



Research article

From Consumption to Subversion: Fanfiction, Masculinity, and Subversive Readings of Contemporary Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian cinema has witnessed an unprecedented surge in films depicting an extreme form of masculine violence and aggression. These films, with their status as commercial juggernauts, exemplify a system where certain idealized forms of manhood, characterized by exaggerated violence and emotional suppression, maintain dominance over women and other subordinated masculinities. This paper uses online participatory and transformative fiction, here fanfiction, to analyse the subversive discourse surrounding these kinds of visual media. For this purpose, I take the two films—*RRR* (2022) and *Salaar* (2023)—as fan reinterpretations that involve, as opposed to the cisgendered and heteropatriarchal settings of the canonical texts, the male protagonists in a homosexual relationship with their respective deuteragonists. Both films are male-centred—set in very ‘masculine’ environments, they make use of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms “male homosocial desire” (1985) and homosocial settings. Lacking any strong or interesting female characters and with idealized male friendships as the most common motif, they depend for their emotional appeal upon the suggestion of homosocial desire amongst men, all the while disavowing any overt homoeroticism. Echoing Michel de Certeau’s proposition to challenge the conception of consumption as formed by authorial enterprises, I conduct a close reading of two texts of fanfiction, one from each film, to establish *RRR* and *Salaar* as reflections of the deeply rooted cultural anxiety surrounding masculinity and male affection within the Indian social structure, with fanfiction questioning the ever-elusive boundaries between homosocial and homoerotic desire. Existing research on fanfiction is rooted in and continues to privilege texts originating from the Western media canon; there exists a significant absence of scholarship regarding Indian fan-narratives and particular to the Indian social context. This study attempts to fill this very gap, and argues also for greater attention to queer fan-reinterpretations in contemporary Indian film scholarship.

Keywords: transformative fiction, fanfiction, homosocial desire, heteropatriarchy, canon



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Introduction: What is Fanfiction?

While it is hard to pinpoint the exact moment that fanfiction emerged, its earliest appearances might be traced back to the works of Sherlock Holmes fan societies in the 1920s, as well as the *Star Trek* fanfic of the 1960s (Derecho, 2006, p. 62). Well-known works that could be labelled as fanfic also include Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Will Self's *Dorian*, in that they expand upon *Jane Eyre* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* respectively. In all the theorization, to date, regarding fanfiction, a precise definition of what it is that constitutes the phenomenon in question has been nearly impossible to come up with, considering its extremely dynamic boundaries.

In his 1992 book, *Textual Poachers*, which is the first piece of work to have provided any theoretical framework for fan studies, Henry Jenkins compares the action of interpretive reading to what he calls "textual poaching"; he describes how "the relationship between readers and writers [is] an ongoing struggle for the possession of the text and for control over its meanings" (p. 24). While *Textual Poachers* has been pivotal for legitimizing fan studies and providing a much-needed insider perspective into fan communities, it is undeniable that Jenkins' focus rests largely on Western and predominantly white media fandoms, which inevitably limits the book's applicability when talking about more diverse or global contexts. Nevertheless, we may explain fanfiction as one of the many manifestations of the struggle for power between the fandom and the originators of the canonical text—it is partly an admiration or fascination with the canonical text, and partly frustration with the text's inability to give the fans exactly what they want from it.

Derecho (2006), in "Archontic Literature: A Definition, A History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction", situates fanfiction within a broader literary tradition that she calls 'archontic' (p. 63). She uses said word to replace the conventionally used terms of 'derivative' or 'appropriative' (p.63), which she contends have pejorative connotations. Her theory is derived from Derrida's (1995) concept of the 'archontic principle', which he introduces in *Archive Fever*; that is, the natural tendency of every archive to change and expand, motivating the archive to always seek to produce more and enlarge itself. By said logic, the archive never can remain stable or still, but wills constantly to add to its own stores. Derecho uses this concept to explain fanfiction's relation to the canonical works that inspire it—fanfiction is but this archontic principle put in practice. It works by "repeating with difference" (p. 73), be it introspective or a 'what if scenario' (p. 76), enabling the reader to simultaneously repeat the act of consuming the original as well as deviating from it. Fanfiction's greatest appeal remains its ability to actualize potentialities, in that each text has approximately as many potentialities as it has readers, and in dismissing the traditional hierarchy that perceives the source texts as primary in terms of being the first as well as the most relevant, which is what Derecho advocates in her essay, ensures the substitution of the usual fixed model with a more flexible and egalitarian model of relation.

Fandoms and Resistance to Mass Culture

One of the most powerful agents in contemporary culture is the popular culture industry; it is mass entertainment that has long taught and enforced codes of behaviour, belief, and value within popular culture. Adorno and Horkheimer (1997)

have, in their essay "The Culture Industry", provided an analysis of what and how the media teach, and how difficult resistance to it has proven to be. There exists "a necessity inherent in the system not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible" (p. 103), resulting in a unified culture wherein all of us are shaped in essentially identical ways by a powerful elite. Yet, the essay does also perhaps overstate the success of the system of mass culture, as well as underestimate fan resistance.

Similar to Adorno and Horkheimer's argument, De Certeau (1984) in his *The Practice of Everyday Life* compares consumers as formed under the expansionist grid of production to sheep, "progressively immobilized and "handled" as a result of the growing mobility of the media as they conquer space" (p. 165). It is assumed, at large, that the public is moulded by what is handed to them in the form of mainstream media, and become 'imprinted' on by the text that is imposed on them. The efficiency of production, De Certeau says, implies the "inertia of consumption... [producing] the ideology of consumption-as-a-receptacle" (p. 167). There is, however, a need to emphasize a fan's resistance to the teachings of mass culture; contrary to popular opinion, fans do not all languish in the alleged 'inertia of consumption' but instead, quite often, take action. In writing fanfiction, a fan becomes an active participant in the creation and transformation of media products and cultural artifacts, thereby questioning the deeply ingrained assumptions about the roles of fans and producers in the media industry.

Slash Fanfiction, and Blurring the Boundaries of the Homosocial and the Homosexual

One of the most controversial subgenres within the vast realm that is fanfiction is undoubtedly what is popularly called 'slash fiction'. Slash fiction reimagines beloved characters from well-known books, movies, television shows, and the like, in same-sex romantic or erotic pairings. From Sherlock and Watson to *Star Trek's* Kirk and Spock, there is no denying the vastness of same-sex shipping in fandoms, with the term 'shipping' referring to the desire of the members of a fandom to see two fictional characters or even real-life people engage in a romantic or sexual relationship. While there is currently no dearth of same-sex female pairings, there is certainly no denying the overarching popularity of the male ones. However, while male slash, or 'M/M' as it is referred to in fandom terms, is as old as the contemporary media fandoms themselves, much of the discussion involving why there is so much M/M slashfic involves simply placing the blame on women fan writers who allegedly write about gay ships because they fetishize gay male relationships. This is partly true, fetishization of the queer community being an age-old concept, but there are nevertheless other, more pertinent reasons as to why male pairings nearly dominate online fanfiction.

While addressing the demographic that commonly partakes in such fan activities as engaging with fanfiction, it is necessary to acknowledge that many writers and readers of fanfiction themselves identify as queer (Green et al. 2006, p. 62). The act of writing fanfiction, especially ones with a romantic plot (in fact most fanfiction tends to revolve

around one or many romantic pairings) has historically been written off as something practiced by women, and much of the early contributions to the field of fan studies were preoccupied with what was then, “the shocking discovery that straight women composed and consumed erotic fantasies about same-sex relations between men” (p. 62). What escaped attention was the emerging dialogue among people of different genders and sexualities in these fandoms, through their mutual engagement with fanfiction. To dismiss slash fanfiction as a mere fetishization of male same-sex relationships would hence be doing the genre a gross disservice.

Slash traditionally makes use of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), in her work *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, called ‘male homosocial desire’ and of homosocial settings. Many, if not most, literary canons are male-centred, focusing primarily on relationships between men, and set in very ‘masculine’ environments. Such canons also fail to introduce any strong or interesting female characters, and idealized male friendships are the most common motifs in said texts. They depend for their emotional appeal upon the suggestion of said homosocial desire amongst men, though the canon usually isolates this desire from any explicitly recognizable form of sexuality. In the context of visual media, it is men that make up the largest chunk of any mainstream media. They not only outdo women in terms of screen time, but male characters are also given more character development and are more fleshed out than the female characters, women generally being consigned to the role of the ‘damsel in distress,’ only there to serve the male protagonist’s storyline. Therefore, since the male characters, as provided by the canon, are more interesting and intriguing, it only makes sense for the fandom to follow suit, resulting in an abundance of male slash fics. While an ordinary member of the audience would, in line with the original author’s intentions, perceive the canonical homosocial relationships as strictly platonic, a fanfiction writer would instead take the opportunity to spin the male characters as being in a homosexual relationship with each other.

Of course, there exists the generic trope of boy-meets-girl, boy-falls-for-girl, and they live happily ever after. Such heteronormative narratives, ending with the romantic promise of a happy, heterosexual relationship, occupy a significant portion of media. However, when these types of stories feature, instead of a heterosexual couple, two male characters, their relationship is almost always reconciled as friendship, hence the ever-expanding pool of ‘bromance’ films. Nevertheless, in the case of these male on-screen relationships, the particular chemistry normally relegated to heterosexual pairings is still present. Indian cinema too, which has long been celebrated for its depictions of romantic love and its epic courtship narratives, does not fall short when it comes to illustrating said trope of ‘bromance’.

Rewriting Ram and Bheem in *RRR* Fanfiction

One of the first movies that is likely to come to mind when one thinks of intense male relationships with homoerotic undertones is, in all probability, the 2022 historical action drama, *RRR*. A massive success, the movie is a fictional retelling of the story of two real-life revolutionaries- Alluri Sitarama Raju and Komaram Bheem- who waged an armed rebellion against British colonial rule in India. While on the surface it is the story of the insurrection executed by these two heroes, who were also reputed to be

great friends, with the way said friendship is presented in the movie it is hard to ignore the homoerotic subtext between the two male leads. From their very first encounter while saving the life of a child, there is palpable tension between Rama Raju and Bheem, with the camera angles highlighting their respective physiques and their exuberant reactions to each other's presence. This might of course be explained away by an overtly strong platonic bond, yet the tension between the two characters is decidedly sexual in nature, and it is unlikely that there would be as many lingering glances and brazen 'male-bonding' activities like wrestling half-naked in a strictly friendly environment. Even as their relationship grows and transforms over the course of the film, the undercurrent of sexual tension is ever present, and even though no explicit allusions are made towards the characters in question being queer, a large chunk of the viewers have interpreted the at times quite unsubtle charged energy between Ram and Bheem as an example of queer-baiting, that is the intentional injection of homoerotic themes without ever fully depicting a queer relationship.

With the film having the aforementioned motif of a male homosocial relationship, the corresponding fandom too has managed to come up with a plethora of fan-work, ranging from fanart to fanfiction, almost all of them detailing the two male protagonists' relationship, which here is made explicitly gay instead of merely having queer implications as in the case of the canonical text. As mentioned previously, much of slash fanfic tends to be male slashfic, and it is the same in this case; indeed, it is no surprise that 'RamBheem'—the 'ship name' bestowed upon the two protagonists—is the predominant subject matter of most fan-works, considering the absolute lack of female characters with any presence throughout the course of the film. Sita, Ram's love interest, has barely any screen time, and no other identity than being Ram's fiancée from his native village, while Jennifer is only a tool to be used for the success of Bheem's mission.

A fitting example of how a typical slash fanfiction, in this case, RamBheem fanfiction, bends the canonical narrative to suit the fandom's purpose, can be demonstrated through the fanfic *Then and Now: Moments from a life*, by the user tennis perfection (2024) on the popular fanfiction website Archive of Our Own. This particular fanfic, short as it is, uses a series of interconnected and non-linear vignettes to explore different moments of Ram and Bheem's life, starting from their initial meeting and the blossoming of their bond to glimpses of their life beyond the time-frame of the film as an already established couple. In essence, this fanfic can be considered a reworking of the canon itself, in that it depicts the events of the film in an expressly homoerotic light, and continues to build a storyline after the film canon has officially ended, where Ram and Bheem are living together as an established couple. The work in question follows the fanfiction trope referred to as '5+1 things', a format well-known though generally restricted to online fandom discourse—this kind of structure typically represents five moments illustrating a recurring pattern, followed by a final moment that resolves or subverts it. The structure, in this case, serves to imitate human memory, in that it is fragmented, with each section highlighting a different observer—Sita,

Lacchu, Venkateshwarulu, or Bheem himself—thus creating a mosaic of perspectives from which to emphasize the relationship between Ram and Bheem.

The character of Sita, too, plays a part in this fanfic, if only in that she comes to the realization that her husband has been in love with another man throughout the duration of their marriage, and that she has tried for years to make Ram as happy as Bheem does but in vain—"You think I haven't seen you those two weeks when we were all together?... How you looked at him, smiling like I've never seen you do since you were a kid?" (tenisperfection 2024) she confesses while breaking down in tears. Sita's character undergoes perhaps one of the most significant reinterpretations—while in the film she serves as Ram's fiancée and a supposed emotional anchor, the fanfic doesn't erase their relationship but reimagines it as having ultimately developed into more of a platonic bond. We might even say that the fanfic offers her character more empathy and dignity than the canonical text where she has no purpose but to remain in the sidelines as one of the protagonists' romantic interests, existing only to further his character arc; in the fanfic, she recognizes and acknowledges Ram's happiness in remaining with Bheem and chooses to step aside, even writing Ram a letter expressing her acceptance. This narrative decision is a common enough strategy in slash fanfiction where the heterosexual relationships as appearing in the canon are transformed into moments of recognition, leading in many cases to the development of deep platonic bonds. The fanfic never stoops to demonize Sita, but allows her to understand Ram's feelings while still enabling the queer romance central to the narrative to flourish.

What the fanfic truly builds upon is essentially the mundane routines of Ram and Bheem's shared domestic life during, and especially after the triumphant resistance to colonialism that is the end of the film. Scenes of writing letters, cooking, and building a home are littered throughout the narrative of the fanfic, shifting thus the focus from the epic spectacle, which is what makes up most of the canonical text, to everyday intimacy and domesticity. The placement of queer love within a framework that is more on the peaceful and contemplative side goes directly against the tendency in mainstream media to associate heroism with heterosexuality and violence in such nationalist narratives. Instead of the male heroes' rewards being marriage to the women of their dreams, the fanfic envisions a future where they end up with each other in a lifelong romantic relationship.

Fanfiction as a phenomenon is necessarily brought about by any gaps that the audience perceives in the canonical text; most works of fanfiction therefore explore such temporary or permanent gaps, usually through retrospection and in connection to its potentiality. *Then and Now* is no different, in that *RRR* does little to address the psychological aftermath of its protagonists being engaged in violent and prolonged struggle against British colonial forces, and said slack is quite effectively picked up by the fanfic in question. It effectively addresses conflicts and emotions left unresolved in the canon. Ram, for his part, is shown as continuing to grapple with the guilt of serving undercover in the British police force and having had any hand in the pain and suffering Bheem had to go through over the course of his imprisonment. The Bheem of the fanfic too, frequently suffers from nightmares in the early years of their cohabitation. However, they do manage to overcome their shared trauma, supporting each other through difficult times and reaffirming their bond.

Part of the appeal is of course seeing Ram and Bheem's relationship expand beyond the limits of the film into a multi-layered web impacting even those around them. We are made to recognize the depth of their affection for each other through different and contrasting lenses—Sita's heartbreak as she realizes she has lost Ram to his new all-encompassing romance, and Bheem's friend Lacchu's initial warning to him about the untrustworthiness of Ram but later warming up to Ram anyway when he observes Ram's sincere devotion to Bheem. In the final section of the fanfic, set years later, Ram and Bheem have managed to build a life together; we witness their deep intimacy and care for each other, but the story doesn't shy away from the fact that their relationship had after all been forged during a time of violence and revolutionary turmoil. Ram and Bheem's pasts clearly still haunt them, yet they have managed to miraculously recover, building that initial incandescent attraction into a resilient, and hard-won solace for the two revolutionaries. The ever shifting, third-person perspective of the narrative serves also to portray the incredible gravity and impact of their relationship on those around them. From Sita's emotional growth, leading to her accepting Ram's happiness, to Venkateshwarulu recognizing Bheem as the missing piece to Ram's family, their love for each other thus transcends just the two of them, rippling outward and irrevocably altering the course of many other lives.

The Queer Afterlife of *Salaar*

In the context of male homosocial desire in the Indian movie space, another film that must be mentioned is the 2023 film *Salaar*. A story of two childhood friends, Varadha and Deva, who later turn enemies, *Salaar* is set against the backdrop of a powerful, independent nation, Khansaar, that is in a state of civil war after the death of its ruler. The story starts off with Deva saving Varadha's reputation at the risk of his own life, sparking a tightly knit and intense friendship between the two characters. Later, Varadha, who we discover to be the son of the then ruler of Khansaar, gives up his largest piece of land, and therefore any respect he had in his father's eyes, to protect Deva and his mother. Years later, when Varadha is once again in dire need of help, it is Deva that he goes to, who returns with him to Khansaar despite having had to escape the place by the skin of his teeth back in his childhood. Once again, as it always is in these kinds of films, said friendship between the two protagonists is too charged to be written off as merely platonic—they are quite literally ready to give up anything and everything for each other, and when it comes to Varadha, Deva has a protective streak a mile wide, so much so that he feels the need to cut the hands off, and subsequently brutally kill whoever dares to touch his 'friend'. The otherwise mild and placid Deva can only be enraged to such lengths when it is Varadha that is in any danger, and Varadha too only ever feels comfortable enough to be inebriated and truly relaxed in Deva's presence. Unlike *RRR* however, *Salaar* does have women characters, and considering they are all secondary or tertiary characters, it can even be said that they have somewhat enough screen time. Nevertheless, these characters, namely Deva's mother, Aadhya, and Radha Rama, have all been delegated the kind of typical roles assigned to women in men-only canons, in that they are, respectively, an

overprotective mother who seeks to control her son's every movement, a simpering damsel in distress, and the femme-fatale almost villain. Among these characters, Radha Rama is perhaps the only one with any potential to contribute to the storyline and develop a character arc in the yet unreleased second part of the film.

With the amount of attention being expended on Deva and Varadha, and the constant tension between the two characters, it is therefore quite unsurprising that the fandom of this film too, will produce literature and art portraying the male protagonists as lovers instead of as friends or brothers-in-arms. Having said that, another pairing that exists in this case other than that of Varadha and Deva, in the way of fodder for slash fanfiction, is that of the two women, Aadhya and Radha Rama, the fandom thankfully having endowed Aadhya with far more depth and personality than the canon ever did. Fanfiction of Varadha and Deva, or VaraDeva as they are referred to in the language of slash fiction, thus has quite a bit in the way of fan works, as well as fan theories, since the second part of the movie is yet to be released.

The VaraDeva fanfiction that has been taken up for the purpose of this paper is *Half Agony; Half Hope* by user tigershroffs (2025), published, as in the case of the last fanfic, on Archive of Our Own. Unlike the previous fanfic, however, which chiefly works to explore the narrative gaps in the canonical text and proceeds to extend the story after the end of the canon, *Half Agony; Half Hope* diverges midway through the canon of the film, in a tactic the fanfiction community refers to as 'canon divergence'. This fanfic is a near-perfect example of the kind of queer worldbuilding that defines slash fanfiction, and its skilful manipulation of the subtextual loyalty present between the protagonists in the canon, into what is a result of explicit romantic desire, serves as an ideal representation of the genre.

The fanfic reframes Varadha and Deva's connection, as portrayed in the film, as romantic longing entangled with the brewing political turmoil of the state of Khansaar. The opening premise sets the scope for the rest of the narrative—Deva had returned to Khansaar to wed, and though Varadha staunchly believes that in no way could he be the person to marry Deva, he cannot help but hope and dream that Deva might choose him. The very first line—"It is a truth universally acknowledged in the kingdom of Khansaar that a man in possession of great power and position must wed" (tigershroffs 2025)—instantly reminds readers of the distinctive first line of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and in drawing this parallel between life in Khansaar and that in Regency-era England, thus proffers some context regarding societal and cultural expectations as pervading in said kingdom. The fanfic, though it modifies the original narrative, retains enough of its core setting and characters to expand upon the tremulous political situation in Khansaar, casting its shadow on the motivations of every other character. The son of the slain Dharaa Raisaar, it is Deva who is the true heir to the throne on which Varadha's father, Raja Mannar, currently wrongfully sits. The marriage in question too, had been suggested by Raja Mannar himself, who hoped, by pacifying Deva as well as marrying him off to his son Rudra, to kill two birds with one stone and therefore maintain his position as ruler of Khansaar.

Half Agony; Half Hope introduces the concept of the 'Challenge', a ritualized combat through which suitors would compete for their right to wed, as it was "by declaring to

participate, [that] eligible nobility must prove their worthiness as a spouse in bloodshed". The rules of the Challenge went thus—the eligible single man, in this case Deva, would set up the Challenge, and suitors who wished to wed him would then have to fight him, either themselves or through the selection of a champion, for the right to his hand. In line with the violence marking every scene of the film, the fanfic transforms even the practice of marriage into a violent spectacle, simultaneously reinforcing the almost militarized masculinity of Khansaar as well as making a supposed romantic union dependent upon combat. Even in Khansaar's bloody history, the Challenge was hard to come by, for as battle-worn as Khansaar's population tended to be, they too were wary of such a beginning to what is intended as a lifelong union. However, the insertion of Deva and Varadha's relationship into the frame of the Challenge, somehow, does little to abate their desire for one another, and the resulting narrative is one where martial prowess is shown to translate into an expression of devotion.

It is important to note that the fanfic also subverts its own concept of the Challenge. It is revealed halfway through that the token signifying a suitor's victory was never in Deva's possession at all—he had already gifted the same to Varadha within hours of arriving at Khansaar. The contest is hence entirely meaningless, for Deva had never considered marrying anyone but Varadha in the first place. This revelation then frames the Challenge as the political spectacle it is, designed for the sole purpose of buying time and manipulating rival factions. Prior to said revelation, Deva and Varadha ending up together had been contingent on Varadha ever mustering up the courage to disclose to Deva his feelings for him, but from this moment henceforth, the readers are made fully aware that their relationship had always been inevitable and in fact predetermined.

The most striking difference between the fanfiction and the film isn't even that the fanfic bends Varadha and Deva's friendship into explicit romance, but in the depth of emotional interiority displayed in the fanfic. As is typical of action films, the characters in the canonical text are portrayed primarily through visual spectacle, the emotional opacity of which is compensated for through the fanfic, which has a more introspective orientation. It is Varadha's perspective that dominates most of the narrative in the fanfic, allowing us readers a glimpse into the uncertainty, longing, and self-doubt he feels with regard to his feelings for Deva. The author, on occasion, expresses as much through Varadha's dialogue as well, for example, during a confrontation with Deva where he confesses to his confusion and embarrassment at having possibly misinterpreted the other man's intentions. Ultimately, both characters, Varadha and Deva, communicate their thoughts and actions to each other leagues better than they ever did in the canon, making up for all of the unresolved plot points and misunderstandings between the characters in the film. The fanfic acknowledges the difficulty of expressing love and maintaining any sort of healthy relationship within a political system as violent and precarious as Khansaar's, yet also manages to overcome the same over the course of the narrative simply by allowing the characters to be open and honest with each other, something that was severely lacking in the source text.

A defining feature of fanfiction, especially of the slash variety, is its inclusion of eroticism in its narratives; the consumption and propagation of explicitly sexual writing being another one of the ways in which fanfiction chooses to explore transgressive and non-normative possibilities of imagination. In the process of creating fanfiction, the original ceases to be any more real, except in its legitimacy and authority, than a work based upon it— “the virtual realm, the realm of possibilities is no less real than the realm of the actual” (Derecho, 2006, p. 74); in its dissemination of infinite interpretations and personalisations, that is, its “infinite potentialities any of which could be actualized by any writer interested in doing so” (p.76), fanfiction allows a work to be both individual and communal at the same time. That is also the reason behind the abundance of explicit sexuality in said works, in that such scenes are merely another route that members of the fanfiction community indulge in for there being even more iterations of experiences and possibilities with which to identify. Fanfiction’s embracing of the erotic is thereby entirely with the intention of amplifying and refracting difference and individual identity—fanfiction takes place in a space where both the real and the fantastic are considered equally plausible and hence makes possible the disruption of conceptions of a gender binary upon which any previous constructions of a sexual orientation or sexual gratification had taken place. *Half Agony; Half Hope* too, adeptly fuses violence and eroticism that not only reflects the hypermasculine aesthetic of the cinematic universe but also softens the otherwise brutal setting by integrating it into Varadha and Deva’s romantic relationship. In the context of Khansaar’s bloody polity, violence becomes the language for everything, including devotion, and this theme culminates in explicit sexual scenes between Varadha and Deva where the intensity of their physical intimacy is shown to mirror the aggression of combat. Their sexual encounter is described in terms of force, urgency, and possession, and such is an apt illustration of the way in which slash fanfiction tends to eroticize canonical power dynamics and transform hypermasculinity into a vehicle for its exploration of desire.

Though the first line of the fanfic is obviously a reference to Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, as observed earlier in this paper, the author specifically mentions in their notes to the text, that the title too is a reference to another one of Austen’s novels— *Persuasion*. This intertextual gesture is significant in that it provides further context for the narrative by situating it within the theme of longing and delayed confession, as in the case of the novel it derives its name from. Invoking Austen here bridges the two seemingly disparate genres—regency romance and social commentary, and contemporary action cinema—leading to a juxtaposition where cultural forms merge, thus creating a sort of hybrid narrative that would rarely, if ever, appear in mainstream media forms.

Conclusion

For all their bold sensual ambiguity, both of these films, as well as other films with similar tropes, stop just short of explicitly depicting any homosexual relationships. It is a calculated obfuscation that leaves ample space for both queer readings as well as plausible deniability around any gay subtext. While some view such kind of withholding as a form of pernicious queerbaiting that perpetuates the existing stigma

against same-sex relationships through a perpetual tease instead of outright portrayal, it is irrefutable that the existing fanfiction building upon such films are radically disruptive to the heteronormativity entrenched in Bollywood and other Indian cinema in that they normalize same-sex intimacy between canonically cisgendered and heterosexual characters originating within mainstream narratives. The films themselves, on the other hand, reflect the deeply rooted cultural ideals around masculinity and male affection within the Indian social structure—whether intentional or not, such exploration of male homosocial dynamics offer a unique perspective on complex male bonds as these films, and others like them, adhere neither to Western clichés of homophobic posturing, nor do they assimilate themselves into the normative Bollywood formula of heterosexual romances. Rather, these films have almost organically developed their own traditions of portraying heightened masculine camaraderie and intimate male companionship that is also rife with queer potential, and this legacy is what provides ample fertile ground for further exploration of non-Western articulations of gender, sexuality, and the ever-elusive boundaries between homosocial and homoerotic desire as depicted on screen.

Existing academic research on fanfiction and fan studies has, almost always, its focus on narratives and communities rooted in the Western literary canon, for example texts the likes of *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, *Sherlock Holmes* and similar franchises. With their sizeable fandoms these works dominate not only the production of fanfiction but also the accompanying scholarship, thereby forming the basis of theoretical frameworks in fan studies. Foundational texts of fan studies, including the aforementioned *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins, along with Anne Jamison's *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World* (2013) and Francessa Coppa's *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (2017) all concentrate almost entirely on Western source materials, and rely solely on instances and experiences drawn from the communities stemming from fandoms of said Western media. The resulting frameworks however, are not applicable to fanfiction written by an author who is non-Western and operating in a fandom belonging to a canonically non-Western text. A fanfic author's offline identity being something that plays a significant role in the characterization, setting, and plot of a fanfic, the Western orientation in fanfiction theory may not fully encapsulate or do justice to fanfic traditions emerging elsewhere.

The imbalance, in the bulk of research in fanfiction studies when compared to the negligible amounts of it in the Indian academic space, is especially evident at this moment with the growth of participation of Indian fans on discourse related to Indian media on online fanfiction spaces like Archive of Our Own and Tumblr. While it is true that fan-content of Indian media has historically been quite marginal, a recent surge in its creation and propagation, be it based on books, popular films, historical epics, and even mythological narratives, calls for documentation in academic discourse thereby expanding the geographical and cultural scope of fan studies and move the discipline beyond its Western centric frameworks. Additionally, fanfiction inevitably reflects the social and cultural realities within which it is produced, more so as it is often a direct expression of the author's own experiences. The Indian socio-cultural

space is shaped by its own complex intersections of caste, class, religion, language, gender, and other heteropatriarchal structures, and therefore any fanfiction written by an author operating within said structures is bound to engage with these realities by reinterpreting canonical texts through alternative perspectives. An examination of such works would then provide insight into how the fanfiction reader or writer interacts with and reinterprets culturally significant narratives. Fanfiction is also known to incorporate regional cultural-references, as well as romanized words of various Indian languages, all of which have their own cultural significations, proving that fanfiction does not in fact follow a uniform global style. Investigating such linguistic and stylistic features is of paramount importance as that would allow an understanding of how global fan practices adapt to cultural environments.

That fanfiction occurs in a digital space and through online archives and community-building platforms accounts not only as repositories of creative writing but also as spaces where interaction, identity formation, and collaboration take place. Especially for Indian readers and writers of fanfiction, these spaces stand to provide a relatively safer environment for the discussion of themes that might otherwise have remained unacknowledged in offline spaces, the likes of queer identity and sexuality, or gender nonconformity. In this light, the scope for fanfiction is immense and interdisciplinary, and this paper is but a small attempt to contribute to such, and part of my ongoing endeavour to make up for the aforementioned gap in fanfiction studies in the context of Indian canonical texts and Indian readers and writers of the genre. I hope to, in future projects, conduct further research in this area—analysis of narrative techniques in fanfiction in the way of the transformation of canonical characters and plots, ethnographic studies of fan communities in India, and an exploration of political implications of fanworks—such that it might contribute not only to the field of fan studies but also to broader discourse about authorship and cultural production in this digital age.

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