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**POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND QUEER REPRESENTATION IN AMAZON
PRIME'S MADE IN HEAVEN**

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Abstract:

With the advent of new and multiple streaming platforms, Indian Cinema and Television is witnessing a dramatic shift with respect to the content made and consumed. These new television series, mini-series and feature films portray a wide variety of themes, which were previously considered taboo and unfit for the public eye. The Indian film industry is one of the largest in the world, releasing approximately a thousand films a year to an international audience of 3.6 billion (Ghosh, 2007: 419). Critically speaking, with media, films and televisions being one of the most popular and consumed forms of entertainment, the restrictive and censored portrayal of themes, people and characters have conditioned the biases of the general public. While queer people were depicted in a lighter vein, used for comic relief for many years, which rejected the multiple layers of complexities that underlie their delicate identities. It is only, recently, that we have witnessed unbiased portrayal of queer on a global as well local level. This paper, attempts to study one such objective queer representation and the politics of identity in Amazon Prime's Made in Heaven (season 1: 2019), starring in main leads SobhitaDhulipala and ArjunMathur. This paper would minutely focus on the portrayal of queer characters in the series and would aim to evaluate their representation, trying to study their trauma.

Keywords: *Indian Cinema, Representation, Queer, Identities, etc.*

Introduction:

Made in Heaven premiered on 8th March 2019, made by Excel media and Tiger Baby, presents a microcosmic picture of the North Indian Society. This is the fourth Amazon Original series for the Indian market, and even before its release, had a global outreach, presenting the western audience a picture of the typical Indian marriage scenario. The show comes out as a cultural bonafide phenomenon. Weddings, generally speaking are a big deal in the South-Asian context, and *Made in Heaven*, stands out as a singular series that introduces a colorful and exotically vibrant picture of the same. The show offers an intricate insight in Indian marriage market, portrayed in a manner that was not done before. It offers an exquisite understanding, with each episode dealing with a different kind of marriage. Written by ZoyaAkhtar, AlankritaShrivastava and ReemaKagti, the narrative is about two best friends, Tara Khanna, played by SobhitaDulipala and Karan Mehra who is played by ArjunMathur, and their wedding company, *Made in Heaven*, which is still in its stage of infancy. The story proceeds as each of the nine episodes presents a different challenge that the company has to



overcome in order to become a success and establish themselves. What overtly looks like a show about wedding planners catering to the elites of Delhi, later goes on to display the complexities that each character possesses - personal problems, changing equations of relationships, complex friendships, cheating, divorce, societal expectations and trauma.

The major attraction of the show that keeps the audience hooked and makes it binge-worthy is its multiple storylines, which the writers try to inter-relate. *Made in Heaven*, stands on the liminal threshold of a series and a serial. Gaby Allarth and Marion Gymnich have distinguished the two in there, *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*, as they quote Kozloff, where the degree of *closure* defines what would come under which category, "Series refer to those shows whose characters and setting are recycled, but the story concludes in each individual episode. By contrast, in a serial the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after a given hiatus" (Allarth, 5).

Though, this clear distinction has blurred over time, and many have adopted a hybrid form, i.e. *serialized narrative*, taking into account the elements of both a serial and a series. *Made in Heaven*, is an example of such a serialized narrative, where even though each secondary storyline ends in a singular episode, the primary storyline of Tara and Karan, carries on and progresses throughout. Their stories however, are ended abruptly in the end of season 1, leaving much scope to explore their characters, inter and intra relationships in the next season.

Apart from the obvious themes of marriage, conflict, social divide, class divide, infidelity and love, the show digs deep on some other important, uncommon and controversial issues through the powerful feminist portrayal of Tara and the queer identity of the male protagonist Karan. Identity politics, here play a major role in defining the lives of the duo. The transition that Tara undergoes, who once belonged to the lower middle and is now the part of the bourgeois owing to the marital transaction, shatters the already set patriarchal norms that dictated the facile representation of women, is a strong suite of the show. The other most important aspect is the immensely refreshing portrayal of a privileged upper middle class gay man, Karan. An article posted in *The Lily* (April 2019) by Bilal Qureshi, instantly grabs our attention with its powerful headline, *Made in Heaven' is far more queer and feminist than Bollywood's usual fairy-tale romances*, Qureshi in this article goes on to talk about how *Made in Heaven*, actively steers away from the cliché of Bollywood romances, where the trope of best friends falling in love, is overused to a great extent, but here, the most out of place and refreshing relationship away from the normative portrayals is the friendship between Tara and Karan, "By centering its story on two friends who are not romantically involved but proudly queer and unapologetically feminist, the show is a far-cry from Bollywood's fairy-tale romances. It's ultimately a series about reconnecting with oneself, rather than living by society's expectations of what happiness looks like."

Queer representation in Indian cinema has always been stereotypical, non-inclusive as well as biased and untrue. The show, written in the backdrop of the decriminalization of Article 377, that made homosexuality punishable by offence, strongly and appropriately challenges this portrayal in an inclusive light. Here, the writers and directors have actively used efficient narrative techniques to bring out different aspects of Karan's life. The storyline of the main lead is revealed in a fragmented manner by the use of flashbacks; in order to reveal



the traumas of his past life that dictate his present as well. I would use these instances as reference points so as to understand the peculiarities of identity and queer politics in this series.

Nuances of Representation: The Biases of India Cinema:

The term queer is an umbrella term that refuses to be imposed by the limitations of water tight categories such as 'gay', 'lesbian' or 'transgender'. Earlier, sexuality and gender were rigid and anything except the set norms was considered unnatural. Over the decades, gender and sexuality have now shattered these binaries and exist in a spectrum of range with their characteristically important feature being- fluidity. Queer reading aims to demolish the angles that have stood as hetero-patriarchal visions. Traditional Indian cinema has been profusely biased towards the portrayal of hetero-normative identities and has paid little or no attention to queer identities. The portrayal of queer identities can be specifically categorized in four parts as are recognized by Bhugra (2015)- laughingstock, the villain, the sensitive or the stereotype respectively. Gay identities were used as a comic relief, and had miniscule roles and contributed nothing to the main plot of the storyline. Some of the most prominent (and recent) films that have that have propagated this very idea are, Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), Karan Johar's *Dostana* (2008), with the portrayal of relationship between Aman – Rohit and Sameer- Kunal respectively. Kielwasser and Wolf (1994) have appropriately pointed out that "gays and lesbians use the mass media for information about themselves." Because it is a subject of taboo it makes it difficult for them to educate themselves from real authentic sources, therefore such representations become a stereotypical caricature of the real issue, giving the minority skewed information and making it impossible for them to understand nuances. With media, being widespread, it is important for it to be liberal as well.

There are only a select few films that fall under the category of unbiased queer representation when it comes to Indian Cinema as are identified by Bhugra (2015)-*Bombay Talkies, My Brother Nikhil* and *I am*. Some others would include *Fire, Kapur and Sons, Aligarh* and *Loev*. The above mentioned films can be best appreciated as they radically break the bias that are sensitive to the issues of the community, they can therefore be best suited to raise awareness and propagate the importance of acceptance. These narratives do not fall under any of the four categories recognized by Bhugra, and stand apart to create a whole distinct yet inclusive category when it comes to queer representation in the Indian context. Apurva Ansari, the writer of Hansal Mehta's *Aligarh* in an article for Bangalore Mirror titled "Queer Bollywood" comments on the dearth of authentic queer representation (even globally) "The first time I saw a gay man on screen was in 1993- in the hard hitting film Philadelphia, where a cute Tom Hanks was in love with a dishy Antonio Banderas. After searching in the dark for 15 years, I was relieved to finally find an image which I could aspire to." Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, talks about the aspect of Scopophilia, whereas *looking itself is a source of pleasure*, since long objectification of women and minor characters were skewed and they became of source of public pleasure, and were never represented in a fair light. Though Mulvey exclusively talks about Hollywood, her observations can be aptly applied to the Indian cinema as well. Therefore, the *gaze and the manner* used by these female filmmakers sets the series aside and establishes its revolutionary



aspect, as is noted by Qureshi in his article, “The show was created and mostly made by a team of female filmmakers. The female and queer gaze is at the heart of what makes the show so daring and revelatory. It is a provocative exploration of gender, marriage and love in a society still wrestling with how to blend patriarchal traditions with modern urban life.”

Policing Identities: Questioning Affiliations and Self:

Made in Heaven, with the single exception of *I Am*, remains an important and singular series depicting queerness candidly. The following sections would discuss the relationship of Karan with his different partners and his coming out, it would also bring into light the other closeted homosexual character – Mr. Gupta. In the first episode itself the queer identity of Karan is revealed. The societal restrictions force him to not openly indulge in homosexual activities, and always lie and conceal such encounters. Through the course of nine episodes, Karan’s relationships with three people are highlighted- Govind, Sam and Martin respectively that bring out different aspects of his personality. Firstly, we are introduced to Karan’s fling, Govind, as he spends the night and Karan’s reputation becomes more malicious in the eyes of his landlords, the Guptas. Through Govind, we are told for the first time, that though Karan is comfortable with his sexuality, he is suffocated by the cultural and social expectations and has a fear of commitment. He realizes that if his real identity is revealed, he will face multiple problems and will be deemed a criminal. The most primary event that takes place regarding his identity happens in Episode 3, where the landlord, Gupta Ji, invades his privacy and installs a CCTV camera to monitor his home life. It is also, in this episode where Karan meets Martin, a foreigner. In one of the most disturbing scenes in the series, for the first time, the country being unsafe for queer people is underlined, as they are caught being intimate on a secluded road and have to bribe the police. Here the grievous conditions of queer people are portrayed as Martin questions what will happen to those who cannot afford to bribe. The idea of bribing to love a person, however absurd it may seem in the post-decriminalization of 377 in India, formerly ruled the lives of many homosexuals.

Episode 5 parallelly narrates the complex storylines of Gupta Ji and Karan, actively bringing out the contrast between these two males. It is here that we see, a middle aged man torn between his real identity and the societal norms that dictate his life. Gupta Ji had no intention whatsoever to hand over the tape in question that had recordings of Karan’s intimate encounters to the police; he was merely using it in order to relive his own sexual fantasies. It is only after his wife, sees these recordings that he chooses to protect his own identity and status by handing the tapes over and filing an FIR under Article 377 which was a non-bailable offence. Karan is unfairly treated and is even sexually abused in the jail, which causes him both mental and physical trauma. Tara and her lawyer, use pre-dated papers in order to bail him out of the prison. It is in this episode, the theme of solidarity is shown from multiple angles. As homosexuality was still a crime, it was thought to be a *disease*, as is believed by his own mother. With press and people defaming Karan from all sides, surprisingly enough it is his father and his brother who stand in solidarity with him.

In episode 6, after Karan’s bail, in the Mehra household, skepticism and tension are dominantly present. Prashant Nair, the director essentially captures the essence of the home life of Karan at the lunchtime, where reporters surround his home, in order to get some



facetious news. The shift of the family dynamics and the conflicting psyche of his parents is shown, when his mother comments, “Yehachcha h, beemaritumharibhugte hum”, (Wonderful, you are the one who is sick but we have to deal with it). The comment is symbolic to the thought process of majority of India, where people are so ill-informed that they consider, homosexuality a disease, and refuse to accept it as a natural manner of being. It is just after this comment, that we see Karan’s father taking up a stand for his son, and outspokenly showing solidarity towards his cause. By doing this, he breaks the stereotype of a strict rigid male authority figure that he was portrayed to be in the first few episodes. Later, in the same episode, Karan comes up to confront his family, in a heartfelt sequence he apologizes to his father, revealing that his mother has known forever, where she even after knowing the truth, forced him to conceal his identity, worrying the ‘effect it would have on his younger brother Arjun’, where Karan reveals that his brother has always known and it doesn’t matter to him. An encounter between Karan and Mr. Gupta also features in this episode, where we see conflicting identities of two queer people, both socially obligated to hide and adhere to the norms of the world. Here, even though solidarity exists between the two, it can’t be openly shown. They are therefore, connected by the bond of secrecy and safe-keeping. Keeping with the solidarity, Mitali, played by Yashaswini Dayama, the daughter of the Guptas, is perhaps the first outspoken supporter of Karan, who accuses her parents of violating Karan’s privacy. She strongly stands against Homophobia, where she calls out her parents and takes a strong stance for Karan. In one such confrontation, where Mr. Gupta excuses that he did this in order to save her, her retort is powerful calling Karan, ‘One of the few men she is actually safe with in Delhi.’ The thread of solidarity explored is an excellent feature used by the filmmakers. Unlike most TV shows and films, where queer characters are shown as a single entity, here the idea of queer being an active part of the society is portrayed by not ostracizing Karan and therefore, in a manner is symbolically representative of (specifically male) solidarity.

Another recurring queer character is Sam, who is involved with Karan for two years now. Through Sam, the writers bring in a whole different perspective. Hailing from USA, he urges Karan, to leave the country and come live with him. Through this encounter we come to see the difference of prevailing social realities in the two countries, where one remains restrictive and the other propagates liberation. Karan refuses to leave the country, calling it *home*, despite the fact, that this habitat has forced him into remaining a closeted individual, and the populace judging his sexual preferences compelling him to conceal his personality. Karan’s refusal to leave the country and therefore an opportunity to live in a free and liberal space is strongly indicative of his attachment to his attitude to make his *own* home liberal.

With the continuous use of flashbacks, Karan’s back story is slowly revealed along with his childhood love interest Nawab. Through these memories we get to know of the claustrophobic attitude that young queer children were subjected to in the Indian society. Karan’s homosexuality is made abundantly clear in the first episode itself, but his subsequent relationships are nothing more than flings. The only true relationship he ever had was with Nawab as a teenager. Episode 8 and 9, take us deep into the psyche of Karan and Nawab. Engaged in one such intimate act, they are ‘caught’ by his mom, who then berates both the boys and restricts her son’s social life. It is here, even after sharing a close bond with Nawab, Karan turns against him and becomes an ally of their homosexual bullies. This incident forces



him to go deep into denial despite formerly attempting to embrace his real identity. It is peer pressure and societal expectations that drive Karan to bully and harass the only true love interest he has had in his entire life. The current events in Karan's life, his arrest, his abuse, his flings with both Sam and Govind, and as well as his conversation with Gupta Ji, that form direct parallels from his past and induce these memories that he has buried deep inside. It is only after such a realization that Karan becomes sensitive enough and decides to bring a change by filing a PIL. In the last episode, Karan finally reaches out to Nawab and we see the old romance rekindling. With this meeting, the story arc of Karan is finally completed and we see his character grow in the right direction.

The controversial and critical identities of someone queer and how they are politically perceived in the Indian society are primarily shown in two incidents. Firstly in Episode 8, *Pride and Bridezella*, a short sequence of Harmony, a rival company tells the audience how they wish to defame Made In Heaven using Karan's case as an excuse and employing it as a PR stunt to defame the company and by extension attempting to acquire more clients. This however backfires, when the Yadav wedding comes, where this is the same excuse given by politician strategically hiring Karan and Tata for his daughter's big budget wedding.

In Episode 8, the following dialogue takes place between Brajesh Yadav and Karan, "Mr. Karan Mehra, aaphumaribetikiweddig planning karrahehai. Yes, you are doing it. Jistarah se aapne ruling government ko sharply challenge kiyahai, I like it. I really like it. Election joitnepasarahehai, tohmaikyasoehathaki agar hamaribetiki wedding planning aapki company karetoh ye apneapmeinek political statement tohantahai." which loosely translates to how Karan's PIL is in strong opposition to the ruling government and his stance is being taken advantage of by the opposition party. Mr. Yadav and Harmony, both want to profit off of Karan, and are extremely insensitive to his issues, making his identity purely political and one-dimensional. The politics of queer identity is revealed through these interactions. There are also snippets of awareness programs and TV debates that Karan attends for the cause. Owing to all this, he becomes a singular object of both appreciation and criticism. The opposition party makes a hero out of him, as is seen in Episode 9, where a group of small politicians at the Yadav wedding, advertise their political agendas and discuss them with Karan, calling out the ruling party, in order to gain his trust and sympathy, making his identity propaganda for their cause. The same is reflected in the following lines, "We need people like you- Vocal. Bada hi tight argument thaaapka. Par tragedy ye haikiissmahaulmein, aapkesahaskoshabhashinhimilegi. Ruling party aapjaisepesakhtnazarrakhehuyehai", (loosely translated to how Karan and his cause is courageous, as he stands against the ruling government) these politicians even though, are using Karan's identity and the common conflict of the community with the government, offer no insight whatsoever, or guarantee that they will change this. It shows, that with the elections just around the corner, all of this becomes nothing but an agenda of advertisement and promotion for the opposition party to use as a tool, and when correctly used will have the power to overthrow the ruling party.

The final and the last scene of the series is a commentary on identity politics. In the final few minutes, Karan reconciles with Nawab and Tara finally leaves Adil (as she finds out he'd been cheating on her this whole time), they reach the *Made in Heaven* office, only to find it in ruins and vandalized by homophobic goons. The office, and by extension their business,



their investments, their profits all remain in ruins, with derogatory terms written in big red block letters on the walls, that are homophobic slurs directed towards Karan. Karan's queer identity, and the lack of its acceptance, defames him in such a manner that it leads to the downfall of his business. The series ends then, with a zoom out shot of Karan and Tara, sitting in their ruined office. With such an ending, the creators have left much space for their respective storylines in the second season. The show ends with a quote, which states the landmark judgment of 2018 that decriminalized homosexuality and the writers have further attempted to explore these themes in a comparatively liberal India.

Conclusion:

To conclude, the exploration of a queer character in *Made in Heaven*, is one of the truest representation of the community. Refusing to adhere to the conventional norms and gaze, *Made in Heaven*, is nothing less than a statement. It stands against the stereotypical representation of both female and queer characters. The show breaks old stereotypes and sets in trend a whole new arena of inquiry towards the community. Gay characters- both out and closeted are foregrounded in the story in multiple levels. The homosexuality versus heterosexuality theme runs actively throughout, with Karan, a commitment phobic gay man and Tara, a loyal committed wife. The opposing binaries can be seen in multiple other storylines, within the show; for instance the relationship between Jazz and Kabir. These binaries are highlighted representing contrast, one of the primary techniques used by the filmmakers to present a multi-layered complex narrative.

The landmark judgment of 2018, is the first step in sensitizing the historically conditioned population of the country towards a better cause, and makes this a liberal state for the sexual minorities. For the queer movement to move forward and bring empirical and radical changes in the society, authentic representation of the LGBTQ+ community is a prerequisite, and hence visibility in the media is of immense significance. These past few years, have proved substantial for the propagation of the community's rights in India. Even with the reading down of Section 377 a lot of progress needs to be made on a cultural as well as social level. Though, many narratives have tried to create prolific queer characters, they somehow never make it to the public eye. *Made in Heaven*, does exactly that, it comes to the public domain, with the help of its streaming platform, Amazon Prime, bringing the story out for a global audience. "Just visibility and representation are not enough; a critical analysis of these representations is of enormous importance since media can be a significant factor in adoption of LGBTQ rights at the grassroots level" (Pradhan, 2021).

Made in Heaven's, queer representation pleases the critical eye as well, with its unbiased and non-stereotypical portrayal. It propagates no toxic traits or any kind of homophobic attitude. The show chooses to add depth and perception to its queer characters, unlike its predecessors, which majorly censored such content due to legal obligations and homophobic attitude. With the queer movement at its rise, and the decriminalization of Section 377, the scope for streaming on OTT platforms that for the time being are not strictly censored, plays a critical role in the media representation of queer community. This show paves a way, influences as well as encourages the upcoming shows in order to make them more inclusive and non-stereotypical. Many shows and films in the recent times have tried to



deal with this very theme, via different angles, a few examples of the same can be – *ShubhMangalZyadaSavdhan*(2020), *Mismatched* (2020), *Modern Love: Mumbai* (2022), *Badhai Do* (2022), *Cobalt Blue* (2022) along with the many major and minor queer characters, multiple others have tried to showcase queer community in their true light, breaking stereotypical normative structures. With such new films and shows, it will be safe to say that Indian Cinema is towards a radical liberal path.

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