
Something is happening: Queerness in the Films of Karan Johar

by

Margaret Redlich

Abstract: In *Dostana* (2008), an Indian mother learns that her son is gay. She declares she will take him back to London where he will be better, but an older Indian gay man, witnessing this, stops her and cries out “Look at me! Miami or London, your son is gay! He likes men! Wake up!” Homosexuality strikes at the very core of the Indian identity. Although it has long been present in Indian popular culture, it has been camouflaged by the concept of “yaari” love, a love between friends that can be closer than that between a man and wife. Meanwhile, as recently as the late eighties, Indian physicians still considered homosexuality to be a disease, treatable by electric shock. In my paper – through an analytical reading of Karan Johar’s movies – I argue that his way of presenting the homosexual couple slowly brings queerness into the light, avoiding controversy in the Indian public sphere.

Although homosexuality in India is still a taboo subject, an increasing number of Indian movies in recent years deal with queerness. These generally fall into two categories: the artistic film that treats homosexuality as a societal issue and is barely addressed only to the Indian public, and the mainstream film that deals with it purely as comedy. Nonetheless more and more films have begun to have gay side characters.

Karan Johar’s movies bring homosexuality into the light by treating the subject in a different way. Johar’s *Dostana* (2008), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (*KHNH*) (2003), and *Student of the Year* (*SOTY*) (2010) are both popular and progressive. A close textual analysis reveals the ways Johar balances mainstream concerns with subversive elements, which allowed his message of acceptance to influence a large number of South Asians. Johar uses his films to support the gay community’s struggle for acknowledgement including blatant queer elements to the plot and for acceptance positioning his characters and stars as accepted by the gay community.

The main difference between art house films and Johar’s films lay in their audience. While *Dostana* was 2008’s 10th most profitable movie in India (boxof-

· Margaret Redlich holds a Masters of Cinema and Media Studies at DePaul University Her research focus on Indian popular culture. mredlich21@gmail.com

ficemojo.com 2014), *Fire* was not even released in Indian theaters until after it had been out in the West for more than a year, while the most well-known parallel movie in India on the issue, Onir's *I Am* (2011) – which won a National Award – was still a box-office flop (Adesara 2011). Johar managed to craft a film that included a message of gay acceptance without sacrificing audience reach.

Johar has been including queer messages in his films from the beginning. His first film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*KKHH*) (1997) revolves around the unspoken love between two friends. It deals with the idea of *yaari*¹ love through the relationship between Anjali, played by Kajol, and Rahul, played by Shahrukh Khan.

KKHH establishes Anjali and Rahul as “best friends”. In fact, Anjali describes them as *yaars*. While Rahul may chase after women all around the University campus, it is his relationship with Anjali that truly matters. Anjali, meanwhile, has no interest in boys or other traditional matters of her gender norm. She begins to have feelings for Rahul, but fears he will reject her. Finally, she has a conversation with her foster mother who urges Anjali to reveal her love, because telling it will make her feel better, there is nothing to be ashamed of. Anjali rushes to tell her love, only to learn that Rahul has fallen in love with another girl. Two close friends, one of whom falling in love with the other, while the former remains totally unaware and uninterested is, following Arvind Kala (1991), a common story. Gay men first fall in love with their best friend, or become friends out of love for another man, only to realize their love is not returned (Kala 1991: 23, 18, 71, and 123). Johar strongly positions the romance in the second half of the movie as a social necessity, providing Rahul with a proper wife, his mother with a daughter-in-law, and his daughter with a mother. *KKHH* went on to great success, containing the possibilities of forbidden love between friends within societal expectations.

Kabhi Alveda Na Kehna (2005) took the theme of forbidden love and never restrained it within the boundaries of traditional Indian behavior. The story follows two married South Asians living in New York who start an affair. In many ways this film is a remake of *Silsila* (1981), a popular movie by Yas Chopra, with two main differences. In the first movie, the couple falls in love before they are married, and then reignites the affair after their marriages. The movie ends with a reaffirmation of marriage as the cheating couple reunites with their spouses. In Johar's movie the couple meet and fall in love after they are married and the film ends with them both being divorced prior to reuniting. Finally, *KANK* shows the disgust present in the physical relationship between the married couples, while *Silsila* shows physical comfort and pleasure within the marriages. The post-marriage meeting between the couple turns the relationship into an irresistible impulse, outside of society. The physical disgust emphasizes the sexual nature of the attraction (Kala 1991: 48, 74, and 76).

Kal Ho Na Ho (*KHNNH*) (2003) was the first to take these themes out of the closet. While queerness in this film is purportedly a mere minor subplot, the entire film invites a queer reading of the relationship between the two male characters. In addition, the casting of the actors makes the queer reading even more tempting, as

¹ *Yaari* love in Indian culture can mean anything from best friends as close as a husband and wife, to same sex lovers (R. Raj Rao 2000; Ashok Row Kavi 2000).

they have both struggled with rumors of gayness. Finally, the way in which Johar wrote the Aman character – who does the most to encourage the humorous misunderstanding of himself as gay, as the perfect Indian man, and a supernatural being – gives God and society’s approval to the gay lifestyle.

Johar also strongly positions *KHNNH* as representing a modern, international Indian society. Gayatri Gopinath (2005: 163) argues it does this through “male homosexuality that marks and consolidates this newly emergent transnational Indian subject as fully modern”. However, her argument focuses on the ways in which the diaspora might react to the film, ignoring the ways in which it questions and challenges a traditional Indian audience. This is present from the opening of the film in which a young South Asian woman (Preity Zinta), her voiceover speaking Hindi, runs through New York scenes, ending up by the river, while Bhangra music² plays in the background, positioning her both as a South Asian and as a New Yorker.³ The sequence ends with her sitting by the river (a subconscious reference to the Ganges, the center of Hindu/Indian culture just as several scenes by the river are a center of this film) as she gives her name, Naina Catherine Kapur, positioning her both as an Indian through her first and last names, and a Christian (and therefore Westernized) through her middle name.

The next few scenes establish the context of the film and the initial plot complications, and introduce the one bright spot in Naina’s life, her school friend Rohit (Saif Ali Khan), wealthy and constantly getting into trouble. Once these various plots have been established, Johar introduces the initial solution to them all, in the person of Aman, played by mega-star Shahrukh Khan. The introduction of Khan’s character begins with Jennifer, Shiv, and Gia, all sitting down to pray for an angel to save them from their difficult situation. As they pray, the camera circles around the familiar back of Shahrukh Khan, who stands on a boat facing the New York skyline, positioned both as a modern international Indian, and, through the presence of the river, a traditional one, as well as an angel through the dialogue.⁴ Next, as Naina comes into the room to kneel with the rest of her family, Khan appears, again from the back, walking next to an older woman in a sari (clearly his mother), helping her down the crowded stairs of a train station.⁵ Finally, he brushes by Naina in a scene from earlier in the film in which she fights with her friend and spills coffee, but in the earlier filming Khan was invisible.

As Naina’s voice over says “Dear God, if you’re listening, please send us an Angel”, the camera moves out the window of the room to the balcony of the house next door to finally reveal Khan full-figure, watching the family. He has been positioned as slightly supernatural through his disappearance and reappearance in the early scene, and through his apparent spontaneous creation in response to the fami-

² A popular musical form from Northern India.

³ This sequence is an example of Nilanjana Bhattachariya’s (2009) argument that song sequences in films set within the diaspora serve to support the Indian identity of the characters.

⁴ As he makes his typical hand movement from numerous other films and interviews, brushing his hair back from his face, identifying him to the audience as Shahrukh Khan, the superstar, not with the character he plays.

⁵ Again, both a significant New York location and a location with resonance in Indian culture.

ly's request for an angel. In addition, this sequence has served to establish him as the perfect Indian man who is comfortable both at home and abroad, and who loves his mother. And finally, through the use of his familiar hand-movement, he also plays himself, superstar Shahrukh Khan with a persona that ranges through all his films.

Aman quickly inserts himself into the lives of Naina and her family, finally confronting Naina stating that she takes on too much responsibility and does not enjoy what she has: "What is the point of praying to God if you do not appreciate the life he has given you?". Again, Johar positions Aman as speaking for God. He ends the discussion by saying: "I know [what my problem is]. I am very sexy, but you are not my type", a foreshadowing of the upcoming second comedy track. Johar introduces this track when Aman and Rohit meet for the first time as the young people go together to a "disco night". The sequence begins with a series of shots establishing the disco location, dancers, bartenders, and so on. Next, Rohit and Aman share a frame together as they drink in unison. They continue to share a frame throughout the rest of the sequence, at first with Naina placed in between them as they face each other, then as another woman joins them with all four characters facing out and the two women on either end, until finally at the end of the sequence, Naina forces herself between the two men to reach the bar and drink shots, which leads to her dancing provocatively, while "It's the Time to Disco" is being played.

Both the location of a disco, a traditional site of gay culture, and the first shot of the characters, placing Rohit and Aman as a couple, serves to establish a possible queer reading of the film for the first time. The queer readings continue for the rest of the disco sequence as Rohit at first attempts to stop Naina from drinking and from dancing. Aman stops him and instead encourages Naina. While the surface meaning of the sequence could be that Aman attempts to draw Rohit and Naina apart, and make Naina loosen up in order to romance her, it could also be read as Aman attempting to draw Rohit and Naina apart in order to romance Rohit, especially as he keeps Rohit close to himself, while encouraging Naina to leave the group. At the end of the sequence, Johar re-establishes the heteronormativity. Drunk Naina and Rohit are thrown out of the club; Aman takes their hands, one on either side. As Rohit and Naina start to talk across him, Aman steps back and has them hold each other's hands, restoring the heterosexual couple.

This does not last long, however, as Johar begins the next scene with a shot of the two men in bed together. They are curled up with Aman's head on Rohit's shoulder and his hand on his chest, although they are fully dressed. Rohit, at first, assumes Aman is his dog, petting his head and calling him by the dog's name. Aman, on the other hand, is fully aware of where he is and smiles with pleasure at Rohit's touch. Aman sits up with Rohit and explains that he spent the night there because Rohit was too drunk to be left alone. He then negates that explanation by casually reaching across Rohit's body for a bottle of water. As they are tangled together in this way, Rohit's maid, Kantaben (Sulbha Arya) comes in the room and Aman proceeds to put on a show for her.

After this disturbing scene, Johar restores the heteronormativity once again with a discussion of Rohit's love for Naina. Soon after, Naina realizes she loves Aman just as Rohit realizes he loves her, leading to another song. In this a series of char-

acters answer the question what is love, and finally Aman declares he will show what love is, followed by images of Naina and Rohit singing of their love. Within the song, there are shots of other couples in love, a motorcycle couple, two children, an older couple, and two men fondling each other and laughing. They are included not as examples of sexual desire or as a humorous oddity, but sincerely as an example of a couple in love. While the queer features of the rest of the plot are used for comedy, this brief moment reveals an understanding of gay love as just as valid as the other examples. This moment is especially unusual when understood in the context on an Indian culture in which Arvind Kala, an experienced journalist writing a book on the gay Indian experience, felt the need to clarify for himself and his readers: “a gay’s attraction for men isn’t merely sexual, as non-gays think, it’s emotional too. Incredible though it may seem, a homosexual falls in love with a man with the same intensity as a heterosexual falls for a woman” (1991: 67).

A scene of Naina talking with her friend and Rohit talking with Aman about how to confess their love follows this song. After finally making an appointment with Naina to tell her, Rohit embraces Aman, saying “Today I am going to say what’s in my heart. I love you Aman! I love you”. The two men separate, and Aman starts blowing kisses at Rohit, who is oblivious. Aman, positioned as not just the perfect Indian man, but in addition as an Avatar of God, enjoys being perceived as gay, in fact courts it. He is putting his supernatural stamp of approval upon same sex relationships. As the character is doing this, so is the star, Shahrukh Khan.

This leads to a plot movement which can only be understood through the context of Kantaban’s misunderstanding, which allows for the possibility that not only might two South Asian men be gay, but also that they may be committed to each other. In another scene, for example, Rohit’s father takes him to a strip club and asks if he is “normal”. As he can’t bring himself to spell the word “gay”, he says: “Kantaben mentioned you might be in love with *someone* [Italics mine]”. This is a very revealing expression, giving the male relationship love status, rather than relegating it to “men who have sex with men”, a definition which is still common in India (Sherry Joseph 1996: 2229). Later in the conversation, Rohit declares he is telling his father “I am in love with someone, I want to marry them, I want to have children with them”. His father, still thinking he is talking about a man, merely asks “Is that possible?” He seems to be struggling to understand and accept the situation, saying “In America, anything is possible; I asked for a daughter-in-law, I got a son-in-law”. The reaction of Rohit’s is typical of a South Asian parent of a gay man, struggling primarily with the lack of cultural context to deal with male love in India, to define a relationship that has no definition (Joseph 1996: 2230-2231; Kala 1991: 83). After this, Rohit corrects his father, but not emphatically, emphasizing that he is in love with Naina, not that he is straight, or acting angry at the misunderstanding. This is not the kind of reaction experienced by the men in Kala’s book, who describe anger and fear from the parents, not just confusion leading to acceptance (Kala 1991: 30, 83, and 85).

This conversation leads directly to Rohit’s father introducing him to a series of eligible women, one of whom he begins to date, a minor plot movement, but one that makes sense only in terms of the initial misunderstanding of Rohit as gay. Aman breaks into Rohit’s apartment, while his maid desperately tries to stop him,

he declares “I will kill myself, but I will never leave Rohit!” bringing up memories of the many Indian suicides when two men or woman are driven apart (Kala 1991: 28-29). After he leaves, Kantaben prays to her religious idol to always keep the two men apart.

Rohit proposes to Naina, she accepts, although she doesn't love him, and the wedding plans begin, including a large engagement party. Throughout the sequence, Aman expresses heartbreak.⁶ In the course of the engagement party planning, mention is made of an interior decorator from France. This character fits nicely within Vito Russo's (1987: 7, 26, and 36) definitions of the sissy as foreign, expansively feminine, and surrounded by decadence. The first time he appears, he wears all red with a beret, makes a face, and declares “Drapes!” Next Johar shows him in black with a motorcycle cap, moving to give a garland to Rohit, before being stopped by Kantaben. Finally, he dresses in red again, this time the traditional Indian garb and another beret, fluttering his hands as he moves aside to reveal the decorated hall for the engagement party. At the party, of course, there is a big dance number.

The number begins with Aman dancing and singing for the couple accompanied by a female chorus, putting him in a female space.⁷ Later in the song, Rohit dances with Naina in a western style. As he spins her out, Aman spins in. The two men pause a moment, then shrug and start waltzing together, in an image reminiscent of the early Edison films showing two men waltzing (Russo 1987: 7). As they waltz, the interior decorator jumps up and down clapping his hands. The older image of the sissy gives his blessing to the new image of the modern man, comfortable with a fluid sexuality.

The wedding moves forward, again showing Aman heartbroken as he watches the couple, but Johar allows for a reading that he mourns Rohit, not Naina. At the end of the film, Aman lays in a hospital bed dying. He says good-bye to all the main characters, but it is Rohit he saves for last. While the content of the conversation is their mutual love for Naina, the fact that this is his farewell, places the relationship between the two men above any other in the film. This scene was spoofed in the 2003 Filmfare awards ceremony – sponsored by a leading film magazine, the Indian equivalent of the Oscars – when Shahrukh Kahn and Saif Ali Kahn acted it again, but instead of talking about Naina, confessed their love for each other.

Some authors criticized *KHNH* for providing a typical gay stereotype (Prמוד K. Nayar 2007: 123; Shohini Ghosh 2007: 424). However, what they ignore is the invisibility of queerness in Indian culture, which makes even a stereotypical presentation a triumph. In addition, as shown by the previous description, Johar positions the gayness within the narrative in a way that makes it legitimate. Aman, the perfect man, the angel, enjoys being thought of as gay. In the same way, Shahrukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan, popular male stars, used this film to show their own com-

⁶ In another scene of the movie, Rohit goes to Aman in his bedroom and says seriously: “I love you Aman, I really do”. Aman pretends coyness and smiles and says “Why, thank you”.

⁷ Anupama Chopra (2002: 79) discusses the construction of his character in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995).

fort with being thought of as gay. This is impressive for both men, as they have both struggled with rumors of homosexuality.⁸

Dostana makes queerness the centerpiece of its plot, impossible to be ignored. At the same time, Johar uses it to promote acceptance through the ways in which the various South Asian characters interact with gayness. While *KHNNH* invites a queer reading, *Dostana* almost demands it. Karan Johar has enormous power in the industry, especially over his own films; he handpicks scripts, is involved with every aspect of filming, and chooses to work with the same small group of actors (Raja Sen 2009). Therefore, even films such as *Dostana*, which he merely produced, or *KHNNH*, which he produced and wrote but did not direct, are still Karan Johar productions, following Tom Schatz's (2009) idea of the "genius in the system".

The start of the movie once again places Karan in control, with the titles reading "Karan Johar presents" before the movie title. Following a series of establishing shots of Florida, a mid-distance close up shows Shilpa Shetty's back, just before the first song music starts and the shot changes to John Abraham walking out of the ocean in a miniscule yellow swimsuit. The camera moves up and down his body, looking at his chest, his back, his waist, and paying scant attention to his face. After an interlude of singing with a female chorus, Abraham appears again, this time in a red swimsuit and a white t-shirt, which he slowly takes off. He then goes into a beach side shower where the camera watches the water run down his back. As Laura Mulvey (2009: 717, and 719) discusses, Abraham's identity is being removed as he becomes no more than body parts to be enjoyed while the female chorus stands in for the audience on screen, enjoying the spectacle. Even before the plot begins, the film is already queer through the focus on the male body, letting Abraham become a "molten beefcake", as he was recently referred to in a review (Nikhat Kazmi 2010). While his body has always been a main focus of the camera, in this movie Karan Johar takes it to extremes.

The second male star/character is introduced. A large pink convertible drives down the center of a bridge, driven by Abhishek Bachchan wearing a pastel shirt. After a load of girls join him in the car, Shilpa Shetty sings to him as he wears a variety of outfits and stands alone, disinterested in her. While Abraham is introduced as a sexual object, Bachchan is introduced as a potential consumer of Abraham's sexuality, through his connection with queer iconography (pink colored car, pastel colored clothing) and his clear lack of interest in women.

While *KHNNH* delays the meeting of the two male characters until well into the story, *Dostana* opens with the two men meeting. They run into each other at the apartment shared by two women with whom they have just had sex. The two men meet on the balcony having breakfast and introduce themselves to each other as Sam and Kunal. They run into each other again trying to catch a cab, and then find they are going to the same location. The way the two characters are constantly

⁸ For Shahrukh Khan, there are jokes about his close friendship with Johar (Shohini Ghosh 2007: 426). For Saif Ali Khan, there was his past associating with Akshay Kumar in a series of popular films which led to them being called "Saikshay". This culminated in the gay activist Ashok Row Kavi specifically citing their relationship in *Main Khiladi Tu Anari* (1995) as gay, which led to Khan publicly punching him (Thomas Waugh 2001: 289).

thrown together by fate is reminiscent of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayange* (1995) and *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), which introduced the idea that a couple meant to be together will meet many times until they finally start a relationship.

At this point, the relationship between these two men is clearly going to be the centerpiece of the film, but it could still be perceived as the *yaari* type friendship, and which can be read as either queer or straight. However, soon after their meeting, the queer interpretation is forced on both the characters and the audience. The two men walk down the street getting to know each other better and sharing a hot dog. At the hot dog stand they run into a white soldier who bursts into tears saying:

It's just that my boyfriend has been sent to Iraq, and I am here. We were so happy after Afghanistan. It was perfect, we were like the perfect family, and I just saw the two of you standing there, you looked so happy, you reminded me so much of us. I mean really God bless you both. I just wish you all the happiness.

This statement is given by an American soldier, in full uniform, and it is the first time any part of the script explicitly states the possibility of queerness. America is confronting these two members of the diaspora and forcing them to acknowledge queerness within themselves.

Kunal walks away. Sam chases after him and grabs his shoulder, trying to convince him they should pretend to be gay to get the apartment. Kunal shakes him off, then is convinced partly by Sam's first and most important argument, that Kunal is his brother, meaning they could never be together. The brother relationship in India can be invoked easily through naming someone in that manner, the same way the brother-sister relationship can be invoked. "Naach girls" (strippers/prostitutes) can even use this method to discourage unwanted suitors, treating them as male relatives and negating any possibility of a sexual relationship (Suketu Mehta 2004: 277).⁹

The two men rush back to the apartment and present themselves as a couple. In fact, when the woman says again that only girls are allowed, Sam says they are girls, then tries again to explain using a series of euphemisms in Hindi, saying they are together, they are both together, they are special friends, and finally, in English, that they are boyfriends. There is no Hindi word for the relationship, they must use an English one, perhaps the most dramatic example of the way in which queerness is impossible in Indian culture. The same thing happens later when, after finding out they will be sharing the apartment with someone else, Kunal asks "One-by-one, do you want to tell everyone that we are...". He cannot complete the sentence as again, there is no Indian word that will convey his meaning, and Sam has to add the word "gay".

Finally, the joke is repeated one more time when their potential roommate, Neha (Priyanka Chopra) appears. The two men rush off to discuss whether they are

⁹ This trope is used often in films to undercut homosexual possibilities, for instance in the shower scene in *Silsila* (1981). The two stars, Amitabh Bachhan and Shashi Kapoor, are showering together. They have an exchange about "dropping the soap". Ashok Row Kavi (2000: 311) describes the experience of watching the film, suggesting that the exchange was so blatant as to be it actually became less noticeable. However, he ignores the fact that the two characters are supposed to be brothers and constantly refer to each other in that manner, therefore making the situation unromantic.

willing to pretend to be gay to a beautiful woman while her aunt tries to convey the situation to Neha. The aunt starts with “they aren’t what we are” then tries “they are ‘modern’ boys” and finally saying “they are boyfriend and girlfriend”. The aunt translates this as “it wasn’t like this in our days, boys used to like girls”. The idea of queerness as being modern ties in both to the idea that it was something brought by the British and placed upon Indian society (Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan 2005: 15) and with the idea proposed by Gopinath (2005) that the characters in *KHNH* who play with the idea of gayness are the examples of modern Indian men.

During the next sequence, in efforts to stop the other from saying the wrong thing, the men have erotic play together, Sam embracing Kunal as he tries to leave, Kunal running and jumping on Sam when he sees the aunt overhearing a conversation. In reaction, the aunt, horrified, says in Hindi “All this isn’t allowed here. Stand straight”. For the first time, discomfort is apparent in her reaction to their relationship. However, this is only after they have performed physical acts that might be considered uncomfortably explicit between a male and female couple as well within Indian culture. The aunt questioning them on how they met, as she might a heterosexual couple, supports this reading.

Sam makes up a story, staring deep into Kunal’s eyes, saying they met in Venice. The audience sees their first meeting, Kunal carrying flowers bumps into Sam and drops them; their hands touch as they both pick them up. Remembering the moment, Sam sings an old film song. Then he says: “For the next few days we kept bumping in to each other”, again following the pattern of fate bringing them together. Sam describes his distress as Kunal turns away from him, but he kept searching, finally finding him. Sam runs towards him, hips swaying, chest jiggling, in slow motion, a classic shot in Indian cinema, usually the woman running towards her love. However, the immediate previous sequence of Sam’s quest for Kunal is usually the male role. One of the problems for the gay and lesbian community in India is the lack of a defined role. This sequence suggests that role as a combination of the male and female position. In the end, the two men meet by the canal where they dance. Again, it plays into the trope that homosexuality was brought by the British as the two men are wearing western style clothing and performing western style dancing

The second song sequence starts, establishing the relationship between the three characters. After scenes of moving in, shopping, eating meals, there is a long sequence in a club. All the characters become drunk and first Neha dances on a table, with minor crowd reaction, and then is joined by the two men, at which point the crowd goes wild and starts throwing money at them. Again, men are positioned as the object of the gaze.

Immediately following this sexualization of the men, there is a scene of Neha coming out of the ocean in a gold swimsuit, with the camera lingering on her body, as the two men react, having to cover their laps with magazines, firmly reinforcing heterosexual attraction, both between the characters, and for the audience which is forced to observe a woman’s body rather than a man’s. With heteronormativity restored, it is possible to have the next sequence in which they watch a scary movie, followed by Sam sneaking into bed with Kunal. Following the song sequence, the three characters share details of their personal lives, this means talking about their

parents. Sam complains about his mother, especially the way she keeps pushing him to get married. Neha takes this to mean that Sam has not told his mother he is gay. It is easier for her to explain an Indian man not wanting to be married as his being gay, rather than merely uninterested in commitment, reflecting the deep importance of married status in Indian culture, which makes being unmarried an admission of disinterest in women (Kala 1991: 139, 154, and 44; Joseph 1996: 2230).

Sam then lightens the mood by talking about how the Gabbar Singh character in *Sholay* (1975) was gay. This is a ludicrous suggestion, but interesting, as the same film contains one of the closest male to male relationships in the history of Indian cinema, that between Veer (Dharmendra) and Jai (Amitabh Bachchan) (Ghosh 2002: 209). The suggestion that Gabbar is gay is safer, as it is clearly false, while the suggestion that Veer and Jai were lovers is a valid reading.

Sam continues the argument in the next scene, when Neha is no longer with them, suggesting a much more likely gay pair, Munna and Circuit (the gangster characters from the film *Munna Bhai MBBS*, 2003). Without the female presence, it is possible to suggest an actually legitimate gay reading of a film. Kunal shoots this down pointing out they called each other brothers, but Sam argues “Even I call you brother in public”. These two sequences show the ways in which the queer community of India has learned to read Indian films, as Gopinath (2000) describes, and invites the audience to read this film in the same manner. Especially as it negates the first argument Sam presented against he and Kunal having an actual relationship, as he regards Kunal as his “Bhai” or brother. This whole scene takes place as they wait in line for residency permits. Following Neha’s suggestions, they decide to register as a joint couple in order to speed up the process. This is of course a ludicrous idea of the American immigrant laws, and again a sign that this film was made not just for a diaspora audience, who would be peculiarly sensitive to immigration status, but for an Indian audience too, who would not know about another country’s laws.

The next sequence introduces the first truly gay Indian character in the film. Neha’s boss M (Boman Irani), who arrives with a swishing gait and a screeching voice, wearing a lilac striped suit. He announces to Neha that he is about to resign and she is up for a promotion, suggesting she invites him over for dinner to meet her young gay roommates. The following dinner sequence, while played for laughs, is the confluence of several actual troubles for the gay South Asian community. There is an expectation of loose relationships, as shown by numerous interviews conducted by Kala (1991), which leads Neha to assume her roommates would be willing to romance her boss, despite their established relationship. There are the legal issues, as the immigration official Javier arrives in the middle of dinner to confirm they are truly in a relationship. This is of course a through the looking glass legal issue, as in fact gay men are more often required to act straight in order to solve legal issues than the other way round. It plays into the problem suggested by Diane Raymond (2003:107) in her article on American television that gayness is often shown as a solution to a problem, rather than the creator of one. And there are the family issues, as Sam’s mother arrives at the end of the dinner and reacts with fainting and horror to the idea of her son with another man (Kala 1991).

Later, after Sam's mother (Kirron Kher) has arrived, M rushes him away, saying "Your mommy doesn't know, does she?". Then grabbing and embracing him, saying "It really hurts, doesn't it?". Javier also touches him, holding his hand supportively, as Kunal stands to the side in discomfort. The whole scene shows the supportive nature of the gay community, especially in a culture where most gay men are not out even to their mothers. Interestingly, M himself breaks down, confessing his true Indian name, and that he has never told his mother either. This is similar to the experiences described by Kala (1991: 60-63) of gay South Asians who left home to live in America, there finding acceptance and comfort they could never find within their own families. The mother interrupts this scene, screaming "Nooooo!". She declares she will take Sam back to London where he will be better, but M stops her crying out "Look at me! Miami or London, your son is gay! He likes men! Wake up!". This is still a controversial statement to make in Indian culture, in which, many respected doctors still regard homosexuality as a disease that can and should be cured (Narain and Bhan 2005).

The mother rushes off to Sam's bedroom, where she sees a photo of Sam and Kunal on the nightstand, and has a vision of Kunal in groom's garb with Sam in a bridal veil, while "Ma, your son rides a bridal palanquin, alas you're done for" plays in the background. Then there is a song sequence as the mother watches the intimate ways in which the two men interact (rolling on the beach, Kunal putting a bandage on Sam's cut), and has a recurring vision of them as a bride and groom couple. Then the two men working out together, which leads her to sneak into Sam's room and try to perform an exorcism, using a necklace of skulls, a broom, and white powder. Next while walking down the street she sees them in a series of couples, from babies to old men. At which point she faints again. The images and lyrics themselves perfectly capture the concerns of an Indian mother, learning her son is gay. However, rather than taking the mother's part, the song positions her as a creature of ridicule, whose concerns are invalid.

This song, like the sequence of the men dancing in the club, is followed by a plot movement that dramatically restores heteronormativity. A new character is introduced, Neha's new boss and a viable love interest for her. After nodding towards male-female love, the queer element is reintroduced when Sam's mother comforts Neha about losing her promotion. After making her feel better, Neha takes the opportunity to talk about Kunal and Sam, saying "For the past three years your son hid the biggest truth of his life from you because he knew that you wouldn't be pleased. You'll be happy, but Sam? If he can live for your happiness then can't you accept the truth for his happiness? Whatever God does is for the best, right Aunty?".

After a buffer scene with Neha and her boss, Sam's mom goes to Kunal's room and bless him, as the song "Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham" from the film of the same name plays in the background, placing her acceptance of their relationship next to the acceptance of forbidden love from the ultimate traditional family movie. She continues with the full traditional blessing for a new daughter in law, before Sam comes into the room asking what she is doing. Sam's mom apologizes, saying she prayed for her own son's sorrows, and finally giving her bangles to Kunal, the traditional gift of a mother-in-law to welcome a daughter-in-law into the family, alt-

though she says “I don’t know if you are a daughter-in-law or a son-in-law” and finally asking him to keep the Karva Chauth fast (a traditional religious fast carried out by wives for their husbands) for her son’s well-being, and to take her blessing: “My victory be yours may you have children”, then pauses, and adds, “forget it” (about the children). There is no cultural way for homosexuality to be addressed in Indian culture, and yet this scene does an excellent job of showing how it can be done. Although, as in *KHNNH*, it is when the question of children arises that the parent realizes the limits of their acceptance, not believing such a thing could be possible. This scene effectively resolves the queer storyline.

For the rest of the movie, the two men plot to break up Neha and her boss, finally succeeding. However, before realizing their plot worked, they confess their love to Neha, and that they lied to her and were never gay. Furious, she throws them out. Later, they track Neha down at a fashion show, confess their scheme, and apologize. The framing throughout this sequence has Sam and Kunal position on one side as a couple while Neha and her boss are on the other, as in the disco sequence in *KHNNH*. Kunal and Sam stand on the stage and declare that Neha is their best friend and they lied to her. The crowd cheers in response, to which Sam repeats “We lied.” This gets an “aaaaaw” of disappointment. Again, this is a South Asian fantasy of American acceptance, or rather the way the modest amount of acceptance in America looks to someone coming from a country which still endorses electric shock therapy.

Finally, Neha’s boss says, in order to be forgiven, they should kiss each other. The crowd cheers. Sam agrees first. Kunal points out he isn’t gay, Sam agrees that he isn’t gay either, but they have to do it for Neha. And then he puts his hands on Kunal’s shoulders and leans in as the both purse their mouths, but he can’t do it. Neha starts to turn away, the film goes into slow motion, and Kunal reaches out and passionately grabs Sam. The camera spins around the couple showing it from several angles. While the initial kiss, after both men confirm their lack of gayness, and with an awkward forced coming together, would have been humorous, the eventual kiss, sudden and violent, is both humorous in context, but erotic out of context, especially as it is filmed in a typically romantic manner, with slow motion and a spinning camera.

This idea is encouraged by the last scene of the film. Two months later, the three friends are shown sitting a bench and Neha asks “When you both were pretending to be gay, at any point, did anything happen between the two of you?” They react in horror, she declares she was just kidding, but after she walks away, the two men look at each other and there is a flashback to the kissing scene implying one or both of them are thinking about it. As the credits start, a remix version of the “Maa de Laadla” song starts, clearly placing the greatest importance of the film on the queer story line and the ways in which it interacts with Indian culture, rather than the hetero romance or the queer story line as pure comedy. Beginning with *KKHH*, Karan Johar has been slowly expanding the possibilities of presenting queerness in popular Indian cinema. With *Dostana*, as revealed through the plot, the images, the presentation of the stars, even certain lines of dialogue, queerness can no longer be ignored.

Johar continued his slow unveiling of queer themes with his next directorial mainstream hit, *Student of the Year (SOTY)* (2010). As Kaustav Bakshi and Parjanya Sen (2012) discuss, in this film there are two possible queer readings, one of the central relationship of the film, between two teenage boys, and the other of the school principal who is broadly drawn as being in love with the football coach. The two boys' relationship is part of the tradition of the possibly sexual or romantic same sex *yaari* relationships previously described. More revolutionary is Johar's presentation of the character of the principal as an educated, responsible, and kindly man, who also happens to be in love with another man. However, ultimately, Johar contains this character, as his love is unrequited. One gay man, alone, cannot threaten Indian society. He needs a partner in his love. The film briefly directly acknowledges his lone status through the speech of the character Sudo at the end who avers that the principal only drives his students so hard because he has nothing else in his life own life, hinting at the misery and loneliness inherent in being a gay man in India.

The films described so far were made for the masses, both in India and abroad. They include massive inaccuracies he does not expect the audience to notice and crowd-pleasing elements, as well as canny methods of containing the threat inherent in the queer content. Once he reaches this audience, he gently shows them that homosexuality may not be the fearsome threat they think it is. He creates audience sympathy for the tragedy of loving your best friend and being unable to express that love. He allows for sexual attraction as an important part of married life, something which, if it is missing, forces a spouse to find it somewhere else. His ideal man, his "angel", has no fear of gayness and find harmless enjoyment in playing with societal expectations. An Indian mother can accept and make sense of her son's sexuality and be happier for doing so. A childless gay man may search for meaning and companionship by raising other people's children but will never be truly whole.

In his career, Johar has made one film aimed at a smaller, specific, audience. In honor of the 100th anniversary of Indian film, four of the leading directors in India today, Johar, Zoya Akhtar, Dibaker Banerjee, and Anurag Basu, came together to make an anthology film titled *Bombay Talkies* (2013). The film was screened at Cannes and enjoyed a limited release in India, but did not play in either the Indian heartland or in the diaspora theaters abroad. The story line of the film takes the jokes of *Dostana* and *KHNH* and plays them as tragedy. Two men meet, they fall in love, their families find out, and their lives are destroyed. While *Dostana* built the whole story line towards the gentle confrontation with the older generation leading to the dominance of a younger, more accepting perspective on queerness, *Bombay Talkies* moves past this concern in the first few minutes, when Avinash (Saqib Saleem) breaks into his parents home, beats his father (in recompense for the many beatings he had been given), and shouts at him that homosexuality is not wrong. Immediately after this, the question of children is raised in the form of a young girl singing an old Hindi film song. This girl is the witness and companion to the two gay characters in this film, first joking with Avinash, then serenading Avinash and Dev (Randeep Hooda) as they fall in love, and finally comforting Dev as he sits with her, heartbroken. The film is part of an anthology in honor of the

hundredth anniversary of Indian film, and the girl singing film songs is the only connection to that theme, the greater message all four films share that movies are India and India is its movies. This great connection to the Indian spirit can only sit by and watch as India's young gay men destroy themselves in misery. Unlike his previous films, *Bombay Talkies* was aimed at the Indian gay community only through its unsoftened content and limited release, not at the Indian mass audience. Johar tells them that the motivation for all his work, the purpose of film itself, is to provide them with the sympathy and comfort they cannot find anywhere else.

References

Adesara, Hetal. 2011. "Box Office: 6 Hindi Movies Fail to Make an Impact". *Business of Cinema.com*, May 3. Accessed January 2014. <http://businessofcinema.com/boxoffice/box-office-six-hindi-movies-fail-to-make-an-impact/33238>.

Bakshi, Kaustav and Parjanya Sen. 2012. "India's Queer Expressions On-Screen: The Aftermath of the Reading Down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code". *New Cinemas: Journals of Contemporary Film* 10(2,3): 167-183.

Bhattacharjya, Nilanjana. 2009. "Popular Hindi Film Song Sequences Set in the Indian Diaspora and the Negotiating of Indian Identity". *Asian Music* 4 (1): 53-82.

Chopra, Anupama. 2002. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*. London: British Film Institute.

Dasgupta, Susmita. 2006. *Amitabh: The Making of a Superstar*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

Dostana (2008)-Boxofficemojo.com". *Boxofficemojo.com*. Accessed March 2014. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=intl&id=dostana.htm>.

Ghosh, Shohini. 2007. "False Appearances and Mistaken Identities: The Phobic and the Erotic in Bombay Cinema's Queer Vision", in Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, eds. *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexuality in Contemporary India*, pp.417-437. London: Seagull Books.

Ghosh, Shohini. 2002. "Queer Pleasures for Queer People: Film, Television, and Queer Sexuality in India", in Ruth Vanita, ed. *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, pp. 207-219. New York and London: Routledge.

Gomathy, N.B. and Bina Fernandez. 2005. "Fire, Sparks and Smouldering Ashes", in Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, eds. *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, pp. 197-204. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

Gopinath, Gayatri. 2000. "Queering Bollywood: Alternative Sexualities in Popular Indian Cinema", *Journal of Homosexuality* 39(3/4): 283-297.

Gopinath, Gayatri. 2005. "Bollywood Spectacles: Queer Diasporic Critique in the Aftermath of 9/11", *Social Text* 23(3-4): 157-169.

Joseph, Sherry. 1996. "Gay and Lesbian Movement in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31(33): 2228-2233.

Kala, Arvind. 1991. *Invisible Minority: The Unknown World of the Indian Homosexual*. New Delhi: Dynamic Press.

Kavi, Ashok Row. 2000. "The Changing Image of the Hero in Hindi Films", *Journal of Homosexuality* 39(3-4): 307-312.

Kazmi, Nikhat. 2010. "Jhoothi Hi Sahi", *Times of India*, 21 Oct. Accessed March 2014. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/movie-reviews/hindi/Jhootha-Hi-Sahi/moviereview/6787856.cms>.

Mulvey, Laura. 2009. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 711-723. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mehta, Suketu. 2004. *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. New York: Vintage Books.

Narrain, Arvind and Gautam Bhan. 2005. *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*. New Delhi: Yoda Press.

Nayar, Pramod K. 2007. "Queering Culture Studies: Notes Towards a Framework", in Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharyya, eds. *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexuality in Contemporary India*, pp.117-149. London: Seagull Books.

Rao, R. Raj. 2000. "Memories Pierce the Heart: Homoeroticism, Bollywood-Style", *Journal of Homosexuality* 39 (3-4): 299-306.

Raymond, Diane. 2003. "Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective", in Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, eds. *Gender, Race and Class in the Media: A Text Reader*, pp. 98-110. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Russo, Vito. 1987. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. New York: Harper & Row.

Schatz, Thomas. 2009. "The Whole Equation of Pictures", in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, eds. *Film Theory and Criticism*, pp. 523-27. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sen, Raja. 2009. "My Name is Karan Johar" *Rediff Movies*, November 19. Accessed January 2014. <http://movies.rediff.com/slide-show/2009/nov/19/slide-show-1-interview-with-karan-johar.htm>.

Waugh, Thomas. 2001. "Queer Bollywood, or 'I'm the player, you're the naïve one': Patterns of Sexual Subversion in Recent Indian Popular Cinema", in Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo, eds. *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, pp. 280-297. London: Routledge.