

Pawan Singh

# Queer Bollywood: The Homotextuality of Celebrity Talk Show Gossip

With the decriminalization of homosexuality in India in 2009, representations of same-sex desire have proliferated in Indian media. This is particularly true of Hindi cinema, more popularly known as Bollywood globally, which has experienced an explicit shift in its visual register in relation to the representations of same-sex desire. Where the Hindi films of the 1980s and 1990s privileged themes of male-bonding and homosociality, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the emergence of queer sub-plots in a number of films such as *Kal ho na ho* (Tomorrow may not be, 2004), *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), *Fashion* (2009) and *Dostana* (Friendship, 2009). Scholars have analyzed these representations through both a queering of the older themes of male-bonding and homosociality, and a close reading of queer subplots where such meanings are explicit. Within the canon of Queer Bollywood, the film text has received scholarly primacy over other discourses of popular culture such as celebrity gossip and film award shows. My purpose in this paper is twofold: first, to expand the idea of textuality within Queer Bollywood by including gossip and celebrity culture as discursive sites for the mining of queer meanings and same-sex representations, and second, to offer an alternative approach to queer visibility that moves away from the predominant models premised on the idea of progressive and sensitive representations of same-sex desire with the effect of equating coming out and claiming pride with liberation and empowerment.

In relation to my first goal, the Bollywood texts analyzed here go beyond the boundedness of the cinematic text, bringing into its ambit other discursive sites, where the primary text accretes or attenuates meaning. Toby Miller's call to pluralize and complicate texts as they travel across space and time is instructive in considering award show performances, television talk shows and celebrity interviews as additional textual sites that resonate with, or destabilize hegemonic meanings. Jonathan Gray's notion of paratextuality is also useful in suggesting the contingency of textual meanings that is constituted by paratexts that include promotional texts, merchandise and movie trailers among others. He argues that a film or program is only one form of the text, constantly in the process of forming and transforming. Paratexts may be tangible, for instance, posters, videogames, podcasts, reviews, or merchandise, or may function intangibly, such as with the genre of a film. My approach to thinking about queer textuality in Bollywood is premised upon a plural view of textuality that includes within it the paratextual functions of television talk shows, celebrity interviews and profiles, performances at award shows and other discourses surrounding the cinematic text.

My second goal of offering an alternative model of queer visibility necessitates a move away from reliance upon affirmative representational access that is ostensibly geared towards queer empowerment and liberation. Instead, it frames



Conference presenters during the “Decentering the Popular” panel

the question of queer representation in terms of ambiguity and contingency in meanings that demonstrate a logic of tacit accommodation and re-inscription of same-sex desire within Bollywood’s textual economy, largely driven by heterosexual romances and valorization of family values. I draw upon Eve Sedgwick’s work on reparative and paranoid reading to illustrate how the discourse of gossip produced on the chat show traffics in a range of ambiguous meanings that become available for the pleasures of queer spectatorship and signal a shift from the mode of explicit representation in the Bollywood films of the mid to late 2000s where same-sex relations and desire have been named and made visible.

Thus, the analysis begins with an analysis of *Koffee with Karan*, a popular TV celebrity chat show in India hosted by a Bollywood filmmaker named Karan Johar who is rumored to be gay but has never spoken publicly about his sexuality. This analysis is followed by a close reading of a homoerotic play enacted by Karan Johar with two other Bollywood male actors at the industry’s

annual award show, called the Filmfare Awards. I situate Johar’s participation in the exchange of gossip on the chat show and the homoerotic play at the award show in relation to his interview on another celebrity talk show called *Simi Selects India’s Most Desirable* hosted by Hindi film actress Simi Garewal in the conclusion of this essay. The interview is noteworthy for Johar’s public position on his private life. The conclusion then reflects upon how the ambiguous queer meanings produced by these paratextual sites confound the dominant model of queer visibility and empowerment in India, and yet these meanings remain available for the pleasures of queer spectatorship when read reparatively as opposed to a paranoid viewing practice.

## GOSSIP AND KOFFEE WITH KARAN

On *Koffee with Karan*, Karan Johar’s guests are mostly his friends from the industry who are engaged in gossip and banter by the host. The host asks them questions about their personal lives,

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and solicits comment on other people's personal and professional lives, creating an intimate, familial atmosphere. Sometimes, the guests turn the questions around, probing the host about his personal life. Johar often straddles the fine line between denial and acknowledgement by laughing off and feigning shock at the anecdotes alluding to his sexuality, told by his guests. The references to Johar's sexuality are always indirect and subtle. In season 2, film star Preity Zinta recounts an incident when a struggling male actor approached Johar with his portfolio and asked Johar for a role in his movie. The director asked him to leave the pictures with his assistant but the aspiring actor reached across the table, came physically close to where the director was seated and said "I am willing to do anything for you." Clearly, the reference here is to the well-established practice of the casting couch, which in Bollywood (as in Hollywood) entails the exchange of sexual favors, typically on the part of struggling female actors, with directors and producers to be cast in their film. The homosexual casting couch is certainly less talked about. However, Zinta's revelation, and Johar's meek protests as he tells Zinta that the incident was something he told her in strict confidence, becomes a self-referential moment that neither discloses nor conceals the allusion to Johar's sexuality. The line "I am willing to do anything for you" is repeated in other episodes by celebrity guests on the show, for instance, on season 3, episode 2 where male actors Ranbir Kapoor and Imran Khan tell the host that they are willing to do anything for the host in order to win the coffee hamper after playing the rapid fire round. The two actors also enacted a homoerotic skit with Johar at the Filmfare Awards in 2009 analyzed later in this essay. There are other occasions when the exchange of gossip produces moments of partial disclosure/outing of the sexuality of the host or the guests. In season 2, actor Shahrukh Khan, a close friend of Johar's, was asked what he would do if he woke up one morning to find out he had turned into Karan Johar. The actor's response was, "Waking up in the morning turning into you is less...but waking up in the morning with you is more likely. That's what everyone says." The actor has starred in a number of Karan Johar films and has appeared in every season of *Koffee with Karan*. While the veracity of

the rumors around their possible relationship as lovers is not relevant here, the exchange of gossip on the chat show allows Johar to claim a queer representational space without full disclosure.

Johar has remained somewhat of a controversial media figure precisely because of his experiments with queer subplots in his films, which has led to much speculation about his sexuality. In discussions on LGBT listservs, while some remain sympathetic to Johar's public position on not talking about his sexuality, others impute the queer representations in his films as an index of his own closetedness and demand a coming out in what Sedgwick would describe as the paranoid mode of reading. Sedgwick's distinction of paranoid and reparative reading is crucial to my interest in thinking about an alternative model of queer reading that is tied more to questions of ambiguity and pleasure. She interrogates the hermeneutics of suspicion engrained in critical theory and its imperative to always question, which leads to the privileging of paranoia, particularly in anti-homophobic theory. She further questions the lens of paranoia through which most queer reading occurs in her view, for instance, in Butler's work on drag and the associated intention of demystification and denaturalization of dominant gender roles. Paranoia's faith in exposure as the ultimate site of truth often overlooks the pleasures and possibilities associated with the reparative mode. Where paranoia aims to foreclose and make certain, reparation allows contingency and multiple possibilities.

The insistence for Karan Johar to come out and serve as a role model for the Indian queer community is paranoid in its quest to make certain the truth of his sexuality. However, a reparative reading tied more to contingent meanings would be attentive to the subtlety of the accommodation of queer meanings and the pleasures associated with its ambiguity. The homoerotic skit performed by Johar with two other male actors from Bollywood is yet another instance where the former claims a queer representational space where the gesture is towards performing the closet but never dismantling it keeping the audiences guessing as a result.

The scene of the homoerotic skit at the 54<sup>th</sup> Filmfare Award ceremony opens with actor

Imran Khan entering the stage and making an announcement. Actor Ranbir Kapoor enters the stage next and snatches the microphone from Imran and says, “Dude, what are you doing? That’s my mic.” Imran snatches it back and says, “No, it’s my mic!” The two then continue to snatch the microphone back from each other. To contest this claim of microphone’s ownership, they slowly start ripping items of their clothing (starting with the bow, the vest and the shirt) and with each item, the claim “my mic” is voiced strongly and erotically. They slowly start taking steps backward, still holding the same microphone and snatching it back and forth, and fall back on a red bed, set against a red heart-shaped door on the wall. Their shirts are undone and they are physically closer, half supine on the bed. The camera intercuts this scene with audience reactions of shock and laughter. As they get closer and start panting in erotic undertones, chanting the phrase “my mic” in an almost sexual rhythm, the heart-shaped door opens and Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone enters the stage. She appears horrified and moves to the front of the stage as a Hindi film song about heartbreak plays in the background. The two male actors are still locked in the rhythmic snatching of the microphone, which by now is clearly understood to represent a phallus to the audience. The actress melodramatically performs her horror and pain at this homoerotic scene and exits the stage. The two actors are almost incoherent in their chanting of “my mic,” as if they are getting closer to the point of (sexual) climax. As the two chant with closed eyes, we see Karan Johar appear from behind them, as if he had been hiding under the bed all this while. The two actors turn to face him. At this point, the three appear in close physical proximity, on the verge of a threesome. The camera intercuts to an audience in splits. As Johar rises to face the audience, he says sheepishly, “Actually, it’s my mic.” Johar takes the microphone from them as the two disengage from the simulated sexual play. The following exchange then takes place:

**Johar:** Very hot, very hot! Listen, you gays...(he slips) guys are the ones...I’ve decided you guys are the ones...you both will be in *Dostana 2*!

*The two actors sit up and exclaim in unison, “Dostana 2?”*

**Johar:** Totally, totally, I am very excited, very happy!

**Khan:** Karan, signing amount?

**Johar** (*addressing the audience*): In the history of Indian cinema, for the first time, actors will not get a signing amount.

**Khan** (*confused*): Why?

**Johar:** You will get a signing costume.

**Kapoor** (*whispering to Imran*): Signing costume?

*Johar then leans to the left and picks up a box wrapped in shiny paper and puts it down on the red bed between the two actors.*

**Johar** (*emphatically in Hindi*): Yeh kholo or tum dono yeh pehno...gay! (*“Open this and you both will wear this.” The Hindi word pehnogay means “will wear” but Johar’s clever wordplay makes the double entendre clear.*)

*Kapoor opens box, which is pink on the inside and exclaims.*

**Kapoor:** There is nothing in this!

*The empty pink box is held to the audience.*

**Johar:** This is what you have to wear.

The two actors then nod in affirmation and slap Johar on the back, and say, “Naughty boy!” Johar

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then slaps them on the back and says, “See, John [Abraham] had pulled it down till here, so a little bit further down, and behind...you know what I mean...chew on that.” (Johar is referring to actor John Abraham’s slight exposure of his buttocks in the film *Dostana*, where the actor pulls down his trunks at a beach scene).

Once Johar exits the stage, the two actors are shown to be sitting in close proximity as they debate whether to take Johar up on his offer to wear nothing in the filmmaker’s next production. Ranbir Kapoor says, “Yaar, I don’t really have a problem, because mine is very...” (He makes a click sound with his tongue). Imran chuckles dismissively and says, “Yeah, I’ve seen it.” The two then fantasize about the moment for a few seconds before they both stand up abruptly as if struck by the import of Johar’s offer. As Kapoor says in a huff, “Coming straight to the point.” Imran responds, “Or diagonally,” and both exit the stage in a rush.

The naughty homoerotic play is loaded with innuendos and double entendres, trafficking in a range of queer meanings that are contingent, and yet known, as if through a contract between the actors and the audience. Throughout the dialog among the three, queerness circulates as an epistemic force, also binding the audience in the certain knowledge of who is gay and who is not, without ever naming anyone. Audience reactions of shock and amusement register the open secret of Johar’s sexuality. Karan Johar, on the other hand, occupies the space of the queer voyeur (as if he had been watching them all along), given that he appears from under the bed, emerging directly behind the two actors immersed in homoerotic play. His claiming of the microphone as his own, presenting them with a pink box containing nothing, and offering to cast them in a sequel to *Dostana* are not performative utterances in the sense, “I am gay” or coming out is. Rather, they are periperformatives in the sense in which Sedgwick defines them.

Periperformative utterances allude to explicit performative utterances and describe them as much as they negate them. Drawing upon Butler and Derrida, Sedgwick intends to spatialize concepts mostly theorized in temporal terms (for instance, citationality, iteration). By marking the space around the performative as periperformative,

she suggests that this spatializing move can make it easier to switch back and forth between the two registers of the performative: speech act theory and dramaturgical performance. Periperformatives also perform the task of disinterpellating from a performative scene by disavowing, demurring, repudiating, and perhaps making contingent (emphasis mine). Inasmuch as Johar displaces his queerness through theatrical performativity without resorting to the explicit positive performative of “I am gay,” he marks a much more contingent and ambiguous space in the utterance of periperformatives (It’s my mic, this is what you have to wear, naughty boys!). Or if coming out by explicitly uttering “I am gay” opens up a space of fixed and defined meaning, Johar disinterpellates from that space by acting in the periperformative space of the homoerotic play (innuendo, double entendre). Further, the emptiness of the pink box becomes symbolic of the evacuation of fixed meanings, crossing the border into the terrain of the indeterminate. I now turn to the conclusion, in which I discuss Johar’s appearance on another celebrity chat show called *Simi Selects India’s Most Desirable*, hosted by former Hindi film actress Simi Garewal.

## CONCLUSION

In season 1, episode 14 of *Simi Selects India’s Most Desirable*, Hindi film actress Simi Garewal has a candid conversation with Karan Johar in which she asks him openly, “When people speculate about your sexual orientation, does that bother you?” Johar’s response almost verges on full disclosure. He says, “You’re single, you’re 39, obviously there’ll be conjecture about your sexuality, your orientation. I have no problem with that...it goes with the territory, I can’t be upset or angry about it.” Simi then probes further: “Wouldn’t you ever like to give respect to who you are, your identity, and come out and talk about it because you are a role model, Karan?” Johar quips, “Why should I tell them that I am straight or bisexual, or I am homosexual, or trisexual ...why should I talk about my personal life? Nobody knows what I stand for in terms of my personal life and I like to keep it that way.”

The exchange between Garewal and Johar



pertains to the dominant model of visibility where coming out and accepting one's identity is directly equated with pride, respect and liberation.

Garewal's public interpellation of Johar's sexuality takes on greater significance in the wake of the public debate on homosexuality in India, especially in relation to questions of legal reform and social acceptance. As the Delhi High Court's 2009 judgment in *Naz Foundation v. Union of India* that decriminalized homosexuality remains pending in the Supreme Court of India, the question of queer visibility remains fraught given the disjuncture between legal recognition and social acceptance.<sup>14</sup> In the Indian context, queer visibility and empowerment despite the provisional change in the legal status of homosexuality remains undercut by the modality of moral policing of non-normative bodies and behaviors in certain contexts. Or to phrase it as Sedgwick does when writing about paranoia and reparation: What does

a hermeneutics of suspicion and exposure have to say to social formations in which visibility itself constitutes much of the violence? Indeed, my goal to think about the alternative ways in which queer desire in is represented in Bollywood texts through a logic of tacit accommodation without recourse to an explicit identity-based register is motivated by this profound question. Instead of framing the question of queer representation in ocular-centric terms of transparency and clarity of meanings as mandated by the lens of paranoia, a reparative glance at the paratextual sites of Bollywood yields a much richer space of ambiguous, contingent and fleeting pleasures of queer spectatorship. It also calls attention to the various ways in which queer desire is accommodated tacitly within Indian society outside the framework of legal rights and reform, which while indispensable, remain beholden to a language of visibility that seeks to fix the meanings that accrue to non-normative identities.

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**Pawan Singh** is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego. His research concerns questions of legal reform around sodomy laws in India.

### Notes

1 For instance, see, Ghosh, Shohini. "Queer Pleasures for Queer People: Film, Television and Queer Sexuality in India." In *Queering India: Same-sex love and eroticism in Indian culture and society* edited by Ruth Vanita, 207-221. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

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Gopinath, Gayatri. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005.

Wagh, Thomas. "Queer Bollywood, or 'I'm the Player, You're the Naïve one': Patterns of Sexual Subversion in Recent Popular Indian Cinema" In *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* edited by Matthew Tinkcom & Amy Villarejo, 280-297. London and New York: Routledge, 2001.

2 Hansen, Ellis. *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 1999.

3 Miller, Toby. "National Cinema Abroad: The New Division of Cultural Labor, From Production to Viewing." In *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* edited by Natasa Durovicova & Kathleen Newman, 137-159. New York: Routledge.

4 Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts*. New York & London: NYU Press, 2010.

5 Sedgwick, Eve K. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

6 *Koffee with Karan* is a celebrity talk show hosted by Bollywood filmmaker Karan Johar. The show was produced by STAR world India and ran from 2004 to 2007. The show is immensely popular among urban audiences in India. Source: <http://hindu.com/thehindu/tbscrip/print.pl?file=2005052800220300.htm&date=2005/05/28/&prd=mp&>

7 *Koffee with Karan*, Season 2 (Starworld, November 11, 2005) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V\\_3627U62Pw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_3627U62Pw) (at about 25 minutes and 28 seconds).

8 The coffee hamper is a basket containing an assortment of goodies such as chocolate, cupcakes, and coffee awarded to the winner of the rapid fire round. In the rapid fire round, the host asks his guests a volley of questions requiring them to answer

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quickly and wittily. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spmyBUNbDdQ> (at 35 minutes and 9 seconds).

9 *Koffee with Karan*, Season 3 (Starworld, November 2, 2007) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8v\\_Tm1FXiE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q8v_Tm1FXiE) (at 31 minutes and 5 seconds)

10 LGBT listservs such as LGBT-India, movenpick, and Khush have served as spaces for queer activism, exchange of ideas and debates on queer culture since the early nineties in India.

11 54<sup>th</sup> Idea Filmfare Awards telecast on February 28, 2009, Mumbai. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBrsrgSigN4>

12 *Dostana* (Friendship, 2009) is a Bollywood film produced by Karan Johar. The film features a queer relationship among the two male protagonists who pretend to be gay to woo the girl they both love.

13 *Simi Selects India's Most Desirable* (*Starworld*, Episode 14, September 11, 2011) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiTYeE8SswE8> (at 9 minutes).

14 Editor's note: At the time of the publication, India's Supreme Court overturned this ruling.