

The Changing Image of the Hero in Hindi Films

Ashok Row Kavi

SUMMARY. Beneath the surface of the Bollywood cinema is a culture relating gay culture trying to break free, waiting for the hero to emerge from subtext into text. For now, in what we might call a period of transition, the Bollywood hero has been (particularly in the past three decades) the focus of increased homoeroticization, his body becoming a spectacle at every turn. Unfortunately, what has facilitated this is a veiled (and sometimes not-so-veiled) form of marriage in which the heroine's role is minimized such that, rather than an erotic filmic character falling in love with the hero, the audience is invited to see the macho (and perhaps narcissistic) hero as unattainable and therefore available for homoerotic desire. [Article copies available free from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>>]

One has just to see two Hindi motion pictures separated by nearly two decades. One is *Achyut Kanya*—"The Untouchable Girl"—produced by the now-defunct Bombay Talkies in the 1940s; the other is *Judwa*—"Twin"

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self-centered male eroticism, of unattached-ness and solitude, reached its zenith in Vijay Anand's *Guide* (1965), where the heroine just disappears in a puff of ambiguity while the hero becomes a martyr to the rain-gods! "Parama Yagna" (human sacrifice) personified.

The first significant step in the full eroticization of the male was in the rise of the elastic hero Shammi Kapoor, from the "RK" clan.¹ Shammi Kapoor achieved this eroticization through a highly personalized form of high camp behavior and acting which made himself the focus of attention. The heroine in all of his movies was a silent, still, and slightly startled persona who drew attention away from herself through a very low-profile performance. Meanwhile, dancing and prancing around her in a mixture of plastic and erratic movements would be the hero, as he redirects the audience's attention to his highly vibrant, sexualized performance. But even Shammi did not strip, show his bare waxed chest, or flaunt the pelvic movements with which the hero of the eighties and nineties frontally assaults the spectator.

Shammi not only brought freshness to his roles, but he externalized the character of the hero himself. The hero now was no more the repository of the traditional value system, which had shaped the Indian Renaissance and the struggle for India's freedom; he was instead a fragile, faithful symbol of the younger Indian, born post-Independence. This post-Freedom persona of the hero lays more stress on the physicality of the young man himself. The heroine was not only no longer the vehicle wherein desire was addressed, but she also slowly shifted erotic values away from herself and back to the male by sometimes sexually teasing and touching the hero on his chest and back. Shammi Kapoor's heroines were usually all new-comers, such as Asha Parikh, Amita, and Vidya Sinha. Voluptuous and vapid, these three would move into Hindi filmdom like so many zombie-like dolls. Unlike older heroines such as Nargis or Madhubala, they did not, or simply could not, support storylines in their own right. They were merely appendages to this high drama of the eroticization of the male, and did not represent a legitimate heterosexual partner for the hero to engage. In the 1960s, the subtle homosexual themes in director Raj Kapoor's *Sangam* (1964) and Satyen Bose's *Dosti* (1964) had already heralded the marginalization of the heroine. It is thus ironic that the lascivious Vyjayantimala, who had previously risen to high erotic eminence in such films as Bimal Roy's *Madhumati* (1958), later saw her status as sex-symbol marginalized in *Sangam*. One of her clones, Padmini, tried to demonstrate the very limits of female erotica in Radhu Karmakar's *Jis Desh Mein Ganga Behti Hai* (1960). But, in only one of her earlier films, the Indian censor board could not handle Padmini's wet body writhing under a waterfall, a scandalous scene which prompted debates galore in the Indian press.

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al Amroshi) took India's subterranean gay world by storm, a film in which the heroine's stature as the film's erotic focus was effectively destroyed. There is an incredible exchange of dialogue in the film, in which the heroine Meena Kumari actually tells a *tongawalla* to "take her to the graveyard" when she is asked about her destination—it marks the death of her female eroticization as well. Meena Kumari was on her last legs in real life, and there was indeed poignant behind-the-scenes news of how her husband was counting her financial assets while she lay on her deathbed.

However, a new trend started with a completely new generation: the ubiquitous Amitabh Bachchan. Amitabh's popular yet subtle anti-hero image started with Prakesh Mehra's *Zanjeer* (1973), but, with his career still in its chrysalis stage, he had already come into his own with the role of a life-time in *Anand* (1971), in which he evoked a silent, quiet, brooding sexuality. The plot is about a dying cancer patient who is looked after by a wonderfully humane doctor (Amitabh). The doctor, a paragon of virtue, makes his presence felt through a tacit yet strongly homoerotic bond with the dying patient. The patient, played by the then-superhero Rajesh Khanna, effectively killed the last of the chocolate heroes. Rajkesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan also did a terrific job in Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Namak Haram* (1973), where the homoerotic male bond between the two principals is delineated with disarming clarity. In a revealing scene in the same year's *Zanjeer*, Amitabh is made the focus of "yaari" (male bond) in a highly sensual male dance performed by the evergreen Pran as a pathan. The pathan tribes, from the north-west frontier province, have indeed always been open in their displays of homoeroticism.

This sophisticated, concerted effort at shifting the erotic focus onto the hero and gently pushing the heroine into the background had been effectively represented in *Zanjeer*, a watershed in Hindi filmdom. It inaugurated the slow but steady climb of the homoerotic themes that continued with the Amitabh-Dharmendra combination in *Sholay* (1975), where an equally homoerotic song was enacted openly for audiences. The song—*Yeh Dosti, Hum Nahi Todenge* ("We Shall Never Break This Bond of Friendship")—features lyrics plainly homosexual in content. One verse, openly sexual, says: "I will take anything from you"—"Tere Liye Lelenge." "Lelenge" is Hindi street slang for the phrase "getting fucked." Amitabh, only apparently the most heterosexual of Hindi film heroes, may have initiated his career with a strong silent-type image, but he also went on to play with gender. In Prakash Mehra's *Laawaris* (1981), Amitabh plays a cross-dresser, in full drag singing "Mere Angane Mein Tera Khya kaam Hai" ("What Business Do You Have in My Backyard?"). Amitabh's insistence on downright homosexual themes could verge on misogyny, signalling movies to completely focus on men to the utter exclusion of women.

Though there would be women-centered films, in which actresses such as Dimple Kapadia, Rekha, and others tried to reverse the trend, Amitabh's towering personality defeated them at the box office. Even Rekha's *Umrao Jaan* (1981) was just a cult period movie in the mold of the gay-campy *Pakeezah*; its popularity was further debilitated by Muzaffar Ali's Muslim-centric direction. Even the *mujra* (dancing girl song) in *Umrao Jaan*, "Dil Cheeze Khya Hai," became a gay theme song played out—and acted upon—by gay men.

It was in the film *Silsila* (1981, directed by Yash Chopra) that our homosexual theme was so casually, and yet so openly, brought up that it escaped even most gay men. The film was said to reflect a so-called real life scandal—between Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha, the then top pair in filmhood. Never mind the parallel gossip about an alleged lesbian affair between Rekha and her private secretary Farhah. The film monthly *Cine Blitz* was sued for Rs. six crores (Rs. 60 million) by Rekha for printing pictures of Rekha and a rather butch Farhah together; it got mysteriously sorted out with a simple apology. Nevertheless, in *Silsila*, the male duo, Amitabh Bachchan and Shashi Kapoor, are showering together when the soap drops to the floor. When each anticipates the other bending down, suddenly both start laughing uproariously and Shashi Kapoor says, "I'm not going to bend down. I know what happened last time." This is the clearest reference to the "penetrating" image of Amitabh Bachchan.

The gay construct in *Silsila* is of gay men as we recognize gay constructions in the West. There is no playing around with gender; it is a straightforward, clearcut sexual bonding held above the usual male bonding revealed in Hindi cinema through the decades. However, this construction has required a slow and steady evolution through numerous years of groping in the jungles of male-bonding themes. When Shashi Kapoor dies in *Silsila*, Amitabh smashes a TV set in grief, becomes unstably emotional, and otherwise suffers a breakdown. His secondary consolation prize is the film's perfunctory heroine, Rekha, who cuddles and comforts him, saying, "Well, you'll have to be happy with me." This is a telling commentary on the state of the Hindi film heroine.

There have been openly male bonding-themes in Hindi films, as in Mahesh Bhatt's 1991 *Saathi* (whose title means "Friend," anyway), and even *Veeru Dada*. Mahesh Bhatt, who has been mostly open about his own bisexual nature, has even tried to demonize and criminalize the *hijra* sexual minority in *Sadak* (1991), in which the veteran Sadashiv Amrapurkar plays a hijra who is involved with criminal rackets. Mahesh Bhatt's pictures, seemingly not a part of mainstream Hindi cinema, wound up bombing at the box office. The brilliant woman director Kalpana Lajmi did try to make a film, *Darmiyan*, addressing alternative sexuality, but even she, too, ended up criminalizing

sexual minority under great stress in India's modernizing economy. The film was also a box office failure, largely because gay men were furious about how depressing alternative sexuality was portrayed to be. It was the first time that many gay men had started getting angry about the presentation of gay lifestyles.

Nevertheless, the point stands that the gay construct itself is now firmly entrenched in Indian society. The mass-circulated Hindi gossip magazines openly mention the gay lifestyle of many of the top stars in Hindi cinema. The Hindi magazine "Mayapuri" even runs features where the heads of Hindi heroes (Akshay Kumar is my favorite) are superimposed on female torsos. The magazine, a top-seller at half a million copies, is evidence that there is obviously a market out there that likes to see its heroes gender-bending. There are gay scripts floating around in Bollywood. Gay themes have already been attempted in a series of TV programs, and homosexuality and lesbianism have become central themes on talk shows. Still, a *real* mainstream gay theme film will be an unforgettable landmark in Hindi cinema.

NOTE

1. Shammi Kapoor is the son of early film actor Prithviraj Kapoor. He is also the brother of actor-director Raj Kapoor, and brother of actor Shashi Kapoor. (Ed.)