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***Dedh Ishqiya: Obscuring the Female-Bond***

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# ***Dedh Ishqiya: Obscuring the Female-Bond***

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# ***Dedh Ishqiya: Obscuring the Female-Bond***

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Through his Bollywood film, *Dedh Ishqiya*, Abhishek Chaubey addresses matters of comfort and discomfort through the use of typically heteronormative conventions in film. The Bollywood film *Dedh Ishqiya*, tells the story of a wealthy widow's search for a new poet husband in the setting of an Urdu poetry gathering (*mushaira*). She is accompanied and supported by her female friend and handmaiden, Munniya. Their two supposed lovers, Khalujaan and Baban, are thieves, out to steal the love and wealth of these women. However, unbeknownst to these men, the women are lovers themselves and they too are out to steal the love and wealth of a suitor so that they may run away together. Director and co-writer, Abhishek Chaubey, uses conventions drawn from the Sufi, Urdu, and *bhakti* poetic and literary aesthetic worlds. He builds up an aura of comfort through the use of these conventions. But, he focuses on the complex, but platonic female (*sakhi*) -bond. Chaubey uses the *sakhi* bond, as well as other conventions, to draw the viewer into a seemingly heteronormative and conventional (therefore, comfortable) film. But this viewer is then brutally let down when the film subverts those conventional tropes in favor of a *non*-heteronormative romance. Chaubey does this by referencing Ismat Chughtai's short story, *Lihaaf*, and Ridley Scott's film, *Thelma and Louise* in his film. Both story and film take the female-bond and complicate it in a way that forces the viewer to examine their own conceptions of comfort, especially those related to sexuality and romance. This thesis focuses on the process of building up comfort through a heteronormative-use of conventions, and then the breaking down of that comfort by referencing *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise*.

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## Introduction

To feel discomfort is to stretch and push our boundaries of comfort to the brink of what we can tolerate. Abhishek Chaubey's Bollywood film *Dedh Ishqiya*, does just that through the literary and filmic convention known as 'female-bonding.' The average Bollywood viewer must adjust their notions of comfort to accommodate different uses of the trope. The film complicates the generally heteronormative and platonic relationship between *sakhis* (female companions). The two main female characters in *Dedh Ishqiya*, Munniya and Begum Para, seem to epitomize this platonic female-bond. To the average Bollywood viewer, female-bonding, and a few other conventions I will look at here, should make the film a comfortable one to watch. Each woman has a male lover, and they have each other to help woo their respective man. Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti* conventions pull the viewer into a safe place of poetry and love.<sup>1</sup> But this viewer is then brutally let down when the film subverts those trusted conventions to tell a *non*-heteronormative romance between these women. Two literary and filmic references help to transform this film from a comfortable, conventional romance to a non-conventional one. Both depict similarly subversive and complex female-bonds: Ismat Chughtai's short-story, *Lihaaf*, and Ridley Scott's American cult classic, *Thelma and Louise*. In this thesis, I will focus on the process of building up and then breaking down of comfortable filmic conventions in *Dedh Ishqiya*, particularly female-bonding. This process greatly affects the average Bollywood viewer, and forces them to reconcile with their own conceptions of comfort, especially those related to matters of sexuality. Through *Dedh Ishqiya*, I will also take a closer look at what this notion of comfort is and how it comes out in mainstream film.

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<sup>1</sup> When discussing the aesthetics and conventions of various literary traditions, in this case of Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti* traditions, the inclination is to separate them from one another. They are seen different languages with histories that merely overlap at certain points. However, this is not a helpful way to think about these three, supposedly separate, traditions. For the remainder of this thesis, when I reference the Sufi and/or Urdu literary traditions, it will be to refer to the connection between the two.

## Abhisheky Chaubey and *Dedh Ishqiya*

Director and co-screenwriter of *Dedh Ishqiya*, Abhishek Chaubey appears to have always had an interest in the translation of literary works to the silver screen. Therefore, it is not unusual to find references to *Lihaaf*, *Thelma and Louise*, and, possibly, Homer's *The Odyssey* in this film. Chaubey's past film projects suggest his interest in translation and distance from the typical "masala" film formula. Born in Faizabad, Uttar Pradesh<sup>2</sup> in 1977, he went on to study English Literature at Hindu College in Delhi. From there he moved to Mumbai where he took courses in Film and Television Production at Xavier Institute of Communications. He often worked with film director, Vishal Bhardwaj, as associate producer and co-writer. Bhardwaj (a mentor and friend of Chaubey) and Chaubey went on to co-direct, -produce, and -write many more films together, including *Dedh Ishqiya*. Between these two, the list of films which makes reference to or adapts well-known pieces of literature, as well as folktales, is considerable in length and prestige: *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011, *The Seven Wives of Bluebeard* by Anatole France), *Omkara* (2006, *Othello*), *Maqbool* (2003, *Macbeth*), and *The Blue Umbrella* (2005, *The Blue Umbrella*, an Indian novel by Ruskin Bond). One film that was not necessarily a translation but was compared to the cult classic, *Pulp Fiction*, is *Kaminey* (2009). One thing that remains constant throughout all these films is a strong leading female character. This is something which Chaubey claims to be very interested in integrating into his films.<sup>3</sup> However, audiences and critics did not expect the extent to which he took this interest in the female character for *Dedh Ishqiya*.

Upon its release in January 2014, responses to the film were varied. The film was highly anticipated, largely because the queen of Bollywood, Madhuri Dixit, was making her come back. The prequel, *Ishqiya*, was a hit at the box office in 2010, and the public was expecting something similar. *Ishqiya* told the story of a small-town woman, Krishna (Vidya Balan), whose husband, Verma, was a local gang leader. But she convinces him to leave behind his gang lifestyle. Following an explosion, Krishna believes him to be dead, but she

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<sup>2</sup> Faizabad boasts of multiple singers, poets, and authors of the Urdu language who originate from the city: Begum Akhtar, Mir Babar Ali Anis (well-known poet of the Urdu genre, *marsiya*), and Brij Narayan Chakbast (Urdu poet and translator of the Ramayana into Urdu). The fact that Chaubey grew up in an area rich in Urdu literary culture is extremely significant for this film.

<sup>3</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news-interviews/Abhishek-Chaubey-on-Dedh-Ishqiyas-unexpected-end/articleshow/30207325.cms>



later discovers that he may be alive. She befriends and seduces two criminals, Iftikhar aka Khalujaan (Naseeruddin Shah) and Razzak Hussain aka Baban (Arshad Warsi). Krishna uses them to locate her husband who actually staged his own death so he could continue with his illegal work. *Dedh Ishqiya* supposedly picks up with Khalujaan and Baban where *Ishqiya* ended, minus Krishna's character. Their charming cluelessness and on-screen chemistry made them a favorite at the box office. However the two leading ladies in *Dedh Ishqiya*, Madhuri Dixit (as Begum Para) and Huma Qureshi (as Munniya aka Munni), overshadow Khalu and Baban. What reviewers and viewers expected from the film, especially with regards to its prequel, did impact its reception and success at the box office. Conventions, therefore, were not the only source of discomfort.

The critical response to *Dedh Ishqiya* was overwhelmingly positive. The film proved Chaubey to be a fully developed director, capable of taking over the reins from his mentor. But reception at the box office was not what was expected. Some expected the film to be a replica of the first, more traditional, comic thriller. Instead, *Dedh Ishqiya* brought over only Baban and Khalujaan, and none of the traditional charm of *Ishqiya*. There were, however, two positive critiques which many reviewers expressed. The first is that thanks this film, and a few other recent releases (*Queen*- 2014; *Highway*- 2014; *Gulaabi Gang*- 2014), the idea that female characters are meant to titillate and support the main (male) characters, was no longer viable for the success of a film.<sup>4</sup> The second outcome was that because of her role as a non-heterosexual lover, Madhuri Dixit discussed and accepted her relatively new status as "gay icon" in Bollywood.<sup>5</sup> But not everyone was overjoyed by the fact that Madhuri Dixit was turning away from previously, overly-sexualized characters of her past films. *Dedh Ishqiya* has quite a different tenor from her previous films.

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<sup>4</sup> "Dedh Ishqiya: Women are no more eye candy, says Madhuri Dixit." n.p. January 1, 2014. <<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/dedh-ishqiya-women-are-no-more-just-eye-candy-madhuri-dixit/442698-8-66.html>>

"Queen, Gulaab Gang, Highway: Women in Indian Cinema are finally claiming their rightful place." Shomini Sen. March 21, 2014. <<http://m.ibnlive.com/news/movies/queen-gulaab-gang-highway-women-in-indian-cinema-are-finally-claiming-their-rightful-place/459253-8.html>>

"Heroine is the new Hero." Tania Ameer Khan. February 23, 2014. <<http://www.millenniumpost.in/NewsContent.aspx?NID=52704>>

<sup>5</sup> "Madhuri Dixit: I don't mind being called the new gay icon." n.p. February 20, 2014. <<http://www.rediff.com/movies/report/slide-show-1-madhuri-dixit-i-dont-mind-being-called-the-new-gay-icon/20140220.htm#1>>

This matter of tenor (i.e. what the audience expected and what they didn't get) in the film makes for a confusing viewing experience. Leading up to *Ishqiya* and *Dedh Ishqiya*, Chaubey's films were all somewhat dark and humorous in tenor. Two in particular carried this tone because they are filmic translations of two of the darkest and bloodiest plays by Shakespeare: *Othello* and *Macbeth*. *Ishqiya* and *Dedh Ishqiya* appear to depart from this dark humor and drama by portraying what appears to be at first, a comfortable, heteronormative romance. But, the slippery way in which *Dedh Ishqiya* slides from genre to genre and tenor to tenor, makes it a difficult film for critics and audiences to pinpoint. The film starts out with Baban telling a crass joke to his thieving employer. But only ten minutes later, the tenor of the film moves to the genteel world of Urdu poetry. Chaubey seems to divide the crass and genteel moments between the male and female characters, implying that men are crass and women are genteel; or at least, only up until a point. Chaubey evidently wants the film to appear like any conventional (male-female) romance, so that he can pull his audience into a state of comfort and safety. But with that state of comfort established, the tone of the film then becomes confusing, altering with every twist and turn in the plot. The meaning and significance of the film emerges by following these shifts.

## The Plot

*Dedh Ishqiya* takes place in Mahmudabad (Majidabad for the DVD release)<sup>6</sup> in the present day; however, the film brings viewers back to an era in which *mushairas* (poetic symposiums) were at the height of popularity. This background creates a sense of comfort in the average Bollywood viewer. With the exception of the first fifteen minutes of the film, Chaubey makes the audience feel as though they left behind the roughness and vulgarity of the present age, and have been transported back to a simpler time of poetry and romance. Moments interrupt this reverie, jarring the viewer back into the present. But most of those moments occur only when the screen is populated with male characters. If anything this

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<sup>6</sup> Lalitha Gopalan's book, *Bombay*, discusses the influence which powerful parties have over the final cut of any given film. The change from Mahmudabad to Majidabad is a mysterious one which has largely gone unnoticed. Those who have noticed it (evidence of this is limited to twitter comments) have not engaged with the change.

Lalitha Gopalan. *Bombay*. London: British Film Institute, 2005.

speaks to the way that viewers are meant to interpret specific characters. Up until the second half of the film, crass moments on screen are usually brought on by the presence of a male character. Female characters bring moments of poetry and romance. Who these characters (supposedly) are (what their names are, who they are a lover or friend of, etc.) contributes to the plot.

The film revolves around a small cast of characters. The first two characters on screen are Khalujaan and Baban, the only characters brought over from *Ishqiya*. The two men are vulgar. They don't seem to care about anything except stealing money. The film begins with them visiting a *darzi* (tailor) to rent an expensive looking *sharwani* (men's Indian suit). Baban dresses up as a Nawab so that they may gain access to an expensive jewelry store and steal a necklace. They are caught in the act and separated while being chased by police. Baban is left empty-handed while Khalujaan makes off with the necklace. The next time Baban sees Khalujaan, the latter is on television dressed as a Nawab. The newscaster introduces him as the Nawab of Chandpur, Iftikhar Hussain, one of the poets participating in Begum Para's annual *mushaira*. Begum Para hosts the *mushaira* every year (this being the fourth year, reference to *The Odyssey*)<sup>7</sup> to search for a new husband. She promised her late husband that she would remarry a poet.<sup>8</sup> What better venue for such a search than a *mushaira*.

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Odyssey*, Penelope tricks her suitors for three, going on four years. Her husband, Odysseus, is believed to be dead and she is pressured to remarry. She promises her husband, before his departure, that she will remarry if he does not return by the time their son becomes a man. She tells her suitors that she will make a decision by the time she completes weaving a shawl for a neighbor's husband. But every night, for three (almost four) years, she sits down to her loom and undoes all of the work she completed that day. One day someone catches her in the act. But the trickery continues. She sets up trials for her suitors (one of note for this discussion is the shooting competition) which none but her husband can win.

<sup>8</sup> The matter of widow remarriage is a complex one which is surprisingly not a matter discussed or referenced to in *Dedh Ishqiya* to any great extent. Begum Para is a widow who must remarry but does not have the inclination for the task because from her perspective, she already has a partner who fulfills her every need. The only use for remarriage in her case is to deal with the financial troubles caused by her late husband. I do believe that to a certain extent, Chaubey tries to counter the highly prevalent notion that remarriage is a good thing. Not only does she show no real desire to remarry but she also already has a lover, but her lover is not one with whom she can form a 'legitimate' bond with. Perhaps in another space and paper, this matter of remarriage in film can be taken up because it greatly needs and deserves the attention and analysis.

Begum Para, and her companion and hand-maiden, Munniya, host the mushaira every year to the same group of Nawab-bred poets. The relationship between the two women is a close one. Munni is also the only one who knows Begum Para's secret. Para seems polite, courteous, and beautiful, but she is herself a mystery (hence part of her appeal). She appears to have some pent-up anxiety related to her late husband, but the reason for this does not become clear until much later in the film. The mushaira begins with a welcome feast. The scene is dim but Begum Para and Munni provide more than enough light for the party by their mere presence. In this scene, both women are made to appear out of reach for any suitor; but, this does not stop a few suitors from trying. Khalujaan (the lover) and Jaan Mohammed (the rival) pursue Begum, and Baban chases after Munniya.

After the first night, Khalujaan reveals to Begum Para that he knew her as a young woman when she was a dancer. He does not tell her this, but he has come to her to have his trembling heart and hands cured. She expresses some inexplicable distress at her performance history being mentioned and leaves the room abruptly. The next day at the rifle-shooting competition she ignores Khalujaan. She instead talks with Jaan Mohammed (who wins the competition). He mentions something about money and land he lent to her, but the reason for the loan is not mentioned. He goes on to threaten her, saying that he has done everything for her out of love; but just as his name Jaan (meaning 'life') implies, he can give life and take it away.<sup>9</sup> During the same shooting contest, Baban chose Munniya to be the object of his affections and flirts with her incessantly. During this scene, the women appear to be the victims of unwanted attention by all surrounding men. Para appears to be a weak, wealthy woman. Munniya is vivacious but uninterested.

Para arrives home from the competition and grabs her wedding album. She hysterically scratches out her face from each photo. Munni comes up behind her and calms her by massaging her shoulders. She gives Para a pill and Para falls asleep. She awakes to hear music playing in the house. Begum Para and Khalujaan meet when she catches him in a room with all of her dance mementos. Everything is covered in a thick layer of dust. But Begum Para eventually accepts his efforts to bring her back to dance. She and Munni dance

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<sup>9</sup> Earlier in the film, the viewer is told that not only is Jaan the villain of the film, but he cheats. He kidnaps another poet and steals that poet's work to recite at the mushaira. He is not a real Nawab and he is not a real poet.

together with Khalujaan and Baban watching through the windows. From here on, she and Khalujaan flirt and glance at one another as lovers do.

Even Munniya and Baban's relationship progresses to spending a night together. But her intentions are unclear. She recruits him to do something. In the beginning of the film, Munni hires a man to kidnap Begum Para but that man is arrested. It seems that she recruits Baban to take his place. But even in the midst of life threats, possible kidnappings, and fake Nawabs; lovers, poetry, and *sakhis* remain. When the women are away from their respective suitors, they are together, laughing and chatting. The film does not divulge the subject of their discussions, but it can only be assumed that they gossip about their lovers.

The final night of the *mushaira* arrives and Begum Para chooses Jaan Mohammed, shocking poor Khalujaan. On the day of the engagement, a masked Baban bursts in and kidnaps Begum Para. They drive off but are closely followed by a heroic-feeling Khalujaan. Begum Para then reveals to them that she planned her own kidnapping. From the audience's perspective, as shocking as this revelation is, it still seems possible that Para will end up with Khalujaan, and Munniya with Baban. Unfortunately for the two men, Para and Munniya have only ever been interested in Para and Munniya. When they tell their respective male 'lovers' that they are not in love with them, Khalujaan and Baban become extremely upset. They see the women's actions as deceitful and false, forgetting that they themselves are thieves. The tone of the film changes drastically when Para comes out as the main conspirator. It changes even more so when she explains to Khalujaan that her husband was a lover of young men, not women. For her, Munniya cured her of the pain of loneliness and rejection (reference to *Lihaaf*). The kidnapping was a ploy to get money from Jaan Mohammed to pay off her late husband's debt. It was also meant to be a clean escape for her and Munniya.

The film ends with a traditional police shootout when the four characters go to meet Jaan Mohammed for the ransom. The two women escape, driving off into the sunset, leaving everything behind (reference to *Thelma and Louise*). They did not get the ransom money but they do have the necklace Baban stole. He gifted it to Begum Para earlier in the movie. They sell the necklace and set up a dance school in a small town. The two men were sent to prison but an unknown source bails them out. They step out of the building expecting to see the

two women but instead find the Mushtaq bhai, man who hired them to steal the necklace. Even after Para and Munni left them in the dust, they were still convinced that they were the typical (male) Urdu lovers of this film. This sentiment, that the two men's relationships with Para and Munni are the center of the story, is carried throughout the film. Most of the film shows Khalu and Baban as the proactive lovers, going after the beloved. The end of the film completely flips this scenario. It was in fact the women who drew the men in for their own purposes. Para and Munni chose one another over Khalu and Baban time and again, but the men could not give up the idea that these women were not in love with them.

This last sentiment (that the love between Para and Munni is consensual, but that the love with the men is one-sided) refers directly back to the title of this film: *Dedh Ishqiya* (One- and-a-Half Love). The numbering of the title obviously must be of some significance, otherwise Chaubey would have simply entitled the film *Do Ishqiya* (Two Love). Again I find Chaubey to be playing with the discomfort of incompleteness. *Dedh Ishqiya* is uncomfortable largely because the love between Khalu and Para, and Baban and Munniya is not that of a lover and beloved, but something different, something incomplete. This concept of a half-love does not instill in the viewer reassurance with the plot. How can someone love another in a partial way? Is this possible? This discomfort tells us something about our own conceptions of love. The film seems to portray a different idea of what 'love' looks like, and it is not exclusively romantic.

## Creating the Aura of Comfort

Conventional comfort in film and the arts, and how that translates into *Dedh Ishqiya* is the primary concern of this section. Conventions and tropes create not only a sense of comfort, but also the feeling of a comprehensive story. Each one works to bring new light to the plot by complicating it, as well as by feeding the expectations of the average viewer or reader. Sometimes the story is happy, sometimes it is sad, but the conventions remain the building blocks of most narratives. Such building blocks do differ from genre to genre, and period to period, but Chaubey and the other filmmakers insert tropes in such a way which

generally cut across those boundaries. These conventions also speak to the viewers' assumptions and comfort regarding love (i.e what it looks like and who it involves).

The main story begins when Khalujaan appears on TV and the newscaster announces Iftikhar's participation in Begum Para's *mushaira*. The term 'mushaira' is restricted to *Urdu* poetry gatherings; therefore, this is a signal to the audience of what the background of the story will be. Urdu poetry, in film at least, is seen as the literary vehicle for love. For example, most Bollywood love songs are (although even this is changing) in Urdu. The sweetness of the Urdu language supposedly conveys the feeling of romance better than Hindi. The Urdu *mushaira* is a place of love, but more specifically, in Bollywood films, that love is always heteronormative love. All of this comes through in the world of aesthetics which Urdu (as well as Sufi and *bhakti*) poetry constantly refers to.

The world of Urdu and *bhakti* aesthetics<sup>10</sup> is comprised of different characters. The bond between certain characters can be of special significance for the union of the lovers'. The primary relationship in this world is that of the '*aashiq* (the lover) and the *ma'ashuq* (the beloved). The relationship between the lover and beloved is never platonic. The love that the lover feels for the beloved is all-consuming. Surrounding these two are the suitors and the rival (*raqib*) who are also in pursuit of the *ma'ashuq*. But next to the *ma'ashuq*, supporting her in her pursuit of the beloved is the *sakhi* (female friend or companion). She may seem a relatively insignificant character, but often the *sakhi* has the power to bring together the lover and beloved, or to keep them apart. The relationship between the beloved and *sakhi* is always (seemingly) platonic. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, Chaubey assigns these roles as follows: Khalujaan as '*aashiq* and Begum Para as *ma'ashuq*; Munni as *sakhi* to Para; Munni and Baban also as *aashiq* and *ma'ashuq*; Jaan Mohammed as *raqib* to Begum Para; the poets are suitors of Begum Para. The most important of these bonds for the purposes of this discussion is that of the *sakhi*-bond between Begum Para and Munni. She helps Para prepare to meet her suitors and to support Para as she searches for a lover.

The *sakhi* character comes primarily from the *bhakti* aesthetic world. In that world Krishna is the beloved of the *gopis* (milkmaids) and Radha (Krishna's favorite *gopi*). The

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<sup>10</sup> The following chapter will discuss in more detail the term 'aesthetics' and what they do in *Dedh Ishqiya*.

*gopis* are usually depicted as the *sakhis* of Radha. They support and help Radha in her pursuit of Krishna. But sometimes the *sakhi* hinders the lovers' union because she too wants to be with the beloved. The bond between *sakhis* is a sisterly, and often jealousy-ridden one. Their visibility and roles in *bhakti* literature did change with time;<sup>11</sup> but, certain characteristics of the *sakhi* have carried on into film, and it is those characteristics which I will focus on in the following chapter. The *sakhi* does facilitate the development of the story, but she also represents a sacred, sisterly bond with the female beloved/lover. If the *sakhi* misbehaves, such as by impeding the lovers' tryst, she is never considered a negative character like the *raqib*. The *sakhi's* dedication to the female lover (Radha) is meant to be considered as sweet and sisterly. This trait comes across in Munni's character; so too does the jealousy. Munni is constantly by her mistress' side, helping Para to find an '*aashiq*.

The first chapter will look at how Abhishek Chaubey creates an aura of comfort through the use of these literary conventions and tropes. The aesthetically pleasing background of the *mushaira*, combined with the literary figures of the '*aashiq* and *ma'ashuq* brought to life on screen, brings the viewers to a place far removed from their reality. In this world, the lover, suitors, and rivals fight one another for the affection of the beloved while the beautiful and faithful *sakhi* stands at an appropriate distance. Chaubey exhibits his mastery at the art of translation from poetry and literature to the silver screen. But he uses those same skills of translation to obscure the very conventional tropes he uses to paint a picture of heteronormative love.

## Dispelling the Aura of Comfort

Comfort does not always coincide with the extent of reality. For example, in the case of *Dedh Ishqiya*, Begum Para and Khalujaan make a wonderful couple, but in the reality of the film, she is simply not interested in a conventional relationship with a man. Chaubey rips away the comfort that comes from such a heteronormative coupling by introducing a

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<sup>11</sup> In earlier stories of Krishna's childhood, specifically the *Bhāgavata purana* (9<sup>th</sup> century) more emphasis was put on the *sakhis* as the lovers Krishna, not Radha. Radha does not become as a central figure in the Krishnaite story until the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the *GitaGovinda*. As her status increases, the *gopis* become mere female companions to Radha, and no longer the lovers to Krishna.



world full of gender- and sexuality-bending, as well as by disrupting the symmetry of the narrative (two men and two women). He does this by toying with the viewer's expectations of the female-bond between Begum Para and Munniya. Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* and Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* alert the knowledgeable viewer of what Chaubey implies is happening between Para and Munniya. I will go deeper into the references of these two works in the second chapter, but now let it be sufficient to say that they force the viewer to look at love (romantic, platonic, or somewhere in between) differently. *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise* force the viewer to return to the film with a renewed sense of understanding, and an adjusted sense of comfort and discomfort in relation to sexuality.

Both the short story and film tell the stories of the relationship between two women. These stories point to a deeper and more complicated bond between women which surpass the relatively shallow titles of 'romance', 'sister', and 'friend'. The women in *Dedh Ishqiya*, *Lihaaf*, and *Thelma and Louise*, instead portray women as individuals capable of acting outside of those strict labels. *Lihaaf* tells of an aging Begum who has been forgotten in the back of the house by her husband. He has a predilection for young boys and gives all of his attention to them. The story goes on to describe the sexual and emotional relationship between the Begum Jaan and her female masseuse, Rubbu. They keep one another company in a way that Begum Jaan's niece, the narrator, cannot understand and is frightened of. *Lihaaf* is a story that speaks of the sexual and emotional revolt of women who are forgotten.

*Thelma and Louise* tells the story of two women who must act in response to impossible circumstances. They go on a road trip where they find themselves entangled in cases of homicide, battery, and theft, largely because of the horrible men they encounter. But they must deal with consequences of their actions. The result is that they refuse to take responsibility for that which was thrust upon them by the men who took advantage of their situation. Both references wrench the *Dedh Ishqiya* viewer out of their comfortable reverie to face the reality of the bond between Para and Munniya.

## Conclusion

What appears to be a conventional, heteronormative romance of two couples is in fact an experiment in pushing the boundaries of comfort. *Dedh Ishqiya* also highlights Abhishek Chaubey's mastery of translation, except that in this case, he uses that skill to turn upside down the conventions he used to build up the story. He does this especially with the supposedly platonic female-bond between Begum Para and Munniya. The two main male characters of the film, Khalujaan and Baban, seem to understand their own love story from the audience member's perspective. Viewers only know as much as the male characters do, making for a more shocking ending than if the story had been told by the women's perspectives. They see only the conventions and understand that to mean that they are writing their own love stories. Unfortunately for both the audience *and* Khalujaan and Baban, the women fooled everyone into believing that their existence on screen was purely for the fulfillment of a male-oriented, heteronormative romance.

## Chapter One: Creating the Aura of Comfort

The comfort of the literary or filmic convention typically represents that which the average viewer or reader expects. The viewer will accept some unexpected elements in film- or story-lines if those elements support a comfortable, conventional plot. What is conventional does change with the genre and period of the artistic piece (literary art, visual art, performance art, and most recently, film), but there are certain conventions which cut across such boundaries of type and time. Such interdisciplinary and atemporal conventions can be found in multiple works of art, literature, and in this case, film. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, Chaubey took conventions from Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti* poetics, many of which can be found in the earliest of Bollywood films. In this chapter I am interested in how Chaubey builds up the illusion of *heteronormative comfort* through such poetic and filmic conventions. I will base my discussion around the female-bonding trope, found throughout *bhakti* poetry<sup>12</sup> and Bollywood film. I will also discuss how the use of Urdu aesthetics and poetics, based around the presence of this female-bonding convention, sets up the film for a romance-filled plot. At the end of this comfort-building process, the viewer is left with a feeling of contentment, and expectation for a heteronormative, romantic ending.

### Aesthetics in *Dedh Ishqiya*

*Rasa*, or “aesthetic relish” as Rupert Snell describes it, indicates a complex and emotional listening, viewing, or reading experience, one which can be found in *Dedh Ishqiya*.<sup>13</sup> Even when those emotions are negative, such as if the beloved leaves the lover for the rival, the audience member still feels a sense of pleasure at listening to this. This pleasurable feeling that comes regardless of the lovers’ emotions is this sense of comfort that I have been referring to up until this point. The conventions and tropes that I discuss

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<sup>12</sup> The roles and purposes of the bond do change depending on the genre and period of the poetry. For the sake of consistency, I will restrict my selection of *bhakti* poetry to *saguna bhakti* poets of the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries. *Saguna* poets are those who believe in a God with attributes. God has a name, usually Krishna, and physical and emotional attributes of any man. *Nirguna* poets understand God to be something without attributes. God can be called by any name or no name at all, giving the idea that God is essence and cannot be found in physical form.

<sup>13</sup> Rupert Snell. Draft Book Chapter. “Literary Aesthetic Codes.”

below were carefully inserted into *Dedh Ishqiya* to replicate this feeling for the audience. In this section I am interested in first defining this concept of *rasa*, and then moving onto who and what resides in the world of aesthetics. As I will demonstrate, *Dedh Ishqiya* takes on not only individual conventions or tropes, but rather creates the atmosphere of 'aesthetic relish' which the cultured viewer expects and is comforted by.

Depending on the source and treatise discussed, the emotional experience of the receiver can be extremely complicated.<sup>14</sup> For example,

*"Rasa is "the poem's capacity to elicit a deep response from a sensitive reader." The cultivated reader was the sahrdaya, the "person with heart" who could open himself up to the meanings and nuances of poetry, music, and dance. The aim of reading or listening was to have an experience of the dominant rasa that animates the poem, and the sahrdaya feels the emotions of the parted lovers in the poem."*<sup>15</sup>

This definition of *rasa* is from the *Rasadhyaya* of the *Natyasastra*, Bharata's famous treatise on the subject. Rupert Snell states that, "The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is one of the great technical treatises of ancient India. Though traditionally attributed to a legendary figure named 'Bharata', it actually represents the culmination of a gradual development over many centuries."<sup>16</sup> Just as in literature, film too attempts to evoke those same emotions of the lovers in the knowledgeable audience member. Another definition of *rasa* that helps to

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<sup>14</sup> "The analysis of drama (*nāṭya*) and (*kāya*) traditionally sought to understand and explain the nature of the aesthetic experience undergone by the audience or reader – especially to address the paradox whereby the depictions of even painful or unpleasant feelings in a poem or a drama can provoke aesthetic *enjoyment* on the part of the readership or audience." Snell goes on to explain different emotions, negative and positive, which are still meant to create a pleasing feeling in the knowledgeable audience member. Three technical terms are given to explain who is affected by what emotion and to what extent they feel emotion, and then the emotions portrayed in the actor's performance, and lastly, the existence of transient emotions which 'augment and promote the main one...*rasa* is the emotion that is provoked or excited by the playing of artistic stimuli upon these permanent emotional modes."

Rupert Snell. Draft Book Chapter. "Literary Aesthetic Codes." p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Aditya Behl. *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379-1545*. ed. Wendy Doniger. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 31

<sup>16</sup> Rupert Snell. Draft Book Chapter. "Literary Aesthetic Codes." p. 4-5

Snell also implies the extension of those literary forms and genres that are affected by and take on notions of *rasa* and aesthetics. Film is merely one more form of media which takes on aesthetics of the subcontinent. "The aesthetics of *rasa*, first developed for the drama in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, became applied to other genres of literature, especially by Bhāmaha (c.15<sup>th</sup> century), who sought to analyse the distinguishing features of literary expression."

visualize this emotional transfer from performer to viewer is 'juice'. The 'juice' of *rasa* runs from performer to viewer and into *bhakti* and Sufi poetry. The process of *rasa* does not stop with Sanskrit poetry but continues to affect the poetry of every poet touched by the tradition. This would explain, in some part, the prevalence of some poetic conventions in multiple literary traditions.

The world of aesthetics can extend well beyond the character-driven world I described in the introduction. In these worlds of aesthetics, a scene is set in which there are certain meteorological elements (weather-rain, sunshine, blossoming flowers; planets that are visible- phases of the moon), living creatures, props, and characters present (lover, beloved, rival(s)/suitors, *sakhas*/male companions, *sakhis*). The lover and beloved are usually at the center of this world and most of what happens is due to their existence. Certain conventions and figures are used in Urdu and *bhakti* aesthetics, but most overlap, creating a blur between the two literary traditions. Certain scholars such as Carl Ernst, Indrani Chatterjee, and Richard Eaton have looked at this overlapping from a historical perspective, but there has been relatively little scholarship discussing such a connection between different literary strands in South Asia. Here I hope to at least tease out the links between poetic and literary aesthetics, with those used in *Dedh Ishqiya*.

Related to this increasingly complex world is the matter of ambiguity and identifying what character plays what role. In literature, poetry, and even the visual arts of Sufi, Urdu, and *bhakti* traditions, ambiguity is important when asking the question of who the beloved is supposed to be. In both the Sufi/Urdu and *bhakti* literary and aesthetic worlds, the relationship between the '*aashiq* (lover) and *ma'ashuq* (beloved) is the most important one. Artists depicting this world carefully hide the identities of the two under a layer of ambiguous language, tropes, and gendered voice. The identities of the couple can change depending on the poet, the genre, and the *rasa* under discussion. Identities can change also when the poet wishes to hide the identity (particularly the gender) of the lover and beloved.

The identities of the lovers play an important role in reading and understanding any given text; however, the change in the lovers' identities does not necessarily define the poet or piece of art as Sufi, Urdu, or *bhakti*. Although, each literary tradition does tend to use

particular literary and mythological couples more often than others: Laila and Manjun/Qais (Arabic), Radha and Krishna (*bhakti*/Braj), Rumi and Shams (Persianate), Mahmud and Ayaz (Islamicate), and Heer and Ranjha (Punjabi). Using such figures in place of the nameless lover and beloved is a tribute to or signifier of the type of love they represent. For example, when referring to the insanity that love produces, Laila and Majnun are often the characters invoked to explain the feeling. Some of the above lovers come from religious and mythological stories, but the poet rarely makes it clear if he/she is writing about a divine love or a mortal love.<sup>17</sup> What is certain is that the relationship is turbid and uncertain. The *'aashiq* is in a near constant state of anxiety, afraid that the *ma'ashuq* will not return their affections. The *ma'ashuq* constantly teases the *'aashiq* by running off to the rival (Urdu term, *raqib*) or some other suitor. When the lovers are apart, the lover suffers from *viraha* (*bhakti* term, love in separation).

All of these traits cut across literary boundaries, which makes it easy to insert them into most Bollywood films, including *Dedh Ishqiya*. *Dedh Ishqiya* does retain a certain level of ambiguity as to who the true beloved is and who that beloved is destined for. For example, the audience does hope that the female beloved ends up with the penniless lover, but in *Dedh Ishqiya* there is the possibility that she stays with Jaan Mohammed, the *raqib*, for understandable financial reasons. There are a few other instances of ambiguity regarding the identities of specific characters, but I will discuss this role mostly in the following chapter.

The remainder of this section will focus on the role of individual literary conventions and tropes in developing a state of comfort in *Dedh Ishqiya*. I will also look at the question of who the narrator is for it is that character who holds the power over the presentation of the narrative. From the beginning of the film, the viewer is given an idea of who tells the story, and what conventions and tropes are important for the story. That

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<sup>17</sup> Even this need to separate mortal from Divine love is problematic when looking at this poetry. One *qawwali* speaks to this inability to separate the two: Allah hu. In this *qawwali* the lover is afraid that he is unfaithful to God by being in love with Laila. At the end of the *qawwali*, God speaks to the Majnun character saying:

میرے مجنوں بس نہ کر اتنا گلہ  
 عشق لیلی سے تجھے گریاس ہے  
 غم نہ کر رب تیرا تیرے پاس ہے  
 ارے عشق کا مجنوں بنانا کام ہے  
 میرے ہی جلووں کا لیلی نام ہے

process of building up comfort through particular conventions occurs from the perspective of the 'narrator' is significant and will be referred back to at certain points throughout the remainder of this thesis. This includes their narrator's understanding, or rather assumptions, regarding the nature of the *sakhi*-bond.

### The Narrator of this Story

The narrator of any particular story is the one who holds the power of narration and perspective. However, who the story-*teller* is can be a very different question from that of who the story-*writer* is; at least such is the case for *Dedh Ishqiya*. In this film, the narrator(s) appears to be the one(s) who the camera follows. They have more on-screen time than the other characters because most of the film is told from their perspective. If the film opens up following a particular character, this could be an indication of who the narrator is. In the case of *Dedh Ishqiya*, the film opens with Baban, trapped in a hole surrounded by his cousin and bodyguards. He flashes back to the robbing of the necklace which Khalujaan takes and then runs off with. The film proceeds to follow Baban until Khalujaan is reintroduced when the former sees him dressed up as a Nawab on television. The shot moves to Begum Para's *haweli* in Mahmudabad. The camera moves in from behind, showing only the back and then side of Begum Para. Abhishek Chaubey then cuts to Khalujaan pulling up to Begum Para's home. Khalujaan then becomes the object of the camera's fancy. The film alternates between these two men, Baban and Khalujaan, giving the audience the impression that they are the ones telling and 'writing' their love stories. They continue to be the center of attention up until a certain point. Even during Begum Para's mushaira, she is few scenes by herself. She is usually surrounded by suitors, the *raqib* (rival), or the '*aashiq* (lover). The first night of the mushaira gives the impression that the female characters are the ones being watched by the narrators, and not the other way around. As the female beloveds and *sakhis*, they have relatively little power over the narrative.

## First Night of the Mushaira: Establishing the Convention

The first night of the mushaira serves to introduce a cast of literary and filmic conventional characters and tropes, each of which is meant to instill in the audience a sense of comfort. The first and most obvious one is that of the romantic background of the poetry gathering. The lover (*'aashiq*) and beloved (*ma'ashuq*), *raqib* (rival), suitors, and the *sakhi* (female companion) are the most important characters introduced. They fit perfectly into the poetic world which they discuss in their poetry. This section focuses on each of these except for the *sakhi*. Each of these expected conventions draws from a literary history of poetics, writers, and authors who had drawn from this same world of aesthetics. Here I will look at each of these conventions both in literature and then in *Dedh Ishqiya*.

The viewer is introduced to the mushaira and Urdu poetry early in the film when Baban sees Khalujaan on TV pretending to be the Nawab of Chandpur. Khalujaan recites a poem on the train station platform in Mahmudabad. Baban hears the last *shair* (couplet), which seems to be directly addressed to Baban: “Tum tanhaa duniya se ladhoge, bachon si baaten karte ho (You shall fight this world alone, You say such childish things).” The newscaster comes back on screen telling his viewers about the mushaira competition to be held there. The scene is set. Poets present at the mushaira are there not only to spread the beauty of their poetry, but rather to “steal” or “win” the mushaira. In the case of this gathering, there is a real prize which all the suitors are working towards: Begum Para.

On the first night of the mushaira, the *'aashiq* and the *ma'ashuq* (Khalujaan and Begum Para) meet at the feast celebrating the start of the symposium. Begum Para has the opportunity to meet this year's crop of suitors. She has come to expect the same group of men every year, but this year, the fourth year of mushairas, is different. Khalujaan, as the thieving lover, has come to capture the mistress' love and wealth. However, he is surrounded by dozens of other men who have the same thoughts, each one thinking that he is the lover and writer of the story. This first scene captures the essence of one trope common in Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti* poetics: the *'shama'* (flame, candle) and *parwaane* (moths). The verse below is one of many examples of the convention, this one by the *bhakti* poet, Kabir:



*If the lamp and the flame are brought  
and the oil is brought as well:  
Once these three become united,  
the moths will flutter and burn.<sup>18</sup>*

This couplet of Ghalib's also speaks of the prevalence of this trope in Urdu poetics:

شامِ غم میں سوزِ عشقِ آتشِ رخسار سے  
پر فشانِ سوختن ہیں صورتِ پروانہ ہم

*In the evening of grief, from the burning of the love of fire of the cheeks  
For the scattering of burning, we are like moths*

The *shama'* represents the light of the beloved, but also the danger of coming too close to him or her. The *parwaane*, or suitors, represent the helpless pull to the *shama'* regardless of the possibility of incineration. This convention is common enough in films for it to be recognizable to the average Bollywood viewer. Short scenes, such as when the lovers meet and one burns themselves with a flame, bring this convention to mind immediately.<sup>19</sup> While such a literal translation of fire and burning is not in *Dedh Ishqiya*, a much more poetic interpretation of this trope can be found on the first night of the mushaira.

There is a substantial waitlist for the mushaira, but for those fortunate enough to make it through the doors, buzz and flutter around, awaiting the beloved's entrance. They cannot help but flock to her light. Munni calls for the poets' attention and begins her introduction of Begum Para:

*"Chand baatein jin se har mard se ghor karne ki guzaarish hain. Begum se kisi  
bhi qism ki jismani lamse parhez kare aur aankhon ko, aankhon ko na tak niki  
hidayat na dein. Begum kaagzi hai. Ke ziyada to dekh le to nazar lag jaati hai.*

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<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Vaudeville. *Kabir*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 166.

<sup>19</sup> This particular example of the convention comes from the 2013 film, *Goliyan ki Raseela Ram Leela*.

*Is liye thandi saansen, gahari aahein, aur khamosh fugaaein Begum ki majjudgi mein khair jaiz hai. To haazreen, Begum Para.”*

*“There are a few things which every man is requested to consider. You are to avoid touching in any way, and the eyes, the eyes are instructed not to stare. The begum is fragile. If you look at her too much, then she might be harmed. For this reason, cold breaths, deep sighs, and silent lamentations are not allowed in the presence of the Begum. So gentlemen, Begum Para.”*

In this scene, the camera pans up to where Munni is standing at the balcony. Partially obscuring the shot is a candelabra, giving off a soft glow. From behind the fixture, Begum Para steps out wearing a lush green, verdant color. Standing next to the candelabra, Begum Para appears to be the source of the light. She is the decoration to the candelabra. The crowd of suitors below gazes up at her in wonder. The dialogue sets up expectations of how men must behave in the presence of Begum Para, and also of how Begum Para should be viewed by her suitors; as something that is out of reach for most of them. She is a candle which, if you get too close to, will engulf you in flames. From the Sufi aesthetic world, this is exactly what the lover would want, annihilation (*fana*) at the hands of the beloved. At the hands of the beloved, both suffering and satisfaction can be had, but in the world of aesthetics, they are one and the same.

This scene instills in the cultured viewer an appreciation for beauty, and Urdu is the vehicle for that appreciation. Romance is already in the air by having the background be a mushaira. In Hindi/Urdu films, Urdu poetry is equitable to love; therefore this *shama'* and *parwaane* scene only further solidifies the viewer's confidence that the Begum Para and Khalujaan will end up together. But the only (anticipated) problem with this scenario is the expected presence of the *raqib*: Jaan Mohammad. The relationship between Begum Para and Jaan Mohammad is uncertain and it is that uncertainty that makes the lover, Khalujaan, nervous. He is sure of his love, but he is not sure of the beloved's affection. Just like the flame of a candle, sometimes the beloved is steady but sometimes she bounces about with the change of the wind. The presence of the rivals and suitors also provides for some nerve-racking moments for the viewer. This carefully structured film with its use of trusted

conventions does account for some level of anxiety and thrill in the story. But that anxiety is carefully controlled.

Drawing from this same analogy of the changeable flame is the overall flighty, flirty, and borderline cruel temperament of the beloved. In the Urdu aesthetic world, the beloved is known for constantly teasing the lover by flirting with the rival and her many other suitors. In *bhakti* poetry, the beloved is Krishna who skips out on trysts with the lover, Radha, to spent time with some other *gopi*.

*Show me your beauty, crooked dark one,*

*pay some attention to me!*

*Your glances are crooked, your eyes are charming,*

*and your showy gait is as if intoxicated.*

*[He] doesn't heed this heart of mine.*

Here the poor *gopi* or Radha is anxiously waiting for the beloved Krishna beloved to acknowledge her presence and her heartache. This same flirty and flakiness of the beloved is something which both Baban and Khalujaan must deal with.

In *Dedh Ishqiya*, the cruel beloveds, Para and Munni, embody different traits of the literary beloved. Para is constantly surrounded by her suitors. In most scenes, she is either accompanied by her *sakhi*, Munni, or any number of poet suitors. She is not cruel to Khalujaan but she is popular like the beloved. As the speech by Munniya above infers, Begum Para (as the beloved) is untouchable. The cinematic effect of that first shot of her portrays this quality of the beloved perfectly. She is above everyone and she is the light of the party. Munni on the other hand, takes after the cruel and careless temperament of the beloved so common in Urdu and *bhakti* poetry. She will give her lover, Baban, all of her attention one minute, but will slap him around and ignore him the next. Baban even seems to notice that her cruelty towards him is a good sign. At a few points in the film, Munni shoves, hits, or yells at Baban, but all he can do is smile because the beloved is nothing if not cruel to the lover. He also feels that sense of insecurity even after they spend a night

together. He says to her, “Aaj zindagi mein pahli baar mein tae nahin kar paa rahe hun. Ke mein de ke aa rahe hun ya le ke aa rahe hun (Today for the first time in my life, I can’t figure this out; If I came here to give it to you or if I came here and took it from you.)” However, this scene will take on new significance after the next chapter. But in the moment, Munni merely seems to be like the cavalier *ma’ashuq* who gladly takes the suitors’, *raqib*’s, and *aashiq*’s attention. But for Para, she seeks the attention of poets and this is what she gets by hosting a mushaira with the promise of a real prize to the winner.

On the first night of the mushaira, various suitors and the *raqib*, Jaan Mohammed, each go to the microphone to prove themselves and their poetic skills to Begum Para so that they may ‘steal the mushaira’. Then Khalujaan as Nawab Iftikhar Hussain approaches the stage. If everything goes right in this world of poetry and aesthetics, the lover of Begum Para will steal, or win, the mushaira. Khalujaan’s *ghazal* causes a roar of appreciation to ripple across the crowd, and thus seals, in the viewer’s mind and his, victory over all and, most importantly, Begum Para. Even though Jaan Mohammed captures a reputable poet and uses that poet’s verses to compete, he is not pure of heart like Khalujaan. The following poem sealed his win:

نہ بولوں میں تو کلیجا پھونکے  
 جو بول دوں تو زبان جلے ہیں  
 سلگ نہ جاوے اگر سنے وہ  
 جو بات میری زبان تلے ہیں  
 لگے تو پھر یوں کے روگ لاگے  
 نہ سانس آوے ، نہ سانس جاوے  
 یہ عشق ہے نامراد ایسا  
 کہ جان لیوے تیھی تلے ہیں

*If I don't speak, then my heart may burst*

*That which I would say, it burns my tongue*

*May she/he not ignite if she hears*

*That burnt thing I have to say*

*When you catch it, it is like a disease*

*No breath enters, no breath escapes*

*This is love, it is without intention*

*Once it takes your life, only then does it leave you*

The poem speaks of the pain of love. The inability to breathe normally and the inability to speak normally are both side effects of the disease of not having the beloved nearby. This poem also reflects the feelings of Khalujaan with regards to his past with Begum Para. He wants to tell her who he is but is unsure if she will combust upon hearing his words. But if he does tell her, then she will take his life, and he is only too willing to hand it over to her.

*Viraha: The Physician, Patient, and Medicine*

*Jitne bhi rog hain sab ka jhara khud ba khud ho jayega.*

*Whatever your disease is, you will be cleansed of it.*

*-Begum Para, Dedh Ishqiya*

The disease which every *'aashiq* suffers from is the pain of separation, or *viraha*, caused by being apart from the beloved. The above quote by Begum Para describes the outcome which Khalujaan hopes for by going to the mushaira. His courtship with Para some twenty years prior has left an aching in his heart and his hands. During the feast on the opening night of the mushaira, Munni and Para go down and Munni introduces each suitor to Para. When they get to Khalujaan, who claims to be the Nawab of Chandpur, Para asks him if they have met before. Khalujaan cannot give away his true identity so he replies: "Agar yaad aayi kahan to itiraaz zaroor kijiye. Hum bhi dhond rahe hain kab se apne aapko

(If you remember then you must please tell me. I too have been searching for myself for a long time).” This search for the beloved is closely tied to *viraha*. Khalujaan has come to Begum Para’s doorstep to do more than rekindle their romance (and get rich). He has come to her to deal with the physical effects of *viraha*. This concept of *viraha* is closely tied to that of *rasa*, or aesthetics, which I discussed above. The pain of love in separation is difficult for the lover to bear, but the audience member knows and appreciates *viraha*. The conventionality of the emotion bodes well for the story being told.

Before lovers come together they must be separated in love, and the emotion that comes from this is *viraha*. Nothing can quite describe the pain of this separation, hence the reliance on aesthetic metaphors. Those who are near the lover, such as the *sakhi*, can only stand by and watch as the lover self-destructs. The *sakhi* will comfort the female lover when the beloved is away. *Bhakti* poets often describe this pain through the eyes of a *gopi* (milkmaid in pursuit of Krishna) or Radha, both who are waiting for the return of Krishna. Urdu poets mourn the separation of the lover from the beloved when the latter is off with the rival. *Viraha* and the love that causes it are portrayed through a variety of tropes. The one under discussion in this section and used heavily in *Dedh Ishqiya* is the physician, patient, and cure trope. This convention crosses into both Urdu/Sufi and *bhakti* literary traditions beautifully. This makes for an interesting trope in films because it will creep up in scenes when the lovers first meet. In the case of *Dedh Ishqiya*, Khalujaan suffers from *viraha* because his relationship with Para was not resolved in a satisfying way. So how does one cure the pain of separation from love? Fortunately for Khalujaan, a respected *hakim* gave him the answer. But before I go into the depiction of the trope in the film, I will look at some examples of the trope in the Urdu and *bhakti* worlds of aesthetics.

The lover relies on the beloved in much the same way a patient relies on the physician to cure illnesses. Only in this case, the illness relates not to the immune system but to the heart. In both literary traditions, the lover is left alone to mourn the loss of the beloved and bear the pain of separation. The feeling of *viraha* is often compared to a burning fire and the most common side effect is insanity. In *bhakti* poetry, the pain of separation and insanity that follows may come when Krishna leaves Radha and his *gopis* for Mathura to fight. The *gopis* are inconsolable and refuse to get over Krishna, even when he

sends a yogi messenger, Udho. He tells them to remove Krishna as a physical lover from their minds. Below is a *bhramargit*, or 'bee-messenger', poem which gives an example of such a scene by the *saguna*<sup>20</sup> *bhakti* poet, Surdas:

*Udho, they say, has arrived in our midst*  
*To peddle his yoga to poor young maidens*  
*His postures, his dispassion, his eyes turned within—*  
*Friend, how can they shorten our distance from Syam?*  
*Of course, we're just herders, so how should we know*  
*The pleasure of mating with a hunchback girl?*  
*"But what kind of doctor, says Sur, can this be*  
*who hands out prescriptions*  
*when he doesn't know the disease?"*<sup>21</sup>

These devotees have no patience for someone telling them how they must forget the one who made them sick with love. They scoff at the idea that some lowly messenger could even hope to "peddle" some yoga to cure their malady. They doubt that he can even understand the disease from which they suffer. This poem is also interesting because it shows the *gopis* as the only source of comfort. They must turn to one another for support in their hours of need and separation. The message is clear, that only may the *sakhi* comfort and console the lovesick lovers.

In the Sufi *qawwali* tradition, separation from the beloved is a frequently discussed topic. Above I mentioned that poets use particular literary couples to discuss different

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<sup>20</sup> *Saguna* poets are those who believe in a God with attributes. God has a name, usually Krishna, and physical and emotional attributes of any man. *Nirguna* poets understand God to be something without attributes. God can be called by any name or no name at all, giving the idea that God is essence and cannot be found in physical form.

<sup>21</sup> John Stratton Hawley. *The Memory of Love: Surdas Sings to Krishna*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 132.

forms and stages of love. Laila and Majnun usually represent the insanity that comes with being separated from one's beloved. Their story begins in childhood. They fell in love at a young age. As they grew up, Majnun went around town reciting poems in honor of his love for Laila. Those in the village regarded him as mentally unstable, hence his nickname Majnun (from *junoon*, meaning madness or insanity). He asks for her hand in marriage but Laila's father arranges her marriage to someone else. Majnun runs off into the forest and goes crazy. Laila dies of heartbreak and Majnun is found dead at her grave. Majnun is the perfect example of what happens when the lovers are separated: insanity and death. Below is a reference to Laila and Majnun in the *qawwali* "Na to Butkude ki Talab Mujhe (I Search Neither for the Temple):

*I see Majnun, I see Laila*

*In solitude/madness, I see every design upside down*

*Look, this is love*

*Having whirled in from the Valley of Najd, the wind that came*

*Even now comes the echo of Qais' crying*

*Look, this is love<sup>22</sup>*

These verses highlight not only the connection between solitude and madness, and Majnun, but also how that insanity effects the malady-ridden lover. In the second line the narrator states that separation from Laila not only brings loneliness but also alters his perceptions of things. Everything that ought to have a design, or a specific way of being, appears upside down. The narrator uses the characters of Laila and Majnun to describe his own experience of solitude and madness. Their experience of madness has become one with his experience, so much so that he can hear "the echo of Qais' crying." From this burning feeling and insanity comes the illness of the lover.

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<sup>22</sup> *Majnun nazar aati hai, Leila nazar aata hai  
Wahshat mein hare k naqsha ulta nazar aata hai  
Dekho yeh hai 'ishq  
Wadi Najd se phir kar jo hawa aati hai  
Qais ke rone ki ab tak yeh sadaa aati hai  
Dekho yeh hai 'ishq*



The malady-ridden lover can now do nothing but hope that the physician can lessen his pain until the beloved returns. In this *nazam* by Mir Taqi Mir, the narrator is the lover suffering from the *viraha* illness, and is completely incapacitated by pain. This is only a small section of a long *nazam* detailing the entire process of *viraha*.

*Passion-crazed I would sit, shaking like a bamboo frail,  
Remembering that cypress shape, and her elfin ways.  
I became sick and pale, my speech turned to drawl,  
As if an evil spirit held my soul in thrall.  
Some approached the sorcerer to get my spell annulled,  
Some brought an amulet my inner heat to quell.  
I was shown around to the physicians wise,  
Who made me drink the potions which I deeply disliked.  
My system wouldn't accept the potions they prescribed,  
Prolonged was my treatment, but I had no respite.<sup>23</sup>*

Mir describes here the process of deterioration due to separation. Concerned friends and loved ones can only watch as he writhes in pain waiting for her return. He has even taken multiple remedies for a pain which he knows to be incurable by all but the beloved. He has lost the ability to speak coherently. His body becomes that of an invalid. The illness of *viraha* is a real thing to this poor patient. Only the image of his beloved's figure in his mind is enough to set off the detrimental effects of *viraha*.

The above verses speak directly to the relationship between Khalujaan and Begum Para, at least from the former's point-of-view. Khalujaan understands himself to be the true *'aashiq*. He has an affliction of the heart which can only be cured by the cause of the affliction: Begum Para. At the beginning of the film, Khalujaan suffers from hand tremors. He

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<sup>23</sup> K.C. Kanda. *Masterpieces of Urdu Nazam*. New York: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2004, p. 39-40.

and Baban are in a clothing store when his hands start trembling again. The tailor says that his father is an old, respected *hakim* (physician of traditional remedies) who might be able to help him. He asks if Khalujaan would like to meet with him. Later at Begum Para's Khalujaan reveals to Baban that while he was supposed to meet Baban after stealing the necklace, he in fact visited that *hakim* who diagnosed Khalujaan's tremors thus:

*“Tumhari marzi ka taaluq shirianon se hain. Gham ziyaada ho barh khudar. Bachpan mein koi chot? Koi adeem ya afsos? Khush o raham raha kar lo, Miyan! Yeh hi tumari dawa. Tum marizi-e ‘ishq ho. Kahin dil mil lagao! Phir yeh sare kapkap yeh ghaib ho jaye, khud ba khud. Inshallah!”*

*“The cure to your affliction is related to the stuff of the heart. You are weighed down with great worries. Any wound from your childhood? Any regret or sadness? Stay happy and peaceful, my friend! This is your medication. Your cure is love. Go and find it somewhere! Then all of this trembling will disappear automatically. God willing!”*

After this discussion Khalujaan understands that the cure to his trembling hands lies with the cure of his heart, and the only thing that can cure his heart is to deal with his unresolved feelings for the beloved of his youth, Para. This scene is interesting for a number of reasons besides the literal translation of the trope. As the poet, one would expect Khalujaan to be well aware that his affliction is related to the heart. But he must visit a doctor for what he understands to be a simple trembling of the hands. Unlike the above poems, he is not aware that he is still holding on to years of devotion and love for one woman. His first reaction is to scoff at the *hakim* when he says that his affliction is related to the heart. However when the physician mentions his past, Khalujaan immediately recalls Para. He jumps at the chance not only to cure his trembling hands and heart, but to make it financially worth his while. He does get his cure, but not the riches. In the final fight scene at the train station, Khalujaan gets injured and Begum Para rips her *dupatta* and binds the wound. He looks at his hand in wonder. The trembling stops as soon as she binds his wound. This trope is one of the most powerful used in mainstream film. It aptly describes intense love affairs depicted on screen, but also references back to film's connection with literary aesthetics.

Through these basic but important conventions the average Bollywood viewer can appreciate the steadiness of the plot and feeling of comfort that comes with their use. By paying tribute to this world of aesthetics, Abhishek Chaubey also points to the importance of the relationship between the lover and beloved. From the heteronormative perspective, the film's *'aashiq* and *ma'ashuq* are Khalujaan and Begum Para. Munni is present only to support her friend. Shots of Begum Para and Khalujaan flirting and exchanging meaningful glances in between poetry recitations gives the viewer little reason to assume that the movie would end with these two lovers not together. The same can be inferred in Munni and Baban's relationship. Not only does her temperament match with the careless beloved, but she spends a night with Baban. Even though she seems cavalier following the act, the sex and her careless behavior seems to solidify her identity as the heteronormative beloved. Both women take on the different traits of the beloved with their two male lovers in pursuit. These first few scenes of the mushaira depict the world of aesthetics. This is given further credence by the presence of the rival figure, Jaan Mohammad, and the multitude of suitors. The patient and remedy-provider trope in particular can be found in many other Bollywood films. For example, in *Barsaat ki Raat* the women discuss the uselessness of physicians when it comes to matters of the heart. They must instead seek solace from the local Sufi shrine. But in the midst of all of these love problems, at least the women have their *sakhis* to turn to for support.

### Female-Bonding in Literature, Film, and *Dedh Ishqiya*

The female-bond in film and literature is a complex and near-sacred relationship between the female *'aashiq* and her *sakhis*. The female companions help the lover in her quest for the beloved by setting up the lovers' tryst, giving her advice, and listening to her while affected by *viraha*. However she too wants to be in the company of the male beloved and is shown to be a jealous friend. Each of these traits of the *sakhi* is thanks to the development of her character from one literary period to the next. In film, the *sakhi* is a compilation of these characteristics making for a relatively complex character. Their presence on screen signals to the audience a conventional story complete with male and

female lover. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, the audience is further put at ease by giving the *sakhi* her very own lover to flirt with. This section will look at how the female-bonding convention has been used in past Bollywood films, and how each film represents an expected form of the convention. Chaubey brings together all of these forms of the *sakhi* in Munni and Para.

The *sakhi* character is only as complex as the nature of the female-bond allows. The *sakhi* performs a particular function, therefore her ability to develop is limited by that function. The *sakhi* is generally supportive; however, she will occasionally go after the same man and will sabotage the tryst set up for the lovers. But even if she is to thank for the successful union of the lover and beloved, this female-bond is usually considered as relatively unimportant compared to the bond between lover and beloved. The heteronormative romance ought to always be the primary bond. The female-bond merely supports this central bond. Earlier I mentioned the importance of the apparent narrators of the story. Chaubey establishes the importance of each bond (between Baban and Khalujaan, then between Khalujaan and Begum Para, to Begum Para and Munni, and lastly to Baban and Munni) by introducing them in a particular order. The *sakhi* bond is introduced following the introduction of the male friends, and the lover and beloved. This suggests that while the *sakhi* is important, she is not the central character in the *ma'ashuq's* (or female *'aashiq's*) life. Their bond is sacred, but it does not come first. Before I look further into how this female-bond plays out in film, I will look briefly at the presence of *sakhis* in literature<sup>24</sup>, particularly Braj *bhakti* poetry.

### The *Sakhi* of *Bhakti* Poetry

In Braj poetry, the *sakhi* plays the role of the medium between lovers, confidante, and occasionally peeper. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, Munni plays the role of *sakhi* perfectly, taking on each of these roles to the satisfaction of the conventional Bollywood viewer. It is thanks to her help that Begum Para is ready to meet the suitors well-dressed and emotionally

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<sup>24</sup> I am not implying here that the *sakhi* is limited to literature. In dance, vocal, and visual representations of characters such as Radha, Krishna, and the *gopis*, the female companions are never far away. They are depicted peeping on the lovers' during their tryst, and whispering behind the lovers' backs. Their presence can be felt in every form of art.

prepared. She plays the role of handmaiden and confidante by being a good listener. And lastly, she enjoys watching Begum Para with the other suitors by peeping on them; however, her stance and the look on her face give the impression that she is jealous of something or someone. Below I will give a few examples of these roles in poetry before looking into how they are portrayed in film.

The *sakhi* can be a patient and quiet listener when she needs to be. When the male beloved passes over the female lover to spend his time with a rival, the female '*aashiq* has no one to cry to about her situation. But the *sakhi* is there. This verse depicts such an episode. The lover inexplicably has not shown up for their tryst:

*What can I do, friend? My lover has not come.*

*I spend my nights without him tossing and turning.*

*I cry and cry, and sleep eludes me.*

*Night and day this lovesickness torments me,*

*when I remember his words.<sup>25</sup>*

The *sakhi* is there to help the lover when she is going through a bad case of *viraha*. But in cases such as this, the *sakhi* may be employed to locate the beloved for her friend so that the female lover's suffering can end. Sometimes her assistance in bringing the beloved to her friend does help matters. In the *Gita Govinda*, the *sakhi* encourages her friend, Radha, to go to Krishna and enjoy herself:

*Seeing Hari light the deep thicket*

*With brilliant jewel necklaces, a pendant*

*A golden rope belt, armllets, and wrist bands,*

*Radha modestly stopped at the entrance,*

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<sup>25</sup> Lalita Du Perron. *Hindi Poetry in a Musical Genre: Thumri Lyrics*. New York: Routledge. 2007, p. 135.

*But her friend urged her on.*

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*Revel in the wile luxury on the sweet thicket floor!*

*Your laughing face begs ardently for his love.*

*Radha, enter Madhava's intimate world!*

*Revel in a thick bed of red petals plucked as offerings!*

*Strings of pearls are quivering on your rounded breasts!*

*Radha, enter Madhava's intimate world!"<sup>26</sup>*

Like the above verses, the one listed below depicts the *sakhi* as patient and silent listener. These particular verses are called *murki* poems. They are short and humorous. In the first three verses, the narrator describes someone or something which sounds vaguely or extremely sexual or romantic, but ends up being something ordinary. These poems exhibit another way which the *sakhi* is pulled into the action by the poet. She doesn't actually say anything but the narrator, assumedly the female lover, uses the *sakhi*'s presence to deliver the final punch line. Below is one example of this 'say-and-deny' style of poetry:

*Day and night he remains erect in the courtyard,*

*Enduring the heat (of day) and shade (of night):*

*One seeing him one does not feel hungry.*

*Who, friend, your good man? No, sister (sakhi), a tree."<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> Jayadeva. *The Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gitagovinda*. ed. and trans. Barbara Stoler Miller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 118.

<sup>27</sup> G. W. Gilbertson. *The Assembly of Mirth: A Literal Translation into English of the Sabha Bilasa*. Benares: Medical Hall Press, 1900, p. 405.

The lover seems to be using this style of communication to discuss her beloved but out of propriety, denies that she is discussing anything but a common object, like a tree. These verses meant only to shock and amuse. But the *sakhi* remains the silent listener throughout.

The *sakhi* is a very busy and helpful girl. She helps the lovers come together, and she helps her friend deal with the male beloved's absence and possible infidelity. With all of this running around, the *sakhi* needs to feel some kind of enjoyment in the work she is doing, and that comes with peeping. In this verse, the *sakhi* is narrating a sexual encounter between the lover and beloved. She cannot see the two but she can hear them. During these lovers' trysts, the *sakhi* is the vicarious enjoyer of the lovers' lovemaking. She is also the lookout. These trysts are not typically between husband and wife. The cost of getting caught by anyone but the *sakhi* is quite high, especially in the female lover is married or still lives with her mother.

पर्यो जोरु बिपरीत रति, रूपी सुरत रनधीर ।  
करति कुलाहल किंकिनी, गह्यौ मौनु मंजीर ॥ १३० ॥

*He's on his back, love's warrior astride him!*

*Her waist-bells sing a fanfare*

*As anklets hold their tongue<sup>28</sup>*

The roles of the *sakhi* as confidante, go-between, and peeper are all present in *Dedh Ishqiya*; however, who exactly the *sakhi* is is not entirely clear, but I will elaborate on this matter in the following chapter. Munni seems to be the ideal *sakhi*. She helps Begum Para prepare and meet with various suitors, she helps Para with whatever mystery illness she later suffers from, all the while vicariously enjoying the pleasure of Begum Para and her lovers (particularly Khalujaan).

While Begum Para is flirting with Khalujaan, it is Munni's job to keep the other suitors away. One scene in particular shows this. Khalujaan informs Begum Para of who he

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<sup>28</sup> Rupert Snell working translation

really is. He is not a Nawab, but a thief. Begum Para says that she knows. From this confession is born new intimacy between them. The two move closer together, holding hands. Baban starts to march over to them out of protest but Munni stops him. After he leaves Munni watches them with a smile on her face that slowly dissipates, leaving only a blank and almost jealous look. She has made her choice by sleeping with Baban, but she sees the sweet tenderness between Begum Para and Khalujaan, and seems to wish that were her. The peeper role of the *sakhi* is a complicated one. She enjoys and protects, but she is also jealous of the intimacy between the lover and the beloved. This would explain why in some cases, the *sakhi* pursues her friend's lover.

In both poetry and film, the *sakhi* remains a character whose purpose it is to support the *'aashiq*. While there is some sense of ambiguity in poetry involving the *sakhi*, as the following section will show, the *sakhi* of film is not the most dynamic of characters. But even though the *sakhi* of poetry has a bit more fire than those depicted in film, in the end, the *sakhi* and the female lover are close friends who act mostly to support one another's happiness. She wants the lover's beloved. She feels jealousy and will occasionally act upon that feeling. But the literary *sakhi* is not an over exaggeration of herself. She can be all of these things and more at once. As the following section will show, this is not always the case in film.

### The *Sakhi* of Film

In film, the *sakhi* plays a similar role as the character in literature with regards to general helpfulness and jealousy. Her bond with the lover is sisterly but always platonic. Sometimes she is a simple character, sometimes complex. No matter the form of the relationship, the female-bond is a comfortable convention that the average Bollywood viewer expects and welcomes. She is usually overly jealous of the male beloved or so helpful that she seems uninterested in men in general. Her relationship with the lover is very simple. Most of their conversations revolve around a man or about a man, hopelessly failing the Bechdel test. However, in those films which feature the male bond, men are shown to have multiple interests besides the pursuit of a girlfriend. The films below exhibit some of



the more traditional film *sakhis*. I will restrict myself to a few films which highlight some of the traits that make their way into *Dedh Ishqiya*.

Up until this point, I have discussed the female and *sakhi* bond as a particularly *bhakti* convention; however, some of the most well-known and classic examples of this bond in film are between Muslim women. Films such as *Mughal-e Azam* and *Barsaat ki Raat* are prime examples of such a bond. In *Mughal-e Azam*, fellow courtesans compete with one another for the Prince Salim's affections. The heroine of the film, Anarkali, must now deal with a dancer of higher rank to win the prince. Her competition, Bahar, continues to make it difficult for her and Prince Salim to come together. In *Barsaat ki Raat*, two women are a part of a battling *qawwali* group. One of the women is in love with a poet but he is in love with a police commissioner's daughter. The poor *qawwali* singer has only her fellow singing-companion to confide in. In this case, the *sakhi* is meant to console the lover as well as provide some comedic relief in the film.

Since the release of these earlier films, the convention has not changed drastically. There are some changes in the demeanor (wearing Western clothing and speaking English) and actions (drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes) of the women, but that fundamental bond between female friends did not alter. Below are a few films from the 1980s to the present, 2014. These films make up some of the expected and beloved depictions of female-bonding.

In the female-bonding trope, if one *sakhi* does something cruel to her friend, such as stealing the beloved, even then in the Bollywood universe, she is forgiven. One example of such a deplorable, but forgivable act, takes place in the 2006 remake of *Devdas* with Shahrukh Khan, Madhuri Dixit, and Aishwarya Rai. Paro (a woman from a decent family) and Chandramukhi (a courtesan), fight over Devdas, a rich, spoilt young man recently returned from London. Paro tells Chandramukhi that she may 'have' Devdas through song, and their bond is solidified. Natalie Sarrazin looks at the importance and place of Hindi songs in a particular narrative as indicative of what is happening. She also looks at this differentiation of good and bad characters through the lens of music in films. She states that those characters who are not good, and therefore do not have the right to love, do not have

the right to sing. In the film world, the *sakhi* is immune from becoming a true villain and is instead considered a lovable but naughty young woman.

The success of the lovers' union is helped along or made possible by some deficiency in the *sakhi*. She may be relatively unattractive or she may already have a male lover. In the films *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (2008) and *Yeh Jawaani hai Deewani* (2013), the two *sakhis* are presented as not as beautiful as their friend, not as appealing (with regards to intelligence, appropriateness, and willingness to marry), and not available. They are there only to mediate between and give advice to the couple. They are a non-threat to the lovers. In the case of *Jaane Tu*, Aditi's friend, Shaleen, seems to have no interest in men. In one scene she is shown to be dancing with a very attractive girl. She is never in the company of men outside those in their circle of friends. By not involving herself in Aditi and Jai's relationship, Shaleen's advice to Aditi is rational. There is even a scene of Aditi, the modern female lover, awaiting the return of her beloved with her closest (and asexual) *sakhi*. When he does not show up, the *sakhi* supports Aditi's decision to leave the country.

In *Yeh Jawaani hai Deewani*, Naina's friend, also Aditi, is interested in one boy in the beginning and marries a different one at the end. But she never encroaches on the relationship between Naina and her love-interest, Kabir. She is a good friend but she doesn't compete for Kabir's affections. Similar to Shaleen, Aditi dresses relatively unconventional. In both films, a good female friend is someone who is not competing for the male lover's affections, and whose beauty is subdued in comparison to the main female.

Para and Munni mimic a number of the characteristics from the above bonding examples, the most common of which being the advice-giver and go-between for the lovers. However, even though the *sakhi* gives advice and helps the lovers, this does not mean that she will not try to go after the male beloved. But in some circumstances she already has a lover (*Yeh Jawaani hai Deewani*) or exhibits no interest in the opposite sex (*Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*). Munni seems to exhibit all of these characteristics. She seems jealous of Begum Para but herself has a lover (Baban). She is also an advice giver and go-between. In the beginning of the film when Munni introduces Begum Para to the poets, she is constantly at Begum Para's side. Such is the case for most of the movie, especially when Begum Para appears in public among her suitors. This may be because of Begum Para's rank. It seems

only appropriate for her to be accompanied by a 'handmaiden' figure.<sup>29</sup> Munni plays this part of the helpful companion and handmaiden well by keeping away nagging suitors when Begum Para is busy flirting with one. She makes Begum Para presentable when she must go out in front of the crowded mushaira. She helps Begum Para arrange to be kidnapped. She helps her mistress in every way. Because of her lower status and younger age, Munni is not a threat to Begum Para's romantic conquests. That being said, before Begum Para reveals herself as the one behind the kidnapping, it seems that Munni does harbor some resentment and jealousy towards her. There are a few scenes in which Munni is in her room, surrounded by photos of various exotic locations. By this point in the film, Munni has gone to visit a man who she wants to kidnap Begum Para. It is easy to assume that Munni wants her kidnapped so that she can leave Mahmudabad and travel, and Baban may be the person to do that with.

The relationship between these two women follows the experienced Bollywood-viewer's expectations of female-boning. Leaving aside the individual traits of the *sakhi*, what is equally as important is the emotional connection between the women. As companions, even when one treats the other horribly she is forgiven. Others have written of the supposedly special relationship between women. For example, Meg Miroshnik's play, "The Fairy Tale Lives of Russian Girls," addresses the complexities of the relationships between women, and the lengths they are willing to go for one another. It is not unusual when one friend kills someone, and the other two friends help to bury the body. This play and *Dedh Ishqiya* show the extent to which female companions support and forgive each other. Munni, similar to in Miroshnik's play, is willing to risk getting in trouble with the authorities by hiring a man to kidnap Para. Prior to involving Baban in her plans, she confronts a contract kidnapper. When he mocks her for not bringing the money to hire him, she allows her *dupatta* to slide from chest, giving him a view of her deep-necked *kurta*. Her dedication to Para cannot be overstated in such a situation. There is some inexplicable tie that brings these women together in such a way that they are willing to do anything for one another. Even if that means burying a body or arranging to kidnap someone. However, this

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<sup>29</sup> Further work on the relationship between the handmaiden and the mistress would be interesting to look at in relation to hetero- or non-heteronormative relationships. I will look at this to a certain extent towards the end of this chapter in relation to Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, for a similar relationship is depicted in that story. But a historical study of this relationship would be worth pursuing.

unbreakable and complicated bond invoked in *Dedh Ishqiya* is always located in a heterosexual world where the *sakhis* want two male lovers, and not each other.

## Conclusion

*Dedh Ishqiya* layers convention upon convention, drawn from both the literary and filmic aesthetic world, to make for a comfortable viewing experience. In Bollywood film, and *Dedh Ishqiya*, the world created by these comforting conventions typically tells a heteronormative story of love and friendship. Abhishek Chaubey starts his film from the perspective of Baban and Khalujaan. He makes them his conventional lovers. Khalu and Baban pursue Para and Munni through the most romantic and comfortable of settings: the Urdu mushaira. Chaubey's characters embody the archetypal Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti* aesthetic figures, turning an aesthetically 'Urdu' film into a collage of literary strands. The lovers and beloveds are present, as are the suitors and the *raqīb*. Everything is set. The relationships are depicted in their appropriate levels of importance. However a few things happen almost immediately once Para and Khalu, and Munni and Baban are coupled together. First, the viewer discovers that Begum Para and Munni have more control over the development of the story than their male counterparts. They draw in the suitors, including Khalujaan and Baban, for their own purposes. They have taken control over Khalujaan and Baban's carefully planned romance. Unfortunately for the convention-seeking viewer, Chaubey has no intention of ending his film in a way that satisfies his audience.

## Chapter Two: Obscuring the Female-Bonding Convention

In most Bollywood films, the female-bond and certain literary conventions are typically a source of comfort; but in *Dedh Ishqiya*, Chaubey uses them in such a way to cause the viewer uneasiness. This unease stems from the viewer's assumptions regarding how those conventions ought to be used. In the previous chapter I looked at the process the average Bollywood viewer went through to reach a place of comfort with the film. Unfortunately for the viewer, this feeling does not last. Chaubey continues to make use of literature and film, but instead, to obscure the viewer's state of comfort. Ismat Chughtai's controversial short story *Lihaaf*, and Ridley Scott's equally as controversial cult classic film, *Thelma and Louise*, portray quite a different understanding of the female-bond compared to the average Bollywood film. By complicating that bond, these two references question the importance of the heteronormative (male-oriented) narrative. By referencing *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise*, Chaubey reveals the true nature of Para and Munni's non-heteronormative relationship. By 'true nature' I refer to not a strictly platonic or romantic relationship, but rather one is riddled with more complexities than the *sakhi*-bond and the 'aashiq-ma'ashuq bond previously allowed.<sup>30</sup> In this chapter I am interested in how Abhishek Chaubey translates *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise* onto Para and Munni, and thus causes the collapse of the conventional, heteronormative story he so carefully created.

This chapter hinges on a discussion of the assumed relationship between gender and sexuality, and the gender-bending that occurs in the film. I see this assumed connection as the basis for the comfort, and then discomfort depicted in *Dedh Ishqiya*. By this I mean that the film uses heteronormative conventions (literary and filmic) which support the notion of a connection between gender and sexuality. By seeing two beautiful women on the silver screen, their sexuality is assumed to be heterosexual and thus the pieces fall into place as to whom they will be with by the end of the film. This also touches on the matter of

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<sup>30</sup> The *sakhi* bond and 'aashiq-ma'ashuq bond are complex ones, especially if when looking at the change of the bonds over time. Poets, artists, singers, and dancers highlighted different traits of these characters throughout history. However I find the allowance for flexibility in these bonds not to be inherent but the result of imposing colonial British sensibilities of sexuality. According to scholars such as Indrani Chatterjee and Rachel Sturman, colonial concepts of gender, sexuality, and legitimate (and illegitimate) relationships were forced into the legal system, disrupting the relatively Indian flexible notions of the aforementioned.

narration. Up until the point that Begum Para has herself kidnapped, the viewer could assume that Khalu and Baban were the narrators of the story. They are the 'aashiqs and the women are the cold, but beautiful *ma'ashuqs*. But all of this is destroyed by the gender- and sexuality- bending Chaubey employs. The 'bending' merely refers to the obscuring of culturally accepted gender norms. Such gender norms imply that men and women must play out their gender roles which are assigned based on their biological gender. Scholars have hotly debated this issue, most notably Judith Butler. But others, particularly Indrani Chatterjee, have started to look at this in relation to sexualities in Indian history.<sup>31</sup> *Dedh Ishqiya* pushes against the average Bollywood viewer's heteronormative sense of comfort by implying that roles of gender and sexuality are more loosely (rather than tightly) connected. This point applies to what is expected of both 'straight' and 'gay' women and men. The film does not go along with the expected roles of 'streamline' sexualities. The women are not depicted as more 'manly' in their appearance and dress. They also do not seem to believe in strictly monogamous relationships, thus inferring that few borders should be built around conceptions of gender, sexuality, and relationships.

This brings me to my next point, that by playing with the female-bond, *Dedh Ishqiya* touches on the uncomfortable reality that monogamy, particularly marital monogamy, is not the epitome of the intimate, romantic relationship (particularly for Munni and Para). However, this does exactly fit within the lines of culturally (and occasionally legally) accepted relationships. This, I think, is a crucial point in this film, and in any film that plays with gender and sexuality norms and roles: society's purpose has been to set up parameters of culturally acceptable and *legitimate* lifestyles. Lifestyles can refer to one's relationships as well as to the identity society's citizens. Those who do not fit within these parameters are pushed to the fringes of society. But there would hardly be a definitive society if there weren't individuals who existed outside of it. Certain aspects of one's lifestyle must remain in the dark to exist within society's borders. In the case of *Dedh Ishqiya*, those aspects are safely hidden in the household behind the *sakhi*-bond.

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<sup>31</sup> Indrani Chatterjee. *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013.

## Destroying Comfort and Convention: *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise*

Reference to *Lihaaf* and then *Thelma and Louise* removes the layer upon layer of promising romantic conventions which the lovers and beloveds glided upon. This all changes, first when Begum Para chooses Jaan Mohammed as the future Nawab of Mahmudabad. However even up until this point, there is still hope that the story will resolve itself in a symmetrical and romantic fashion. But reference to *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise* signals to the literary and knowledgeable viewer that there is no hope for such a conclusion to the story. Here I will look at how and why Chaubey inserts certain moments from the short story and cult film into *Dedh Ishqiya*.

### Ismat Chughtai and *Lihaaf* in *Dedh Ishqiya*

Ismat Chughtai was born in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh in 1915 and died in 1991. She was one of the youngest in a family of ten siblings. She spent most of her childhood surrounded by her many brothers, one of whom she credits as her first teacher. She attended the first Progressive Writers' Association<sup>32</sup> meeting while still working on her B.A in Lucknow. She later went on to get her B. Ed at Aligarh Muslim University. She wrote in secret for a long period of time because her family was opposed to it. She married in 1941, one year before the publication of *Lihaaf*. Once *Lihaaf* was published, Chughtai was slammed with allegations of obscenity and titillation. She was given the option to apologize or to go to court. She did the latter and won. Her lawyer argued that unless any particular moments of obscenity or homoeroticism in the story could be pointed out, then the case should be dropped, and it was. *Lihaaf* was not Chughtai's only story to be nearly banned. Numerous other works and books discussing class, gender, and religion incited the rage of those not willing to be criticized by a female author. *Lihaaf* is merely one of the more controversial stories of many.

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<sup>32</sup> Anjuman Tarraqi-e Pasand (Progressive Writer's Movement): A progressive, Urdu literary movement beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Writings by association members were largely anti-colonial and leftist, seeking to highlight social, economic, and gender injustice. Authors include: Sadaat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Rajinder Bedi Singh, Sajjad Zaheer, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Hameed Akhtar, and Rashid Jahan.

The *Lihaaf* trial was especially trying for Chughtai, largely because she did not want others to think of the story as obscene. To her, if the story is obscene, then she should be punished for it.<sup>33</sup> But her essay on the ordeal, “The *Lihaaf* Trial”, implies that she was extremely conflicted. Sadaat Hasan Manto, another Progressive Writer’s author, was on trial for obscenity for his story “Bu (Odor)”. Together, the two of them traversed the difficulties of writing what one is compelled to write, and then paying the price for that. She states,

*“Aslam Sahib, in reality no one told me that writing on the subject dealt with in “Lihaaf” is a sin, nor did I read anywhere that I shouldn’t write about this...disease...or predilection. Perhaps my mind is... but a cheap camera instead, which, whenever it sees something, pushes its own button and the pen in my hand becomes helpless. My mind tempts my pen, and I can’t interfere in the relationship between the mind and then pen.”<sup>34</sup>*

Her own thoughts regarding the reality depicted in *Lihaaf* tie the story together well with gender-bending *Dedh Ishqiya*:

*“When I read those things [about sex] as a child my heart suffered a jolt. I thought they were filthy. Then I read the book again when I was in B.A. and discovered those things were not filthy at all. They were matters every intelligent person should be aware of.”<sup>35</sup>*

According to Chughtai, the story depicted no more than what she understood to be the reality of women’s situation in life and in relationships. Her story was not meant to titillate but merely to inform her readers of a world under the quilt.

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<sup>33</sup> Ismat Chughtai. *My enemy, my friend: Essays, Reminiscences, Portraits*. Trans. Tahira Naqvi. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 140.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 140-1.



### *Lihaaf*: The Story

*Lihaaf* tells the story of an aging wife, Begum Jaan, who is left in the back of a large house with no one to keep her company but her female masseuse, Rubbu. Her husband, Nawab Sahib, leaves her there after their wedding while he plays host to a parade of young, fair-complexioned, slender-waisted boys. The story is from the point-of-view of Begum Jaan's niece who saw and heard things, all of which have been branded forever in her mind. The niece says that Begum Jaan married the Nawab, an older man, when she was in the prime of her youth. That youth faded quickly due to neglect, leaving her thin and sickly. She comes back to life when Rubbu comes into it. When the niece visits, she is disturbed and put off by the way Rubbu and Begum Jaan interact. She hears things at night; trumpeting like an elephant and slurping like someone enjoying a fine meal. Rubbu is constantly pressing and massaging some part of the Begum's body, especially her back. The niece does not quite understand what is happening underneath the quilt (*lihaaf*) every night, but she does know that it makes her extremely uncomfortable. The way the quilt moves and creates shadows on the walls reminds her of a large elephant and she thinks that perhaps a robber has made it into the house. At the end of the story, the niece is let in on what happens under that *lihaaf*. The corner of the quilt lifts up and the niece sees everything, yelping out for God and diving back into her bed.

*Lihaaf* influences *Dedh Ishqiya* on a few levels, some of which are simply direct translations of particular moments in the short story to the film. I will look at two such scenes. I will then broaden my analysis by looking at a few concepts which transfer from the short story to the film. There are also a few examples of the use and obscuring of poetic conventions in *Lihaaf*, but I will examine those further later on in the chapter.

*Lihaaf* appears in *Dedh Ishqiya* in two scenes to two different ends. In the first, Baban tells Munniya that he loves her, but she does not return the sentiment. He pushes Munni to the ground in anger, but Para comes up from behind and hits him with a wooden beam. After this Baban wakes up tied to a pole with Khalujaan. The remainder of the scene is shot from the level of the men who are sitting on the ground looking up into the loft where the women are. The men sit in darkness, but the camera shoots up to the women who are bathed in light. Munni and Para are playing, tickling, flirting, and drinking together

without a thought for their so-called 'aashiqs sitting below. The camera then moves back to Khalujaan. The gray cement wall behind him is partially lit, but the shadows of Munni and Para are cast against the wall. As the shadows play behind him he asks Baban, "Thand lag rahi hai? Lihaaf maang lein (Are you feeling cold? Shall we ask for some warmth (or a quilt).)"The men start laughing, and it seems that Naseeruddin Shah and Arshad Warsi come out of their characters to laugh about the brilliant punning reference just made to Chughtai's story. The shot pans out, showing Khalujaan as a small figure against the large wall. The wall is lit up like a shadow-puppet theater. Behind Khalujaan, the shadows of Munni and Para stumble into one another before they collapse to the ground, two shadows morphing into one. The shadow moves more slowly now and then the film cuts to the next scene.

In *Lihaaf*, the niece narrating the story describes such a scene in which she witnesses the moving around of the quilt, creating shadows on the wall. Below is only one of multiple references throughout the story to such shadows. At the beginning of the story before she begins her tale, the niece describes her discomfort with the shadows made from her own quilt. The shadows remind her of the confusing and discomfoting time she spent with her aunt. During that time, she could not understand what was happening under the quilt. Even now as she narrates the story many years later, the shadows cast on the wall by her quilt bring her back to a veiled and uncomfortable world:

جب میں جاڑوں میں لحاف اوڑھتی ہوں تو پاس کی دیوار پر اس کی پرچھائیں  
باتھی کی طرح جھومتی ہوئی معلوم ہوتی ہے۔

*In the winter when I go under the quilt, the shadows on the nearby wall seem  
to sway like an elephant.*

The shadows refer to a world that is covered but is no less real than the one we live in. The shadows imply something which not everyone can or want to understand. *Dedh Ishqiya* takes this one step further by showing, just for a moment, what is happening under the quilt by bringing the viewer into Begum Para and Munni's world.

The second scene takes place the following morning in the warehouse. Khalujaan is quiet and refuses to take food from Para's hands. She says that she wishes she could make him understand the difficult situation she is in. She says:

*Hum 'ishq ke lahari se bahut door nikal chuke hain Iftikhar. Hum kisi ke hamdard ban sakte hain. Dost ban sakte hain, madadgaar ban sakte hain. Magar ma'ashuq nahin ban sakte.*

*I left the inclination for love far behind, Iftikhar. I can become someone's companion. I can become someone's friend. I can become someone's helper/confidante. But I can't be anyone's beloved.*

Khalujaan looks at Para as if she duped him into believing that she was his mythical beloved. The beloved is someone placed on a high pedestal, well beyond any suitor's reach. But Begum Para brings herself back down to earth to tell Khalujaan she cannot be that person for him or for anyone. While Munni seems to be her beloved, their relationship is still an unconventional one which does not fit within the strict parameters of lover and beloved, or *sakhi* and lover. But here, she tries to remove any misconceptions about herself from Khalujaan's mind.

In the same scene, at Khalujaan's insistence, Begum Para tells him the story of her unfortunate circumstances. Khalujaan does this largely to distract her so that Baban can free himself and Khalujaan. But to the literary viewer, her story sounds extremely familiar:

*Humre shauhar, Nawab Mir Muhammad Tameen Khwan Sahib ko aurton mein koi dil chaspi nahin thi. Unke din rāt jua, shirāb, har londebāzi mein guzarte the. Hamne alag hone ke bahut koshish hai ki magar humara sāth kisi ne nahin diya. na hamre parivar ne, na kisi aur ne. Ham bimar hain lage. Koi bhi doctor, hakeem, mashwarae dawi, ham pe kuch na asar kar saka. Hamare saansen Munniya ke ghuzar hain. Voh hamare dost bhi hain. Behin bhi hain. Aur jaan bhi hain. Phir ek din Nawab Sahib guzar gaye aur hum azaad ho gaye magar bikaare ban kar.*

*My husband, Nawab Mir Muhammad Tameen Khwan Sahib had no interest in women. All day and night he spent gambling, drinking, and sleeping with other men. I tried very hard to separate from him no one took my side. Neither did my family nor did anyone else. I became ill. No doctor, nor physician, nor drugs, had any effect on me. I am indebted to Munniya for my life (breath). She is my friend. She is also my sister. She is also my life. Then one day, Nawab Sahib passed away and we were free, but made paupers.*

Prior to this reference to *Lihaaf*, the literary viewer may have guessed that Khalujaan's use of the word *lihaaf* was a nod to the short story. This divulging of Para's past merely seals that possibility.

Chaubey uses Begum Jaan's past in *Lihaaf* to do a number of things in the film. For those who know the story of *Lihaaf*, such a reference tells the audience that the relationship between Para and Munni is reflective not of a platonic female-bond. However, the previous scene of Para, Munni, and their playful shadows infers this too. The second scene instead opens up a new way for the audience to interact with Begum Para and Munni. They are no longer the beloveds of Khalu and Baban, but are now characters separate from their male counterparts. However, Begum Para's actions call her goodness in the filmic world into question. After Begum Para first, chose Jaan Mohammed, then, came out as the one behind her kidnapping, and lastly, tied up Khalujaan, she proved herself to be the least trustworthy of the main characters. But by explaining herself to Khalujaan, Para hopes to vindicate herself. While she is able to do this, she also removes herself from the conventional love story. She is not the *ma'ashuq*. She declares her complete dependence on Munni, not Khalujaan. The viewer gets no respite from the state of discomfort. Para's concern for Khalujaan seems to be not that of the beloved for the lover. I should not say this definitively because there is still plenty of time left in the film, and the viewer cannot forget the fact that Khalujaan has come to be cured. It would be too cruel of Abhishek Chaubey to allow Khalujaan to suffer needlessly for a woman who does not love him. But in order for him to be the lover in search of the cure, he must also be the narrator of his love story, but that too has been taken away from him.

Concern for identity of the narrator is something Chughtai makes apparent by making it clear to her readers who that is. The age and gender of her narrator greatly impact how the story is told. For example, in order to know what happens under the quilt, or the *lihaaf*, one must be invited, and in order to be invited in the room with the *lihaaf*, or even be invited into the home, you must be a woman. From a historical perspective, this encourages us to turn back to the historical household when looking at the development of gender and sexuality.<sup>36</sup> But the niece of Begum Jaan was one such individual who was invited into this world. At the end of the story, the narrator sees what happens under the quilt. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, the identity of the narrator is also important but not to make the story clearer, but rather to obfuscate it. The male lovers seem to be the ones writing the story only to find out that their female *ma'ashuqs* are in fact the ones who have drawn them in. They have drawn in their suitors by playing the roles of *sakhi* and *ma'ashuq/aashiq*. By assuming what is expected of them, they are able to narrate quietly from the wings. In *Lihaaf* and *Dedh Ishqiya*, the power of the narrator cannot be overstated. The narrator controls what the reader or viewer sees or hears. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, certain truths regarding Para and Munni's relationship were not known to the male narrator, and were thus not made known to the viewer. By knowing who the narrator is, the recipient can guess what will happen in the story and adjust their expectations.

Combined with this concern for the narrator's identity is the matter of choice. The narrator has the power of choice, in this case the power of choosing who their beloved will be. In a number of Bollywood films, particularly those highlighting the male-bond<sup>37</sup>, women are used as objects upon which the male lover's attentions are fixed. They are pulled in by the magnificence of the male lover. However, in *Lihaaf* and *Dedh Ishqiya*, switching who chooses whom (male lover or female lover) and for what reasons (selfish or not) confuses the viewer and reader as to who in the story holds the power over the narrative. The choice

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<sup>36</sup> Historically, men have been the writers of history. That which they were not able (or not invited) to see was not included in any historical rendering of the time. Such is obviously the case with *Lihaaf*. Those men who were upset with Chughtai's story were not invited under the quilt and in the back of the house to see that which they couldn't understand. In order to understand Begum Jaan and Rubbu's story, they would have to relinquish some of their assumed power over the women in their household. The same is the case with *Dedh Ishqiya*. Why were Khalujaan and Baban so angry that they had been duped? They could not understand the relationship between Munni and Para. In order to understand that relationship, they would have to let go of the illusion that they were the ones writing their own love story.

<sup>37</sup> Dil Chahta Hai, Zindagi Na Milegi Do Bara,

to have a male or female lover is the most apparent one in both *Lihaaf* and in *Dedh Ishqiya*. Begum Jaan exhibits the possibility to choose a lover over dedication to an uninterested husband. The same goes for *Dedh Ishqiya*. Begum Para is given the option to be with her childhood lover and poet (the latter fulfills the requirement of the late husband, putting the viewer further at ease), Khalujaan. Throughout the film and towards the end, she does show affection towards him. However she chooses to be with her handmaiden, romantically and physically, bending the definition of the *sakhi*-bond even further.

The final and perhaps most important point to draw from *Lihaaf* is the matter of physicality in the seeming *sakhi*-bond. To infer that women will seek sex and physical intimacy from a source other than their spouse (especially if that other person is a woman) acknowledges the existence of their sexuality. By this I mean that women desire and want sex, and not necessarily (only) with men. For example, in *Lihaaf*, that which frightens Begum Jaan's niece is what happens under the quilt. Under the quilt is unknown territory. The same is the case in *Dedh Ishqiya*. That which happens up on the loft is unknown to the men below. But in addition to this fear of the unknown is the idea that sex is separate from love and can be separate from men. The reaction to *Lihaaf* in the form of a trial is one example of this. And the anger that Baban has towards Munni is indicative of that fear that sex and love are not necessarily connected. But going back to *Lihaaf*, the niece's fear of what happens under the quilt extended to the Chughtai's male readers.

The significance of acknowledging women's sexuality is bound up with the history of *Lihaaf*. This story was written at a point in which women were the object of India's reform. With the onslaught of British power over the subcontinent, certain things were considered more important and worth protecting. Women were seen as the protectors and holders of Indian culture and civilization in the face of a powerful and encroaching British colonial power. Women were carefully guarded, but they were also carefully molded to the type of reform that was desired. One example of this was the matter of women's education. Women ought to be educated but not too educated. They ought to be modern but not modern enough to pass as a British woman. Women were china dolls placed on pedestals which were meant to protect them from the harmful influences of the British. They became

objects to be protected and to show off when necessary. How could such objects desire sex, let alone think sex with a woman was an option for them?

Munniya is the perfect example of the supposedly platonic *sakhi* who shocks all by not only having a female lover, but also by believing in casual sex with men. These two items destroyed the conventional *sakhi*-bond in *Dedh Ishqiya*. But to Chughtai, this is reality. Those who don't want to read about (or watch) it, those who cannot face it, see it as obscene. *Dedh Ishqiya* does not go so far as to replicate the sounds and the movement of the quilt, but the film does touch upon the more basic idea that women want sex. Munni's actions depict a woman who is not necessarily 'a loose woman', but rather one who lives by a different set of rules with regards to sex and relationships. Through Munni, monogamy, heterosexuality, and marital sex are all thrown out the window.

One scene in particular shows this well. After the four run off to a warehouse to hide from Jaan Mohammed, Baban and Munni have a fight regarding the status of their relationship. Baban pulls Munni aside to tell her that he's truly fallen in love with her. And her response is brutal and unexpected. She states that this is the problem with the boys of today:

*"Ishq aur sex mein farq nahin kar pata hai na? Matlab kiya? Jo ek raat kisi ke saath so rahi ho, agle din pant utaaro to dil rakna milta hai. Dekh bhai, hamari ghalati hai. Hamen ma'afkar dein ja mein tere saath sex kar liya. Par yeh ishq wishq par naam le ke na. Is liye meherbaani kar aur door raahn se.*

*There's nothing difference for you between sex and love? What does this mean? That after sleeping together one night, your pants come off and join with your heart? Look bhai, it's my fault. Forgive me for going off and having sex with you. But don't you use this 'love' word with me. Therefore, thank you very much and stay far away.*

This scene is shocking for a number of reasons; the first being that Munni is not a girl who equates sex with love. This implies that she is a sexual being, not like the image Indian reformists wanted their women to look like. *Lihaaf* also brings up this concept of women as needing sexual pleasure. Secondly, Munni does not try to act embarrassed about their affair.

She is instead extremely annoyed that Baban used the 'love' word to make her be with him. She apologizes for sleeping with him and then threatens him to never use the word again. Baban starts to hit her out of anger, but Para comes up from behind with a large wooden beam, hitting him several times. She brings Munni to her and hugs her tightly. They then tie up Baban with Khalujaan. During this scene, Khalujaan is watching and laughing hysterically from his post. The shocked look on Baban's face reflects the discomfort felt also by the audience. In this scene, the construction of the conventional couple begins to disintegrate before the eyes of the audience, leaving the viewers to figure how the film could possibly go on in a satisfying way.

The purpose of inserting *Lihaaf* into *Dedh Ishqiya* is to rip the viewers out of their comfort zone and to keep them there. The short story makes a varied and complicated appearance in the film by translating certain scenes and moments, each of which contribute to the film in some way. Questions of narration, sexuality, and choice arise in *Lihaaf* and the film, making for a richer reading and visual experience. For example, in *Lihaaf*, Begum Jaan and Rubbu upset the notion that women seek sexual pleasure in the heteronormative world. But the question then becomes, was their world always a heteronormative one? The film makes a similar challenge to gender and sexuality norms in society and how those norms are portrayed in film. By making the conventional female-bond the object of such challenges and questions, it is more difficult for the viewer to walk away from the film still in a state of comfort. By obscuring that bond, the certainty and comfort that comes with conventions is then removed. But *Lihaaf* is only one reference which puts the viewer on edge.

### *Thelma and Louise: A Female-Bond with No Limits*

*Thelma and Louise* is not a comforting movie. The relationships are messy, confusing, and largely disappointing. The only thing that remains constant and strong is the bond between the two main female characters, Thelma and Louise. Similar relationship dynamics can be found in *Dedh Ishqiya* between Para and Munni. It is a sisterly, friendly, emotional, and physical bond. What brings these two women (in both films) closer together is not the presence of a man, but the journey they take to leave their past behind. While



*Lihaaf* could be considered a tribute to the sexual rebellion of women, *Thelma and Louise* rather acknowledges and celebrates the freedom to act. The film came out in 1991 and became, for many women, the prime example of women acting as befits their situation. . For others, the film simply depicted bad women doing bad things. *Dedh Ishqiya* takes the position of the former. To show this, the film replicates the final, iconic scene from *Thelma and Louise*. It is a small but powerful homage to small and large acts of rebellion.

Ridley Scott's career is full of box-office hits, Academy Award winners and nominees, but *Thelma and Louise* continues to be one of his most iconic films. Films such *Gladiator*, *Alien*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *G.I Jane* hint at his willingness to have women as complicated and significant characters; however, his most recent work does reflect the otherwise varied body of his work. He was born in England where he went to the West Hartlepool College of Art for Design. He attended the Royal College of Art for film. He does not cite any major influences on his work. The only apparent overarching theme to his work is the existence of some moral quandary which the characters must overcome or succumb to. Action with characters who have a conscience sums up the bulk of his films. *Thelma and Louise* departs from this type of film, but does at certain points give the audience a dose of action.

Thelma is the submissive housewife of a controlling man, and Louise is a boisterous and sassy waitress. The two women go off on a two-day road-trip. On their first stop, Thelma is nearly raped but saved by Louise who holds a shot gun to the man's head. As the two walk away the man yells out obscenities to them, and Louise turns around and shoots him. For the remainder of the film the women are on the run from the police. They meet a young man on parole, J.D. The women run low on cash so Louise withdraws her life savings with the intention of driving to Mexico. J.D steals the money after sleeping with Thelma and takes off. A guilty Thelma robs a convenience store, and she and Louise speed away. Back on the road a truck driver makes obscene gestures to them and they pull him over demanding an apology. When he refuses they shoot at the truck tanker and it explodes. The police

finally corner the two women at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Together they decide not to surrender. They hug and kiss<sup>38</sup> before stepping on the gas and driving over the cliff.

Chaubey pays homage to this cult classic by replicating the most iconic scene in the film when Thelma and Louise drive over the cliff. In *Dedh Ishqiya* this takes place after the final shootout scene with Jaan Mohammed and his men. Para and Munni have the opportunity to run to the car to make their escape. They wave to Khalujaan and Baban to come with them but the police start shooting at them. The women hop in the car and drive off, leaving Khalu and Baban behind. The two men look after the car in disbelief. Even then, they believed that Para and Munni would wait for them, even with the police chasing after them.

In both scenes, the female companions drive off into the sunset (although Para and Munni do not drive off a cliff), their cars spitting up dust and dirt into the faces of the men chasing after them. For Thelma and Louise, this final act is their only truly independent act since their trip began. Various unfortunate circumstances pushed them in one way or the other to shoot, to rob, or to run. But in the end, they choose to do what they want, not what is expected of them. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, the late Nawab forces Begum Para to marry a man, not of her choice because he must be a poet. She must also marry a wealthy poet to clear up her debts, narrowing her options of appropriate suitors even more. Begum Para decides to drive off into the future with Munni, leaving Mahmudabad and all that was expected of her behind.

Thelma and Louise, and Begum Para and Munni represent new ways to look at the bond between women. The relationships between both sets of women push the limits of the conventional female bond. They also stretch the limits of strict heterosexual love. These women describe their relationship as one of friends, sisters, and lovers. Both sets of companions will steal and deceive for one another. Thelma and Louise even choose to die in one another's company. Such a relationship goes well beyond the boundaries of the literary *sakhi*. The same is the case with *Dedh Ishqiya*. Munni reaches out to suspicious characters to find someone to kidnap Para. She willingly risks her reputation and safety, all so that she

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<sup>38</sup> The kiss at the end is actually the object of some controversy. Supposedly the director, Ridley Scott, did not want the women to kiss at the end, but Sarandon (Thelma) told Davis (Louise) that she would do the kiss.

and Para can live out their dream of freedom. If *Lihaaf* opened up the notion that Munni and Para are lovers, then *Thelma and Louise* complicated such a clear-cut understanding of their relationship. Both story and film in *Dedh Ishqiya* push viewers to consider other ways which aesthetic conventions can be used. Female-bonding is one such convention.

### The Obscuring of the Female-Bond

Poets, filmmakers, and authors tease apart the tie between female companions, and use it to push along the lovers' story. In *Dedh Ishqiya*, the filmmakers tease with their audience by playing with the average *sakhi* traits, as well as with who takes on those traits. At the beginning of the film, when Munni steps out to introduce Para, she appears to be the ideal, helpful *sakhi*. But as the film progresses there are moments when other characters, Khalujaan and Baban in particular, take on the traits of the female companion. These moments are confusing to the average viewer because Munni is suddenly put in the place of the lover, upsetting the heteronormative aesthetics of the scene. *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise* are largely to blame for this obscuring of the sacred female-bond. However I don't want to imply that the swapping of roles from *sakhi* to *ma'ashuq* is definitive. Rather, the film tries to do away with definite roles of lover, beloved, female companion, and male companion altogether. As in *Thelma and Louise* and *Lihaaf*, the female-bond has not been broken. It has only been obscured and altered. In this section, I will look at a couple scenes in *Dedh Ishqiya* which portray this push for flexibility in the defining of women's as well as men's roles.

In this section I am interested in revisiting two scenes in particular which I already discussed from a conventional point of view in the previous chapter. In the previous chapter I looked at a few roles and traits of the *sakhi* in poetry and film, and then how they translated to *Dedh Ishqiya*. In this section my discussion will be somewhat limited by the choice of scenes, but those I look at do exhibit a meshing together of the *sakhi* and *ma'ashuq* roles. I will first look at the role of the *sakhi* as peeper or vicarious enjoyer of the lovers' pleasure. The first scene takes place soon after the shooting contest when Khalujaan convinces Begum Para to return to her passion for dancing. In the second scene a flirtatious

Begum Para nuzzles with Khalujaan on the grass. Taken from a conventional perspective, Munni seems jealous. She also seems to be peeping on and keeping guard over the happy couple, hoping to enjoy the pleasures of love vicariously through them. Instead I will look at this scene from a different perspective.

The first peeping scene occurs after Khalujaan forces Begum Para to face and accept her past as a dancer. He confronts her in the room where she keeps all of her dancing memorabilia and accessories. But even prior to this, on the second night of the mushaira, he expresses a desire to see her dance. In exchange for the stolen necklace he asks to watch her rehearse. However she does not want to discuss her past with anyone, even Khalujaan. On the day of the shooting contest, he confronts her again, but still she is not ready to confront her dancing past. She slams the door in his face. But from the other side, he convinces her to put on her *ghunghru* (anklet bells for dance) and dance. He can hear the music and bells from the other side of the door but he cannot see her. He runs outside to find a window to peep through. As he watches her, Munni runs through the hall calling out her name. She pushes Baban aside on her way to the room. She pounds on the doors until Para flings them open with tears in her eyes. Para grabs Munni's hands and drags her into the room to dance. Baban too runs outside to peep on the two female companions (lovers?) holding hands and spinning. Munni sees both men peeping on them and seems concerned for a moment but is eventually taken over by Para's twirling. Khalujaan and Baban are clearly enjoying themselves by watching the women enjoying themselves.

Here the role of the peeping *sakhi* is clearly switched from Munni to the two male lovers. The scene begins with Khalujaan very much in power as the lover. He comes as a devotee to Begum Para, pushing her to dance for him. He expresses his admiration for her dancing. But between him and Munni, she chooses the latter to share in the joy generated from the freedom that dancing affords her. Even the altercation between Munni and Baban in the hallway plays off of this swapping between *sakhi* and *ma'ashuq*. In the previous chapter I mentioned that the beloved is cruel to the lover; however, Munni takes on that role more so than Para. As Munni searches for Para, Baban blocks her way and mocks classical Indian dance moves. She grabs him by the lapels and pushes him away. But as she runs off, his face turns gleeful. She touched him *and* she was mean to him. What clearer

indication could there be that she is his beloved. But then he too is relegated to the role of peeper by rushing outside to join Khalujaan at the windows. The women are inside the room and inside their own world, while the men wait outside, relishing in the joy of the *sakhis* and hoping to be noticed by their beloveds.

In the second scene, Begum Para has by this point forgiven Khalujaan for reminding her of her dancing past. She even seems to have accepted him as her *'aashiq*. He comes to her to confess that he is not a real Nawab. She tells him that she knows this. What seems to be important to her is that he is a true poet; honest, like a Sufi. He says that he is no poet, no Sufi, and no Nawab. He is a thief. But her response is that he is a thief who has stolen her pain. Then she slowly says his name. Iftikhar. He takes her hand and moves his head closer to her. The shot cuts to Munni who is watching the couple. Baban nearly stomps over to them in annoyance but Munni wrenches him back. She leans up against a pillar watching them with a smile on her face which slowly turns flat. She looks jealous and upset; but who is she jealous of?

In the previous chapter, I implied that she is only playing the role of the jealous *sakhi*; but this explanation makes little sense because that jealousy is usually rooted in desire for the male beloved/lover. In this case, Khalujaan is significantly older than the *sakhi*. It would not make sense for her to want him as Para does. This leaves only one explanation for the jealous and upset look on her face. She is jealous that Para is showing perhaps real affection towards a man, and not her. She knows what she and Para must do in order for their plan to be successful, and she knows that she and Para are the lovers. And yet here she stands, visibly uncomfortable by the affection between Para and Khalujaan. This is not the vicarious enjoyment of the *sakhi* but jealousy of the lover for her beloved.

Female-bonding is often portrayed as a clear-cut bond between two girls or women that is sisterly in nature, and yet that is not the case in this film. They depend on one another in the quest for the beloved. Or they depend on one another to deal with the affections of the lover. In film, the picture of this bond changes with time but the essence remains the same. What also remains is their interest in men. The presence of a male lover makes the female lover beautiful and, simply put, a woman. *Dedh Ishqiya* changes this. These women are still portrayed as beautiful and womanly; but, instead of a man by their

side, they only need one another to be happy, beautiful, and womanly. The bond remains but the rules of heteronormativity are no longer in effect. Chaubey builds up the conventional female-bond in *Dedh Ishqiya* only to be obscured by swapping assumed gender roles. By reassigning and complicating certain *sakhi* traits, particularly of the peeper, the jealous friend, and the vicarious enjoyer, Chaubey takes away the comfort that Munni's character would normally provide to the average audience. Khalujaan and Baban then take on roles that they (as 'aashiqs) are not accustomed to playing. The 'aashiq is a devotee of the *ma'ashuq*. He (or she) seeks out the beloved so that they may be cured of their aching heart. They should be the ones uniting with their beloved, not the ones watching as the *sakhis* play together. The last section brings together the male lover's expectation to be healed with the *Dedh Ishqiya* female-bond.

## Healed by the Female Beloved

The physician trope from Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti* poetry is one of the most prevalent and powerful ones to make its way into film; but the way Chaubey uses it in *Dedh Ishqiya* is confusing because it is not restricted to the heteronormative couple. At first, *Dedh Ishqiya* takes this convention and uses it to put forward a seemingly straightforward narrative of man (Khalujaan) seeks woman (Para) for cure to love. However Chaubey plays with the convention by granting Khalujaan his cure, and by turning Para into the malady-ridden lover as well. But she does not turn only to Khalujaan for the cure. In this discussion of the physician trope, *Lihaaf* too plays a small but important role in obscuring this convention and the female-bond. This section will examine the role of *Lihaaf* in rewriting this convention and how this relates back to the female-bond. I will also look at couple of new scenes between Begum Para and Munni which depict a complicated version of this trope.

At the time of *Lihaaf*'s publication, the sexuality of women was not something discussed openly, especially any non-conventional predilections (sexual interest in other women) they may have. But the stories of *Lihaaf*, and now *Dedh Ishqiya*, imply that women will seek out coital and romantic bliss with those of the same sex. However, Chughtai and Chaubey imply not only this, but also that certain conventional tropes may now be used to

tell a story involving two women. In *Lihaaf*, Begum Jaan is almost completely dependent on Rubbu for her physical and emotional satisfaction. Rubbu is so effective that only her touch through massage is enough to satisfy Begum Jaan. Above I mentioned that both Begum Jaan and Para became ill because their husbands neglected them. Here, Begum Jaan's niece describes her malady-ridden aunt:

مگر بیگم جان سے شادی کر کے تو وہ انہیں کل ساز و سامان کے ساتھ ہی گھر  
میں رکھ کر بھول گئے۔ اور وہ بیماری دہلی پتلی نازک سی بیگم تنہائی کے غم میں گھلنے لگیں۔

*“But having gotten married, he [Nawab Sahib] placed her in the house with  
everything and forgot her. And she began to dissolve in the sorrow of  
loneliness, becoming sickly, skinny, lanky, and weak.*

ربو نے نیچے گرتے گرتے سنبھال لیا۔ چپ پٹ دیکھتے دیکھتے ان کا سوکھا جسم برا  
ہونا شروع ہوا۔ گال چمک اٹھے اور حسم پھوٹ نکلا۔ ایک عجیب و غریب تیل کی مالش سے  
بیگم جان میں زندگی کی جھلک آئی۔

*It was Rubbu who rescued her from the fall. Soon her thin body began to fill  
out. Her cheeks began to glow and she blossomed in beauty. It was a special oil  
massage that brought life back to the half-dead Begum Jaan.<sup>39</sup>*

Rubbu is credited with bringing Begum Jaan back from the brink of death. Her “special oil massage”, a combination of touch and ‘potion’, produces a positive effect on Begum Jaan’s disposition and appearance. Rubbu could simply be the ideal *sakhi* but her massages are not restricted the massaging of Begum Jaan’s aching limbs. Chughtai’s use of this trope is significant. She takes what is considered a heteronormative convention and uses it to portray a very different relationship.

Begum Para is similarly dependent on Munniya for her health and well-being. Above I quoted Begum Para, explaining her situation to Khalujaan. This part of her monologue succinctly describes her reliance on Munni:

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<sup>39</sup> Ismat Chughtai. *Lihaaf [The Quilt]*. trans. Asaduddin, M. in *Manushi*. ed. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita. No. 110. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1996, p. 37.

*Ham bimar hain lage. Koi bhi doctor, hakeem, mashwarae dawi, ham pe kuch na asar kar saka. Hamare saansen Munniya ke ghuzar hain. Voh hamare dost bhi hain. Behin bhi hain. Aur jaan bhi hain.*

*I became ill. No doctor, nor physician, nor drugs, had any effect on me. I am indebted to Munniya for my life (breath). She is my friend. She is also my sister. She is also my life.*

Leading up to this moment, Begum Para is shown to be completely dependent upon Munni. Munni helps Para prepare to meet the suitors. She combs her hair. But most significantly, she makes sure that Begum Para takes her medicine. She is that traditional and poetic remedy-giver. The way Para explains her relationship with Munni also forces the viewer to expand their understanding of the female-bond.

The film ties together Munni's medicinal qualities with Begum Para's freedom from her anxieties related to finances and Jaan Mohammed. For example, after the shooting contest, Jaan Mohammed sits down next to Begum Para and tells her that the reason he gave her money to cover her debts was 'issaq (love). He doesn't want his money back, he only wants her love. To this Begum Para replies, "Lekin hamein hamare saansen wapas chahiye (But I want my (freedom to) breath(e) back)." She gets up to leave but Jaan Mohammed follows her to the car. He states that like his name, Jaan (meaning 'life'), he can give life, but he can also take it away. As Begum Para's drives away she begins to hyperventilate. She loses that breath she so desperately wants back. Once she gets home, Begum Para frantically searches for something. It is her wedding album. She hysterically flips through the album, stopping at a photo of her off to the side. Her husband is also in the photo but surrounded by young men. She grabs a pen and systematically scratches out her face in each photo. As she scribbles away, Munni comes up behind her, lays her hands on Begum Para's shoulders and massages her, saying "Bas, bas, Begum (Enough, enough, Begum)." Munni then kisses her on the head. Begum Para breathes in deeply and exhales slowly, gradually regaining her breath. The next shot is of Munni giving Begum Para her pills and Begum falling asleep. This touching reenactment of the beloved as the cure-giver, similar to *Lihaaf*, brings together two dimensions of the convention: Munni as medicine-giver as well as being



cure itself. Her presence and touch alone soothes Begum Para, bringing back her breath and health.

*Dedh Ishqiya* uses this physician and patient trope in two ways. The first is to show Khalujaan's love for Begum Para. For him, she is his physician, even if she denies her ability to be his *ma'ashuq*, she still is able to cure his trembling hands. But Begum Para's illness is related to her loss of breath, caused by anxiety. Munni takes away Para's anxieties and brings back Para's breath and freedom. By allowing both patients to be cured by their respective *ma'ashuqs*, the film opens up the idea that the roles of the lover and the beloved are constantly in flux and largely dependent on the lover. Even if one denies the role of the *ma'ashuq*, this does not remove the feelings the lover has for that individual. This also opens up the possibility for a more flexible conception of love and sexuality. The greater question then becomes what is the purpose of limiting the bond between two people by defining it in terms of sexuality (heterosexual or homosexual), gender (male or female), or type of love (platonic or romantic). This film attempts to remove such dichotomies by confusing the viewer as what type of relationship is being shown on screen. Such confusion can only cause discomfort and uncertainty. But it can also open the door to an adjustment of how relationships are understood by the viewer. Depending on if the relationship is seen from a conventional or non-conventional perspective, the nature of the relationship changes. *Lihaaf* shows that only grief and illness come by denying what one needs. In the case of this film, what one needs will often be uncomfortable to the average film viewer.

## Conclusion

By including references to *Lihaaf*, *Thelma and Louise*, and other conventional tropes from South Asian literature (Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti*), the complex and non-heterosexual nature of the relationship between Munni and Para is revealed. From literal translations of the short story to inferences regarding the nature of the female bond, the film uses Chughtai's short story and Scott's film to alert the cultured viewer to a change in the story. Begum Para and Munni are lovers, sisters, and friends. They are one another's support and

they are one another's remedy-provider. The reference to *Thelma and Louise*, though brief, also implies a more complex view of the bond between women.

The conventional and non-conventional worlds are not separate, but are merely hidden under a quilt, in the household. Only those invited in to witness it, know of its existence and can understand it. But in order to begin to understand it, power must be relinquished. This was the problem with Khalujaan and Baban. They could not get past the betrayal of Para and Munni to see what was happening between their supposed beloveds. Those who critiqued Chughtais' story felt the same. She did not see her story as obscene because it was a story about the reality of women, but it was a reality which men did not know, or did not want to acknowledge. This is the contribution of films like *Dedh Ishqiya* and *Thelma and Louise*. The truth is rarely a comfortable thing to encounter.

## Conclusion

In the mushaira and Urdu poetry world, the structure of the couplet, or *sha'ir*, is unique. The first line, or *misra*, has the job of setting up a problem or situation which needs to be fixed or addressed. The second *misra* is meant to solve, or at least, address that problem. The second *misra* is meant to be a surprising twist to the plot set up in the first line. The overall structure of *Dedh Ishqiya* reflects this structure of the couplet. The first half of the film (and the first chapter of this thesis), sets up the conventional, comforting world of heteronormativity. And yet the second half of the film, thanks to references to *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise*, makes for a shocking twist in response to the conventional beginning. The second *misra* does not always 'solve' the problem from the first *misra*. Such is the case with this film. The second line must be unexpected for the *sha'ir* to be considered excellent.

The question of what is comforting and discomfoting comes up repeatedly in *Dedh Ishqiya*. It pushes the viewer to interrogate their own views of love and sex. The final product is a presentation of and then obscuring of conventional, and usually heteronormative, tropes from the literary and filmic worlds. Tropes pulled from Urdu, Sufi, and *bhakti* aesthetics give the film an air of legitimacy. By legitimacy I refer in large part to the use of expected conventions. Any good story ought to have certain story-building elements to draw the audience to the theater. Love, poetry, and Urdu go so well together that the average Bollywood viewer cannot help but feel at ease. But once Chaubey has his viewers in place, he finally has the chance to put them on the edge. For example, as I watched the film for the first time with a few friends, most of them said that they 'didn't get it'. They felt bad for Khalujaan. They thought the women acted cruelly. But they also felt uncertain because they saw those same traits in the men...but women aren't supposed to act like that! They are supposed to be 'better' than the men. There I sat with close friends who themselves were victim to the comfort/discomfort switch of Chaubey's. They couldn't see the source of their discomfort, but they certainly felt it.

The purpose of this thesis has been to point out those points of discomfort which at first are difficult to locate. A few literary-minded viewers may pick out the *Lihaaf* reference. Some fans of old American cult classics may see *Thelma and Louise* in Begum Para and

Munni. But it takes time to bring those references together with the poetic conventions, and to next formulate an opinion on why those references were made. What viewers can describe, however, is the feeling of discomfort. The discomfort may be from a seemingly conventional story being flipped. It could also be Para and Munni stooping to the level of Khalujaan and Baban to get what they need, especially when they are the suspected *ma'ashuqs*. Chaubey takes structured storyline and then ends the film in chaos. The women are together and the men are alone (again). The women have sold a stolen necklace to run a business and the men are in jail. Confusingly, two different *ma'ashuqs* are cured by two different *'aashiqs*, leaving the impression that the romantic-type of love is much more complicated than assumed.

The combination of the conventional female-bond, and poetic aesthetics and tropes produces a complex and confusing film. Abhishek Chaubey and his fellow filmmakers envisioned a way to take those comfort-producing elements and create a new type of love story. The *sakhi*-bond typically represents a connection between sisterly companions. They fight and they steal (the other's beloved), but they also support and love one another. This is the bond that is at the base of *Dedh Ishqiya*. Supporting this bond is the background of the *mushaira* and the presence of other characters from the world of poetry. The *'aashiq* and *ma'ashuq* are supposedly the most important figures in this world. This would assumedly put Khalujaan and Para at the center of the film. And, in typical *sakhi* fashion, Munni tries to hog the spotlight by getting an *'aashiq* of her own. She also appears to want to permanently get rid of Para by planning her kidnapping. All of these elements, though disturbing, are not unexpected.

References to *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise* make for a graceful but firm transition away from the conventional love story. Both pay homage to a complex relationship between female companions. However they also steal away any certainty of the sexuality of Para and Munniya by implying that these women are not immune to the effects of their male companions. Para is obviously fond of Khalujaan. Munniya spends the night with Baban and trusts him to carry out Begum Para's kidnapping. And yet, neither relationship reaches the depths of affection which the women have for one another.

Each of the *sakhi*-bonds avoids making generalizations of who they are, based on their sexual inclinations. References to *Lihaaf* and *Thelma and Louise* then open up the possibility that those conventions, previously used only in heteronormative plots in film, could be used in a multitude of situations. Chaubey does not remove the conventions altogether; he merely proposes the idea, like Chughtai and Scott, that conventions can be inserted to produce different effects to different ends. By creating a film such as this, Chaubey fills a hole in the Bollywood industry. His of literary works and mainstream actors makes it difficult to discuss the film's overall contribution.

It is not the first and only film to deal with the issue of non-heteronormativity. The art-house film, *Fire*, comes immediately to mind in such a discussion. If *Dedh Ishqiya* does not hold that place as the first sexually controversial film, then what does it add to the world of Bollywood film? It straddles the line between main-stream film and art-house film by producing something to be absorbed by the film-going masses, but also to be considered in a significant way. It traverses the imaginary divide between films to make a profit and films to make an impact. By employing popular actors and actresses such as Madhuri Dixit, Naseeruddin Shah, and Arshad Warsi, audiences are drawn to the cinema houses easily. It is then up to Chaubey to produce something worthwhile, which it seems he has done.

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