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Revisiting *Lihaf*: Queer representations in *Dedh Ishqiya*

Akshata S. Pai

SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, Inde
akshataspai@gmail.com

Résumé

Cet article porte un regard critique sur la représentation des désirs homosexuels des femmes dans le film hindi *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014). Cette étude aborde la relation intertextuelle qui existe entre *Dedh Ishqiya* and *Lihaf* (1941) et s'intéresse à la façon dont le film réécrit *Lihaf* afin d'imaginer une autre possibilité pour le désir homosexuel des femmes. Cet article approfondit également les questions sur le regard masculin et analyse la manière par laquelle le film déstabilise la position voyeuriste, hétéronormative du spectateur masculin. Il considère le film comme une intervention contre les conventions de représentation de l'homosexualité dans le cinéma populaire hindi.

Mots-clés : cinéma hindi, homosexualité, bollywood, intertextualité

Représentation du Queer dans *Dedh Ishqiya* : *Lihaf* revisité

Abstract

This paper critically engages with the Hindi film *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) to study its representation of female queer desires. The paper is concerned with the intertextual relationship between *Dedh Ishqiya* and *Lihaf* (1941) and studies how the film rescripts *Lihaf* in its attempt to imagine a different possibility for queer female desire. The paper also delves into questions of the male gaze and studies how the film unsettles the position of the voyeuristic, heteronormative, male viewer. It also reads the film as an intervention in queer representational conventions of popular Hindi cinema.

Keywords: hindi cinema, queerness, bollywood, intertextuality

There is a scene in the Abhishek Chaubey directed film *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) in which its protagonist Begum Para, agitated at the prospect of marrying the smarmy Jan Sahib, frantically searches for old photographs of her and her deceased first husband. The album tells its own story. Starting with a picture or two of the Begum and the Nawab as a couple, soon, these images give way to those in which the Begum stands aloof while her husband poses jauntily with several male friends.

These images provide an early intimation of the film's intertextuality with "Lihaf", a short story by the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai. Chughtai's story, written in 1941, thematises a homoerotic relationship that develops between Begum Jan, an aristocratic Muslim woman, and her maidservant and masseuse Rabbu. This relationship develops when the Begum's husband who is interested only in the young boys whom he patronises forgets about his wife entirely after marrying her and "installing her in his house along with the furniture" (Chughtai, 1993:130). The relationship between the two women is enacted entirely within the space of the zenana, mostly under the eponymous quilt and is unwittingly witnessed by Begum Jan's young niece, who narrates the incident several years after its occurrence.

In the film, the Begum feverishly attempts to scrape off her own image from these pictures. The slight hint of male homoeroticism suggested by the photographs is immediately followed by a suggestion of female homoeroticism. Munia, the Begum's companion, in trying to calm the Begum down, embraces her from behind and for a brief but telling moment, the camera cuts to a close shot of her hand caressing the Begum's shoulder. By deliberately drawing our eye to the gesture, the shot hints at an erotic charge underlying this seemingly "innocuous" act. The Begum's frantic search for the photographs seems like a figuration of the text's own urge to unearth "Lihaf" from the archives. Already contained in this urge is the desire to change the urtext by removing the queer woman from under the patriarchal framework. The scene encapsulates the film's own relationship with "Lihaf" - retrieval followed by a crucial mediation. Through its reference to "Lihaf", *Dedh Ishqiya* maps itself within a tradition of queer female representations in India but also indicates its desire to imagine new possibilities of representation.

In post-independence India, the question of representation has been central to discussions of homosexuality in the public sphere. Two issues were central in mobilising public debate around queerness. One was Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* (1998), the first film to visibilise lesbianism in India which was met with rioting, threats and attempts at banning what was seen as an attack on Indian, particularly Hindu, culture. The other is the legal battle about the constitutionality of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. In December 2013, the Supreme Court reversed the ruling of the Delhi High Court which had decriminalised consensual homosexual activities between adults in 2009, leading to a pouring of outrage and protest from vast sections of the English-speaking national media and pockets of urban civil society. Released less than a month after this ruling, the film staged a crucial intervention into this highly visibilised debate about queer sexualities.

1. Hindi cinema and its sexual representations

Since it began to be given serious theoretical and critical attention in the 1980s, Indian film theorists have theorised popular Hindi cinema, widely known as Bollywood, as a site of discursive production that registers changes in ideology and cultural sensibilities and mediates in discourses of gender, nation, class, and sexuality. In her essay “Bollywood Cinema and Queer Sexualities”, Shohini Ghosh builds on these ideas by suggesting that we read Bollywood cinematic texts as specifically sexual representations; as “sites of competing discourses around sexuality” by studying their changing articulations of desire (Ghosh, 2010: 55).

Catering to vast, heterogeneous audiences, popular Hindi cinema often inserts multiple visual pleasures in its films to appease its diverse audiences in its dedication to the “something for everyone project” (Kasbekar, 2001: 289). Thus, when the Indian LGBT community became visible and vocal in the public sphere in the last decade of the twentieth century, Hindi cinema sought to address this new emergent constituency. However, this new mode of address could not be employed easily. As Asha Kasbekar points out, “every Hindi film in search of commercial success must not only identify the desire for different kinds of pleasures amongst its socially and ethnically diverse constituencies, but it must also accommodate sometimes incompatible desires within the same film and make them concordant with the existing cultural and moral values of the society in which it circulates” (290). Hindi cinema had to find a way to address these new concerns while also catering to and without alienating or discomfiting its more conservative, heterosexist, mainstream audiences.

Mainstream Hindi films before *Fire* had allowed for queer viewing pleasures only through a somewhat resistant reading. Talking of the appropriative possibilities of Hindi cinema by queer diasporic audiences, Gayatri Gopinath writes of how this cinema, by way of the often fragmented, episodic and non-realist structures of its films, offers many opportunities for queer spectatorial interventions (Gopinath, 2005: 98). However, as Shohini Ghosh notes, after *Fire*, representations and representational strategies of Hindi cinema changed (Ghosh, 2010: 57). For the first time, queerness began to be tangibly expressed. In the 1990s, due to globalisation and liberalisation of the economy, the urban mediascape underwent a radical change. More and more space was created in cinema and television for the depiction of sex and sexuality (56-57). Especially, after the violent and widespread public debate engendered by *Fire*, queer sexualities became impossible to ignore in popular cultural production (62). In the 2000s, Hindi cinema began to develop new forms and strategies of representation to address not only the new visibility of gay and lesbian sexualities, but also the deep anxieties triggered by this visibility.

Ghosh observes that these films were marked by a simultaneous address to the erotic and the phobic. One of the tropes employed by these films was the trope of “misreading” (Ghosh 2010: 62). Following a trend set into motion by the diasporic *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), in films like *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and *Dostana* (2008), the audience is kept aware of the heterosexuality of the pair that is misread or masqueraded as homosexual (62-63). This gap between the audience’s and the characters’ perceptions that not only generates humour but offers an outlet for homophobic anxieties. Films of the period often featured “reactionary closures”: providing heteronormative closures closing off every queer possibility at the end of the film. (Ghosh, 2007: 434). One must also take note of appearances of queer characters and episodes in many other films where queer characters and subplots are often simply foils to the main straight characters and storyline.

Most of the Bollywood cinematic texts outlined above articulated and visibilised queer spectatorship positions and created pleasures for the queer gaze while being careful to not rupture the heteronormative paradigm. Representations of female queer desire were even more fraught as there was always the threat of images of queer female desire becoming fodder for the voyeuristic male gaze. As Linda Williams has written in the context of erotic thrillers in Hollywood, while lesbian scenes mark the exclusion of men from female desire and pleasure, men are invited to participate visually as voyeurs. (Williams, 2005: 207).

Despite these ambivalences, these films played a crucial role in making audiences queer-literate. According to Ghosh, *Fire* and other films depicting queer desires in the late 1990s and 2000s not only taught its audiences to look for the queer in cinema, but to *look queerly*. (Ghosh, 2010: 59). The audiences *Dedh Ishqiya* addresses are the audiences produced by these films. The question that then arises is why the film chooses to use “Lihaf” as its central intertext at a time when debates about queerness are so visible in the public sphere. Why does it draw on strategies of dissembling, silence and disarticulation to represent queerness? While one reason is, as the director himself admits in his interview with *Tellychakker*, to avoid losing conservative spectatorial constituencies, the film also puts this representational reticence to other uses.

Before moving on, I will provide a brief synopsis of the plot. *Dedh Ishqiya* begins with the footloose uncle-nephew pair of thieves, Khalu and Babban, from the prequel *Ishqiya* (2010) trying to escape from the police after a failed shoplifting attempt. Babban escapes the police only to be taken into the custody of Mushtaqbhai, their employer. Khalu, meanwhile, has entered the partly fantastical world of Majidabad, where we are told that the Begum Para of Majidabad hosts annual mushairas (Urdu poetry conventions) to honour a promise she made to her dead husband - that of

marrying a poet after his death. At this mushaira, Khalu masquerades as a Nawab and a poet, hoping to win the affections of the Begum. Babban soon arrives on the scene, and after a little protest, joins the masquerade as Khalu's butler. Babban is romantically interested in Munia, the Begum's companion. The men's romantic pursuit of the women is frustrated by their major competitor, Jan Sahib, the local MLA who seeks to add aristocratic weight to his economic and political power by marrying the Begum having already obliged her by paying off her first husband's heavy debts. As this narrative, heavily invested with nostalgia and romance, progresses, Khalu and Babban begin to believe that they have found true love and expect a resolution to that end. However, unbeknownst to them, the mushaira and the remarriage plan merely constitute a screen for a larger plot devised by the Begum and Munia.

2. Representational reticence and the male gaze

Gayatri Gopinath argues that Chughtai's "repeated insistence on 'not knowing' must be read as a strategy of disarticulation allowing female homoerotic desire to elude a colonial legal apparatus that functions squarely within the logic of categorization, visibility and enumeration" (Gopinath, 2005: 151). The film repurposes these silences and evasions of "*Lihaf*" to nudge its spectators away from a conventional heteronormative reading. The heteronormative male gaze, embodied by Khalu and Babban on screen and by the camera itself, runs into several dead ends and is troubled and undermined by a great excess of meaning, not to mention its heterosexual expectations and desires are frustrated by the film, many times over.

Let us take for instance the scene that plays with the swaying shadows of "*Lihaf*". Chughtai's short story, the quilt underneath which the two women make love sways and heaves at night, throws strange shadows on the wall that frighten the young viewer. This is one of the opening images of the story and remains central. In the film, the two male protagonists, and the audience, is given a glimpse of the two women laughing and cavorting with each other. After two brief shots of the women, however, we no longer see them directly. Instead, we only see Khalu looking at them, and the women's moving and merging shadows on the wall behind him. Not only is the men's gaze emptied of all power (they are handcuffed in the scene) but their sense of entitlement to the women's affections is also ruptured. The large, looming shadows of the women over the wall mountain over Khalu's miniscule looking figure in the lower half of the screen, suggesting that female sexuality is in excess of the male gaze and fails to be represented through it.

The film also defamiliarises the trope of misreading by using it not to allay homophobic anxieties but to fuel them further. Several instances in the film show us Babban and Khalu misreading scenes and episodes being unable to move beyond heteronormative interpretations. In the final scenes, their reading is clearly undone for the audience. We hear the women address the men in voiceovers saying clearly that they do not desire the men in a romantic or sexual fashion. After this voiceover, we watch Babban and Khalu still assume that the women bailed them out of prison. Babban excitedly remarks, “Didn’t I say? They love us” and begins to fantasise about marrying Munia only to learn that it was Mushtaqbhai who bailed them out only to take them into his own custody. Even as this moment generates ironic humour, it forces us to see the inadequacies of a heteronormative reading. The scene is a satire not only of Hindi cinema’s abrupt heteronormative foreclosures that habitually shut down all queer possibilities but also the audience’s easy acceptance of such abrupt and absurd resolutions.

3. Rewriting “Lihaf”

The space of the zenana, the women’s quarters of gender-segregated Muslim homes, is the thematic mainstay of Chughtai’s text. “Lihaf” shatters notions of the zenana as an inviolate heteronormative space, exploring how patriarchy’s own contradictions produce it as a site of agential possibilities for women. Gayatri Gopinath points out that Hindi cinema too “is saturated with rich images of intense love and friendship between women in the context of archetypal spaces of female homosociality, such as the brothels, women’s prisons, girls’ schools, the middle-class home, and the zenana” (Gopinath, 2005: 103). *Dedh Ishqiya*, however, seems concerned with exploring possibilities for queer female desire beyond these homosocial spaces. “Lihaf”, in the words of Geeta Patel, stages the dynamics of sexuality that occur “within circles of enclosure” - queer sexualities play out under the quilt, within the zenana, within the hetero-patriarchal home. Queer female desire is also enclosed by larger circles of male homosocial/homosexual desire (Patel, 2001: 180). *Dedh Ishqiya* seems to recognise the queerness that exists in these homosocial spaces within patriarchal structures, but it also struggles to allow that subterranean queerness to erupt out of these concentric ‘circles of enclosure’ into the open. In doing this, it routes queer female desire into larger economies of desire - causing it to exist alongside and even to contest heterosexual male desire.

In “Lihaf”, as Geeta Patel observes, “male-male sexualized affiliation marked by a turning away from women, directs women back into the harem, keeps them there, and turns them toward each other as desiring ‘subjects’” (Patel, 2001: 178-179). The women’s queer desire in “Lihaf” is precipitated by the Nawab’s lack of interest

in women. Of course, in the context of mid-twentieth century India, queer female desire could hardly exist outside of the interstices of heterosexual structures, mainly spaces of “sanctioned female homosociality legislated by normative sexual and gender arrangements” (Gopinath, 2005: 153). While *Dedh Ishqiya* acknowledges these pockets of invisibility, it also opens up the space of the zenana. In this rescripting, the film departs from both “*Lihaf*” as well as *Fire*. *Fire* too portrays homosexual desire as derivative and occurring *after* heterosexual desire. Queer female desire might have emerged from a lack of heterosexual avenues but in *Dedh Ishqiya* it thrives alongside and even counters heterosexual male desire. The Begum has not one, but an entire mehfil of men vying for her affections. Her companion too, is provided with a heterosexual lover of her own. The women choose each other over these several heterosexual possibilities.

In rekhti poetry¹ with which both the film and the short story are resonant, there is, among several other narrative voices, the voice of a male persona witness to women’s sexual intimacy, who reprimands the women and forces himself on them until they promise to never “play chapti” again (Vanita, 2004: 30). Even in contemporary India, the homophobic discourse around same-sex desires continues to dwell on the notion that same-sex desires are derivative and emerge from a lack of heterosexual opportunities, and that queer women and men can thus be “cured” through heterosexual marriage and sex. It is crucial that Munia not only has a heterosexual possibility open to her in the film, but also consummates it, sleeping with Babban. Despite this, she repeatedly reveals her preference for the Begum over Babban. As Sarah Waheed writes, *Dedh Ishqiya* does not define “the two women’s relationship in terms of lack, as in *Fire*, i.e., ‘there is no word in our language for us’, but inscribes the relationship in terms of fulfilment” (Waheed, 2014: 26).

The narrative of “*Lihaf*” ends with an impasse where queer desire is ultimately not named or exposed - the women continue to inhabit the space of the zenana, while persisting in their non-heteronormative, non-reproductive sexual practices. This narrative impasse serves not only to register “the aporias and complexities that mark moments of women’s gendered resistance” (Ghosh, 2004: 11) but makes a rearticulation of the space of the zenana imperative. As Geeta Patel astutely notes, “because the wife does not ultimately leave the zenana, run away with her masseuse-lover, or repudiate her wifely assignments, the story provokes a retelling of the sanitized, secular heterosexual domestic space so necessary to nationalist narratives” (Patel, 2004: 146). While the narrative end of “*Lihaf*” leaves queer desires a hidden, persistent, and threatening presence within patriarchal structures, it also leaves those patriarchal structures themselves persistent and in

power. *Dedh Ishqiya* seeks to take queer female desire beyond these impasses and attempts to imagine for the two women a different possibility. In doing so, *Dedh Ishqiya* offers a utopian ending that seems to iron out the nuances and complexities of the short story but we must read the end from within the generic conventions of the masala thriller as we will go on to do.

The narrative impasse of “Lihaf” is first resolved through the death of the patriarch. However, the Nawab has left his wife bankrupt and in heavy debts. Jan Sahib enters at this point, paying off the debts - an act of “benevolence” which further entraps the Begum in an economic dependence making it impossible for the two women to set out on their own. The economic clout which he shoddily cloaks as “ishq” makes visible the power politics which underlie heterosexual romance. While the Nawab is dead, what threatens now is a re-enactment of the older narrative through the patriarchal figure of Jan Sahib. That one patriarchal figure is stepping in for another is made very plain - at one point during the Begum’s narration of her story, we see the Nawab’s portrait morph into Jan Sahib’s. The trope of remarriage itself becomes symbolic of the attempt by patriarchal structures to draw the Begum back into the heterosexual matrix - to bring her sexuality again under male surveillance and control. The story, it seems, is all set to re-enact itself, and to once again, enclose the queer woman within its structures.

The narrative of “Lihaf” is thus propelled forward beyond its impasses in the film. The climactic sequence at the railway station is crucial as it brings the text’s renegotiation of the relation between queer female desire and patriarchal structures to a head. It is significant that this renegotiation takes place at a railway station called “Bap”, a Hindi word that has become in recent times the slang for “daring” or “epic”, but literally means “father”. “Bap” then becomes the site on which several patriarchal institutions congregate, among them, the institution of heterosexual romantic love embodied by Khalu and Babban, the institution of marriage and economic power which Jan Sahib stands for, and the police who are the representatives of the patriarchally governed institutions of the state and the law. When Khalu offers to hold up the men so that the two women can escape, the Begum refuses the offer and asks the men to leave instead. The women thus, refuse a narrative resolution determined by male beneficence and sacrifice, refusing also to relinquish their agency and control over their narrative. It is significant that the film takes queer female desire out of the zenana to be renegotiated with these patriarchal institutions in a space as public as a railway platform. However, after staging this conflict where queer female desire must contest and hold off heterosexual male desire, the film arrives at an answer that is not completely removed from “Lihaf”’s original premise.

One of *Dedh Ishqiya*'s most evocative scenes is the one where the two women run away from Bap, get into their car, and drive off into vast, open country. As they reach their battered red car, they look back and motion to Khalu and Babban to join them. Up to this point, the two men still harbour the belief that the women desire them, and they continue to believe it afterwards too, but at this critical point, they refuse and wave the women away. It is as though they are unwilling to step out of the patriarchal world. But it also seems that there cannot be any room for the men in the space that the text imagines for queer female desire. After having navigated through larger economies of desire, female same-sex desire must again enclose itself within a homosocial space - only this time, the homosocial space is not within the hetero-patriarchal home but outside its influence and power. The *zenana*, as it were, has disjoined itself from the patriarchal home and set root elsewhere. The image of the women driving away in a red car also resonates with images of Babban's journey early in the film. Mobility and agency seem to have been relayed from the men to the queer women in the course of the narrative. The red car, here, becomes the central register of queer female desire. This is a momentous shift from "*Lihaf*" in which the quilt was the register of the women's desires. Whereas the quilt concealed queer female desire, it also circumscribed it. The car, on the other hand, ascribes a mobility, agency, and autonomy to the women's desires.

Released within a month of the reinstatement of Sec 377 by the Supreme Court, the film emerged in the midst of renewed debates and discussions on several media platforms about queer sexualities and about Sec 377. Released at such a time, *Dedh Ishqiya* becomes a crucial intervention. Press reports tell us that special screenings of the film were co-hosted by the producers along with Humsafar, the Mumbai-based organisation working for LGBT rights, for people from the community. Vivek Anand, one of the founders of Humsafar, is reported to have said, "*Dedh Ishqiya* has acquired iconic proportions and Madhuri's character as Begum Para is the new diva of the LGBT community" ("Is Madhuri Dixit the new gay icon?"). The images of the women's escape from the police and the ambit of the law become images of resistance and recalcitrance against a repressive law/ state, imagining a moment of total deterritorialisation of desire from patriarchal structures.

The film sets the queer pair of "*Lihaf*" free from the patriarchal constraints that it lived under. In a sense then, the film lets the queer couple "out" without having them "come out" of the closet - an interesting stratagem at such a time as this, when queer sexualities are visibilised in the media but still remain outlawed. It offers an interesting counterpoint to the discourse of the closet, in which, "the refusal to come out [becomes] not only undesirable, but tragic" (Kohnen, 2010: 190). Kohnen also argues that the discourse of the closet mandates sexualities to

be always placed along and concretised on the heterosexual/homosexual and gay/lesbian binaries (56). Instead, *Dedh Ishqiya* frames the women's relationship as fulfilling without having to be validated through the rite of "coming out" or named as "lesbian".

Madhava Prasad (citing Raymond Bellour) writes that Hindi cinema has conventionally been committed to the "endless reproduction of the [heterosexual] couple" (Prasad, 1998: 95). Through the threat of a re-enactment of an older narrative, the film seems to stage the performativity of Hindi cinema's heteronormative texts only to intervene in that ritualised, cyclical repetition. *Dedh Ishqiya's* resolution not only produces a queer couple but also consolidates and celebrates it in a song-and-dance sequence located outside of the narrative.

A wide shot captures the women's flight in their car across the open landscape. This visual, suggestive of vastness and mobility, is immediately succeeded by the image of the men behind bars. While the women break out of the impasses of "Lihaf", for the men, the narrative begins and ends with almost exactly the same scene, that too, a scene of confinement. While the women have escaped from the recursive cycles of patriarchal narratives, it seems that the men and the text itself are caught up in narrative loops they cannot escape. The men, despite having resigned themselves to the women's queer desires and refusing to go along with them, now almost absurdly hark back to their heteronormative readings. As they walk out of prison, after being bailed out, they rhapsodise about their romantic reunions with the women, and expect to be greeted by the women outside - instead their raptures are brought to an abrupt end when they sight Mushtaqbhai and his men. Babban makes to walk off, but Khalu holds him back, gesturing to him that the situation must be entertained, and their roles performed. The conventions of the genre, the masala thriller, cannot be escaped.

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Note

1. Rekhti is a genre of Urdu poetry written in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India. Though often written by male poets, it deals with women's everyday lives and concerns, and depicts female-female sexual and romantic relationships as they played out in the homosocial space of the zenana. It is seen as an earthier form of the classical rekhta, which centres on courtly and divine love. "Chapti" is the Urdu term that these poems use to refer to female-female sexual practices.