Queering Bollywood:
Alternative Sexualities
in Popular Indian Cinema

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SUMMARY. In this essay, I demonstrate through numerous examples taken from four identifiable Hindi film subgenres queer themes which, though nontransgressive in their native Indian context, acquire subversive value and serve as queer points of identification when viewed from a non-nationalist bias. Watching particular films with this "queer diasporic viewing practive," sex/gender play which is normative (yet still coded) in the land of the films' production can be reclaimed as queer through the differently subjective lens of transnational spectatorship, a lens removed from patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia. This particularly becomes apparent in the Bollywood dance sequence–the frequent site of Hindi sex/gender play–whose coded queer desires are much easier to de-code (or re-code) when in the diaspora. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress. com>]*

India is the largest film-producing country in the world, and films made in India, especially in the huge film factories of Bollywood (as the Bombay film

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...try is known), are circulated throughout an ever-expanding network of ...uth Asian diasporic communities throughout South Asia, North America, .. Caribbean, the Middle East, East Africa, and elsewhere.[1] Given the vast-...ss of its reach, surprisingly little critical work has been done on the recep-...n, consumption, and distribution of popular Indian cinema within these ...fferent diasporic locations. While Vijay Mishra argues that the introduction ..Bollywood films in the diaspora in the 1930s was "a crucial factor in the ...ntinuation of culture and in the construction of the imaginary homeland as ...homogenous identity,"[2] I would argue that Bollywood cinema circulates in ...e diaspora in less predictable ways; indeed this paper suggests that Bolly-...ood provides "queer diasporic" audiences with the means by which to ...magine and reterritorialize the "homeland" by making it the locus of ...eer desire and pleasure. My interest in tracing the possibilities of "interpre-...e interventions and appropriations"[3] by diasporic audiences allies my ...ject with that of feminist film theorists such as Judith Mayne, Valerie ...aub, and others who theorize female spectatorship.[4] In her analysis of the ...ainstream Hollywood film *Black Widow*, Traub argues that the appropri-...ons and readings of "lesbian" spectators exceed the film's strategies of ...taining lesbian pleasure within a heterosexual matrix: "Insofar as the film ...nnot be read separately from the transaction taking place as it unrolls ...fore an audience, *Black Widow* becomes an event of cultural production, a ...ment in which "lesbian" subjectivities are constructed."[5] Similarly, this ...say begins to trace the influence of popular film in constituting a particular ...ueer diasporic subjectivity," one that confounds dominant Euro-American ...nstructions of "gay" and "lesbian" identity and that negotiates between ...e spaces of multiple homes, communities, and nations.

...I employ what I call a "queer diasporic viewing practice" in order to ...ce" the various articulations of same-sex desire in particular examples of ...pular Indian cinema. This viewing practice conceptualizes a viewing pub-...c as located within multiple diasporic sites, and the text itself as accruing ...ultiple, sometimes contradictory meanings within these various locations. ...other words, I place these films with a "queer diasporic framework" ...hich allows us to conceive of both the text and the viewer in motion. ...nematic images which in their "originary" locations simply reiterate con-...ntional nationalist and gender ideologies may, in a South Asian diasporic ...ntext, be refashioned to become the very foundation of a queer transnation-...culture. Furthermore, queer diasporic readings within such a framework ...ow us to read non-heteronormative arrangements within rigidly heterosex-...l structures as well as the ways in which queer articulations of desire and ...asure both draw on and infiltrate popular culture. While queer reading ...ctices alone cannot prevent the violences of heteronormativity, they do ...ervene in formulations of "home" and diaspora that—in their elision and

disavowal of the particularities of queer subjectivities–inevitably reproduce the heteronormative family as central to national identity.

While I focus on a range of popular Indian cinema from 1960 to 1996, I also discuss examples of what is known as "middle cinema," that is, the spate of "socially conscious" films made in the 1970s and early 1980s that attempted to chart a middle course between "art" films and the song-and-dance formulae of popular Hindi film.[6] In including different genres within my discussion, I hope to examine the ways in which each genre both allows for and forecloses the possibilities of representing non-heteronormative desires and subjectivities on screen. Interestingly, many of the scenes I discuss are of song-and-dance sequences; the fact that forty percent of an average popular Indian film is made up of song-and-dance or fighting sequences suggests that these scenes may need to be taken just as seriously as the film's main plot or narrative. Indeed, these sequences often act as a place of fantasy that cannot be contained or accounted for in the rest of the narrative; not surprisingly, it is often in these moments of fantasy that queer desire emerges.

In an attempt to provide some coherence to a vast range of material, my analysis is organized into four sections: "Sexing the Sisterhood," "Budd(y)ing Boyfriends," "Macho Mems, Sissy Sahibs," and "Hijras and Homos." Clearly, these sections are somewhat arbitrary and hardly offer an exhaustive treatment of popular Indian cinema. Instead, I hope to begin an examination of the various ways in which popular cinema encodes alternative sexualities and desires, and makes certain spaces available for their representation. A project such as this is interested not so much in looking for "lesbians" in Bollywood, but rather in looking for those moments emerging at the fissures of rigidly heterosexual structures that can be transformed into queer imaginings.[7]

SEXING THE SISTERHOOD:
FEMALE HOMOSOCIALITY/FEMALE HOMOEROTICISM

This first section considers a series of films made between 1960 and 1994 that depict archetypal spaces of female homosociality such as brothels, women's prisons, girl's schools, the middle class home, and the zenana. Popular Indian film is saturated with rich images of the intense love between women in the context of these women-only spaces. Not surprisingly, these spaces allow numerous possibilities for intense female friendship to slip into queer desire; I am thus interested in pointing out some of the visual codes used in popular films to depict that slippage between female homosociality and female homoeroticism that a text like Chughtai's "The Quilt" so brilliantly exploits.

The first two scenes under discussion depict moments of female bonding

vinced of the hegemonic power of their own heterosexuality. However, the fact that gender reversal in *Hum Aapke* occurs within a space of female homosociality renders the implied homoeroticism of the scene explicit to both the characters and the film's audience, and as such makes it eminently available for a queer diasporic viewership. For a "queer South Asian viewing subject," then, the scene foregrounds the ways in which South Asian popular culture acts as a repository of queer desiring relations; it also marks the simultaneous illegibility of those relations to a heterosexual viewing public and their legibility in a queer South Asian diasporic context.

It is critical to note that upon *Hum Aapke*'s release, the popular press attributed its tremendous and sustained popularity to its return to "family values," a phrase that apparently referred to the film's rejection of the sex and violence formulae of other popular Hindi movies. However, this phrase speaks more to the ways in which the film works within Hindu nationalist discourses of India by articulating a desire for a nostalgic "return" to an impossible ideal, that of the supposedly "traditional" Hindu family and kinship arrangements that are staunchly middle-class and heterosexual. The incursion of female homoerotic desire into this ultra-conventional Hindi marriage plot–both suggested and contained by the scene between Dixit and her cross-dressed partner–threatens the presumed seamlessness of both familial and nationalist narratives by calling into question the functionality and imperviousness of heterosexual bonds.

Two other films that depict the slippage between female homosociality and female homoeroticism are the 1984 *Ustav* (dir. Girish Karnad) and the 1981 *Subhah* (dir. Jabbar Patel); in both, female homoerotic desire plays more active role in the narrative rather than simply serving to briefly interrupt heterosexual relationships. *Ustav* takes place primarily in and around a brothel and *Subhah* in a women's reformatory, and both hint at the alternative forms of sexuality that exist outside the middle-class home as represented in the previous two films. *Ustav* belongs to the genre of courtesan films that plays on the nostalgia for an ancient erotic Indian past (the latest example of which is Mira Nair's 1997 film *Kama Sutra*).⁹ In *Ustav*, the film star Rehka plays Vasantsena, a fourth century prostitute who falls in love with a young Brahmin merchant named Charudutt. Halfway through the film, Charudutt temporarily shunted out of the narrative by a growing friendship between Vasantsena and his wife Aditi. In a telling scene, Vasantsena and Aditi sing each other after exchanging clothes and jewelry. This act of making oneself desirable, of dressing and undressing, donning and discarding saris and jewelry in particular, is a sexually loaded trope in popular Indian cinema, having connotations of wedding nights and signifying a prelude to sex. The film reworks the typical love triangle of popular film where two women compete for the man's attention; here, it is Charudutt who is sidelined while the tw

women play erotically together. Interestingly, feminist analyses of the film have critiqued this scene as merely "playing out the ultimate male fantasy," whereby female bonding between the wife and the courtesan enable the man to "move without guilt between a nurturing wife and a glamorous mistress."[10] Clearly such an interpretation misses the more nuanced eroticism between the two women that a queer diasporic reading makes apparent.

Ustav's reversal of the standard heterosexual triangle is also evident in the 1981 middle cinema film *Subhah*, starring Smita Patil. Upon its release, *Subhah* was heralded a feminist fable, in that it followed the struggles of a middle class housewife named Savitri to leave the confines of middle class domesticity and become the warden of a women's reformatory. Savitri's process of individuation is figured in terms of movement, with her leaving behind the gendered, hierarchical family arrangements of the middle class household and entering instead the confines of the all-women's reformatory. The film ends with a familiar image in "middle cinema" women's films, with Savitri on a train, embarking alone on an unspecified journey after having left both her family and the reformatory behind.

What distinguishes *Subhah* from the other so-called women's films of the era is that it explicitly references female same-sex eroticism, by naming the relationship between two of the inmates in the reformatory as "lesbian" (the English word is used). Predictably, the "lesbianism" of the inmates is held apart from the burgeoning feminist consciousness of the film's heroine: Savitri labels the two inmates as pathological even as she tries to defend them to her superior. The physical and psychic movement of the feminist subject, then, is opposed to the fixity of the "lesbian" characters who remain firmly situated within a narrative of sickness and pathology. Indeed on a narrative level, the film is unable to articulate female desire and sexuality–let alone female same-sex desire–in terms other than pathologization; Savitri herself is shown repeatedly refusing sex with her husband but never actively desiring.

Yet one instance in the film exceeds its own narrative trajectory and hints at alternative narrativization of female same-sex desire. Significantly, the scene is one of the few song-and-dance sequences in the movie: the women are seen here celebrating a festival, and the camera cuts repeatedly from the face and body of one the "lesbian" characters to that of the other, who gazes at her adoringly. The scene reworks the familiar triangulation between characters in song-and-dance sequences in popular Indian film, where two women dance for the male character whose appraising gaze orchestrates the scene. In *Subhah*, however, a triangulated relation forms between the two lesbian characters and Savitri, who is drawn into the circuit of exchange of looks between the two, and both returns and receives their admiring and curious glances. The scene is interesting in that, however briefly, it articulates female desire outside the realm of pathology in a way that the rest of the

narrative is unable to do. Instead, the scene hints at the particular forms and organizations of female same-sex desire that are produced within the homosocial spaces of the middle class home; and these forms exist, surprisingly, even when those spaces are thoroughly saturated by the state's patriarchal authority.

As this scene in *Subhah* suggests, narratives that explicitly name female same-sex desire as "lesbian" may be less interesting than those moments within the narrative that represent female homosociality in the absence of "lesbians." Such a moment is particularly apparent in the 1983 Bollywood epic *Razia Sultan* (dir. Kamal Amrohi), where Hema Malini plays a Mughal princess pining for her male lover while being comforted by her maidservant (Parveen Babi). The scene takes place in a small boat, as Parveen Babi ostensibly sings to Hema Malini about her lover while caressing and eventually kissing her from behind a white feather. This sequence is a brilliant reworking of the visual conventions of the Bollywood historical epic in that it explicitly references the famous scene in the classic 1961 film *Mughal-e-Azam* (dir. K. Asif), where the hero Dilip Kumar kisses the heroine Madhubala while passing a white feather in front of their faces. While *Razia Sultan's* use of this masking device has a lot to do with the censorship exigencies of Indian film, it also speaks to the ways in which female homoeroticism is visually encoded within popular cinema; female homoerotic desire and pleasure are often mediated by and routed through heterosexuality as well as class difference.[11]

I do not mean to suggest that implicit encodings of alternative sexuality are necessarily superior to explicit representations; however, I would argue that scenes such as the ones I have discussed above suggest alternative formulations of female homoeroticism that cannot necessarily be produced in popular film under the sign of "lesbian." These scenes become eminently available for a queer diasporic viewership because they encode female homoeroticism outside the logic of homophobia. Instead, they gesture to a model of what we can term a queer South Asian femininity, where gender conformity and indeed hyper-femininity do not necessarily imply heterosexuality. In much of popular Indian film, as I will discuss in the following sections, explicit gender transgression in women is definitively (and sometimes violently) resolved into heterosexuality. It may therefore be more useful for queer purposes to draw on those moments where hyper-gender conformity encodes female homoeroticism, and as such allows queer sexuality to erupt at the interstices of heterosexuality.

BUDD(Y)ING BOYFRIENDS:
MALE HOMOSOCIALITY/MALE HOMOEROTICISM

The depiction of male friendships has a long tradition in Indian cinema From the 1960 film *Chaudvin Ka Chand* (dir. M. Sadiq), to the buddy movies

of Amitabh Bachchan and Dharmendra in the 1970s, to the current buddy duo of Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali Khan, men in popular Indian film are often depicted within an erotic triangle involving a woman and another male friend: very often, both men forfeit the heroine and opt for the friendship of the other man instead. In this section, I focus primarily on the buddy movies of the seventies and early eighties, as it is during this time that the buddy movie in Bollywood seems to come into its own. As in Hollywood film, male bonding and barely disguised same-sex desire that accompanies it often comes at a price; predictably, women and effeminate men, for instance, have no place in this macho brotherhood.

The prototypical hero of the buddy movies of Hindi cinema is the megastar and some-time politician Amitabh Bachchan, who for at least twenty years has successfully depicted a series of tough men with strong morals. In an early Amitabh movie, the 1973 vigilante film *Zanjeer* (dir. Prakash Mehra), which was the first in a long line of Amitabh's films that cast the hero as outlaw, Amitabh plays a cop-turned-vigilante who befriends a Pathan gambler (Pran). In *Zanjeer*, as in most of Amitabh's movies, male friendship is articulated in the same hyper-romantic terms used for heterosexual relationships; in one scene, for instance, Pran dances joyfully for Amitabh and effusively proclaims how love has changed his life, and eventually envelops Amitabh in an embrace. As is typical of many films of the buddy movie genre, Amitabh's female love interest in *Zanjeer* is distinctly secondary to his friendship with Pran. The generic elements evident in *Zanjeer* are repeated in the quintessential male buddy movie of the seventies, the 1975 masala western *Sholay* (dir. Ramesh Sippy) also starring Amitabh. The romance of male friendship is clear in a scene from *Sholay* which has Amitabh and his male friend (Dharmendra) singing a duet about their undying loyalty and love for each other. Diasporic gay men have been quick to seize upon the barely veiled desire between the two, and have used the song as a queer anthem at Gay Pride parades in New York and San Francisco. Although throughout the film male friendship keeps heterosexual love interests at bay, *Sholay's* ending conveniently restores the primacy of heterosexuality by having Amitabh die heroically by saving Dharmendra's life.

A somewhat later Amitabh buddy movie, the 1980 film *Dostana* (Dir. Raj Khosla), attempts to replicate the formula of *Sholay* but makes no such attempt to resolve male friendship with heterosexuality. In fact, *Dostana* makes blatantly apparent the ways in which male bonding codifies male same-sex desire. The film also shows how this romantic male bonding and desire often relies on sexism and misogyny. *Dostana* is structured through the typical male buddy triangle of two men ostensibly competing for the attentions of the same woman (Zeenat Aman). It quickly becomes apparent that Zeenat's role is simply to act as the object of exchange between the two men;

as a bonding device that serves to cement male friendship, she gets passed around from one to the other at various points in the film. The homosocial triangulation that structures *Dostana* is most apparent in a scene in where Amitabh and his buddy have a fight, ostensibly over Zeenat, and in the language of a lover's quarrel Amitabh sings to his friend about his grief over the loss of their friendship.[12] The camera very obviously traces the triangulated desire among Amitabh, his male partner, and Zeenat; what is striking in this scene is that while both men appear somewhat animated and active in different ways, Zeenat remains curiously inert, and simply stares blankly into the camera. Zeenat is useful in this scene, and indeed in the entire film, only insofar as she acts as a conduit between the two men; indeed, by the film's end Zeenat has disappeared entirely. The movie closes with a shot of the two men embracing and walking hand in hand into the sunset, as the words "This friendship will live forever!" flash on the screen.

However, it is not only women who are violated by romantic male bonding. In the 1983 film *Holi* (dir. Ketan Mehta), male bonding takes a more sinister turn as the homophobia that underlies desire between straight men is made remarkably explicit. *Holi* takes place in that quintessential arena of male bonding, male desire, and homophobia: the boys' school. In a wrenching scene, an effeminate boy who has had "relations" with other boys in the dorm is harassed and pushed around by them; his harassers insult him by calling him a "girl" and saying that "he's worse than a woman," implying that he's too weak to fight back. The scene graphically depicts the ways in which, in a heterosexual context, male same-sex desire can tip into violence both homophobic and misogynist.

Thus the buddy movie and its depiction of male bonding is one of the ways in which desire between men is referenced in popular film. These depictions, however, may simultaneously rely on sexist ideologies, as well as the rejection of effeminacy or any other version of non-heteronormative masculinity. Whereas "Sexing the Sisterhood" detailed the privatized spaces of female homosociality which allow for certain forms of homoeroticism to flourish, this section demonstrates the remarkable latitude within public spaces for male friendships that can easily tip into homoeroticism. While the gendered distinction between public and private is predictable given the legacies of colonial and nationalist constructions of "home" and family, these distinctions are complicated within the films I have discussed here: both male and female erotic friendships are fostered within the strictly patrolled public institutional spaces of schools and prisons. In my next section, I turn from same-sex eroticisms within single-sex institutions to a series of cross-gender identifications in a variety of Bollywood films which seem to register some awareness of alternative sexualities and genders.

MACHO MEMS, SISSY SAHIBS:
CROSS-GENDER IDENTIFICATION

Even a cursory glance at popular Indian film offers up numerous representations of men and women who defy gender stereotypes. Men in dresses or with feminine mannerisms, and women with short hair, trousers, and a tough demeanor, have figured quite prominently on the Bollywood screen. In particular, cross-dressing of both men and women has been a standard comedic and plot device in popular Indian film for decades. These representations are useful for queer purposes in that they hint at other possibilities of gender and sexuality that fall outside the confines of traditional heterosexuality; however, the films I discuss here also tend to shut down these possibilities almost as quickly as they raise them.

Bollywood seems to have responded to the growing visibility of a lesbian and gay movement in South Asia with a marked increase in recent years in representations of characters that are explicitly cross-gender identified. In the 1996 film *Raja Hindustani*, for instance, the heroine's main sidekicks are an effeminate man and a masculine woman who predictably provide much of the comic entertainment in the film, mostly through the confusion they generate among other characters as to the "true" nature of their sex. In *Raja Hindustani*, as in much of popular film, feminine men are given a limited, ritualized role as either comic figures or as hijras.[13] Masculine women, however, do not have even these limited options for representation, and are more often than not made to disappear from the film entirely, as they do in both *Raja Hindustani* and in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, the film discussed in the first section of this essay.

Scenes of cross-dressing are often followed by dramatic moments of revelation that re-establish proper gender roles and identification. In the 1995 *Baazi*, for instance, the hero Amir Khan cross-dresses in order to entrap the villain, who is under the impression that he is about to have sex with an attractive woman. Instead, Amir Khan strips off his drag and, in a display of macho virility, beats him up. This excessive revelation scene anxiously confirms the hero's heterosexuality by violently disowning and punishing any queer desire or pleasure opened up by the act of cross-dressing. A similar moment of revelation and a return to one's "true" gender occurs in the 1970 film *Mera Naam Joker* (dir. Raj Kapoor), which stars the actress Padmini cross-dressing as a feisty and independent vagabond and circus performer who wields a knife and is called Minoo Master. Minoo Master's butch toughness, however, prefigures the inevitable revelation scene, where Minoo is exposed as Mina, a curvaceous beauty who dons a sari, grows her hair, and eventually becomes a wife. Minoo Master's domestication as Mina points to the ways in which masculine women in film are not allowed to exist more

than momentarily, and are inevitably feminized in order to be drawn back into heterosexuality.[14]

This is not to say, however, that popular Indian cinema lacks images of strong, independent women. On the contrary, from the early stunt films of Australian-born Hindi film star Fearless Nadia in the 1930s and 1940s to the latest action films of the tremendously popular current South Indian action film star Vijaya Shanti, popular film has reveled in images of tough women on screen. Nadia's persona as "the lady with the whip," as she was known in the thirties, acted as a precursor for Amitabh's action films of the seventies, and particularly for the films of Vijaya Shanti. Vijaya Shanti's films, with names like *Police Lockup* and *Lady Boss*, are tremendously popular among women at least in part because she offers an image of a tough yet glamorous woman who defends both herself and other women from predatory men. However, both Nadia and Vijaya Shanti are able to enact their tough woman personae because they remain quite clearly recognizable as attractive, heterosexual women. Nadia played upon the stereotype of the sexually liberated foreign woman, while Vijaya Shanti, despite her short hair, big gun, and police outfits, still retains the big-eyed, fair-skinned aesthetic of the prototypical Indian female film star.

The 1996 Madhuri Dixit film *Anjaam* makes clear both the possibilities and limits representing non-traditional gender roles in popular film. Madhuri plays an innocent widow who has been thrown into jail due to the machinations of various villainous men. She arrives in prison only to be thrown at the mercy of a cruel and semi-masculine female warden, who calls her a whore, tells her to strip, and proceeds to beat her up brutally when she resists. The prison warden is, of course, a stock character familiar from B-movie prison films in the U.S., where women's prisons are imagined as notorious sites of lesbian sexual predation and sexual violence. *Anjaam's* prison warden seems to follow in this tradition but is shown in the following scene in bed with her male superior; she is thus quickly and firmly re-established as properly feminine, heterosexual, and sexually available, as are most other masculine women on the Indian screen. The ultra-feminine heroine, meanwhile, transforms into a Devi figure, a wrathful feminine goddess wreaking revenge on all those men who have wronged her. However, the most drawn-out and gory scene of violent revenge is reserved for the female warden, whom she beats up and eventually hangs in a scene so violent that it is hard to watch (and one wonders here at the voyeurism that the film both evokes and plays upon in watching women kill each other). The depiction of Madhuri as an incarnation of Devi denotes the traditional space available for women within popular culture to be strong, aggressive, and even violent-and still be seen as properly female, feminine women.[15] If Madhuri-as-Devi embodies an acceptable representation of female strength, the prison warden-with her vaguely mas-

_uline demeanor–comes to symbolize an unacceptable version of female power, and is brutally punished as a result. The film .thus pits a feminist-coded character against a queer-coded one, and the latter loses out on all counts. Feminist accounts of self-realization, in other worlds, are achieved within Bollywood cinema at the expense of the queer or masculine female character. Certainly a queer reading practice can uncover moments of visual pleasure in the image of a tough or masculine woman on screen, but the pleasures of either desire or identification are brutally foreclosed by the swift and unusually violent punishments that always await such characters. This points to the limits of accounts of queer spectatorship which prematurely celebrate the abundance of queer-coded characters in mainstream Indian cinema. In short, popular Indian film does have a place, up to a point, for representations of those men who do not embody a virile, heterosexual mas-culinity, and those women who reject a weak, passive form of femininity. However, as I am arguing, we quickly reach the limits of these unconventional gender representations: effeminate men are comic relief or are shunted into the category of "hijra," while strong women are acceptable only as long as they can still be contained with heterosexuality and properly feminine behavior.

HIJRAS AND HOMOS: "PERVERSE" SEXUALITIES ON SCREEN

If the possibilities of representing gender transgression in popular film are necessarily limited, as discussed in the last section, the possibilities of repre-senting sexual transgression are all the more so. In this section, I explore the ways in which popular film explicitly marks certain characters as somehow sexually aberrant. Hijra characters remain the most obvious and common manifestation of sexual and gender transgression in popular film. Hijras, who may be cross-dressed biological men, eunuchs, or hermaphrodites, form communities that have a ritualized, historically rooted role in Indian society. For a queer South Asian viewership, the relative visibility of hijras on screen on the one hand makes apparent other forms of sexual and gender subjectivi-ties than those available within heterosexuality. On the other hand, as pre-viously mentioned, "hijra" becomes a generalized category for all forms of gender or sexual transgression, and thereby closes down the possibilities of representations of other forms of non-heteronormative genders or sexualities.

Representations of hijras locate and limit the possibilities of gender trans-gression by creating a category of people who supposedly embody the full extent of both sexual deviance and gender cross-identification. Thus in the 1974 film *Kunwara Baap*, a group of hijras is depicted singing a song that comes to represent hijra identification; this song is replayed in later films like *Raja Hindustani* to mark all non-normatively gendered characters (such as effeminate men) as hijra. While *Kunwara Baap* did usefully allow for the

visibility of hijras within mainstream cinema, it also denied hijras complex subjectivities by fixing the hijra as a symbol of gender and sexual deviance. In later films such as *Anjaam*, hijras have been represented as comic characters or as villains who nevertheless manage to articulate oblique critiques of the ways in which they are maltreated, ridiculed, and marginalized in mainstream society.

Despite the prevalence of the hijra character as the primary marker of sexual otherness, there are other characterizations of explicit sexual deviance in popular film. One such characterization becomes apparent in the 1991 film *Mast Kalandar*, starring Anupam Kher as an effeminate homosexual named Pinkoo. Pinkoo's flamboyant effeminacy is meant to provide comic relief, while his pink Mohawk and penchant for speaking English mark him as respectively foreign and upper-class. This characterization of male homosexuality as now not simply a hijra identification but as foreign and alien clearly resonates with conventional framings of sexuality within nationalist discourses. In a sense, the Pinkoo character makes clear the ways in which male same-sex desire, when it is consolidated into an identity in popular film, can exist only on the level of stereotype. I do not mean this as a call for "positive images" of gay men in popular Indian cinema; rather, I am suggesting that within popular cinema, the most interesting representations of nonheteronormative desire may exist in the absence of "gays" and "lesbians." The limitations of representing explicitly marked "homosexual" characters in popular cinema is particularly apparent in *Holi* and *Subhah*, two films previously discussed that fall under the rubric of social realism. *Holi*'s gay male character is the object of virulent homophobia and violence, and is subject to a brutal bashing from which he escapes only to commit suicide. Similarly, in *Subhah*, the film marks the two characters as "lesbian" only in order for them to be pathologized and singled out for punishment. Ultimately, both films subsume sexuality and a critique of homophobia under seemingly more important issues such as class and gender oppression. Thus non-heteronormative sexual subjects exist in popular cinema as "lesbians" and "gay men" only if they provide comic relief or are punished and killed in predictable ways.

CONCLUSION

This necessarily schematic survey has attempted to locate the potentialities and the limits of representing non-heteronormative genders and desires in popular Indian cinema. While the codes and conventions of popular cinema do open up the possibility for the emergence of same-sex eroticism, it is often achieved at the expense of the effeminate male or masculine female character. Given the limits of popular Indian cinema in enabling queer pleasure,

desire, and fantasy, it is no surprise that queer South Asian diasporic film and videomakers in the 1990s have both drawn on and decontextualized the conventions of popular Indian cinema in their work. For instance, Pratibha Parmar's 1991 *Khush*, which documents an emerging diasporic South Asian queer movement, intercuts talking heads interviews with fantasy sequences of two women, clad in Bollywood-inspired finery, watching old Hindi movie extravaganzas while stroking each other's hair. Similarly, a 1996 documentary on a South Asian transgender activist shows her as in the persona of a Bollywood starlet named Nina Chiffon, complete with jewelry, silk sari, and high heels, waiting for the train on a New York City subway platform.[16] We next see her in the subway car, flirtatiously swinging from pole to pole and lip-synching to a Hindi film song. I would indeed like to close with the image of Nina Chiffon's performance of the hyperbolic femininity of Bollywood screen goddesses, as it captures the ways in which queer diasporic subjects both appropriate and remake the representations available to them in popular culture in order to reterritorialize even the most unlikely of public spaces.

NOTES

1. This article based on a video-clip show and lecture presentation entitled "Desi Dykes and Divas: Alternative Sexualities in Popular Indian Cinema," co-created with Javid Syed and commissioned by the 1997 New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.

2. Vijay Mishra, "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora," *Textual Practice* 10:3 (1996), 446.

3. Valerie Traub, "The Ambiguities of 'Lesbian' Viewing Pleasure: The (Dis) Articulations of *Black Widow*," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity*, eds. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 309.

4. Mary Anne Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator," *Screen* v. 23 n. 3-4 (Fall 1982): 74-87; Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Valerie Traub, "The Ambiguities of 'Lesbian' Viewing Pleasure," in Epstein and Straub. 309-328.

5. Traub, 322.

6. Most of the films I focus on here are Hindi; while I want to avoid replicating dominant nationalist discourse that frames "India" as both North Indian and Hindi-speaking, my access to non-Hindi films was limited. I suspect that a very different set of categories and conclusions would be arrived at if one were to focus this project on particular regional cinemas (such as Tamil or Malayali) as each has very different cinematic traditions, and may reflect different formulations of sexuality and gender.

7. Attesting to the ways in which these films circulate in the diaspora, many of the films I was working with in this essay were pirated copies and did not always identify the film's director. I have included information on the director and year of release wherever possible.

8. Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Reorientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 44.

9. For a feminist analysis of the courtesan film genre. see Sumita Chakravarty. *National Identity and Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987.* (Austin: U. of Texas P. 1993), 269-305.

10. Chakravarty, 284.

11. The intertextuality of *Razia Sultan* and *Mughal-e-Azam* is underscored by the fact that the director of *Razia Sultan,* Kamal Amrohi, wrote the screenplay for *Mughal-e-Azam* some twenty-five years earlier. See Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 42.

12. Obviously my formulation of the erotic triangle in this section draws upon Eve K. Sedgwick's generative model of homosocial desire in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985).

13. Hijras occupy a "third gender" or transgender category in India; representations of hijras will be further discussed in the following section.

14. For a discussion of the representation of the fate of masculine women in Hollywood and queer independent film, see Judith Halberstam, "Looking Butch: A Rough History of Butches in Film," in *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP. 1998).

15. For an excellent discussion of women protagonists in rape-revenge films. see Lalitha Gopalan, "Avenging Women in Indian Cinema," *Screen* 38:1 (1997): 42-59.

16. *Julpari* (dirs. Swati Khurana and Leith Murgai, 1996).