

Spring 5-1-2007

# Motherhood and the Political Project of Queer Indian Cinema

Bryce J. Renninger

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# Motherhood and the Political Project of Queer Indian Cinema

Bryce J. Renninger

Candidate for B.A. Degree  
in English & Textual Studies, Television Radio Film, and Religion  
& Society with Honors

May 2007

APPROVED

Thesis Project Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_  
Roger Hallas

Honors Reader: \_\_\_\_\_  
Tula Goenka

Honors Director: \_\_\_\_\_  
Samuel Gorovitz

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Abstract

*Motherhood & the Political Project of Queer Indian Cinema* is a thesis that works to understand the variety of ways the films of queer Indian cinema use the figure of the mother. The Indian mother has a long history at the fore of the Indian imagination. Popular narratives and public culture within India have a history of focusing on the mother as a key site of Indian tradition. Narratives and cultures of all religious traditions in India have consistently focused on the mother as a central character and agent of change.

Queer Indian cinema, of the diaspora and made from within the subcontinent, has this same focus on the mother. Queer Indian cinema is different from many other cultural products of India and the diaspora in that it operates under certain inherent politics. The first is the burden expected to represent and to make visible the queer Indian community. There is also the political burden of creating a cultural product that engages in a tenuous cultural conversation, specifically the one on queerness or homosexuality. This thesis seeks to explore the variety of ways in which queer Indian cinema uses the narrative trope of the mother to further the political cause of queer Indian cinema. From mothers who must be questionably homophobic to mothers who are questionably queer to nagging mothers and cinematic mothers, the maternal is consistently important as a central narrative figure within queer Indian cinema. Through textual analyses of the films, engagement with the writings of prominent Indian, queer, and diasporic film scholars, and an analysis of the reception of these films, I come to understand the effect of these many ways of portraying the mother in film.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must thank Roger Hallas for his multiple close readings of this text, always supportive, practical, and constructively critical. I value most sincerely the passion and humility he displayed, teaching me *and* learning with me. I am likewise thankful to Tula Goenka for reading this text and giving me much needed context for the study.

Those at the Syracuse University Honors Program also deserve much thanks, specifically for funding my trip to Delhi through the Angell Scholarship. This trip provided greater confidence in my scholarly research, as I was able to develop a greater understanding of Indian culture on the subcontinent through this trip. My visits with Shohini Ghosh and Ira Bhaskar were illuminating in my journey to become better acquainted with Indian film and queer studies. My trust in Shohini was validated when, after we had a conversation about Shah Rukh Khan's popularity amongst the gay community, I was glanced over by a man in a car whose rear window featured a sticker for the Khan-starrer *Don*. Both Shohini and Ira were incredibly welcoming and engaging, providing a wonderful academic stimulation during my visit to Delhi. Also, it is necessary to thank here the people at Cross Cultural Solutions who provided me with a wonderful platform to become introduced to the culture of Delhi and a platform to engage with the wonderful people at the Habitat Learning Centre.

My friends and family have heard much about queer Indian cinema, Hindi films and the political culture of India and its diaspora, and for their kind and supportive ears, I am thankful.

## Introduction

An old woman stands amongst a group of villagers as she opens the gates to fill up the village's new dam. She is the matriarch of the village, yet most of those around her are men. A huge amount of respect can be felt exuding from the men to their matriarch. As she opens the dam, the men are watching her every move, as if she is bestowing her holiness upon it. It is as if she is a goddess to these men. Before this initial scene, the credit sequence shows a modernizing India, the India of the film's present, in which a rural area is taken over by tractors and other machines. The opening of the dam is a part of this modernizing movement, and the town's mother is instrumental in this process.

Film scholar Rosie Thomas has called *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) the quintessential Indian film (11). Indian Muslim actress Nargis plays Hindu mother Radha. The film follows Radha's (Nargis) life in her rural village. She works hard to pay back the unfair man, Sukhilala, who loaned her land. Her husband loses his arm while working and runs away from home after he realizes that he cannot contribute any money towards the debt and has become a financial nuisance. Her son, Birju, is known amongst the young women for his prankster ways and is thus an unattractive mate.

We return again to the film's present at the end of the film, where we see that Radha has championed over her nemesis, Sukhilala. This comes after Radha kills her son Birju to protect the village. The hard work and determination of the heroine for the good of the village is seen as so valuable that she becomes a figurehead in the village. As the village modernizes, it recognizes the hard work

of the Indian woman in all the roles she takes on. What is most important is the special way in which she negotiates her membership as a mother in her family and the head of household in her village. Once Radha proves that she is more interested in her role as a villager looking out for the village's best interest, she is seen as an invaluable figure in her community.

Radha in *Mother India* is an exemplary figure of womanhood in the (North) Indian imagination. As Rosie Thomas points out, Radha must prioritize her womanly roles – wife, mother, community member (15-6). “[S]he is both venerator of men and venerated by them as *devi* (goddess) and *maa* (mother), and she is, in turn, in need of men's protection and a protector and destroyer of men” (Thomas 16). What is most important to Radha's character is her multitude of identities and the ways in which she negotiates them. These feminine identities, shorthand and epitomized with “mother,” invoke Hindu goddess imagery (Thomas 17). Not only is Radha the name of Krishna's lover, but Sukhilal gives Radha the nickname Lakshmi, “goddess of wealth and good fortune, to whom brides are customarily likened” (Thomas 17). In the (Hindu) nationalist worldview, all things that give birth to life (cows, rivers, nature, goddesses, women) are ascribed mother imagery.<sup>1</sup> As the title to Stanley Kurtz's book on Indian psychoanalysis says, “all the mothers are one.” As he makes the case, it is a part of the Hindu understanding of the *devi* that no matter the name, it is always

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<sup>1</sup> Vijay Mishra says that “*Mother India* is, quite defiantly, not a religious but a secular epic of the new, modern India where a universal moral principle transcending religious and caste difference is the dominant dharma” (77). Mishra makes the argument that because Radha is named Radha and not Sita – the embodiment of wifedom – the film does not make the case for a reading of mother equals nation. However, much of Hindu mythology and practice creates a singular Devi, goddess, which has developed different attributes, identities, and names.

the same concept: womanhood through the device of the *devi*. In working through other Indologists' conception of the *devi*, Kurtz argues that goddess in a particular form used in a particular manner is often constructed as either sister-daughter or wife but always as mother. However, a goddess with the possibility to be a sister or daughter only can reach this conceptualization by being a vile creature, an "impure, bloodthirsty destroyer of demons"; a goddess with the possibility to be a wife only does so by being a "selfish, jealous dominating one" (Kurtz 24). When the mother in *devi* comes out, so do her more benevolent aspects and traits. And when psychoanalytic theories of development are applied to natural mothers, Kurtz's analysis strives to make "the distinctive Hindu mix of physical indulgence and personal distance make sense" (Kurtz 53). Thus, Kurtz notices a peculiarity in Hindu child development in that the child is fed with its mother's breasts quickly after crying begins. He also observes the Hindu child's involvement with the greater community at a young age as a point in which the child is removed from its mother.

Radha's negotiation of her mother-ness or woman-ness is indicative of her status as a woman, and at the end of the film she is seen as the embodiment of the community. Motherhood and nationhood are linked here through the narrative of the film, and they are also linked to the name of the film.<sup>2</sup> *Mother India* the film can be seen as an indigenous redefining of womanhood by creating a powerful woman, who is an easily identifiable example of motherhood. Although

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<sup>2</sup> *Mother India* is also the name of a 1927 book by Katherine Mayo, "an antagonistic and racist book...a best-seller that...was used as a powerful propaganda tool by the British against the Indian nationalists" (Mishra 67). Mayo's book focused on sexual violence and exploitation in India, phenomena which she reveals in Pennsylvania and the Philippines in other books (Mishra 67).



motherhood is instrumental to understanding Indian nationalism, motherhood is also a negotiated text on which *Mother India* the film has played out much of the intricacies of the “mother” concept.

If *Mother India* is the quintessential Indian film, then *Gulabi Aaina* (*The Pink Mirror*, Sridhar Rangayan, 2003) is the quintessential queer Indian film. It does not have the monetary or popular success of *Mother India*, but it is the film that does the most in its narrative to define a queer Indian film genre. Like Radha in *Mother India* whose motherly status is used to develop the idea of a modernized India, the idea of motherhood is used to create a queer Indian world. Understanding the text of the film and the politics of its director, Sridhar Rangayan, will help to define the idea of queer Indian cinema and the particular issues surrounding this concept, which are the principal concerns of this thesis.

While there have been many successful films from India and the diaspora which have dealt with queerness and depicted queerness, it is important to understand why I have identified *Gulabi Aaina* as the epitome of queer Indian cinema. The dual identity of queer Indians is essential to the narrative focus of queer Indian cinema, precisely due to the often conflicting and tenuous representative struggles between queerness and Indianness and often queerness and diaspora. While there are many films I have seen fit to include in this study because they deal with queerness and are from Indian or diasporic producers, many of them challenge this category of films that is made for and from within a (diasporic) Indian queer community. *Gulabi Aaina* is thus important because its director/producer Sridhar Rangayan, a queer activist and mainstream TV and film

producer has taken up the responsibility of creating films that work to define this genre. He has taken it as a project to create a series of seven queer-themed films which he finances using his income from his mainstream TV and film production work (Karani).

*Gulabi Aaina* is set in a queer utopia, a space that could be anywhere. The hustle of urban Delhi is nowhere to be seen in the physicality of the film's setting. There are only scenes in Bibbo's house and on the stage which Bibbo and Shabbo perform drag. Outside of the queer network of people, there is only a short amount of time spent with other "straight" Indians, but they do not get a voice. Instead, they are queered by being audience members of the drag show at which Bibbo and Shabbo are performing. Through dialogue, it is clear that the film is in India: Rangayan has a very explicit audience for his film; its characters are entrenched in the Hindi film industry; the film features Shabbo and Bibbo performing in drag to popular Bollywood songs; and finally, it creates a kinship network that feels unique to Indian queerness.

One of the most important things in Sridhar Rangayan's understanding of his own films is his audience. On his website promoting *Gulabi Aaina*, he is sure to mention that the film is in Hindi (Rangayan). In an interview in the San Jose-based South Asian queer magazine *Trikone*, Rangayan says that *Gulabi Aaina* has received "a lukewarm response from Indian LGBT groups, especially the straight-acting, English-speaking gay genus" (Karani). Not only is Rangayan naming an explicitly queer audience, but it is clear that he is simultaneously defining a very narrow conception of Indianness, in which language and thus class is an important

factor. According to Rangayan's logic, the queer people who respond poorly to his film are people who have been affected in a peculiarly transformative way by colonization and globalization. In many ways, those who speak English have been assimilated to the colonizers in a way that has proven marketable and profitable in today's global economy. They speak English and do not have an appreciation for the camp of *Gulabi Aaina*. In this quote Rangayan is also implying that *khoti* (which the film translates to "queen" in its English subtitles) identity and behavior runs counter to the value of these emulators of Western culture. He is therefore marking *khoti*-ness as a unique attribute of queer India.

The fact that *Gulabi Aaina* depicts a series of gay men working in the Hindi (Bollywood) film industry serves two purposes. First, it situates the film in relation to one of the most popular cultural identifiers of Indian-ness. Second, it affirms the queer culture's assumptions about the queer influence on Bollywood, a popular Western term for contemporary Hindi cinema. The character of the wannabe Bollywood star is directly compared to Shah Rukh Khan and Hrithik Roshan. Shah Rukh and producer-director Karan Johar have been suspected of queerness in gossip circles and deny these allegations publicly (Chawda). These queer allegations and controversy are commonplace in Hindi film industry's thriving gossip culture. Moreover, personal gossip and trivia is a central part of Hindi film culture.

The Bollywood music in *Gulabi Aaina* is a part of a trend of Indian and Indian diasporic cinema of adopting audio and visuals from Bollywood cinema to make these films more relevant to the same audiences of mainstream Hindi

cinema who appreciate the cultural value of Bollywood and Bollywood culture. Bollywood music is not only a huge part of Indian culture but also an especially prominent part of Indian queer culture (Waugh). The final song in the film, “Choli ke peeche kya hai” (“What’s under your blouse”), touched off a debate on obscenity which was dually about the obscenity of talking about nudity and the female homoerotic situation in which the film was situated in the film. The song was stripped from the film it was in (*Khalnayak (The Villain)*, 1993), but became incredibly popular on tape and as a video on TV (Ghosh 211-2). *Gulabi Aaina*’s inclusion of this song is an authentic part of global Indian queer culture. “In the 1990s...“Choli ke peeche kya hai” became a staple at parties and in drag performances within South Asian queer spaces in multiple diasporic locations” (Gopinath 111).

*Gulabi Aaina* creates an alternative family structure where the elder drag queen, Bibbo, serves as the mother of all other queer people in the film, in name and in duty. Bibbo is seen primarily as a mentor for the other queer characters, but she is simultaneously a sexual being, as her lustful feelings for the younger gay men are displayed. What *Gulabi Aaina* does is impose the kinship structures of family onto a network of *khoti*. The mother raises her children in a communal group (Bibbo serves as the grandmother, with Shabbo the mother, raising the others together). The mother-son Oedipal bond is boldly present (Bibbo and her “children” flirt). The mother is proud of her children when they grow up and are able to fully function in society (in this case, when the “children” independently flirt and arrange dates).

It is this manipulation of Indian familial structures and particularly the figure of the mother in these networks that will form the crux of my analysis of queer Indian cinema. It will become clear that there is a general collective understanding of Indian tradition that is not inclusive of queer identities. It will also become clear that Indian and Indian diasporic filmmakers often see the figure of the Indian mother as an embodiment of Indian tradition. By holding the burden of cultural tradition, the Indian mother's acceptance of queerness can be read as an example, blueprint, or instance in which queerness can be understood in Indian terms. Likewise, the presence of an Indian queer mother insists that the very foundation of Indian tradition can be accepting. Furthermore, it can itself be queer. It is in these ways that the films of this study work to appropriate and queer dominant movements in Hindi and diasporic filmmaking.

### *The Queer South Asian Political Project*

The political project of South Asian queers is centered around creating queer space, legal reform, and, in some instances, the ability to have open queer identities. For many academics in the field of queer studies in India, the intellectual project at hand is trying to create a lineage of queerness in India. These attempts at collecting instances of queerness in classical Indian literature comes as a response to conservative nationalist Indians who contend that homosexuality and other queernesses came from outside of India in the Moghul or British empires (Vanita and Kidwai 197). For some, queer movements in India can succeed only when a pre-colonial history of queer identities in the region is

established. Jyoti Puri contends that the canon of Indian literature that these queer activists are searching through “are the social histories that are shaped by the pernicious influence of colonialism and the colonial attempt to shape a European self-identity by projecting contradistinctive histories onto its colonies” (177). Therefore, this body of literature has been canonized by the colonizers and the most visible of the colonized – the upper-caste Brahmins. Puri also cites Nayan Shah’s words of warning that “overemphasizing history...may limit what is possible (and permissible) in the present” (177).

For other queer activists, a queer history project eclipses the true task at hand – finding human rights for queer Indian citizens now. After all, male homosexual activity (and all other sodomy) is still illegal in India.<sup>3</sup> The Indian Law Commission, an organization of the British colonial government introduced Section 377, the law that prohibits sodomy on October 6, 1860. This law was created in a particular moment in British history in which there was a multi-faceted movement of the British authority to spread its own supposed moral purity (Bhaskaran 16). Still on the books, Section 377 has stopped political movements such as that to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS in prisons by providing condoms to the inmates on the grounds that providing condoms would, in effect, legalize homosexual activity (Bhaskaran 15).

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<sup>3</sup> It took until 2003 for the United States to take their anti-sodomy laws of the books. The U.S. Supreme Court found anti-sodomy laws to be unconstitutional in *Lawrence v. Texas*. At that point, 13 states had anti-sodomy laws (CNN). Anti-sodomy laws are still in existence in many countries throughout the world, including countries in Asia, Africa, North America, and South America (Summersgill).

In the American LGBT magazine, *The Advocate*, Indian lesbian activist Betu Singh expresses her difficulties in being a lesbian in India, a society that she says endorses compulsory heterosexual marriage. In the article, she describes her work to allow queer women a space to meet and socialize. She also describes a situation when she had to rescue a woman from her family after they quarantined her for her lesbian identity. She says, “Right now, though gay and lesbian people in India are starting to feel comfortable in social spaces, they aren’t making a political issue out of it.” In a conversation I had with queer activist, theorist, and filmmaker Shohini Ghosh, she expressed her disagreement with Singh’s statement saying that she felt that queer social spaces like gay bars and clubs (assuming that is what Singh is alluding to) are not necessarily the only answer for fostering a queer identity in India. What is being contended here could be informed by differing class identities. That is, the cyber or institutional (e.g. academic or artistic communities) means to connect with other queer people have been most easily attainable by middle to upper class Indians.

***“Queer,” “Indian,” and “South Asian”: A Defining Moment***

Before I go any further, it is important to take note of what will be meant when I refer to “India” and “South Asia.” For the most part, the subjects of the films either live in or are descendents of people who lived within the current boundaries of India and Pakistan. I sometimes switch between India (or Pakistan) and South Asia, as if they speak of the same set of boundaries. The concept of “India” as a nation is important in some cases, especially with any films falling in

the category of Indian cinema. Pakistani cinema is not as established an industry and cultural force as Indian cinema, and for that reason, any discussion of nationhood and cinema will focus on work from India. Despite the grand number of Indian cinema industries, Hindi cinema makes the most profits and is the hegemonic industry within the region. I do use the term South Asia, but it is only India and Pakistan that are the subjects of these films, not any other countries in the region. The films that I deal with come out of the tradition of Bollywood, Indian parallel cinema, or are from Indian or Pakistani diasporic directors and screenwriters.

The word “queer” most conventionally means something which is strange or unusual, which defies norms. When talking about sexualities and genders, I define anything that does deviate from the norm as queer. Therefore, I will use queer to describe homoerotics and sexually implicit homosociality. It is a word that I will use to describe the state of challenging gender and sexuality categories and constraints. I will also use it to describe what has most commonly come to be known as queer in the Western academy: lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender identities. So while my use of the word “queer” is quite broad in its meaning, I will not make a distinction between queer and lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities. That is, I will treat queer as a synonym of LGBT when appropriate, and I will also draw upon its more general, versatile denotation of calling things into question, challenging the norm to discuss those who transgress heteronormative genders and sexualities.



### *Queer Indian Cinema*

This is a thesis which focuses on the genre of “queer Indian (diasporic) cinema.” The films on which I focus are from various countries of production and have subjects of various national identities. I take up films that address the issue of homoerotics or queer identities in an explicit way. The films that I am examining are films that have received wide attention from various audiences. *Touch of Pink* (Ian Iqbal Rashid, 1994), *Chutney Popcorn* (Nisha Ganatra, 1998), and *Yours Emotionally!* (Sridhar Rangayan, 2006) were huge queer film festival successes. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) was nominated for an Academy Award. *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (*Tomorrow May Never Come*, Nikhil Advani, 2003) is one of Bollywood’s highest grossing films of all times. And of course, there is the incendiary reaction to Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996). These films are important not only for their content but also for the reaction they garnered. I will provide a close analysis of these films and their themes so that the effect of viewing these notable, or notorious, films can be explored. I will often take special notice of the generic and industry constructions that have produced the films, as there are marked differences between a Bollywood film (e.g. *Mother India*) and a film that has been most widely seen at American film festivals (e.g. *Gulabi Aaina*). Indian and South Asian diasporic film producers have provided far fewer representations of South Asian lesbians on the screen, so my analysis will have a predominantly male focus. David Eng and Alice Hom argue that the focus on gay men in queer Asian representation occurs because emasculated

Asian American men and hyperheterosexualized Asian American women do not allow room for Asian American lesbians (1). Women filmmakers and cultural producers have also historically dealt with little capital for their own film production and distribution and thus any production about themselves.

The thesis is divided into various issues that arise within the genre of queer Indian cinema in its political project, so although there are many films that feature latent homoerotic themes in the category of Indian cinema, the work of those films is not the focus of this thesis. I am interested in the ways in which filmmakers use their films to portray queer characters and themes in ways that are politically progressive or controversial in some way. Queer communities rarely latch onto cultural texts that have these latent themes, and this project is primarily concerned with the work that these films do for queer identities in queer communities and in the greater transnationalist public. It is the public engagement of these films (i.e. the films' engagement with public and popular discourses on cultural tradition and sexuality of all types) that makes them important and relevant to its audience. Similarly, I do not emphasize the legions of films that portray queer characters in supporting roles. In recognition of the differences in representing communities in fiction and nonfiction film and of the emphasis that South Asian culture places on fiction film and film viewership, I will exclude documentaries from my analysis. While I do focus on issues of gender and sexuality throughout the thesis, the essays do focus primarily on sexuality. The transgender issue, specifically the issue of hijras in film, is a topic with such unique complexity that it deserves its own venue for explication.

*Here and There: The Question of Diaspora*

In placing an emphasis on the role of diaspora in the films I chose, I intend to focus on the fact that many of the films were produced by filmmakers of the South Asian diaspora and that some of the films are set in the diaspora. There is truly no film that I examine that has not been affected by the transnational nature of the film industry. There are certain questions of production, representation, and reception in the global context that will inform the ways that the films in this study are produced and read in a variety of global contexts.

Diasporic production is predicated on the site of diaspora. “Filmmakers in Britain, Canada, and the United States (the English-speaking locations in the diaspora) are much more likely to gain access to resources and be marketed commercially” (Desai 45). It is important to understand the difficulties of gaining the means to production and who amongst diasporic South Asians gains these means. In Britain and Canada, directors and screenwriters like Gurinder Chadha, Srinivas Krishna, and Hanif Kureishi rely more on government support of the production of films (Desai 47-8). According to Indian diasporic film theorist Jignai Desai, “[the British nation-state] did little to ensure the commercial success of these films.” So amongst the diaspora, there are sites (e.g. United States) where gaining monetary means to produce is difficult and sites (e.g. United States and Britain) where wide distribution and profits are difficult to achieve.

David Eng and Alice Hom, in their collection *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, recognize a value in creating a queer Asian America. They identify

themselves thus: “We are queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Asian Americans who are willing to engage actively in the discourses of both Asian American and queer politics but unwilling to bifurcate our identities into the racial and the sexual” (3-4). They are declaring identity that is not only Asian American and queer, but one that is a part of the queer Asian diaspora – a peculiar identity that recognizes the complexities of identity and implies the diversity of LGBT and Asian diasporic identities. In the same paragraph, they say that this particular kind of dual identity emerged “in the face of, perhaps even in spite of, this virulent backlash [physically against people of color and queers and politically against initiatives that would benefit people of color and queers]” (4). Eng and Hom here bring up a specific instance of the similarities of queers and immigrants in the Western (specifically American) experience.

Gayatri Gopinath clearly names what it is about queer diasporas that is so critical in defining the diasporic experience and in challenging any hegemonic nationalism. She details first the value of understanding diasporic stories, embracing “diaspora as a concept for its potential to foreground notions of impurity and inauthenticity that resoundingly reject the ethnic and religious absolutism at the center of nationalist projects” (7). Addressing the concept and value of queer diaspora, she says “a queer diasporic framework productively exploits the analogous relation between nation and diaspora on the one hand, and between heterosexuality and queerness on the other: in other words, queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation” (11). She also notices the two ways in which these analogies are read by various audiences. The promoters of

heteronormative nationalist causes can see both queerness and diaspora as transgressions of truth, rightness. Others may see queerness and diasporas as challenging the hegemonic power of heterosexuality and nationhood. The presence of queer diasporas highlights the Gopinath's analogy and thus promotes discussions on topics of queerness and nation.

There are two elements of representation that are incredibly important for the interaction of films and Indianness: the representation of diasporic people by the cinema of the diaspora and the representation of the same group of people by popular Hindi cinema.

For diasporic films, it is often the case that films, "negotiating their location in the West, carefully identified the political, economic, and social ramifications of racial exclusions and Eurocentrism on South Asian communities." (Desai 48). This strategy of representation can come under scrutiny from cultural critics who desire a specific view of Indian or diasporic life. Mira Nair was criticized for her *Salaam Bombay!* for creating a film that used an Orientalist narrative of disadvantaged Indians to draw in Western art house audiences (Desai 49). Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity is helpful in understanding the problems behind claims to cinematic representation of cultures. The heterogeneity of representations of cultural identity attests to filmmakers attempts to create cultural identities for their characters. According to Hall's concept of cultural identity, it is a production, "never in complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (704). This conception of cultural representation implicitly argues for heterogeneous readings

of these heterogeneous cultural constructions. One is cautioned from producing conceptions of cultures that are static and immutable, much as the constructions themselves are a product of the media artifact they are in. There should be no burden of representation that limits the ways in which a culture should be or should try to be representations. At the same time, though, Hall contends that identities are informed by the narratives of the past (706). Thus, the heterogeneity of these representations cannot overcome the (colonial) history of Indianness and the post-colonial globalization of public cultures.

The other way of thinking about diasporic representation is to focus on the representation of the diaspora by the Hindi film industry. This representation is tremendously linked to the recent marketing of Hindi cinema to diasporic audiences and the production of Hindi films that represent non-resident Indians (NRIs). There are two striking elements of Hindi film's obsession with diasporic subjects: One, "overseas Indians are classed (and gendered) in ways that elide the struggles of less-privileged diasporic peoples" (Mankekar 733-4). Two, "transgressions of what may be called the 'deep structures' of kinship...are less likely to be accepted by the Indian viewer" (Mishra 249). The first assertion provides the understanding for who is seen as the subject – heteronormative wealthy NRIs. The second provides an introduction to Hindi film's understanding of queerness. When a Hindi film takes up queerness, it must keep this in mind – that the viewer is not used to or may not want to see transgressions of "family values" on the screen, even if the setting is diasporic.

The diasporic audience has also become incredibly important for Hindi film producers in their efforts to create a profitable audience for their films. “Two crucial advances in technology, the VCR and cable and satellite TV, have played an important role in diasporic appropriation of homeland culture” (Mishra 238). This consideration of a global audience is important when considering the audience of Hindi films. In fact, many diasporic films use this viewing practice, of watching films (especially the TV serial of the *Ramayana*) in their films to create a portrayal of diasporic experience.

***Culture and Consumption: South Asian (Diasporic) Queer Viewership***

In Indian and South Asian diasporic contemporary culture, as is true with any contemporary culture, much of the issues around identity politics are played out in the production and reception of popular culture. Films are particularly charged with the importance of locating a place for the politics of identity surrounding the dual identity of queer South Asians to be fleshed out. *Trikone* has articles in most of its issues on film; some issues are solely devoted to film. The events that they sponsor and cover often are South Asian or Indian events centered around queer Indian cinema. Nitin Karani’s blog is committed to “anything that affects [him] and anything that may be of relevance to queer people in India.” The contents of his blog are mostly about visibility, and thus venerate the work of Sridhar Rangayan in forging a queer Indian cinema. He also shows his personal position in queer life in his commentary on *Brokeback*

*Mountain* with “I have seen enough closeted men up-close so that I look at most of them with a clinical detachment.”

Though he is a visible member in the social-political circle of Indian queers, Karani’s calls for a queer Indian cinema are valuable and indicative of the droves of Indian diasporic queers who attend queer film festivals to see queer Indian cinema. While I was watching *Yours Emotionally!* at New York’s LGBT film festival NewFest, the crowd was roughly half Indian gay men and their mostly white partners. The film received a standing ovation at the end. The white partners of diasporic Indians who came to the screening and probably those of other film festival favorites will most likely use these films to understand the cultural differences between themselves and their partner. This phenomenon is facilitated by the popularity of biracial couples and friend pairs in queer Indian cinema (*My Beautiful Laundrette*, *Yours Emotionally!*, *Chicken Tikka Masala*, *Touch of Pink*, *Chutney Popcorn*). These films also affirm and validate these biracial couplings by depicting mothers who care little about the biracial aspect of relationships once queerness is acknowledged.

### ***Identity Politics and Religion in India and Its Film***

Throughout the thesis, I have decided to focus on religion as a central point on which issues of queerness have been discussed. Particularly because this is an analysis of a national film industry and culture, Hinduism and Hindu nationalism are incredibly important to my argument. A vast majority of Indians are Hindu, and the religion is pervasive across public and popular culture in the



subcontinent. The cosmology, ideology, and iconography of Hinduism are familiar to all Indians, and is a part of Indian life to anyone living in the subcontinent.

Members of the conservative Hindu nationalist movement have been particularly vocal about the presence of queerness as an aberration of Hindu – often stated as Indian – morality. One Hindu nationalist who led the attacks against *Fire* rhetorically asks in an interview, “Why do they [the sisters-in-law who are lovers in the film] have to be Hindu?” (*Fire*). She goes on to ask why they cannot be Muslim or Christian. To any fan of queer media, this statement is easily identified as ignorant to the great volumes of films which have queer Christians and the few that portray queer Muslims. Because of this ignorance, this woman’s statement is clearly defensive. Director Deepa Mehta uses Hinduism’s power to portray most illustratively the repressive dominant Indian culture, and the activist responds to this defensively, feeling personally attacked at being associated through common religion to lesbian sexuality.

In the same documentary report on the *Fire* DVD, director Deepa Mehta says that she believes she would be killed were she a Muslim. The political differences between Hinduism and Islam (and to a lesser extent Christianity) are particularly marked by the Hindu right’s rhetoric. In this rhetoric, there is a strong distrust of outside religions like Islam and Christianity. These influences are the same ones that Indians encounter when they emigrate from the subcontinent. Whether in the national boundaries or outside of them, Hindu nationalism works to identify Hinduism with Indianness and thus righteousness.

There are a limited number of filmmakers who produce work that would easily be identified as queer Indian cinema. These filmmakers are from a variety of religious traditions. Deepa Mehta and Sridhar Rangayan are Hindu. Ian Iqbal Rashid is an Ismaili Muslim. Often, these filmmakers portray protagonists of their own religion. Their films address the cultural place of each religion in the lives of their protagonists. In Mehta's *Fire*, much is made about the oppression of its protagonists by Hindu cultural practices. Rangayan's films do not work to attribute difficulties in being queer to the less politically pervasive Sikhism. In *Yours Emotionally!*, the only address of its protagonist's religion occurs when he introduces himself as Sikh, to which he hears back the stereotyping but ambivalent response, "Oh! I love your turbans!" In Rashid's work and *My Beautiful Laundrette*, much is made of the derogatory nature of the term "Paki" to describe South Asians due to the racist negative perceptions of South Asian (Pakistani) Muslims. In these various ways, political and more personal, the religions of India become important in understanding the cultural context of queerness in India and its diaspora.

### ***Conceptualizing the Indian Mother and the Queer Mother***

As Maithili Rao says in her analysis of women's role in Hindi cinema, "[w]omen's response to popular cinema is a ceaseless love-hate thralldom because the film image ostensibly celebrates her eroticism while reducing her to a passive sex object" (241). Or alternatively, there is the traditional conception of women as "dependent in youth on her father, during marriage on her husband, and

in old age on her son” (ancient lawgiver Manu quoted in Young 173). In scholarship concerning women in Hindi cinema and in Indian popular and mass culture, the idea of woman as (Hindu) goddess prevails as a viable lens to understand views of (Hindu) womanhood. In Rosie Thomas’s analysis of *Mother India*, she explicates the character of Radha not only as the goddess Radha but as many of the major goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. She lists off Radha’s roles as:

Sita (archetypal dutiful, loyal wife and embodiment of purity, whose trail by fire and abandonment with two young sons are implicitly invoked); Savitri (exemplarily devoted wife); Radha herself (the cowherd who was Krishna’s lover); Lakshmi (goddess of wealth and good fortune, to whom brides are customarily likened and to whom Sukhilal explicitly, and somewhat ironically, given the contest of his attempted seduction, likens Radha); and the more fearsome mother goddesses, Durga and Kali, powerful symbols of female sacred authority and embodiments of *shakti* (female power), who punish and destroy if they are displeased.

(17)

I quote Thomas’s commentary to display an example of typical scholarship on the mother or woman as goddess. And this explicit and implicit invocation of Hindu goddesses is quite common within Hindu public and popular culture, including the films *Mother India* and *Fire*. Both of these films work off of the public imagination of the Hindu goddesses to infuse their narratives with preconceptions

of Hindu goddess imagery by naming their characters after the goddesses. Many of the films in this study will not apply to this framework due to diasporic placement or non-Hindu religious identities, but it is important to acknowledge this hegemonic structure of Hindi filmmaking and film reception.

The figure of women in films intersects with class, in that “lower-caste women always had considerable independence, in part because of her labour in the public sphere, which provided economic power, and in part because she could romantically define her relationships and decision for marriage” (Young 174). Thus, the more vocal, potentially insightful voice of the low-caste woman is altogether absent from Hindi films. Another parallel argument is that upper-class women, who are the subjects of most films in India and the diaspora, are in many ways slaves to their cultural responsibilities. That tradition is bounded to middle-class women is the case of this criticism, and it is reinforced by most Hindi films. No economic change is advocated by the films, because lower class people are marginalized by contemporary Hindi cinema<sup>4</sup> and rarely without criticism for an attempt to pander to Western art-house audiences eager to espouse sympathy for the poor developing world<sup>5</sup>. The lack of feminist ideals visiting the film screen could possibly be attributed to the overwhelming popularity of Hindi films

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<sup>4</sup> The recent Hindi film *Guru* (Mani Ratnam, 2007) depicts the rise of a conglomerate corporation. At one point the CEO (Abhishek Bachchan) has so disgruntled his employees that they boo him while he attempts to tell them that their conditions will improve. After a little PR magic, his workers are on his side again. All the while, the viewer only catches brief glances of these disgruntled workers.

<sup>5</sup> “The phenomenon of the art house is based on positioning ‘foreign’ films as ethnographic documents of ‘other’ (national cultures and therefore as representatives of national cinemas...mapping to and from racialized transnational postcolonial bodies, diasporic filmmakers frequently occupy the position of native informant” (Desai 39)

amongst young men and young men's reluctance towards films' depictions of nontraditional behavior – especially love marriages (Derné).

### ***The Figure of the Mother and Queer Indian Cinema***

In queer Indian cinema, the mother is often at the foreground in the family arena. The goal of this thesis is to expose the multifaceted ways in which the figure of the mother works in the political projects (e.g. representation, visibility, community building, and political activism) in which queer Indian cinema engages – how the mother is resignified in the context of the queer narratives. This queering of the mother is variable and is complicated by many factors including the role of the mother in the narrative and her own understandings of queer sexualities. The thesis is divided into various historical industrial circumstances and narrative devices that are used to create queer Indian cinema. From these frameworks, I will investigate the role mothers play in the creation of a queer cinematic representation. The various ways in which all other Indian (diasporic) cinema utilize the figure of the mother shifts in Queer Indian Cinema so that heteronormativity can be challenged and the emotions and viewing practices of the South Asian viewer can be drawn on to succeed in a queer Indian project.

The creation of the queer wife and queer mother is the subject of the first chapter. The queer wives in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and the queer mother-to-be in Nisha Ganatra's *Chutney Popcorn* will provide the subjects for the inquiry into how queer mothers are created within the films and why these two narratives have

proven the most popular and controversial in the list of queer Indian cinema. In Chapter Two, I examine the role of conservative genres in creating a forum for queer representation in the Western teen flick (*Bend It Like Beckham*; Gurinder Chadha, 2001) and a Bollywood film (*Kal Ho Naa Ho*). Chapter Three focuses on the ways in which queer characters in *Touch of Pink* and *Yours Emotionally!* interact with their biological mothers and the alternative mother figures they have found in queer networks. For the conclusion, I take up two films in which the mother is conspicuously absent in most scenes: *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Surviving Sabu* (Ian Iqbal Rashid, 1998). I will work through the specific subjects that can be accessed due to the absence of the mother, and how this changes the effects of these films.

### **Trials by Fire: The Creation of the Hindu Queer Mother in *Chutney Popcorn* & *Fire***

In a study that seeks to link the concepts of motherhood and queerness in Indian and diasporic cinema, the project is complicated by films that portray characters in whose bodies queerness and motherhood are negotiated. *Chutney Popcorn* (Nisha Ganatra, 1999) and *Fire* (Deepa Mehta, 1996) both deal with the subject matter of women and queer behavior. In *Chutney Popcorn*, director Nisha Ganatra plays out lesbian, Reena, who is artificially inseminated, becomes pregnant, and eventually gives birth. In *Fire*, the film focuses on the married life of two women married to brothers, Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das). The two women begin to express their love for each other and eventually must prove their love by “trial[s] by fire” after they are unable to become mothers. Through textual analyses of both films, it is clear how each film positions the relationship between Hindu value structures (as enacted via family) and queerness. *Chutney Popcorn* is unusual in that it actually creates a space for the Hindu queer mother. *Fire* is helpful in its vivid rendering of a Hindu family who must confront hidden queerness between two sisters-in-law. There is no more notorious response to a film in India than that of *Fire*, so readings of this film by various groups and individuals will provide the final component of this investigation. The reception of *Fire* by queer feminist critics will allow the film’s complex relationship with feminist and queer readings and agendas to be more clearly understood. By the end of these three analyses, the considerations and consequences, the delights and curses of producing queerness in an Indian and diasporic cinema will be more apparent and understandable. The figure of the

mother, as a part of the greater Indian family, stands as a prominent actor in these moments of queerness.

*Chutney Popcorn* depicts a biracial relationship between Reena and her white girlfriend, Lisa (Jill Hennessy). In the opening scenes of the film, we see Reena at work doing Henna and photographing her work. The film depicts Reena as an aspiring photographer who seems to be tattooing for financial sustenance. In an exchange between the two women, Lisa tells Reena that she likes Henna because she does not want “real, *permanent* tattoos.” Here, in the midst of one of the ubiquitous Indian arts in the eyes of the West, Henna thematizes one of the film’s central dramatic dynamics: Lisa’s fear of commitment. The film’s other central dramatic dynamics are addressed in the next scene, when we go to something else ubiquitously Indian – the colorful, nearly weeklong marriage festivities. Reena and Lisa are late to the festivities, but we hear off-screen voices telling Reena’s sister, Sarita (Sakina Jaffrey), “Promise to have many children, alright? Not just one; as many as God blesses you with.” This statement anticipates the obvious fact that Sarita is assumed to have children and Reena is expected to be a childless woman due to her unspoken lesbianism. Finally, this statement also situates the complications that Sarita is about to have conceiving a child by placing emphasis on the great pressure that her Indian family is placing on her to have a child with her (also white) husband, Mitch (Nick Chinlund).

The conflict between Reena’s lesbianism and her Hindu culture is embodied in Reena’s relationship with her mother, Meenu (Madhur Jaffrey). After Reena shows up late for her sister’s marriage, her mother chastises her both



for being late and for being gay. After her mother expresses her disappointment that Reena will never have a wedding or children, Reena says, “I’m a lesbian. I’m not sterile. You have no shame!” Here, Reena expresses her frustration with her mother over what she perceives as her mother’s homophobia. Her mother refuses to mention the word “lesbian” and shudders when it is mentioned. She also expresses disappointment in her daughter for being gay. The film creates a foil for Meenu in Lisa’s mother. Lisa’s mother stops by Reena and Lisa’s apartment in a housewarming gesture and says that she is “glad [Lisa] is finally settling down.” So Meenu’s homophobia – expressed simply by not acknowledging Reena’s queerness – is situated physically in an embodiment of Indian culture, the Indian wedding, and in opposition to the white mother’s support of her lesbian child. Meenu’s status as an Indian single *mother* sets her up both as one who was abandoned by the man she married and as one who is the closest family member responsible for serving as watchdog over her children’s engagement with Hindu culture. I will explore these trends of comparing Indian mothers to white parents and to Indian fathers in the chapter on *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho*.

The conflict that makes *Chutney Popcorn* so different from any other queer Indian or diasporic film is its portrayal of a queer Indian mother. After Sarita and Mitch realize they cannot have a child together due to gynecological problems with Sarita, Reena suggests that she carry a child inseminated by Mitch. Sarita goes back and forth with the idea, but ultimately she consents. The insemination is harder than anyone ever planned. While Sarita gets frustrated with the process, she decides that she does not want to have a child anymore.

Shortly after this decision, Reena discovers that one of her attempts at fertilization has proven successful. Although Sarita does not want the child, Reena and Mitch decide that they would both like the child to be born, which causes their respective partners to abandon them.

While the narrative never doubts the dedication of Sarita and Mitch's decision not to raise the child together and to respect Reena's custody of the child, both Sarita and Lisa become very uncomfortable with the idea of their partners bringing a child into the world. Lisa goes on a date with an ex, and her mother expresses her disdain for what she is doing by abandoning Reena and going back to her less trustworthy ex-girlfriend. What happens when Reena and Lisa attempt to get back together is a very complex moment in the film.

It is fairly apparent that Lisa left Reena due to her fear of commitment. However, when Reena and Lisa meet to talk about what has happened between them, Lisa gives the excuse that Reena's mother is the problem with their relationship. She tells Reena that because of Meenu's homophobia, she does not feel comfortable being in the relationship. Lisa seems to be insinuating that if Meenu were like her mother (i.e. able to talk about her lovers), she would not have left. The viewer is left wondering why Lisa is not addressing her former fear of commitment, but nothing in the film seems to question the diegetic logic. In fact, at this point in the film, Meenu has disposed of her homophobia due to the excitement surrounding a grandchild – the growth of her family. Lisa can use the idea of family and the idea of a mother's proper role to her advantage to distract Reena from her true reason for temporarily leaving her. Through something that

emulates heterosexual life – the raising of a child – Meenu can suddenly become supportive of Reena’s relationship with Lisa. Reena’s indifference to Lisa’s suspicious behavior can easily be seen as ignorance to Lisa’s persistent lack of commitment.

However, there does seem to be some semblance of truth to Lisa’s reasoning. She is insecure with her relationship to Reena because Meenu does not treat Lisa as a part of the family. All in-laws have a certain effect on their children’s spouses, but Lisa believes that Meenu specifically has the power to impinge on her freedom. Lisa sees Meenu as limiting, especially after experiencing Reena’s virulent reactions against her mother. Even for Lisa, it is incredibly important to gain approval from Meenu. It is true that the same would be the case no matter what ethnicity Reena is, but for Reena and her mother, there is a culturally defined sense of duty to be married, to have children, to be a part of the Hindu institution of marriage. It is not primarily a struggle over Meenu’s need to develop a tolerance for queer sexual orientations and identities or over whether Meenu must accept Lisa. Meenu simply wants Reena to fulfill her womanly duty, because this duty will provide Meenu with the responsibility that comes with being a grandmother. The film is also unique in that Meenu does not try to arrange Reena with anyone else. Reena’s cousin does assume marrying a man would help and offers to be her husband of convenience in exchange for dates with Lisa, and Mitch and Reena do become incredibly close when Sarita decides she does not want the child Reena is carrying. However, neither of these men are seen within the characters’ perceptions as viable options for Meenu. The

central struggle of the film is Meenu's acknowledgment and embracing of Reena's sexuality in the face of what it may mean to the mother that her daughter become a childless grown woman, thus fail to become a mother.

The film ends with Reena giving birth to the baby with Lisa and Mitch in the delivery room and Sarita and Meenu uncomfortably in the waiting room with two of Reena's lesbian friends. This unconventional family structure takes up the screen in the final credits of the film in the form of a tableau, where each member of the family is seen caring for or holding the child. There seems to be some kind of harmony in this situation, the film has created an alternative family structure of Reena, mother, sister, baby's father/sperm donor, and a group of queer friends that form an alternative family structure. The final moments of the film portray a Reena who is happy, perfectly content with the familial structure that has developed around her newborn child. Meenu also approves the situation by the end of the film. Instead of surrounding Reena with Meenu's relatives, Reena's and the baby's aunts, Reena's queer friends take on this role. Meenu is nonetheless tolerant of this situation and there seems to be nothing she objects to. It is only Reena's motherhood that was needed for her mother to respect her and to allow for the greater family to coexist as it does.

The most notorious film that addresses issues of queerness and Indianness is undoubtedly Deepa Mehta's *Fire*. Unlike *Chutney Popcorn*, the protagonists are not diasporic (although the filmmaker is), the protagonists are not mothers, and the ending is not rosy. Unfortunately for a positive queer reading of the film, the film is more concerned with its feminist and class critiques that it misses out

on many opportunities to make queer critiques on the central structure of patriarchal heterosexuality. Much has been said about the reception of the film, especially the violent reaction it received from Hindu right group Shiv Sena. I will start first with the film's narrative and its claims of Indian queerness. The women in *Fire* are not mothers; in fact, the narrative focuses on two sisters-in-law, Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das), who are sexually unsatisfied in their marriages. The elder Radha is found to be infertile. After her husband finds that she cannot birth him a child, he becomes a celibate ascetic in the vein of Gandhi, devoting more of his attention to his guru than to his wife. The recently married Sita was arranged in a marriage with a man who is in love with a diasporic Chinese woman, with whom he still goes out on dates and has sex with. Liberating herself from the requirement to have sex with an unfaithful husband, Sita takes herself out of the realm of potential motherhood, by eventually refusing sexual relations with her husband. Both Radha and Sita are set outside of the realm of motherhood, one by biology, the other by self-respect.

Whereas *Chutney Popcorn* challenged the specific character of the girlfriend for not being committed enough to be a mother, *Fire* creates villains of its protagonists' husbands due to their lack of love for their wives, their inability to allow their wives to be mothers. It is at the point in the film when both women realize that they will not be mothers that they begin to lust after each other. Therefore, the film is using the expectation of the presumed transition from wife to mother to create the point when the women surrender into each other's arms. Mehta created a film that challenges patriarchal disrespect for a woman's right to

a monogamous partner within an understanding of monogamy and a woman's right to sexual pleasure from her husband. However, she created this film at the expense of respect for lesbian desires as autonomous, capable of subsisting outside a framework of marital discontent and frustration with patriarchal heterosexuality.

*Fire* emphasizes the symbolism of Sita's "trial by fire" for Radha, an obvious allusion to Sita's "trial by fire" that proved her devotion to Ram in the *Ramayana*. We see the mythological Sita cross the fire in the TV version of the *Ramayana*, in a public cross-dressing performance of the material, watched by Radha's husband, his guru, and other devotees. Finally we see the film's Sita cross the fire of her flame-consumed home to leave her husband and to go to an unnamed location. Sita's "trial by fire," though, is much different from that of the *Ramayana's* Sita. In the *Ramayana*, Sita is asked to prove her love for Ram by stepping across fire. Ram asks her to do this because she has been held prisoner by the king Ravana, who had ill intentions for Sita when he abducted her. The film's Sita has not passed her trial by fire at the request of her husband. Instead, she has been faced with a trial by fire which, although unintentionally initiated, could have ruined her and subjugated her to her husband's anger. She declares autonomy by crossing the flames of her house, and abandoning her husband and his fire.

Hindu values and allusions are not *Fire's* only claim to Indianness. Although *Fire* was written and directed by Indo-Canadian Deepa Mehta, it claims Indianness in its setting – New Delhi. This "authenticity" of tradition and

Indianness includes a reverence for motherhood and elders. Thus, the mother in the film should be the embodiment of Indianness and Indian tradition – or so the cultural script goes. The only complication for Biji, the husbands' mother, in communicating her objection to a transgression in tradition is that she is mute. Thus, when Radha and Sita dance in drag and kiss right in front of her, she cannot protest against it. By creating a mother who staunchly despises the women's relationship but cannot say anything about it, Mehta is quieting the embodiment of Indian Hindu values. Biji is a non-threatening figure of protest, one who cannot actually contest that which she disagrees with, against Radha, Sita, and also the servant, Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhry).

Mehta does create a distraction for those fixated on the relationship of Radha and Sita. The character, Mundu, is more subversive and shocking than the relationship of the two women. He is a character created to garner pitiful sympathy for the maltreated lower caste. Just as Mehta's figuring of Radha and Sita's relationship is based on her critique of Indian patriarchy, Mundu is a character whose horrendous acts are a product of the cultural landscape of Delhi<sup>6</sup>. Mundu is so lonely as the exploited servant of the household, that he resorts to watching porn videos for pleasure. What is so inappropriate (and contemptuous) about Mundu's practice is that it is done in the presence of the matriarch of the house, Biji – the mute mother of the brothers. Here, Mundu's responsibility to watch over Biji is confronted with his sub-human status in the family. He

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, the brothers are again attached to blame for Mundu's bad position when Ashok (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) unknowingly provides Mundu with the videotapes that Mundu steals for masturbating. Although Ashok does not know Mundu is taking the tapes, he knowingly rents them to underage patrons.

essentially holds a great number of responsibilities in the family, but has none of the perks of a family member – privacy, sex, a day off. In many ways, the film’s statement against servitude and class is more shocking and stronger than the one, if it exists, against homophobia. Mundu’s story, of course, is not a persuasive argument for better treatment of the poor or the servile due to the carelessness in his actions. However, his storyline does distract from the (mis)behavior of the women and creates another oppressor of women’s rights when he spots the Radha and Sita dancing and kissing. Under the patriarchal pressure the men of the household place on him after he is found masturbating in front of Biji, Mundu reveals what he has seen Radha and Sita do. Thus, they are revealed and must leave the confines of the house once their secret is revealed.

Despite its lack of a completely positive depiction of lesbian sexuality, the film was the subject of a very strong backlash from the conservative Hindu right (specifically Shiv Sena), and the film’s reception was hotly debated by various sections of Indian society. As Mary E. John and Tejaswini Nirinjana notice, “the sharpest and most interesting debates...were... amongst different sections of the women’s movement itself” (372). So despite the fact that the Hindu right activists who bombarded the theaters in which *Fire* was playing received much more media attention, their actions and responses are simply reactionary and do not add much depth to the discussion. Instead, the minds of women thinkers will lead much more insight onto the film, especially to how it was received amongst those working for gender equality in the Indian subcontinent. From a strong response against the Shiv Sena to a strong response against Deepa Mehta herself, feminists



have a variety of responses to *Fire* and its resultant discussions about queer sexualities. An anonymous account of two women who protested against the Shiv Sena's protests, expresses astonishment that the foreign word "lesbian" should even appear on the pages of an Indian newspaper (quoted in John & Nirinjana, 524).

In Carol Upadhyā's response to the Shiv Sena's violent attacks against *Fire*, she proposes a counter-attack that "could point out that India is a diverse society and that brahmanical notions of sexuality and female purity, now reflected in the Sangh parivar [family of Hindu right organizations] discourse, historically have been held by only a small section of society" (quoted in John & Nirinjana, 373). Upadhyā is pointing out the privileged, yet dominating, Brahminical voice which is dissenting against *Fire*. Upadhyā argues that through her situation as a Western-born woman living in India, she is particularly sensitive to any binary in which the West is seen as a breeding ground for decadence. She also is aware of the fact that "[t]hese values are presumed to contribute to the solidarity and stability of the family, both of which distinguish Indian society from the social fragmentation and sexual permissiveness (and perversity) of western [*sic*] societies" (quoted in John & Niranjana, 373).

Writing to the Campaign for Lesbian Rights, anonymous writer V.S. points out the political usages of the lesbian classification by both sides – those who wanted and those who damned the depiction of a Hindu lesbian relationship. V.S. takes issues most closely with Mehta's own positioning of the film and their interpretation of Mehta's rendering of the film itself. V.S. takes great offense to

Mehta's downplaying of the presence of a lesbian theme in the film,<sup>7</sup> her knee-jerk response to identify openly as heterosexual, and her statement that she "would be devastated if her daughter turned out to be a lesbian" (V.S. paraphrased and quoted in John & Nirinjana, 519). When she takes to the film, V.S. accuses it of having "no exploration of the immense frustration and tension that comes from the overwhelming strain of trying to nurture an intimate sexual bond in a crowded household without privacy, autonomy or mobility, as is the case in so many families when doors cannot be locked or separate beds claimed" (quoted in John & Nirinjana, 519). Thus, V.S. has a great problem with the film because it is ambivalent about its own address of queer sexualities.

Madhu Kishwar Nae criticizes Mehta, calling her a "self-hating Indian" (quoted in John & Nirinjana 520). First, Nae makes the case that Mehta was looking for a fight against the Hindu right by attacking Hindu mores. She cites instances in which Mehta doubted that *Fire* would even pass the Hindu censor board (quoted in John & Nirinjana 520). Then, Mehta shows the demonizing of the character of Ashok, who takes up a Gandhi-inspired celibacy and spiritual path. According to Nae's logic, any attack of the cultural figurehead of Gandhi is incredibly heretical. Nae goes on to say that India is not homophobic, and did not adapt any homophobia from the British colonizers (quoted in John & Nirinjana 521). Nae contends that because India does not have organized, explicit homophobia, it is not homophobic. The first response to this is that just because

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<sup>7</sup> In an interview with *Trikone*, Mehta said, "I have never ever said that *Fire* is not a lesbian film. I have always maintained that a really important aspect of *Fire* is the lesbian relationship between the two women. But, *Fire* is also more than that" (Kamani) Even talking to the publication who would most like to hear Mehta say that her film is explicitly lesbian, Mehta is extremely noncommittal on the subject.

homophobia does not look like it does in the West, it does not mean it is not homophobia. Second, the homophobia espoused by Shiv Sena is fairly strong and outright, and looks like the conventional Western brand. In defending nationhood, Nae finds it impossible to simultaneously defend queerness.

Taking notice of these feminist critics, it is clear that when one understands the reverence Shiv Sena and the nationalist project place on the family, the repressed presence of queerness becomes easier to recognize in the nation. That is not to say that one must like or dislike the film to recognize and resist homophobia, but the responses that are more compassionate to the queer community are more aware of the ways in which the ideal of the family is manipulated. In the same way, *Chutney Popcorn* as a film that respects the role of the family is much more supportive of queer Indian identities than *Fire*. It is the respect of family and the acknowledgment of queer alternative networks that makes *Chutney Popcorn* the more valuable film for forging an autonomous queer identity. While queer alternative networks are not necessarily viable in the diegesis of *Fire* due to the tentativeness of the protagonists to declare queer identities, V.S. identified the exact problem of this film – there is no consideration of how a queer identity is made difficult by the conventional heterosexualization of its subjects. There is no creation of a queer identity in *Fire*.

*Fire* is certainly more preoccupied with critiquing gender and class inequities, but that does not excuse the film from its prioritizing. *Chutney Popcorn*'s status as the more positive portrayal of queer identities is one that is affected by many other factors within both films. As Gayatri Gopinath has taken

note, *Fire*'s portrayal of an India which does not understand queer sexualities<sup>8</sup> leads many Western viewers and reviewers to create an India in their imagination which is morally inferior and primitive in its conception of society (142). *Chutney Popcorn*'s Meenu is that film's closest thing to "traditional" Indian ignorance of queerness. However, Meenu's homophobia is framed as being primarily motivated by her desire for Reena to take part in the Hindu institution of marriage and the important role as mother, not as a rampage against her daughter for having sex with women instead of men.

As Ruth Vanita discusses in her book on same-sex marriages in the U.S. and India, "[m]any kinds of marriage have been outlawed in different societies; among these are widow and divorcee remarriage, inner-caste and inter-racial marriage, and same sex marriage" (2). And in her case for the differences between U.S. and Indian marriage, she details the importance that the U.S. places on civil marriage in contrast to the history of Indian marriage. She makes the case that marriage in India is less defined by the state than by community standards that vary on the citizens and those seeking marriage (17-9). Considering also the great spectacle and event status that Indian marriage takes, seen specifically in Sarita's wedding to Mitch, Indian marriages take on a special significance. They are simultaneously dictated not by the hegemonic state, but instead the local community. Therefore, although the institution of marriage is heterosexist, it is not immutable. The Hindu value system, occasionally allows for the opportunity for special cases to change community standards. No one is fighting for marriage

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<sup>8</sup> In the conversation between Mundu and the women upon his discovery of their relationship has Mundu chastising the behavior as un-Indian, for there is not even a Hindi word for it.

in *Chutney Popcorn*, and in fact, no character considers it a possibility that Reena and Lisa could get married. However, there is a parallel in the ways in which Reena's relationship with Lisa and child are, over time, understood by Meenu. *Chutney Popcorn* shows this process optimistically. *Fire* does not create queer identities for Radha and Sita, because it seems like they do not know what to do with their sexual longings. When they are outted, the couple comes up against their husbands. They have the opportunity to explore options and voice their relationship, but their husbands too quickly destroy with fire the home that the families have shared. The film also only allows for the husbands to have a substantive response to the women's queerness. Biji's response cannot be verbalized or presented in a logical relationship. This creates a situation where tyrannical men are the only monitors of Indian life and mores.

As shown in *Chutney Popcorn*, the figure of the mother, the female embodiment of moral supervisor, is a way in which cultural critique can be made by taking a critical yet flexible angle on Hindu morality. While this ability relies on the stereotype of women as more understanding and able to hear arguments than men, it is not the gender of the agent of social change and understanding that is important. Instead, Meenu's actions are able to portray a Hindu culture that is not archaic and unchallengeable like that of *Fire*.

**“But You’re Indian”: Queer (Sub)Texts, Suspecting Mothers, and the  
Question of Diaspora in *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho***

When queerness is taken up by conservative film genres, the common trope is to create a situation of homosociality which is questioned by other characters. This homosociality then becomes the butt of homophobic jokes where homosociality is understood as homosexuality. Once the subject of homosexuality is broached or at least implied, there is an opportunity for a film to make liberal moves within its own text to promote some degree of a queer agenda. *Bend It Like Beckham* (Gurinder Chadha, 2002) and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (*Tomorrow May Never Come*, Nikhil Advani, 2003) are two such films in conservative genres (the Western teen flick and the neoconservative Bollywood film) that take up the idea of suspecting queerness in homosocial relationships. In fact, both of these films devote a large amount of time to this topic despite their seemingly formulaic narratives and their address to mainstream audiences. While both films deal explicitly with queer topics, they also work with queer subtexts that are particularly telling to the relationship between sexuality, gender, nationality, and parenthood in the South Asian diaspora.

*Bend It Like Beckham* is the tale of Jesminder or Jess (Parminder Nagra), a Sikh British Indian living in the London suburb of Hounslow, who is recruited onto a women’s soccer team. Within her home, Jess must hide her participation in the sport due to her mother’s belief that soccer would dissatisfy her expectation of Jess’s virginal modesty. Within the understanding of her mother, this modesty violated by her playing a masculinized sport that involves her dressing

immodestly (i.e. showing her legs in shorts). Jess lets her sister in on her secret, and her father is quietly supportive of her sporty endeavors.

Two subplots contribute greatly to the sexual politics of the family in the South Asian diaspora and white Britain. First, Jess's sister, Pinky (Archie Panjabi), potentially disrupts her arranged marriage by making love with her husband-to-be, with whom she is "in love" – a concept that is seen as diametrically opposed to accepted South Asian practice. But what disrupts the original arranged marriage is the family of the fiancé's accusation that Jess was in town kissing a boy in public. Once the other family has left, Jess defends herself by saying that she was not with a boy, but rather her friend Jules (Keira Knightley), who is a white, female member of her soccer team. It is not the infidelity of Pinky, that ends the engagement; instead, it is Jess's queerness which is misunderstood as illicit heterosexual behavior.

The second subplot disrupts Jules's family and is completely ignored by Jess's. Once it is finally revealed to Jess's family that she is indeed on the soccer team, the focus and stigma is located on her deceit and her immodesty. When Jules's mother makes a mistake similar to Pinky's fiancé's parents and believes that Jess and Jules are in a relationship, Jules's mother takes precautions to limit Jules's relationship with Jess. Jess and Jules are seen by Jules's mother to be dangerously close to falling in love. Their relationship is portrayed so intimately that Jess's mother has no reason to think that they wouldn't be in a lesbian relationship. Jess's family, however, is portrayed as completely ignorant to

concepts of lesbianism and does not consider that a possible identity for Jess because it is not within their frame of reference.

By unabashedly declaring a gender expression that runs counter to the wishes of her parents and culture, Jess is strongly queering her gender. There is a scene in *Bend It Like Beckham* in which Jess explicitly complicates her gender in relation to her diasporic identity. One of the reasons her mother does not want Jess on the soccer field is because it forces her to wear shorts and be immodest. Before she first joins the team on the field, she hesitates getting onto the field, telling the coach, Joe (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), she is ashamed of a scar she has on her leg. In effect, the scene creates a point in which Jess and her mother both desire the same thing. Jess wants to be modest because she is worried about her body image. Her mother is more concerned with her immodesty from religious-cultural ideology. What makes this scene of convergent diasporic and traditional culture even more intriguing is the fact that it was not originally a part of the script. Gurinder Chadha added the scene when she was warned by the agent of Parminder Jarga, the actress playing Jess, that Jarga had a scar (Fuchs). Chadha's particular ideology of *Bend It Like Beckham* was based on the mantra of girl power epitomized in the late 1990s by Victoria Beckham's pop group, the Spice Girls (Fuchs). Thus, Chadha felt it was important to include the imperfection of her actress in her revised script. The final effect of the scene, though, is to provide a diasporic interpretation of body image that more closely resembles that of Jess's white counterparts than that of her mother.



Jess's mother responds to Jess's queered gender by forcing her to participate in activities like cooking that would make her a more likely (i.e. hyper-feminized) bride. Once Jess's family understands Jess's desire to fit into an alternative gender role, her mother takes it upon herself to teach her how to be a woman. In a montage that shows Jess's negotiation between her two lives – soccer star and domesticated future wife, Jess tries to burst out of the shell her mother is attempting to put her in. While she is trying to teach Jess how to cook, Jess is disinterested and treating a head of lettuce as a soccer ball, kicking it in the kitchen. Jess's mother does not have the power to overcome the Western influence that has made it easy for Jess to queer her gender even in her household. However, she tries; she grabs hold of Jess once she realizes what she is doing and pushes her into the dish she is cooking, screaming at her to keep her focus on her culinary instruction. She is so suspecting of Jess's gender transgression and its effects on her ability to find a mate, that she turns forceful in encouraging the motherly behavior onto Jess.

Jules's mother is obsessed with the inclination that her daughter is a lesbian. She harps on it extensively after she has the first inkling. Ultimately, she confronts her daughter when she finds Jules at the wedding of Jess's sister. There, Jess is wearing shoes that Jules's mother has decorated, which prompts her to command Jess, "Take your lesbian feet out of my shoes." To which one of Jess's aunts respond, "I thought she was a Pisces." After which, Jules and Jess deny the accusation and Jules and her mother have a short conversation about accepting lesbians, especially Martina Navratilova. What is striking here is the

unabashed homophobia of Jules's mother and obsession with her daughter's supposed lesbianism and the ignorance of Jess's family of a way of talking about queer identities.

As Michel Foucault reminds us, the naming of homosexuality is what creates it as an actuality (43). Here, as in homophobic movements within the South Asian continent, the postcolonial state of India is seen as a place where homosexuality did not exist before the name for it was brought with the British colonization. The older relative at the wedding is indicative of Jess's entire family in that they had not only no idea what a lesbian was but that Jess had the possibility of being one. On the contrary, Jules's mother is hyperaware of the existence of homosexuality because, as Foucault indicates, homophobia is bred at the advent of a word for homosexuality within the power structure of Western society's control of sexuality.

Although the female members of Jess's family are meant to impart to Jess the importance of falling into a conventional arranged heterosexual marriage, they do not need to know about the potentially disrupting force of homosexuality. The older women (i.e. the mother figures) of Jess's family here serve as representatives of the South Asian sexual worldview – unaltered by the effects of diaspora. Within the conceptual framework of the film, the status of Jess as a young woman in the diaspora who challenges and queers her own gender allows her the ability to understand queerness better than her older relatives. However, when Jess's cousin comes out to her by saying that he “*really* likes [David] Beckham,” Jess tells him that he can't be gay. She exclaims, “But you're

Indian!” Even though Jess understands her ability to challenge standard conceptions of gender, she still is caught up in the idea that Indians cannot have gay sexualities.

Returning to the scene where Jess’s sister is getting married, it is important to note that her father encourages Jess to leave the wedding and participate in her soccer game which is going to be watched by an American scout. Here, the film embodies the conventional representation of the mother in South Asian cinema, where she is seen as the embodiment of tradition (Mankekar 750). Jess’s father, typifying the male South Asian diasporic representation of pursuing capital success in the West, encourages her daughter to play in the game because it means she could go to college and be successful within her new home in the West (Mankekar 750).

Even though *Bend It Like Beckham* is set in Britain, it has an explicit ideological representation of the U.S. Chadha is quick to differentiate *Bend It Like Beckham* from mainstream Hollywood representations of feminine autonomy, such as *Clueless* (Fuchs). In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Chadha creates women who not only create autonomy for themselves, but they also redefine womanhood in the process. It is in this way that both Jess and Jules queer their gender and become autonomous women within the British social system.

Within *Bend It Like Beckham*, the U.S. is seen as the ideal site for women’s freedom of expression, specifically the freedom to play sports professionally. It is in the U.S. and not the U.K. where the two women would be allowed to play professional soccer. Thus, the women aspire to leave the U.K. for

freedom to work in the professions they please. On the continuum of freedom for people who queerly identify their gender, the order is quite painstakingly painted as India, Britain, and finally the U.S. If we follow the logic of this film which is similar to the logic of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ; The Brave Heart Will Take the Bride, 1995)* as explicated by Mankekar, the South Asian mother is an agent of traditional culture. The mother figure is given much agency in the attempted transformation of Jess into a fitful bride. In fact, it is almost solely the mother who works for Jess's feminization. In the diasporic setting, Jess's mother is more extended in this capacity. Jess's mother must work harder against the omnipresent "Western" pressures because they exist all around her in Britain. According to the film's logic, the mother's goal would be even more difficult to reach in the United States. Thus, on a continuum from India to the U.S., the role of the South Asian mother as the cultural agent for familial hegemony becomes more important and difficult.

This is the film's own understanding of itself; however, I would argue that the Britain and India are really un-liberalized to the same extent. We can see by the mothers' similar responses to their daughters' queerness that both mothers are each equally worried about their daughters' perceived deviation from a normal gender or sexual identity. Still, though, the United States is seen as the home of appreciation or acceptance of Jess's and Jules's queer genders. The homosocial pair of the independent women Jess and Jules goes to college on soccer scholarships in ultra-liberalized California.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ironically, the women's league to which the Jess and Jules aspire is now defunct.

Chadha identifies *Bend It Like Beckham* as a film primarily concerned with representing the teenage reality for a multicultural diasporic girl (Fuchs). Within the generic form of the teen flick, *Bend It Like Beckham* performs many of the tropes. It looks and feels like a conventional Western teen flick. The teenage girl's repressed sexuality is forced into the bedroom (Lewis 63-4), where both Jess and Jules spend a great amount of their time in the beginning of the film when they don't know each other. While Jess has pictures of heartthrob David Beckham plastered on her wall, Jules has pictures of "butch women" (to quote her mother) all over her wall. Jules's wall is filled with pictures of stars from the U.S. soccer league of which she aspires to become a member. Jon Lewis identifies the coming-of-age trope of moving out of their pseudo-sexualized bedrooms: "As young girls move out of the bedroom, one finds sexuality the central issue once again" (64).

Lewis goes on to say that the conventional way of imagining female teen sexuality is the glamorization of the sexually active female. However, he says, "[t]he most exploitative films about teen sex—the wild youth and horror pictures—end up disastrously for promiscuous youth" (76). The bedroom-localized restraint of teen female sexuality is present in *Bend It Like Beckham*. However, Jules challenges this notion by confusing her mother into placing her within this trope. By saying that Jules is looking at butch women on her wall, her mother is assuming that Jules should be living out her sexual fantasies with men on her wall, not fantasies (sexual or professional) with women. The oft-misconstrued denouncing of female teen promiscuity is also troubled in the film.

There is only a slight slippage of the friendship between Jess and Jules when they both fall for and erotically pursue their coach, Joe, and Jess's sister is not greatly implicated for being unfaithful to the man her hand in marriage was promised to.<sup>10</sup>

In these ways, *Bend It Like Beckham* comments on the intolerance of queerness in both traditional Indian culture and the traditional teen flick. In many ways, *Bend It Like Beckham* works against these tropes in order to form a more liberal portrayal of queer genders and sexualities. While still staying within the confines of a conservative teen flick, Chadha's film makes frank jokes and references to queerness albeit at the expense of stereotyping Sikh culture as wholly intolerant of any challenge to narrowly defined gender and sexuality categories.

Indian cinema within the subcontinent has its own conservative genres, most notably at the turn of the century, the neoconservative romance. An example of this, *Kal Ho Naa Ho (KHNH)*, will add to this particular shade of diasporic commentary as it has the distinction of being a Bollywood film set in the U.S., specifically the boroughs and suburbs of New York City. Gayatri Gopinath's personal anecdote of her first time seeing *KHNH* is a place to find more on queer diasporas in conservative cinema. Gopinath, a South Asian lesbian who grew up in New York City and now lives in California, first saw *KHNH* with her mother in Chennai. She uses her story about watching her childhood home, New York, depicted in a Bollywood movie in the country of her heritage (i.e. her

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<sup>10</sup> The viewer's first look into this infidelity is during a backseat hookup. However, there is more urgency to Jess's backseat antics when she is forced to change from her soccer uniform into her sari so that she may return to her sister's wedding.

“homeland”) to end and encapsulate her book, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Her intellectual project in the book is to situate home in queer diasporas, and she uses her reading of *Kal Ho Naa Ho* to show how complicated the nature of homes for people of diasporas can be. The notion of a queer diaspora is even more difficult because it requires the queer person to defy the heteronormativity of home.

In *KHNNH*, Naina (Preity Zinta) and Rohit (Saif Ali Khan) are two friends living in New York City who met in a class they were both taking. Naina lives at home with her grandmother (Lajjo), mother (Jennifer), mentally disabled younger brother, and adopted younger sister (Gia). Her grandmother hates her sister simply because she is adopted. Rohit is a loser character who is unlucky in love. The lives of this cast of characters are shaken up when Aman (Shah Rukh Khan)<sup>11</sup> suddenly comes to town. During a musical number inspired by Roy Orbison’s “Oh, Pretty Woman,” Aman expresses his desires for Naina. Naina’s family take a liking to Aman instantly; however, Naina is not fond of him at first.

As the film continues, Rohit and Aman simultaneously fall in love with Naina, and Naina falls in love with Aman. Aman stops their emotions from going too far by telling Naina that he is married. Aman had been trying to encourage Rohit and Naina, who had never considered dating before to think about getting together, but along the way he fell in love with Naina. What Naina and Rohit do not know is that Aman does not want to continue his relationship with Naina

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<sup>11</sup> Shah Rukh Khan’s presence in this neoconservative romance is particularly important, because Khan is one of the largest players in the neoconservative romance boom in Bollywood cinema. He starred in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), which is often credited as invigorating the genre in Bollywood. He has since starred in the blockbusters *Khahi Khushi Kabhie Ghum* (2001) and *Devdas* (2002).

because he is dying of a debilitating disease. Eventually, Naina and Rohit find out that Aman is going to die and decide to marry. All the while, Aman has been behind this marriage and has also been an agent of change within Naina's family. Aman also encourages Naina's family to revamp the failing restaurant they own by successfully changing it from the Americanized New York Diner to the ethnicized New Delhi Diner. Aman also tells Lajjo that Gia is not adopted but that Lajjo's son fathered her in an illicit affair. He explains, then, that this is the reason her son killed himself. He also champions Jennifer here by noting her strength at raising a daughter who was the product of her husband's infidelity.

In her reading of the film, Gopinath notices that Aman is the "knight in shining armor...teach[ing] the film's hapless diasporic characters about life, love, and pride in their Indian heritage" (189). She also places Aman within the typical Indian diasporic male role of providing financially for his family in the diaspora. In this case, Aman's family is not his own blood family, but that of Naina's. Up until this point, I have given no indication as to why this film would be included in an investigation of queerness in film. However, the film explicitly pits Aman and Rohit in compromising positions of homosociality and homoeroticism – they cuddle, they have conversations in innuendo – all to the chagrin of Aman's housekeeper. The judging, motherly figure of the housekeeper is particularly interesting in the film because her comedic disapproval or shock at the relationship between Aman and Rohit proves that the relationship should be read as queer. Even if it seems it is only for the purpose of comedy, these movements prove that Aman and Rohit's relationship should, on some level, be understood as



beyond the typical homosocial contact that is socially acceptable in South Asian society. The love triangle Aman, Rohit, and Naina are in is now complete. For within the film, the possibility of a Rohit-Aman connection is explicitly depicted. In fact, queer relationships are given a surprising endorsement during a song sequence montage – for a few seconds, a gay couple kissing is shown as a symbol of “love.” There is a great difference between the conventional two male, one female triangle of *KHNNH* and the inverted two female, one male triangle of Jess, Jules, and Joe. It is improbable that this inverted homosocial love triangle would allow a film to be so successful in the Hindi film market as it has in the British/American market with *Bend It Like Beckham*.

Aman’s actions are particularly interesting because they disrupt Naina’s family as soon as he comes. More than Jennifer, Aman portrays the fatherly *and* motherly roles of the family. The film slowly unfolds the psychological pressures – her husband’s infidelity and its consequences – that have forced her into this role. Before I get into the implications of the figure of Aman, I must first explicate each element of New York life that he interrupts: the family’s conception of Indianness in multicultural New York, Lajjo’s relationship with Gia, and Rohit and Naina’s relationship.

When Aman sings “Pretty Woman” on the street outside of Naina’s apartment, unabashedly declaring his attraction to Naina, he is joined by the multicultural neighbors that have been playing in the street even before he came. Aman sings amongst the neighbors in front of a large American flag. This picture of multicultural Americanism is noted by Jennifer when she tells Aman, “I’ve

never seen so much color on the street.” Aman responds by saying, “I know, it’s a boring street.” To the American viewer who associates color with ethnic diversity, there could not be a more unusual dialogue following the song. Judging by the group that was gathered outside of her apartment even before Aman came, Jennifer is surrounded by an incredibly diverse array of neighbors. What Jennifer is commenting on, then, is not the ethnicities of her neighbors. Rather, she is identifying with a “colorful” representation of Indianness. Both Jennifer and Aman privilege Indian culture as colorful amongst the myriad other diasporic communities represented on the street who are decidedly not colorful enough.

Here, Aman is serving a similar role as the Indian mother by being the champion of Indianness. However, he is eligible as this authority because he is not considered a part of the diaspora yet. Thus, he cannot fulfill the diasporic male view until some time is spent in the states. At this point, Aman takes on the conventional role of the male in the South Asian diaspora by being the source of entrepreneurial or capitalist success. He does this by instigating the Indianization of the family’s diner. He is still providing a dual role by endorsing Indian tradition while also excelling in the accrual of capital for his (adopted) family.

Aman steps into the family’s business again by revealing to Lajjo the reason for Gia’s presence in the family. Aman is acting as a sensible outsider by realizing that this revelation will be beneficial for the value of life for Gia and Jennifer. He is also acting in another ambiguously gendered role within the conventional roles of the South Asian family structure. Aman is uniting the

family by acting as the matriarch, emphasizing the importance of family, and also acting as the patriarch, providing a complement to Jennifer's devotion to the family.

When it is clear that Aman is going to die, he is effectively castrated. He stops Naina from loving him anymore and attempts to force Naina and Rohit together. Thus, his queer-coded relationship with Rohit is less likely to be considered seriously and be inappropriate to audiences. Aman can be thought of as a queer character because he has the ability to cross the gender lines and to destruct the gender binary in this unusual way. Returning to Rohit and Naina and their relationship at the beginning of the film, it fits well within a queer framework to consider them both as queer. They have a very close friendship, yet neither one of them thinks about being in a relationship with each other until Aman forces them to consider it. Aman acknowledges these odd roles of he, the castrated, and Rohit, the queer when he tells Rohit on his deathbed that he will allow Rohit to have Naina in this life, but she is his in all other lives. The assumption here is that Aman will be virile in all future lives, and it seems that Rohit is a sensible choice because he is coded as queer and thus unthreatening.

Jyotika Virdi historicizes the generic conventions of the neoconservative Bollywood film as coming from the economic liberalization of India. The neocon romance film, which reinforced the value of heterosexual coupling and the nuclearization of the family, replaced the action film in the late 1980s as the most dominant Bollywood genre. The queer subtexts and agendas that are expounded in *KHNNH* are brought to a mainstream conservative audience by creating a

character which one cannot suspect of sexual acts let alone sexual deviancy due to his emasculation. According to gay activist Ashok Row Kavi, there is no issue with a lack of queerness within the Indian film industry. The problem is that any representation is marred by some ignorance ranging from offensive portrayal of hijras to stereotypical representations of gay characters. Also, mainstream Bollywood producers are simply afraid to tackle the subject (312).

The queer themes in *KHNNH* can be understood, within a queer reading of the text, as both intended and unintended. Bollywood producers probably did not position Aman in a way to represent (motherly/fatherly) queerness in mainstream cinema. However, much can be gained by understanding his role as an inhabitant of two gender roles. Queering his role helps the viewer understand the persistence of gender roles within the conventions of the gender roles of the neoconservative Bollywood film. This complex queering is paired with a rather explicit queering that has quite possibly been planned by its producers. It is clear that the producers have some sort of queer awareness or agenda due to the placing of the gay couple in the song montage, but it is not clear whether that image is meant to portray a sexually liberal America or to make a supportive commentary on the value of sexually liberal America. The latter choice seems more likely, because the image is placed in good taste amongst the montage. This image runs counter to the great majority of the film's explicit representation of queerness, in the form of the comical treatment of the homoeroticized relationship between Aman and Rohit. In this way of reading *KHNNH*, the film does have a queer

agenda within its neoconservative framework, in that it (if only once) represents queerness in a way devoid of comedy.

Both *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Kal Ho Naa Ho* are quietly placing subtle liberal messages in their mainstream, conservative frameworks. By treating the subject of queerness in a conservative way and by working within the conventional gendered tropes of diasporic identity and family, both films make subtle yet disruptive arguments for a more liberal treatment of queerness in diasporic communities. *Bend It Like Beckham* uses the structure of the white mother being overly concerned with lesbianism as opposed to the Indian mother's preoccupation with gender and marriage roles to support an anti-homophobic agenda. That is, the Indian family is cheered for its ignorance of homophobia (even at the expense of an ignorance of homosexuality), and the Indian family is simultaneously seen as accommodating to a Western, liberalizing view of gender. *Kal Ho Naa Ho* deals with queerness in a way that also challenges the denial of the existence of a South Asian queer identity. By placing the narrative in one of the most sexually liberal cities in the world, it has provided an excuse to portray queerness in a non-threatening way through the agency of a character that can be read as queer and fulfilling a motherly (and fatherly) role. Both films use the framework of the queer diaspora to provide a subtle subversive message to a mainstream conservative (possibly unsuspecting) audience. However, due to the nationality and cultural framework of their intended audience, they work hard to adjust their portrayal of the (queer) South Asian diaspora. And as can be seen in Gopinath's own reading of *KHNH*, there are resonances and truths that can often

ring true to those with any connection to queerness or the diaspora whose own situation can provide a drastically liberalized reading while sitting amongst the unsuspecting mostly conservative audience the films draw.

**Mothers and Their Queer Counterparts: Mothers, Media Obsession and  
Mentorship in *Touch of Pink* and *Yours Emotionally!***

Because mothers in queer South Asian films are typically used to represent traditional familial values and to reinforce heterosexual familial structures, it is logical that mothers take on a badgering role in many of these films. For this portion of my analysis, I will take a look at two films with different narrative structures that use the figure of the pestering mother within their text. Both films create a similar structure of the gay South Asian (diasporic) man's conception of the mother – a nagging, anxious figure who serves as the metaphorical representation of the Indian heterosexual norm. This particular trope of motherhood that both films exploit provides a depiction consistent with those of the archetypal Bollywood parents in films where a heterosexual child is expected to fulfill his or her matrimonial duty.

Because the films deal with two different queer themes, “coming out” and finding love, looking at the films together will lead to a greater understanding of the gay male South Asian (diasporic) reading of the mother and a particular point of view on South Asian and South Asian diasporic queer representation. In many ways, the two stories work as a continuum in which the mothers' roles stay consistent but change because of the circumstances of the two plots. At first look, it seems the mother in *Yours Emotionally!* (Sridhar Rangayan, 2006) starts off where the mother in *Touch of Pink* (Ian Iqbal Rashid, 2004) left off. However, there is a marked difference in how the films deal with the mother's exposure to queer life and identity that becomes very important in a comparison of the two

film's representation of the mother. *Touch of Pink* is a coming out story in which British-South Asian Alim (Jimi Mistry), who initially guards his sexual orientation and boyfriend from his visiting mother, reveals it when the burden of the closet becomes too strong. On the other hand, *Yours Emotionally!* is the story of an openly gay British-South Asian man Ravi (Premjit), who visits India at the invitation of an e-mail pal for the purpose of attending secretive sex parties.

These two films work well together by providing complementing views of South Asian and South Asian diasporic queer life, which I will extrapolate by investigating the portrayal of each protagonist's mother. In these two films, the mother critiques Western, or imported, influence in her son's life. Both film's mothers are (temporarily) displaced as their son's maternal figures by queer men or men coded within the film as queer. In *Touch of Pink*, the demonized medium is American classic films; in *Yours Emotionally!*, the Internet. Very explicitly, both mothers criticize the method by which these mentors come into the lives of their sons. The mother's critique of their son's obsession with a particular media form compounds any tension they may have for their son's departure from the conventional family structure and thus their son's sexual identity.

In *Touch of Pink*, Alim's mother, Nuru (Suleka Mathew), lives in Canada with the rest of her family besides her photographer son, Alim, who stayed where he grew up in England. The first time we see Nuru, we see her talking to her sister and brother-in-law about their son's upcoming wedding and Alim's fantasy love life. This scene is sandwiched in between scenes of British public gay culture – a gay club, the location for an anniversary party for Alim and his



boyfriend, Giles. Placing the two scenes so close together works to reinforce the geographical distance Nuru has to the gay bar. Not only does Nuru know nothing about her son's participation in queer culture or his queer identity, but she is so far distanced there is no way she could know. Nuru decides to visit Alim in order to persuade him to come to his cousin's wedding. Alim, who lives with Giles, decides he will continue to hide his sexual identity from his mother while she visits. The film starts by creating a mother whose role it is to instill fear of heterosexual, familial expectations onto her son. In fact, filmmaker Ian Iqbal Rashid has created a story in which the father is dead, so within the narrative there is no way for the parent's matrimonial expectations for their son to be held by anyone else but Nuru.

Throughout her stay, Nuru expresses discomfort that Giles seems awkwardly familiar in the supposed living arrangement between friends. Nuru also disapproves of Alim's engagement to a non-Muslim woman, which Alim fabricated in order to continue the lie. After Alim reveals this false engagement, Nuru announces she is leaving. Here, Nuru's anger is strongly held against inter-religious marriage. It is possible that Nuru is essentially angrier about her son's inter-religious marriage than his homosexuality.

Before she leaves, she has a night on the town with Giles, who comforts and spoils her against Alim's knowledge. In her "date" with Giles, Nuru finds herself in positions almost as compromising as those that Alim feels he is in with her. For instance, Nuru complains to Giles about the nine months of struggle she had carrying Alim in her womb, and now he is disappointing her. All this was in

front of a pregnant woman, whose spirits Nuru is worried she has crushed. She also explicitly tells Giles that she does not want him to tell Alim she is drinking or drunk. At this point, Nuru admits her fallibility and exposes her humanity. Rashid shows us a side of Nuru that we did not expect to see – one where she lets her guard down and works to deceive her son.

Soon, Nuru finds that Alim is not engaged to a woman, but instead is dating Giles. Alim comes out by showing Nuru a nude picture of Giles he took. She is overcome with emotion and leaves the next day for Canada. From the perspective of Alim, this solidifies Nuru's lack of credibility. It is particularly interesting that Alim tries to come out to Nuru through innuendo, and gets more explicit as she shows ignorance to the fact that her son could be gay. Eventually, Alim points out to Nuru, with assurance written on his face, that this is a nude picture of Giles which Alim took. Alim finally gets through to Nuru here. She quickly says she will leave and, for now, expresses her disappointment towards Alim.

While Nuru covers up for Alim's absence at the wedding, Alim and Giles split up, which Giles takes as a cue to sleep with another man. Defeated, Alim surprises his mother with an appearance at the wedding. Nuru is still hostile towards Alim until she finds him fighting with his cousin, the groom, over the groom's sexual advances towards Alim. Alim alludes to the fact that this was a dynamic between the two since childhood. For the rest of the film, Nuru is an advocate for Alim and his relationship with Giles (which rekindles when Giles shows up at the wedding) and encourages her sister to stop the marriage of her

son due to his gay identity. Nuru's sister acknowledges that she knows that her son is gay, but that she is encouraging the wedding, because it is his duty. To the contrary, Nuru reveals Giles's relationship to Alim to her family, unashamed. The film's final act portrays Nuru as the ideal mother to the queer child – accepting and embracing. However, this comes at the expense of Alim being sexually assaulted by his cousin.

Rashid is creating a utopian model of South Asian mothers in which they start out in a conventional role – the propagator of conventional (hetero)sexual mores. Only until she sees her son in a victim role where he expresses his deep love for his lover is she convinced that he needs to be defended. Not only is it a chance for her to defend her son against his cousin, but it also gives her the opportunity to defend him in front of her sister, which she does with stoicism. Under these circumstances, she can fault her sister for creating an unfortunate situation for her son by forcing him to marry. Nuru is simultaneously coming out as the superior caregiver here, too, for she is showing more compassion for the situation. Most importantly, the greatest side effect of this change of heart is Nuru's sudden willingness to fight for the will and strength of her son. Whatever the reason for Nuru's transformation, it is a part of Rashid's hopeful message for the film.

What is missing from my analysis of *Touch of Pink* thus far is an investigation of one of the film's most obvious narrative devices – Alim's mentor and imagination friend, Cary Grant. From the very first scene of the film, Grant is situated as Alim's guide through a successful but rocky relationship with Giles.

At the beginning of the film, it is clear that Grant serves a motherly role. In fact, because of Alim's aversion to his mother, it is as if Grant is the only parental figure serving in a parental role at the beginning of the film. He watches over and guides Alim's every action to impress and better the relationships between Alim and both Giles and Nuru. It is also apparent that Alim is the only one who can see this Grant incarnation; he is essentially imagination -- and queer. At all mentions of Alim's queer life, Grant is involved in the conversation and not once does he object or contradict the queer language of Alim's life.

Grant is an incredibly important character in the film and does a lot to explain Alim's relationship to his mother. At first, Nuru makes it clear that she does not approve of Alim watching the vast amount of black-and-white classic films that he watches. Eventually, though, we understand why Nuru is so adverse to those films. Her distaste for them, and all things associated with them, adds more human dimension to her character. The inspiration for the film's title, *That Touch of Mink*, stars Cary Grant and Doris Day. None of this, of course, is coincidental. The choice of Grant himself is interesting in that he is often situated in roles that have him humorously being mistaken as expressing interest in other male or masculine characters (Russo). An Internet search for Grant bisexual rumors will also reveal a great deal of speculation, based by various Hollywood biographers' and historians' interviews with his colleagues. Rashid admits that the film is incredibly autobiographical, that he remembers staying home from school and watching *That Touch of Mink*, one of his mother's favorites, with her (Movie Chicks).

In exploring a trend he finds in much Western gay male spectatorship, film theorist Brett Farmer writes about the effects of gay matrocentrism on film viewership and cinephelia of gay men. The first effect of this gay matrocentrism in connection with cinephelia is subtle: Sulika Mathew, in being cast as Nuru, is virtually the same age as Jimi Mistry. In effect, Mathew is a part of a gay cinepheliac tendency to identify the mother's history with glory and glamour (Farmer 170). By costuming the already glamorous, beautiful in the wares of a mother, a certain population of gay cinephiles is living through the dual fantasy of mother's life and Hollywood at its enchanting heyday. More importantly is the very structure of the film, which relies on Grant as Alim's hero and Day as Nuru's. Farmer highlights psychoanalytic theory that leads to the hypothesis that leads the gay man to identify with the mother than the father and to view films through the eyes of the woman who exposed him to the films, his mother (168-170). Using the research of Farmer, which included a series of letters from gay men who reported matrocentric viewing behaviors, one can see how *Touch of Pink* draws upon this identifiable, common trend and accesses the collective memories of these cinephiles who grew up in this Doris Day/Cary Grant – mother/son world of moviegoing.

For a good portion of the film, Nuru condemns Alim's obsession with these films. She is disappointed in his job – taking still photos on a film set. She yells at him for watching movies while doing work. Overall, she strongly and immediately reacts to any exposure to these classic films. In fact, when Alim comes out to her, she blames films for his queerness, saying they are “made for

Victorians, not us.” This is highly reminiscent of the popular tendency to blame the nascence of homosexuality in the Indian subcontinent on the Mughal or British Empires.

After Nuru confronts the situation with Alim and his cousin, we find that when Alim was a child, Nuru used to take him to see these films, and that Nuru’s hatred for them comes from the harm they did to her in her life. After becoming obsessed with classic Hollywood movies, Nuru decided to move to London to become Doris Day. She quickly found that the (Western) world “did not want an Indian Doris Day.” It is her own ambivalence to Cary Grant, Doris Day, and their white idol statuses that led her to condemn Alim’s behavior. Nuru says that after they moved to Britain, Alim took to himself and created imagination friends. She tells him this story shortly before the final scene of the film – the wedding – where Giles comes back and Cary Grant is not needed as the (queer) mother figure and disappears from Alim’s life.

Once Nuru comes to her senses on her respect for Alim’s queerness, there is no reason for the stand-in figure of Cary Grant to exist as a parental figure. In this way, Nuru is also restoring a sense of diasporic South Asian identity within Alim, because Alim was essentially ruled by the parenting of a white man until she came back to her post as mother. This transition of power is also only allowed after Nuru not only knew about her son’s queerness but also became an ally. Only then would the transition from queer parental figure to mother be acceptable within the framework of Alim’s life.

No matter Nuru's motivation, the supportive nature she has at the end can be seen as a good basis for understanding Ravi's mother in *Yours Emotionally!* Sridhar Rangayan's film is unique amongst South Asian queer cinema because it is one of the few film representations of a queer subculture within the South Asian subcontinent. Ravi's mother is unaware that Ravi is going to India with his white British friend Paul to attend a sex party, but the film contains several phone calls from her and mentions of her acceptance of Ravi's sexual identity.

Each phone call that comes to Ravi from his mother is located within the narrative at plot points where Ravi is exposed to queer life in America and India. For instance, we can hear (but not see) Ravi talking to his mother when he is leaving Leicester for the sex party. He also gets a call from her when he is entering the sex party and again when he arrives at the home of his older gay mentor, Mani. Never does Ravi stay on the phone long with his mother or reveal too much about his current situation. From what we can tell of Ravi's conversations with his mother, his mother is always showing concern and worry for her son as he travels India – her former home.

Ravi's mother is especially interesting in *Yours Emotionally!* because she is never seen on screen, and never gets to say too much before her son cuts her off. The only time the audience gets to hear words in her voice is when Ravi is also in England. Rangayan's film creates an India that is shielded from the eyes of the mother figure. Even though Ravi's mother is well aware of his sexual orientation, she is not privy to the gay culture in India or her son's involvement in it.

Much like Alim's heavy viewing of classic films in *Touch of Pink*, Ravi is characterized as a heavy user of new media. His invitation to India came through his e-mail correspondence with queer Indians, and various scenes of Ravi on his cell phone, talking and texting, run throughout the film. And much like Alim's mentoring, Ravi meets a gay couple, Anna and Murthi, through this correspondence who serve as his hosts and temporary caregivers (i.e. parental figures) during his stay in India. Because Anna and Murthi are actually queer and not just coded as queer like Cary Grant and they are part of an earlier less open and less accepted queer community, Ravi and Paul actually serve simultaneously as supporters or mentors of Anna and Murthi's identity as a gay couple, which is beyond the scope of what the couple's authority to mentor.

Both the ability to meet Anna and Murthi through e-mail correspondence and the ability to name a queer identity within India are facilitated by the existence of new media. According to Sandip Roy, the Internet is essential for middle-class queer people to be able to have a queer life. Unlike upper-class South Asians who can go on holiday with a (possibly rented) queer lover outside of South Asia, middle-class South Asians need to stay within the subcontinent to express their queerness. They also differ from lower class South Asians in that they can afford to access the Internet, even if it is only at a café. Due to the shared geographic spaces in which middle- and lower class Indian gay men express their queerness, the Internet can be used in a way that allows middle-class men to do the online networking and low-class men can join these queer meet-ups by face-to-face networking.



Although the Internet community of queer South Asians is particularly strong in the subcontinent because of the need for it there, the link that diasporic queers have in the network is still seen in *Yours Emotionally!* From its earliest use among queer South Asians as a global network for queer South Asians and diasporic South Asians, the Internet has been at least slightly coded as Western. After all, Ravi is accessing the same resources that his invitees are. What makes these particular communities un-Western from the standpoint of those within them is that the queer South Asian networks have been appropriated to the South Asian (and diasporic) community by creating networks that are exclusive to South Asians and sometimes their diasporic family. Paul's presence does not contradict this idea. Instead, the social networks existed to create the ability for Ravi to come and bring his white friend who actually makes the effort to satiate the South Asian members' desires.<sup>12</sup>

Ravi's mother makes an interesting comment at the end of the film, which is reminiscent of Nuru's distaste for Alim's films. She yells to him to stop talking to his friends on his computers and eat while he is busy writing a thank you to Anna and Murthi on his computer. While he was in India, Ravi gets calls to his cell phone from his mother that check up on him, but he ignores her parental need

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<sup>12</sup> Rangayan's film also works on cinephelia, but it does not depend on the same Hollywood cinephelia on which *Touch of Pink* relies. Instead, the film makes allusions to films like Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*, where scenes, specifically those of overt sexuality, are copied nearly frame by frame. *Un Chant d'Amour* is a part of the (European) queer film canon most often accessed by those producing queer media and those in queer circles of art. In his analysis of the figure of Genet, film theorist Richard Dyer postulates that Genet is "both a known set of symbols for a homosexual existence and a reference point for argument about what homosexual existence is or should be" (48). By invoking Genet, Rangayan makes certain statements about explicit sexuality, anonymous sexuality, power dynamics in sex, and other issues that are resonant for those in certain communities. These communities, however, are probably not the same ones who appear in his film, through which he claims a greater authenticity of Indianness. Therefore, the film works to create both categorical queer and Indian authenticity.

to do this and quickly ends the phone calls. He does this to separate his mother from the queer culture he is immersed in at the times of these calls. Ravi's case proves that media can find an alternative queer parental or mentoring figure, and these alternative figures are needed even after the conventional mother comes to accept and even embrace queer identities. The alternative mother figures created by technology are meant to foster a Westernized gay identity which is not defined by the indigenous Indian worldview on sexuality. Even though both films feature protagonists that can be described as Western-assimilated, the family structures from which they came do not fit into the Western mold of family. This Western family mold is often able to foster a gay identity which can be localized dually within a queer community and a family structure that are aware of each other. The South Asian diasporic identity within the family is blind to queerness and avoids Western conceptualizations of family that challenge the Indian notion of marriage and family.

*Yours Emotionally!*'s mother figure, in some ways, serves as a continuation of Nuru in *Touch of Pink*, because Ravi's mother, like Nuru, is ultimately supportive of her son and accepting of his lifestyle. However, there is no knowledge in either mother of the queer culture in which their sons live in. Both filmmakers have created a utopia in which mothers of queer children are naïve and will eventually learn to accept or happily leave unquestioned their sexual identity. Instead, the makers of these two films created mother-son relationships in which the mothers are critical of their son's obsession with a particular popular medium. The "natural" mother figure, then, is never tainted by

exposure to queer life. It is only because the sons are situated in the Diaspora that they have free and open access to these alternative mother figures, but it is also their diasporic identity which creates the need for this figure.

## Conclusion

As the previous chapters have illuminated, mothers are most often used in films to present a personification of Indian tradition. The mother in these films provide examples and reinforcements of Indian culture. This personification can often more usefully be used to work out any discrepancies the film has with certain elements of its understanding of Indian culture. If we rely again on Purnima Mankekar's understanding, that starts by saying there exists a filmic stereotype of (diasporic) mothers as upholders of (Hindu) values, she goes on to say that there is another stereotype of diasporic fathers as primarily concerned with capitalist ventures (750). To conclude my own analysis of the effect of the mother character on queer Indian cinema, I will finish with a look at two diasporic films, both from South Asian diasporic Muslims – Indo-Canadian writer-director Ian Iqbal Rashid (whose *Touch of Pink* I have already dealt with) and British Pakistani screenwriter Hanif Kureishi. The absence or marginalization of the mother in these films provides the opportunity to play with the queer Indian narrative and creates an opportunity for narratives to deviate from the stock stories of Indian tradition versus Western decadency and queerness.

Ian Iqbal Rashid's short film *Surviving Sabu* (1998) provides an excellent example of the possibilities and alternative routes that can be taken when mothers are absent from queer male narratives. In it, father and son, Sadru (Suresh Oberoi) and Amin (Navin Chowdhry), debate the value of British and Hollywood film star Sabu while making a documentary about the actor. While Sadru contends that Sabu was the epitome of Indian success in the diaspora, Amin, who

is well-versed in postcolonial and film theory, objects to the films that portray Sabu from the colonizer's gaze.

As Gayatri Gopinath points out, "the relation between father and son in *Surviving Sabu* is characterized by a complex relay of desire and identification" (73). She details the many ways in which father and son read the figure of Sabu differently. While Sadru idolizes the strong and toned body and is frustrated by Amin's indifference to exercise, the picture we see of Sabu is one that is highly erotic and is, within *Surviving Sabu* being viewed not only by us, but by Sadru and Amin. Thus, there is irony in Sadru's insistence that the gay Amin aspire to and idolize another man's body (74). There is also Amin's outward ambivalence towards Sabu and his concessions to Orientalist film producers. This ambivalence adds another layer to the viewing practices of father and son. In the film's final scene, Amin projects a Sabu film on the outside of the house to surprise his father. As this scene shows, Amin is able to concede that there is viewing pleasure in the films of Sabu.

Through all of these viewing positions, there is yet another position that is most interesting to my particular project. The film opens with Sadru's primary motivation for exposing Amin to the films of Sabu – so that Amin could see that immigrants could be successful like Sabu. Mankekar's thesis is here brightly validated: Sadru's focus is primarily on the capitalist venture of emigrating from India, his greatest pleasure and most important reason for sharing with Amin the films of Sabu's is the actual documented proof that those who come from India to a Western nation can succeed financially. In a way of proving his own point,

Amin asks Sadru to explain his own story, what he thought it would be like to move to England and what actually happened when he did. To this, Sadru gives him a blank stare. Amin notices a disconnect with what Sadru idolizes on the screen as a perceived reality and what is actual reality.

While this short film does not depict Amin's mother anywhere in the film, there are various references to her. By placing the mother both at the mosque and at the marriage committee at different points in the narrative, she "becomes the marker of normative tradition, community, and family against which a queer gay male genealogy is formed" (Gopinath 76). By making the mother absent, there arises the opportunity for the father and son to share the homosocial moments within the home that are charged with the various modes of viewing Sabu's figure and body. It also allows for an exploration of the variety of roles Sadru can take on as a diasporic father of a queer child.

The film does feature a series of scenes in which Sadru is domesticated in the kitchen, preparing dinner for the family. It is in these scenes that Sadru's personality becomes feminized in the respect that we begin to see him care more about the same Indian traditions that the mothers in the film have traditionally cared about. In one exchange, Amin tells Sadru he must tell him something. Sadru responds sarcastically, "You've decided to find a nice Muslim girl and give us a reason to live?" The true news is that Amin has been showing rough cuts of his film to others and he is getting a very positive response. This scene takes place shortly after Amin has come out to his father, and Sadru's unenthusiastic response is informed by a certain homophobic disappointment and frustration.

This shock and disappointment in his son's queerness overshadows the fact that Amin could potentially "make it" in England with this film, like Sabu. While it is his shock and not actually the kitchen setting which provides this feminized version of Sadru, the device of the kitchen works to provides Sadru the opportunity to demasculinize Amin figuratively right in front of him while in conversation. The above exchange takes place while Sadru hacks away at a zucchini. This scenario takes place at a time when Sadru is ambivalent towards Amin's announcement.

The figure of Sabu, through the formation of Amin's documentary and repeated viewings of Sabu's films, helps bring the two together again. The ideal figure of Sadru's version of British Indianness has thus been queered in the sense that his films have provided the opportunity for Sadru and Amin to live civilly together – to share a cigarette on the couch while watching one of Sabu's films. Ultimately though, it is not a scholarly discussion of Sabu's role in their diasporic imagination that keeps father and son together. This discussion can only go on for so long, and father and son do provide a thoughtful exchange on the subject – Amin creating higher awareness on the subject and Sadru making exceptions where he sees fit. Ultimately, it is the sheer enjoyment of the Hollywood portrayal of Sabu with which the two finish.

Screenwriter Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Stephen Frears, 1985) also relies on a network of men who inform the life of a queer male. The film features Omar (Gordon Warnecke) living his twenties in Thatcherite Britain. West London is the setting as Omar finds a job with his entrepreneurial uncles

first as an attendant in their parking garage and then in charge of their latest business venture – a laundrette which will be fixed up into a deluxe experience of clothes-washing. To help him prepare the laundrette for opening, Omar recruits an old friend of his, who happens to be a former white supremacist, Johnny (Daniel Day Lewis).

While Omar makes a stop with his uncles on his quest for a job, he encounters the separate spheres of the Pakistani home. We can tell by the disorienting way this scene is shot, with dark lighting and stealthy approaches to rooms on the other side of corners, that Omar is sure he is entering a pseudo-secret society of his uncles. In growing up, Omar did not have much contact with his family and does not consider himself Pakistani but British. So in his first contacts with his greater family, under the recommendation of his father, he is truly introduced to South Asian family structures and the unusual set up of the men of the family. Omar is taken to a closed-off room that is inhabited with several of his uncles. There, the talk is all business and sex, and anytime Omar is within these male spaces, the talk is consistently on these subjects. The men dabble in various businesses – illegal and legal – and seem to be thriving in Thatcher's neoliberal economy. And while these businesses are profitable for the men, they contest that "we're nothing in England without money," meaning that British Asians are nothing unless they are successful capitalists. Thus, in the minds of these men, the capitalist venture of South Asian immigration is essential to be a respected citizen. Thus, Omar's entry into this world is a desirable experience for him, even if he is consistently bombarded with heterosexual erotic



verbal imagery and flirtation from one of his female cousins. Amongst the group of men, Omar is constantly asked if his penis is in working order because he is never seen with women. Even the poetic imagery that the men use to talk about the nation is infused with heterosexist language. His uncle tells him, “You must know how to squeeze the tits of the system.” Assuming he does not understand, another man translates this for him: “He’s saying he wants to help you.”

The day that the business is ready to open, Omar and Johnny have consummated their love. They make love in the foreground as one of Omar’s uncles and his mistress dance in the background, on the floor of the laundrette. This film is particular in that its characters are not openly queer. Omar and Johnny are not a public item. The relationship is treated just as any other, as Kureishi acknowledges (Hill 213), except for the fact that the relationship is unknown to most. Kureishi designed a screenplay in which the queer relationship is not an issue, because it is invisible to any display of South Asian tradition. Potentially, this could be in response to the particular situation in the mid-1980s; this is a point in which there is hardly any other queer South Asian discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Much like Omar’s self-identification, *My Beautiful Laundrette* is more about Britishness than British Asianness. “[I]t is not the past experience of whites in India with which the film is concerned but rather the experiences in contemporary Britain” (Hill 209). Here, film theorist John Hill notices the reverse

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<sup>13</sup> Ismat Chughtai’s Urdu short story, “The Quilt” came under charges in 1944 for obscenity for its depiction of lesbian sex (Kidwai 283). A newsletter, *Gay Scene*, was published in Calcutta for a few issues in 1980. A 1982 *India Today* survey found thirteen percent of men prefer having sex with other men. Other gay magazines and media became prevalent after the mid-1980s. *Trikone* began in 1986; London’s magazine *Shakti Khabar* began in 1988. *Bombay Dost* started in 1990, and others in India were published intermittently in the 1990’s. (Vanita and Kidwai 210). The documentary *Khush*, about South Asian queer life, was released in 1991.

role that the film is placing itself in as a reverse Euro-colonizer film. By sidestepping the sexuality issue, the film can also sidestep the specificities of South Asianness that would certainly have to be accessed were Omar's queer relationship to come out as an issue. By keeping it under wraps, the film can be a film that feels unrepresentative of British Asians. Hill points out that the film had much ambivalent reception because it did not seem to fit the paradigmatic representations of Asians in Britain – Where are the poor British Asians? Why do the British Asians seem so bastardly? And what is this about queerness? Hill calls the film's strategy of representation "in-betweenness" in that it cannot commit to any sort of identity so that it cannot possibly be held responsible for the representation of that identity. Thus, the queerness in the film works as a confounding variable to the stability of the white-brown binary.

The essentiality of homosexuality is also challenged by creating a homosexuality that arises without questions and that inverts the colonial white-dominating same-sex sex act (Hill 213). The film's homosociality and elision of a mother figure creates an environment where this is possible. If we are to understand the male space in diasporic families as one primarily concerned with capital, in this case, an upper class level of capitalist society that is race blind, what is important is not cultural tradition. Instead, what is important for the male mentors to monitor in Omar's life is his ability to run the laundrette. At the end of the film, his ability is left ambiguous when the establishment is sabotaged by Johnny's skinhead ex-friends, but it is not Omar's actions that lead to this attack.

They retaliate against other family member's actions against the skinheads and the resultant defenses Johnny wages in the name of Omar's family.

***Final Thoughts: Gaps and Trends***

It may be particularly obvious now that I have just finished focusing the first part of this chapter on men and men alone, but there is a definite lack of women in the stories of queer people of India and the Indian diaspora. Especially because there is in some respect a need for queer feminist readings of Indian culture that extends beyond what something like *Chutney Popcorn* can do justice to. My study's attention to the mother in queer Indian cinema has focused on the ways in which maternal characters are manipulated in order to create queer narratives that are often validating (*Touch of Pink*, *Bend it Like Beckham*, *Chutney Popcorn...*). It is also the case that sometimes these mothers are the source of Indian tradition that is either too stubborn or too influenced by heterosexist patriarchy to make an impact (*Fire*). The figure of the mother can alternatively be projected onto other figures (usually men) who presume motherly roles, whether in a conventional queer sense or not (*Yours Emotionally!*, *Surviving Sabu*).

This use of Indian motherhood is certainly based upon two stereotypes: one of the mother as the diasporic site of homeland tradition and one of the caring, compassionate nature of women. The combination of these two traits creates a figure that is at once embodying tradition and also able to be justifiably changed. From what we have seen in these films, this mother comes to great use in promoting the values of these queer narratives.

As I have shown, the motherly trope is being shifted from the mother to many other figures within narratives, and to great effects. The offbeat film *My Brother...Nikhil* (Onir, 2005) features a conventional AIDS narrative, where the life of the HIV-infected Nikhil is immortalized and made inspirational through the nurturing narration of his sister and his boyfriend! The figure of the mother and father are present; however, these figures are not as passionate about the story of Nikhil in the film. And though there is nothing unusual about the film's narrative, it is unusual in the genre of queer Indian cinema, in that it gives the ally role to someone who is not queer and who is not a mother or father, Nikhil's sister. It is also unusual in that there is an Indian boyfriend who is likewise given the chance to provide support in the ways that conventional narratives rely on parents. The film does not go as far as to take away the overall importance of parental approval and support; parental support is just not seen as central. *My Brother...Nikhil* provides a good example of a new structural device in queer Indian cinema. By breaking from the mother convention, a new angle is taken on the subject of queerness, one where cultural tradition is not the foreground. Instead, the parental figures are pushed into the background with tradition, and the foreground is taken up by a story and investigation of liberal sexual health activism in modern India.

As Bollywood movies begin to become more diasporic and more global in production and narrative, they are not losing their basic structure. In fact, they are themselves becoming global hegemonic story structures. As cultural theorist Ashish Rajadhyaksha classifies Bollywood as not only a film industry, it "occupies a space analogous to the film industry, but might best be seen as a more

diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities” (27). And though the mother is being claimed as central to much of queer Indian cinema, various other strategies are being taken on to make the issues surrounding queerness in an Indian context more complex. Conversely, as queer Indian cinema and queer Indian subculture becomes more defined and visible, there seems to be a trend towards the West as an ideal example of queer culture. On repeated nights as I spent a month in Delhi, I sat in an Internet center next to a young, pretty female student who was flirting online with a boy who lived outside of the city but whom she knew through family. I was persuaded to eavesdrop into her instant messaging after I saw at the corner of my eyes the word “bisexual.” “My ex-boyfriend is bisexual,” she wrote. The boy she spoke to was quite surprised. She explained herself, saying “It’s much more liberal in the city.” She went on to talk about a boy with whom a marriage was “set up,” planned a year after she graduated high school. I finished my eavesdropping after she began to talk about how much she loved “sate” (*Sex and the City*) and that her friends thought she was a “cross between sjp [Sarah Jessica Parker] and the blonde girl [Kim Catrell].” What could simultaneously be lost with the loss of the figure of the mother is a sense of cultural specificity. And India could be subjected to a *Sex and the City* where Mumbai is the titular metropolis.

While there are trends and movements within queer Indian cinema, there is no clear direction for queer Indian media as a whole. As one can see, there are certainly ways that queerness can be incorporated into Indian and diasporic culture. Conversely, there are ways that Western sexuality has worked to define

sexuality and the representation thereof within Indian and diasporic discourses on sexuality. Only time will tell the ways in which globalization will affect the constantly changing definitions of sex and sexuality within an Indian context.

### Filmography

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