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**QUEER PERSECUTION AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION  
IN THE INDIAN BIOPIC ALIGARH**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Indian society often considers the concept of homosexuality as something ‘unnatural’ or ‘abnormal.’ Consequently, homosexuals or gay men are treated with contempt for going against the societal norms of sexual conduct. Over the past few decades, media representations, particularly Bollywood movies, have consistently tried to change this mindset. It is crucial to understand how queer identities portrayed in films either challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms. Indian cinema has witnessed a gradual shift in queer representation which reflects a societal transformation and a greater understanding of queer identities. Engaging with a host of gender and queer theorists, this paper shows how contemporary films like Aligarh move away from stereotypical portrayals to offer a more nuanced and empathetic representation of queer lives. Aligarh, directed by Hansal Mehta, is based on the real-life story of Dr. Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a professor who faces discrimination and persecution due to his sexual orientation. The paper probes how the professor’s quest for personal and professional respect and his struggle for dignity and acceptance in a conservative society aptly reflect the isolation and prejudice faced by homosexuals in India. The paper discusses how Mehta’s realistic and minimalistic approach towards the subject and his use of candid dialogues and naturalistic cinematography accentuate the film’s emotional impact. Moreover, the paper focuses on the violation of Siras’s privacy to explore the legal and socio-political issues surrounding homosexuality in India, including debates regarding its criminalization under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. In conclusion, the paper argues that although thought-provoking movies like Aligarh cannot modify people’s mentality in India overnight, they play a pivotal role in bringing about a gradual social change.

**KEYWORDS:**

Homophobia, homosexual, queer, discrimination, Aligarh, Indian biopic.

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Indian society often considers the concept of homosexuality as something ‘unnatural’ or ‘abnormal.’ Consequently, homosexuals or gay men are treated with contempt for going against the societal norms of sexual conduct. A deep sense of homophobia prevalent in Indian society is responsible for the gender discrimination and persecution faced by homosexuals. In most cases, homophobia stems from a blind acceptance of gender roles imposed by society. Indian society has always been rigid about gender norms, and any deviation from convention is treated with suspicion and derision. Over the years, the definition of gender has changed. Once, the notion of gender was associated with the biological attributes with which a person was born, and thereafter identified as male or female. The identification of gender at birth led to the psycho-social conditioning of individuals, due to which they were expected to conform to certain traits designated by society as belonging to the male or female sex. There was absolutely no space for alternate sexualities to emerge, and people who were not comfortable with their gender category remained trapped within their biological shell. This trend of viewing gender as a synthesis of the mental and physical being created fixed patterns of accepted gender roles, which individuals were not permitted to flout. Till a few years ago, individuals in India had no choice but to struggle and adjust to their biological gender. Further, the determination of gender at birth made people draw a natural connection between gender identity and sexual desire, thereby making heterosexuality a norm to be followed by all. However, things began to change gradually with the advent of queer theory.

Queer theory explored the discrepancy between gender identity and sexual desire to put up a resistance against heteronormativity that took heterosexuality for granted and

considered it to be the default sexual orientation. However, soon “queer,” which was once a term used to denote homosexuality, became a reference term for all kinds of “marginal sexualities that could not fit into the traditional discourse about gender and sexuality” (Piantato, 2016, p. 3). Unfortunately, with time, the term lost its theoretical relevance, as it turned out to be an umbrella term that did not address a particular identity category, such as gays or lesbians, but problematized and challenged the grounds for any “unitary identity politics” (Beemyn and Eliason, 1996, p. 5). Despite these limitations, one of the most significant contributions of queer theory, which also connects it to feminist theory, has been its exploration of how homosexuality and heterosexuality mutually define each other. Two of the most influential works behind this theorization are Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985). Whereas Butler claims gender to be a “performance” that “must be continually reproduced”, thereby making its structure always prone to “mutation and subversion,” Sedgwick redefines heterosexuality as a fear of male homosexuality that motivates men to redirect their desire towards women (Butler, 1990, p. 30). Butler also discusses how the temporality of gender norms creates room for numerous future possibilities “that cannot be fully anticipated” (21). Therefore, Queer theory managed to shed some light on non-normative sexualities and gender identities by focusing on the fluidity of sexual and gender categories. Today, gender is not just a set of physical attributes one was born with, but how one feels inside. In fact, according to the queer theorist, Teresa De Lauretis (1991), non-normative sexualities are not to be considered as transgressive, deviant, or an optional “lifestyle,” but must be acknowledged as newly emergent social and cultural forms that continue to exist in their own right.

Over the past few decades, media representations in India, particularly Bollywood movies, have played a significant role in transforming people’s attitudes towards queer existence. Using

queer theory to analyze films allows one to understand how queer identities interrogate traditional gender norms. As one of the most influential and widely consumed media representations and an ideological state apparatus, cinema has the power to shape discourse and opinion about various social issues. The theory, therefore, allows one to critically examine the onscreen representation of LGBTIQ+ characters and themes and understand how these depictions mirror the social attitudes towards them. Only very recently has the world started talking about the rights of gay men and other members of the LGBTIQ+ community. For a long time, Bollywood movies portrayed gay men stereotypically, with them being subjected to either mockery or villainy. Such portrayals emerged from a deep-rooted homophobia in Indian society, which continues to subject gay men to social discrimination and deprive them of their fundamental human rights, despite the decriminalization of homosexuality. Such movies had limited viewers coming from the country's comparatively progressive and urban regions. However, even people from these areas were hesitant to support or show love to such movies due to social conventions on gender and sexuality. Thus, gay characters ended up being marginalized and othered even within the predominantly heteronormative world of Bollywood.

Bollywood continued to witness homophobic representations of gay men in the films of the 1990s, such as *Bombay Boys* (1998) and *Split Wide Open* (1999). The post-millennial movies tried to address the psychological and physical problems of gay men subtly in films such as *The Pink Mirror* (2003), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *68 Pages*, and *Dunno Y... Na Jaane Kyon* (2010). These films showed greater sensitivity on the subject and created a space for an open discussion on such tabooed topics. However, it is essential to note that none of these films were considered mainstream Bollywood movies. It was only around 2010 that Bollywood started producing mainstream movies that began representing the community in a more realistic and non-despising manner. Many of these films such as *Bombay Talkies* (2013), *Aligarh* (2015), *Kapoor and Sons* (2016),

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020), and Badhaai Do (2022), moved away from the trend of portraying caricatured and regressive versions of gay men and tried to address their real-life struggles and longing for societal acceptance. Things have progressed further in contemporary times, with several Indian OTT (Over-The-Top) shows along with mainstream movies foregrounding queer characters. Thus, along with movies, Indian OTT shows such as Made in Heaven (2019), His Storyy (2021), Romil and Jugal (2017) played a crucial role in reshaping narratives surrounding queer identities in India and promoting their inclusivity in Indian society.

This gradual yet prominent shift in the nature and number of films made on queer lives in Bollywood indicates a societal transformation and a greater acceptance of queer identities. Gradually, contemporary Bollywood films moved away from stereotypical portrayals of gay men to offer a more nuanced and empathetic representation of their lives. This shift in the representation of queer lives marks a period of transformation and reflects larger social acceptance and growing understanding of queer identities. Such films, which portray the struggles and complexities of a queer life, have the potential to move the audience to empathize with such characters and acknowledge their identities. Cinema, therefore, no longer provides just entertainment but also learning that creates awareness and sensitizes audiences towards a particular marginalized community. Aligarh is one such movie that boldly portrays how Indian society misuses Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code to subject homosexuals to discrimination and persecution. The film is an apt depiction of the hatred and the brutal prejudice against homosexuals deeply ingrained in Indian society, which stems from their inability to fit into the acceptable social stereotypes. This study aims to show how contemporary Bollywood movies like Aligarh, depicting the protagonist being subjected to unjustified defamation and persecution for his sexual expression, act as a catalyst for social change by fostering justice, inclusion, and empowerment. Such films use thoughtful storytelling to play a transformative role in

building a just and equitable society by incorporating diverse identities and encouraging meaningful dialogue with them.

Hansal Mehta's directed movie Aligarh is an Indian biopic featuring the intolerable violence an individual faces due to his homosexual identity. The fact that the movie is a biopic makes the narrative and the protagonist's struggles more authentic. The film narrates the life story of Prof. Ramchandra Siras, who becomes a victim of social exclusion and legal charges after being secretly filmed in a compromising position with his partner. He is recorded without permission and is allegedly caught in the act by some local media persons and university colleagues, who insult, expose, and eventually ostracize him. Prof. Siras's colleagues, who pose as representatives of the Indian society, hold him responsible for ostensibly violating the codes of social morality. Surprisingly, the people who barge into his house, intrude on his privacy, and record him without his consent go scot-free. The recorded material is used by his colleagues with malicious intent and is presented as compelling evidence against him in court. Furthermore, instead of supporting him, the university uses the unfortunate incident as an excuse to take disciplinary action against Prof. Siras. He is removed from the Head of the Department position and suspended from his duties.

Soon, Prof. Siras is issued a legal notice to vacate the residence provided by Aligarh University. Despite his repeated protests, the electric supply to his residence is cut off, and Prof. Siras is finally forced to shift to a private accommodation. One of his colleagues, Prof. Sridharan, coerces him into writing an apology letter to the university, expressing embarrassment over the incident. Prof. Siras agrees to this proposition in hopes of retaining his position. This letter, however, is later used against him as evidence in court. In fact, nobody really feels sorry or regretful for the way Prof. Siras is treated by his university and society at large. The people who act against Prof. Siras and even burn his effigy justify their actions by claiming that he had disgraced both the university and the city of Aligarh. Even some of his friends, like Tahir Islam from the

philosophy department, who were empathetic towards the professor, chose silence over supporting his cause due to societal pressure. Moreover, when the chief editor of the Indian Post newspaper, Namita, learns of Prof. Siras's suspension from Aligarh University, she considers assigning a sex scandal expert to cover the story. It is only Deepu Sebastian, a junior journalist working under her, who is highly disturbed by the blatant injustice to which Prof. Siras is subjected and decides to support him. Prof. Siras's case highlights how societal indifference perpetuates suffering and injustice.

Released in 2016, Aligarh received widespread critical appreciation for its sensitive portrayal of homosexuality in India. The film begins with a reference to Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which had initially criminalized homosexuality, considering it to be against the order of nature. It moves on to state that on 2nd July 2009, the Delhi High Court had declared Section 377 as unconstitutional and had thereby decriminalized homosexuality. Therefore, in its own way, Aligarh contributed to the ongoing debates regarding the decriminalization of homosexuality, which was eventually granted also by the Supreme Court of India in 2018. The film subtly touches on the legal aspects of violating the privacy of LGBTQ+ individuals in India and discriminating against them. The cinematic representation of Prof. Siras' personal experience reflects the broader legal battles and social struggles for LGBTQ+ rights in India.

Hansal Mehta views queerness through the lens of Siras's personal struggles and social ostracization. Mehta aptly uses symbolism and visual framing in the movie to highlight Prof. Siras's isolation and suffering. The thoughtful use of darkness, close-up shots, muted colour palettes, cluttered settings, and old Bollywood songs reflects Prof. Siras's mental state and the oppressive ambience around him. Furthermore, dialogues crafted to reflect honest conversations about queerness and societal norms successfully capture the difficulties and prejudices faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Although with the enthusiastic involvement and support of some

LGBTQ activists, Prof. Siras manages to win the court case and reverse his suspension order, he is unfortunately found dead under mysterious circumstances in his apartment, a day before returning to his service. The movie's ending is tragic and poignant, and instead of offering a hopeful solution, it emphasizes the ongoing nature of struggles faced by marginalized individuals like Prof. Siras. Yet, the progress in legal rights, as reflected in the decriminalization of homosexuality, that happened a few years after the release of this movie, makes the audience believe in the possibility of social change and motivates them to continue advocating for LGBTQ+ rights in India. Prof. Siras's case was one of the most unfortunate and exemplary cases of persecution on the grounds of gender discrimination in India, especially because the deceased professor had never disclosed his sexuality voluntarily, being fully aware of the consequences of such a revelation in a conservative and homophobic society such as that of India.

Prof. Siras's quest for personal and professional respect and his struggle for dignity and acceptance in a conservative society aptly reflect the prejudice and persecution faced by homosexuals in India. For ages, the Indian society has ostracized homosexuals and treated them as outsiders or social outcasts. Movies like *Aligarh* provide real-life instances that refute the traditional assumptions about gender and sexual identities and prove that the "outside is already inside" (Namaste, 1994, p. 220). Further, the use of biographical narratives enhances the credibility and authenticity of the film. Applying queer theory to the movie, shows how homosexual subjectivities like that of Prof. Siras are simultaneously "produced and excluded within culture", and continue to exist "both inside and outside its borders" (Namaste, 1994, p. 220). Critics like Diana Fuss (1991), in her foundational work *Inside/Out* reassert the necessity of moving beyond an inside/outside model in order to view sexuality from a critical perspective. Moreover, films like *Aligarh* play a significant role in what Jennifer Terry (1991), calls "theorizing deviant historiography" by focusing on the conditions and processes

that constrain the historical emergence of gay men like Prof. Siras. It does so by focusing on the violation of Siras's privacy to explore the legal and socio-political issues surrounding homosexuality in India, including debates regarding its criminalization under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Further, the public uproar the film faced upon its release reflects the latent homophobia prevalent in the predominantly heteronormative Indian society. Hansal Mehta's realistic and minimalistic approach towards the subject and his use of candid dialogues and naturalistic cinematography accentuate the film's emotional impact. Thus, in conclusion, one might argue that although thought-provoking movies like *Aligarh* cannot modify people's mentality in India overnight, they play a pivotal role in bringing about a gradual social change.

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