Beyond weeping and slammed doors

As Pride month draws to a close, will mainstream cinema move on from the coming-out experience?

BY KENNETH ROSARIO

The Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival this year had the Asian premiere of Vandana Kataria's Noblemen, where Kunal Kapoor is a drama teacher who deals with bullying and homophobia in a boarding school.

After the screening, one viewer stood up and accused the film of depicting gay men in an unflattering light. “It does nothing for the gay movement,” he declared. Another viewer defended the film, saying Indian queer films rarely go beyond the coming-out experience.

Coming out is undoubtedly a milestone in a queer person's life, especially when it's coming out to the family. This innately dramatic moment, when depicted on screen, takes the shape of a perfect conflict, enough to drive an entire film.

When a college-going Varun comes out to his mother, he is asked to leave home in Lokesh Kumar’s Tamil film, My Son Is Gay. There is ample weeping, some slapping, and a few slammed doors. Sridhar Rangayan's Hindi film, Evening Shadows, makes the process even more melodramatic by setting it in the middle of a lake.

Karthik and his mother are in a core of leisurly. When she becomes aware of her son's sexuality, she is crestfallen and confused. Confined in the boat, her inner conflict is brought out through melancholic music and a long shot of the lake against the setting sun. In a more mainstream set-up, Sunita (Ratna Pathak Shah) stumbles upon her son Rahul's (Fawad Khan) photos with his partner in Kapoor & Sons (2016). Her favourite child is no longer flawless.

New directions

While these mothers do come around (with varying degrees of comfort with homosexuality), the primary source of conflict in the stories of gay men remains their hidden sexuality. In Kumar’s film, Varun (Ashwinijit) discreetly consults a psychiatrist when he is attracted to men in his gym. The doctor takes him under his wings, introduces him to his gay activist son and explains the normalcy of homosexuality, almost as if addressing the viewer.

Queer films certainly provide a fertile ground for education, but not without the imminent threat of being didactic, or worse, painting queer lives as those destined to doom. So the big question is: where is Indian queer cinema today?

A few regional independent films like Nagarkirtan (Bengali), khejdi (Hindi) and Irattajeevitham (Malayalam) are bringing in diverse narratives. Suresh Narayanan’s Irattajeevitham chronicles the post-transition life of a transman in a small coastal village in Kerala, and is narrated in a sombre tone, as if mourning the loss of a pre-transitioned body.

One could attribute the grimness of Indian queer films to the largely hostile environment that surrounds LGBTQIA+ citizens in India. It is hardly surprising then that directors rarely make homosexuality incidental to the story.

Gay story (from left) Stills from My Son Is Gay, Irattajeevitham and Evening Shadows.

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