‘Relationships Which Have No Name:’
Family and Sexuality in 1970s Popular Film

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In the closing moments of Farhan Akhtar’s 2001 blockbuster *Dil Chahta Hai*, the dying Tara describes her connection to Siddharth (Sid) by saying, “There are some relationships which have no name.”¹ This is a redemptive moment in an otherwise tragic scene, as Tara grasps on to the last few minutes of her life, and Sid struggles to convey to her how much she has meant to him. The communication is particularly meaningful for Sid, whose relationship with Tara, throughout the film, exceeded conventional understandings of relationships between men and women, and which, when it was briefly forced into the paradigm of romantic love, all but fell apart.

For a popular cinema so seemingly invested in fixed relationships, a sentiment such as Tara’s might seem strikingly novel. Indeed, many critics have heralded *Dil Chahta Hai* (DCH) as a new kind of film, which transgressed conventional representations of familial and romantic relationships in Hindi cinema. The relationship between Sid and Tara epitomized this sense, because Tara was older and divorced. But Tara’s words suggest that what is significant about their ‘relationship’ is precisely that it eludes definition. If its undefinability is the source of its transgression, then what Tara and Sid share is not entirely new, but something that popular film had been experimenting with for decades. It is no accident that it is in Farhan Akhtar’s film that the idea of a relationship without a name finds form in language, as it mobilizes the sentiment found in the scripts penned by his father, Javed Akhtar, and his contemporaries a generation ago.

¹ “Kuch rishte hote, jinka koi naam nahin hota.”
earlier. Tracing Tara’s sentiment backwards, we find ourselves at the films of the 1970s, which reveal a pressing and somewhat paradoxical interest in representing socially unrepresentable relationships.

But popular cinema in the 1970s, like Hindi popular cinema across the decades, generally relies on what Ravi Vasudevan calls “high contrivance in narrative mechanisms” (10) such as formulaic plots, tropes and themes. In this way, conventions for representing the family and romantic love, among others, provided the background for the expression of deep social angst that took the form, in this decade, of the ‘angry young man’ (Mazumdar 1). In contrast to contemporary parallel cinema, in which social injustice was described through a harsh realism and original, psychologically probing plots and characters, the angry young man was not represented in opposition to formulas but by means of them. He was thus often positioned as a son, or a brother, or a lover. Familial or romantic structures served as background against which this more dynamic figure was placed and in coordination with which his meaning emerged.

This essay argues that popular film of the 1970s opened up a space for representing new kinds of social relationships, but within and based on its use of melodramatic formulas. I argue that over the course of the long 1970s, we see a process of repetition and resignification whereby formulas such as the lost-and-found plot and the long triangle were re-presented, and their constitutive elements rearranged, in order to generate alternatives to conventional kinship and romantic paradigms, respectively. These alternatives were not paraded, and often not even articulated, but were advanced nonetheless through the suggestion that, anticipating DCH’s Tara, the language used by Hindi cinema to describe relationships at times falls short. It is in this

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2 Thomas and Nandy provide detailed descriptions of the various formulas and tropes of Hindi popular cinema.
indirect and mostly unstated way that these films bring to light lived experiences of fraternity, love and desire at the margins of social legibility.

I. The Broken Family

Tejaswini Ganti points to the common usage of the ‘lost-and-found’ formula in 1970s films, which she relates to healing the traumas of Partition. Here, popular film is figured as a utopian space where the land, family and sense of wholeness lost at Partition can be put together again. This certainly accounts for the pathos and popularity of the formula, but it is not quite clear, in Ganti’s hypothesis, why the lost-and-found is so prominent more than two decades after Partition. One wonders, by contrast, whether there might be a connection between the lost-and-found formula and the sensibility of ‘angry’ restlessness that is also seen to define the decade’s films. Although seemingly incompatible, their coincidence in the 1970s seems suggestive.

*Deewaar* (Yash Chopra, 1975), although not strictly a ‘lost-and-found,’ might seem a central text to advance this theory, as the young man’s anger against the state is inseparable from his alienation from his family. *Deewaar* tells the story of two brothers, Ravi and Vijay, who take separate paths as they reach adulthood, which take them to two different sides of the law. Ravi becomes a policeman and Vijay becomes a smuggler associated with Bombay’s biggest gangs. As Priya Joshi shows (in this volume), *Deewaar* is in many ways a film about the psychic loss of the mother’s love, which is allegorically cast as alienation from the nation-as-mother. Its anger against the state is thus figured as what Joshi calls a ‘family romance,’ a Freudian parable for filial expulsion and loss.
In this sense, *Deewaar* might be seen to offer a specific, allegorical repetition of the more traditional lost-and-found, such as in the earlier film *Yaadon ki Baaraat* (Nasir Hussein, 1973). This film begins with the orphaning and separation of three brothers, who watch their father and mother die at the hands of Shakal, a masked thug, and are separated as they try to escape his men. The film flashes forward to their adulthood, where the brothers have taken significantly different paths. They are unknowingly brought together by a series of coincidences that land them all at the same hotel, where Monty, the middle brother and now a pop singer, begins a concert with a song that their mother had sung, the eponymous “Yaadon ki Baaraat.” The brothers, all attending the concert for reasons of their own, hear the song and are thus reunited. Unlike *Deewaar*, the separation of *Yaadon*’s three brothers does not carry any obvious allegorical weight, either relating to the mother-as-nation or to Partition. If anything, their separation is attributed to nothing beyond Shakal’s villainy. Shakal is a smuggler and runs a gang of thieves and thugs, and there are a couple of indications that he steals high-price jewelry and other valuables so that he can sell them to Robert, a mysterious foreign buyer, and presumably an Englishman. The connection to colonialism is thus invoked, but it is Shakal who continues to be the target of the brothers’ rage and it is his downfall that the ultimately united brothers work to effect, even after Robert has made his escape.

Despite this difference, however, both *Deewaar* and *Yaadon* assume the significance of blood bonds, which gives moral weight to the originary losses. In *Yaadon*, the importance of blood as a means of linking individuals within the family is never stated because it does not need to be; we only see the family together in the film’s first scene, but otherwise we are provided no details about what kind of family they constituted. Likewise, when the brothers meet as adults they have nothing in common except what we know to be their biological connection. Thus we
are asked to assume that merely because they were a family, their breakup is devastating and, in the moral universe of the film, must be righted. *Deewaar* offers a bit more complicated scenario, but here as well the unassailability of the blood bonds is a powerful force within the plot. Vijay, despite his self-assured rebelliousness, is particularly susceptible to it, and thus when one of Dawar’s goons suggests killing Ravi, Vijay becomes quickly enraged: “Yes, he’s my brother! And if you talk about him again I’ll kill you!” Likewise, Vijay’s connection with his mother is portrayed as incontestable, even when his morality in other spheres is compromised. It is in fact his love for his mother that impels his self-sacrifice at the end of the film, rather than any true contrition for his illegal activities. Ultimately then, Vijay’s inherent connection with his genetic family is an equally powerful determinant of his fate as his lived alienation from the nation.

*Deewaar*’s Ravi, on the other hand, has a different relationship to his biological identity. When Ravi is first told by the police commissioner of his assignment to capture the smugglers’ gang which includes Vijay, he refuses the case, saying, “Sir, I can’t take this case… [hesitates]… Vijay Varma is my brother. He’s my brother, sir… You can understand my helplessness. Perhaps I won’t be able to carry out my responsibility fully. That’s why, sir, please give this case to someone else. I’m sorry…” His hesitation indexes a profound internal ambivalence between his professional and ethical duty and the power of the blood tie. Despite this initial doubt, however, the injustice he continues to see with the eyes of a police officer compels him to reconsider, and he ends up taking the case. Ravi is only the secondary hero of the film, but even so his character begins to question the assumption of the blood tie which is generally at the heart of the lost-and-found. In the significance of his decision to choose morality over genetics, the film suggests that blood bonds are not as unassailable as they might appear.
The relationship between Vijay and Ravi thus gets recast outside of the dominant vision of a family united by blood. The brothers exist in relation to their mother, Bharati, whom they both seek out to claim, but they are alienated from one another, reborn not as brother and brother, but as upholder of the law and its transgressor. In *Yaadon*, by contrast, the brothers never get to know each other as friends, acquaintances, or in any other non-fraternal capacity. Besides for a few chance encounters, they are strangers to one another. Their *only* relationship to one another is blood and the shared memories of the past. In *Deewaar* it is precisely the conflict between the ‘real’ logic of the bloodline and the social oppositionality of the brothers’ respective positions that marks the film’s problematic morality. *Deewaar* is in this sense an ironic lost-and-found, in which the genetic energy that underlies the success of the formula is dissipated by new moral concerns.

Fictive Kinship in *Amar, Akbar, Anthony*

The unsettling of the assumption of genetic kinship that was indexed but not fully developed in *Deewaar* comes to fully inhabit the plot of a film made two years later, *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (Manmohan Desai, 1977). Desai’s film takes the disarticulation between biological kinship and social reality even further to offer a radical reinterpretation of kinship, in which a new morality emerges out of the lived experience of sociality. This compels us to rethink not only the loss of real ties in the wake of Partition but to question the very ‘realness’ of those ties in the first place.
Amar Akbar Anthony is the story of three brothers separated in childhood when their mother abandons them and their father, fleeing from a group of gangsters who framed him for a murder, leaves them at the foot of a Gandhi statue to await his return. The young boys wander off one by one and are found by three different men, a Hindu policeman, a Muslim imam, and a Catholic priest. The men, unable to trace the boys’ parents, adopt the boys and give them new names befitting their new religious identities: Amar, Akbar, and Anthony. The boys grow up under these identities until, in a series of coincidences, all of them are caught up in the lives of the same gangsters. They ultimately come to know of their genetic relations and are reunited at the film’s end.

Like Yaadon, the film uses a classic lost-and-found formula, but layered on this structure is another element of critique, as the boys’ split directly references the separation and alienation of India’s religious communities. Conversely, their reunion represents the utopian harmony of these communities within the larger umbrella of ‘Indianness,’ conceived as the biological family unit. Like Deewaar, then, Amar Akbar Anthony imbues the family break-up with social meaning beyond the purely biological violence of separating individuals who share common blood.

Yet early on, Amar Akbar Anthony does present the family’s separation as a primarily biological one. This is evident in the oversignified credits scene that comes about half and hour into the film. I say ‘oversignified’ because this scene of blood ties is so protracted and theatrically staged that it exceeds its stated meaning. The credits sequence is an extended tableau of the imagined reconciliation of the broken blood ties, through a deliberate spatialization of the three brothers vis-à-vis Bharati, their birth mother. Bharati has had an accident, the doctors are desperate for blood donations, and by coincidence they call upon Amar, Akbar and Anthony, who do not know their relation to each other or to Bharati, as the donors. The mise en scène—
with Bharati lying at one end of the room and the brothers, in parallel beds, at the other—makes it clear that the scene is not supposed to represent an actual transfusion, but instead to serve as a representation of the ‘family tree’ by which the brothers are literally tied, through the force of blood, to their rightful mother [Fig. 1]. To add to the staged quality, the camera operates primarily by way of lengthy pans rather than cuts, tracing the length of the tubes that connect each son to his mother, while the film’s theme song plays in the background, undergirded by the refrain, *Khoon khoon hota hai, pani nahin*, or, ‘Blood is thicker than water.’ On top of this, behind each son’s bed is a false window which shows an image of the house of worship of his adopted religion, a temple for Amar, a mosque for Akbar, and a church for Anthony.

Fig 1: The family tree *tableau* presented at the opening of the film.

Yet while this presentation might seem to lament the loss of the unity of the postcolonial nation using a biological metaphor, *Amar Akbar Anthony* instead offers an entire plot structured over a parallel set of relationships unrelated to the brothers’ blood tie. In this way, the film finds hope not solely in the reunion of lost biological bonds, but in the possibilities for ‘fictive kinship.’ I use this term as a means of describing the lived experience of kinship, which may or
may not relate to real genetic bonds. Thus although the originary point of Amar Akbar Anthony is the broken family, the substance of the plot is concerned with the ‘new’ relationships the characters make with people with whom they are not, or so they think, genetically related. These include the three father-son relationships between the boys and each of their adoptive fathers, the closeness of which complicates the idea that blood is thicker than water. More centrally, the film traces the coincidental interaction of the lives of the five family members as they negotiate the morally corrupt landscape of 1970s Bombay, in the process of which they meet one other—again, not knowing that they are related—and establish new relationships in the idiom of kinship. Bharati, for example, consistently refers to Amar, Akbar and Anthony as her bete (sons) and they to her as maa or mai (mother). Anthony and Akbar refer to each other as bhai. All these relationships constitute the lived experience of fictive kinship that is entirely independent of the fact that the individuals are genetically related.

The concept of ‘fictive kinship’ has been largely criticized by scholars because embedded in the term is the assumption that social relationships are false, as compared to their ‘true,’ biological counterparts (Weston 98-102). However if we retain a sense of ‘fictive’ not as false but as actively constructed (the word comes from the Latin fingere, to contrive or form), we might shift emphasis from the contrast between real and constructed relationships and focus instead on the actual, social process of forming. I suggest that despite its oversignified titular tableau, Amar Akbar Anthony invites us to do just that—to focus on kinship as a process.

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3 I want to clarify here that although the three brothers do share genetic bonds, the series of relationships they form during the course of the film’s plot are not dependent on those biological bonds. Rather, they are ‘fictive’ bonds because they use the idiom of kinship but are social rather than biological; they are actively made rather than assumed a priori.

4 Bharati’s constant use of kinship terms is a convention unsurprising to Indian viewers (kinship terms are often used as a marker of respect in intergenerational conversation), but here they are deliberately overemployed, in a classic dramatic irony, to tease the audience towards the resolution presented in the credits tableau.
Kinship thus becomes significant not because it necessarily is, but because it is constantly being made and remade.

This is particularly clear in the scene when Bharati comes to give Amar a flower, and she finds Anthony in prison, where he has been arrested by Amar. Anthony calls out to her from inside his jail cell:

Anthony: Mai! O Mai!
Bharati: What’s this, this sounds like Anthony’s voice!
Anthony: “Then what?” Who else could have such a manly voice?
Bharati: What is he doing here? ... Bete [to Amar], he’s a very nice boy.
He also donated blood to me. He’s just like my son, just like you are.
Anthony: He Mai, what are you saying? [laughs] He’s your son, I’m your son—according to that logic we should be brothers… Right brother [looking at Amar], what do you think…
Bharat: Amar bete, please release him.
Amar: Maa ji...
Anthony: No way, he’d never release me. Even if I were his real brother he’d never release me. He’s very strict, very strict.

Then, a few moments, as Anthony is on his way to the courthouse:

Anthony: Hey Mai, this is the first time I’ve come to a police station, and you made the inspector my brother. Today I’m going to the court for the first time... could you give me a flower, for good luck? You know why? If I go there and meet another strict man, I’ll give him the flower and make him my father (apun usko apna baap banayega).

In the fictive kin relations described here, their underlying ‘realness’ is irrelevant; what the dialogue demonstrates is Anthony’s deft negotiation of the social landscape through the idiom of kinship. Here, kin terms provide a generic idiom in which social relationships are articulated. These sometimes raise contradictions—for instance when two enemies are both called ‘bete’ by the same ‘maa.’ But more importantly, the terms are productive, constituting individuals in various relations of proximity through their usage. Thus just as by ‘making the inspector
[Anthony’s] brother’ Bharati attempts to mitigate the conflict between the two sides of the law, Anthony believes that by ‘making the judge [his] father’ he might get a lighter sentence.

This logic of kinship differs from that presented in the credits sequence—or, for that matter, in Yaadon ki Baaraat—in which blood bonds, even if they have no social value, constitute the dominant connection between individuals. And it is this fictive kinship that animates the lived experience of sociality in *Amar Akbar Anthony* to such an extent that it comes to overshadow the blood bonds that were so self-consciously staged in the opening. As the film goes on, the dramatic irony of the encounters between the brothers loses its comedy, as the real, social bonds they form with one another begin to acquire greater moral weight. When the five family members finally discover that they are related, therefore, it is more generative of satisfaction than surprise, as the realness of their relations had already been established by their solidarity against Robert and his goons. What the film turns out to advance, therefore, is not the unassailability of blood bonds, but the immensely redemptive possibilities of patching together new families following the loss of an originary one. Insofar as this is allegorical for the disillusionment of post-Emergency India, the film suggests that a connection to the land of one’s birth, while psychically very powerful, is not, in itself, enough; the connection needs to be consistently reworked and re-earned as part of the lived reality of the nation. In this way the film puts pressure on the lost-and-found, brother-centric formula seen throughout popular film of the 1970s to suggest a fundamental instability at the heart of the formula. It suggests that equally important, if not more so, to real bonds are those forged in daily life, which cannot be reduced to blood kinship but gain their force from their metaphorical closeness to family. These new relationships—*bhais* who are not necessarily brothers, and *mais* and *baaps* and who are not
necessarily birth parents—constitute a world in which the lost-and-found has value, but only partially so: while a meaningful tie is lost, new sources of meaning are found along the way.

II. Homosociality and Desire

If lost-and-found is the repeated formula that allows for a reconsideration of the biological family, then the classic ‘love triangle’ raises similar innovations for rethinking romantic love. As with the broken family, 1970s films offer iterations of the love triangle as a means of unleashing an unstated subtext which, by later in the decade, will offer a glimpse of new kinds of relationships outside conventional representations of desire. These include relationships which allow for the expression of male-male desire in a public cinema with little language to represent overt homosexuality.\(^5\)

An early, and classic, version of the love triangle formula can be found in Sangam (Raj Kapoor, 1964). Sangam is the story of three childhood friends, Radha, Sundar and Gopal as they negotiate their relationships to one another in early adulthood. The film is a classic love triangle not only because Radha and Gopal love each other while Sundar is in love with Radha, but because of what will become the crucial element as the formula is repeated: the “dosti” (Mishra 83) between Gopal and Sundar. When Sundar leaves for a mission with the Air Force, he makes Gopal promise that he will save Radha for him; Gopal, on his part, is unable to tell Sundar that he is in love with Radha. Underlying this lack of communication is an unstated but highly

\(^5\) Gayatri Gopinath calls such films “buddy films” (290) which focus on the homosocial friendship; I emphasize the ‘love triangle’ because I see shared desire for the woman, which is not common to all ‘buddy films,’ as a key conduit of homosocial desire in these films.
intense relationship between the two men, which is unexpressed in the primary storyline but accounts for the intensity of their clash surrounding Radha. Both men’s love for her is charged with desire for the other, which is spatialized most overtly in Gopal’s death scene, when the men are finally able to hold each other and only invite Radha into the embrace as an afterthought.

This “barely disguised homoerotic feeling” (Mishra 6) in *Sangam* is given more space to develop in *Sholay* (Ramesh Sippy, 1975). This film reinterprets the love triangle formula by reducing the role of the woman at the center of the triangulation to a minor character (albeit a memorable one), and thus figuring the relationship between the two men on center stage. This has the effect of highlighting what in *Sangam* was unexpressed—that the triangulated love story is merely an alibi for a representation of homosociality within the censorial parameters of heteronormativity. *Sholay* underscores this by representing Basanti as forthright and carefree, which immediately makes her unappealing to Jai, and thus precludes the full formation of the love triangle from the start. But Basanti is still the primary site around which the nature of Jai and Veeru’s relationship is negotiated. For instance, in the dialogue when Veeru, drunk, is asking Jai to discuss his engagement with Basanti’s aunt, and Jai jokingly demurs, Veeru pouts:

> You’re not my friend. … This is why you’re being difficult, right? Because no one else can do this job for me? If my mother were here today, then I would have been long since married. I would have had kids by now. If I had a father, he would have celebrated my wedding in full style. If I had brothers and sisters, they would have touched [Basanti’s] Auntie’s feet to get us married. … You’re not that friend. … What I had thought of you, Jai, but look how you turned out!”

As in *Amar Akbar Anthony*, the social value of the men’s relationship lives in the discourse around it, which reveals it to be constantly in negotiation. Because of its inassimilability to

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6 The nature of the friendship between Jai and Veeru has been extensively discussed by critics, including Jha (46-7), Ghosh (60-1) and Gopinath (290-1); Dudrah (293 and 305n.5) offers a useful survey of the different queer readings of Bollywood, most of which include at least some reference to *Sholay*. 
socially accepted kin or romantic terms, Veeru here has no vocabulary to name it; and thus can only define their relationship by what it is not.

Earlier in *Sholay*, in the extradiegetic arena of song, their relationship had been defined as *dosti*, and it is in this space that most critics have seen the most powerful expression of their homosocial desire (Gopinath 290). In the song, the love triangle is briefly invoked as well, in a village woman whom they both gawk at, and then flip a coin to see who will be allowed to pursue her. The entire scene is presented as comedy, with the film speed increased as the woman walks away, turned off by their indecision. The two men shrug and continue their song. This temporary break in the narrative of a song about friendship stages the irrelevance of the female term in the love triangle in a way that *Sangam* alluded to but could not quite pronounce, and in a way that Basanti repeats but cannot quite contain. In the song sequence *Sholay* comes closest of all the films of the decade to making explicit homosocial desire, even as it codes it as the legible and normative *dosti*. But it does so by stretching the love triangle formula to such an extent that it is basically no longer a love triangle. The question of romance is thus sidestepped in favor of the more neutral ‘friendship,’ and the channels of desire are disarticulated from those of sexuality.

Brotherhood and Queer Kinship in *Silsila*

*Silsila* (Yash Chopra, 1981) offers a unique resignification of desire, brotherhood and homosociality by reanimating the female lead which *Sholay* had effaced but retaining the hero’s indifference to her. Here, Shobha is too staid for Amit, but perfect for Shekhar, Amit’s biological
brother. The film thus tells two love stories, between Amit and Chandni, who meet at a friend’s wedding and fall instantly in love, and between Shobha and Shekhar, who are on the verge of getting married when the film begins. However, early on Shekhar dies in a fighter plane accident and, when it is revealed that Shobha is pregnant, Amit makes the decision to break his engagement with Chandni and marry Shobha instead. He is initially bitter about his decision and is driven to meet Chandni, now married herself, where they begin a love affair that gives them immediate pleasure but whose moral implications eat away at them both. It is not until the end of the film, when Chandni’s husband has a near-fatal accident, that Amit realizes the social and personal consequences of their actions and changes his course, returning to Shobha for good.

_Silsila_ reanimates the unexpressed desire that is emptied out at the crucial moment of _Sholay_ to reinterpret the relationship between men in the context of the love triangle. For although Amit and Shekhar are biological brothers, their relationship is presented as more complex than what is contained in the kinship term. On one hand, their fraternity is assumed, as in _Yaadon ki Baaraat_: the audience expects that the two brothers will be close because of their biological connection. However, the extent of their relationship does not stop there. Unlike _Yaadon_, the film is constituted by the negotiation of their relationship in a sphere removed from their biological bond. As in _Sholay_, this occurs first in relation to Shobha, the woman who both men will ‘share.’ When Shobha picks Amit up from the airport, around twenty minutes into the film, they discuss his relationship with Shekhar:

Shobha: Why do you call yourself Amit’s brother and then start laughing?  
Amit: That was a big problem, which we resolved with some consideration.  
S: I see.  
A: My brother is 1 ½ years older than me, but we’re friends. We started smoking together, and we started drinking alcohol together, at the same time, from the very same glass. But even before that we fell in love at about the same time...  
S: With the same girl...
A: You know that already? Good. And before that we used to shower together naked.
S: I heard that.
A: You must not have seen it...
[both laugh]
A: We both keep changing our roles.
S: [looking surprised] Changing roles...? I don’t understand.
A: I’ll explain it to you. When one of us was in trouble, the other would play the role of big brother.
S: [laughs] Amit ji, I’ll go crazy listening to your chatter...
A: This is just a sample. We still have a whole life together.
S: Meaning?
A: You’re related to my brother, I’m related to my brother, so you must be related to me...!

We can understand from this conversation that the two men are brothers, but that is in fact the least we understand. The whole conversation about brotherhood describes a multi-faceted relationship between two men, of which blood brotherhood seems the least important aspect. Instead, the conversation is full of allusions and insinuations that point to a range of relationships. What Amit describes is a relationship of deep intimacy that includes growing up together, friendship, homosociality and something that borders on sexual intimacy even if not actual sex (showering naked together, falling in love with the same girl). This latter relation, capped off by the allusive suggestion that the two brothers ‘kept changing their roles,’ verges on an identificatory relationship, what Priya Jha calls in the context of Sholay “[t]he affirmation of a singular, dyadic identity—two sides of the same coin” (47), where the two men are so close than they are occasionally replaceable. Unlike Sholay, however, this identity is actually put to the test when Shekhar dies and Amit has to decide whether to marry Shobha. This jocular discussion of the multivalence of the two men’s relationship thus gains a moral weight in the plot of the film.

We might not feel that the term ‘queer kinship’ is appropriate in the context of a film with a heteronormative telos and produced in a context in which sexual themes are restricted by a
heavy censorial gaze; however, if we take queer kinship to refer not only to kin relations formed by openly gay, lesbian, or transgender individuals, but to the ‘queering’ of kinship more generally, we can open up the focus of kinship analysis to other bonds besides those of the heterosexual family unit. Part of the analytic value of the word ‘queer’ is that it does not merely point to different kinds of existing relationships but, like the notion of ‘fictive kinship’ discussed above, indexes the presence of new relationship-possibilities at the margins of the socially intelligible. It is in that spirit that we might label the relationship between Amit and Shekhar as ‘queer’ in relation to the Hindi popular film repertoire for describing relationships between men.\(^7\)

It is also true that their relationship—their ‘fraternal friendship’—is laced with desire. For instance, the first communication between the two men in the film takes place in the form of a letter, which Shekhar writes to Amit to invite him to Kashmir; the scene in which Amit reads Shekhar’s letter immediately follows another epistolary scene, this time in which Chandni is reading a love letter from Amit. Juxtaposing these scenes draws an implicit relation between the two letters, setting up a second ‘triangle’ in which desire is repeated in epistolary form.

Evincing a pattern that has come to be central to the triangulation formula, then, Amit’s decision to marry Shobha has less to do with his feelings for Chandni or his pity for Shobha, and more with his intense relationship with the dead Shekhar, with whom his relationship is fundamentally ambivalent. At one extreme, they are two individuals who share a biological

\(^7\) Rajinder Dudrah frames the question of intentionality well when he asks, “Is the Queer Reread in Bollywood or Is Bollywood Inherently Queer?” I follow Dudrah in arguing that although queer subtexts might not be the intention of the films’ writers, “it is possible to argue that in a caricature of selfhood queer Bollywood is not only a matter of the ‘queer readings’ that ‘queer audiences’ bring to the text, but rather Bollywood’s investment in caricature makes it a rich cultural resource where meanings of ‘queer’ and ‘camp’ can be readily created and contested. Thus, even the manifest heteronormative content is queered by a representational excess that marginalizes questions of authenticity (of straightness, for example) because both queer and straight are equally caricatured” (301-2).
bond; at the other extreme, they are so close that they are potentially replaceable (‘we would keep changing our roles’). In Amit’s struggle over his course of action following Shekhar’s death, the intense yet ambivalent homosociality of their relationship is put to the test. As a brother, it is unclear whether he has any obligation toward Shobha, and no explicit mention is made—although it might constitute a subtext—of a purely fraternal responsibility. Yet Amit and Shekhar are not ‘merely’ brothers, but ‘two halves of the same coin’—an excess that raises unanswerable questions for Amit, such as How far into domesticity, into practical sexuality, ought their fraternal friendship to extend? How much was their sexual intimacy a childhood game, and how much does it produce adult obligations? And, more generally: What happens to socially unrepresentable desire when it condenses into social obligation? Despite the putative moral fixity of Hindi popular film, these questions remain largely unanswerable, and Silsila is pervaded with a certain moral bleakness that results from such impossibility. First, Amit marries Shobha in what he thinks is acting right by his friend—by becoming his sexual equivalent. Yet that proves an unsatisfactory outlet to his desire, which also lies in the socially sanctioned space of heteronormativity represented by Chandni. Then he follows his desire but finds that it leads him back out of social sanction, into the transgressive realm of adultery. These transgressions are not his personal failings, but the impossibility of expressing his multivalent relationship with Shekhar within social conventions. Much like, in DCH, Siddharth’s short-lived attempt to envision his relationship with Tara through the idiom of “pyaar” (socially sanctioned romance), Silsila similarly shows how a relationship with no name cannot survive the rigid paradigms of social life.

Silsila’s resolution—its way out of this murky moral territory—is to take literally the metaphor of identification that was used to describe the two men’s homosocial intimacy, and
thus the film ends with a repetition of the song “Sar se sarke,” but this time with Amit in Shekhar’s place (Dwyer 202). The formal integrity represented by the repetition of this song can only be restored when Amit has returned to his rightful place by Shobha’s side.

This is a somewhat counterintuitive reading of transgression in *Silsila*, which has primarily been located in Amit’s extra-marital affair with Chandni, a reading buoyed by rumors of a real affair between actors Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha (Dwyer 193). From the perspective of adultery, *Silsila*’s ending could be read as a capitulation to the bourgeois values which uphold the nuclear family. However, in the context of the unarticulated homosociality that underlies the triangulation plots of the 1970s in general, *Silsila* might also be seen as offering another mode of transgression. This transgression irrupts onto the surface of the text only once, in the widely-discussed shower scene, in which Amit and Shekhar, while showering together (now as adults) laughingly express reluctance to bend over and pick up a bar of soap lying on the shower floor. Indeed, this scene is a moment where the subtext exceeds the surface text, but nonetheless it provides a crucial index to the space outside conventional romantic or kin terms where the reality of the men’s relationship lies. From this perspective, *Silsila* functions similarly to *Amar Akbar Anthony*, not only repeating the earlier formula but calling into question the assumptions and paradigms it relies on. Coming right at the end of the 1970s, *Silsila* seems a kind of capstone in thinking about homosociality and desire in the decade. It shows with even more intensity the possibilities for incorporating new kinds of social relationships into the registers, even if not the explicit language, of popular film.

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8 Several critics have noted the homosexual overtones of this scene (Gehlawat 84–114). Ashok Row Kavi writes of this scene, “This is the clearest reference to the ‘penetrating’ image of Amitabh Bachchan” (311).
III. Conclusion: Social Ferment and Popular Film

I have not intended this discussion to be a teleological analysis that implies that films get ‘better,’ more sophisticated or more subtle over the years. Indeed, by tracing the sources of Tara’s incisive phrasing in *Dil Chahta Hai* to the ‘formula-films’ of the 1970s, I hope to show how what appear to be new innovations often took root long before the current turn towards what appear to be more open representations of sexuality in popular film. Yet at the same time, as part of this special issue’s interest in the uniqueness of the 1970s as a period, I do want to suggest that the films of this long decade constitute a particularly relevant subset of the large body of Hindi popular cinema that was engaged with some amount of persistence in representing human relationships outside of social sanction or conventionally accepted kinship terms. The sheer repetition of the formulas we have seen and the subtle variations that distinguish individual films, along with what are quite radical critiques of normative social relationships, make this set of films not the only, but a particularly interesting case study for the socially radical possibilities of popular film.

The 1970s has often been considered a period of a “crisis of the state” (Ganti 30) but it was also a time in which Hindi films were increasingly receptive to the global energies of social ferment, sexuality and rebellious youth. These sensibilities are at times concentrated in figures who are direct antagonists of the corrupt state, and at times emerge as new kinds of music, costumes, hair styles, and language, or more overt representations of sexuality. But in all these cases the culture of the era ruptures the conventionality of generic formulas, adding more exuberance—even, I venture, a bit of an edge—to popular film’s representation of the family and
of romantic love. Again, popular film does not work by exploding older representational structures, or by suggesting that they do not carry any weight in a jaded political world; it is not so overtly oppositional as that. Rather, it is by repeating the formulas and thus offering repetition-and-difference as a form of narrative innovation that these films call attention to the constructedness of generic paradigms, and open up a space of difference where new meanings can emerge outside of the language that conventionally contains them.

Works Cited


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