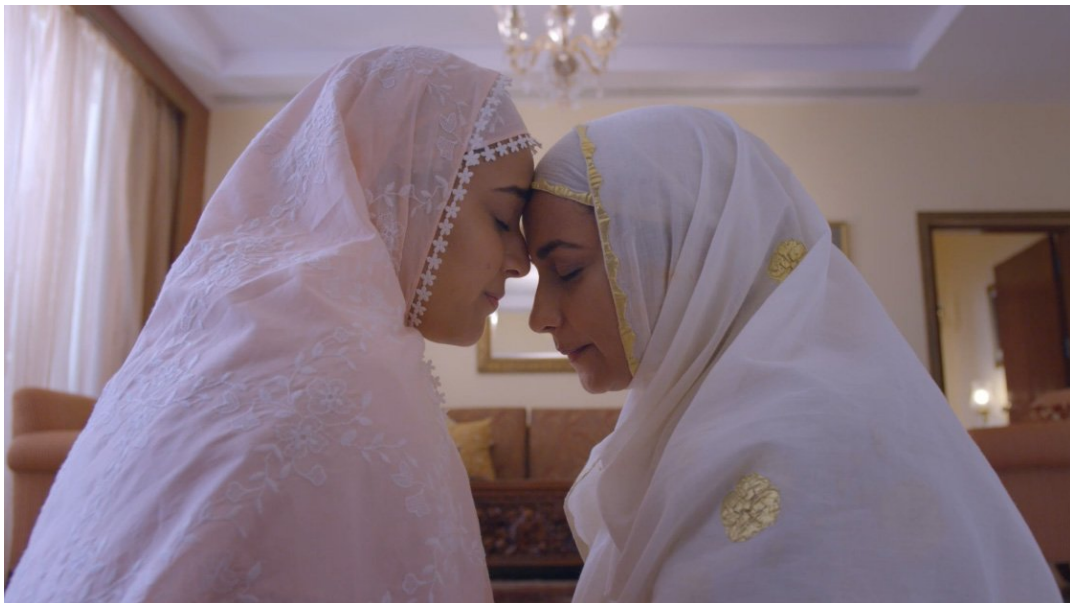


At Outfest Fusion, Queer South Asian Filmmakers Take Control of the Narrative

Queer Desi filmmakers aren't waiting for Hollywood to catch up when telling real LGBTQ+ stories from their community at the Outfest Fusion QTBIPOC Film Festival.

By Jireh Deng

April 23, 2023



Two South Asian women in white traditional head scarves with white and gold accents rest their heads together. A still from Faraz Arif Ansari's *Sheer Qorma*.

Today's queer South Asian representation is few and far between on screen. But in 2022, *Joyland*, a Pakistani love story between a cisgender man and a transgender

woman, broke barriers in the portrayal of gender and sexuality, winning mass acclaim from critics across the globe. This past weekend on April 21st, the film made it's highly anticipated Los Angeles theatrical debut before making it's way to theatres across the country.

Still, few if any major studios have backed a film that features South Asian characters, much less, queer South Asians. However, the lack of recognition from Hollywood executives hasn't been a deterrent — if anything, the creative autonomy offered in independent filmmaking has been a nurturing site for queer Desi filmmakers who aren't beholden to the limits of a dominant white and heteronormative gaze.

At this year's **Outfest Fusion QTBIPOC Film Festival**, the block aptly named "All in the Desi Family" featured half a dozen shorts that push our expectations of what intergenerational connections and family reconciliation could look like. These actors and filmmakers aren't just telling stories for representation's sake, they're portraying real lives and experiences that have been hungry to be seen on screen — they're not waiting for Hollywood to catch up. They're already taking the reins and leading the conversation.



A South Asian person with dark hair sits at a piano. They are looking back at someone in the foreground. A still from Snigdha Kapoor's *Look Like You*.

Look Like You

In *Look Like You*, director Snigdha Kapoor attempts to portray a complicated and nuanced depiction of queerness that isn't just about sexuality, but about redefining family structures and chosen bonds. In the film, we see Tara, a mother confronted with the choices she made to give up her child for adoption as she sees her son Ray struggling to understand his own identity as a Brown boy with white parents.

Kapoor lets the audience do the work of interpreting the subtle hints at context clues. The distance that Tara drives out to see Ray, references Ray's family moving from Brooklyn to a white suburban neighborhood, and Tara's reluctance to public displays of affection with her partner. We can read the tension in her body language and fear that her son might experience the same ostracization she has encountered as a queer woman of color.

It's Kapoor's background as a documentary filmmaker and attention to detail that roots the audience in a specificity of time and place even without naming a location or year.

Kapoor interviewed real adoptive mothers, birth mothers, and a social worker as the non-fiction basis for this story. Although they struggled to find South Asian birth mothers willing to speak about their experiences, their research is the backdrop of their nuanced portrayal of queer families and transracial adoptees.

The film was loosely inspired during a time in the pandemic where Kapoor was coming to terms with the cultural pressures of reproduction living in a female body. “I consider myself fluid when it comes to like gender identity,” said Kapoor in an interview. “What does mothering really mean? Do I need to define myself as a woman?”

At the end of the film, we don’t leave with a clear answer about motherhood, but that’s ok. It’s the silence and pauses between characters throughout the 13-minute film that speaks volumes and allows space for the audience to sit in quiet and thoughtful reflection.



Three South Asian women embrace each other, smiling together. A still from Faraz Arif Ansari’s *Sheer Qorma*.

Sheer Qorma

Sheer Qorma was a clear crowd favorite in this shorts bloc as it made its Los Angeles debut. Before the screening at Outfest Fusion, the anticipated award-winning short has already had a successful tour at dozens of film festivals. And one can see why — it has all the core elements of an Indian family-drama film including unspoken, but palpable tension over a household dinner.

The 30-minute short spoken in Hindi, Urdu, and English centers around a non-binary person, Saira, who has spent 15 years in the U.S. estranged from their family. For the first time in over a decade, they return home to India, bringing their partner Sitara only to find that their mother’s views on their queer relationship have not changed. But writer-director Faraz Arif Ansari offers us a view of what reconciliation could look like between mother and child, providing us tender moments of healing and an apology through of course — a serving of sheer qorma.

After the film ended, audience members with tear-streaked faces gave roaring applause. As most of the production team is based abroad in India, California-based Seema Hari, an associate producer, attended Outfest Fusion representing *Sheer Qorma*. In 2019

when Hari heard of the synopsis, they immediately resonated with the characters and asked to help bring the story to life. Seeing the film premiere at Outfest Fusion, they're proud of the representation it offers to non-binary and queer South Asian people like themselves.

For Hari, the film's powerful message lies in its hope and a potential guide for how LGBTQIA+ South Asian people in India and the diaspora might approach conversations about queerness with their own families.

"Cinema has that possibility to create that change" Hari shared in an interview after the film's screening. As a first-time filmmaker, she wants everyone to leave inspired to tell their own stories. "I highly recommend everyone get together with your friends and tell a story. We all have the power to do it now. You never know who your story can empower and what changes your story can create in other people's lives."



A South Asian girl with shoulder length black hair wearing headphones sits on a chair. They stair off camera in a contemplative state. A still from Amritpal Kaur's *Zindagi Dobara*.

Zindagi Dobara

After experiencing the crushing loss of her parents, a niece is forced to live with her aunt she's never met before. Grief is the undercurrent of *Zindagi Dobara's* narrative, but as the film's translated namesake implies, the two find *life again* in one another even after this devastation.

Dilreet Kaur, Mahi's aunt, is more than ready to receive her orphaned niece with care as someone who has been waiting to reconnect as an ostracized queer member of their family. As queer people know all too well, family is complicated, and at first, Mahi is angry that her aunt has been missing for most of her life. But bereavement forces them to confront their differences to create a new family for themselves.

The 14-minute short is effusive with tenderness and care even at moments of strife and it's surely because the production company behind the film, **Brown Girl Joy Productions**, is femme-centered and founded by three Punjabi siblings, writer-director Amritpal Kaur, producer Jaspreet Kaur, and Aman Kaur who plays Mahi.

Jaspreet Kaur describes a spiritual-like experience working on set. Their team was intentional about how they wanted to build community amongst their cast and crew — most of whom identify as people of color, undocumented, and/or queer. It's those lived experiences behind the camera that shines through on-screen and allow us to feel the full weight of emotions being portrayed.

“[In] thinking about intergenerational trauma, we thought the team we need to create space on for these emotions to come through. [It] has to be people who can resonate with the story in one way or another,” Kaur said of their selection of the cast and crew.

With the Sikh talent in front of and behind the camera, there was also a concentrated effort to portray Sikhism onscreen to challenge common depictions where queerness is diametrically opposed to religion. It's in the juxtapositions where *Zindagi Dobra* succeeds — pulling us through the peaks and valleys of joy and despair that allow us as the audience to journey with their characters.

Jireh Deng (they/them) is a queer Asian American writer and filmmaker born and raised in the San Gabriel Valley. Their words on L.A. appear in *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *Teen Vogue*, *NPR*, *The L.A. Times* and more. They co-direct the *Asian American Journalists Association LGBTQIA+ affinity group* and serve as a national board representative for its L.A. chapter. You can follow them on Instagram at [@bokchoy_baobei](#).

Deng is one of the eight 2023 Outfest Inclusive Press Initiative Fellows for the Outfest Fusion QTBIPOC Film Festival. You can learn more about them and the program [here](#).