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A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF THE 'BROMANTIC' JOURNEY OF BOLLYWOOD: FROM SHOLAY TO SONU KE TITU KI SWEETY

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Abstract:

This paper will try to explore Bollywood's reception and treatment of homosocial relationship. Exploiting the concept of 'Bromance' which has a close association with male homosociality, and projecting an asexual but emotional bonding, some Bollywood productions venture on showing a strong tie of friendship between boys. Unfortunately, the stories generally show that the entry or subsequent mediation of any woman tell upon that bonding and the 'boys' try hard to resist that entry into their homosocial space. This construction of an 'all male world' is problematised when these productions are analysed through the lens of the Bollywood ideology that promotes a normative cultural discourse to the pan-Indian audience and dares not to embrace any deviating or alternative cultural standpoint. The bottom line is the establishment of the supremacy of heteronormativity. This paper will discuss this in the light of *Sholay* (1975) and *Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety* (2018).

Keywords: Bromance, Heteronormativity, Bollywood, Homosocial Relationship, All Male Worlds

I

I would like to start my discussion with an analysis of the idea of 'Bromance' which is generally called a close non-sexual relationship between two or more men. But this affectionate male bonding shares emotions of all kinds and entails with it the idea of homosociality. Homosociality gives bromance the non-sexual dimension and at the same time makes it something more than just love or friendship. Now my point is that the idea of 'bromance' is very much a part of the Indian culture and there are substantial references to it in our literature and art. Prof. Tapobrata Ghosh in his book *Gora aar Binoy* (2002) sums up the idea of 'bromance' referring to Kabikarnapur. Sri Kabikarnapur Goswami in his book *Alankarakaustava*² comments that what pleases our mind is *Rati*. This *Rati* is of two types- 1. *Sampruyogbishoya* (where the pleasure comes through physical intercourse) and 2. *Asampruyogbishoya* (where there is no physical intercourse). The second type can be present between a man and a woman, two men or two women. *Asampruyogbishoya Rati* is of four types- 1. *Preeti*; 2. *Maitri*; 3. *Souhardya* and 4. *Bhava*. Of these *Preeti* and *Souhardya* are always found between a man and a woman, *Bhava* is the *Rati* mixed with awe and respect and is directed towards God or person with comparatively higher stature. *Maitri* denotes the love between two men or women. *Souhardya* among these four types of

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Asamproyagbishoya Ratis is *nirvikara* or that type of pleasure where there are no sensuous desires like seeing or touching (Ghosh, 2002, p.15). Therefore, it can be deduced that *Priti*, *Maitri* and *Bhava* are not *nirvikara* that means they can have the sensuous desires.

This *Maitri Rati* or the pleasure of bonding between two boys or girls appears naive to the heteronormative and/or homophobic social matrix until there is no explicit or implicit sexual reference. Herein, we can bring the reference of the action 'touching' that characterizes *maitri*. Prof. Tapobrata Ghosh comments that according to *Alankarakoustava*, *maitri* is '*sporshadikochita*,' which means there is no harm in touching each other in *maitri* though this touching is proscribed in *Preeti* as it is the *rati* between opposite sexes and is heterosexual in nature. But the *sparsh* or touch which brings the needed intimacy and passion in a relationship has been allowed to a certain extent. Biswanath Chakraborty in the *Subodhani* notes to *Alankarakoustava* writes: "*eyong maitri paraspor skondeshu hastadisparshokarmoni*" (My Trans: 'in *maitri* the friends can hold each other's hands and touch their shoulders.') (qtd. in Ghosh, 2002, p.16) but he goes on to say: "*streenang paraspar jathestho sparshadi byabohare dosho nasti/purushanamapi geyang*" (My trans: 'the girls can touch beyond this and even the boys also') (qtd. in Ghosh, 2002, pp. 16-17). Therefore, bromance which is a type of *maitri rati* in the Indian socio-cultural context may or may not be sexual. My point here is that there can be even implied or sometimes explicit sexual dimensions in bromance which the traditional Indian socio-cultural structure approves.

The Mahabharata shows an intimate passionate relationship between two great men-Krishna and Arjuna, who call each other *sakha*. The mystical relationship between *Krishna* and *Arjuna* has been related to their previous birth as *Nara* and *Narayana* who were complementary to each other. Ruth Vanita in her *Introduction* to the book *Same Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2008) comments: "The author-narrator, the sage *Vyasa*, explains to the preceptor Drona that *Narayana* is the creator of the universe who produced his equal, the great sage *Nara*, by his austerities" (Vanita, 2008, p.6). Referring to that bonding *Krishna* in the *Vana Parva* of *Mahabharata* expresses his deep love for *Arjuna*:

Thou art mine and I am thine, while all that is mine is thine also. He that hateth thee hateth me as well, and he that followeth thee followeth me! O thou irrepressible one, thou art *Nara* and I am *Narayana* or *Hari*!...O *Partha*, thou art from me and I am from thee! (qtd in Vanita, 2008, p.6)

These words of *Krishna* for his soul mate *Partha* echo several times in the epic and testify to the *swavikara maitri rati* between them. Further, we see that after the war, the day before *Krishna* returns to *Dwaraka*, both embrace each other repeatedly. The act of embracing emphasises the need of *Sparsh* or touch that becomes instrumental in expressing one's passionate feeling for the companion/mate/ lover. Precisely, *The Mahabharata*, being the social, cultural and political history of ancient India, cannot ignore the human relationships from all angles. There are references of bromance in the Puranas, the stories of *Panchatantras*, the tales of *Jatakas* and the *Kathasaritsagara* also. In the nineteenth century, we find the letters and writings of *Biharilal Chakraborty* and his *Saradamangal* (1879) where he celebrates *maitri rati*. *Biharilal's* follower and ardent admirer *Rabindranath Tagore* in his works have pertinently projected bromance. In reality, we get a different dimension of bromance in the relationship between his male characters. His *Sandip* and *Nikhilesh* in *Ghare Baire*, *Sribilash* and *Sachis* in *Chaturanga*, *Mahendra* and *Behari* in *Chokher Bali* and *Benoy* and *Gora* in *Gora* have that intimate bonding, which is more than mere friendship and different from love. In fact, *Tagore* was highly influenced by the writings of *Whitman* also who in one of the *Calamas* poems 'Whoever You are Holding Me Now in Hand' expresses his longing for manly love from his comrades: " Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,/ With the comrades' long-dwelling kiss or the new husband's kiss,/ For I am the new husband and I am the

comrade" (Whitman, 1950, p.100) In another poem from *Calamas* 'I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing' he talks of "...a live-oak growing," and its "...rude, unbending, lusty" look "makes him think of manly love" (Whitman, 1950, pp.108-109). Whitman's steady move from the non-sexual bonding of bromance towards a homosexual relationship problematises the very idea of homosociality present in bromance and reminds us of Sedgwick's 'homosocial continuum.' According to Eve Sedgwick homosociality is the passionate bonding between two men. Though it has analogy with the 'homosexual,' it has been consciously defined as different from the latter in the context of the homophobic, heteronormative society. But if we read Whitman's *Calemas* poems or Edward Carpenter's "Woman's soul within a Man's form dwelling" ... "With man's strength to perform, and pride to suffer without signs./ And feminine sensitiveness to the last fibre of being" (Carpenter, 1917, p.410), Sedgwick's "unbroken continuum between homosocial and homosexual" can be clearly identified. Actually Sedgwick's homosocial continuum only establishes the emotional expressions of *Maitri rati* when it becomes *savikara* from *nirvikara* emphasising the passionate desire to touch each other beyond all normative barriers.

II

The representations of the bromance or to be more specific the *maitre rati* in Bollywood are generally careless, obtuse and sometimes comical depiction of effeminacy. Though in most of the cases this perverted depiction is explicit, there are implied depictions also. Ultimately, the Indian box-office is controlled by the heteronormative ideology with its rhetoric of masculinity. The Indian box-office darling *Sholay* (1975) has the bromantic relationship of Jay and Veeru. There is neither perverted or comical representation of effeminacy nor any hint of homoeroticism. But here the bonding suddenly comes to a jolt with the appearance of two women— the cart driver Basanti, and Thakur's widow daughter-in-law, Radha. The sub plot of the movie comprising the potential love stories of Jay and Veeru with the two women unconsciously becomes the driving force of the main plot—Jay winning the toss and going to fight with Gabbar. In reality, the mainstream Bollywood ethos cannot leave a man alone, homosocial/ homoerotic. To become the hero he has to be a masculine heterosexual man. But the situation is problematised by the widowhood of Radha, who cannot be married to the hero for that would go against the mass feeling and consequently tell upon the marketing of the movie. On the contrary the film cannot also celebrate the bromantic *maitri rati* of Jay-Veeru. Hence Jay dies and Veeru is united with Basanti, whose love scenes appear as comic relief to the tensed moments of the thriller. Therefore, *Sholay* in its conformity to the heteronormative and traditional mediocre ideology fails to depict the bromance of the two heroes despite its potential.

The recent trends in Bollywood movies show an inclination towards bromantic relationship and market studies show that the theme makes a profitable storyline. Farhan Akhtar's *Dil Chahta Hain* (2001) or later *Rock On!!* in 2006 and *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011) deal with male bonding and the trend is set. Rohan Sippy's *Bluffmaster* in 2005, *Taxi No:9211* or the recent *Nautanki Saala* present the male bonding where no sexual hints can be traced. The obvious question that comes up here is why these films are so cautious while dealing with bromance or male bonding without any sexual connotation? In the Indian cultural context, where *savikara maitri rati* is not only acknowledged but also celebrated, where sexuality in all its forms and variations are projected and promoted, there this conscious distancing from the depiction of sexuality in friendship or *maitri* is intriguing. A close study of this tendency foregrounds the market demands which control the production and other criteria of any Bollywood movie which in turn is again controlled by a macro-level heteronormative culture. The latter disallows any kind of deviation from the normative structure. Therefore, Jay and Veeru cannot be gay partners or they come physically close to each other only after Jay dies. The famous song "*Yeh dosti, hum nahein torengi...*"

remains only as an instance of failed male-bonding in the truest sense. The line: “Tera gham mera gham/ Teri jaan merry jaan/Aisa apna pyar...” moves onto “Zaan par vhi khelenge/ Tere liye le lenge/Sabse dusmani” reminds us the bonding between Krishna and Partha who celebrated the *savikara maitri rati* within the scope of an epical structure. Unfortunately, Bollywood cautiously defines friendship only as friendship devoid of any varied connotations or dimensions of relationships.

III

I have already mentioned that male bonding is the in thing in Bollywood these days and the trend of implied potential homosocial bromantic feelings can be traced in many other movies. But recently, Luv Ranjan’s *Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety* (2018) brings in the concept of bromance almost from a new angle with an implied heterosexual masculine ideology. The movie projects an asexual but emotional male bonding, a strong tie of friendship between two boys—Sonu and Titu. Sonu with his caring and nurturing attitude disallows any woman to enter into their homosocial space. The film starts with the breakup of Pihu and Titu as the latter unknowingly opens her Tinder account. Sonu comes up as the caring friend and becomes instrumental in their breakup with posing a curt question of choice between him and Pihu. And Titu chooses his best friend, Sonu. The story moves on with the preparation of Titu’s marriage and now he starts courting Sweety. With the appearance of this new woman, the simple story line of the film comes across a crisis. Titu, his parents and grand mom approves the girl, who appears as a potentially caring wife. But Sonu finds in her a villainous menacing woman, who will slowly but steadily disrupt the bonding of this affluent, open-minded and liberal family. Being a childhood friend of Titu, Sonu hatches a plan with Titu’s grandfather, Ghasitaram and his best friend Lalu Kaka to expose Sweety. On the occasion of Titu’s bachelor party, he happens to meet Pihu again and emotionally convinces her to join Titu’s marriage ceremony so that Sweety feels embarrassed. But this plan also fails and Sonu is finally exposed to Titu as one who wants to dissuade him from his conjugal happiness. But on the wedding night when Titu and Sweety is about to exchange their garland, Sonu poses the same question to choose between Him and Sweety. And Titu again goes after Sonu. The story line of the movie clearly points to the homosocial bromantic relationship between the two boys which parallels to the mature bromance between Ghasitaram and Lalu. The movie gives the suggestion of a complacent, closed and complete utopic space of the all-male world where these four can eat kebabs, drink whisky and make merry.

But this construction of an ‘all male world’ is problematised when the film is analysed from the perspective of the Bollywood ideology which promotes a normative cultural discourse to the pan Indian audience and dares not to embrace any deviating or alternative cultural standpoint. Therefore, the film has to take resort to misogyny to validate the homosocial bonding between the two friends, Sonu and Titu. Sonu and Titu could have been two homosocial partners or even gay partners. But then they would have fallen short to become the ‘main-stream’ bollywood heroes, who are expected to be heterosexual. Therefore, at the end when after the dismissal of Titu’s marriage, he asks Sonu about their future, the latter curtly retorts that he will get married to a beautiful, young and “good girl.” To the utter amazement of Titu, Sonu further says that “*upparwala acchi ladki banane hi bhul gaye*” (God has forgot to make good girls) and, therefore, he broke the marriage because it was his duty as a good friend to save him from the “bad girls.” But interestingly, the movie also shows its compulsion to project the boys as heterosexuals and the seemingly bromantic bonding is only because of this lack of “good girls.” In various song sequences where they are seen partying, the movie gives ample references to Sonu and Titu’s heterosexual orientations. But what comes up as the obvious issue is the chance of their homosocial bonding. Sonu’s reactions to Titu’s emotional break downs after his break ups or when

he claims that: *Sweety tu Titu ki wo baat janti hain jo wo tumhain baatatein hain, aur mein wo baat bhi jaanta hun jo wo mujhe nahin baatatein hain* (Sweety you know those things about Titu what he tells you, but I know all that he doesn't even tell me) projects Sonu as the life-partner who will protect him from all the odd (read: *budi ladki*) around them. Interestingly, throughout the film, Sonu appears as a competitor of Sweety in achieving Titu. His schemes to distance Titu and Sweety are duly approved by the other two bromantic partners— Ghasitaram and Lalu, suggesting a construction of a utopic all-male world.

But what disturbs us is the validation of this construction of this male utopia through misogyny. At the end it becomes obtusely discernible that Sonu and Titu's bromance is because of the typical female complexities that agonizes the boys. Their homosocial bonding is not to open up a new vista of human relationship, but it walks on the clichéd sexist path that considers women detrimental to their carefree and complacent life and hence they should prohibit their entry into their male space. In this context, we can bring in the reference of the Karan Johar movie *Dostana* (2008) that strategically exploited gay partnership only to ridicule it. The bottomline remains the compulsion of establishing heterosexuality as the norm. The story of *Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety* was potent enough to celebrate the *maitri rati* with or without sexual desires. But Sonu's disclaimer at the end in a song: "*teera yaar hun main*" only establishes him as straight, sexist and merely an uni-dimensional heterosexual man, who wants to save his friend from the supposedly menacing women who, according to patriarchal beliefs, are only to disturb and disrupt their male utopia.

Bollywood from the very beginning was controlled by the hetero-patriarchal dicta and this trend is still continuing. Occasionally, some film makers dare to deviate. But in those cases, the economic, social and cultural contexts are different. Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1996) or movies like *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) or the recently released *Such Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (2020) have different target viewers. Recently, the OTT platforms also offer more liberal and open space for the filmmakers to experiment with new issues and concepts. But dealing with the queer issues and the struggle for making them visible in the Indian cinema is not my point of discussion though these contents are welcome. Rather, I would like to question the very tendency of straight jacketing bromance or male-bonding and tagging them as purely asexual. The serious viewers of Bollywood are awaiting the release of movie of two boyfriends and/or girl friends who grows up to realize that they are not 'just friends' but friends who enjoy all types and variety of passions in their relation and celebrate their *dosti*...

Notes:

1. I am highly indebted to Prof. Tapobrata Ghosh's book *Gora aar Binoy* which gave me the basic idea to formulate the argument for this paper. Prof. Ghosh's in-depth analysis of *Maitri Rati* and his abundant references to the various Sanskrit texts gave me the direction to trace and establish bromance in the Indian cultural context.
2. Please refer to *Alankara-kaustubha* (1923) by Sri Kavi-karnapura. Rajshahi: Varendra Research Library.

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