

# CAMP IN BOLLYWOOD

By Rhea Srivastava

Bollywood plays a very different role than what other national cinemas do for their audience. It signifies a social relevance, a mirror to not just what we are but what we wanted to be. This form of cinema, which has unfortunately been reduced to an oversimplification to *camp* - the mass-produced dominant popular culture in India, and hence this perception abroad, is not 'dominant' without reason.

For many decades, its songs have become our main playlists, we have emulated its fashion at school/university, at weddings, sometimes even funerals. Over the decades, one print ad with a star turned into a massive billboard on the motorway. Before we knew it, the advent of television meant that the same star was selling us everything, from talcum powder to a Tag Heuer watch. Indian culture is deep-rooted in hero worship, and Bollywood has added to this cause. The sheer fantasy that Bollywood represents, for a gamut of supposedly simple people with big dreams, is enough to catapult it to a heaven-like status. For a diaspora audience, Bollywood's campiness is about more than just emulation. It is what differentiates us from other national cinemas, and connects us to our mystical, colourful, ethnic homeland. It is inclusive in a way where groups which are marginalised do not reduce themselves to matching acceptable notions of existence.

The (un)sensibility of camp that was once associated with the Baroque-isation of regular objects, an alternate fantasy version of mainstream stories, generally terribly visual effects in pulpy science fiction movies, and elaborate stylisation of comic books, became synonymous with the visual style and the fashion of movies produced at the time, and thankfully continues to greenlight the movement which is now a global phenomenon. Now mainstream, nostalgia-ridden and self-referential (read: *Om Shanti Om*), this evolution of campiness was often represented by specific Bollywood stars, who had the chutzpah to pull it off.

## HELEN

Our story begins in 1958. The film is *Howrah Bridge*, and a former chorus dancer gets her big break in a quirky little number called *Mera Naam Chin Chin Chu*. To the regular Bollywood audience, Helen represented the 'other,' in two ways. She was less 'heroine' than Madhubala's commanding comedic performances, and far beyond the pool of tears of Meena Kumari's unrequited love.

Helen was not the girl-next-door. She smoked, drank, and danced with gay abandon. The visuals in every song

that Helen performed helps us dive straight into the escapist world that Bollywood's camp aesthetic would go on to master. She was coquettish, but not vulgar, even as her skirt ripped and revealed the gold-sequined number in *Piya Tu Ab To Aaja*. Her neon lipsticks, long wigs, frilled dresses and eyeliner redefined chic for that era. Unfortunately, it was only through a burlesque-style dance song (and Best Costume Oscar-winner Bhanu Athaiya's iconic red dress) where Helen could claim to be the "galiyon ki parchhai... shaam hee se kuch ho jaata hai mera bhi jadoo jawari" (shadow of the streets with a youthful magic that comes alive at night). It was still the '60s. Sharmila Tagore and Mumtaz, two contemporaries who carefully tread the line between the 'vamp' and the leading lady tried their hand at the aesthetic as well, and rather masterfully, helped make it more acceptable - the former in *Leja Leja* from *An Evening in Paris*, and the latter in *Aaj Raat Hai Jawaan* from *Bhai Bhai*, amongst others.

The appreciation of Bollywood's contribution to camp is marking its presence steadily. Canada-based drag queen 'Muffy St. Bernard' wrote about how Helen exuded a certain honesty and personality, especially when drunk. Muffy's piece is an insight into 'personal queer icons' - strong women with quirky personalities. They were slightly bizarre, they didn't have the perfect face, perhaps they weren't even the best at what they did, but that made them more relatable. What is a drag character? It is putting on a facade, but is it really? The world suddenly allows you to hide your flaws and emphasise on your best qualities, as you see them, albeit with exaggerated make-up and costume. In a roundabout way, Bollywood's most iconic stars who knowingly or unknowingly embraced camp, weren't too different from their queer fans. They are flawed, but they put on a certain amount of candid charm with their persona, which makes us believe that this is what we should strive to be.

## **THE RETRO DECADE**

Which brings us to more icons of kitsch. The '80s and '90s in Bollywood is often considered the brightest period in association with this aesthetic. The bold colours and artsy prints that are now emulated as retro kitsch (in a collective, retrospective cringe), were influenced by desperados and their hustlers. Mainstream actresses were now seen in glittering gowns and feather boas, they were flawed femme fatales too, something that was only the vamps did till then.

Feroze Khan donned a dapper suit as Zeenat Aman's silver dress swayed to *Laila*, and Parveen Babi's curly mane and golden suit as she seductively pranced to *Jawani Jaaneman* became what every closeted filmy wanted to emulate.

The epitome of poise and elegance, 'dream girl' Hema Malini - whom we most often visualise as the sparkling village belle or graceful danseuse - does this to the tee. As a lounge singer who catches the fancy of two best friends in *Naseeb*, Hema leads this image with panache, a slinky black number with a pink feather boa as she calls out to her dream man in *Mere Naseeb Mein*. What is noteworthy here is that in spite of this transformation, Hema doesn't lose any of her natural charisma. In fact, she becomes a trendsetter for a community of people forced to remain vanilla even while they yearned for the release of their alternate personas.

## **REKHA**

What Hema did in a song, Rekha did with an entire movie. In Rakesh Roshan's remake of *Return to Eden*, *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1980), Rekha's character gets a makeover where she has big hair, big shoulder pads and gold chains, and everything else in between is perhaps an overstatement of 'shiny.' The greatest cinematic moment of the film comes when Rekha is the talk-of-the-town in the modeling world, which infuriates former modeling sensation Sonu Walia, and the two ladies compete in a dance-off. Silver ear-cuffs, fluorescent pink and neon blue garbs, and choreography which only someone who is really high on their cardio game would be able to perfect, this song signifies a greater inspiration to those who are fans of camp. To this day, *Khoon Bhari Maang* is considered one of the most glorious examples of camp and over-the-top Bollywood masala. But we forget that the advent of glamour into fashion was the notion that it would help individuals express themselves, make themselves known. Perhaps in Rekha's projection of this unique sensibility, gay men and straight women found an idol who not only possessed femininity, but could also put another facet of it (and own her sexuality) whenever it suited her.

## **SRIDEVI**

In a scene in Karan Johar's poignant short *Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh* in Bombay Talkies, the openly gay protagonist tells his female boss a sure-shot way of identifying a 'gay man.' He says if someone is a Sridevi fan, he is most certainly gay. The queer man's worship of the female superstar is perhaps best signified by this generalisation for the late '80s into the early 90s (the counterpoint here being that if one was to try and identify a straight man, search for the nearest Madhuri fan). What separated Sridevi's resonance with this community was more of a natural penchant for glamour than being a sex symbol. After decades of actresses still gaining second-billing to their male counterparts, here was Sridevi - a bonafide superstar who with her femininity, charm and talent lead the feminist movement in new-age cinema. In *Chaalbaaz*, she effortlessly breaks the notion of super-stardom as she shares screen-space with macho stalwarts Rajinikanth and Sunny Deol. The role she portrays as feisty Manju provides a great dichotomy to the acceptable demure and homely Anju. She drinks beer and abuses unabashedly, she is the more 'open version' of our real selves. And she doesn't need the world to carry on - *kisi ke haath na aayegi yeh ladki* (this girl is not easy to pinned down).

In *Mr. India*, she carefully treads the line between brazen and obnoxious while going for the 'Chaloo Chaplin' avatar, but is also capable of effortlessly slipping into a fruit-salad hat, a shiny golden gown

and bright red lipstick for the bizarrely fun *Hawa Hawai*. If one had to be their most confident, honest self, one would strive to be Sridevi who was capable of entering a room full of men, and owning it not just by virtue of her beauty but mainly by her spunk. She could steal secrets from your pocket and create magic on-screen... a strangely liberating watch as a *naagin* (snake-woman), or as an *apsara* (fairy) although the latter may not be too far-fetched to her real persona.

### **GOVINDA: KING OF CAMP.**

Complete desi vibrancy. It wasn't just Govinda's garishly loud wardrobe which he wore with panache and comfort - leather accessories and rainbow-coloured trousers - but even his body language was made of every ounce of the campy carefree humour that only he could pull off with effortless guile. His films and their visuals would go on to match and surpass his fun, colourful and eccentric personality. But best of all he owned everything about being himself with an endearing charm - "meri pant bhi sexy, meri shirt bhi sexy," (my pant is sexy, my shirt is sexy too) everything about him is sexy. "tujhko mirchi lagi to main kya karoon," (if you're offended, it's not my problem) and finally, the self-declared rank that "main tera hero no. 1" (I am the number one hero).

### **METROSEXUALITY AND CAMP**

Through to the new millennium, the brand of campiness that Karan Johar's cinema brought to the fore conveniently blurred the line between what tropes of such over-the-top characters for men could do in 'massy films.' Two of the best examples for this are Shah Rukh Khan and Saif Ali Khan in *Kal Ho Naa Ho* with not-so-subliminal homoerotic undertones, and specifically what Abhishek Bachchan manages to achieve as a pretend-gay man in *Dostana*. Amidst the sculpted bodies that gyrate on Miami beach, Abhishek's nurse-man goes for baby pink and floral exhibitionism in all its glory even before his character goes for fake-gay. In *Bol Bachchan*, the transition is even more seamless. He finds his inner femininity almost instantaneously because he has nothing to lose as a character who has been sidelined for being outrageous anyway.

### **RANVEER SINGH AND THE NEW CAMP**

Every time Ranveer Singh steps out, his fashion choices know no bounds and no limits. This is not a carefully thought out wardrobe but more a pursuit of what makes him feel comfortable and happy. When tracing the history of 'camp' in Bollywood, it is not just his sartorial sense but specifically

Ranveer's out-of-the-box persona, which thankfully he chooses to embrace even off-screen, which redefines the notions of gender in the industry. Here is a man for whom feeling authentic, his true self, is of most importance. The brand of masculinity that we have been attuned to so far across decades and generations of heroes who show off their machismo in movies and otherwise is not something that Ranveer conforms by. In Ranveer, an entire community of people have found an outlet to defy the shame and stigma that comes with being themselves.

A user on Quora asked, rather pertinently, if Bollywood is 'intentionally campy.' For those with and without a socio-cultural context to the metamorphosis of popular Hindi cinema, this may warrant a heated debate. On one side, this excerpt from another user's response neatly summarises - "*If you don't know the language, you may find many movies within Bollywood to be characteristic of a whole generation of overwrought melodramas, which typically wove complicated drama, romance, thriller, action and humour subplots into the same movie. These movies tread the dangerous line of becoming 'campy' in their "failed seriousness."* But is it a failure? The bold but not brazen, the liberal use of colour has wittingly or unwittingly built in its wake a reference for the marginalized of today to express themselves. The oppressed can now tweak the establishment's nose, can now make them cringe. A subversive yet peaceful protest as we march into a colourful world.