**Representation of Same-Sex Relationships in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Geeli Puchi***

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 **Proposal**

Stories have been used since antiquity to instruct and edify. Stories have the power to influence and instruct, spark imagination and ideas. Today, stories have evolved – from the time when we used to sit and listen with rapt attention to our grandparents and parents to being glued in front of the television and phones consuming stories.

*Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* has all the makings of a romance, a family entertainer which projects the age-old ideas of finding love, finding a soul – mate and the villainous family playing their part in trying to divide the lovers. So what makes it different? Romantic-comedies as a genre have glorified heterosexual love to give a warm and fuzzy feeling to the viewers. It reinforces the gullible faith in soul mates and the beauty of falling in love and the sanctity of marriage. *Shubh Mangal Zyada* *Saavdha*n has all the makings of a rom-com. It is riddles with the rom-com recipe - the exaggerated gestures and proclamation of love – the shocking revelation, the interfering family, the shocked parents, the forced marriage to a partner of the parents’ choice, the social pressure. Yet, it digresses from the norm by portraying a homosexual relationship.

This study intends to show how the representation of homosexual relationships have undergone changes as seen in the recent movie *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and the short movie *Geeli `Puchi* from the anthology series *Ajeeb Dastaans*. In the former, the movie takes a bold stance to make a rom-com with a homosexual relationship at the centre of it stands witness to the popular media willingness to re-represent same-sex relationships. In *Geeli Puchi*, the sensitive depiction of same-sex relationship with an angle of casteism, represents the shift in depiction of love. Previously, homosexual leanings have been used either to ridicule or to create humour in popular movies.

The research proposes to look at same-sex relationship between two men in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* two women in *Geeli Puchi*. In both the movies the representation of homosexuality, though the central focus, is not seen as awkward. The complexities and the challenges of the couples are seamlessly blended in the narrative without objectification. The narrative critiques the heteronormative approach towards relationships and the other external factors that undermine homosexuality.

**Key-words – Homosexuality, same-sex relationship, rom-com, short movie, critique, heteronormative approach**

**Review of literature:**

An investigation conducted by Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) revealed the significance of positive representation of the GLB community in media. They use the positive characters represented in media to form their own identities and men and women even look up to the positively represented characters as role models.

A statistical study conducted by Madzˇarevic´ and Soto-Sanfiel (2018) concluded that when audience encounter a positive representation of homosexuality in media they develop a more favourable attitude towards them. The more they interact with people of varied sexual orientation better their opinion of them will be.

We cannot contest the Bollywood has evolves in the representation of the LGBTQ community. Ankita Chowdhury (2021) reflects on the growth how Bollywood has representation of the gender minority over the years. She has also come to the conclusion that such a positive representation will help with homophobia and to dismantle the hegemony of heteronormativity.

A powerful medium like movies must be aware of the reach and impact their representation of characters and communities have on the audience. Misrepresentation and stereotyping of female homosexuals and female homosexuality on screen continues though a glimmer of progressive representation and hope is assured with the releases post 2015 (Bose & Sreena K, 2021).

Bollywood is progressing towards representing the “socio-economic and political concerns of the lesbian” community and giving them a central role in the movies. As Chowdhary and Chaudhary (2020) postulates the female homosexual characters have gone a physical and social change in the movies starting with the release of Fire in 1996to the release of Girlfriend in 2006.

**Analysis:**

The paper proposes to explore the need and significance of a homonormative approach in movies to initiate the legitimisation of homosexual relationships. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* portrays the homosexual relationship between the protagonists (name) as a normal everyday occurrence. The opening scene of the movie playfully introduces us to the lovers taking a bike ride through the busy streets of the city. (name) decides to lovingly embrace his love from behind as they navigate the busy roads. There is no shock factor associated with this behaviour. The normalising of the homosexual relation is significant to send a positive image of a relationship that is not heteronormative.

The characters Aman Tripathi and Kartik Singh are not portrayed as sissy or effeminate as is often the prejudiced manner in which Bollywood has presented homosexuality. Here the protagonists are representative as the boys next door. They have no overt physical traits that have been used as a trope for insensitive humour that degraded homosexuality and stole dignity from gay relationships. They are two people in love. The love is what is in focus in the movie just as love is the focus in any rom-com movies.

Rom-coms depict a love that is larger than life. They must overcome obstacles of their own making as well as the complications posed by over interfering families. But in the end either one of them realises or both of them are enlightened by the understanding that their love is one of a kind and if they do not fight for their soul-mate, the entirety of their existence will be fraught with misery. Thus the lovers are inspired to jump through hoops of fire, challenge social expectations and finally marry the one they love. Love triumphs! We find the same pattern being used in the movie.

The normalising of the relationship is refreshing. The movie does not edify nor make any moral claim to change the mind-set of the society but portrays it as a normal love story. “The normalization… fell like a canopy over the former images of homosexuals shown as criminals, mental patients and the like” (Kuhar, 88). When such positive images of acceptance is portrayed in motion pictures, the possibilities of the next generation accepting homosexual relationships as normal rather than deviant or threatening seems a possibility. As Goran Madzˇarevic´ and Marı´a T. Soto-Sanfiel (2018) say*,* “Narratives can be a useful tool for changing attitudes towards social issues.” Visual representation of (something) can “cause an emotional impact resulting in a change in attitude.”

Another interesting thing one cannot overlook is that the movie is set against the backdrop of the legalisation of same sex relationship in India. The out lawing of section 377 comes as the much sought relief that Kartik Singh and Aman Tripathi needs. This once again adds on to the acceptance of their relation by their family. Legalising something on paper may not change the attitude of the people, but it does bring juxtaposition in the movie. The movie tries to balance the prejudices of a society against the ultra-normal relationship between Kartik Singh and Aman Tripathi. Without being overtly instructional or morally self-righteous; it subtly brings out the injustice of a society that had labelled a group of people as deviants, denied them acceptance, normalcy because they irk the heteronormative ideology and sensibility. This is perhaps expressed through the reaction of the father who catches them in a lip lock on the train. The father Mr. Tiwari is unable to stop gagging, a reaction that is unusual. The reaction would have been different if he had caught his son in a lip lock with a girl. There would definitely have been open anger and drama. But here, he quietly ‘suffers’ the indignity of the find, the ‘unnaturalness’ of it all because it digresses from the socially accepted heteronormative world.

One of the stories titles *Geeli Puchi* in the anthology *Ajeeb Dastans,* portrays a lesbian relationship. While Shub Mangal Zyada Saavdhan was celebrating a romantic relationship, *Geeli Puchi* comes with a more subtle tone. The women work within the fears set down by a heteronormative society. The colours presented in the movies are mute witnesses to the celebration and fear presented in the narratives. *Geeli Puchi* is shrouded in shades of grey and monotones, while Shub Mangal Zyada Saavdhaan is reflective of the colours of summer and happiness.

The character of Bharti Mandal exhibits the stereotypical masculine traits associated with lesbians. She rejects the colours and the feminine touch in her dressing style. She exudes an aggression, seriousness and occupies a space in a factory that has traditionally been a male dominated space. She keeps to herself; she has neither friends nor family. The story establishes her under privileged identity at the outset which is at logger heads with her ambition to be promoted to the job of an accountant that she is qualified for. Her caste identity has determined the oppressive glass ceiling. This is stated through the archetypal age old man, (name) only friend.

The woman who steps into her life unexpectedly is just the opposite. She comes from a privileged background. She is feminine and colourful, chirpy and pleasant. She looks for a companion and friend in the only other female worker at the factory. The narrative unravels the mystery of this young married wife and mother through her friend from college whom she misses much. Now she would like Priya to be her new best friend.

Priya reveals her dissatisfaction and unhappiness with her married life. The attraction between Bharti and Priya becomes palpable. Her rebellious nature is reflected even in her gastronomic delights. She enjoys the non-vegetarian food that she not tasted since she got married. Could the rebellion denoted in her culinary diversity be a euphemism for her sexual orientation? That last time her palates danced with joy was when she used to go out with her friend Kavita and then again, when she invites herself to Bharti’s place to savour the flavours of non-vegetarian food. The narrative plays hide and seek with what may have happened afterwards but there is a new hope and pleasantness in Bharti and Priya.

The narrative once again does not make attempts to edify or moralise, instead presents the predicament and the love that blooms in this unusual factory removed from the expectations of the society. A positive representation of non-normative sexuality improves the acceptability of such relationships and the attitude towards it (Madzˇarevic´ and Soto-Sanfiel, 2018).

The narrative does not glorify the relationship either though it definitely makes a comment on the misery that is brought about by the social ineptitude to understand and accept a non-normative sexual leaning. Neither of the characters are saints. They are everyday women trying to get by in the world. This normal portrayal inspires identification with the normality of the people who have non-normative heterosexual leanings. Priya immediately withdraws from Bharti on realising that she is from a lower caste community. Bharti is jilted by her love interest and hence decides to take revenge or rather do right by career prospects. Thus remains true to her character. She has always been driven by her career goals. Once again as the dissatisfaction she carries within due to her inability to full fill her personal desires is invested into her efforts to find satisfaction elsewhere - her career, her work.

While Shub Mangal Zyaada Saavdhan uses the rom-com approach to normalise and bring the marginalised homosexual community into the centre and mainstream, Geelli Puchi has used a slice of life approach to bring the problems of the marginalised community to the centre. Research has proven that when the audience identifies with the characters that belong to a minority community, they shed their prejudices and fears and develops a more favourable outlook towards them (Madzˇarevic´ and Soto-Sanfiel, 2018).

## Queer theory and gender studies explore issues of the marginalized communities in literature and culture. (Gender studies and queer theory (1970s-present)

Gender(s), power, and marginalization. They deal with the issues of sexuality and power. It emerged in1990s out of queer studies and women’s studies and has broadly been associated with the study and theorisation of gender and sexual practices that exist outside of heterosexuality, and which challenge the notion that heterosexual desire is ‘normal’ (Wikipedia) The above mentioned movies too deal with the issues of the same without edification and with a bold attempt to normalize the relationship between two individuals irrespective of their gender.

An article in a leading newspaper ‘The Hindu’ states quite rightly that the queer community has not yet been normalized in the Indian society. It is still viewed through the lenses of morality, religion and other. The above movies have made a good attempt at normalizing the queer relationships and portraying it in the simplest form which exudes positivity. In an influential essay, Michael Warner argued that queerness is defined by what he called ‘heteronormativity'; those ideas, narratives and discourses which suggest that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or normal mode of sexual orientation. Warner stated that while many thinkers had been theorising sexuality from a non-heterosexual perspective for perhaps a century, queerness represented a distinctive contribution to social theory for precisely this reason (Wiki). In both the movies the couples fall under the category of queer in the way they display their sexual preferences which are outside of heterosexuality and the movies definitely challenge the ideas and beliefs that the society has accepted as ‘normal’. The movies though challenge the societal norms yet have played their part in subtle portrayal of the queerness without emphasising the need for acceptance or a call for outright societal change.

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