

Interrogating Queerness and Patriarchal Politics in Abhishek Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya*

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Abstract

This article will explore the representation of the politics of subversive lesbian bonding in Abhishek Chaubey's Bollywood film *Dedh Ishqiya* (trans One and Half Love) released in 2014. The film owes part of its title to Chaubey's earlier film *Ishqiya* (trans. Love) released in 2010 and it is partly a sequel in the sense that two of the male lead characters, Khalujan played by veteran and prolific Indian actor Nasiruddin Shah and Babban played by the young Arshad Warsi are integral parts of both the films. In fact, if *Ishqiya* narrated the romantic and erotic interactions of Khalujan and Babban with the seductive and deceptive widow Krishna Verma played by Vidya Balan, *Dedh Ishqiya* narrates their love stories with Begum Para and Muniya, respectively. The significant departure is that the heteronormative overtures of the earlier film give way to the submerged homoerotic aspects of its lesbian sequel. The main ideas that this paper is going to explore include a critical understanding of the 'queer' and transgressive nature of Begum and Muniya's relationship and the problems and contradictions of such a same-sex bonding in the context of a patriarchal and conservative Indian social life. The film successfully challenges the so-called norms of a heteronormative society and unsettles the binaries and discursive constructs of romantic love and heterosexual courtships. The film strongly critiques the patriarchal institutions of marriage and re-marriage as safe and necessary survival options for women and interrogates the discursive constructs of patriarchal politics endorsing such subordination and subjection of women. But before going into a full-blown analysis of the film's representation of two lesbian Muslim women and their romantic bonding, my paper will briefly refer to the social and cultural context of lesbian love in India.

Keywords: Queerness, Lesbian Politics, Film Studies, Marginalised Communities.

In the eyes of the laws in India, homosexuality is a taboo and still considered a criminal offence. The Supreme Court verdict on reinforcement of the Indian Penal Code Section no. 377 was a major setback to the respectable and liberal

humanist aims and expectations of the male and female homosexual communities in India. Under this act, homosexual relationships have not been given any legal acceptance and the urge towards same-sex coupling has been labelled as both ‘unnatural’ and ‘criminal’ to reinstate the age-old myths and prejudices against an Indian citizen’s homosexual orientations. The storm of protests from major gay and lesbian groups, NGOs and human rights activists have failed to change the conservative orientations of the Indian judiciary who have put down the appeal from the homosexual communities and refused to legalize homosexuality in India. Jyoti Puri in her research monograph analyses this state monitored understanding of the domain of sexual privacy indicates the overbearing nature of political and administrative units in India to invade the personal space assigned to sexual freedom (15). However, due to continuous movements launched by LGBTQ communities and human right activists, the Supreme Court of India was forced to re-consider this ban, and on 6th September 2018, homosexuality was finally legalized in India (Kirpal 24-25). But due to the cultural climate of regressive and self-contradictory societal ethics, if the position of the male homosexual in India is still socially unstable and unacceptable, then except for in the metropolis the female homosexuals are ‘doubly’ disadvantaged, both for being the second sex and for their same-sex orientations and partner preferences.

Charu Gupta’s book on the issues of female sexuality in British India entitled *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (2001) emphasizes that “in India feminists have pointed out that there has broadly been a ‘conspiracy of silence’ regarding [female] sexuality,” and this is more so in case of Muslim women (2-3).

Historically, the Muslim community in India has denied equality, education and freedom to explore the public sphere to their women, confining them to zenanas and harems, the Muslim equivalent of the private sphere. This rigidity and regimentation have been modified with the passage of time, but by and large the Muslim women of the aristocratic and average backgrounds are denied many rights and privileges granted to the male members of their community. Hence, the lives of these women have been eclipsed by the problems of obscurity and anonymity with most of them failing to find a voice and articulate their closet experiences of love, marriage, sexuality and childbirths. Anjali Arondekar argues in her essay “Border/line Sex: Queer Post colonialities or How Race matters Outside the U. S.” that perceptions about Muslim sexuality pertains mostly to male heterosexual and homosexual experiences, and Muslims in pre-modern ideas of the West were attacked for their sexual licentious while now that attack

is re-ordered and legitimized in the name of sexual repression (551). However, she also asserts that there is a refusal to discuss the individual voices and experiences of Muslim women who are at the receiving end of all kinds of sexual repression that now typifies the whole community. These contradictions in the public sphere to grant wider relief to sexuality of the Muslim women problematize the presence and visibility of the Muslim 'lesbian' woman to a great extent.

Both Gita Thadani in her pioneering work *Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India* published in 1996 and veteran queer historian Ruth Vanita claim that the efflorescence of a harem culture among Muslim men maintaining many wives simultaneously and the complete denial of public access to women produced female-female bonding among women kept confined together. Instead of becoming rivals for male sexual attention, they often compensated for the sexual indifference of their much-married and philandering Muslim husbands by getting into intimate, meaningful lesbian bondings with each other described as *sakhiyani* or female friendship. This traditional concept of *sakhiyani* often defied differences of age and class and was somewhat like described in the words of Adrienne Rich as "lesbian continuum" which she explains in the following words:

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range through each woman's life and throughout history of woman identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support ... we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism.' (648-649)

Rich's notions regarding the sharing of a strong emotional and psychological affinity between lesbian women is the essence of *sakhiyani* too. *Sakhiyani* is not merely physical but transcended sexual desires to emancipate the female minds from the clutches of patriarchal indoctrination. Thus, the rich sub-culture of the closet lesbian bonding of *sakhiyani* has been active among Muslim women consigned a remote and marginal existence by Muslim patriarchy; and these hidden lesbian intimacies continued to exist despite the ethical and religious

dictums against female homosexuality in Islamic laws and religion. These same-sex relationships existed as proofs of female articulation of sexual freedom and humanitarian sisterhood. In other words, these were muted instances of female resistance against the coercive rules of Muslim patriarchy and the misogynist implications of the Koran. *Sakhiyani* enabled a process of self-empowerment that strengthened these women with more will power and self-confidence to resist patriarchal victimization. A similarly repressed kind of female friendship as claimed by Western lesbian theorist Valerie Traub was also foundational to the formation of female sexual identity in Renaissance England where “early modern England witnessed a renaissance of representations of female homoerotic desire” in literature, paintings, illustrations, anatomy books, pornographic texts and other cultural texts (247). Traub points out that while on the one hand there was a strong moral and socio-ethical impulse within Renaissance patriarchy to condemn lesbian desire on the other hand there were vivid and ubiquitous cultural representation of such female-female desire and her research was “to balance the supports of identity and the pleasures of identification with a recognition of the instability of these supports and the problematic nature of these pleasures” (262).

More recent criticism on queer studies in India have focused on the issues of power equations between queer subjects and the heteronormative society (Upadhyay and Rabecca, 2017); the emergence of nationalist, colonial and neo-liberal ideologies to represent queerness (Puar 2017); the complicit and defiant aspects of queer politics (Judge 2018) and the ways in which queer subjects can be identified with subaltern politics of difference (Chatterjee 2018). In this emerging theoretical matrix, there has been a repeated interest in exploring the various nuances of the complex interface between queer subjectivity and homoeroticism and homo-nationalism. Recent criticism on queer politics in India have tried to establish that despite the increasing visibility of heterosexuality in the public domain in a globalized, neo-liberal state, the space assigned to the female homosexual is still marginal and implies invisibility and oblivion. The level of tolerance that the Indian media and popular culture forms (cinema, soaps and serials, advertisements, web series on OTT platforms) have achieved towards sexually explicit content is much higher and improved, but the censorious attitude towards homosexuality still remains.

There has been a spate of films on alternative sexualities in the Bollywood industry mostly to probe the sensitive and problematic aspects of queer individuals and their identity crisis in a repressive community. There are films on gays like

My Brother...*Nikhil* (2005), *Dostana* (2008), *Aligarh* (2015), *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), *Badhaai Ho* (2022) among others. There have also been quite a few Bollywood films on lesbian women in India – *Fire* (1996), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) and *Ek Ladki Ko DekhaToh Aisa Laga* (2019), *Badhaai Ho* (2022) and some more too. Regional films in vernacular have also tried to project queer subjects as protagonists in socially challenging and meaningful narratives in the Indian context. Thus, whether by poking fun at gay sex (*Dostana*) or trying to highlight the real life struggles of queer protagonists (*Aligarh*) and by unanimously trying to create a liberal narrative about the troublesome and contradictory interface between the great Indian family system and values and the contrary demands of homosexual freedom, these films have brought the taboo subject of homosexuality to the forefront and garnered active affective and ethical responses from the collective and popular cultural imaginary associated with the issue of viewership of Bollywood films. The rising popularity and multiplex-going urban audience's acceptance of a hybrid type of film that brings together the serious reflections on social issues and also provides colourful and meaningful entertainment has enabled contemporary directors to focus on the difficulties of gay and lesbian subjects in the Indian social context that demand both serious critique and playful exposure leading to a broader socio-cultural awareness.

In this respect, the release of the film *Dedh Ishqiya* in January 2014 is a significant step in the history of cinematic representation of lesbianism on the Indian big screen. It strikes the hornet's nest by choosing a bold and controversial subject in a male-dominated and heteronormative film industry, but the style of presentation is such that it appeals to not just a niche audience but a wider section of the Indian cine-goers. *Dedh Ishqiya* as a film harks back upon this age-old practice of *sakhiyani* among Muslim women and also protests against the regressive denial of legal sanction to same-sex love by the law-makers in India. The director indicates that despite the public and legal resistance to same-sex love on moral grounds, they will continue to flourish and endure at individual and private levels of human experiences to which law and societal morality has no access, or has no importance or influence. The heteronormative relations are apparently the focus of the film, but behind it hide the real relationship that grows between the two women in the film. By showing the same sex relationship between two women the director Abhishek Chaubey subtly and ironically questions the stable foundations of romantic love, courtships and marriages sanctioned as sacrosanct by Indian patriarchal ideologies.

He offers alternative and fresh perceptions on gender and sexual stereotypes as this film conflates both techniques from commercial and parallel cinema and become a hybrid type of film that offers self-reflexive entertainment. At the helm, Chaubey is capable of handling the issue of female bonding with subtlety, humour and realism and posits the central female-female relationship in a matrix of complex and deceptive heterosexual social world that has very little awareness and tolerance about lesbian existence. There are two major reasons why this film did not invite so much public and fundamentalist rage like Deepa Mehta's cult lesbian film *Fire* released in 1996. Firstly, *Dedh Ishqiya* is a sequel to the popular and critically acclaimed *Ishqiya* (2010) which went on to become a box-office success for its portrayal of the heterosexual love triangle of two men and a widow. It is apparently heterosexual in mould as it deals with the courtship of Begum Para by the aged conman Khalujan posing as the Nawab of Chandpur and the love plot between Muniya, Begum's confidante and partner and the other conman, Babban. The hidden 'romantic friendship' of the Begum and Muniya is not the focus of the film though it is the relationship that survives and succeeds unlike the vague and hypocritical heterosexual couplings shown in the film. The second possible reason that the film had someone as iconic and sexually appealing like Madhuri Dixit in its lead role, an actress who ruled the hearts of men and the box-office in 90s Bollywood, and this film was her comeback venture. Having chosen to play a lesbian subject, she uses her charm and gravity to convince and attract the audiences to the theatres.

If we analyse the plot, scenes and overall narrative thrust of the film, we can easily detect how the director narrativizes the interplay of queer subversive with the larger and more malevolent and cunning forces of patriarchal heterosexism. Madhuri Dixit's portrayal of Begum Para comes across as a bisexual in the sense that she was previously in a heterosexual marriage with the Nawab of Mamudabad till his death and even apparently wants another heterosexual match with a poet as per her deceased husband's wishes. Hence, the reality of her lesbian identity is not directly revealed until the end of the film. The same can be said about her lesbian partner, confidante and servant Muniya who boldly flirts and titillates men like Babban. In fact, these two women share a deep bonding in an overtly heteronormative society where they cannot establish their lesbian relationship openly, and hence function as lesbians masquerading as heterosexuals. Hence, the director's representation of their relationship is oblique and covert and a lot of space is granted to the possibilities of romance with the violent, fraudulent and selfish men around them. The film uses lot of insinuations

and innuendoes to represent queer love. The film ironically engages with the possibilities of an idealised and normative male-female relationship only to shift its final emphasis upon a beautiful and serene same-sex coupling of two women disillusioned with the exactions and unreliability of the patriarchal society they belong to. In a female same sex relationship, the butch is the dominant male equivalent and the feminine and passive 'femme' depends on her. These identities are dialectical and relational, but in this film the archetypal homoerotic binary has been complicated by their interactions with the more powerful and static domains of heterosexism and patriarchy. The butch-femme role playing in the film is rendered complex by Abhishek Chaubey's projection of two beautiful and voluptuous women who magnify the performative nature of all gender identities and to use the words of Teresa de Lauretis, this performative nature of the lesbian identity acts as a kind of "reverse discourse," one which stands as "the representation of lesbian desire against both the discourse of homo-sexuality and the feminist account of lesbianism as woman-identification" (146). However, the preference she gives to the subversive potential of the "mannish lesbian" does not figure in the film where the two women mostly act coy and assume male roles and prerogatives only out of necessity. The internal contradictions inherent in this configuration of butch/femme produce a "systematic challenge to the necessary connection between gender and sexuality while appearing to reaffirm heterosexuality and [yet] forcing a consciousness of the artificiality and constructed-ness of gender positions" (Roof 245).

It is important to critically engage further with the significant scenes and plot of the film to prove how effectively queer relationships are prioritized by the two women in the film. The male voice-over introducing the Begum in the film prays to God that she settles for a match this year as she has been stalling her choice of a new nawab for about three years in a row and the reasons are not known to anyone publicly. Even Jaan Mohamaad, the powerful and influential local MLA disguised as poet and Nawab is pursuing her for the last two years and for mysterious reasons, yet the Begum resolutely avoids his romantic advances. In the mushaira or a poet's competition ceremony she is introduced to her wannabe suitors by her *sakhi* Muniya, and despite the best efforts of the male suitors Begum playfully avoids their company. Instead, within the closet she is seen close and intimate with Muniya and shares her world with her as is typical within any butch-femme bonding. Quoting from a film review it can be said that:

Begum Para's stunning and labyrinthine palace complements the story with its many layers wonderfully. Setu's elegant cinematography, while giving your retinas a spa massage, also plays on the idea of layers visually. And so, for example, when we see the gathered audience for the shayari contest, we see them from the top, through a net of bulbs that serve to both illuminate and obscure. There's a scene in which cinematographer Setu's use of shadow play that will haunt your dreams for days. (Fadnavis 2014)

The reviewer surely makes reference to the scene of physical intimacy between the two leading ladies that is represented as a 'closeted act' and hence, represented through a deliberately obscuring film technique that both titillates and excites the audience's erotic imagination. Like, all the treachery and deception around, there is also a strange sense of mystery that is imparted to the Begum-Muniya closet relationship and surely there are broad hints that there are more than what meets the naked eye. In a way that is a pivotal scene in the play as far as the assertion of their closeted lesbian identity is concerned—it is strongly implied and obliquely represented. The director playfully asserts the importance and value of their same-sex relationship that determines the (un)predictable ending of the film.

However, the competitive and disturbing presence of male suitors is a source of both dark humour and suppressed contempt in the narrative. This time among the Begum's suitors is the arch-trickster Khalujan disguised as the Nawab of Chandpur who tries to seduce her with his exuberant poetry and even inspires her to revive her dancing skills. He also hands to her the precious necklace stolen from one of the jewellery shops to convince her about his wealthy background and chivalrous nature. But the Begum's joy of freedom and artistic fulfilment after she starts dancing again is not shared with Khalu but with Muniya again. In a significant scene in the film, Begum dances with Muniya celebrating their *sakhiyani* and the two men dying for their romantic attention keeps peeping at them from the stained-glass windows, suggesting that this world of queer women is not meant to be penetrated. The Khalu-Babban male-male bonding is shown as worldly, deceptive and hypocritical as they always come together to execute criminal plots and dupe innocent people. Ironically, they are shown as morally wicked and materialistic men who cannot and do not understand the beauty and intricacy of female nature. If the two same sex pairs are compared, we find a lack of depth and trust in the male pair. Khalu and Babban chemistry

is strongly enjoyable as it generates black comedy but the core of the film belongs to the two intense women—Begum and Muniya. They engage in role-playing and masquerade as nubile and attractive women, yet in reality they are dismissive and suspicious about male company. They do not trust the men around them and never share any warmth or affective bonding with these selfish, opportunistic and decadent suitors.

Thus, in another significant scene that follows, the distressful Begum recalling her traumatic and repressive conjugal life with the Nawab keeps staining with ink the pages of an old album containing photographs from her early married life. However, in this unsettling moment she is soothed and controlled by Muniya. Through this scene the director wants to make a significant statement. The Begum wants to erase her heterosexual self and her contacts with men and her memories of a marriage that was dominated by her husband's chauvinistic whims and prejudices. She has no genuine intentions of getting married for the sake of it. The love and sexual attention she and her *sakhi* get from the men around them are false and dominated by greed, sexism and selfishness and hence, they never hesitate to manipulate and exploit these men for money. Since the Begum was rendered bankrupt, she plots with Muniya to extract money from any of her suitors and finally consolidate their own lesbian relationship.

Finally, the problematic issue of commodification of lesbian love experiences of Indian women by the film industry arises here. The director does try to capitalize on the beauty and glamour of the beauty queen of the 90s, the lively and voluptuous Madhuri Dixit by making her look attractive in fine and expensive costumes and perform in colourful and sexually nuanced songs. Muniya played by Huma Querishi is also quite curvy, seductive and fetching. But the audience must not be misled by these exterior and superficial features of these two women as they pretend to be very 'womanly' and 'feminine' to catch male attention, but in reality, they are not interested in stable and meaningful relations with the opposite sex. The director does not commodify the bodies and looks of these two closeted lesbian women as does more commercial and shallow films like *Girlfriend* (2004) where the lesbian girl Tanya played by Isha Koppikar is projected as aggressive, abnormal and explicitly sensual. In mainstream films like these, homosexual girls are identified by their brazen attitude and bold display of flesh that this film does not endorse or exhibit. Even the physical intimacy and lovemaking scenes are subtle and merely suggested rather than overt and gross portrayal. Chaubey's film lacks the usual indecency and insensitivity with

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which homosexual women have been represented in Bollywood films to titillate male voyeuristic curiosity about lesbian lovemaking and overtly sexual self-fashioning. It steers clear of recycling performative constructs associated with representation of lesbians in popular culture.

Eminent film critic Anupama Chopra in her review of the film for *The Hindustan Times* opines that:

There are nawabs, sher-o-shairi, and a courtly old-world romance but make no mistake, this is a twisted theatre of the absurd in which the gamut of human folly—greed, decadence, deceit, stupidity—is laid out for us.... Best of all, the film gives us women who are unapologetically scheming and lusty. They break all the rules and get away with it. It's wonderfully refreshing.

Chopra highlights how in a corrupt and decadent world, these two women are not expected to conform to every female virtue attributed to women by patriarchy, but they also can play around with the societal norms and conventions creating a playfully unsettling vision. They are grey characters in a typically fallen, decadent and violent world dominated by treachery, bloodshed and ruthlessness. But they cannot be described as morally culpable since the men they come across are even more debased and wicked. The director even problematizes the typical butch-femme patterns in his representation of the Begum and her sakhi, Muniya. The Begum is supposedly the “butch” figure in the relationship for her superior beauty, talents, class and societal position, but her lower class “femme” partner Muniya appears to be stronger in terms of having more access to the public sphere, physical strength and a certain rough-and-touch attitude especially displayed during the fighting scenes where she carries and uses a gun effectively. So the binaries of dominance and subjugation are re-invented by these queer characters who play butch and femme roles interchangeably to make their relationship work and do not stick to any pre-determined gender roles. The irony and fluidity with which the butch-femme hierarchy is treated allows scope for transgressing and refuting any flat imitation and recycling of the power politics within heterosexual relationships.

In the last scene, their secret *sakhiyani* comes alive before both Khalu and Babban and the audience when they escape in a hatchback car in a truly Ridley Scott's queer film *Thelma and Louise* style, driving their way to the new and unknown horizon. Finally, after one and a half months later, they write back to Khalujan and Babban sharing the news of their success in setting up their own