

Chapter-4

Mothering the Queer: Overcoming Maternal Dilemma

Maternal Dilemma

“I realised I was being asked to choose between the two most important parts of my life: my child and my church. I chose my child.”

Susan Cottrell, TEDx Talks.

In a poignant TEDx Talk titled *Why I Chose my LGBTQ Daughter over the Evangelical Church*, Susan Cottrell speaks about her experience as a mother when her daughter came out to her as bisexual. She speaks of the difficult choice she had to make, which led to her losing her community and her family. While coming out is a milestone moment in claiming one's identity as an individual with nonnormative sexuality, it is also a watershed moment for the family, especially the mother. Although homosexual relationships have been decriminalised in India, the socio-cultural setup continues to treat homosexuality and queerness as an aberration and illness, and engaging in a queer relationship in India comes with manifold challenges. (Singh, 2015). Like elsewhere, the revelation not only destabilises the family values and their traditional beliefs but also places the mother in a state of moral and political dilemma. Institutional motherhood prescribes that mothers serve the interests of patriarchy by exemplifying in their children the values and beliefs of religion, social conscience, and nationalism. Through institutional motherhood, the patriarchal society “revives and renews all other institutions” (Rich, 1976, p. 45). So, on the one hand, with the revelation of the child's nonnormative sexuality, the mother either blames herself for having failed to become the good mother whose responsibility it is to bring up a dutiful citizen for the country or is blamed by others for the disaster. On the other hand, as a morally good mother, she is also expected to unconditionally love her child despite what he or she is and

thereby accept their sexual orientation. This maternal dilemma of whether or not to accept the child stems from her role as the custodian of the cultural identity of the nation, which expects women to preserve the domain of the family and its spiritual entity by adopting material modernity while keeping intact the national tradition (Chatterjee, 1991, p. 220). When faced with the event of a child's coming out, she is in a conundrum to interpret their nonnormative sexuality as a transgression of the national tradition or as an aspect of modernity, which can be assimilated within the existing socio-cultural beliefs. The mother's acceptance of the child's nonnormative sexuality comes over a period, and this involves mourning the loss of the heterosexual identity of the child while accepting the existing child for what they are. Simultaneously, the mother also mourns the loss of her identity as a good mother and comes to terms with her renewed role as a mother to an individual with nonnormative sexuality. In recent times, popular Hindi cinema has seen a significant shift in the representation of nonnormative sexuality; these challenges, especially about coming out to family and acquiring parental approval, have been addressed convincingly in films on the queer. This shift has been further accelerated since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India in 2018, leading to greater queer visibility both on and off the screen. Through a selection of Hindi films, this chapter examines the representation of the process through which mothers are coming to terms with their offspring's nonnormative sexuality.

This chapter contributes to the emerging field of queer studies and motherhood studies by exploring the complementarity between these two fields and building an understanding of the mothering of sexually nonnormative individuals and its representation in Hindi cinema. This primarily involves the mother's trajectory of accepting her child as sexually nonnormative, her subsequent assimilation of the queer community, and her possible role as a queer sympathiser. This chapter studies the

process of revelation and the repercussions of coming out in the Indian context to find its impact on the family structure and especially on the mother. Through a thematic analysis of select Hindi films depicting nonnormative sexuality in contemporary times, *Memories in March* (Nag, 2010), *Margarita with a Straw* (Bose, 2014), *Kapoor and Sons* (Batra, 2016), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Kewalya, 2020), and *Badhaai Do* (Kulkarni, 2022). The first three films have homosexuality as a subplot, and at significant moments of these films, the mother discovers the child's queer identity. The last two films were released post-decriminalisation of homosexuality and deal exclusively with the themes of winning parental approval and negotiating the societal stigma of people with nonnormative sexuality. There is a significant shift in the themes and tropes employed in these films.

Trajectories of Acceptance: Discovery, Dilemma, and

Acknowledgement

Coming out to one's family as a queer individual continues to remain one of the most challenging aspects of forging one's identity as a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer on account of the perceived fears and the actual negative consequences (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Waldner, 2008; D'amico et al, 2015). It is also considered one of the major developmental milestones by mental health professionals; however, it comes long after one's first awareness of one's nonnormative sexuality (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Dunlap, 2016). Over the years, there has been a changing pattern in the parental reaction towards the nonnormative sexuality of one's offspring. (Bergen et al., 2021). In the 1970s, parents displayed denial, refusal, and even conflict when their children came (DeVine, 1984; Lewis, 1984). In the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, there was a slight improvement, and although parents initially reacted negatively, they gradually moved

towards acceptance; parents were more willing to change their heteronormative beliefs (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Thus, with time and knowledge, these parents moved from ambiguity to acknowledgment. It is important to note that when such individuals came out, they would prefer to test family attitudes by coming out to their mothers before coming out to their fathers or the entire family because of the fear of a negative response (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Ben-Ari, 1995). Mothers mostly display a supportive response to their offspring's nonnormative sexuality, and it is less threatening to come out to their mothers with whom they tend to be closer than they are with their fathers (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Miller & Boon, 2000; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Further, individuals with mothers who have supportive responses experience less anxiety and are less likely to avoid close relationships in adulthood (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). However, a negative reaction of the mother to a child coming out or not coming out to the mother may lead to anxiety in relational attachment and sometimes sexual compulsivity (Carnelley et al., 2011; Chaney & Burns-Wortham, 2015). In general, negative reactions of parents to children's nonnormative sexuality can lead to depression, substance abuse, and unprotected sex (Ryan et al., 2009; Padilla, Crisp, & Rew, 2010). The difference in paternal and maternal reactions towards their offspring coming out has become negligible in the US; however, this is not so elsewhere (Baiocco et al., 2014; Brainer, 2015).

Mothering the Queer: The Real and the Reel

In India, despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the queer community prefers to remain in the closet all their lives because of the prevalent stigma and moral policing (Horton, 2017). Here, homosexuality and other nonnormative sexualities are still considered a form of “moral and psychic pathology and contamination,” which

demands medical attention to restore public moral health (Singh, 2016). Studies show that “the clinical practice of mental health professionals in India, in part, continues to rely on older treatment-based models that include behavioural therapy, shock treatment, and drugs and hormones to “cure homosexuality” (Sheikh, 2011, para 29). When nonnormative sexuality is labelled as a form of aberration, it becomes difficult for individuals to claim their sexuality and come out even before their parents. This strong form of fear has prevented even celebrities like Karan Johar from publicly acknowledging his sexual orientation, despite being one of the most prominent directors and producers of the Hindi film industry (Luther, 2021), while others like Onir and Rituporno Ghosh have used their films as an indirect means of coming out (Singh, 2015; Dasgupta & Bakshi, 2018). The parental reaction to coming out in contemporary India seems to replicate the 1990s response of the West, where parents moved from ambiguity to acknowledgement. In all the films examined in this chapter, despite sharing a close bond with their offspring, mothers find it extremely difficult to accept their child’s nonnormative sexuality.

The stages of acceptance of the child’s nonnormative sexuality progress through stages of grief and mourning like the ones proposed by Kubler-Ross (1969). The parents are thereby given an opportunity to “restructure their expectations and goals for the future life course of their children” (Boxer et al., 1991, p. 86). After the initial shock of discovering their offspring’s sexuality, they go through- denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Anderson, 1987; Bernstein, 1990; Pearlman, 1992; Borheik, 1993). Mahoney (1994) notes that parents mourn-

[T]he loss of the heterosexual identity of their child and their hopes, dreams, and expectations for a traditional life for their lesbian or gay child; the lack of grandchildren and the perceived lack of success as parents and as individuals; ... and the improbability of changing their child’s orientation (pp. 24-25)

Parents, thus, not only mourn the absence of the perfect child, but they also mourn their inability and failure to become good parents. However, Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) note that this process is not always linear and have also questioned the appropriateness of a model-based grief reaction to describe the reaction of parents and the change that these models undergo over time. Again, most of these studies do not differentiate in their understanding of the grieving pattern of mothers and fathers, but the present study approaches Hindi Cinema through the Kubler-Ross model of grief to understand the stages of grief mothers go through while accepting the nonnormative sexuality of their offspring.

Lesbian and gay studies in the Euro-American academy, by and large, take the view that same-sex desire has historically been unrepresented in South Asian languages and that its representation appears only in the work of recent Indian writers in English, many of them diasporic. (Vanita, 2013, p. 3)

Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in their *Same-Sex Love in India*, contest and challenge this biased view and analyse how ancient Indian works in Indian languages contain several instances of same-sex love and the range of discourses such representations brought forth. Vanita identifies in her later works how the “colonialists and nationalists attempt to rewrite multivocal traditions into a univocal, uniform tradition, and the way their rewritings are contested.... the nineteenth century as the crucial period of transition when a minor strand of precolonial homophobia became the dominant voice in colonial and postcolonial mainstream discourse.” (Vanita, 2013, p. 3). She states that the rhetoric of modern Indian homophobia is a Victorian import of the Judeo-Christian discourse and one that is not rooted in South Asian History and religion, as has been claimed in many of the Euro-academy. Such influence is deep-rooted and has further affected the representation of queer sexualities in Indian cinema. To exemplify, she discusses how *Fire* (Mehta, 1996) provides a “one-sided representation of Hindu

tradition and practice”, which highlights the repression of individual desire and pleasure and of women’s freedom (Vanita, 2013, p. 2). Nevertheless, the release of *Fire* has led to the “coming out” of cinematic queerness and, with it, generated the “first major public debate on queer sexuality”, encouraging the formation of a class of actors known as the queer activists (Ghosh, 2010). Gayatri Gopinath’s landmark project *Queering Bollywood* examines non-transgressive yet queer themes in select Hindi films to examine the coded queer desires far more identifiable in the diasporic context (2015). However, recent works on the representation of queer in popular Indian cinema have mostly charted the prevalent stereotypes and themes in contemporary Indian cinema. The two most prevalent stereotypes are the laughing stock and the villain (Bhugra et al., 2015). We find comic caricatures in *Mast Kalandar* (Rawail, 1991), where Anupam Kher plays the role of the homosexual Pinkoo with his flamboyant effeminacy and pink Mohawk haircut. The subplot between Aman and Rohit in *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Advani, 2003), which is an element of discomfort for Rohit’s maid, or in *Dostana* (Mansukhani, 2008), where Sam and Kunal pretend to be homosexuals to share an apartment with the woman, they both love. There are also other homosexual characters in films, but all of them conform to the stereotype of the laughing stock. Such as, in *Student of the Year* (Johar, 2012), we find a homosexual man as the principal of the college in which the film is set; however, he is also used as a comic relief. There are also other instances where queer people are used as a trope to offer comic relief in an otherwise serious plot; in the process, it is always implied that such sexuality is not part of the nationalist discourse and is “alien and imported.” (Bhugra et al., 2015, p. 458). We also find homosexual men as the other, who are being criticised for their choices and life decisions and thereby being considered the villains, as seen in *I am Omar* (Onir, 2010), where Omar, the gay protagonist, teams up with a policeman to extort money from

another gay man Jay. This homosexual as a pathologising stance is also noticed in *Girlfriend* (Razdan, 2004) and *Men Not Allowed* (Srivastava, 2006). Again, in *Bombay Talkies* (Johar et al., 2020), which is an anthology of four short films, in the film *Ajeeb Dastaan* Avinash, the gay man who is portrayed as a homewrecker. However, in the same film, the segment of *Sheila ki Jawani* has a more nuanced representation of gender fluidity and the kind of conflicts it causes in the Indian familial system (Chopra, 2017). More recently, in *Ajeeb Dastaans* (Khaitan et al., 2021), also an anthology with four short films in the segment titled *Geeli Pucchi*, we see Bharti Mandal, a Dalit lesbian woman acting vindictively; she is looked down at office because of her caste, but then she makes a place for herself by replacing her higher caste partner, by tactically sending her away on maternity leave. This otherwise representation of homosexuals also aggravates their negative reception in society; so, recent representations post-377 have instead tried to assimilate queer people within the familial system with the politics of respectability as in *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (Dhar, 2019), *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (Kewalya, 2020), and *Badhai Do* (Kulkarni, 2022) which have adopted an ambiguous approach. However, there are still films such as *Honeymoon Travels* (Kagti, 2007), *Memories in March* (Nag, 2010), *Margarita with a Straw* (Bose, 2014), *Kapoor and Sons* (Batra, 2016), *Aligarh* (Mehta, 2016), and others which offer a more balanced representation of queer life and their positions in family and society. There are also TV series like *Made in Heaven* (Mehra et al., 2019) and *Modern Love Mumbai* (Bose et al., 2022), where the subplots bring in elements of homosexuality and the everyday reality of living one's reality in metropolitan cities like Delhi and Mumbai and the challenges one faces while coming out about one's sexuality.

Overcoming the Maternal Paradox: Acceptance of the Self and the Other

Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, in their edited volume, *'Bad' Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (1998), explore the historical phenomenon of blaming mothers for various issues related to child development and well-being. The book delves into how societal perceptions and expectations of motherhood have led to a tendency to hold mothers accountable for problems faced by their children, and mothers have been criticised or blamed for their mothering practices, whether they are perceived as overly protective or not protective enough. As seen in the previous chapters, the idea of an ideological mother has been prevalent both in Western countries and India. While in the West, the “good” mother is expected to be white, heterosexual, economically dependent, and child-focused, in India, good mothers are expected to be son-bearing and embody unstinting affection, manifested in an undying spirit of self-sacrifice for the family. In India, motherhood' is deeply ingrained within the cultural fabric, treating all women as maternal figures. Consequently, a significant portion of women's sexuality becomes intertwined with the objective of producing male offspring. This male child, in turn, assumes the role of an obedient and valorous citizen safeguarding the national interests and the nation mother. Krishnaraj accurately highlights that the true impact of motherhood serves to uphold the existing patriarchal structures. This perpetuation of male dominance is achieved through a triad of mechanisms that revolve around controlling reproduction, regulating sexuality, and enforcing a sexual division of labour (Krishnaraj, 2010, p. xii). Mothers play a vital role in maintaining a heteronormative society, as also pointed out by Rich (1976). The role of the dutiful sons and daughters they produce is to contribute to nation-building. Thus, when the sons or daughters claim themselves to be sexually

nonnormative, it is essentially the mother who is blamed for having failed in her duty. Additionally, in India, the discourse of nonnormative sexuality runs parallel with the discourse of disease, disability, or psychological illness, as has been discussed earlier. So, here the mother is often blamed, or she blames herself for giving birth to an unhealthy child incapable of procreation and unable to participate in nation-building. However, as a good mother, she is also expected to provide unconditional love and unstinting affection to her child, who may or may not be the ideal child. The mother's struggle to accept her sexually nonnormative child also stems from her inability to accept her failure as a good mother, giving rise to the maternal paradox. Besides being worried about their son/daughter's future in a homophobic society, they also mourn their position as mothers who failed to ensure a respectable position for their son/daughter (Mahoney, 1994). The role of the mother in the Indian family adheres to the colonial nationalist discourse concerning women and their role in nation-building. She is supposed to embody womanly virtues such as "self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labours of love", thereby maintaining familial cohesion (Chatterjee, 1998, p. 247). However, with time she was also required to adopt certain Western modernities while retaining these necessary traditional and spiritual values (Chatterjee, 1998). Thus, while accepting their offspring with nonnormative sexuality, mothers must overcome the maternal paradox because they are expected to incorporate within their traditional values the offspring's nonnormative sexuality, which is primarily considered a western import and is essentially a form of aberration (Kapur, 2017).

Memories in March (2010)

In *Memories in March*, Aarati learns of Siddhartha's sexuality accidentally, only after he dies in a car accident. She comes to know through a colleague of Siddhartha, who

tells her about her son's relationship with his office senior. Although Siddhartha was extremely close to his mother and wrote her emails regularly, and shared every detail about his everyday life, he could not send the mail that he had drafted as a way of coming out. He kept postponing it and thought he would introduce his partner to his mother the next time they met. Aarati finds the mail, later, in his office laptop. Aarati's life comes to a halt when she comes to know that her son is a homosexual and was in an intimate relationship with a man. Things around her come to a halt, and she sits down on the stairs as things come crashing down on her; she is swept over with several emotions all at once. The news of her son's homosexuality seems to upset Aarati more than the news of his death; she admits that as many times she thinks that nothing worse could happen to her, fate brings her something worse. It could also be that it was difficult for her to come to terms with his death and homosexuality simultaneously. She reminisces how earlier she thought that her divorce was the worst that could happen to her, but then her only son died of an accident, and then finally she came to know that the son whom she loved so much and was the one whom she held closest to her was a homosexual, and something he kept away from her all her life. Her shock and grief were a combination of all these three- his death, his homosexuality, and his not sharing about his homosexuality.

It is important to note that Aarati's despair could result from her disappointment with her son's homosexuality, or it could also be about his choice to hide it from her. Aarati's shock soon transforms into denial as she searches for proof in her son's empty apartment to prove that her son is not gay. However, in the process, she soon finds the mail that he drafted for her but never sent. Also, on conversing with her son's partner, she realised how important she was to him and so many other things that she had not known about him. In the aftermath of the death and revelation, Aarati cannot help but

be angry with her son's partner, Ornob. She blames him for seducing her son and for letting him drive after having drunk heavily. She blames him for her son's nonnormative sexuality as well as his untimely death. While both are grieving the loss of a loved one, the mother's loss seems a little heavier for her after the revelation. The only way we see her expressing her grief is through venting out her anger. But she soon realised it was her son who approached Ornob to be his lover. From Ornob, she gradually learns several things about her son that she never knew-both Aarati and Ornob dwell on their memories as they weave together a bond of their own. It occurs to her that Ormob loved Siddhartha with as much purity of heart as she loved her son. So, despite her despair and initial anger, she realises that she cannot delegitimise their relationship.

Acceptance comes not only with time but also with awareness and knowledge. Aarati finds herself accepting her son's homosexuality after she talks to his partner Ornob and Shahana, his colleague and friend, in the office. They spent significant time with Siddhartha in the last few years. They had known him in ways Aarati could not. Exchanging these memories, she somehow felt pacified and more comfortable accepting not only his death but also his homosexuality. Also, the irreversibility of fate struck her in the wake of her son's death. *Memories in March* is one of the few films which deals sensitively with the issue of coming out and the impact it may have on the parents of such children.

***Margarita with a Straw* (2014)**

In *Margarita with a Straw*, Laila comes out to her mother, Shubhangini, when they are seen bathing each other and engaging in light-hearted conversation. Laila has been a disabled child all her life, and the film revolves around a disabled person's journey towards exploring her sexuality. Prior to this film, "the rhetoric of ableism desexualises

disabled bodies by making them appear as asexual,”- implying that gendered and sexual dimensions of ableism deny independence and sexual agency to the disabled body (Chakraborty, 2021). Laila finds out about her bisexuality during her stay in New York for her higher studies; her finding out during her stay in New York also implies that her bisexuality is a Western import and is not Indian her close relationship with her mother (Chakraborty, 2021). Her stay in New York also enables her to come out before her mother; she does not come out before her father and her family and friends. Although Shubhangini is very close to Laila, she is shocked into silence when Laila tells her that her blind friend Khanum, is a lot more than just a friend; she is also her partner. Her mother initially does not understand the gravity of what Laila is trying to convey because of Laila’s speech impairment. When she finally does, Shubhangini is silenced, and the scene cuts short the poignant moment that the mother-daughter was sharing together. This implies that the revelation does negatively impact the close relationship that they had; their time together also would be cut short on account of Shubhangini’s death. Shubhangini, on the other hand, does not go through a prolonged phase of denial; she rather isolates herself from Laila and stops talking to her. Shubhangini had seen her child grow up as a disabled child who had her share of difficulties in an ableist society, but to also be with nonnormative sexuality would make her doubly marginalised. Shubhangini is soon admitted to the hospital, and Laila regularly visits her and takes care of her. As a mother, she gets very little time to be angry with Laila, and she is more anxious about Laila’s future post her death than holding grudges about the revelation. On realising that as a disabled bisexual, Laila might have to face further marginalisation in her family and society, she asks her to go back to the USA. There, Laila is likely to find more acceptance and opportunities to pursue her dreams and develop an identity for herself. Throughout the film, the US is portrayed as a culture without homophobia

and ableism; “it seemed like ableist and homophobic ideologies and practice exist only in India” or in the East; this is also noticed when Khanum reveals that her Bangladeshi/Pakistani parents failed to accept her lesbian identity, but now she gets to live an independent life as a transnational activist. (Chakraborty, 2021, p. 96). However, after Laila’s mother’s death and her separation from Khanum, Laila stays back in India. Following her mother’s acceptance, she finds it easier to accept herself as a disabled bisexual individual. Although she does not come out before her friends and other family members, and she also separates from Khanum, Laila becomes more confident about herself post her mother’s death.

Kapoor and Sons (2016)

In *Kapoor and Sons*, Rahul is the eldest son of the family and his mother’s favourite. With the pressure to be the perfect son of the family, he lies to them about having a girlfriend in London while being in a homosexual relationship. The revelation happens when Sunita, his mother, accidentally sees photos of him with his boyfriend on his laptop; she is shocked into a state of disbelief. This revelation also coincides with her coming to know of her husband’s continuing extra-marital affair, which he claimed to have ended years back. It is also followed by the accident and unexpected death of her husband. Sunita, who was closest to her elder son, feels betrayed on coming to know of his homosexuality. She is shocked that Rahul has been lying all these years about having a girlfriend in London; that Rahul lied to her and disappointed her as much as his being a homosexual. When she confronts him, and he keeps evading the question; he finally gives in when his boyfriend calls him over the phone in front of his mother. Sunita goes through denial as she repeatedly asks for confirmation from Rahul and locks herself in her room, trying to isolate herself from Rahul and others. She feels betrayed by her son and husband. While her husband had betrayed her previously, the

betrayal of her favourite son affects her severely. She falls silent, and the death of her husband further adds to her grief; her son leaves soon after this incident, also making her lonely. Sunita's first breakdown is at the family gathering. She accuses her son and husband of betraying her. Following this, her husband leaves and dies in the accident. With so many incidents following in quick succession, she breaks down further, but she is mostly angry with Rahul. They do not speak to each other for a long time, and although she remains in pain, she prefers not to resume communication.

Both in *Memories in March* and *Kapoor and Sons*, we see the mother blaming herself for their son's sexuality. While on the one hand, Aarati feels that her divorce negatively impacted her son, and she failed to give as much time to her son as she should have, Sunita, on the other hand, tries to figure out where it all went wrong- why her son and her husband both betrayed her and, in a way, left her all alone. Both Aarati and Sunita feel, as mothers, they have failed to perform the role of a good mother, which has negatively impacted their respective sons. Sunita takes her time as she immerses herself in her catering business. Finally, when she meets Rahul on his next trip back home, she apologises for her behaviour, and the mother-son starts rebuilding their relationship. However, Rahul comes out only before his mother and younger brother; the rest of the family does not get to know about him.

Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan (2020)

In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, the father accidentally sees Aman and Kartik kissing each other on a train. He is so shocked that he is unable to share it with his wife and other family members; he even collapses on the train. However, after this, the couple again kisses in front of the whole family at a wedding, and the rest of the family, along with the mother, comes to know of it through this incident, which then becomes a matter of family embarrassment, and the wedding is called off. Here, the revelation

comes as a shock to the entire family at a family event, and then the families go into absolute denial. The parents initially deny that their son could be homosexual and dismiss it as his state of mind, but when he persists, they arrange an elaborate ritual of funeral and rebirth to commemorate the death of their homosexual son. The mother then brings the son in front of the family in a ritual which is to signify his rebirth and renaming, following which the family decides to get him married to a girl of their choice.

When this does not work, and Kartik comes back to confront Aman's family, Aman's father reacts angrily and beats up Kartik. While Sunaina, the mother, is never seen being angry with her son, she mostly remains a silent spectator since she is caught in the dilemma of supporting her husband or her son, both of whom she loves dearly. But as the problem persists, the father accuses the mother of having spoiled the son, she also feels guilty for having failed as a mother. They also bargain with their son; as the father threatens the son by attempting to commit suicide, the mother coaxes him into marrying a girl for the sake of their family reputation and lineage. Aman agrees to the marriage when Karthik is beaten mercilessly by his father.

Aman's family begrudgingly accepts his and Kartik's love and relationship with their persistent effort. However, Sunaina is the first one to raise her voice when the police come to arrest the couple for their same-sex relationship. She also voices the dilemma that mothers face when their sons expect them to accept their relationships, going against all societal norms, cultures, and traditions. The mother, here, stands at the threshold of the family and the state protecting the values of the state within her family and vice versa. She coaxes her husband and her brother-in-law to protect their son when the state intervenes through the police force. She rightly says that it is not possible for

her to unlearn years of socio-cultural constructions and accept her gay son within a day, and she expects her to give some time.

Badhai Do (2022)

Badhai Do brings us the story of a lavender marriage, where a lesbian woman and a gay man get married to overcome the family pressure of getting married and engaging in heterosexual relationships. However, Sumi, the wife, gets caught by her mother-in-law while having sex with her lesbian partner Rimjhim. While Shardul, the husband, is not caught, he decides to come out before his family and claim his identity as a gay man. Thus, in all these films, it is not a planned coming out; rather, the parents accidentally discover their child's sexuality, which often adds to the shock and disappointment that follows. However, interestingly this revelation also coincides with other major life events. Like, in *Memories in March*, Araati is also coping with the grief of the death of her son when she comes to know that he was also gay. Again, in *Margarita with a Straw*, Laila comes to know that her mother's cancer has relapsed soon after. Similarly, Sunita in *Kapoor and Sons* comes to know of her husband's extra-marital affair, and she herself confesses that she gave away the manuscript of her younger son, Arjun, to the elder son, which helped Rahul to become a bestselling author. Both in *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Badhai Do*, the revelation leads to a chain of other events, which determines the plot of the film and is the major turning point.

In *Badhai Do*, both Sumi and Shardul's family sit down separately with their respective family and try to process the shock that Sumi's sexual revelation offers them. However, Shardul, on seeing his family insult homosexuals in general and Sumi in particular, cannot stop himself and reveals before everyone that he, too, is a gay man. He escapes from the family gathering, which becomes claustrophobic; this is symbolic of him

coming out of the closet. Here, both families treat homosexuality as a form of aberration and a disease which requires treatment. They find homosexuals as individuals who disgust them and almost treat them as untouchables. Shardul's mother, who discovered Sumi's relationship with Rimjhim, falls silent after her initial shock. However, she is rarely seen to have a say in her family; being a widow, she lacks agency in the absence of her husband, and she does whatever she is asked to do by the other members of the family. Shardul's coming out shocks the entire family, it is as if his job as a police officer and his masculine physique never hinted about the possibility of nonnormative sexuality, but his mother comes out in his support as she follows him to the terrace soon after, and comforts him. On the other hand, Sumi's mother is not as supportive, and she continues to be angry with her for some time. She shames her for being a lesbian and wishes she were dead. Sumi's mother, who performs a *maun vrat* (a ritual of not speaking as a form of devotion to God), speaks for the first time in this scene. She has an outburst on Sumi for having failed as a child.

Shardul and Sumi get married and enter into a bargain to appease their mothers and other family members. Before their marriage, both their mothers used to send them matches to get them married at an appropriate age, with a person from the appropriate class, caste, and religion. The question of gender does not occur in their discussion because it is assumed that the child would always be heterosexual. Sumi and Shardul, after their marriage, continue to face family pressure to have a child. Giving birth to a child and continuing family lineage is an important part of the socio-cultural setup. In an ideal situation, the families would not prefer to accept an adopted grandchild, but in case it is not biologically possible, they would settle for it. However, even after they come out to their family, Sumi and Shardul continue their societal bargain of a lavender marriage to adopt a child. This makes it easier for the families to accept their offsprings

and their respective sexualities; also, in the process, this highlights how the LGBTQ community in India continues to push for legal acceptance of same-sex marriages and their right to adopt children.

In the last few minutes of the film, we see a family after a year of their revelation, where each of the family members, in their way, tries to understand and educate themselves about the LGBTQ community. As a family, they become far more inclusive than they were a year ago. The families encourage the gay couple and the lesbian couple to participate together in a religious ceremony and thereby sanction their acceptance through religious parlance. Encouraging conversations around nonnormative sexualities enhances their acceptance and understanding. These films, in their own way, pave the way for such conversations. Families in general, and mothers in particular, find a voice in the dilemma they experience while coming to terms with their children's nonnormative sexuality.

From Maternal Paradox to Empowered Mothering

Both in *Memories in March* and in *Kapoor and Sons*, we see the mothers blaming themselves for having failed as a mother. It is noteworthy that while Aarati is a divorcee, Sunita had a complicated relationship with her husband, who cheated on her more than once. However, both were closest to their sons. Both considered their elderly sons to be their support system and shared with them every detail of their lives. So, following the revelation, they felt, somehow, that their marital problems had negatively impacted their sons. However, they also felt betrayed that their sons could not confide in them. This, too, brings in them a sense of failure as a mother. Their marital problems, combined with their inability to contribute to a heteronormative society by bringing up a sexually normative individual, further cover them down. Of these mothers, it is important to note that only Aarati and Sunita are urban working women who also have

an identity beyond their families. Shubhangini is also an urban woman settled in Delhi; although she is not working and has a traditional outlook, her exposure to the outer world while caring for a disabled Laila, helps her open and be more inclusive. It is on account of this, Araati, Sunita, and Shubhangini find it easier to accept their offspring than the others, who are deeply rooted in their traditional and cultural setup. In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, the father blames the mother for the son's homosexuality; out of guilt, she finds ways of dissuading Aman from pursuing his love. However, as a mother, she also feels guilty for forcing her son to live a life of compromise by marrying him to a girl of their choice. While she is not fully able to accept Aman and Karthik's homosexual relationship, her love for her son empowers her to accommodate his sexuality within the ambits of her family values. The legal acceptance of same-sex love makes it easier for her and the whole family to accept their relationship. In *Badhai Do*, both mothers remain silent throughout the film. Sumi's mother because she observes a fast, and Shardul's mother because she lacks agency in the absence of her husband. While for Shardul's mother, it is difficult to accept her daughter-in-law Sumi's sexuality, she does not take long to support Shardul. As Shardul weeps on the terrace of their house, she is seen comforting him while holding him in a maternal embrace. We do not see such maternal warmth between Sumi and her mother, nor is she seen participating in the religious ceremony performed by the two gay and lesbian couples. She is yet to accept her daughter as a lesbian by the end of the film. Even when her husband and Sumi's in-laws accept their lavender marriage, she registers her disapproval by not being there for the ceremony. The same mother who fasted for Sumi's well-being and happy marriage previously failed to acknowledge her happiness. But Sumi never expected her mother to accept her; she rather wanted the support of her father, which she did receive eventually.

Both Sumi's mother and Shardul's aunt fail to overcome their years of learning and their familial values and traditions. Post-decriminalisation of homosexuality films has highlighted this familial aspect and targeted these audiences who hold the Indian heteronormative familial setup highly. These deep-rooted cultural values very often prevent individuals from coming out to their parents and, in ways, also prevent them from accepting their identity, coercing them into assuming the role of the "good Indian queer woman (or man)" (Chatterjee, 2021, p. 177). Unlike *Fire* (Mehta, 1996), which was met with opposition and protests for hurting Indian sentiments, these films try to mould "queerness within its hetero/normative indicating that a shift in cultural discourse about queerness may not necessarily promise either dissidence or transformation." (Chatterjee, 2021, p. 179). In the Indian culture, the primacy claimed by the biological family is supreme, and we can also see this in *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019), which was promoted as a film about family and friendship and not about a lesbian relationship, even though it was released immediately after the decriminalisation. Writing about the film Chatterjee notes- "Restrictions that were placed on representation and discourse... are illustrative of, and threaded with, fears about the forced and perceived disjuncture between queerness and culture, queerness and the family, which, it is understood, can only be resolved by making the family subsume queerness as queerness pays its debts to the family" (2021, p. 181). Sumi's mother stands for those who cannot assimilate themselves within the changing discourse of gender and continue to prioritise their socio-cultural values and roles over their children. For Sumi's mother, it is more important to abide by her culturally assigned role of being a good mother than to stand up as a good mother for Sumi. For Sumi's mother, it is also difficult because Sumi, as a woman, transgresses by claiming her identity as a lesbian. Although Sumi was a working woman, having married

Shardul, she adhered to the cultural discourses of a “normative model of citizenship”, who is modern and liberal but performs her assigned gender role as Shardul’s wife (Rajan, 193, p. 124). But as soon as she claims Rimjhim as her partner, she transgresses her cultural role and disrespects Indian traditions. In *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan*, Sunaina highlights this maternal dilemma between tradition and modernity, materiality, and spirituality- the nationalist practice since colonial times of assigning women the duty of being traditional while adapting to the everchanging modernist project of nation-building (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). These mothers face the challenge as they have to keep intact their traditions and cultural values while performing the role of the loving mother. In a way, Sumi’s mother manages to respect her Indian traditions, but she forgoes her role as a mother by marking her absence in Sumi’s new familial setup. Sunaina, on the other hand, acknowledges the legal amendment of Article 377 and is happy to retain her son within the confines of her familial values. It is important to note that both Kartik and Aman cannot complete their wedding rituals; it gets interrupted mid-way, and even when the conflicts are resolved, the priest does not agree to perform the ritual, so instead of the traditional chants of mantra, they decide to sing a song of friendship while going around the holy fire. The Indian Penal Code is yet to give homosexual marriage legal recognition, so the ceremony performed by Karthik and Aman caters to their modernist agenda while not transgressing traditional and cultural values and sentiments. Thus, these films, post-decriminalisation of homosexuality, also perform the role of representing nonnormative sexualities while moulding them in accordance with the Indian familial setup, thereby contributing to nation-building. Within this phenomenon, these mothers on screen and their maternal dilemma play a significant role in maintaining the organisation of the family in particular and in shaping socio-cultural discourses at large.

Towards the end of *Badhai Do*, there is a gay parade which shows not just members of the LGBTQ+ community walking, but also shows their families joining in, especially their mothers as queer sympathisers. To highlight mothers taking up the cause of their off-springs with nonnormative sexuality, is a milestone in the journey of the queer movement in India. These mothers have not only accepted their offspring's sexuality but also acknowledged the need to stand up for their rights. This is not just an act of maternal love, rather, this comes through the mother's understanding of her role as a change-maker. So that more such mothers take up such roles, it is important to understand the challenges they overcome in the process to stand by their children while also performing their culturally assigned roles. Popular Hindi Cinema plays a significant role in representing such mothers on-screen, as there has been a clear shift in the queer films being made post-decriminalisation of homosexuality; they are being made to assimilate the queerness within the familial setup in India without indulging in many transgressions. However, we are yet to see sexually nonnormative mothers and their mothering practices on-screen, which would, in the true sense, open greater scope for scholarly discussions involving the discourses of the queer.