

Eroticism and Sexual Representation in Indian Postmodern Cinema: Negotiating Desire, Censorship, and the Gaze

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Abstract:

Erotic and sexual representation in Indian postmodern cinema reflects a nuanced negotiation between desire, cultural norms, censorship, and evolving gender politics. Moving beyond the conventional romanticised imagery of earlier Bollywood, contemporary filmmakers explore complex depictions of intimacy, sexual identity, and power. Films such as *The Dirty Picture* (2011) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) foreground female sexual desire while challenging patriarchal constraints, while *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) and *Aligarh* (2015) address LGBTQ+ identities with empathy and depth. *Fire* (1996) broke ground by portraying a lesbian relationship, and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) explores the intersection of sexuality, disability, and queer identity. These works challenge heteronormative frameworks and reframe the traditional male gaze by introducing female and alternative gazes that grant characters, particularly women, sexual agency and subjectivity. Navigating the strictures of the Central Board of Film Certification, directors have long relied on metaphor, symbolic imagery, and the song sequence to convey eroticism within cultural constraints. Postmodern representation also expands erotic discourse beyond romance, engaging with exploitation (*Parched*, 2015), consent, and identity, revealing how sexuality operates as a site of both resistance and negotiation in a socially conservative milieu. While persistent taboos and moral policing continue to shape what can be shown, Indian postmodern cinema has emerged as a contested yet transformative space, one that reflects and influences ongoing shifts in societal attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and erotic expression.

Keywords: patriarchy, censorship, sexual identity, representation, eroticism, male gaze.

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Introduction

The civilisation that produced the *Kamasutra* and sculpted the couples at Khajuraho managed, for most of its cinematic history, to avoid showing a kiss (Longest Interval). Although this paradox is well known, it is still worth starting with, since it sets out the fundamental condition under which Indian cinema has dealt with desire: not silence but displacement. Michel Foucault cautioned against what he referred to as the repressive hypothesis, that is, the reassuring idea that power merely suppresses sex. He noted that modern societies in fact "dedicated themselves to speaking of its ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret" (35). Indian popular cinema may be the most elaborate example of that assertion. Since it could not show intimacy, it developed a whole erotic language based on substitutes: the wet sari, the trembling flowers, the interrupted embrace, and the item number. Censorship did not eliminate eroticism from the Indian film screen; it spread it everywhere.

The study explores the period of postmodern Indian cinema as the era that emerged after economic liberalisation and began in the mid-1990s (Krishna). This phase inherited a system of coded desire and then slowly broke down its established norms. The importance it has today does not lie in the appearance of new bodily spectacles, but rather in the way that new claims are made about whose desire is made visible, whether that is a widow's, a lesbian couple's, a disabled woman's, a gay professor's, or that of a once-popular erotic star (B. Bose 44-52). By closely examining the films *Fire* (1996), *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Aligarh* (2015), *Parched* (2015), *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), as well as the archival material relating to censorship controversies in India, the article argues that the key feature of cinema in the post-liberalisation period is not laxity but redistribution: the reallocation of the gaze, agency, and the right to be shown as a desiring subject. This process of negotiation

takes place at the same time as the certifying state, the forces of moral policing, and the inherited conventions of cinematic representation.

The Regime of the Cut

Any examination of screen eroticism in India has to take the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) into account. Set up under the Cinematograph Act of 1952, the CBFC is a statutory organisation whose official function is certification, though in practice it usually acts as a censor. According to M. Madhava Prasad's significant study, the ban on the kiss was not really concerned with the kiss itself; rather, it was popular films that were prohibited from showing private intimacy, that is to say, the autonomous couple who existed outside the approval of family and community (Prasad 88). This ban on such a structure affected the form of cinema. Lalitha Gopalan refers to Indian cinema as a "cinema of interruptions", in which desire is continually approached but postponed. The interruptions, such as cuts to a song, a waterfall, or to elsewhere, at key moments created a system in which the act of withholding itself became part of an erotic economy (Gopalan 14). The song sequence, which is typically situated in imaginary locations outside the story and beyond the censor's control, then became the accepted place for erotic content. The choreography could indicate all those things that the narrative could not explicitly show.

The certifying system has, from time to time, made its real reasoning clear, as shown by two recent examples. In 2016, the Board's revising committee, headed by then-chairperson Pahlaj Nihalani, requested numerous cuts to Abhishek Chaubey's film *Uda Punjab*. It listed eighty-nine required excisions, including the deletion of the name of the state, until the Bombay High Court got involved, permitted the film to be released with only a single cut and reminded the Board of its statutory function, which is to certify films and not to rewrite them ("Bombay HC Overrules

CBFC"). The year after that, the Board refused to grant certification to Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha*, and the language used in the letter it issued is so revealing that it deserves to be quoted in full:

The story is oriented towards women and sets out their fantasies regarding life; it includes continuous sexual scenes, abusive language, audio pornography and a slight reference to a particular section of society, which is why the film was refused" (qtd. in "Lipstick Under My Burkha: Row Erupts").

The Film Certification Appellate Tribunal overturned its decision, and as a result, the film was released in theatres in July 2017, but the letter remains the most honest document from that era. The first offence mentioned is not nudity or violence but rather orientation, the film being 'lady-oriented' and told from the point of view of female fantasy. The censor, when asked to examine the film, ended up examining himself. The government has, at various times, admitted that there is a problem. A committee of experts, led by the film director Shyam Benegal and set up in 2016 in response to the controversies, suggested that the Board should limit itself to the certification process and give up using the scissors altogether. Like previous recommendations, this one has still mostly not been put into practice. As for Nihalani, he stated after his dismissal in 2017 that the hindrance faced by *Uda Punjab* had been ordered from above, illustrating that, at least on certain occasions, the power to grant certification rests with political figures.

The Coded Erotic: Rain, Song, and the Item Number

Before postmodern cinema could redistribute desire, it first needed to inherit the established codes in which desire had been encoded. The ban described by Prasad eventually resulted in the development of a refined erotic sign-system which every Indian viewer had come to recognise

from a young age. This system included rain appearing at the right moment to make fabric stick to the skin, flowers touching as the faces came close, a cutaway at the bedroom threshold, and the honeymoon song set in imagined Switzerland. Gopalan's point regarding interruption is particularly relevant in this context: these were not avoidances of eroticism, but rather formed the very mechanism of it. Just as classical poetics did, this kind of cinema found that unfulfilled or 'arrested' desire was more powerful than satisfied desire (Gopalan 22).

The item number is the most obvious aspect of this representation's commercial nature. Since it functions as a separate erotic performance, it lies outside the narrative's internal logic and can therefore be denied, allowing films to show exactly what their stories appear to reject. The image of the item girl embodies this contradiction: essential to the film's emotional functioning, yet capable of being discarded within the narrative and morally disadvantaged (Jain 1-10). This situation is closely examined by postmodern cinema. For instance, *The Dirty Picture* presents the 1980s item number as its main feature, while both praising and criticising the tradition. Viewers are thus encouraged to enjoy the usual pleasures while becoming aware of the mechanisms which produce them; the main female figure is now seen as a subject rather than an object. The continued use of this convention through quotation exemplifies the postmodern approach of reflexive engagement, maintaining a critical distance from cultural forms while remaining within them.

Fire and the Price of Visibility

The pattern established by the Indian film *Fire*, Deepa Mehta's movie, of progressing from certification to backlash and then to recertification had already been set in motion two decades earlier. *Fire* has to be regarded as the essential starting point for any examination of queer representation in Indian cinema. The plot, which centres on two sisters-in-law, Radha and Sita,

who turn to each other in a loveless joint-family household, was granted an adult certificate without cuts in May 1998 and released in November of that year. Just one month later, activists from the Shiv Sena attacked the Cinemax theatre in the suburbs of Mumbai and the Regal in Delhi, breaking the screens and setting the posters on fire, while other groups carried out attacks on showings in Surat and Pune (Ghosh 41). Rather than standing up to defend the film, which had been certified, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting sent it back to the Board; this move was generally seen as rewarding the vandals, and the CBFC eventually cleared the film again in February 1999 with not a single cut (Ghosh 45). This incident showed that in India the censor is plural: in addition to the statutory Board, there is what might be described as a street censor, and the tool this latter censor uses is not the certificate but the stone (N. Bose 67-87).

Shohini Ghosh's extensive study of the film points out that the controversy served as a kind of publicity for the desire which it had sought to suppress. By launching the attacks, the words 'lesbian' and 'Indian' were placed side by side in newspaper articles for weeks, thus forcing a public discussion that had hitherto been kept quiet by politeness (Ghosh 12). Foucault's paradox came into play in the streets, since the campaign aimed at getting female homosexuality unsaid instead became the setting for its most vigorous expression. The fact that the protest groups objected to the characters' names, Radha and Sita, names which carry strong devotional connotations, only confirmed what the film had asserted: that women's desire was being controlled in the name of a tradition which had already determined their roles.

Reclaiming the Gaze

According to Laura Mulvey's theory of narrative cinema, women are portrayed as spectacles, defined by the quality of being looked at, and the act of gazing is associated with male protagonists

and spectators (11). This approach properly describes many years of the Hindi film tradition, as shown by the cabaret number and the rain song. Although postmodern cinema does not eliminate the gaze, it reconfigures it, questions it, and at times overturns it, thereby restoring visual agency to those previously treated as the objects of that gaze.

The film *The Dirty Picture*, directed by Milan Luthria, carries out this investigation using material from the industry's own records. In the form of a pastiche biography modelled on the southern star Silk Smitha, it enables Hindi cinema to examine its own erotic economy. The film directs its attention to the item girl who is liked by the audience but disliked by the more respectable members of society, and towards the producers who make a profit from a woman's body while at the same time denying her personhood. The character played by Vidya Balan, Silk, gives a name to the desire which the industry exploits and for which it does not feel ashamed. She won the National Film Award for Best Actress, which was a case of the state recognising a performance concerning exactly the type of figure which its censors had been trimming for decades. The film's ambivalence is one of the reasons it is of interest, since it simultaneously criticises the pleasure it offers. This results in a kind of postmodern doubleness that allows the audience to both consume the spectacle and its criticism.

Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* achieves this reversal. The film features four women from the small town of Bhopal: a college student, a young beautician, a mother of three, and a fifty-five-year-old widow whose secret life is centred on pulp romance novels. These women are not presented as objects for anyone's viewing; instead, the film is told entirely from the point of view of their fantasies, with the voice-over provided by the widow's pulp-novel heroine, Rosy. Here, desire is directed towards bodies which Indian cinema had completely excluded from erotic treatment: middle-aged women, those who are veiled, married women, and ordinary people. As

the certification letter makes clear, the real scandal was not what the film showed but where the camera was aimed.

In rural Rajasthan, Leena Yadav deals with the same argument by following three friends: a widow, a wife with no children who is beaten by her husband, and an erotic dancer. The film shows their experiences regarding marital rape, stigma, and most importantly, pleasure and laughter, thereby asserting that women who are most oppressed by patriarchy do not therefore cease to be desiring subjects. Although the female body is often shown in the films, it is presented as the site of lived experience rather than as a passive spectacle. Thus, the important distinction that Mulvey's essay made thinkable is realised (16).

Queer Emergence: From Crime to Citizenship

During that period, queer films had to contend with an additional layer of censorship imposed by criminal law. The third section of the Indian Penal Code, the colonial law prohibiting 'carnal intercourse against the order of nature', was interpreted more leniently by the Delhi High Court in 2009, then reinstated by the Supreme Court in 2013, and was finally declared invalid in relation to consensual adult relationships by a bench of five judges in the case of *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India* on 6 September 2018. This landmark ruling includes a powerful remark by Justice Indu Malhotra saying that "history should offer an apology to the members of this community and their families for the delay in providing redress for the humiliation and social exclusion they have endured over the centuries" (qtd. in "Navtej Singh Johar"). Since homosexuality was still technically a criminal offence, every queer film produced at the time was made, certified and released while it remained a crime; thus, their empathy was, in the strictest sense, ahead of the law (Maity 433-445).

The film *Aligarh* by Hansal Mehta illustrates the consequences of delays in the legal system. The film is drawn from the recorded case of Dr Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, the Marathi professor who was suspended by Aligarh Muslim University in February 2010 following a sting operation in which he was filmed having a partner of the same sex in his own bedroom, and who died just a few days after a court had reinstated his position; although the film is sometimes seen as being concerned with sexuality, it is really about privacy. It underscores the right of a retiring man to live a life that is not broadcast. Manoj Bajpayee portrays Siras as a man confused by the linguistic noun imposed on him and unable to express his strong feelings in a single word. This performance earned both the Asia Pacific Screen Award and the Filmfare Critics' Prize, and the film had its world premiere at the Busan Film Festival in 2015 before being released generally in India the following year (Kameshwari).

While *Aligarh* has a mournful atmosphere, Shakun Batra's *Kapoor & Sons* follows a policy of normalisation. The film, made by Dharma Productions, includes a gay son, who is presented as the apparently 'perfect' child, within a traditional family melodrama focused on inheritance, jealousy, and sorrow. The fact that the protagonist is gay is treated as just one ordinary aspect of family life, not as a disorder that needs to be cured. The choice to cast Fawad Khan, who is usually cast as a romantic lead, in a gay role is important since it breaks the long-standing film industry practice of putting queer characters in comic or villainous positions. Rahul is in no way one of those; he is the ideal son, and it is his mother's inability to accept this aspect of his life that forms the film's central emotional theme. The film notably avoids sensationalist elements such as a dramatic coming-out scene or a courtroom clash. Rather than treating sexuality as something exceptional, it presents it as one of several family secrets, and this decision not to set queerness apart is the film's most powerful contribution.

In the same way, Shonali Bose's film *Margarita with a Straw* addresses the ground that Indian cinema has long ignored. The main character, Laila, a college student in Delhi who has cerebral palsy and is played by Kalki Koechlin, comes to realise her bisexuality during the course of the film, thus asserting the erotic agency of a disabled body which has previously been denied such subjectivity by both cinema and society. The film, which premiered in Toronto in 2014 and won the NETPAC Award, quietly yet powerfully argues that desire need not be based on ability or heterosexuality (*Margarita with a Straw*). It is noteworthy that the film's central conflict is not with the state or the street censor, but rather with a caring mother over a kitchen table. This situation powerfully shows that the most enduring censor board in India operates within the home and that the most important struggles for postmodern films take place in domestic settings outside the scope of the Cinematograph Act.

Consent, Exploitation, and the Widening Discourse

Both *Parched* and *The Dirty Picture* place systemic exploitation at the heart of their narratives, illustrating marital rape in one case and the film industry's transactional use of a woman's image in the other. With this perspective, the talk of desire becomes directly intertwined with the question of consent. The move of adult storytelling to streaming services after 2018, starting with series like *Lust Stories*, completely removed explicit content outside the CBFC's usual area of control (*Lust Stories*). This change in turn led to the enactment of the Information Technology Rules in 2021, which expanded state supervision to the digital realm. The same pattern reappears within Foucault's framework, since every new channel for discussing sex leads to the creation of a new mechanism for regulating it, and every restrictive mechanism in turn produces alternative forms of expression (Foucault 42). There is nothing in the Indian discussion that has been finally decided upon, and it is precisely this lack of finality that makes it an ongoing negotiation.

Conclusion

Indian postmodern cinema has not really freed the erotic element so much as it has debated it, one scene at a time, one certificate at a time, and one verdict at a time. Its real achievement has been the transfer of ownership. The desire shown on screen now belongs more to those who are watching it than to the joint household that uses it—namely, to Radha and Sita rather than to the household, to Silk rather than to the audience that consumes her, to four women who are wearing burkhas and lipstick rather than to the men who think that they know them, to Siras rather than to the cameras that had invaded his privacy, and to Laila in her wheelchair rather than to a cinematic tradition which had never before looked at her. Yet it is necessary to recognise the material constraints of these aesthetic interventions. Most of the films that mark this postmodern shift, such as *Aligarh*, *Margarita with a Straw*, and *Parched*, appeared mainly in multiplexes and on international festival circuits rather than taking over the mainstream single-screen box office. These films function as sharp critiques rather than as tools of commercial dominance. Nonetheless, to regard their influence as minor is to fail to understand how ideological changes spread through popular media. For example, by joining the major production companies, such as Dharma Productions' *Kapoor & Sons*, and by using digital distribution platforms, these stories have considerably undermined established mainstream conventions, forcing the industry to make gradual changes to its visual and structural approaches.

Censorship and the practice of moral supervision are still very much present. The Board's "lady-oriented" letter and the stones being thrown at a Cinemax screen, even though they occurred two decades apart, can be seen as belonging to the same continuous history. Moreover, in a real and not just chronological way, the aesthetic qualities of these films are postmodern. The *Dirty Picture* functions as a pastiche by putting together its story using the industry's abandoned images

of desire; *Lipstick Under My Burkha* combines visual realism with the stylised language of pulp fiction; *Margarita with a Straw* brings together aspects of the coming-of-age genre, the discourse on disability, and queer romance to create a single, indistinguishable cinematic style. This kind of fragmentation reflects the decline of single, authoritative narratives, whether familial, national, or censorial, in today's Indian cinema.

Nevertheless, the general direction is clear: Indian cinema, which previously couldn't show a kiss, is now having public discussions about which fantasies are deemed to be pornography and which privacy the country should protect. This struggle, which is taking place in courts, tribunals, and at the box office, is at the heart of the change. Eroticism in India is no longer a subject kept hidden and exploited without limit, but has become a form of cultural citizenship, even though it is claimed unevenly from film to film.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

While preparing this manuscript, the author employed generative artificial intelligence to improve the language's structure, format the citations in accordance with the MLA 9th edition guidelines, and check the accuracy of the historical film timelines and legal case records. After using this aid, the author thoroughly reviewed, edited, and verified the text for academic and theoretical consistency. The author fully accepts responsibility for the final intellectual and analytical content of this publication.

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