

## TALE OF A RUPTURED FRAME: YEARNING FOR PAST AS IMAGINED FUTURE IN *KAPOOR AND SONS*

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In *On Photograph*, Susan Sontag has observed, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.” (2). Such observation renders a curious expansion in the dimension of photograph as a medium. Instead of defining it as a narcissistic tool to derive pleasure of self-assertion, Sontag went further to conceive it as a discourse to disseminate values pertaining to one’s ideology. In fact, photograph appears to be a potent medium to do so by virtue of its illusion of reality. As Sontag has commented: “Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out.” (2). Thus, photograph, far from being real, renders a highly stylized and sophisticated version of reality, shaped by the artist.

The tradition of family photograph in India originates in the colonial period. The pre-colonial period exhibits the fashion of commissioning self-portrait in the royal families and feudal lords. Such paintings consisted of the portraits of individuals rather than families with a few exceptions. They demonstrate physical, stylistic and attitudinal attributes in conformity with the norms of the class and gender of the subjects. The photograph has problematized the attributes associated with portrait paintings by combining the components of heteronormativity such as heterosexual monogamy as the formative ideology behind the formation of the primary social unit, that is, family. Indian middle class, nurtured by the colonial education of the Victorian mode, has appropriated the ideas of heteronormativity within its framework of the extended family. The desire to promote the narcissism of lineage is manifested in the aspiration to be photographed along with the predecessors and successors in order to demonstrate the continuity of the values upheld by them. The photograph, however, represents family as an illusory domain restraining and disciplining the pre-colonial Indian affinity with polygamy. It symbolizes a repressive realm in which sexuality is carefully restrained, polygamy pushed out and familial harmony achieved at the cost of individuality. The display of individual pride in portraits gets transformed in the collective snobbery of succession and lineage. The photograph becomes a combined emblem of a glorious past, pleasurable present and future aspirations of a family,

which seeks to assert itself to the world outside. As Susan Sontag has observed

Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness.... Photography becomes a rite of family life just when, in the industrializing countries of Europe and America, the very institution of the family starts undergoing radical surgery. As that claustrophobic unit, the nuclear family, was being carved out of a much larger family aggregate, photography came along to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life. Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives. A family's photograph album is generally about the extended family—and, often, is all that remains of it. (5-6)

As in Europe, so in India, the advent of photography corresponds to the deconstruction of the traditional expanded family of India, as well as the gradual formation of nuclear families in cities and towns. The consolidation of colonial economy consisting of industry and service sector compelled the urban and semi urban middle class youths to migrate to cities to work in merchant firms leaving their families in hometowns. Such migration resulted in the disintegration of the customary joint families and the emergence of nuclear families. The desire of the Indian middle class to be photographed in the form of extended family, therefore, renders nostalgia for a fleeting tradition on the one hand, and at the same time implies expression of conformity with the heteronormative values imported from the West. For them, family photograph represents family as a utopic space of perfection and order, which is vulnerable to subversion and disruption due to occasional intrusion of non-heteronormative influences.

Family has always been hailed in Indian tradition as a sacred institution to hold the dominant patriarchal structure since the later Vedic age. In *Smriti*, the discourse on social and behavioural norms has held family as a symbol of order and a popular trope of ideal mode of living. Such valorisation of family and familial norms may be attributed to the role of the former as the origin as well as microcosmic representation of the state, which, in turn, is the macrocosmic expansion of the family to control the masses by the master class. *Manu Smriti*<sup>1</sup> the standardized manual of the post-Vedic Hindu society, has stipulated its norms with a vision to construct family as an institution to manipulate as

well as regulate the social, cultural, moral as well as the sexual behaviours of the individual. In fact, family, in *Smriti Shastra*, has been projected as the space to discipline the unruly desires of the non-normative individuals. Family, thus, appears to be the desired and idealized utopia of the Indian society that celebrate patriarchy.

*Kapoor & Sons (Since 1921)* directed by Shakun Batra and released in 2016 manifests the desperate endeavour of an Indian middle class family to create a utopic image of a perfect, harmonious, extended family through a family photograph with caption *Kapoor & Sons (Since 1921)*. The caption acquires significance by virtue of its linguistic affinity as well as cultural association with the tagline of a renowned brand of Indian textiles on the one hand, while it smacks of the fragrance of the era of the great Kapoors, the nostalgic classical age of Bollywood on the other. The implied association becomes explicit with the obsession of the old grandfather with bathing image of the actress Mandakini in the film *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), a classic production by R. K. Films.

The film is set in an isolated house situated in the outskirts of the town. With picturesque Nilgiri in the background, lush green valley and misty atmosphere, the quaint house becomes an idyllic space appropriate to construct a utopia of perfection and order. The house, by virtue of its solitude, seems to be immune to disruption until it falls apart from within. The narrative begins with the trivial camouflage of death by the old grandfather, who desperately tried to have the attention of his elder son Harsh, a bank employee turned unsuccessful businessperson and his daughter-in-law Sunita, an aspired to be entrepreneur homemaker. In spite of its comic effects, the act of feigning death imparts a note of pathos, which culminates into the actual cardiac arrest of the old man. The narrative sets in motion following the return of Rahul and Arjun, the sons of Harsh and Sunita from abroad and Sashi, the younger brother of Harsh with his family on the insistence of the old father. On their return, the old man, a retired army officer, expressed his final wishes to be buried (in spite of being a Hindu) in the graveyard along with the members of his former regiment and to have a complete family photograph with the caption *Kapoor and Sons (Since 1921)*. The wishes cumulatively render the nostalgia for the extended family as well as a desire to assert the patriarchal lineages, army and family. The two institutions symbolize the desired patriarchal spaces formed on the principles of discipline, perfection and order, identified by Foucault as the essential components of 'scientia sexualis'.<sup>2</sup>

Such a utopian dream of perfect extended family could hardly be sustained as it implies suppression as well as elimination of subversive desires hovering beneath the façade of normativity. The polygamy of

Harsh, the unyielding ego of Sunita, inconsistency of Arjun, homosexuality and plagiarism of Rahul, nonchalance of Sashi and even the sexual fantasy of the old grandfather, cumulatively contribute to the disruption. The progression of the plot only renders gradual unfolding of hypocrisy and duality embedded in the characters.

The idea of family based on heterosexual monogamy and holy matrimonial bond seems to be disrupted by the ruptured bond between Harsh and Sunita. The 'ideal' husband Harsh barred Sunita to start a business of her own in spite of his own inability to succeed in entrepreneurship. Moreover, his extramarital relationship with his former colleague Anu renders a deviation from the stipulated sexual codes upon which the social institution 'family' is formed. The separate beds and argument over the flawed water pipe symbolize the excess of spite in their relationship leading to the final catastrophe on the birthday of the old father. While the first generation old man was capable of saving the marriage in spite of his sexual fancies and polygamous inclinations, perhaps because of his subdued wife, his infidel son could not. The death of Harsh appears to be a literal event of the end of the marital bond between him and Sunita, who actually parted long before his death.

The subversion of familial bond in the film is not merely limited to its projection of a ruptured marital bond, but in the subversion of heteronormativity itself. The narrative not only betrays the expectation of the audience by incorporating homosexuality in a baffling manner, but also has reduced hypermasculinity into a mere caricature. In fact, the most shocking discovery befalls when Rahul, the most eligible bachelor with a good fortune and the heartthrob of women turns out to be a gay. Such a discovery has also ruptured the façade of succession and lineage as the 'perfect baccha' of Sunita becomes imperfect and even incapable to continue the lineage. Moreover, his exposed plagiarism of the plot of the yet unpublished novel of Arjun uncovered the hypocrisy of the claim of perfection and order of the family. The premise of heteronormativity and stipulated gender roles has further been contested by the independent mind of Tia. Her candid behaviour with strangers, fondness for parties and even excitement about bodybuilding competition and Arjun's playful fiddling with a female bra have been celebrated. Bubl, the muscleman and symbol of hypermasculinity has been reduced to a mere caricature.

The utopian dream of the old grandfather to cherish the nostalgia of an extended family constructed in the family photograph gets shattered on his birthday party, when the ruptured bond between members of his family has been exposed culminating into a catastrophic end. The birthday party appears to be a cornucopia of disruptions of

relationships at multiple levels. The episode not only uncovers the shattered marital bond between Harsh and Sunita, but also renders the extent of bitterness and hatred in the relationship between Rahul and Arjun. Such disruptions, however, have been anticipated by the chitchat between the grandfather and his neighbours on the table. The ending scene of the episode with deserted space, scattered furniture, and moaning symbolize a failed feast, an unfinished ritual of togetherness.

The ending of the film presents the final endeavour of the old grandfather to unite his fragmented family in his long cherished family photograph. The photograph was taken with a cut out image of his dead son to endow it with an entirety. However, like the cut out image of Mandakini to fulfil his sexual fancy, the cut out image of Harsh serves as an emblem of wish fulfilment. Instead of wholeness, it only evokes a deep sense of nostalgia, a futile yearning for something, which has already been lost. Susan Sontag has aptly commented: “Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos.... A beautiful subject can be the object of rueful feelings, because it has aged or decayed or no longer exists.” (11)

#### Notes:

1. See for detailed discussion Chapter 8 of *Manusmriti*. file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Manu\_Smriti\_Sanskrit\_Text\_With\_English\_T%20(1).pdf
2. See for a detailed discussion Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. Volume I. London. Penguin. 1998. PP. 53-73.

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