

The Queer Gaze in Bollywood: A Study of LGBTQ+ Representation in the Film “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga”

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Abstract

Bollywood, India's dominant film industry, has long been criticized for marginalizing LGBTQ+ characters, often portraying them through harmful stereotypes or omitting them entirely. However, in recent years, there has been a shift toward more nuanced and respectful representations of LGBTQ+ identities. “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” (2019), directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar, plays a key role in this change. The film focuses on Sweety, a young woman navigating her lesbian identity in a society defined by heteronormative expectations. It explores her emotional journey toward self-acceptance and coming out, highlighting the challenges she faces from her family and society. This paper examines how “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” contributes to the emergence of the “queer gaze” in Bollywood—a perspective that challenges traditional portrayals of love and desire. Through a queer theoretical framework, the study explores how the film disrupts mainstream cinematic conventions and offers a more inclusive representation of LGBTQ+ individuals. It further investigates the film’s role in dismantling long-standing stereotypes about queerness in Indian cinema, moving away from tragic or exaggerated depictions toward authentic portrayals of queer lives. Ultimately, “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” is a pivotal film in Bollywood’s evolving approach to LGBTQ+ narratives. It offers a hopeful, transformative depiction of love that transcends gender and societal expectations, contributing to broader cultural acceptance and visibility of LGBTQ+ identities in India.

Keywords: Bollywood, LGBTQ+, stereotypes, heteronormative, queer gaze, gender

1. Introduction

The term “LGBTQ” (which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning) emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a way to encompass a wide range of sexual orientations and gender identities. While it's difficult to pinpoint exactly who first coined the term, the acronym evolved from earlier terms like “LGBT” (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender), which was used in the mid 1980s by activists and organizations seeking to create a more inclusive label for people of diverse sexual orientations. The “Q” for queer or questioning was added later, reflecting a broader understanding of gender and sexual diversity, particularly in the 1990s as the term “queer” was reclaimed from a slur into a more positive, inclusive identity. It was a collective evolution within the LGBTQ+ community rather than the work of a single person. Bollywood has long been criticized for its limited and often negative representation of sexual minorities, with LGBTQ+ characters typically relegated to secondary roles or depicted through harmful stereotypes. Queer narratives were seen as a challenge to India’s deeply rooted

heteronormative cultural values, resulting in portrayals that often dehumanized LGBTQ+ individuals. However, with shifts in global conversations about gender and sexuality, Indian cinema has increasingly embraced more inclusive portrayals of LGBTQ+ identities.

“Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” (2019) marks a significant turning point in this evolution. Directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar, the film tells the story of Sweetie (Sonam Kapoor), a young woman in love with Kuhu, another woman, and her struggles with societal and familial expectations. Unlike other Bollywood films that often treated queerness as either a tragedy or a comic trope, this narrative centers on themes of love, acceptance, and personal growth. It offers a refreshing portrayal of LGBTQ+ relationships, avoiding stereotypes and providing a more complex representation of queer identity.

This paper explores how the film exemplifies the “queer gaze” in Bollywood, challenging the industry's traditional approach to LGBTQ+ narratives. Through the framework of queer theory, the analysis examines how the film redefines Bollywood's engagement with queer representation, offering a progressive and nuanced perspective on sexuality. Released shortly after the decriminalization of same-sex relationships in India (September 2018), the film portrays the ongoing struggle of the LGBTQ+ community for acceptance and equality. Despite this legal change, same-sex marriages remain unrecognized, and societal discrimination persists.

By challenging Bollywood's heteronormative structures, the film contributes to a broader cultural shift toward greater visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals. Through its depiction of a lesbian relationship set against Indian family dynamics, this film redefines love and identity, marking a significant step in the evolving discourse on sexuality in Indian cinema.

2. Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to critically analyze “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” within the context of LGBTQ+ representation in Bollywood. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. Investigate how the film portrays LGBTQ+ identities, focusing on its depiction of a lesbian relationship in a conservative cultural setting.
2. Explore the film's role in contributing to a broader cultural shift in India toward greater LGBTQ+ acceptance and visibility.
3. Examine the application of the “queer gaze” in the film and how it challenges normative representations of love and identity in Bollywood.
4. Analyze the societal and familial dynamics that influence the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, as depicted in the film.

This research aims to offer insights into the evolving representation of LGBTQ+ characters in Bollywood and contribute to the growing discourse on social change and inclusion in Indian cinema.

3. Methodology of the Research

This study employs a qualitative research methodology that combines film analysis with queer theoretical perspectives. The research process involves the following steps:

Textual Analysis: The film will be carefully analyzed to identify key moments that highlight LGBTQ+ representation. Attention will be given to the development of Sweetie's character, her relationships, the dialogues, cinematographic choices, and the narrative structure. A focus will be placed on how the film addresses Sweetie's coming-out process and the cultural and familial challenges she faces.

Queer Theory Framework: The analysis will be framed using queer theory, particularly focusing on the

concept of the "queer gaze." Queer theory critiques heteronormative systems and enables a deeper understanding of how non-heterosexual identities can be presented as valid, complex, and deserving of equal representation, rather than as mere deviations from the norm.

Secondary Research: The study will draw upon existing literature on LGBTQ+ representation in Indian cinema, queer theory, and the broader cultural shifts in Bollywood. Scholarly articles, books, and critiques of the film will provide a foundation for situating "Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga" within the broader landscape of LGBTQ+ narratives in Bollywood and global cinema.

4. Literature Review

LGBTQ+ representation in Indian cinema has evolved significantly over the years. Early Bollywood films either ignored queerness or depicted it through reductive stereotypes. Films like "Fire", released in 1996 (one of the first mainstream Bollywood films to explicitly show homosexual relations, and the first to feature a lesbian relationship) by Deepa Mehta and "My Brother... Nikhil" (2005) began to shift this narrative by introducing complex queer characters, although these films were often met with backlash from conservative segments of Indian society.

Ranjani Mazumdar, in "Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire", notes that Indian cinema has historically favored heterosexual narratives and the ideal of the family unit, leaving little room for queer stories to emerge. However, recent cultural shifts have begun to challenge this norm, fueled by broader global conversations about sexuality and gender.

Gautam Bhan's "The Queer Indian: Representation and Identity in Cinema" explores how queer characters in Bollywood have gradually moved from invisibility to more nuanced portrayals. While films like "Dostana" (2008) and "Kapoor & Sons" (2016) introduced queer characters, they often did so within the context of comedy or light-hearted narratives. "Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga" represents a more earnest attempt to present LGBTQ+ love with depth and sincerity, marking a significant milestone in the industry's evolving treatment of sexual minorities.

Manju K. Pillai, in her analysis of the film, highlights its departure from traditional Bollywood structures. While it remains rooted in familiar tropes, the film reframes the narrative of queer love, making it an integral part of human experience rather than an aberration. Pillai also discusses how the film's focus on family dynamics is significant, as it reflects the complex struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals who must navigate societal expectations and familial approval.

Sudhir Kakar's "The Indian Family: A Cultural and Psychological Approach" examines the crucial role the Indian family plays in shaping identity. In "Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga", the protagonist's journey to self-acceptance is intricately tied to her family's expectations, highlighting the tension between individual desires and cultural norms.

5. LGBTQ+ Representation in Bollywood: An Overview

Bollywood's representation of LGBTQ+ characters has evolved significantly over the years, with earlier films either ignoring or portraying queer identities through harmful stereotypes. Historically, the few films that addressed LGBTQ+ themes were niche or controversial, and their portrayal of queer characters often fell into tragic or marginalized storylines. For instance, Deepa Mehta's "Fire" (1996) explored a lesbian relationship, but faced strong opposition, including protests and censorship. Similarly, films like "My Brother... Nikhil" (2005) dealt with HIV/AIDS but often relegated queer characters to tragic arcs, reinforcing negative perceptions. The portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals in mainstream Bollywood

frequently depended on comedic, often demeaning tropes, such as the flamboyant gay best friend or cross-dressing sidekicks. While these characters provided some visibility, they did not reflect the complexities or realities of LGBTQ+ lives. It was only in the last decade that Bollywood began experimenting with more genuine LGBTQ+ representations. Films such as “Dostana” (2008), “Margarita with a Straw” (2014), “Aligarh” (2015), “Kapoor & Sons” (2016), “Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan” (2020) “Badhaai Do” (2022) etc. started introducing queer characters within mainstream narratives. These films focused on comedic or dramatic elements but often failed to offer fully realized characters, resulting in portrayals that still emphasized spectacle over authenticity.

“Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” (2019) represents a breakthrough in LGBTQ+ representation in Bollywood. By avoiding sensationalism and stereotypes, it presents a nuanced and emotionally resonant narrative that acknowledges queer identity without casting it as deviant or tragic. The film marks a pivotal shift in the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals, offering a portrayal grounded in emotional realism and social relevance.

6. The Plot of “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga”

“Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” is a 2019 Indian Hindi-language coming-of-age romantic comedy-drama film directed by Shelly Chopra Dhar. The screenplay was written by Dhar and Gazal Dhaliwal, with the story inspired by the 1919 novel *A Damsel in Distress* by P. G. Wodehouse (Wikipedia). The film centers on Sweety (Sonam Kapoor), a young woman struggling with her hidden love for Kuhu, a woman she meets and falls in love with. Sweety’s internal conflict is driven by her family’s expectations, which press her to fulfill traditional roles as a daughter, wife, and mother. The film chronicles her journey toward self-realization and coming out, highlighting the emotional toll of living in a society that expects conformity. Unlike many earlier Bollywood films that depicted queer relationships as either tragic or deviant, “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” normalizes Sweety’s relationship with Kuhu, presenting it as just as legitimate and natural as any heterosexual love story.

The core of the film lies in Sweety's struggle for self-acceptance amid familial and societal pressures. Her father, played by Anil Kapoor, initially reacts with confusion and denial toward her sexuality. His eventual understanding represents the potential for social and cultural change, offering a hopeful narrative of familial reconciliation and acceptance.

7. The Queer Narrative in the Film

The film’s narrative is built around the theme of coming out and the emotional journey associated with it. Unlike many LGBTQ+ films that center on tragedy or repression, “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” offers a hopeful, positive portrayal. It focuses on the emotional complexity of coming out, emphasizing that it is not just about personal realization, but also about the difficult process of navigating familial and societal expectations.

What makes this film unique is its setting within the context of Indian culture, where family is integral to one’s identity. The depiction of Sweety’s family’s reaction to her sexuality reflects real-world attitudes in India, where LGBTQ+ issues are often considered taboo. However, the gradual shift in her family’s attitude towards acceptance highlights the possibility for change and understanding, both at the familial and societal level. The relationship between Sweety and Kuhu is portrayed with tenderness, framed within the same emotional depth usually reserved for heterosexual love stories. This marks a crucial departure from previous Bollywood films that treated queer love as secondary or sensationalized. In the film, queer

love is positioned at the heart of the narrative, offering a powerful and genuine portrayal of LGBTQ+ relationships.



8. The Queer Gaze and Disruption of Heteronormative Norms

The concept of the "queer gaze" plays an important role in reshaping media portrayals of sexuality and identity. By presenting queerness through a queer theoretical lens, “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” disrupts the heteronormative narratives that dominate Bollywood. The film deconstructs the conventional Bollywood romantic formula, which almost exclusively focuses on heterosexual relationships. Sweety's love for Kuhu is shown as equally valid, profound, and emotional, signaling a shift toward more inclusive portrayals of love in mainstream cinema. In doing so, the film challenges the idea that love and relationships must conform to traditional gendered expectations. Sweety’s character is portrayed not as a hyper-feminine woman or a stereotypically masculine lesbian, but as a complex, multidimensional person whose sexuality is just one aspect of her identity. This nuanced representation provides a more authentic portrayal of LGBTQ+ experiences, free from the limitations of past stereotypes.

9. Cultural and Societal Impact of the Film

“Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” has had a significant cultural impact in India, a country where discussions around LGBTQ+ issues remain largely taboo. By telling a story that centers on LGBTQ+ identity, the film opens up important dialogues about the struggles and aspirations of LGBTQ+ individuals in a conservative society. The movie has contributed to shifting perceptions of queerness, particularly in relation to family dynamics and societal acceptance.

The film also serves as a platform for LGBTQ+ voices within mainstream cinema. Despite its sensitive subject matter, the film was commercially successful, signaling a growing openness among Indian

audiences toward diverse forms of representation. Its success highlights a cultural shift, suggesting that Indian society is beginning to embrace a wider spectrum of sexual identities. Additionally, the film's portrayal of a father's journey from denial to acceptance represents the potential for change within traditional Indian families, where LGBTQ+ individuals often face rejection or alienation. By showcasing this transformation, the film reflects the broader societal changes in attitudes toward LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance, which are still evolving in India.

The movie also encourages further conversations about the need for more inclusive representations in Indian media. It challenges the notion that LGBTQ+ themes are too controversial for mainstream cinema and paves the way for more authentic, respectful portrayals of queer characters in the future.

10. Conclusion

"Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga" is a landmark film in Bollywood's evolving representation of LGBTQ+ identities. It presents a realistic, compassionate portrayal of a lesbian protagonist navigating her love life, identity, and societal expectations. By focusing on the complexities of coming out and familial dynamics, the film offers a narrative that goes beyond the stereotypes and sensationalism often associated with queer stories in Indian cinema.

Through its engagement with the queer gaze and subversion of heteronormative norms, the film represents a major cultural shift in Bollywood. It is part of a growing movement toward more inclusive portrayals of love and identity in mainstream media, offering hope for the future of LGBTQ+ representation in Indian cinema. By presenting a queer love story that is neither tragic nor sensationalized, the film contributes to the broader cultural conversation about LGBTQ+ rights, acceptance, and visibility, marking a significant step forward in Bollywood's engagement with LGBTQ+ issues.

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