



## From Awareness to Acceptance: The Queering Of Bollywood

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### Abstract

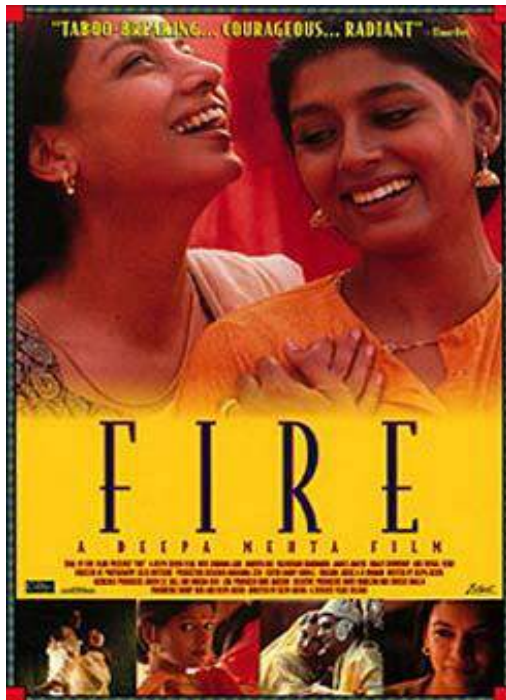
This paper focuses upon the Queer- LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) and the role of Bollywood. In the contemporary Indian society where homosexuals are looked upon with an inferior eye and are not considered 'normal', Bollywood movies are trying to present the struggle and the feeling of existential crisis homosexuals face in their everyday life. The reflection is made through the observatory study of two movies- Fire by Deepa Mehta and Mango Souffle by Mahesh Dattani—and attempt to bring awareness and a hope for acceptance among people.

**Key words:** Bollywood , Queer-LGBT.

Sexual identity—as an equal rights issue, an academic study, and as a subject for creative exploration—has been present in the western world since the 1960's. In the U.S. today, the federally funded healthcare Medicaid covers gender reassignment surgery, and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) characters are featured in Hollywood movies and on TV. In India, however, the LGBTQ population remains generally misunderstood and mistreated—which is ironic, given that “queerness” finds its roots in our ancient history: we find evidence of the so-called “unnatural” in the statues of 'Khajuraho', in Indian scriptures/fables like 'Ardhanaarishwara', in Vatsayana's scripture 'Kamasutra', in the avatar of 'Vishnu' as 'Mohini', and in a popular myth wherein Lord Rama's devotees sacrifice their respective masculinity or femininity in order to be with their God. Here, we find the birth of transetivite.



But attitudes in India about LGBTQ people are changing, thanks to the work of activists, artists and filmmakers. Remarkably, within the past two decades, India's historically suppressed LGBTQ population has reached a Bollywood audience. In this paper, I'll discuss how Bollywood has impacted or promoted India's LGBTQ population through two films: *Fire*, starring Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi, written and directed by Deepa Mehta, and *Mango Soufflé*, written and directed by the Sahitya Akademi winner and a contemporary playwright Mahesh Dattani. In these films, both Deepa Mehta and Mahesh Dattani portray the so-called 'dark and hidden' realities of our society.



*Fire*, a very intense movie, portrays a lesbian relationship between bisexual women from typically middle class families living in Delhi. The family is trapped in all the ways and customs of the world. Sita (Nandita Das) and Radha (Shabana Azmi) are the daughter-in-laws of this family, and appear completely dissatisfied with their husbands. They are unfulfilled physically and emotionally, and aside from their husbands and extended families, are largely isolated. In their mutual loneliness and longing for connection, Sita and Radha are drawn toward each other. We watch the progression of their relationship from friends, to close confidants, to lovers.

Deepa Mehta's keen skills as a filmmaker are especially evident in the gradual and credible awakening of two "heteronormative" women as they move toward a lesbian love affair. At various intervals, the characters discuss the stereotypical customs and hypocritical biases of their society, the customs and biases that can destroy women, in spirit and body. Mehta's reference to Indian mythology is obvious in his choice of character names, and also the film's title, which not only describes intense sexual passion, but also refers to the mythological anecdote in the Indian scripture--Ramayana. In the myth, Sita had to walk through flames to prove her purity. Similarly, in the movie Radha also had to face the fire in order to prove the

purity of her love for the other woman and to establish her own identity. But perhaps more interestingly, *Fire* challenges our tired notions of sexual preference: the preference for love and understanding over assumptions and dominance *is* a sexual preference.



In contrast to the urban middle class context of *Fire*, the adapted screenplay *Mango Soufflé - A not so Straight Movie* is set in a Bangalore farm-house. It is adapted from the play *also named Mango Soufflé* written by Mahesh Dattani himself. This movie is a sincere reflection on the conflicts homosexuals face in their families, their society, and within themselves. A few rich gay friends (Sharad, Bunny, Ranjit and Deepali) get together at Kamlesh's farm-house to help the protagonist get over an ex-

lover, Prakesh, aka Ed. Ed is engaged to Kamlesh's sister Kiran.

*(Dialogues in the movie are adapted from the play.)*

In the following scene, Kamlesh and Ed sit on a bench, facing the road. Ed is fearful of coming out as gay:

ED (*looking out*). ...Look at all those people on the road.

KAMLESH. They can't see us.

ED. No. They can't.

KAMLESH. They can't see us at all, although we can see them. They must be blind... If only they could see how beautiful we are together.

ED. I don't know. (*Points to the on the road people.*) They wouldn't think so.

KAMLESH. They don't really see us.

ED. ... There are real men and women out there! (CP II, 198)

After Ed leaves Kamlesh for a "normal" life, Kamlesh's friend Sharad comments:

You see, being a heterosexual man— a real man, as Ed put it—I get everything. I get to be accepted—accepted by whom?—well, that marriage lot down there for instance. I can have a wife, I can have children who will all adore me simply



because I am a hetero— I beg your pardon—a real man. Now why would I want to give it all up? So what if I have to change a little? If I can be a real man, I can be King. Look at all the kings around you, look at all the male power they enjoy, thrusting themselves on to the world, all that penis power! Power with sex, power with muscle, power with size. Firing rockets, exploding nuclear bombs, if you can do it five times, I can do it six times and all that stuff. (Thrusts his pelvis in an obscene macho fashion.) Power, man! Power! (CP II, 217)

While Sharad describes “real” manhood in terms of word domination, Kiran, Ed’s new young fiancé, considers the traditional gender roles she and Ed have taken on as a lack of imagination:

If there are any stereotypes around here, they are you and me. Because we don’t know any better, do we? We just don’t know what else to be! (CP II, 222)

Kimberley Jones in her report on the **Fifteenth Annual Austin Gay & Lesbian International Film Festival** where Dattani’s film was screened to rave reviews, points out that queer cinema is no longer limited to ‘coming out’ or AIDS stories, the two definitive subjects of the 1990’s. (Jones, 2002)

Now, mainstream viewership everywhere accepts these ‘queer’ identities without batting an eyelid, with the evolution of new prototype of the gay individual. Would that then indicate a swallowing up of the gay audience, reducing it to something of a ‘sidekick’? Herein lies the relevance of a film like **Mango Soufflé**, the first Indian feature film to explicitly address homosexuality, addressing gay issues within the territorially distinct identity of its subject. (Chaudhuri, 95)

Since the release of **Fire** and **Mango Soufflé**, other films (*My Brother Nikhil*, *Girlfriend*, and *Kamasutra*) have furthered awareness in mainstream Indian audiences of the trials and conflicts faced by the LGBTQ population in India. And as popular culture embraces queer cinema and celebrity, let’s hope that our mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers will come to accept—and embrace—diversity from within.





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