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Silent Desires: Emotional Isolation and LGBTQ+ Longing in Sachin Kundalkar's Cobalt Blue

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Abstract

This article explores the complexities of queer identity, desire, and emotional isolation in Sachin Kundalkar's novel and film adaptation, *Cobalt Blue*. The narrative centers around two siblings, Tanay and Anuja, who develop romantic feelings for their paying guest, exploring themes of sexuality, family, and societal norms. Through a critical analysis of the characters' experiences, this study examines the psychological turmoil that can accompany non-conforming identities. It highlights the impact of societal expectations on individual desires, underscoring the need for greater understanding and acceptance. The article also discusses the role of cinema in normalizing queer identities and promoting broader discussions about sexual identity. By utilizing queer theory as a conceptual framework, this research provides insight into the complexities of human experience and the importance of representation in promoting empathy and acceptance. This study demonstrates the significance of *Cobalt Blue* as a work that challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality, offering a nuanced portrayal of queer longing and emotional isolation. By exploring the intricacies of human desire and identity, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the LGBTQ+ community and the importance of inclusive representation in media.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Indian cinema, LGBTQ+, Film adaptation

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Introduction :

Indian cinema, with its long and vibrant history, has often struggled to authentically portray the experiences of queer individuals. For decades, LGBTQ+ characters were relegated to stereotypical roles, often used for comedic relief or as objects of ridicule. This lack of nuanced representation contributed to the marginalization and erasure of queer identities in mainstream society. While independent films and regional cinema occasionally offered glimpses of more complex queer narratives, these stories rarely reached a wide audience.

However, in recent years, there has been a gradual shift towards more inclusive and sensitive portrayals of queer lives in Indian cinema. Films like "Cobalt Blue" (Johri, 2024; Kundalkar & Pinto, 2022) and others are beginning to challenge traditional stereotypes and explore the complexities of LGBTQ+ relationships with greater depth and understanding. This evolving landscape reflects a growing awareness of queer issues in Indian society and a desire to create more diverse and representative narratives on screen. While challenges remain, these developments offer hope for a future where queer people are seen and heard in Indian cinema with authenticity and respect.

Queer Representation and the Literary Landscape:

"Cobalt Blue," a 2013 fictional drama novel by Indian film director, screenwriter, and playwright Sachin Kundalkar, marks his literary debut. Initially published in Marathi in 2006, the novel was subsequently translated into English by Jerry Pinto and released in 2013. The narrative centers around two siblings, Tanay and Anuja, who develop romantic feelings for their paying guest at their Pune residence. The novel explores themes of sexuality, family, and societal norms. Kundalkar conceived the novel shortly after relocating to Mumbai at the age of 22. He expressed a sense of urgency, stating, "I had nothing else to do, so I started writing Tanay's monologue and later Anuja's." The writing process commenced at the age of 20 and concluded at 22. Upon completion, Kundalkar shared the manuscript with his friends, who recognized its literary merit. The novel was subsequently published in Marathi in 2006. In 2013, Jerry Pinto, after Shanta Gokhale's recommendation, read the novel and was captivated by its emotional authenticity, despite its technical imperfections. Pinto subsequently translated the novel into English, presenting it to his Marathi teacher for feedback. He then shared it with Gokhale and finally with Kundalkar, who approved the language choice.

The Film Adaptation:

In November 2018, it was announced that the novel would be adapted into a feature film of the same title for Netflix. Written and directed by Kundalkar, the film was scheduled for streaming on the platform starting December 3, 2021, but was subsequently postponed. It was finally released on April 4, 2022. In a nutshell, Cobalt Blue is a well-crafted and visually stunning film that becomes overwhelmed by its excessive use of symbolism. The film's cinematography is beautifully executed by Vincenzo Condorelli, with the coconut tree-lined horizons and backwaters of Kerala being effectively utilized. However, the decision to shift the movie's setting from Maharashtra to Kerala was inexplicable and surprising, impacting various other aspects of the film.

Narrative Focus and Visual Language:

The storyline is simple yet emotionally charged, featuring a mysterious young painter who becomes a paying guest in a family. The two younger siblings, Tanay and Anuja, develop romantic feelings for him. While the film captures the romances effectively, it leaves room for improvement. The first half of the film is tediously slow and excessively saturated with the color blue. Numerous walls, a diary, Prateik Babbar's paintings, his cycle, and his notebook are all painted blue. Even a wooden crate is blue.

Queer Themes and Creative Choices:

Kundalkar himself adapted the book into the movie's screenplay and made several changes, some more welcome than others. Portraying a romance between two men set in a homophobic, patriarchal, and traditional Indian household presents a challenging task without resorting to proving a point or altering the world. LGBTQIA+ movies do not necessarily need to conclude with a pride parade, and this film does not. It fulfills its expectations without becoming preachy or breaking into groundbreaking monologues.

Although the original book is written in Marathi and the movie features a traditional Marathi family at its core, one rarely encounters a Marathi dialogue throughout the film. The characters are proficient in Malayalam and Hindi, with a few English dialogues interspersed. Tanay's Hindi dialogues appear rehearsed and mechanically delivered, despite his impeccable Hindi writing. As previously mentioned, the movie has been set in Kerala, and Kundlaker attempts to incorporate the socio-political aspects of this setting into the film, but the effort is half-hearted and superficial, lacking any meaningful callbacks.

Personal Interpretation:

Whenever we read a book, it is inevitable that we project our own image onto the characters. Less so as the writer imagined them and more in our own likeness. Readers bring the words on the pages of a book to life within the confines of their minds, creating an instant feature film where we assume the roles of actors, directors, and cinematographers. This phenomenon occurred to me when people read Jerry Pinto's translation of Sachin Kundalakar's novel *Cobalt Blue*. When people read a queer love story written by an Indian author that was not a blog post or a short story on a queer fanfiction website. It was a full-fledged novel, written in the 1990s and translated and published as a mainstream English-language novel. It introduced me to a concealed world of extraordinary possibilities, and they recognized myself within its pages. Having said all that, they would like to clarify that they do not expect the director to perceive what they saw as a reader.

The Absence and Aspiration of Queer Representation in Indian Cinema:

As a queer individual in India, individuals genuinely feel the absence of representation in Indian cinema, particularly in mainstream Hindi cinema. Queer men are either portrayed as comedic figures or perverted predators, with the Fires and the Aligarhs being rare exceptions. Recent releases such as *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Badhai Ho* represent a welcome change, but they fail to adequately encompass the diverse experiences of the Indian queer community.

Since the day they read this book, they had eagerly anticipated its movie adaptation and was thrilled to learn that Netflix had acquired the rights to it. However, the movie adaptation, directed by the author himself, premiered on April 2nd, 2013, and they was filled with elation, despite the circumstances.

Key Points:

1. Definition of queer theory and the characteristics of the theory,
2. Employment and themes of queer theory in the novel *The Cobalt Blue*.
3. Portrays romance between two men in a homophobic, patriarchal, and traditional Indian household.
4. Avoids preachiness and ground-breaking monologues.
5. Receives mixed reactions from viewers, with some finding it relatable and others feeling uncomfortable.
6. Highlights the need for more representation of queer individuals in Indian cinema.

Queer Theory:

Queer theory encompasses a range of ideas that challenge traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Emerging from the radical queer movement of the 1990s, it draws on influences from gay liberation and feminist thought. At its core, queer theory rejects the idea that gender is

rooted in biological differences and instead sees sexual categories as complex, unstable, and historically constructed.

This theoretical framework examines how societal norms and power structures marginalize individuals who don't conform to traditional gender and sexual binaries. By highlighting the fluidity and diversity of human experience, queer theory seeks to dismantle these binaries and promote a more inclusive understanding of identity.

In academic contexts, queer theory often intersects with post-structuralist thought, drawing on the works of scholars who have shaped our understanding of identity, power, and desire. However, its relevance extends beyond academia, informing activism and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting greater inclusivity and acceptance.

Ultimately, queer theory's goal is to challenge dominant narratives and create space for diverse voices and experiences. By interrogating the ways in which societal norms are constructed and maintained, queer theory offers a powerful framework for understanding and addressing the complexities of human identity.

The Impact of Queer Cinema on Representation and Identity:

Queer films have emerged as a significant medium for exploring and challenging traditional notions of gender and sexuality. By introducing non-normative desires into public discourse, these films subvert cinematic conventions and bring marginalized themes into the mainstream. This shift in representation enables a more nuanced understanding of complex identities and challenges the dominant heteronormative narrative.

The portrayal of queer characters and their experiences in films like *Cobalt Blue* provides a platform for catharsis and empowerment. By humanizing these characters and their struggles, these films promote empathy and understanding, allowing audiences to engage critically with the themes and issues presented. The narratives of these films offer a powerful testament to the resilience and strength of individuals who navigate complex identities and societal expectations. Queer cinema challenges dominant narratives by presenting alternative perspectives and experiences. By exploring the complexities of human identity and experience, these films provide a platform for marginalized voices to be heard and celebrated. This shift in representation has the potential to mitigate the trauma of marginalization and promote a more inclusive understanding of identity.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, queer films offer a unique platform for exploring and challenging traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Through their narratives, these films provide catharsis and empowerment for marginalized communities, promote empathy and understanding, and challenge dominant narratives. As a result, queer cinema has become an essential part of the cultural landscape, providing a powerful tool for promoting greater inclusivity and acceptance.

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