

Theater as the Means of Distressing the Damsel

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Abstract

Woman in the utmost need for a man to live a fulfilling life, the damsel in distress trope has been the part of women's life as well as literature since time immemorial. In 1919, P. G. Woodhouse wrote a novel, *A Damsel in Distress* with the similar patriarchal plot line, wherein distressful Lady Maud Marsh, as she is not allowed to marry her beloved Geoffrey Raymond, is saved by George Bevan. This narration is changing gradually as women are realizing to help themselves from their distressed state. This paper endeavors to focus on one such narrative.

After 100 years of the novel, director Shelly Chopra Dhar, co-writing the screenplay with Gazal Dhaliwal, retells the Woodhouse plot in the form of motion picture named *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* (2019). This film pioneers the positive queer representation in commercial Bollywood cinema, through the love story between two women. As Damsel in Distress has been the model of representing women, similar is the case in portraying heterosexuality, these two ways of representing womanhood and sexuality has become extremely common that it seldom gets noticed to be refuted. Thus when two women writers, one of whom a Trans woman, re-narrates a man's story, they rebuke both the above mentioned tropes.

Shelly employs theatre as tool for her narration, ensuing from another classic narrative technique of play within a play. As *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* is the very first film to present a different kind of love story, it slyly hides the homosexual innuendoes from the trailer as well from the promo, therefore inviting the audiences, without any prior prejudices. Similarly within the film, theatre is used to familiarize the people of Moga, a community not homophobic but unaware about the queer identity. Thus the paper will attempt to study the role of theatre-cinema, replacing the helping hand of a man in distressing the damsel.

Key Words: theatre, queer, damsel in distress

Identity

After reading Woodhouse's *Damsel in Distress*, we find plotlines of both the movie and novel as almost similar. Interestingly the point of difference in the movie is the employing of drama element in the process of distressing the damsel. Notably central scenes of the movie also happen

in the setting of a theatre. For instance on one hand Sweety's revelation of her sexuality to the family happens to be in the theatre, while on the other hand acceptance of her sexual identity is on the stage too. Another example is of Sahil's and Sweety's first meeting, running away from her brother, theatre becomes her hiding place, where Sahil's new play is being rehearsed. Here Sahil has been given a significant statement pertaining to identity:

waise chupme ke liye sahi jagah dhumdhi he tumne, nai matlab duniya se bachna ho, ya khud apne aap se chupna ho to theatre se achi jagah ho hi nai sakti he (you know you chose the best place to hide. I mean weather you are hiding from the world or from yourself. No better place than a theatre) (1:46:25-1:46:16)

Theatre provides a platform to assume as well as reveal one's identity. Gazal Dhaliwal the co-script writer of ELKDAL, in one of her interviews talks about growing up on Bollywood Cinema, because it provided her a window towards happy endings, from leading a torturous life of a women inside a man's body. She also confesses in her talk with *INKtalks* as being suicidal, searching for sleeping pills merely at the age of 12.

Although Bollywood provided merry-cheerful stories, as boy wins the girl at the end, it is important to see the other side of it. Commercial Bollywood had no examples of positive queer representation; it was always a girl boy romance. And cinema which shies ways from gay and lesbian portrayal has miles to go before positive trans representation. Thus Gazal as child hiding in cinema for happiness grows up to be using it as her tool to represent queer community.

I really believe that people in general are good, what make them do wrong things is fear, fear of what they don't know, of what they don't understand, today if the LGBT community is rejected by our society, it is because people don't identify with them and one way to change that is telling stories, to write stories, stories of this minuscule minority, in a way that majority can relate to. And I as Bollywood writer find myself in unique position to be able to do that. To tell the stories of this misunderstood characters, in mainstream Bollywood, so that it would reach out to the maximum people. For example say a romantic comedy about two girls who meet during Bhangra dance practice of big fat Indian wedding, or a story of a huge family coming together after years to celebrate a child's new birthday when the child went through sex change surgery, or may be the story of cop solving a murder mystery along with his super-hot constable cum boyfriend. Stories which entertain, which don't preach, which don't scream activism and yet they don't derive humour at the expense of someone's identity. They show a glimpse into the lives of these people who may seem different from the outside but are actually like just like anybody else (10:44-13:39)

Gazal is normalizing the taboo around queer community by using the commercial language of cinema, thus palatable to majority of audiences. She has written the character of Sweetie similar to herself, who turns her hiding place into a stage to shout out loud.

Basic plot of both the movie and book runs on mistaken identity. For instance, in the book George is mistaken as Maud's American lover by majority of the characters, George thus himself gets the assumption of Maud being in love with him, Lord's love for roses adorned in his corduroy trouser makes him the gardener of the palace for many. Similarly in ELKDAL Sweetie's brother is mistaken as her lover by Sahil, house help makes Sahil believe that Sweetie is in love with him, Balbir Chaudhary's love for cooking makes him the chef(bavarchi) of the house for many. Thus misplacing of identity theme fits perfectly with theme of the movie, which is misplacing of sexual identity.

Casting

In taking about theatre often overlooked aspect is of casting. In queer representation the question of casting becomes pertinent, wherein there are two major camps regarding this issue. One believes that it is alright to cast a cis gender person for a queer role, as one doesn't go to find a real doctor to portray a doctor on screen. On the other hand it is believed that a queer person should be casted for depicting a queer identity, basically to acknowledge the sensitivity of struggles that a queer person has faced. In the documentary called *Disclosure*, trans community discussing the discourse of casting is noteworthy.

In *Disclosure*, Laverne Cox asks a pertinent question: 'what does it mean to go into culture that you don't exist in and tell those stories? And how do we have critical relationship so that we learn?' (30:2-30:12): Representing queer in a sensitive manner is not everyone's cup of tea. There are multiple examples in both Bollywood and Hollywood of horrifically downgraded portrayals. Thus Gazal being a trans women becomes an apt candidate to tell the story of ELKDAL. Being on the journey herself she knows the horrors from within.

Billy Porter, Emmy winner for playing our beloved Pray Tell from *Pose* speaks on the issue of casting with teary eyes but fearless attitude at the *Paley Centre for Media*. How a gay man's masculinity is always in question, their masculinity is up for discussion, they are offered masculine jobs, because those are the jobs that exist. And queer people try to fit into this paradigm of existence, so that they can at least work. To cope up with homophobia, terror and rejection they have to choose sanity over fame, by adopting energy of expecting nothing, so that they are always surprised which keeps them going. Further Billy shares his experience at Carnigi Melon College from where he graduated. One of the basic lessons taught at the college to be a great actor was to know yourself and be authentic, but in the next breath the professor will turn to the gay boys telling them 'except you faggots'. Thus Billy confesses to spend his 20-25 years

believing this, being unauthentic and lying to one's own self. Quoting James Baldwin he says it took him many years before he could vomit up the stuff that people told him about himself. People were casting him as Romeo, but they were the archetypes of cis-gender relationship. To be himself he had to be the side queen, best friend of somebody, sissy that everyone liked but never the leading man. Billy Porter here is talking about the LGBTQ representation, how roles are made only for a section of society, a queer person can only be on the side line, never to be in lime light. Never taken seriously and always made fun of.

In Bollywood too the situation of queer casting is similar. Team of ELKDAL doesn't share the their casting experience, but another positive queer commercial movie *Subh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (SMZS) team does. Approaching many queer actors for the role team was met with the response that after coming out as belonging to queer community, they will not get the cis roles, which are the majority of roles created in the industry, ones out of closet audiences will not accept them in cis roles. Term used for living such a life, doing roles that don't identify with their own sexuality and often even trivialize their identity is to be done for surviving in industry, is called stealth living. *Disclosure* provides example of Ajita Wilsons, Tracey Africa and documentary features Sandra Caldwell who survived doing such stealth roles in movies like *Love Songs* (1999), *Little Men* (1999), *Good Fences* (2003), *Mentors* (1999), *The Cheetah Girls* (2003) etc, Caldwell shares her experience living this life until she could come out as transgender:

you know what's it like to go on a set and be afraid? Your head is trying desperately to stay in the scene you wake up afraid, you sleep afraid, you are trying to figure out if someone is going to drop the bomb that day, the next day, when is it gonna happen? So you are just afraid all the time, but anyway I did what I had to do it was called survival never think for a moment that I was the only one, and you wanna go and you wanna say, girl ain't we something? But nah you just left it alone. I wish I could have, man wouldn't that have been good (29:15-27:55)

Bollywood is still the stealth phase, where actors like Caldwell are afraid to come out. To contest this issue more shows like *Pose* and more empowering characters like Pray Tell should be written. That can be done with comparatively added sensitivity if attempted by a queer person and will also provide space for queer artists to express themselves.

Apart from stealth SMZS team also revealed another issue of finding queer individuals who are already out and eager to act but are non-actors. Meher Mirza in *BBC Culture*, mentions a noteworthy point about director Faraz Ansari. In his movie *Sheer Qorma*, not only has Ansari casted a trans person as a *cishet* (cisgender and heterosexual) woman, but almost the entire cast and crew are women, from his producer, to editor, to costume designer, to production designer,

line producer, to his associate director and to his assistant director. Ansari has gone even further. Frustrated by an inability to find a trans person to star in their upcoming film, and aghast at the squandered talent and antagonism levelled at them, Ansari held free acting workshops for trans people across the country.

It is interesting to note that in the movie ELKDAL, there happens a theatre workshop in Moga, conducted by Sahil. And as lesbian characters he casts Sweety and Kuhu playing lesbians in the movie. Thus the issue of out queer people with in experience in acting trained through such workshops and fear related to coming out are both resolved in the movie. Contrastingly the actual cast of the movie Sweety played by Sonam Kapoor and Kuhu played by Ragina Cassandra are both heterosexuals.

Casting cis actors for the role of queer thus generates another issue of adding to the already existing stigma towards queer community. Jen Richard: transgender writer, actress, producer and activist remembers watching Jared Leto (cis-gender) receiving Oscar for Best Supporting Role in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2014) for playing Rayon. In his white tuxedo and full beard, in that moment world perceived him as man despite being sensitively in the movie. Thus it is reinforced in public's mind every time they see a man who played trans women off-screen that trans-women are nothing but man with good hair makeup and costume. Another example she provides is of *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), where they did approach Elizabeth Coffey Williams a trans women, but for them she looked like a real women to play the part and instead casted Chris Sarandon, which again, even though being his debut movie was nominated for Oscars. This has been going on for 40 years , Eg: John Lithgow in *The World According to Carp* won The Academy Awards (1983), Cillian Murphy in *Breakfast on Pluto* won The Golden Globes (2006), Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl* (2015) won The Academy Awards (2016). Further she says:

having cis men play trans women, in my mind is the direct link to the violence against trans women. And in my mind, part of the reason that men end up killing trans women out of fear that they're gay is that the friends, for having been with trans women, is that the friends the men whose judgement fear of, only trans women from media and the people who are playing trans woman are the men that they know. This doesn't happen when trans woman plays trans woman. Laverne Cox is just as beautiful and glamorous off screen as she is on screen, as is Jazzmun, as is trace Lysette and Alexandra Billings and Angelica Ross and so on, when you see these women off screen still as women, it completely deflates this idea that they're somehow men in disguise.

Casting of Sonam Kapoor and Ragina Cassandra in ELKDAL, Ayushmann Khuranna and Jitendra Kumar in SMZS and Fawad Khan in *Kapoor and Sons* pose the similar questions. Audience who feel empathy for the queer character played on stage would be extended to the

individual playing that character, but this extension unfortunately cuts off as the character is played by cis-gender individual.

Distressed Damsel

ELKDAL can be called the first commercial film to be progressive for the queer community. Along with that it breaks others taboos too, such as character of father is shown to be passionate about cooking, in Indian society men in kitchen becomes the laughing stalk. Character of Chatro is a divorced woman who had until now put others first but now has decided to give herself priority, by following her passion in acting. Sahil Mirza is the son of a rich father but a man who wants to build something on his own, without the silver spoon.

Even though the film being progressive in so many aspects, it does fall into the same patriarchal traps. With minor changes in the plot it could have broken the ties. Girls like Sweety still has to run from home and hide away from brother to fulfill their desire and locked in the house when found out. while on the other hand man like Sahil Mirza for fulfilling his desire can uproot from Delhi to Moga without being answerable to anyone. Even if Sweety uses drama as the medium to express it is Sahil who guides him. It has to be the man guiding women. Character of Beeji is the epitome example of patriarchal rule, even though being an elder of the house, her opinions doesn't seem matter even a bit, she remains just a clown providing comic relief. When her son Balbir is against marrying Sweety to the Muslim boy, she too against it, when he approves of it, she does too, when he walks out the theatre finding out about Sweety's queer identity, beeji automatically follows him. Contrastingly in the book Character of Lord's sister has overpowering voice but again that strong voice is depicted as her being the shrew. Thus women either can a shrews to tame or sheep to be herded.

It is man's approval that matters. As through Sahil's help she could speak up, with father's consent she can be herself. Minor changes that could have changed this patriarchal narrative are by altering Beeji's reaction in the end at least making her stand with Sweety when she reveals herself. Sweety could have been shown hiding in theatre where some woman director's play is being rehearsed. This woman could have been a lesbian falling in love with Sweety and following her to Moga. Such a narrative along with patriarchal trope could have changed the love triangle trope of Bollywood. Instead of a man director it could have been this woman director helping her come out, and thus empowering women solidarity.

On the other had it being a first movie of its kind, certain models of narrative employed could be tolerated for the purpose of luring the audiences. Theatre shown to be a man's tool to distress the damsel in the movie contrast with the fact that actual director (Shelly) as well as the writer (Gazal) of the movie are women. Even a women centred film created by women has to have loop holes to make it palatable to patriarchal society.

From Page to Stage

As mentioned above, the crucial point where the movie differs from book is the element of drama. Sweety has been shown to write in her diary from childhood, due to the lack of a friend to whom she can confide in. Her feelings and emotions were locked inside the pages of her diary until she meets Sahil. On writing the script Sweety gives her diaries to him for making the script more real to her journey. Letting in a man, outside of the queer community to travel through her life.

It is the stage which gives her courage to speak out loud, it is no longer a family secret but something out in wide open space. We as audiences are watching a drama being played inside a movie. Viewing a drama on stage and cinema on screen has basic difference level of engagement. In the darkened cinema hall, the experience becomes distanced as the screen comes in-between viewer and actor. In a drama theatre, with actors performing live, it less of a make believe. The specialty of theatre is that it materializes the imagination, in a book it remains in your mind's eye, while when put on the stage with actors playing it, it seems to be actually happening and not something in your head, thus becomes more real. Drama being a communal activity, makes the audience share the portrayed experience. Unlike book, which one can read in the corner of one's house the experience of watching something in theatre is communal and thus as community one consumes it, which diminishes the shame factor as the experience is shared. For instance If one reads a sex scene in a book, it remains personal, to oneself, but when the same is enacted on the stage, it becomes a shared viewing and thus stigma around that normalizes. And what better way to normalize a taboo around queer, if not through theatre.

Conclusion

It was hypothesized in the abstract that in the modern age, women director and writer putting up a show would be progressive in nature compared to the book written in 1919, hundred years before today's production. Although drama element is nuisancely used to speak out the long suppressed voice of queer community, it does have the patriarchal undertones. Apart from this we have studied the difference in practicality and theory of casting for queer representation. Ending with the advantages of employing theatre by learning multiple meanings of it.

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