



## Self-censorship in *Dedh Ishqiya*: Desexualization of Lesbianism as a Means of Countering Cinematic Hetero-normativity

Kashish Dua

### **ABSTRACT:**

Can subversive possibilities be explored by playing by the rules of restrictive censorship laws? This paper will attempt to study the revolutionary potential of self-censorship in the process of the production of popular Hindi cinema. Divided into four sections, the paper will begin with an analysis of the history of popular Hindi cinema to highlight the comparative under-representation of lesbianism. The second section comprising of a retrospective evaluation of the attitudes of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and of the extra-legal censorship forces towards films on lesbianism will ascertain the underlying causalities of the explicit sense of lesbophobia. The third section will position Abhishek Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) in the larger discourse on censorship and will closely scrutinize the film for its strategies of self-censorship. Here, the examination of the film vis.-a-vis. the changing connotations of the word and the figure of the 'sakhi' in Indian literature and society, as well as a critical comparison of the film with Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf (The Quilt)* (1942), will be used to show destabilization of the dominant hetero-patriarchy in popular Hindi cinema. The paper

will conclude by suggesting that self-censorship might not be an unproblematic solution to issues of film censorship but rather becomes an axis of unveiling the fissures in the conception and articulation of CBFC's guidelines.

**Keywords:** lesbianism, self-censorship, Dedh Ishqiya, Ismat Chughtai, Lihaaf, CBFC, Hindi cinema, lesbian films, sakhiyani, rekhti

## I

### **The Case of the Missing Lesbians: Popular Hindi Cinema and the Domination of Hetero-patriarchy**

Since its beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, popular Hindi cinema brought myriad of themes to life. From experimentation with different genres to the use of various filmmaking techniques and narration of varied stories, the Hindi film industry has been a diverse space. However, the mainstream Hindi cinema hasn't been very receptive to non-heteronormative subjects. An analysis of the popular films produced in Hindi until March 2017 reveals a conjecture about the problematic attitude of the Hindi film industry towards representation of homosexuality. Either most of the Hindi films produced so far shy away from dealing with subjects of homosexuality at large or use it as moments of comic relief in overall heterosexual narratives. While critics like Gayatri Gopinath and Ruth Vanita have tried to queer the otherwise heterosexual Hindi films by providing readings from the perspectives of queer audiences and a discussion of queer possibilities of homosocial relationships in the films, Ajay Gehlawat has engaged with the homosexual visibility facilitated by films like Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and Tarun Masunkhani's *Dostana* (2008) despite their non-serious treatment of the subject. The available critical discourse itself becomes an evidence of the lack of sensitive and direct representation of homosexuality in popular Hindi cinema.

The cinematic representation is even more minimal in the specific case of lesbianism. The only five films on lesbianism that have found large scale releases in India include Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996/98), Karan Razdan's *Girlfriend* (2004), Abhishek Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014), Shonali Bose's *Margarita, with a Straw* (2014) and Pan Nalin's *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015). The prominence of the under-representation of lesbians in popular Hindi cinema surfaces if it is pitched against thousands of mainstream films addressing issues and experiences of heterosexual women, ranging from Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), B.R. Chopra's *Insaf Ka Tarazu* (1980), Rajkumar Santoshi's *Damini* (1983), Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1996), Madhur Bhandarkar's *Chandni Bar* (2001), Sujoy Ghosh's *Kahaani* (2012) to the recent Aniruddha Roy Chowdhary *Pink* (2016).

Significantly, out of the five films engaging with lesbianism in any form, only *Fire* and *Margarita with a Straw* albeit their other problems, give a comprehensive view of lesbian relationships with an emphasis on both emotional companionship and sexual fulfillment. Conversely, Razdan's *Girlfriend*, fuels both the cinematic space and social imagination with negative images of lesbians. This under and misrepresentation of lesbianism in Hindi cinema indicates the contribution of popular culture in the constant affirmation and reaffirmation of natural heterosexuality of women instead of uncovering the compulsory nature of heterosexual relationships. The dearth of substantial number of sensitive cinematic narratives on lesbian experiences and the predominance of the idealized heterosexual love and marriage act as what Adrienne Rich in her essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" identifies as one of the major methods of withholding discourse on lesbianism and hence, denying lesbian existence in the society.

The speculated reasons behind such comparative invisibility of lesbians in popular Hindi films can be a reflection of dominant conventional mindset of the lesbophobic Indian society or the fear of transgressing the strategies of producing commercial films

that might result in failure at the box office in terms of revenue. Nonetheless, the more important issue for the relevance of the present study is the relationship between the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) and attempts at well researched and sensitive attempts at presenting tales on lesbian lives.

## II

### **Central Board of Film Certification and Lesbianism in India: The Politics of the Tussle**

The establishment of the CBFC and its working has incited much discussion, debate and publishing in both the academia and the popular media, alike. The anomalies between the Cinematograph Act of 1952 and the Fundamental Right to freedom of speech and expression, has repeatedly made CBFC a site of contestation. Other debates that surround the issue of film censorship in India as discussed by Tejaswini Ganti involve “the argument against censorship (which) is based on the idea of the discerning spectator whose subjectivity is autonomous from the act of film-viewing, i.e., the belief that citizens are formed prior to cinema, (and) the argument for censorship (which) is predicated upon the social significance of film and its potential to shape subjectivities in ways that could advance or limit the state’s efforts at modernization” (90). Moreover, the practice of film censorship in 21<sup>st</sup> century is also condemned on the basis of its redundancy of trying to regulate circulation of any audio-visual material in the time of the internet and the resulting free availability of films and videos which cannot be effectively controlled.

The most noted aspect of this certification body is the flaw in its very conception. It cannot be denied that the CBFC’s functioning primarily resonates with the 1918 Censorship legislation introduced by the British government, which on the pretext of regulating the quality of cinema instrumentalized censorship to suppress anti-colonial and nationalist provocation through films. A disturbing parallel that can be drawn in the 1918 Censorship legislation and the 21<sup>st</sup> century regulations for certification lies in

the inability or the unwillingness of the representatives of censorship laws in trying to break away from the State control over censorship bodies. While in 1920 the police commissioners were made responsible for the Regional Censor Boards in different cities of colonial India, the CBFC even in 2017 comprises of members recruited by the central government, whose decisions are implemented through the use of the institution of the police in different states.

The nature of CBFC as a State run body challenges the intentions of its members and raises suspicion about CBFC's underlying aim of extending indirect State control over the production of knowledge. The aim of this paper is to go beyond yet use these debates to bring the CBFC under the lens to discern its relationship with cinematic representation of lesbianism in India.

### **Fiery Girlfriend: Concretization of Lesbophobia in Film Certification**

For a comprehensive understanding of the position of Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya* in the larger context one needs to go back to the watershed moment of the relationship between the CBFC and lesbianism i.e. the 1998 release of the film *Fire*. *Fire* gained attention for being the first Hindi commercial film on lesbianism and for provoking religious and political uproar in the nation. The *Fire* controversy and the comparison of the events with contemporary scenario is a telling comment on the regressive movement of the practice of film censorship in India. More than 18 years ago, a film like *Fire* that explored the sexual and emotional nuances of lesbian relationships in an Indian setting was released without cuts by the CBFC and with only an instruction to change the name of a character. Nevertheless, what came up with *Fire*'s release was the assertive power and influence of extra-legal censorship structures in the form of right-wing Hindu protests that turned violent and destroyed theatres screening the film. Regardless of the intense politico-religious unrest, the CBFC had again passed *Fire* unaltered. However, it was the rise of such extra-legal censorship and the havoc it kept

creating for film certification process in the years to follow that necessitated the production of a film like *Dedh Ishqiya*.

The specific causality of creation of *Dedh Ishqiya* lies in the reception of the lesbian themed films that followed *Fire*. Razdan's *Girlfriend* which was released by the CBFC with an 'A' certification was received with a similar negative and violent reaction as *Fire*. The interesting fact about its release history is that this time the demands for a ban on the public screening of the film were raised by both the LGBTQ community and the right-wing groups, however for different reasons. The protests of the right-wing were based on the same fear of corruption of the supposedly moral culture of India by the display of lesbianism that had come up during the *Fire* protests, whereas the LGBTQ community opposed the public screening of *Girlfriend* for its skewed representation of lesbians and for perpetuating negative stereotypes about them. Tejal Shahl condemned the film for its message which "...that endangers the life of any woman who may look or behave boyish, any woman who chooses to experiment with her sexuality, and any woman who asserts her right to different choices including those women who are good friends and hold hands when they walk down the street."

This critique of Razdan's *Girlfriend* by the LGBTQ activists and allies, calls for a critical look at the CBFC's guidelines. Although, the guidelines issued on December 6, 1991 state that the Board of Film Certification shall ensure "Visuals or words involving defamation of an individual or a body of individuals, or contempt of court are not presented," the CBFC did not consider the defamation of lesbians or women in general as a matter of serious concern in the case of *Girlfriend*. It will not be wrong to suggest considering such casual attitude of the certification board that post-*Fire*, the CBFC had gradually developed an implicit alliance with the widespread lesbophobic tendencies of the Indian society. What created problems for the CBFC was that despite its efforts to align itself with the dominant social lesbophobia by allowing negative representation of lesbians in cinema and their eventual death resulting in restoration of hetero-patriarchal setup, it could not escape the violent right-wing demonstrations. Thus, the pressure

exerted on the CBFC by the extreme intolerance of the extra-legal censorship structures to any kind of lesbian presence on the silver screen and the integral significance of the extremist groups in the maintenance of the government's power, eventually resulted in an unsaid yet strong presence of lesbophobia in the CBFC's working.

### ***Dedh Ishqiya* and the Need for Self-Censorship**

Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) is a story of Begum Para (Madhuri Dixit), the widowed begum of Majidabad and her hand-maiden, Muniya (Huma Qureshi), who together plan the kidnapping of Begum Para herself and start a life with each other in a new place with the ransom money. The female companions use the event of Begum's 'swayamvar', a contest for eligible suitors, to select a rich suitor, Jaan Mohammed (Vijay Raaz) who can pay the ransom money to Khalujaan a.k.a Iftekhhar (Naseeruddin Shah) and Babban (Arshad Warsi), who are also tricked by the women to accomplish their plan.

The film in its entire course interestingly uses none of the words popular in the 21<sup>st</sup> century discourse on lesbianism be it social, cultural or legal. Neither does it portray explicit love making between Begum Para and Muniya, yet the power of the film lies in its strategies of bringing the issue of lesbian relationships back in public theatres of India. The choice of *Dedh Ishqiya* as a subject of discussion gets further justified if one juxtaposes its unproblematic passage through the structures of both legal and extra-legal censorship and its certification of UA (unrestricted public exhibition subject to parental guidance for children below the age of twelve) with the films that followed it. The rise of the destructive extra-legal censorship groups and their differences with the CBFC that gained prominence during the release of *Fire* and *Girlfriend* increased the resistance of the CBFC to lesbian portrayal in popular Hindi cinema. It was a consequence of this resistance that Shonali Bose was asked by the Examining Committee of the CBFC to reduce the length of a lesbian kiss in *Margarita with a Straw* as per moral guidelines. It was only by approaching the Revising Committee that the film

was passed without affecting the portrayal of the lesbian relationship in the film nevertheless limiting its screening to adult audiences.

The CBFC's opposition to lesbianism further seemed to concretize with the case of Raj Amit Kumar's *Unfreedom* (2014). It was denied certification by the Examining Committee for its capability of igniting unnatural passions, amongst other reasons and the director was instructed to cut several scenes by the Revising Committee. The film faced eventual ban when Kumar tried to appeal to the Film Certification Appellate Tribunal (FCAT) on the premise of the violation of his creative expression. Since the time the CBFC's process has become deeply entrenched in hetero-patriarchy, lesbianism hasn't found a central place in popular Hindi films.

*Dedh Ishqiya* exemplifies a model of filmmaking that both escaped the obstacle ridden fates of *Margarita with a Straw* and *Unfreedom* and simultaneously managed to deploy the very dictates of repressive censorship laws against their own implicit hetero-patriarchal forces. The radical possibilities of a film like *Dedh Ishqiya* cannot be fully understood without unearthing the connection between lesbophobia in the production of cinema and its certification, and the 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial nationalist discourse. It is important here to take as a point of departure Partha Chatterjee's research on 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial nationalist discourse, which acts as a critical tool to uncover the hidden State oriented design behind censorship of lesbian themed films. As per Chatterjee, the 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-colonial nationalist discourse ripped women off their sexual identities, desires, and concerns and imposed upon them the burdensome role of being emblems and preservers of Indian culture unaffected by the west. The labeling of women as goddesses and mothers in this discourse did not leave room for sexuality to be even imagined as one of the integral parts of their existence. Despite the influence of globalization and economic liberalization, this notion of the new Indian woman hasn't witnessed much transformation. As per Sridevi K Nair, although the new Indian woman is allowed to get education and work outside the home, "she continues to be

policed and disciplined by the dictates of heterosexual marriage and motherhood during this period..." (2).

Similar approach of the State of denial of female sexuality, choice and patriarchal resistance surfaces through the use of the CBFC to deny certification to Alankrita Shrivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) for the film being "lady oriented". It is in such times of State control over artistic and creative freedom that Abhishek Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya* becomes a necessary instrument of subversion. The subversive tendencies of Chaubey's film do not arise from a head-on confrontation with hetero-patriarchal regime of various censorship models through direct representation of lesbianism; rather it is in the exercise of self-censorship that *Dedh Ishqiya* challenges ideas of natural heterosexuality in cinema and society.

Unlike *Fire*, *Margarita with a Straw* and *Unfreedom*, that got noticed and were attempted to be silenced for their lesbian portrayal, *Dedh Ishqiya* addresses the complex dynamics of lesbian relationships through methods of suggestiveness. The intelligence in filmmaking techniques reflected in *Dedh Ishqiya* insinuate that Chaubey might have carefully read and decoded both the written and unwritten CBFC rules to discover the fissures and weaknesses in these rules to finally dismantle their very basis even while following them. These fissures as will be explained later are used by Chaubey for self-censorship before putting the film through the grind of conventional process of certification. The overturning of the lesbophobic politics of CBFC which will be dealt with in the following section, makes the case of *Dedh Ishqiya* an exception in the general cynical view about self-censorship that prevails. Someswar Bhowmik in "Film Censorship" writes, "If the industry people replace the CBFC as the censor(s) it will lead to the replacement of bureaucratic authoritarianism with commercial manipulation. The so-called Indian film industry is not at all a homogeneous entity in terms of either cultural parameters or economic dimensions...nobody nowadays sees

the Indian film industry as having enough discipline, management skills, stability and predictability to be able to operate self-censorship in an efficient manner” (305).

The succeeding section of the paper through a detailed study of the film, will try to establish how the self-censorship at work in *Dedh Ishqiya* whether or not exercised for commercial appeal, successfully lays out the entire story in accordance with the ease of audiences with heteronormative sensibilities but works since the beginning to shock them out of their comfort zone into an acknowledgement of lesbian existence in the Indian context.

### III

#### **The Radical Underpinnings of Self-censorship in *Dedh Ishqiya***

Abhishek Chaubey's *Dedh Ishqiya* has all the features of a mainstream commercial Hindi film, from popular actors like Madhuri Dixit, elements of comedy and suspense to entertaining song and dance sequences but its ground-breaking ability comes forth when these commercial features negotiate with each other to produce a story entirely unexpected from popular cinema. This section beginning with Chaubey's use of self-censorship in his film through his maneuvering with notions of 'swayamvara' and 'sakhiani' will analyze desexualization of lesbianism against the background of Ruth Vanita's comprehension of the literary and cultural history of the changing connotations of 'sakhi'. It will then engage with the film by making Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf (The Quilt)* 1942 a vantage point to study how self-censorship instead of being an act of yielding to stifling structures of censorship can also be directed to threaten the contours of the directives of censorship.

#### **The 'Swayamvara Sakhi': Treading the Homosocial-Homoerotic-Homosexual Boundaries in *Dedh Ishqiya***

The colonial legacy of homophobia combined with the intense repression of female sexuality in any form has always made lesbian existence in India vulnerable to physical

and emotional threats. The fear of getting identified and the consequent ostracism along with limited access to public spaces, have kept lesbians in India in the closet. The only spaces available to them to establish lesbian bonds without exposing themselves to the dangers of heteronormative regulation are the homosocial spaces like the zenana (insides of a house), all-girls schools, colleges, hostels, etc. Critics like Kuhu Sharma Chanana note that the women are relegated to the confines of such homosocial spaces as a patriarchal move to protect the women's chastity and to control their sexual energies. These homosocial spaces then become formative sites of 'sakhiani' or female friendships where women end up deriving strengths from each other

*Dedh Ishqiya's* Begum Para and Muniya belong to a similar homosocial world which is frequented by men only once a year during the contest of shayars or Urdu poets to win the hand of the Begum. The 'sakhiani' between Begum and Muniya at the outset appears to be a friendship struck between women residing in an all-women haveli of Majidabad. It is to direct attention towards this homosociality between Para and Muniya and to let the homoeroticism between them recede to the background that Chaubey constructs the narrative around a 'swayamvara' being organized as fulfillment of the last wish of Begum Para's deceased husband. In it, poets from different parts of the nation compete with one another in mushairas and rifle shooting to win both the beautiful Begum and the position of the new Nawab of Majidabad.

In the typical heterosexual scenario of different men trying to impress Begum Para through romantic poetry and witty exchanges, make the film seem like any other conventional Hindi film with heterosexual wooing as its focus. Neither the CBFC nor an audience entrenched in hetero-patriarchy recognizes until half way through the film the underlying subversive scheme operating behind the smokescreen of a heterosexual 'swayamvara'. *Dedh Ishqiya's* challenge to heteronormativity of popular Hindi cinema has to be understood by focusing on the history of the word 'swayamvara'. Surprisingly, the heterosexual association with this word emerged much after its

conception. Ruth Vanita in her discussion of changing meanings of the word 'friend' writes, "In medieval Sanskrit texts, a special friend is termed a *swayamvara* or "self-chosen" friend, different from run-of-the-mill friends...The word *swayam* means "self" and *vara* means "boon," "wish," or "desire," and also comes to mean "bridegroom" or the "desired one" (114).

Her remark on how 'swayamvara' when used as an epithet, signifies the overlap between friendship and marriage becomes significant in the context of *Dedh Ishqiya*. The origin of such connotation of special friendship of the word 'swayamvara' is noted by Vanita to be in the 11<sup>th</sup> century text *Kathasaritsagara*, where 'swayamvara' is used for both a male friend of a man, 'sakha' and a female friend of a woman, 'sakhi'. It is in accordance to the belief of such friendship to be 'janamantara' (continuing from birth to birth) and to be based on "reciprocity, selfless devotion, and sacrifice; as in ideal marriage, (where) the partners live and die together" (114) that the 'sakhi' bond between Para and Muniya appears to be removed from modern day understanding of homosocial friendship and closer to a special friendship of medieval times. Many sequences in the film show Muniya and Para displaying a kind of self-sacrificial love and concern for each other. Muniya's frequent yet secret visits to the unsafe areas of the town to hire a kidnapper to give Para a life free of constraints and Para's refusal to board a train to a safer place leaving Muniya behind on the platform full of people pointing guns at each other during a critical scene in the latter part of the film, lends their 'sakhiani' a non-heteronormative dimension.

The self-censorship in the film functions as a revolutionary tool through this very trope of play with the different ideas of 'swayamvara', where days of events are organized to bring men of riches to the Begum's disposal only to be used later to aid the financial requirements for the gratification of the relationship between the 'swayamvara sakhis' who have been chosen much before the false heterosexual 'swayamvara' is organized. Not only the CBFC's heteronormative agenda but even the hetero-patriarchal audience is shaken out of its heterosexual complacency when the real aim behind the

heterosexual 'swayamvara' is revealed. Chaubey censors the obvious display of sexual relationship between Para and Muniya to escape the critical eyes of the censors but replaces it with increased association of their 'sakhiani' with a more late medieval understanding of 'sakhi' relationships. The correlation between Para and Muniya's relationship with the ones between 'sakhis' described by Vanita as they appear in medieval miniature paintings add to the homoeroticism to Para and Muniya's 'sakhiani'.

Just like the 'sakhis' of medieval paintings Muniya is seen sharing the intimate space of Para's bed chamber and helping her with beauty regimes and assisting her wear her clothes. One of the layered scenes in the film is where Khalujaan encourages Para to reignite her love for dance but when Para dances and indulges in the ecstasy she derives out of it the only person who is allowed to share this moment of joy with her is Muniya. While Khalujaan is forced out of the room and is only given an opportunity to peep through the closed glass window, the Begum pulls Muniya inside the room and the scene ends with the two of them holding hands and performing Kikkli dance. This visual of the men occupying the peripheral position and the 'sakhis' inhabiting the intimate space resonates with the medieval idea of 'sakhis' being "aspect(s) of the self, close, and accessible" (Vanita 122). The film also uses the common motif of the 'sakhis' holding up the mirror to one another as Muniya stands close to Para and both of them gaze at their reflection in the mirror, symbolizing the symbiotic nature of their relationship.

The homosocial and subtle homoerotic depiction of a medieval perception of 'sakhiani' in the film then censors and couches the more sexual understanding of 'sakhiani' that evolved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century erotic Urdu poetry called Rekhti which has extensive descriptions of lesbian love making. The discourse on lesbian relationships in Rekhti, however, provides a justification for the way Para describes Muniya, as her friend, sister and life ("wo hamari dost bhi hai, behen bhi hai aur jaan bhi hai"). Vanita's

remarks on 'dogana', a term used to describe a woman's female lover in Rekhti exonerate lesbian lovers from the notion of incest as she writes, "That a dogana may be a lover and spouse does not preclude her also being a sisterly figure... fictive kinship relations are not equated with biological relations, and incest taboos do not affect them in the same way... fictive sisterhood can coexist with a lover relationship between women... Thus, the fact that the female speaker in Rekhti may sometimes address her dogana as "sister" does not mean that the relationship is necessarily non-amorous" (189).

Instead of including scenes of sexual intimacy like those in *Fire* and *Margarita with a Straw*, *Dedh Ishqiya* is replete with other ways of alluding to the sexual aspects of 'sakhiani' that do not let the self-regulation yield to the lesbophobia of the CBFC but rather makes a strong case for lesbian presence in the film as well as the society. One such most effective way of confirmation of sexual relationship between Muniya and Para, is basing the film in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaf* (*The Quilt*).

### **Overturning the Metaphor of Concealment: Uncovering Lesbianism in *Dedh Ishqiya* through *Lihaf***

Chaubey's strategy of self-censorship to reclaim the space on the silver screen for lesbians reaches its highest point, in the film being influenced by Chughtai's *Lihaf*. More than the story it seems that *Dedh Ishqiya* has utilized the discourse *Lihaf* has generated since its publication. The lesbian theme of *Lihaf* has been discussed so widely for both its boldness and the obscenity trial Chughtai had to face on its pretext in 1946 that it has not escaped the notice of either its readers or the critics. It is the reception history of Chughtai's short story that makes the references to *Lihaf* in *Dedh Ishqiya* very loaded ones. *Lihaf* features in the theme and the plot of the film by being the source for Begum Para's backstory where like Begum Jaan of *Lihaf*, Para is married to a gay nawab and is forced to lead a loveless and sexless life only to be rescued by a female attendant in whom she finds the solution to her *Lihaf*'s itch like anxiety.

The film transcends *Lihaf* by probably taking cue from the problems of the story critiqued in the academic works produced on it and one sees as Aneeta Rajendran puts it that *Dedh Ishqiya*, "...removes the predatory sexual ardour of Begum Jaan... Begum Jaan is almost completely a dependent on the mobile Rabbo while here Begum Para, a talented dancer, is as much part of the action in her own way as Muniya is" (155). It should be noted that unlike Begum Jaan, Para is not devoid of heterosexual suitors to have relationships with yet she herself chooses ('swayam') Muniya as her partner ('vara') redeeming their relationship from being only an alternative to heterosexuality, thus making the film a realistic and positive representation of lesbianism on-screen.

The radical use of self-censorship becomes central in the scene where post-kidnapping, Muniya goes to the place where Babban and Khalujaan have kept Para. The way Muniya enters through the door and runs inward, the audience expects her to embrace Babban who has eagerly been waiting for her. The typical heterosexual romance motif of the heroine running towards the hero in slow motion is inverted as Muniya runs past Babban to embrace her true lover, Para who is then shown standing behind Babban just as the lesbianism constantly looms behind the heterosexual cover of the film. As the CBFC guideline in the Cinematograph Act 1952 states "A film shall not be certified for public exhibition if, in the opinion of the authority competent to grant the certificate, the film or any part of it is against the interests of [the sovereignty and integrity of India] the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or involves defamation or contempt of court or is likely to incite the commission of any offence," Chaubey self-regulates any indulgence in scenes of lesbian lovemaking and avoids all the features mentioned in this guideline that could have provoked the CBFC or extra-legal censorship groups to create issues for the film's mass release.

Even in following the hetero-patriarchal CBFC guidelines, Chaubey develops a scheme to unsettle the conventional heterosexual world of his film. The latter part of the film

has a scene where both Babban and Khalujaan are tied and kept captive once Muniya reveals that the true reason for her sexual interest in Babban was to use him to execute the plan of Para's kidnapping. The power of this scene is asserted through the creative use of self-censorship in providing a final proof of the sexual nature of Muniya and Para's bond. As the men sit captivated in the courtyard, the camera shifts focus to the visual of the women from a distance and then their shadows being cast on a wall. Muniya and Para are seen drinking and playing some games inside the room which is accompanied with sounds of joy and laughter. Eventually it appears as if one of them falls on another and the two shadows seem to merge into each other. As the audience sees the visual of the shadows slowly becoming one, the scene fades away with sounds of sexual gratification. Interestingly, as the women engage in their games, the only dialogue given to the men is where Khalujaan rhetorically says to Babban, "thand lag rahi hai. Lihaf maang len?" (It's getting cold. Should they ask for a quilt from the women?). This dialogue is clearly a deliberate move to invoke the lesbian connotations associated with Chughtai's iconic short story. The omnipresence and significance of Chughtai's *Lihaf* makes *Dedh Ishqiya* anything but heteronormative. The shadow work then acts as a veil to the homosexuality between the female protagonists whereas *lihaf* (quilt) changes its metaphorical function from concealment of lesbianism in the short story to a metaphor of laying emphasis of the sexual aspects of the 'sakhiani' in the film.

#### IV

##### Conclusion

Thus, the oscillation between ideas of concealment and revelation that Chaubey works with leads one to its comparison with Chughtai's use of suggestiveness as a strategy in *Lihaf* to escape censorship. The famous obscenity trial of 1946 had Chughtai dragged to the court in Lahore where she was charged for not following the codes of decency in her story. The argument proposed by Chughtai's lawyer that made her win the case was based on the use of words as suggestions and the lack of any direct reference to

lesbianism as she wrote about it in *Kaghazi Hai Pairahan*, "The witnesses who had turned up to prove "Lihaaf" obscene were thrown into confusion by my lawyer. They were not able to put their finger on any word in the story that would prove their point" (98). Chaubey's cinematic story telling doesn't seem very different from that of Chughtai's.

The temporal efficacy of similar strategies of self-censorship to produce narratives that disturb the society's status quo raises questions about the current state of censorship laws in India. The similarity in the use of self-censorship to represent lesbianism on-screen and even the need for it in 21<sup>st</sup> century shed light on the retrogressive movement of CBFC's functioning. It underlines the skewed notion of the nation projected by the CBFC guidelines, which overlook the sexual diversity of India to constantly project a homogenized image of a heterosexual India. The extent of self-regulation in *Dedh Ishqiya* also depicts a way of keeping extra-legal censorship at bay which in turn shows the power CBFC rules have given to groups outside systematized censorship board. The CBFC website under the tab 'Certification' urges viewers to "...check whether the film contains any scene which according to you, is obscene or vulgar or packed up with gruesome violence," which not only encourages detractors of social change to act as censors in their own rights but also lays bare CBFC's acknowledgement of its inefficiency to keep up with the sensibilities of the viewers. It can be concluded then that while self-censorship might not be a problem-free substitute of a State governed body like CBFC, its use in *Dedh Ishqiya* definitely reveals radical ways in which it can be exercised to battle repressive censorship models simultaneously revealing inherent issues in CBFC guidelines.

### Works Cited

Asaduddin, M. "Ismat Chughtai: "Kaghazi Hai Pairahan"." *Indian Literature* 46.4 (210) (July-August, 2002): 90-101. JSTOR. Web. 15 March 2017.

Ganti, Tejaswini. "The Limits of Decency and the Decency of Limits: Censorship and the

Bombay Film Industry." Eds. Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella. *Censorship in South Asia Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.

Nair, Sridevi K. "Writing the Lesbian: Literary Culture in Global India." Diss. The University of

Michigan, 2009. Web. 8 August 2015.

Rajendran, Aneeta. "Popular Forms, Altering Normativities: Queer Buddies in Contemporary Mainstream Hindi Cinema." Eds. Vikrant Kishore, Amit Sarwal and Parichay Patra. *Bollywood and Its Other(s): Towards New Configurations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Print.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs*. 5.4, Women: Sex

and Sexuality (Summer,1980): 631-660. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 June 2015.

Shahl, Tejal. *Dear Mr Razdan, homosexuals are not freaks*. *The Times of India*. 15 June 2004. Web. 4 April 2017.

Vanita, Ruth. *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. Print.

## **Bibliography**

### **Texts**

Chanana, Kuhu Sharma. *An Evening Rainbow: Queer Writings in Bhasha Literature*. New Delhi:

Sanbun Publishers, 2012. Print.

---, *LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer): Identities in*

*Select Modern Indian Literature*. New Delhi: Suryodaya Books, 2015. Print.

---. "Plurality of Lesbian Existence in Modern Indian Writers: Manju Kapur, Rajkamal

Chaudhary and Geetanjali Shree." *Indian Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (257) (May/June 2010):190-219. JSTOR. Web. 12 September 2014.

Chatterjee, Partha. "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women: The Contest in India."

*American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Nov., 1989): 622-633. JSTOR. Web. 27 January 2015.

---, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ:

Princeton UP, 1993.

Dasgupta, Rohit K. "The Queer Rhetoric of Bollywood: A case of mistaken identity."

*InterAlia:*

*journal of queer studies*. n.d. n.p. Web. 30 April 2015.

Desai, Jigna. *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. New

York and London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

Hawthorne, Susan. "The Invisible Torture." *Off Our Backs*. 36.3, (2006): 77-78. JSTOR.

Web.

15 March 2016.

---, "The Silences Between: Are Lesbians Irrelevant? World Social Forum, Mumbai, India, 16-21

January." *Journal of International Women's Studies*.8.3 (2007): 125-138. Web. 27

August 2015.

Nair, Sridevi K. "Writing the Lesbian: Literary Culture in Global India." Diss. The University of

Michigan, 2009. Web. 8 August 2015.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs*. 5.4, Women: Sex

and Sexuality (Summer,1980): 631-660. *JSTOR*. Web. 5 June 2015.

Sakhi. "Indian lesbianism flowers." *Off Our Backs: a women's news journal*. 24.3 (March 1994):

4. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 May 2016.

Vanita, Ruth. *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. Print.

### **Films**

*Angry Indian Goddesses*. Dir. Pan Nalin. Jungle Book Entertainment, ONE TWO Films and

Protein Entertainment, 2015. Film.

*Dedh Ishqiya*. Dir. Abhishek Chaubey. Shemaroo Entertainment, 2014. Film.

*Dostana*. Dir. Tarun Mansukhani. Dharma Productions, Show Man Pictures and Yash Raj Films,

2008. Film.

*Fire*. Dir. Deepa Mehta. Zeitgeist Films, 1998. Film.

*Girlfriend*. Dir. Karan Razdan. T-Series, 2004. Film.

*Kal Ho Naa Ho*. Dir. Nikhil Advani. Dharma Productions, 2003. Film.

*Margarita with a Straw*. Dir. Shonali Bose. Viacom 18 Motion Pictures, 2015. Film.

*My Brother...Nikhil*. Dir. Onir. Yash Raj Films, 2005. Film.