

Hero loves Hero: Understanding the Changing Rendition of Sexuality through the Movie *Shubb Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*

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Abstract


In the contemporary scenario, there is a growing number of shows in films and television that include gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer characters as central figures and have a queer thematic structure. This paper intends to explore the homosexual themes in the Bollywood film Shubb Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020). The film is a big leap in Bollywood culture of queer films being Bollywood's first mainstream film presenting the love story of a gay couple Aman Tripathi and Karthik Singh. The paper focuses on locating the specific instances where queer themes of identity, acceptance, homophobia, and same-sex love emerge. The paper also aims to capture the response of traditional Indian family and society to same-sex relationships as depicted in the film.


Keywords: Acceptance, Cinema, Gay, Homophobia, L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+, Queer, Sexuality, Stereotypes


Article Publication


 Published Online: 12-Jan-2022

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 [10.53573/rhimj.2022.v09i01.002](https://doi.org/10.53573/rhimj.2022.v09i01.002)

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Introduction

Movies are an integral part of modern human culture. They mirror the human society and touch almost every aspect of human life. With the current appearance and acceptance of L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ experiences and rights, cinema has also taken steps to portray the untouched aspects of sexual diversities. In this way, the current years have seen an upsurge of the rendition of queer sexualities in the Indian cinema as well. Ranging from mockery to considering sexual orientation as a reasonable preference, the Indian cinema has portrayed queer sexualities in multiple shades. Earlier, there were no films in mainstream cinema that prominently focused on the L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ experiences but with the changing times both cinema and audience are embracing such renditions. The best thing however is that these films not only focus on presenting the queer experiences in a positive light but also make them less a subject of laugh and homophobia- a much visible scene in orthodox Indian society and cinema.

The change is not always easy to accept and as such the cinematic portrayal of queer experiences has not appeared drastically but gradually in the Indian cinema. The delay is not surprising keeping into consideration the orthodox approach of the Indian society towards sexuality. In this connection, cinema has done a great work by exposing the Indian audience to a diversity of films with queer themes. Films such as *Bomgay* (1996), *Mango Souffle* (2002), *Gulabi Aaina* (2003), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *Fire* (1996), *Dostana* (2007) and *Aligarh* (2015) have initially appeared to bring the idea of diverse sexualities to the Indian cinema. In the last few years one can witness the appearance of a number of L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ themes based films such as *Margarita With a Straw* (2015), *Kapoor and Sons* (2016), *LOEV* (2017),

Evening Shadows (2018), and *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* (2019). The most current additions to this canon are the TV shows like *Sacred Games* (2018), *Made in Heaven* (2019) and the movie *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020).

There is a growing number of films and television shows that include gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer characters as central figures and have a queer thematic structure. This paper intends to explore the gay themes in the bollywood film *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*. The film is a big leap in bollywood culture of queer films being bollywood's first mainstream film presenting the love story of a gay couple Aman Tripathi and Karthik Singh. The paper focuses on locating the specific instances where queer themes of identity, acceptance, homophobia, and same-sex love emerge. The paper also aims to capture the response of traditional Indian family and society to same-sex relationships as depicted in the film.

Directed by Hitesh Kewalya, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* shares the experiences of an Indian gay couple who strives to fight against the ingrained beliefs of Indian society about homosexuality. The story takes place in Allahabad in the home of the middle-class Tripathi family. Their world is full of the typical prejudices and misconceptions about love, marriage and sex. The beliefs of the family are however shaken as they discover the love between Aman and Kartik. The movie also undertakes the rendition of the legal rights of homosexuals that are less known in an ultra-orthodox Indian society. The theme of the movie is unique in itself and raises questions against the accepted standards of heroism and love in the traditional scenario of Indian cinema. Infact, the movie also incorporates a kissing scene between Aman and Kartik that has created much fuss among the audience. The radicalism with which the movie has been presented is appreciable and brings out the clash between tradition and modernity, orthodoxy and freedom as well as hetero and homo sexualities.

The gay homosexual couple is shown sometimes in close proximity in the film, reinforcing the presence of the close yet turbulent homosexual relationship developed in the film. It deals with the sensitive attitude towards homosexuality in the Indian context but casts it under a positive light rather than a homophobic one that is prevalent in the society.

In his work *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981) Vito Russo suggests that it is a virtue for the audience to identify themselves with the positive portrayal of homosexuals portrayed on the screen (245-246). In the context of Indian cinema such rendition has taken a long time where the lesbian and gay community could relate the experiences with someone on the screen. Bollywood has for long depicted the emotional drama and love stories of hetero couples and this has made the audience to believe that there is no other love and sexuality than hetero. In the movie *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* there is a groundbreaking portrayal of same-sex love beyond the expectations of the orthodox hetero audience. Whereas, it has given an opportunity to the gay homo community to relate their experiences, it simultaneously makes the hetero audience to reconsider their understanding of sexuality and poses a challenge to their existing homophobia.

It has taken a long time for humans to understand the complex nature of human sexuality. So, it is not surprising why it is taking more time to comfortably present diverse sexualities on the stage and in films. Whatever has to be presented in the films has doubtlessly to be akin to the reception and acceptance level of the audience. But such films whenever appear in the cinema must be closely studied and analysed and the queer concerns highlighted. In the words of Henry Binshoff and Sean Griffin, "Queer film study, then, understands cinematic sexualities as complex, multiple, overlapping, and historically nuanced, rather than immutably fixed (2). The story of gay couple Aman and Karthik in the movie *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* is a unique and new addition to the love couples that are historically represented in the Indian cinema. The homophobia prevalent in the psyche of the Indian society is also well represented through the social circle of Tripathi family who is not willing to accept any standard of sexuality other than hetero.

Queer concerns are majorly a key part of the social, cultural and family environment because of the stigmas that are put on sexuality by such institutions. These institutions are an important factor for the development of an

individual and the environment that they create must be conducive for the growth and development of a child as an individual. According to Steven Harsin in his article “Pathfinder: Developing a Male Gay Identity”, “Most young men who are homosexual are not raised in an environment in which homosexual development is even recognized, much less encouraged. It is not unusual for men who have currently identified themselves as gay to not have any idea what being gay is all about” (31) The movie *Shubb Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* depicts the struggle of a gay couple whose family and social environment lacks much sense of homosexuality. Aman’s family has an almost entirely hetero focused perspective of sexuality and as such he is forced to not create a mess for himself and remain adhered to the socially accepted norms of sexuality. The homophobia of Tripathi family is made visible through the tantrums that the characters play in order to manipulate Aman for not going into a homosexual relationship.

As an audience, people are mostly sensible to what they see on the screen, but in the context of sexual sensibility, it is different. In *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo has put forth:

People say that there can be no such thing as a ‘gay sensibility’ because the existence of one would mean that there is a straight sensibility, and clearly there is not. But a gay sensibility can be many things, it can be present even when there is no sign of homosexuality, open or covert, before or behind the camera. . . . It is a ghetto sensibility, born of the need to develop and use a second sight that will translate silently what the world sees and what the actuality may be. (92)

In this sense, cinema cannot demarcate itself from the responsibility of giving a voice to the minority experiences of L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ individuals. If the gay sensibility is visible in a film, the identification becomes easier for the people whose sexuality is portrayed on screen.

The rendition of minority is not a new thing in Indian cinema but with the new turn of introducing queer sexualities, bollywood has gone L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ sensitive. A long tradition of stereotyping L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ characters as brothel-owners, effeminate men, perverts, and oversexual predators has existed on the screen for a long time. The norms of such rendition have been challenged with the arrival of movies such as *Shubb Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*. The need of the hour is not just to portray the L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ characters but to do so in a more realistic and dignified manner so that the homophobia of the society can be challenged and the social obstacles reduced for L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ community.

In the hetero driven societies, homosexuality is often labeled as unnatural and belonging to L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ community is largely stigmatized. When such experiences are enacted on the screen, the challenges are posed to the stereotypical ideology of a society. This makes it difficult for such films to gain the same reception and acceptance as other films. According to Richard Dyer:

[Gay Films] are, like all ideology, necessary fiction. . . part of the ceaseless process of construction, reconstruction and deconstruction of identities and cultures. . . . Lesbian/gay culture is different only to the degree to which the erasure of the gap between construction and experience is less naturalised than with many other human categories (notably race, gender, and, supremely, heterosexuality) and thus in its high degree of awareness of that gap. (285-6)

Indian cinema seems to understand the necessity of a realistic identification of L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ related issues and is subsequently coming forward with movies like *Shubb Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*.

Not taking the traditional comic approach towards homosexuals who were portrayed as the subjects of jokes, the movie *Shubb Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* uses humour as a companion rather than a crutch. It is used as a powerful element to crack, if not break, the taboo against the same-sex love of Aman and Karthik and seeks to portray some aspects of lived realities of an urban gay couple in an Indian setting. No doubt the movie doesn't represent the harsh

realities faced by homosexuals in accepting their sexuality and maintains a humorous tone but the film is a leap forward towards the future of Queer cinema in India.

The film also gives a fresh sense of gay masculinity that is often overlooked in the traditional sense of sexuality. The masculine portrayal of Ayushman Khurana as Karthik Singh is also a new thing of the Indian audience who stereotypes a hero as someone on a white horse winning a princess. Karthik is shown as a man with a metal ring in his nose, a triangle tattoo under his ear, wears L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ flag as a cape but being gay he has his own sense of masculinity as well.

Shubb Mangal Zyada Saavdhan holds a virtue for the Indian audience who is not much adapted to see the realistic portrayal of queer sexualities in the mainstream films. Although the concept of gay homosexuality is treated differently in the movie with no history of the characters when they first identified as gay, personal barriers of acceptance faced by them and the story seems to run too smoothly for Aman and Karthik as compared to real life, yet it seems as if the plot is made receptive for the hetero Indian audience who holds a limited perception of sexual orientation and L.G.B.T.Q.I.A+ people.

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