

Foucault, Sexuality And Bollywood Cinema

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Abstract

In India Bollywood cinema has always remained the most powerful influencer for the common public. The present paper uses the theoretical framework of Michael Foucault in which he explores the discourse on sex in 17th century through 18th and 19th up to the contemporary times. He looks at sex as an historical construct-social construct and not only biological construct. He claims that in Victorian ideology, sexuality was regulated, confined, and censored and was limited to home and legally contracted procreative couple. The power is exercised in a general way through prohibition, censorship, and denial. This paper uses this framework to understand how the discourse on sex, lust and desire in India disappeared from the public discussions. To understand the process, this paper uses Bollywood cinema and songs in pre 1990s and post 1990s period. It claims that the regulation of female sexuality and defining normative behaviour on the site of Bollywood cinema becomes a major tool of power exertion.

Keywords: *Discourse, Sex and sexuality, Bollywood cinema, new woman, Desire*

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I. Introduction

Despite the ever-bourgeoning social media, Bollywood, even today, is one of the biggest influencers of youth culture and is one of the frameworks by which society sets its norms and regulations. The dialogue from the iconic DDLJ (Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge released in 1995) regarding Shahrukh khan assuring Kajol that how an Indian boy will never have sex with an Indian girl before marriage, is representative of what society expects from the youth when it comes to premarital sex.

Sex and sexuality is a taboo subject but that does not go to say that they don't get discussed. That just means that sex and sexuality are topics that are considered unpleasant in public discussions and consequently are not considered essential while they are understood to be ubiquitous.

In India, sex is discussed in public sphere through various forms - porn ban and the discussion surrounding it on social media, necessity of sex education in public schools, sex crimes on television serials eg. Gumrah, love jihad, Indian YouTubers like Sahil Khattar who take public opinions of people on topics such as the female orgasm, homosexuality and section 377. But if we look closely and observe the lens through which sex gets talked about, we notice that the most popular lenses are those of science, medicine, and constitutional rights. Most of the socially accepted discussions do not even remotely go near sex and sexuality with a lens that allows them to discuss these topics purely in the light of essential bodily pleasure. While there have been successful attempts at breaking this pattern, those attempts have been made in pockets and therefore have been able to put only a slight dent in the normative. The normative still gets reflected heavily in popular Bollywood films. This paper will study the treatment of sex and sexuality in these popular Bollywood films to analyze the effect that it has on society's understanding of youth culture.

II. Methodology:

Critical discourse analysis: Foucault on sex and sexuality

Critical discourse analysis views a prevailing social order as historically located and therefore socially constructed and variable. It also views prevalent social order and social processes sustained and constituted by a discourse. This discourse cannot be devoid of ideology. Critical discourse analysis method views reality as textually and intertextually mediated via verbal and nonverbal language and texts as site for both the inculcation and the contestation of discourse (Locke, 2004). In this paper, the Bollywood songs are used as sites on which the discourse about sexuality can get constituted. The textual and the contextual analysis of these songs can help us understand the discourse on sexuality as constituted on this site.

Critical discourse analysis emphasizes that meaning is socially constructed via the mediation of the language and other sign systems. While distinguishing language, text and discourse, Locke claims that discourse is the social process in which texts are embedded and thus texts have their place in a social system of signs that is

dynamic. In this context film songs from 1960/70s are seen as texts in this paper and attempt has been made to read/analyze the social context in which these texts are embedded.

In this context Foucault's work on sexuality discourse is important. Foucault in his seminal writings on sexuality, explores the discourse on sex in 17th century through 18th and 19th up to the contemporary times. He looks at sex as an historical construct-social construct and not only biological construct as Freud had put forth. He argues that in 17th century, sexual practices had little secrecy, had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit period of shameless discourses and open transgression. However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a diversity of discourses on sexuality in the fields of medicine, psychiatry, pedagogy, criminal justice, and social work emerged. This occurred as sex became increasingly an object of administration and management through government inquiry. In Victorian ideology-sexuality was regulated, confined, and censored and was limited to home and legally contracted procreative couple. The power is exercised in a general way through prohibition, censorship, and denial.

Thus, sex became confined to the privacy of the home and the procreative couple and at the same time it became an enmeshment of a web of discourses and forms of analysis between the state and individuals.

He further claims that in the modern time, repression continues, but so does the transformation of sex into discourse, with even greater quantity under the repression.

Material

This brings us to think about the similarities with our current times and applicability of Foucault's argument in current times in Indian context. This paper looks at pre 1990s and post 1990s and LPG as the point of rupture. The paper uses films and film songs as a site to see the appearance and disappearance of sex in popular public discourse while borrowing from Foucault that modern literature and films are the other forms of transformation of sex into discourse.

III. Discussion

The Vedas and other Hindu scriptures have historically been sources of academic and non academic references to sex and sexual activities that ranged from homosexuality, threesomes/orgies, the science and aesthetics of sex, etc (Mumbairook, 2013; Chakraborty &Thakurta, 2013). Hindi cinema pre-1990s, has been open about the physical attraction between the protagonists. It was deemed acceptable for the woman to express lust for the man's body and was rendered helpless in with came to controlling her sexual desires.

This desire was expressed and accepted in many songs and was well accepted within the norms of society but always in a discreet 'non-vulgar' manner. Two flowers coming together, the door shutting with the man and the woman in the room, fire (man) and butter (woman), thunder and lightning, etc was used excessively to symbolize the inevitable and passionate sex between the couple. Youth succumbing to their sexual desires was not necessarily looked down upon but was accepted as a product and need of their age. In the late 1960s and 1970s, we see explicit mention of sexual desires and physical intimacy and the fear but paradoxical willingness with which the protagonists were willing to lose control of themselves and give into those desires. The poetry and melody did play a big role in those songs becoming hits, but that was not the only reason. Those songs legitimized the sexual desire of the youths watching those films which contributed heavily to the film's success¹.

All the songs mentioned in the endnote very explicitly talk about the lust or the sexual urge the lead actress feels for the lead hero mainly in 1960s and 1970s and somewhat in early 1980s. What made me interested in these songs was that they are not sung by the vamps then played by Helen, Bindu or Aruna Iraniⁱⁱ-which are commonly seen as morally degraded, sexually charged and out of the middle class, patriarchal, upper caste morality, but by the 'chaste' heroine. The same era witnessed cabaret, bar dances by these vamps -though not very vulgar but illicit and immoral. So, what really differentiates the songs sung by the lead actresses and vamps-though both talk about sex? The playback singing—except few, most of the songs are sung by Lata Mangeshkar, in Srivastav's words (2004), by the voice of the nation. I feel the hegemonic voice of the nation also in a way legitimizes the sexual desire expressed by the lead female actor.

As Srivastav puts it, a particular female singing voice became an expression of gender identity in India. He further says that Lata's voice has dominated the Indian popular music scene and established a specific vocal style, which became recognized as an aesthetic marker of 'modern' Indian female identity. He claims that the 'woman' conjured by Lata Mangeshkar's singing voice is the product of certain development that are peculiar to the processes of Indian modernity.

In his argument Srivastav while referring to Manuel (1993) mainly highlights on vocal style as the important marker of aesthetic identity aside from language. However, I would like to look at language as one of the major markers of aesthetic identity and how language is also a part of the upper caste aesthetic standards. Therefore, upper caste lead actress singing a particular language and in Lata Mangeshkar's voice inevitably legitimizes the desire while instituting a very specific identity of Indian womanhood which can also be seen as part of the cultural politics of the making of the 'modern' Indian woman within the matrices of upper-caste, Hindu

milieus, and part of the nationalist project as well. Most of the songs sung in pre-1990s-expressing desires uses upper caste Hindi version whereas the item songs mentioned in the later section use the versions of Hindi used by the marginalized section or which can be categorized as not so pure Hindi.

Cinema in 1990s

As established by many film studies scholars, pre 1990s cinema dealt with the real issues-be it economic or social-industrial manufacturing, labour issues, unemployment, urbanization, connections with mass based movements-caste/class inequality as reality-sex/sexuality was shown in a very realistic manner. Premarital sex or extra marital sex was not so much of a taboo (*Aaradhana*, *Ek hi bhool*, *Aa gale lag ja*). Along with songs many films during this period used to have elaborate and sensuous scenes of first night after marriage (*suhagraat* scenes). In all, sex was not a taboo but accepted as part of life/everyday life though not glorified. Thus, it is important to raise the question that what really changes after 1990s? What moral code LPG gets with it? How globalization/ emerging New Right changes or de-revolutionizes the content of the Hindi cinema?

Its been said again and again that Bollywood cinema took the Postmodern turn in 1990s (Niranjana, 1994; Bharucha, 1995; Vasudevan, 1991, 1993, 1995). As Ravi Vasudevan says, Hindi cinema was always Hindu in its character (Vasudevan, 1993). I will add that it became more Hindu, Brahmanical and patriarchal in post 1990s. Post 1990s Bollywood was more and more busy in depicting the casteless/classless reality- search for truth was abandoned- there was more emphasis on 'clean, family' movies. There is absolutely no mention of sex and sexuality-rather songs are 'pure' romantic or depicting family celebrations. —passing references of first nights (just a shot of decorated bed in a very clichéd manner) and rest all remains unsaid. On the other hand, we witness more no. of 'item' songs—explicitly depicting the sexual content in form of dances, pelvic moves, provocative lyrics etc. Item songsⁱⁱⁱ reined the Bollywood in last two decades. However, what is interesting is all these songs are picturized on famous Bollywood actresses- who don't play the lead heroine in that movie, and hence they are not part of the narrative or sub-narrative of the movie of which this item song is part of. The actress performing the item song is disconnected from the main storyline. The lead actresses in all these movies are conformists and completely fitted into the normative and the dominant ideology. On the contrary, the item song woman is meant for consumption/for voyeuristic pleasure and not the significant character of the film. The lead actress of the film must be outside of this sexual gaze/ discourse. If we recall, the lead actresses of pre 1990s movies were treated as sexual beings and their sexual desire was acknowledged as a legitimate desire.

One notices that the one who is in item song can be a very chaste heroine of some other film. Similarly, it is acknowledged that incorporating sexual content is necessary to pull the crowd-however keeping it separate from the narrative is an interesting thing. It creates an image for the new woman of 1990s.

'New woman' of 'Family', 'clean' movies:

The project of Hindu nation is ubiquitously tied up to the construction of new woman. This new woman is a complete package-modern, educated and yet traditional. Her identity is always derivative-she is somebody's wife or daughter or mother. However, she is primarily seen as mother-which is defined in terms of her purity, chastity, and sacrifice. Jaya Bachchan in K3G, Kajol in K3G, Madhuri Dixit in HAHK—all of them get their honour in that family when they become mothers or agree to become mothers (Madhuri Dixit sacrificing her love to mother her dead sister's child). Interestingly in the Indian traditional discourse mothers are not seen as sexual beings. And more importantly the lead actresses who will be becoming mothers in due course in the narrative can not be seen as sexual beings because their chastity and purity is the basic condition for them to become mothers. The aunt played by Bindu in HAHK is an interesting case in this context. She is the only quasi-villainous character in that film full with all sugar syrupy characters. She is childless and her husband once says that you are very shrewd and cunning and probably that's why you never became a mother. Obviously hurt by this comment, she decides to behave 'properly' and surprisingly towards the end of the movie at the age of 50 or 50 plus she becomes pregnant. This very clearly establishes the idea in audiences mind that chastity and purity of soul and body are quintessentially connected to motherhood. These lead female characters were never represented as sexual beings.

To quote Fareed Kazmi (2010), in the decade of 90s, the potentially subversive has been tamed rendered toothless. He further says it is not only dispensable but also irrelevant. For more than love there are other much important agendas to be addressed and redressed. And topping the list as Kazmi claims the sanctity of the great Indian family and its attendant culture and lifestyle which must be upheld at all costs and never compromised. The sex and lust have been squeezed out of 1990s cinema.

Moreover, as Virdi (2003) argues women are always seen as unstable signs in the discourse of nation. They represent region, nation, caste, class, morality at different points. Kajol who is otherwise a very *kulin*, chaste, pure daughter in law, and mother-can be a sexual object in fantasy sequence-especially before marriage. In contrast, in the films of 1990s where item songs were not the norm, we see lead actresses involved in dream sequences crossing the boundaries of a chaste, regulated wife, mother and daughter.

It is also interesting to note the way in which media other than films are dealing with the discourse of sexuality. On social media platforms, campaigns like #Me Too or the discussions on the practices like Khatna^{iv} became much more popular than the campaigns like #NO means NO - which tries to talk about women's sexual desire as legitimate. #Me Too or Khatna was seen mainly in the realm of sexual abuse against women and talking about sex in the realm of abuse is much more acceptable than legitimizing the sex desire. The origins of Khatna practice is in the curbing of sexual desire and regulating that desire through marriage. However, most of the discussion stopped at narrating experiences and looking at it as abusive practice-and almost no one talks about how legitimate the sex desire is and thus the problem with suppressing it.

On the site of the television the discourse has shifted from absence of sex on the screen to soft-pornographic view of sex—The serials like *Bhabhiji GharPe Hai* (Sister in law is at home), *Hum To Tere Ashik Hai* (I am crazy for you) mainly depict the urge to talk about sex and making it sensuous by hiding it under the flirtatious relationship of devar-bhabhi (brother in law and sister in law)-which is considered as legitimate flirting in most of the regional cultures of India. The lead actress is always naïve and ignorant. So, you talk about sex and desire but her ignorance and innocence will bring that discussion back into the naïve realm and makes it acceptable as chaste and pure. Both these serials and particularly *Hum To Tere Ashik Hai* experimented with the audiences for quite some time to check the acceptance levels of audiences in the existing discursive space. They eventually stretched the boundaries to soft pornography. Here I would like to narrate one incidence from *Hum To Tere Ashik Hai*. The naïve actress is being told to tease and flirt with an unknown man to save her husband from some future mishap. With a lot of embarrassment and awkward feeling she learns how to flirt and at night she tries it on her neighbor who already likes her because of her innocence. This episode I thought important for several reasons. It reaffirms many things-true essence of any woman is her innocence and naivety and thus chastity and purity gained out of that innocence; the neighbor who has legitimate right to flirt with her under the disguise of devar-bhabhi relationship. This can be explored further.

IV. Conclusion

One can see that the Bollywood movies and particularly the songs which were openly discussing the lust, sexual desire of the lead actress in the pre 1990s period disappear in the post 1990s Bollywood cinema. Borrowing from Foucault's theorization, the paper concludes that the social, political, economic changes and the emergence of New Right in India has erased the entire discourse of sex, lust, and sexuality from the site of Bollywood cinema and its songs in 1990s. As an essential characteristic of the New Right, new tools of control of a person are created to be able to exert power. Regulation of female sexuality and defining normative behaviour is a major tool of this power exertion- as seen in this shift from pre 1990s to post 1990s.

However, the recent films like *Shubhamangal Savdhan*, *Shubhamangal Zyada Savdhan*, *badhia Ho*, *Badhai do*, *Padman* bring back the discourse on sex and sexuality to some extent. Yet mostly the discussions remain in the realm of medicine, psychological/sexual disorder, legal sanctions and not as female pleasure.

ⁱ Some of the songs are mentioned here

- Mujhe chhoo rahi hai teri garm saanse, mere raat aur din mehekane lage hai;
Teri narm sasso ne aise chhua hai ke mere toh pao bahekane lage hai (Swayamvar, 1980)
- Jab bhi khayalon me tu aaye, mere badan se khushboo aaye, meheke badan me raha nahi jaye (Ghar, 1978)
- Aap jaisa koi mere jindagi me aaye toh baat ban jaye, phool o bahar-bahar ko chaman, dil ko dil- badan ko badan, har kisi ko chahiye tan man ka milan, kaash mujh par aisa dil aap ka bhi aaye (Abdulla, 1979)
- Raat akeli hai, buz gaye diye, aake mere paas kano me mere jo bhi chahe kahiye (Jewel Thief, 1967)
- Meri saanson ko jo mehek aa rahi hai ye pehle pyar ki khooshboo (Badalte Rishtey, 1978)
- Tere bina jiya jaye na (Ghar, 1978)
- Jane do na, paas aona
Chuo na chouna mujhe chuoona
Pyase hoton ki jo kahani hai, paas aake tumhe sunani hai (Saagar, 1985)
- Kate nahi katate yeh din ye raat (Mr. India, 1987)
- Tumane hame bebas kiya, dil ne hume dhoka diya (Shakti, 1982)

- Tere chere se nazar nahi hatatee nazare hum kya dekhe
Tuze milakebhi pyaas nahi ghatatee nazare hum kya dekhe
Pighale badan teri tapatee nighaon se
Sholon ki aanch aaye barfilee rahon se (Kabhi Kabhie, 1976)
- Karwate badalte rahe sari raat hum (Aap Ki Kasam, 1974)

ii These were the most cherished sensual and bold vamps of Bollywood cinema in pre 1990s period.

iii The following item songs are very popular:

- Fevicol se (Dabaang 2, 2012)
- Munni badnam hui (Dabaang, 2012)
- Sheela ki Jawani (Tees Mar Khan, 2012)
- Chikni chameli (Agnepath, 2012)
- Kamli (Dhoom 3, 2013)

iv Khatna practice- It is a Female genital mutilation practised in India by Bohri community. The procedure is generally performed when a girl is seven years old and involves the total or partial removal of the clitoral hood.

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