

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS ON THE PORTRAYALS OF SEXUAL MINORITIES IN SELECT INDIAN LANGUAGE FILMS

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ABSTRACT

Without a doubt, Indian cinema has been the cultural repertoire of the Indian society both in India and abroad. It has time and again aimed at capturing the essence of the 'Indian spirit', ethos, pathos and logos of the general public and people of Indian origin (living around the world). In the 100 odd years of Indian cinema that has elapsed, the filmmakers have strived to mirror the changing mindset of the Indian people and the culture that has transformed through the ages. However, the representation of certain outlooks is still considered a taboo in the Indian society, and therefore has had no allowance in the films as well. So, either the filmmakers prefer to stick to established stereotypes, or take the bold step to challenge any such pigeonhole mindset. A striking instance adducing such behaviour amongst filmmakers is apropos of alternative sexuality, also termed as sexual minority. Sexual minority alludes to people who can generally be broadly categorised as lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual and queer (LGBTQ) appertaining to their sexual orientation. In context of the Indian society, this is a community that has been marginalised for centuries, and thus are sidelined by the mainstream cinema, devoid of an authentic voice and true representation.

Major portrayals of the LGBTQ community steers towards lack of character, moral qualm and comical hysteria; scenes in the films are often laced with sarcasm and derogation. This approach is flawed because it demeans the community and also influences the audience's perception about them, and several studies have concluded that media and film influence and shape public opinion. Not only can it be considered as sexual violation and mindless vandalism of the community, but also denial of unfeigned identity. Unlike the dominating genders (male and female), the people representing this community are only being judged by their sexual behaviour, creating a strong resistance in acceptance. This papers looks at identifying such issues in recent mainstream Indian language films, linked to the portrayals of the

sexual minority community - looking to establish the facts, and to bring to light the requirement for fair and just treatment of this community.

INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema is possibly one of the largest film industries in the world, and several believe that is also amongst the oldest ¹. Since the first Indian film was screened in 1913,² the industry has grown by staggering numbers producing an kaleidoscope of films in several genres and languages.

Today, both mainstream cinema and parallel cinema is produced in a variety languages athwart the country such as Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam, and Marathi to name a few. The many genres include thriller, romance, crime, drama, comedy, fiction, action, etc.; and these are amongst the top hits in the box-office. Of course, the language of production has divided Indian cinema into several branches, which the audiences informally recognise as Bollywood, Tollywood, Kollywood etc.

When it comes to the representation of any cultural aspect in Indian cinema, or even world cinema for that matter, usually, a single verdict is not given on any issue; a spectrums of ideas and opinions are voiced out in films, and the same holds good for portrayals of the sexual minorities. It is possible that the negativity is due to the huge level of intolerance towards the community in the Indian society. For instance, a transgender women is almost always disowned by the family and shunned by the society. The same mentality is exaggerated by the film scripts in a rather mocking manner, painting them as elements of the society incongruous for any social interaction. However, was this always the case in history?

Sexual Minorities and Hinduism:

Hinduism is probably one of the most prominent characteristic features of India (as the name suggests, Hindustan). Today India is a secular county, with a myriad of

¹Hogan, P. C. (2008). *Understanding Indian Movies: Culture, Cognition and Cinematic Imagination*. Texas: University of Texas Press.

²Burra, R.D. & Rao, M. (2006). Cinema. *Encyclopedia of India, 1*, 252.

cultures now defining the nation. However, Hinduism is the dominant faith of India, dating back some five thousand years³.

Historically speaking, India's stand on the community we today classify as sexual minority is unclear. Some texts suggest that ancient India might have been more progressive in dealing with sexual minorities compared to the 21st century India. For instance, the Vedas and the regional folklore suggests that many of the Hindu deities can be said to possess ambiguous gender - maintaining attributes of both male and female genders (androgynous or hermaphroditic beings), or being able to manifest as either male or female at different points of time. The hermaphroditic Lakshmi-Narayanan, a combination Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi exhibits the power and strength synonymous to masculinity and the gentle poise and grace that we associate to femininity⁴. Another example is Lord Ardhanarishvara, a manifestation of the union of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvathi; the name Ardhanarishvara literally means - the Lord who is half female.

Coming to the another aspect - some religious doctrines also suggest the fluidity in sexuality and sexual identity. The Bhagavata Purana, one of the eighteen Maha Puranic texts of Hinduism, illustrates a story of Lord Vishnu where he assumes a woman's form, Mohini. The story talks about how Lord Shiva is completely smitten and enchanted by the beauty Mohini. Eventually, the tale leads to Lord Vishnu giving birth to Lord Ayyapan, from Lord Shiva; Lord Ayyapan is also called Hariharaputran, literally meaning - son of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. The main take from these religious doctrines and texts is that *"such relationships are indeed interwoven as natural effects of humanity. The sexual diversity of this religion served as a great tool in the assimilation of very specific sexual minorities."*⁵

Hijras Sidelined during the British Raj

3 Narayanan, V.(2009). Hinduism. New York: The Rosen Publishing Group.

4 Connor. R. P, Sparks. D. H, Sparks. M. (1997). Cassell's Encyclopedia of Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Lore. Michigan: Continuum.

5 Pinto, C. (2013). The Development and Prevalence of Sexual Minorities in Modern Indian Culture. Retrieved from www.culturaldiplomacy.org.

It is no secret that the British attempted to completely eliminate the third gender, whom we commonly refer to as Hijras, the most prevalent transgender in our society - physically male, adopting a female gender role or identity. During the British Rule, existence of this group of sexual minorities was severely threatened. They were executed in groups primarily due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. The Hijras were considered a 'criminal tribe' under their British rule. ⁶ In fact, they were forced to register themselves under The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871.

Their exile during the British Raj was a stark contrast to what existed during the Mughal Empire (16th and 17th century) that preceded the British Raj. These hijras enjoyed freedom and movement within and outside the kingdom. They were respected and often employed in the royal residential quarters and palace grounds, accepted by all strata of the society. Further, they were known to be the confidants of the emperor and his royal family, a coveted position. ⁷

Despite their acceptance centuries ago, sexual minorities in India today live in the fringes of the society; the stigmatisation by the British Raj continues to haunt them, placing them as social outcasts of the society. Their sexual orientation and behaviour is often the premise for their alienation when it comes to politics, culture, economic and social ingress; these are often at the root of the community's distress and affliction. This real issues are often sidelined in the Indian films, filmmakers often try to by pass such issues because it might stem public discord. This study might help show the requirement and need for fair treatment by concentrating on the intensities of sensationalism and exaggeration presented in Indian films. It might also help identify areas and issues that require immediate attention including deconstruction of sexual myths directed towards the community.

OBJECTIVES

⁶ Herdt, G. (1991). Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India. Serena Nanda. *American Anthropologist*, 199-200.

⁷ Thomas, R. E. (2015). Effects of Globalisation on Transgenders in India. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 4(1), 28-29.

This paper is focused on the portrayals of sexual minorities in select Indian language films, scrutinising bias and stereotyping. It expostulates on how films have constantly adopted an attitude of ridicule and lack of character towards the LGBTQ community; however, it also recognises films that have tried to break the taboo linked to the community, or that have tried to depict the reality in the existence of the community.

- Analyse the volume of a film's content that shows the community in either positive or negative light.
- Study the representation in films that shows sex as the only decipher of moral character.
- Decipher if representation in certain films is realistic in expressing the real life difficulties and struggles of sexual minorities.

HYPOTHESIS

The LGBTQ community is challenged by the society on the pretext of moral character, their sexual orientation the judge of their personality and characteristics. Therefore, my hypothesis of this study is:

Although times have changed and the society has adopted a modern outlook, several filmmakers continue to stick to stereotypes when it comes to the portrayal of the community, especially in films where the storyline does not largely revolve around characters that one could classify under the sexual minority community. They have been included to support comic relief.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Portrayal of Sexual Minorities In Hindi Films, Sanjeev Kumar Sabharwal, Lucknow, India, 2012.

Summary of the Work: The paper talks and compares the portrayal of sexual minorities in mainstream as well as alternative Hindi cinema. It looks into the content of mainstream Hindi cinema that shows these sexual minorities in a poor light - usually depicting them with very low moral character - denial and mockery towards the community. The paper also examines the portrayals of the sexual minorities in alternative cinema, suggesting that alternative cinema in India is able to represent

and express the community in true light, alongside possible and workable solutions. The paper looks into several Hindi movies to come to a possible conclusion.

Conclusion by the Author: The author finds that sexual minorities in Hindi films have progressed to a better position in terms of their portrayal. There have been films that have attempted to focus on the lives and experiences of the community (otherwise considered invisible by the Indian society). The author also suggests that more awareness must be expressed about such issues in the future.

Learning from the work: Although dominant public opinion is that Indian cinema almost always plays on the stereotypes linked to the community, the author shows several example of movies that have tried to break the stereotypical norms that have time and again been adapted by popular cinema. However, the author only talks about Hindi cinema, therefore, the prerogative is to also extract examples of other Indian language films that deal with similar issues.

2. *Tryst With Destiny: Sexual Discourse and Third Gender in Select Indian Bollywood Films*, Md Habib Subhan, Aligarh, India, 2013.

Summary of the Work: The author discusses the portrayals of the third gender in three Hindi films. *Sadak* (1991), which the author describes as a movie that classifies the sexual minorities as villains ; *Tamanna* (1997), which according to the author redefines gender identity, and *Welcome To Sajjanpur* (2008), which looks at the community's political participation and thereby their overall identity. The author explores the various issues that the third gender community faces though the film portrayals and also establishes the mandate for their fair treatment.

Conclusion by the Author: The author concludes that although the Indian society has become far more broad-minded compared to earlier times, the representation of the third gender is still debatable on grounds of fairness. He says that only a few films have been able to break stereotypes linked to the community, their plight, still an unheard cry to the world. He urges the need for a single or holistic representation of the third gender in the mainstream Indian films.

Learning from the work: The 'T' of the LGBTQ community, the transgender, or the third genders are the ones being subjected to maximum character destructions in Indian films. They are repeatedly subjected to mockery and humiliation due to the

comical, sarcastic, and stereotypical representation in mainstream films. These films show that their sexual orientation is the only parameter required to judge of their moral character.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the study, a qualitative research design is followed, focusing on characterising and identifying elements that define the qualities of sexual minorities in the films.

The methodology adopted is the content analysis of a variety of Indian language films, concentrating on four such films chosen at convenience and based on the popularity of the same (where, the box office collection is the determinant for the film's popularity).

The study primarily seeks to look at the portrayals of the sexual minorities in films that can be classified as popular and widely accepted based on the numbers from the box office. The logic being, if a film is popular amongst the masses, it would have greater impact and visibility compared to small budget films. For instance, movies like *Bomgay* (Hindi, 1996) and *The Pink Mirror* (Hindi, 2003), which can be classified as parallel cinema, have a lesser impact and influence factor than the chart-topping Shankar's *I* (Tamil, 2014) or Raj Koshla's *Dostana* (Hindi, 2008).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Portrayal of the Third Gender:

Hijras, and the third gender at large were included in the script of the 70's films like Laxmikant-Pyarelal and Anand Bakshi's *Amar Akbar Antony* (Hindi, 1977). But the actual head on dive into the issues of the community was seen in films like Mahesh Bhatt's *Sadak* (Hindi, 1991); Mahesh Bhatt's *Tamanna* (Hindi, 1998); and Vasanth's *Appu* (Tamil, 2000) to name a few. Later films like Santhosh Sowparnika's *Ardhanari* (Malayalam, 2012) and David Atkins' *Queens! Destiny of Dance* (Hindi, 2011) actually dealt with concrete issues that the community faces even today, bring all their misery and ill-treatment to surface.

The difference in the Indian mindset about the sexual minorities is - while transgender is looked as an abnormality in nature; homosexuality, back in the 70s,

80s and 90s was considered a 'lifestyle choice' (referring to a voluntary choice that is indeed reversible) and was most often equated to a mental disorder. So, filmmakers who sought to embark on plots laced with predominant homosexuality themes had a difficult time striking a balance between social morality and standards of the changing society.

Homosexuality: Early Portrayals - Bold and suggestive of breaking social taboos:

Kamal Amrohi's *Pakeezah* (Hindi, 1972) and Narendra Bedi's *Rafoo Chakkar* (Hindi, 1975) are amongst the first films in the history of India cinema that suggests homosexuality, a concept scandalous at those times⁸. Same is the case with Mohan's *Randu Penkuttikal* (Malayalam, 1978), which went a step ahead and showcased the passionate love between two young girls. Other movies like, Vijay Tendulkar's *Mitrachi Goshta* (Marathi, 1981) and *Deshadanakkili Karayaarilla* (Malayalam, 1986) also speaks about lesbian love and physical attraction. Deepa Metha's *Fire* (Hindi, 1998) is a movie that boldly portrays the homosexual relation between two young women. There are several other striking examples not only in mainstream cinema, but also parallel cinema that was able to boldly bring out the issues of homosexuality in modern times. Such as Kaizad Gustad's *Bombay Boys* (Hindi, 1998) and Riyad Vinci Wadia's *Bomgay* (Hindi, 1996).

Two-Faced 21st Century:

As the 2000s set in, sexual minorities across the country began to come out of their cocoons, claiming their rightful place in society. And, filmmakers immediately used the opportunity to create films sympathising their plight, and at the same time trying to decipher the phenomenon behind the LGBTQ movement. A few example are Ligy Pullappally's *Sancharram* (Malayalam, 2004); Onir's *My Brother ...Nikhil* (Hindi, 2005); *Piku Bhalo Aachhey* (Bengali, 2004); Rituparno Ghosh's *The Pink Mirror* (Hindi, 2006), *Yours Emotionally* (Hindi, 2007); *68 Pages* (Hindi, 2007); Onir's *I AM* (Anthology, Hindi, 2011); Syamaprasad's *Rithu* (Malayalam, 2009); Priyanandan's *Sufi Paranja Katha* (Malayalam, 2010); Venkat Prabhu's *Goa* (Tamil, 2010); and Shonali Bose's *Margarita, with a Straw* (Hindi, 2014), to name a few.

⁸ Pukan, V. (2009). 100 Queer Films of India. *Bombay Dost*. Retrieved from www.filmimpressions.com.

Sadly, mainstream films continues to stick to stereotypes of the community, a true spoof of serious subject matter. Films such as Nikhil Advani's *Kal Ho Na Ho* (Hindi, 2003); Raj Khosla's *Dostana* (Hindi, 2008); Karan Johar's *Student of the Year* (Hindi, 2012) make a mockery of gay men. And, films such as Shankar's *I* (Tamil, 2015); Gautham Menon's *Vettaiyaadu Vilayaadu* (Tamil, 2005) show that filmmakers continue to show the third gender with devious criminal minds with a promiscuous sexual appetite.

Welcome to Shajjanpur (Hindi, 2008)

The portion of the film's plot revolves around the struggle between the Hijras and the dominant genders of society. Munnibai (a transgender), decides to file her nomination for the village election, believing that it is the only way she can secure the status of the eunuchs in the village. What follows is a series of ridicule and extremely harsh statements from the entire village. The director and writer, Shyam Benegal, managed to capture the essence of the sexual minorities' problem in our very own society - them being refused a part in the national democracy. The heart-wrenching statements directed towards Munnibai, directly reflects the emotion and the mental turmoil of every transgender in the society. "*Which community will you be supporting? Brahmin, Patel or Dalit? Who is with you?*" (translation of one of the dialogues directed towards Munnibai) ⁹. The movie aptly mirrors the status of the third gender in our society when it comes to issues that actually matter. Sexual minorities, especially the third gender, are almost always alienated.

I (Tamil, 2015)

On the one hand we have films like *Welcome to Shajjanpur* that depicts the struggles of the transgender community, urging the society to think and change. On the other hand, we have movies like *I*. Backed with a humungous budget and a glamorous star cast, the blockbuster's portrayal of transgender women is probably one of the worst plays of transgender stereotypes seen in films in recent times - a lecherous sexual predator, ogling and lusting after the male protagonist, Lee.

⁹Subhan, H. (2013). Tryst with Destiny: Sexual Discourse and Third Gender in Select Indian Bollywood Films. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 2(7), 34-42.

Even as the transgender character, Osma, makes an entrance, the lewd jokes and sly comments begin, drawing from every cliché glued on the community. In fact, the internet has live video feeds of audiences in several theatres enjoying each and every derogatory statement that the movie churns out endlessly. The movie actually suggests that we look at transgender women as an object of ridicule, which supports the primary hypothesis - filmmakers continue to adopt the concept of ridicule and mockery even after so much has been done and said on the status and rights of the third genders in India. However, the audiences' feedback suggests that filmmakers are not the only ones to blame. They are merely reflecting the greater attitude of the dominant genders of our society.

As the movie progresses, Osma continues to behave progressively outrageous and her costumes becomes even more garish by the scene. Finally, completely sick of Osma's constant sexual advances (again, the stereotype), Lee screams at her, "*You are not even human*" - the worst possible statement anyone can direct towards a transgender.

The irony is, Tamil Nadu is possibly the only state which has worked so hard for the welfare and enhancement of the status of the transgender community in the country. It is indeed a shame to see that filmmakers, be it producers, actors, or directors continue to dwell in the disparaging sentiments, demeaning their very existence.

English Vinglish (Hindi, 2012)

The heart warming tale shared by Gauri Shinde, is not only an inspirational tribute to womankind, it also subtly passes a strong message about homosexuality. It shows two gay characters, both different - one is chirpy and slightly feminine; the other, a quiet loner radiating smooth masculine charm - This breaks the stereotype played by most Indian films, (gay men are usually portrayed as overly feminine individuals) suggesting that that is not the only characteristic trait of gay men.

Another striking scene is when the gay teacher breaks-up with his boyfriend, and the other characters make fun of him in his absence (similar to popular cliché). Sridevi, who plays Shahi rightly puts the point that everyone has the right to love and be loved, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender - Members of the sexual minority have a right to be have feelings, since it is not a mental disorder. This holistic

sentiment is what Indian society lacks, and we do need more such movies to spell the importance and need for sexual freedom.

Sanchaaraam (Malayalam, 2004)

This is probably the first Malayalam film that uses homosexuality as the base storyline of the plot. The movie is narrated in a brutally honest and matter-of-fact manner, and this approach was much needed in films, to show the world the real sentiments of the community. The fact that it talked about normal people, who could very well be your own neighbours was the most striking feature about the film. The story takes the audience through the blooming love of two childhood friends, Kiran and Deliliah, coupled with their passion and attraction for each other. When their family learns about their passionate rendezvous, Deliliah's mother immediately arranges for her marriage - Arranged marriage to a man is seen as the only way to undo the 'heinous crime' committed by the two girls, so that everyone can go back to 'normal' life. But is that normal for either Deliliah or Kiran? - The movie shows the reaction and opinion of most Indian parents about homosexuality. In the end, Deliliah, having no alternative option, and without able to bear the constant defiling statements from her family resigns to marriage. Thus, mirroring the fate of several homosexual men and women in our country. The movie was aptly able to bring out the mechanism of family dynamic in the life of a person in the LGBT community, and at the sometime display the cruel face of society as clear as proved facts.

CONCLUSION

When you look at the representation of the sexual minority in the history of Indian cinema, it dates back to the 70's when a few filmmakers decided to break from the Victorian Puritanism mindset. The shift in the scenes was a result of the LGBTQ movement that was abreast around the world. However, a holistic change easier said than done. With the Indian community still caught in the taboo that surrounds the subject, the pretext of moral restriction dissuades the filmmakers from taking up the issue - A greater part of the Indian population is simply not ready for such bold portrayals.

It is an undeniable fact that Indian cinema has played a vital role in instilling tolerance and fairness in the treatment of the LGBTQ community. However, the

same media can be charged guilty of harping on the worst sexual stereotypes of the community, for nothing more than cheap laughs.

A small section of the filmmakers (upcoming directors and those associated with parallel cinema) are trying their best to break the ice between the sexual minorities and society at large. However, the real impact can only be achieved by the more influential filmmakers, who are able to drive the masses (by churning out blockbuster movies) - they need to push the boundaries, and encompass stories that are sensitive to the challenging life and sentiments of the LGBTQ community.

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