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## Bollywood's Queer Dostana: Articulating a Transnational Queer Indian Identity and Family in 2008's *Dostana*

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Mainstream 'masala' Bollywood films have played a key role in producing and reiterating a nationalist Indian identity centered on the monolithic notion of the Hindu, wealthy and patriarchal India. The result of such attenuated discourses has been a great limitation on who gets included in the signifier 'Indian'. Though, as I posit in this paper, these very mainstream 'masala' Bollywood films have at times also offered the opportunity to contest this culturally conflated Indian identity by acting as a heterotopic space – a subversive space for not only the reiteration of the hegemonic social reality but also a space where it can be contested. Particularly relevant here is the role of these films in shaping conceptions of queer desire and sexuality. This paper is an analysis of the 2008 Bollywood film, *Dostana*, and its role as a heterotropic space for the creation of a new queer transnational Indian identity and family. I posit that *Dostana* presented a new queer Indian identity, independent of the historicized, right wing, socio-cultural conceptions of queer desire and bodies prevailing in India. In doing so, I will argue that the film creates a nascent queer gaze through its representation of queered desire, bodies and the Indian family unity – moving the queer Indian identity out of its heteropatriarchal closet and into the centre of transnational, mainstream Indian culture.

## Introduction

**Academic enquiry over** the past decades has helped us to grasp why popular media texts like films assume vital importance in critiquing hegemonic ideologies, which often operate as common sense in mainstream society. As such it is troublesome to note that discourses about sexuality in any form have never been openly included or voiced in cultural and mainstream dialogues in India. Even the heteronormatively constructed notion of heterosexuality as the only form of sexuality and desire operating in India is rarely discussed on any public platforms or in mainstream cultural discourses.

Here Bollywood, often regarded as the largest film industry in the world with over 1000 films released every year, stands as somewhat of a paradox. Sexuality has been ubiquitously present and depicted in Bollywood films, especially over the last 10 years or so; but these depictions have been limited to heterosexual narratives only.

“Explicit references to homosexuality have been largely absent from mainstream commercial films” (Ghosh 2007; Dasgupta 2012). In such a scenario, it is no surprise that queer sexuality and desire has notably been invisible in Bollywood films. This absence of queer imagery in any form exists in spite of, as most scholars note, Bollywood occupying a pertinent position in queer culture in India.

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In fact, after Deepa Mehta’s 1998 film *Fire, Dostana* (“Friendship”) - the subject of the paper - has been the other prominent mainstream Indian/Bollywood film to take as its core theme queer sexuality and desire. In fact, as this paper will argue, *Dostana* has since been ascribed as the moment a definitive identity and visibility for queer Indian men in mainstream culture was finally produced in Bollywood.

Prior to *Dostana* and *Fire*, queer desire and sexuality has never really been represented in any major mainstream Bollywood films. Scholars have noted that the closest representation

of same-sex desire in Bollywood cinema has been limited to homosocial expressions of friendship between male actors, and very rarely between female actors in mainstream Bollywood films (Muraleedharan 2005, Ghosh 2010).

Though, there have been numerous films about queer desire and sexuality made and released in India, films like *BOMgAY* (1996), *Bombay Boys* (1998), *Split Wide Open* (1999) and *My Brother Nikhil* (2005). Yet these films have been bundled into niche categories such as art-house, activist or urban cinema, often tagged as being premeditated to cater to a specifically urban, educated, academic or queer audience, and they are limited to either a few multiplexes or the international film and documentary circuits (Ghosh 2010: 50-51).

In fact, the only form of representation of queer desire and sexuality in mainstream Bollywood cinema has been limited to construction of queer identities as belonging to a third sexless gender devoid of any actual physical desire; or representing homosexuality as being a dark “western” phenomenon, limited to the upper class in urban cities. These queer characters, under both forms of representation, have always been utilized in the fringes of narratives, often being incorporated for comedic relief only (Shahani 2008).

As a result, academic enquiry has instead focused upon the impact of western films, predominantly from the United States and Europe, and the minor exceptional cases like *Fire* and their impact as queer cultural discourses in India (Dasgupta 2012: 5). Another mitigating factor has been that the globalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s led to the arrival of western cable television programming, which in turn is considered to be the largest contributor towards an “efflorescence of sexual speech” (Ghosh 2007: 419). This is seen as having greatly impacted the concepts and notions of sexuality and sex amongst the Indian middle class as it exposed the audiences to an entirely western social and cultural ethos.

Hence, through this paper, I aim to situate *Dostana*'s role in producing a mainstream dialogue on queer desire and sexuality and hence filling in this gap. The film, which went on

to become one of the highest grossing films in Bollywood (*The Economic Times*, 2008), I will argue, constructs a decidedly Indian manifestation for queer desire and sexuality for an audience that is beyond the urban, educated, academic or queer viewer.

The film assembles queer desire and sexuality within the existing discourse of family, home and being an Indian while at the same time, also delineating queer identity from the aforementioned previously historicized conceptions of queer sexuality and desire.

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### **About the Film**

*Dostana* was produced and released in late 2008 by Karan Johar, the owner of one of Bollywood's biggest production company, Dharma Productions. The film tells the story of Sameer Kapoor (Abhishek Bachchan), a nurse, and Kunal Chopra (John Abraham), a photographer, who meet while looking for an apartment to rent in Miami. They find an apartment they both like, though the owner refuses to sublet to them as her niece, Neha Melwani (Priyanka Chopra) will also stay in the apartment and she is not comfortable with Neha living with two men. Eventually, Sameer convinces Kunal to pretend to be gay lovers to get the apartment, which they do, and subsequently move in with Neha. Kunal agrees to this pretend relationship, as it will not only get him the apartment but also citizenship to stay on in Miami.

The film then details how the three immediately bond with each other, with Neha especially approving of their queer relationship. But then, a plot development rather pivotal to this paper, Sameer's mother, Mummy Ji (Kirron Kher) soon enters the fray as she finds out about her son's pretend queer relationship and believing it to be true, visits the motley crew in Miami. And rather surprisingly, after initial disapproval, accepts her son's queer lover as a part of her "traditional" Indian household. In the midst of this all, both Kunal and Sameer start to develop a strong attraction towards Neha and make several attempts to woo her. Though she continues to

believe that they both belong with each other and suspects nothing.

Neha in turn starts to date her boss Abhimanyu Singh (Bobby Deol). As Neha starts to acknowledge her new relationship, Sameer and Kunal decide to break up her relationship by scaring Abhimanyu's son, Veer, about his future if he was to marry Neha. After succeeding in causing a rift between Neha and Abhimanyu, Sameer and Kunal finally admit to her that they are both straight and in love with her. This leads to Neha tearfully kicking Kunal and Sameer out of the apartment.

After a few months, Sameer and Kunal decide to attempt reconciliation with Neha at a fashion show in Miami. They confess to Neha and Abhimanyu about their manipulations of Veer, infuriating the two further. As Kunal and Sameer continue to beg for forgiveness, they get on the stage at the fashion show with the crowd egging them on to get on their knees and apologize profusely. The crowd asks Kunal and Sameer to kiss each other in a final attempt to gain forgiveness, and Kunal subsequently forces Sameer to kiss him.

Abhimanyu sees the gesture as an expression of their true love and respect for Neha and their friendship, and pushes her to forgive them. Finally, Kunal and Sameer propose to Abhimanyu for Neha. Two months later, Neha, Kunal and Sameer are sitting on the apartment's balcony, and Neha asks them if they felt anything for each other as they pretended to be gay. Kunal and Sameer get defensive and Neha leaves saying, "sorry, touchy topic." The final shot on the screen is of Sameer and Kunal, now alone, remembering the kiss.

This film at first sounds akin to archetypical heteronormative Bollywood fare. Here are two straight men pretending to be gay, living in Miami, shores away from India. My analysis will argue that *Dostana* is actually two films layered together in a mainstream Bollywood narrative. I will argue that the film, despite deploying stereotypes, queers the viewers' heteronormative gaze in their viewing of the film. This new, Bollywooded gaze creates queer visibility thereby creating

the possibility of an alternative to the heteronormative conceptions of queer identity.

### Scene Transcript

[Start Scene]

Mummy Ji (Sameer's Mother) waiting for Kunal at the flat he shares with Neha and Sameer, performs a traditional Indian ritual implemented in an Indian family when welcoming a new member, usually a son's bride into the household. As Mummy Ji performs the ritual, she smiles at Kunal and whispers, "welcome...come in" with a smile.

Sameer: Ma, what are you doing?

Mummy Ji: *Beta* (son), please forgive me, I couldn't understand your love at first...what sort of a mother am I that I was asking for a life of misery for my own son.

(At this point in the scene, Mummy Ji brings Kunal over to Sameer and takes out a pair of traditional heirloom bangles—another ritual usually performed between a new bride and the mother-in-law—before proceeding to hand them over to Kunal.)

Mummy Ji: These bangles...I had them made for my would-be daughter-in-law...now, truth be told, I don't know if you are my daughter-in-law or son-in-law...but whatever it might be, take these as a token from my end.

(Kunal takes the bangles but does not wear them.)

Mummy Ji: And try and keep a fast this year for the festival of Karva Chauth. I will send you the necessary items for it. I am now handing over my son to you...Take care of him.

Kunal: Come on Sam, touch Mom's feet and seek her blessings.

Mummy Ji: He called me Mom (with a giddy smile). She then turns to Neha who has been waiting in the background.

Mummy Ji: Thank you for introducing me to my son. Now listen to me, you also find a nice boy. I would have chosen you for my son but he is already booked now.

Neha: That's ok, Aunty. I am as much a part of Sam and Kunal's life as they are of mine.

[End Scene]

## Analysis

On the surface, the aforementioned scene could be interpreted as a quintessentially heteronormative stereotype and frame of gaze being deployed to neutralize the threat imposed by the presence of queer identity and sexuality. Kunal and Sameer, even though their gay identity is a pretense, still could be seen as posing a threat to the natural 'order of things' in the heteropatriarchal Indian family structure. Hence, the ideal way for the social structure to deal with this threat is to deploy recognizably heterosexual tropes of marriage, fidelity and family through the character of Mummy Ji.

One could argue that Mummy Ji is coercing the two or even policing them to package their queer relationship and identities into a heteronormative understanding of what a relationship should be—always with an active (male) partner and a passive (female) partner. The only way for queer sexuality and queer men to exist in the Indian family unit to 'heterowash' their queerness by existing in a family-recognized marriage. Here, I would like to contend that in actuality the heteronormative stereotype of a 'real' Indian family is being queered and appropriated through a subversive representation. The Indian family as a whole here is being reformulated around the presence of queer sexuality.

Rather than offering the viewer just a figurative treatment of a subject (the presence of a queer relationship in a Indian middle class family), here the narrative instead creates a completely new treatment of the subject at hand. The viewer is challenged to analyze and question their conception of what is a typical Indian family and at the same time also see an alternative take shape in front of them; an alternative where the normative and subversive exist in tandem.

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Mummy Ji, the bearer of the traditional gaze, is now challenging the heteropatriarchal socially constructed notion of what an Indian middle class family is and what their reaction to the presence of queerness should be. Through the performance of this traditional ritual between the two men

and the mother in the presence of people who are not part of what would be the traditional family unit, the dominant heterosexist ideology of what is a family is being queered. The perception that a family can only be made up of blood-related, heterosexual, straight members is fluidly displaced.

In fact, the new Indian family we now see is the very embodiment of what a queer Indian family would be. Queer as a definition moves beyond the limitations imposed by the categories of “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual” and “transgender” and in this case “the Indian family.” Here, it is avoiding closure of the family space and unit through its fluidity of signification and appropriation.

As feminist theorist Jackie Stacey notes, “queer can be played across diverse theoretical and political agendas with a range of different consequences” (Stacey 2007: 1). In this instance, the presence of queerness is giving the conception of the Indian family a generative and elusive life by refusing the grid of heteropatriarchal divisions, in conceiving of not only sexual identity but also of what and who is family, marriage and tradition. It is highlighting zones of fluidity, such as Kunal taking the bangles or Neha staking her claim over the boys, by blurring heteronormative conventions and visions.

In this decidedly queer moment, the film underpins and questions the heteronormative frames that define gender and sexuality but also family, culture and even religion. Instead of keeping homosexuality, the queerness, as a subtext, it brings it out with the performance of reimagined traditional practices and rituals which would generally be enacted in a heterosexual space. Hence, it turns the heterosexual space and ritual into a truly Foucauldian heterotopic space—a space where social reality is not only being reflected but also challenged to an extent. It allows for the heteronormative definition of queer, family and culture to be undone by highlighting their inherent performativity that can be adopted and re-structured easily. To situate this analysis into a theoretical framework, one can look at feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler’s argument in her 2004 work, *Undoing Gender*. In it, Butler discusses exactly



how in order to engender social transformation, to challenge the heteronormative gaze, it is queer moments from within a heteronormative frame that need to be deployed.

“The question of social transformation is a question of developing, within law, within psychiatry, within social and literary theory, a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have always been living” (Butler 2004: 219). Hence, it is real bodies, real existing social and cultural structures (like the Indian Family here in *Dostana*), which need to be the sites where these queer moments can be enacted and performed, just as heteropatriarchal moments are enacted and performed.

Butler further writes, “...the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation” (Butler 2004: 217). Hence, what we have here in *Dostana* is a corporeal site of social reproduction (in the form of Neha, Mummy Ji, Sameer, Kunal et al), a heterotopic space, an ambiguous terrain where we can have what are clearly competing (heteronormative and queer) claims being made, while a new social structure is explored.

The film here acknowledges the anxiety that queer identity and sexuality evokes under the heteronormative gaze. At the same time it also acknowledges that this difference from the heterosexual/heteronormative already exists within the social order and structure. The push is for the existing social order to queer itself or at least queer its gaze.

Even though it is a pretend-gay identity for both Sameer and Kunal, it is still brought more and more into the mainstream frame of gaze by an agent who would otherwise be policing and pushing this queerness back into the proverbial closet. In doing so, the film is also directing the mainstream Indian viewer, through Mummy Ji, to do so. The existing normative social order and reality in which the viewer exists as a whole is being directed to look within and see the queerness which already exists, and acknowledge it.

The attempt in the film is to show that the symbolic order need not necessarily be exclusionary. So, as Butler discusses in her work, what is being advocated for here is for working in the social to achieve recognition for marginalized groups (gay men here) by making socio-cultural norms habitable and liveable for queer sexualities and identities. With this almost idealistic transitioning of the gaze of the character of Mummy Ji, the film positions the audience to desire this queer family, it positions them to yearn for the union of disparate elements—Mummy Ji, Sameer, Kunal and Neha – by unifying them in the image of the home and the Indian family. Like Butler’s model of queer theory, these moments in *Dostana* offer queerness visibility in the existing gaze by conferring the agency on recognized social actors such as Mummy Ji to highlight the social and culture’s capacity for transformation, going beyond just liberal inclusiveness.

In *Dostana*, the dominant Indian patriarchal order does not remain stable as it incorporates these initially peripheral queer sexualities, identities, families and relationships into the previously heteronormative fold. This is done by not ingesting them into the existing order of things but by allowing them to become the centre through a reformulation of traditional Indian rituals and practices – rearticulating what it means to be “normal” or “Indian” or “queer.”

The queer identity and sexuality in *Dostana* is not simply entering society on heterosexuality’s terms; rather, these terms are being reformulated by seizing upon instabilities in the heteronormative order of things and the heteronormative gaze to elaborate previously unarticulated ways of life.

The queer identity and sexuality in *Dostana* is not simply entering society on heterosexuality’s terms; rather, these terms are being reformulated by seizing upon instabilities in the heteronormative order of things and the heteronormative gaze to elaborate previously unarticulated ways of life. Here queerness is not just functioning as the force that prevents a particular social order from coinciding with itself. Rather, the inclusion of the queer highlighting the social reality and norms’ fluidity and its intrinsic capacity for change.

Mummy Ji, who initially laments that she had not been able to ‘protect’ her son Sameer, quickly transitions into complete acceptance of Sameer and Kunal’s gay relationship and love. Hence, a social actor from within the home is scrubbing the

notion of the “death drive” that homosexuality has come to represent and embody, as argued by Lee Edelman. As Dasgupta notes:

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 Indianness and religion (2012: 4).

In the process of enacting these queer moments, the film indeed projects an ethical future for queer sexuality and identity in the Indian social structure, even with its exaggerated, campy narrative. The notion of the child symbolic of the future is deployed but it is then quickly dismissed. The queer is hence not seen as the “...the violent undoing of meaning, the loss of identity and coherence, the unnatural access to jouissance...” (Edelman 2004: 132).

Mummy Ji and hence Indianess never imposes any assimilationist demands or norms on the queer relationship and identity of her son and Kunal. By allocating her consent to the relationship between Sameer and Kunal and recognizing their homosexuality, Mummy Ji, symbolically standing in for the Hindu, patriarchal family and mainstream heteronormative culture, consents to the birth of this new queer Indian family; a new family that is inclusive of queer sexuality and identity and desire forming a connected group around the mother who now stands as an emblem of the traditional merging with the queer.

## Conclusion

As I conclude this paper, I would like to again turn to theorist Judith Butler and her work, *Antigone's Claim*. Antigone's plea is that the love she has for her brother needs to become comprehensible through the symbolic order that already exists around her. The impetus is on the social structure to acknowledge and accept her queer desire that exists within it. This notion of inclusiveness, though far more radical in Butler's

work, is to an extent enacted in *Dostana* as well. Like Butler, *Dostana* advocates making the social habitable for non-normative desire and identities by acknowledging that they can and already do exist in this space.

The disruption of the normative in *Dostana* is definitely not radical but at the same time it is also not entirely apolitical. Embedded in all the tropes and jokes is a move to recognize marginalized sexual identities. The Indian home, family and social structure enacted in *Dostana* is not entirely stable, rather the film continually signals at its fluidity and our ability to recast it. The film interpolates queer identity into an already established way of life for the audience. Acting as a heterotopic space it allows for them to conceive what acknowledging the difference that exists within would be like.

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The use of humour, gay stereotypes and tropes in the film might not be the kind of politics that the queer movement in India requires, but the film remains a major progression from previous attempts. The film confers on the social a sense of progressiveness and inclusion, which is also a necessity for the queer rights movement in India. Political change and social change need to go hand in hand, after all. Here we have queer sexuality and identity not just serving as a prop or a product of pure class privilege associated with a 'western lifestyle' but rather as the binding agent of the entire narrative. It makes the possibility of a queer son in an Indian family plausible and acceptable. Unlike previous mainstream films, *Dostana* acknowledges the presence of queer desire but it never quite completely coerces it back into inevitability of heterosexuality. It takes the audience to the same window but coerces them to look at what they see a bit more closely, noticing all that is different. How Bollywood and the audience now proceed from this juncture is still a work in progress.

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