cuts to a montage sequence showing Sweety at growing up and momentous occasions in her life. Sweety speaks about how her childhood was

normal and she had a lot of friends but she one special friend named Gurvinder. A scene showing Sweety at a young age drawing a heart asking god to let Gurvinder love her, but she realised that Gurvinder was unlike her, she had an interest in boys (01:05:05) She then says that her diary took the place of her best friend, and she used her diary as a safe space to hide her thoughts and confide in it, the scene then cuts to a close up of her diary that shows an image of two female brides that Sweety drew and her friends started making fun of her and drew a beard on the other bride to make it 'normal', a male and female wedding (01:05:15). A young Sweety then says that there was someone like her in school, a boy who was also considered to be different, bringing up the notion that the boy is also homosexual (01:06:10). A scene then follows showing Sweety's male friend get teased and bullied by her brother, while people ask him to walk like a female (01:06:49). Sweety's brother then tells her that kids like her friend are disgusting and he uses a derogatory term to refer to the boy as a homosexual and the only



Figure 10 Still from Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019) Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar

reason they are bulling him is, so he can think straight. Sweety then explains to Sahil how she met Kuhu, her love interest at a wedding a year ago (01:08:06). Sweety's brother then found out about her love for Kuhu and confronts her saying "I've been watching you since a kid, you will bring shame to the family, think of our father's reputation, what will people think of you?" (01:09:43). Her brother then goes on to tell her that she has a disease, and can she not cure it? the scene ends with Sahil asking Sweety what he can do for her, to which she responds that he is the first person she has told her truth, and he felt like a friend she never had. (01:11:49).

This narrative or one that openly shows the homophobia faced by the queer community, has never been offered in mainstream Bollywood cinema, let alone not with well-established

Bollywood actors who have much influence over the audience. It is important to also note that this film is directed by a female, Shelly Chopra Dhar. Women and the queer community are often seen as victims of the male gaze (Rangeen Khidki, 2020). This is when a women is offered as desired objects and the world that is presented is one that fits into a heteronormative society. The male gaze seems to be difficult to point out in this narrative, as the characters that are offered are more complex and are not in the film to aid the male lead which often happens in Bollywood films. Sweety being a lesbian character is not fetishized and is offered as a complex queer character, establishing a new norm as to how the queer character should be offered, and not stereotyped. The absence of term lesbian or gay, can be seen as an act taken by Dhar to normalise same sex relationships onscreen, one can also argue that sexuality is a spectrum, one may not identify as a lesbian that's why the term is absent from the film. I offer that Dhar's *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) is an example of how with the abolishment of section 377, film makers are embracing homosexual narratives and are trying to normalise same sex relationships on screen to an audience that has historically been very conservative. Section 377 has stood in the way of mainstream Bollywood exploring sexualities on screen, you would rather find these narratives in smaller budget indie films from the region. Section 377 and the relevancy of the film through its strategically positioned release dates for films and promotional material are a clear indication, that the film maker wanted to evoke discussions in the Indian community around the presence of same sex relationships in Indian society. Hall (1997) speaks about representation, and how another party is involved in the representation of a particular individual or group of people. Although the film is a big step in the right direction for queer character representation in mainstream Bollywood cinema, there is still a long road ahead for the queer community to be an active voice in their own representations on screen, as Rageen Khidki (2020) offers

> *"The actors casted for these movies were all cis-heterosexual artists, one of whom didn't even know that same-sex marriage is still illegal in India. The question of representation then arises before us. Movies are made on queer lives but still there are no real queer actors in it. All this, at the end, makes it mere tokenism in the name of inclusion. These strong voices though talk about queer lives but they still do not give them a platform which is again problematic." (Rageen Khidki, 2020).*

Although the representation of queer characters is slowly arising onscreen in mainstream Bollywood cinema, there is still progress to be made. In order to move away from the star

casting system and move towards inclusive casting of people from within the queer community. This will then offer a full and diverse representation of a queer characters on screen as the fight for queer rights will continue in India.

KALA SHAH KALA (2019)

Kala Shah Kala (2019) translated as *Purley Black* is romantic comedy film directed by Amarjit Singh released on February 14th, Valentine's day. The film follows Lovely a dark-skinned man who is wanted to get married and has sought the assistance of a matchmaker named Nindro Bhua. Nindro Bhua, has been hospitalised and as she wakes up she tells the hospital staff the story of Lovely and a fair skinned girl, beautiful girl named Pammi. Pammi is also unmarried and also needed the assistance of Nindro Bhua, to which Nindro Bhua responds with the fixing of the marriage between Lovely and Pammi. However, Pammi is unhappy with the choice that Nindro Bhua has made, Lovely is dark skinned and unattractive and turns out she is in love with a man named Jaggi from her village. Pammi gets married to Lovely, but she did so just to get rid of him, but then she confesses to Lovely that she does not love him, and she is attracted to Jaggi and was forced into marrying him. In order to keep Pammi, Lovely begins to try and win her over so that she would not leave him for Jaggi.



Figure 11 Promotional Poster for Kala Shah Kala (2019) Directed by Amarjit Singh.



Figure 12 Cover image of the promotional trailer for Kala Shah Kala (2019) Directed by Amarjit Singh

Figure 11 shows the promotional poster for the film. It features the male character, Lovely left of frame in a running motion with a rose in his hand dressed in traditional clothing. The actor playing Lovely seems to have his face darkened cosmetically for the role. On the bottom left there is a black bird with a rose similar to that of the one in Lovely's hand. The bird can be seen as a metaphor referring to the darkness of lovely's skin compared to that of Pammis. Pammi is placed right of frame and she wears traditional clothing with her arms in front of her, her body language and facial expressions read as though she is uncomfortable with being next

to Lovely. Next to Pammi on the bottom right is a white bird again to signify the stark difference in complexion between Pammi and Lovely. The image already presents the notion of dark skin as something unattractive and not appealing by the body language of Pammi. Figure 12 shows the cover image for the promotional trailer of the film, again Pammi and Lovely are in the same attire as seen in figure 11, this time Jaggi appears left of frame while Pammi is in the middle and Lovely is towards the right of frame. Jaggi and Pammi have uncomfortable faces, while Jaggi looks directly signifying that the reason why they are uncomfortable is because of the presence of Lovely and his appearance.

The trailer for the film was released on the 25 January 2019 (Zee Studios, 2019), the trailer opens with Lovely at the barber as he has just finished steaming his face, and the steam fills the screen to reveal his face. Lovely is then at his family home as he has come to seek the blessings of his aunt. Another male character with a turban that is seated, says "Even shackles used on Buffalos will suit him, but he too needs to suit someone" (0:16), offering that he is unattractive, and he would rather find someone who matches his unattractiveness. The scene that follows is a reveal of Pammi through a spray of water as she runs past. Pammi is then seen walking towards a tree to tie a piece of holy thread, she enters right of frame. Her friend tells her that before she ties the thread she should think of the man she wishes to marry, as she says this Lovely appears to tie a thread as well and Pammi says "I don't know how he should be. But I just don't want him to look like this one" (0:36) referring to his appearance. The next scene Lovely is using a sugar cane machine and a man with a turban says, "I like the look of this one, he is just like an engine in terms of colour and strength" (0:51). The scene cuts to a wide shot of two pigeons, one white and one black. The pigeons are used on screen to represent the complexions of Pammi and Lovely. A cut follows showing Lovely seated in what seems to be a class room, and he turns around nervously as Pammi sits behind him. Pammi's face is cringed and she seems like she is about to cry (1:05). A montage sequence follows showing Pammi and Lovely getting along and possibly falling in love with each other. The montage sequence is disturbed by a male voice over, saying that Lovely should finalise his relationship with Pammi. The trailer then cuts back to another metaphorical moment in which another white pigeon arrives next to the black and white pigeon that is already seated on a wall., This new pigeon symbolises the arrival of a new love interest, Jaggi who is fair skinned (1:18). Jaggi is introduced at a party and he catches the attention of Pammi, while Lovely looks at them in disappointment and fear. A J cut follows as Lovely narrates that he believes that Jaggi is more handsome than he is, his friend replies "You are not less handsome. Tell me, what is he lacking

in?" (1:23). His other friend says to him that he shouldn't lie to Lovely he has a nice soul; a text appears on screen with the release date and an image of the black and white pigeon (1:31). Another montage sequence follows showing both Jaggi and Lovely attempting to win the heart of Pammi, the montage sequence ends and a man with a turban that appears to be Lovely's father says "Son, you should stay in the shade. Even Kashmiri apples can turn into water chestnuts under the sun" (1:45). This statement alludes to the fact that Lovely wishes to change his appearance to appeal to Pammi, as lighter skin is more attractive in his eyes. A montage sequence follows again in which it shows Jaggi winning over Pammi's family and her, Pammi says to Jaggi "I thought I am the only one who likes you. But even my family doesn't stop praising you" (2:06). A wipe across the screen occurs and reveals a medium close up of Lovely standing by a train station, a voice over follows, and it is Lovely that says, "I have never seen god, but I am sure he too is fair skinned, that's why he doesn't understand the problems dark skinned people face" (2:08). The films theme song plays, the lyrics repeat "he is dark, I know he is dark" as a montage sequence shows Lovely and Pammi drifting apart followed by the film's title reveal with the metaphorical pigeons placed right and left of frame (2:25). The trailer ends with Pammi and Lovely in a wedding car both dressed in traditional wedding attire and Pammi looks towards Lovely and starts crying (2:29).

Kala Shah Kala (2019) is an example of the Eurocentric beauty standards that are largely present in Indian society, and how notions of class are associated with the colour of your skin. Singh's film also makes use of the brownface trope that has been used in some Bollywood films, this is when a light skinned actor is cast to play a dark-skinned character and his complexion is cosmetically changed for the role. The practice of casting these light skinned actors to play the role of a dark-skinned character, perpetuates inequality and discrimination within the film industry. Bollywood typically uses the dark-skinned character to represent the lower caste and the untouchables, and these stem from ancient texts as discussed earlier in the chapter caste, colourism and its impact in society. People of a lower caste have been described as dark in complexion as a result of the work that they do. Fair skin is often related to a mark of class in Indian society, these notions are a result of colonialism. The British further instilled notions of beauty and societal class, as those who looked closer to the complexion of the European had perks that those of a darker complexion had, thus deepening the prejudice that

had already existed. Hall (1997) discusses Foucault's argument around the relationship of knowledge and power, power that is enabled from stereotyping allows for a hegemony to be



Figure 13 Actor Binnu Dhillon in Band Vaaje (2019) Directed by Smeep Kang



Figure 14 Binnu Dhillon in Kala Shah Kala (2019) Directed by Amarjit Singh

established, thus again excluding those who do not fit into hegemonic norm, in relation to the film Lovely Is excluded from society based on the fact that his skin complexion is darker than that of the other members in his community.

The actor that plays the character Lovely in *Kala Shah Kala* (2019), Binnu Dhillon can be seen in figure 13 which is a still from one of his previous films directed by Smeep Kang entitled *Band Vagie* (2019) where Binnu's natural complexion is showcased and not alterations have been made. In figure 14, a still from *Kala Shah Kala* (2019) one can clearly see that Dhillon's complexion has been changed with make up for the role of Lovely. Monica Sarkar (2020) argues that the reason why such is done to light skinned actors is because "It would be



Figure 15 Sill from Mr India (1987) Directed by Shekhar Kapur

considered perfectly natural that they would don brownface to portray a dark character... (because audiences) also like to be assured that the glamour is still there, behind the mask."

(Sarkar, 2020). This is not the first time that brownface can be pointed out in Bollywood, with early references to possible blackface tropes in the film *Mr India* (1987) directed by Shekhar Kapur. Mr India featured a song sequence entitled *Hawa Hawai* where backup dancers can be seen with darkened skin and wearing afro wigs as they surround the fair skinned female lead seen in figure 15. Earlier in chapter titled the history of Bollywood cinema I discuss how Hollywood films and studio structures seem to have been carried over to Bollywood. *Mr India* (1987) is an example of how problematic tropes have been implemented into representational strategies in Bollywood films.

Kala Shah Kala (2019) offers an interesting example of Spivak's argument in *Can the subaltern speak* (1988). As discussed earlier in this paper, Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak as it is difficult to change the past and reclaim history. The subaltern typically referring to lower caste and marginalised groups, can be identified as Lovely in the film. Although he is given a voice in the film, the representation is still problematic as it heavily relies on the stereotypes associated with those of a darker complexion. These stereotypes are a result of a complex history with colonial influence and western knowledge, thus it will be difficult to change the history of representation as this is what has repeatedly been presented as the norm to the audience. As Spivak says, if the subaltern is given a voice and they speak they are othered, which can be seen with Lovely's character in the film. On the reference of repetition of the manner in which race, and earlier on sexuality is represented, Bhabha's (1983) offering of the notion of fixity can be also be seen in *Kala Shah Kala* (2019) as well as his discussion on Ambivalence and the manner in which the colonised viewed the colonizer and vice versa. In reference to the notion of skin colour, one can view the discussion of hybridity in relation to ambivalence, where the colonizer is seen as a positive and negative force as discussed earlier in the paper. Lighter skin saw certain perks, being closer to the skin colour of the colonizer made you higher in social class, thus you viewed the lower class in the same manner that the colonizer would view all in the colony. The colonizer would also hold those of a similar skin complexion in higher regard as they are closer to the norm of what the Europeans are familiar with when it comes to complexion.

At 0:28:55 the matchmaker meets Pammi's family to tell them that he has found her a match with Lovely they discuss his skin tone. A tracking shot opens the scene as the family sit around her and an aunt, she begins by telling them that Lovely owns a lot of land thus he comes from a rich family, but there is an issue his skin colour. She says that he has a dark complexion, and

Pammi's grandmother says that a little dark is fine with them, to which the matchmaker responds that he is darker than the average dark complexion person, but he is a gem of a person. (0:29:09). Pammi's father then says, "if he is dark then he is a coal not a gem" (0:29:18), to which Pammi's grandmother says that if they continue to talk about colour, the girl will reveal her true side. Pammi's father then agrees to the marriage and says that if he owns 18 acres of land they can forget the fact that he has dark skin (0:29:27). At 0:30:54 Pammi, bumps into her granny and the matchmaker, and greets them her friend then tells them that Pammi is fasting as she wants a handsome husband to which they respond in shock and the scene ends.

This conversation around Lovely's complexion, reiterates the notion that dark skin is unappealing, and the line of dialogue by the matchmaker saying that Lovely is darker than normal others him. The reference of him being darker than normal, suggests that Lovely doesn't fit into society and is different to what the community would consider as dark. This can be seen as what Hall (1997) refers to as a strategy of splitting as a result of stereotyping,



Figure 16 Still from Kala Shah Kala (2019) Directed by Amarjit Singh

excluding those who do not fit into society which happens to Lovely in the narrative of the film. *Kala Shah Kala* (2019) can also be seen as a product of one of the theoretical accounts of stereotyping as offered by Hall (1997). This is that meaning is derived from difference, that if one does not fit into what is known in a culture they are stereotyped and othered, which Hall calls the anthropological account of stereotyping that was discussed in the theory chapter.

The films narrative heavily relies on metaphors and signs when characters refer to the complexion of Lovely. In this particular scene Pammi's father refers to him as coal and even

later on in the scene they discuss that Lovely eats batteries, suggesting that he is abnormal. The recurring image of a black and white pigeon is used in the film, suggesting the relationship of Pammi and Lovely. One could read the use of pigeons in film with regards to Hall's (1997) discussion of the work of Bathes use of Saussure's semiotic approach. The pigeons operate on the two levels that Bathes offers, at a denotative and connotative level. When one looks at the pigeons, all that is seen is the fact that these two birds that differ in colour, but when you look at the pigeons at a connotative level the pigeons refer to the complexion of the characters and with the presence of a third white bird referring to Pammi's fair skinned love interest.

Beauty standards and the manner in which dark skinned characters are offered to audiences are flawed, they are not limited to Bollywood movie theatres they can also be found in big budget marketing campaigns for fairness creams and products discussed earlier. Bollywood continues to be reliant on stereotypes associated with dark skinned characters, one would often find that backup dancers in song sequences of some films are European men and women and not Indian dancers themselves. *Kala Shah Kala* (2019) is an example of how filmmakers are continuing to build narratives and character constructions that are filled with problematic tropes of marginalised groups in society. The film is also offered as a product of the effects of colonialism, how colonialism shaped ideas around race and class. Bollywood needs to move towards more inclusive casting stepping away from racist practices in order to portray stereotypes on screen.

CREATIVE CONCEPT

As a response to the subject matter around sexuality within the Indian community and myself being a person of the diaspora, I wanted to explore these ideas in relation to my own identity through the experimental film format. In the Hindu culture, there are various elements within the practise that blur the lines between masculinity and femininity. That has been discussed in this paper. Through the experimental film form, I wanted to visually depict various cultural practices as a commentary on the way men are given the opportunity to explore a sense of femininity, and making use of the Ghazal, or poetry as the main voice as a reference to ancient Indian texts and poetry that explore notions of sexuality in relation to myself. Some of these rituals and practises that I wanted to explore often take place as a pre-marital ritual involving both partners. I wanted to not only focus on exploring ideas around sexuality, I wanted to also address the cultural practises in relation to my identity in South Africa and showcase this to an extent visually. I wanted to have myself in the film rather than casting as an actor as the film reflects a personal experience.

Through the creative process, I took inspiration from the work of Mona Hatoum, more specifically her work entitled *Measures of Distance* (1988). In *Measures of Distance* (1988) Hatoum used written letters in Arabic between her and her mother in Beirut layered over visuals of Hatoum's mother in the shower. Hatoum translates the letters in English as her mother discusses sexuality and her feelings. The film aims to move away from the fixed identity that is often stereotyped about Arabic women, that they are passive and often non-sexual (Tate,2021). I take interest in the manner in which Hatoum works with text visually, layering the Arabic text with visuals and voice over to create a piece that reads in a particular way. By layering the text over visual moving imagery, one has to actively work to unravel the imagery that is beneath the text on screen. I wanted to make use of this particular layering technique utilised by Hatoum, to enable the viewer of the film to be constantly working to understand the imagery being presented on screen.

The film takes the title *Sampriti* as a reference to the ancient Indian texts that showcased some of the earliest narratives around same sex relationship. *Sampriti* translates to 'extreme love' and the term was used often in Indian texts when discussing the manner in which the characters showcases affection (Vanita and Kidwai,2000). The film opens with myself in a field that is meant to evoke the thought the natal sugarcane plantations as a reference to my indentured

ancestors and myself being a product of them. The text that reads in the beginning of the film refers to the ghazal poetry medium, from ancient India. The Ghazal is adapted from the work of Iftikhar Nasim a gay Urdu poet from Pakistan who's work appears in the book *The World That Belongs to Us- An Anthology of Queer Poetry from South Asia* (2020). The ghazal refers to the internal struggles around sexuality and how a son is heir to a family lineage. I did not make use of a voice over, but rather I have the text as the imagery is presented to the viewer, I did not want to have the voice over as a distraction to the rhythm of the Carnatic music. Carnatic music is made use of throughout the film, that reference a Hindu mythological tale, that tells the story of lord Krishna, convincing his mother that he should leave her care and has to battle

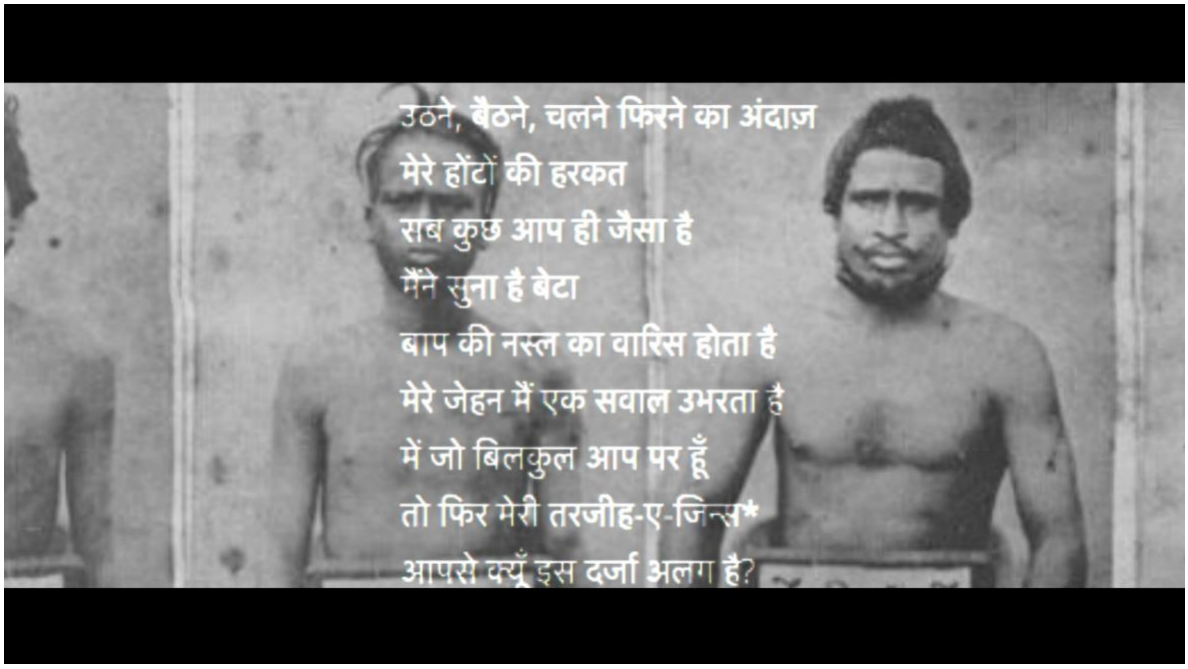

Figure 17 Still From Sampriti (2021)

a 6 headed snake demon. Carnatic music is often used in traditional Bharatanatyam dancing, and male dancers often dress up very femininely to perform, and various facial expressions and hand movements describe the masculine and feminine energies. I make use of the process of getting ready to perform a traditional Bharatanatyam dance to comment on the personal exploration of femininity and sexuality in the film. In the beginning of the film, there is various imagery of my extended family that came from India, including a family member who was a traditional theatre performer and actor drawing on my ancestral relationship and the relationship I have with art. There is imagery in the film that refer to pre-marital rituals, such as a Nelengu and applying Henna, typically the application of Henna is for the female and most times the male does not apply henna before the marriage. The Nelengu is a ceremony that takes place a day before marriage in which turmeric is smeared over the couple and those attending who wish to get married as it is believed turmeric purifies one. I apply turmeric as a reference

to the notion of same sex relationships being seen as impure and one would need to purify themselves to become ‘normal’.



Figure 18 Still from Sampriti (2021)

The editing style throughout the piece is to evoke the rhythmic patterns present in Carnatic music, and with some shots lingering longer than others it is to show how laborious the process of preparation for the Bharatanatyam dance is. There is various imagery that is shown in cuts, such as the Khajuraho temples and art from the Mughal era that reference same sex relationships presence in Indian culture and mythology. One of the images shows the figure of the Hindu god, Ardhanarishvara which is a combination of male (Shiva) and female (Parvati) and it represents the masculine and feminine energies of the universe. This image is overplayed over a split image of myself, showcasing the notions of masculine and feminine energy in relation to myself as an individual. The film closes with a shot that is same to that of the beginning of the film, that references that all that has occurred in the film is internal struggles around sexuality as well as masculinity and femininity and I am still a product of my ancestors and I continue to face these questions.

CONCLUSION

I have analysed the three films and it is clear that pre-colonial India, was more embracing towards same sex relationships and with the presence of the British these notions changed thus a change in the attitude towards homosexuality in India. I argued through the analysis of the case studies and historical context that Bollywood has extensively made use of stereotypical constructions of sexuality and complexion in multiple films. However, it is now slowly moving away from these stereotypes into more diverse offerings in films. The abolishment of Section 377 was a watershed moment in terms of representation of the homosexual character in mainstream Bollywood cinema.

Although the abolishment caused a ripple effect in the number of films and streaming service shows that have same sex narratives, there still seems to be a hesitation to explicitly offer the queer character to a heteronormative audience. The hesitation can be seen as a result of the effect of the British colonial rule over India. The attitude towards skin colour still continues in India, and throughout the diaspora and little is being done to change these notions in mainstream media forms. Therefore, leading me to the conceptualization and creation of my film *Sampriti.* The film is an exercise in which I am able to explore notions of sexuality and the relationship between my South African Indian cultural practises and ideas around masculinity and femininity through the film medium as well as acting in a sense of self representation. The case studies analysed are all commercial Bollywood films and, in a response, challenge the conventional norms of mainstream Bollywood cinema I use the experimental film format. The method that was used for the filmmaking process is one that reflects my personal identity and exploration of how visual imagery is able to communicate a commentary on particular societal views.

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