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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BREACHING THE BOUNDARIES OF FIDELITY IN THE INDIAN MARRIAGE: A STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF ADULTERY AS A MEANS OF FEMALE EXPRESSION OF DESIRE

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Abstract

While the feminist intentions of the film makers, or a lack thereof, may remain a subject of debate, my paper argues that the three films *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (2006), *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015), and *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare* (2019) create a new space for the articulation of women's sexual desires, which seem to find fulfilment only outside the strictures of heterosexual monogamy. In the process, these films relegate questions of marriage morality to the backdrop and focus instead on the emotional and erotic needs of the female protagonists, providing a compelling narrative of women who seek fulfilment that is denied to them.

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Introduction:-

Contextualising and Defining Adultery

The definition and boundaries of what constitutes adultery vary within each relationship, but is usually taken to mean "voluntary sexual intercourse between a married person and someone other than that person's current spouse or partner" (Merriam-Webster). Unfaithfulness in marriage is often referred to as adultery, which is seen as a violation of the norms of heterosexual monogamy. In India, marriage is expected, encouraged, and in some cases, even forced. Arranged marriages, i.e., a social contract between two families on behalf of the bride and groom, are commonplace. These marriages are not based on emotional concerns, and instead place emphasis on the social backgrounds of the bride and the groom, in order to preserve endogamy within social groups.

Respect for the elderly members of the family is often synonymous with not challenging any of their decisions and is touted as a desirable value by Indian families, making it harder for children to refuse their families in the first place. However, should the prospective bride and groom dissent from the practice of arranged marriage, families often resort to manipulation, if not outright violence and coercion. Marrying outside your community can lead to total estrangement from the family, or honour killing in extreme cases. This has been well documented in Bollywood cinema as well - the popular film *Sairat* (2016) focused on inter-caste marriage and honour killing, and *Ishaqzaade* (2012) on interfaith marriage and consequences.

This has been elaborated upon by Michael W. Ross and Alan L. Wells in 'The Modernist Fallacy In Homosexual Selection Theories: Homosexual and Homosocial Exaptation in South Asian Society', wherein they note that "Marriage in India is related more to the family, not so much based on meeting sexual needs, and that procreation is related to marriage rather than to feeling of attraction and emotional love". Intercourse, therefore, is expected to have a reproductive function, and is an attempt to conceive. The Indian wife is thus expected to be sexless, upon

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whom sexual acts are performed for impregnation, instead of an autonomous being who participates in sexual activity.

There is also great emphasis on the chastity of the women - virgin brides are often a prerequisite, while the same does not apply to men. A common wedding night practice in India is to use a white bed sheet during consummation to check whether the woman bleeds. In addition to the absolutely misogynistic nature of this practice, scientifically, a failure to bleed is not indicative of prior sexual activity - the hymen can be broken even through mundane activities. The wife's consent is manufactured legally and socially - virility is a defining factor of masculinity and the wife is expected to never deny advances, and marital rape is not recognised as a crime under the Indian Penal Code, further proving that the wife's consent let alone her sexuality do not find place in marriage.

The reactions to adultery and extramarital liaisons embody double standards - men are psychologically conditioned to believe that they can expect society to be permissive if they take mistresses or look outside marriage for sex; while women, for whom sex is not supposed to be anything but a moral duty in continuum with domestic work, are heavily censored if they do so indulge in it. Mahua Bhattacharjee in 'Women and Law: A Gender Perspective', points out that the reactions towards adultery are extensively gendered - a wife's infidelity is not only worse than her husband's, it is also seen as causing direct harm to him.

The significance of extramarital affairs and liaisons become more pertinent when considering Indian attitudes toward divorce and remarriage. Divorce rates in India are extremely low, around 1% (*Deccan Herald*). Social taboos contribute to the stigmatised nature of dissolution of a marriage. Considering that only 29.4% of the 2021-22 workforce in India was female, which was down from 29.8% in the previous year (*The Wire*), economic dependence on the husband and the role of the housewife seem to work in favour of keeping women from attempting to initiate divorce. Remarriages as well, are more permissible for men rather than women. Premchand Dommaraju elaborates on this in 'Divorce and Separation in India', that since it is harder for women to remarry, it may affect their decision to seek a formal divorce from their partner.

Marriages therefore become a sort of civil death for the woman, wherein her body is worked as much as it can for reproductive and domestic purposes. The wife's sexuality and emotional fulfilment do not find any place in it. Institutional heterosexual monogamy functions well enough to gear the wife's sexuality only towards reproduction. I argue that Bollywood, either consciously or unconsciously, has portrayed adultery as the only recourse through which suppression of female desire can be overcome, in the movies *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (KANK, 2006), *Dil Dhadakne Do* (DDD, 2015), and *Dolly Kitty aur Woh Chamakte Sitare* (DKWCS, 2019).

The Indian Wife: Desexualisation, Reproductive Functions and Domestic Theatre

In KANK, Maya (Rani Mukherjee) and Dev (Shah Rukh Khan) are married to Rishi (Abhishek Bachchan) and Riya (Preity Zinta) respectively. Both unhappy in their respective marriages, enter into an extramarital affair with each other during their attempt to better their marriages with their spouses. Dev has a son with Riya, while Maya is unable to have children. As Priya Shah points out in 'Representation of Women and Identity in Bollywood Films', Maya views Rishi as childish, and thus inserts herself into a mothering role, wherein she is his caretaker. Even though Rishi has not made her so, the circumstances of the marriage and his behaviour designate Maya as devoid of sexual feeling, the lack of which he even accuses her of harbouring towards him, questioning why she doesn't want to sleep with him. Her designation to the role of a wife devoid of the ability to feel desire is not explicit, but it is present - through her assumed childishness of Rishi and consequently, her caretaker role, and through Rishi's anger of her refusal of his advances and her inability to produce a child.

At the beginning of KANK, while conversing with his father en route to his wedding, Rishi says that "It took her three years to say yes", hinting that Maya wasn't exactly keen on this marriage. Dev and Maya first meet in a park where Maya is dressed in traditional Indian wedding attire, and she expresses doubt about this marriage - she tells Dev that after her parents passed, Rishi and his family became hers. While it is not explicitly said, this hints that Maya has not entered into this marriage based on her own free will; emotional and indirect pressure is present that influences her decision. It is not an unfair assumption that her consent is manufactured - Maya cannot, in good faith and out of what is probably a feeling of indebtedness, refuse the request of those who raised her in her parents' place.

Dev and Riya's marriage is shown to fail due to Riya's successful career and her commitment to it, and Dev's lack thereof due to the injury his leg has sustained rendering him incapable of playing sports. Dev has already fathered a child with Riya; the main function of the marriage has been achieved. Riya is portrayed as a demanding and unreasonable wife, despite all that she asks for is Dev's love towards her and their son. Dev and Riya's sex life is virtually erased from the screen - the only time it is mentioned is when he is acting out how it should be with Maya. Dev later tries to initiate and re-enact this scenario with his wife, which only angers her, playing into the Indian trope of the non-domesticated, career-oriented, difficult woman who nags at her husband and complains even if he makes attempts at truce.

There is a failure to recognise that it is a fairly absurd expectation of Dev's that Riya will accept all sudden physical advances without any emotional change - especially since his detachment was her main complaint, that a broken marriage needs work instead of only spontaneous intimacy. Riya also refuses a co-worker at her workplace that flirts with her, saying that she is loyal to her husband. In the movie, Riya is seen as refusing physical advances twice, to her husband and to her co-worker - which conforms well with the 'women are emotional and men are sexual beings' misogynistic myth. Riya's desexualisation is two-fold: if a wife is devoid of the ability to feel sexual desire, then the Indian mother is unsexed further.

This very desexualisation takes place through manipulation in *DDD*. Married off to the man of her parent's choice, Manav Sangha (Rahul Bose), at the young age of 21, Ayesha (Priyanka Chopra) starts her own business, Musafir, by selling her own jewellery. Ayesha was in a relationship with Sunny (Farhan Akhtar), the son of her father's manager, who wanted to wait till he became more accomplished so that he could bring himself to ask for her hand in marriage. Ayesha's parents conspired to keep the two lovers apart - her father and mother sent Sunny to Yale to keep him away from her. This fact remains unknown to Manav, who is introduced to Sunny as Ayesha's ex-best friend. Ayesha's agency to choose her own sexual partner is taken away in order to ensure she marries and reproduces with someone that her parents consider of their social rank - her parents constantly, and very publicly, reiterate their wish for a male heir.

Ayesha and Manav's marriage is not a happy one. Manav is seen pouting when Ayesha denies wanting to have sex, and all their intimate moments, it is made clear, are an attempt to conceive. Ayesha's attitude towards her sex life is one of despair - she is guilt-tripped into sleeping with him after she has clearly said no, and is secretly taking birth control pills in order to ensure that she does not get pregnant. Manav suggests IVF, and tells Ayesha that they have to do it upon seeing her obvious hesitation. All of Ayesha's actions are heavily controlled and policed by him, and all her achievements appropriated under the garb of his permission.

Ayesha's father, Kamal (Anil Kapoor), it is made known, is notorious for having affairs, which his wife Neelam (Shefali Shah) tolerates. However, his affairs never arise out of lack of another pathway of desire, nor do they threaten his marriage. The sexual division of labour is upheld - the wife has fulfilled her role of providing an heir, and is no longer attractive or of use. The man can venture out of marriage, not due to frustration or suppression of any sort of desire, but simply because his desire does not face any control. The reproductive function has been achieved, it is notable that it is the boy who is the younger child, because without a son an Indian family is supposed to be incomplete - the wife's desires, that patriarchy does its best to deny existence, no longer need to be manipulated.

In *DKWCS*, Dolly (Konkona Sen Sharma) is married to Amit (Aamir Baashir), whom she has two sons with. Their relationship lacks sexual intimacy - penetration is extremely painful, and Amit turns to call centres, connecting unknowingly to Kajal (Bhumi Pednekar), Dolly's cousin, who has come to stay with them in order to look for a job in town. Kajal, in the beginning of the film, had attempted to notify Dolly that Amit had been making untoward advances, but Dolly passes it off as Kajal's fancy, instead insinuating that Kajal is interested in Amit.

Amit and Dolly try everything, from oil to temperature control, but are unable to be intimate. Dolly confesses to Kajal that she had undergone hymenorrhaphy before her marriage to Amit, and feels that is the source of her inability to be physical with her husband. Amit also calls Dolly "frigid", worsening her esteem of her sexual ability. I analyse this as an internalised sense of the rules of heterosexual patriarchy - she has had two sons, fulfilled the quest for an heir, and subconsciously feels that it is now not her role to engage in sexual activity, especially since it takes place as a pleasure-seeking activity.

The film also carefully brings out how Dolly and Amit's marriage is truly empty at the core - Dolly steals money from her job and sells her jewellery to put down money for the apartment they plan to buy, but does not reveal these problems anywhere in order to maintain the appearance of the family's normalcy - the onus of which falls of course, on Dolly. Even when their son's cross-dressing tendencies are revealed, it is Dolly who reprimands him for exhibiting behaviour that society sees as abnormal - Amit merely sits outside and leisurely asks her to stop. I do not claim here that cross-dressing and gender dysphoria is in any way immoral, I put forth this point to illustrate that the major portion of the theatrics of a normal family is placed onto the wife, which systematically reinforce and reflect prescribed roles: the desexualised, all sacrificial mother, and the pleasure and comfort seeking uninvolved father.

Transgressive Sexuality On Screen

While Rishi, for the major part of the movie attempts to keep Maya happy by proposing dates and being affectionate, which also includes attempts towards piquing her interest in sex, their first major fight breaks out after Maya declines his advances. Rishi rages against her for not being able to provide him with a child, pointing out that even though he did not deprive her of sexual expression, for him, the ultimate purpose of their marriage was a child, and due to the impossibility of their union providing one, Maya has failed him as a wife. It is a bigger insult to be childless than any of the other offences he claims against her, among which he claims that she has never loved him and that their entire marriage is a compromise to her.

At the same time of Maya and Rishi's altercation, Riya and Dev fight, with Riya's main point again being his behaviour towards her and their son, and very openly insinuates that she believes he does not love her and feels emasculated by the fact that she is the main financial contributor to the household. This is the final trigger for both Dev and Maya, who leave their homes in the middle of the night and arrive at the subway, leading to an angsty confession of feelings and eventually, a start of the extramarital liaison.

Both Dev and Maya are unfaithful to their partners, but it is Maya whose sexuality is given opportunity through her relationship with Dev - she is in a marriage that she was not completely and freely consenting to be in, and her husband is childish, for whom she has to double as a caretaker. Dev opts out of his marriage out of spite, feeling overshadowed by Riya's success. The only intimate scene that takes place is between Maya and Dev, which is liberating particularly for Maya, who we have consistently seen and heard of as not the most willing sexual partner. Dev pushes his way out of the marriage in order to regain masculinity, while Maya seeks out a partner she wants to be with, where she is allowed to explore beyond her expected role as a wife and future mother, and the scorn she receives for not having been able to become.

In *DDD*, Ayesha and Sunny meet years later on a cruise to celebrate her parent's anniversary after Sunny's father manipulates his filial conscience in order to coerce him to come, citing his old age. Ayesha and Sunny have visible tension left between them. Sunny even goes as far as to stand up for Ayesha against Manav, after Manav openly says that he has "allowed" Ayesha to work, as no woman in his family has worked before. This altercation results in Manav's anger, and after the party, he self-imposingly justifies himself to Ayesha in private. It is only then that Ayesha demands a divorce - something she had tried to mention to her mother at the beginning, but was immediately reprimanded for. Only through Sunny does Ayesha realise that there are better lives to be fought for, and her life will not end should she attempt to leave Manav despite the conservative set-up of her household.

After hearing her aunts discuss Sunny's prospective marriage to her cousin, Ayesha storms into his room and tells him to refuse the offer, after which they have an argument about their relationship. Ayesha continually questions why he did not come back from America despite her begging, and ends with her kissing him. While Ayesha is never shown to go further than this with him, it is the first physical declaration that she initiates herself towards another man. All her intimacies with Manav have been forced onto her, and she cannot deny them as her parents publicly state their wish for a grandson. It is only with Sunny, through stepping outside the marriage physically, that Ayesha's desires are allowed to surface.

That one intimate moment with Sunny eventually comes as a wish fulfilment for Ayesha - it is initiated by her. Sunny represents all she wants from life - support, professionally and emotionally, and sexual autonomy. He stands in contrast to the type of man her husband is - controlling, conventional and patriarchal. It is a powerful reminder that true autonomy often requires breaking free from constraints, even if it means stepping outside the bounds of traditional morality. Post this instance is when Ayesha pushes hardest for a divorce from Manav, and eventually succeeds with the support of her father and her brother. The movie ends with the establishment of a lasting version

of empowerment for Ayesha which she experienced during committing adultery. Sunny is informed of her impending divorce, and Ayesha initiates this phase as well by asking him to wait for her, to which he readily agrees.

In *DKWCS*, Dolly later has an affair with Osmaan Ansari (Amol Parashar), a food delivery boy working at Ippy. It is through her affair with Osmaan that she realises that she can enjoy physical intimacy - they sleep together once without any pain on Dolly's part. This scene powerfully counteracts all that has happened before - from Amit telling her she is too cold to enjoy intimacy, to her own analysis of hymenorrhaphy. Once outside the bounds of heterosexual monogamy, Dolly is able to indulge in and engage with all of her desires.

Dolly's difficulties with Amit even prompt her to reconnect with her mother, who had eloped with her lover and abandoned Dolly, to ask whether there could be a hereditary explanation for feeling such intense pain during sex. It is revealed through the conversation that the lover is no longer in the picture, but her mother stands by her decision to run off - because, as she says, it helped her attain freedom. Dolly's mother openly, confidently and quite revolutionarily insists that her affair freed her, and offered her space to explore her desires.

Osmaan is later tragically shot, and Dolly and Amit separate soon afterward. During their fight that leads to their separation, Amit admits to having behaved inappropriately with Kajal, an action he attributes to them not having been intimate in years. Male desire is uncontrolled and unchecked - Amit does not seem to feel any guilt towards having bordered on sexual assault towards his wife's relative, but instead rambles in order to stop her from leaving him. Indian men highly value the so-called 'wife/whore' dichotomy, which allows them to have a family set-up which gives them a woman who is societally expected to make herself sexually and domestically available to her husband at all times, and can fulfil all other whims outside marriage. Men have the luxury of choice - of having all desire fulfilled whether they remain faithful or not, while wives often do not. Dolly then takes one of her two sons, the other stays behind with Amit of his own will, and leaves, refusing to be in a marriage that has brought her nothing but anguish any longer.

Adultery and Female Desire

Through the examples of these three movies, it can be seen how female desire is never really accommodated in Indian marriages, and its representation on-screen. The burden of the Indian wife, the roles she is expected to play, psychologically create such tension that female sexuality is repressed even further than Indian society commands it so - even with 'loving' husbands, who attempt to create a comfortable environment for sexual relations, do so within the context of their entire marriage, which is founded on unequal gender terms. This breeds resentment, and alongside the societal proclamations of sex as purely reproductive in marriage, leads to the marriage as a space where sex is a chore and is not something a woman can enjoy. Thus, the flip side of marriage which is adultery and betrayal, establishes itself as the alternate, wherein sex is for enjoyment, exploration.

These films carefully counter the desexualisation of Maya, Ayesha and Dolly through sexual self-expression on screen. Heterosexual monogamy is neither romanticised nor is it brushed under, but a new fulfilment of desire is given space as opposed to traditional domestic female submission. *KANK*, *DDD* and *DKWCS* are fairly frank in their articulation of female desire, with their disruption of the normative forms of the feminine is expected to take. I do not think that the films are particularly feminist, as they do buttress some conservative values; especially with regards to the reformation arcs of the misogynists such as Dev's father in *KANK*, Kamal and Neelam's reuniting despite his absolute mistreatment of her, and *DKWCS*'s stance on sex work - but they interrogate, quite effectively, the burden of heterosexual monogamy on married women, in order to suggest that feminine discourse in marriage needs to be unleashed.

Bollywood's stance on adultery in all these three movies is surprisingly not one of denunciation - the women that venture outside their marriage in order to find satisfaction is an understandable attempt at escape from their husbands, who they are at best unmatched and incompatible with, and at worst, victimised by. Shah points out this difference of women from 2000s onwards, saying that, for wives, "Not only is desire something that is acknowledged, but now it is being sought after as well" - even though the characters individually may face censure, the ending rewards them. Maya reunites with Dev, Dolly's lover is killed but she leaves her husband, and Ayesha establishes the possibility of a romantic relationship with Sunny.

Through the existing social paradigm, women as wives are not allowed the space to explore their sexual lives, even with a loving partner - the role of the Indian wife and its expectations simply do not allow for that. I argue that the

wife's adultery in Bollywood cinema is a trope, which among other things provides space for the exploration of her desires. While the feminist intent of the films remains a subject of debate, they prepare the ground for a radical revisiting of social norms. Judgements on morality become secondary to desire - through adultery, the wife has an opening to fully delve into sex as an activity to be enjoyed, not to have forced upon her either as per her husband's wishes or through the demand for an heir.

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