



An Analytical Study On Representation Of Transgender In Indian Film Industry

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ABSTRACT

To a large extent, the dominant worldviews and cultural values of the target demographic are reflected and shaped by the dominant cultural forms that serve them. The last ten years have seen a meteoric surge in the popularity of many types of media, thanks in large part to the proliferation of online video streaming services like Netflix and the Thanks to people watching more and more videos online, pop culture has developed at a dizzying rate in recent years. According to research conducted by Deloitte, media consumption increased from 29.3% of all internet traffic in 2013 to 89.3% in 2018¹. Thus, it is crucial to examine how media at large has portrayed different demographics. Because of the wide appeal of video content, Netflix's member base has grown from 70.8 million in 2015 to 167 million in 2019. These numbers demonstrate the scope of potential audiences for any media released on Netflix, and hence the potential for societal change. Video content is crucial because it allows us to learn about and engage with aspects of reality that may be difficult to access in our everyday lives. Because of the proliferation of media throughout the world, people from different backgrounds are able to interact and learn from one another, and traditional barriers between societies are being broken down. And that's why it's more important than ever to have positive portrayals of the LGBTQ community in mainstream media. This article examines the complex portrayal of the 'queer' community in audiovisual media, how it has changed over the past several decades, and how it has mirrored and influenced societal attitudes.

Keywords: Third gender, Bollywood, Portrayal, Films, Multimodal Discourse

Introduction

During the postmodern era, gender roles have been fluid. Gender identity, subjectivity, and its representation have all been questioned from a variety of perspectives by postcolonial theorists, feminists, and poststructuralists. As a result, the meaning of gender or sex has been subject to constant debate, with shifting perspectives as a result. Those who identify as third gender have historically been excluded from mainstream culture and identity discourse. Transgender persons are often referred to as "third gender" since they do not conform to traditional gender roles. Those who don't neatly fit either the feminine or masculine gender categories are often referred to under this umbrella phrase. As a result, their situation is more like that of the 'subaltern'.¹

Film is an integral aspect of modern culture. Like a mirror, it reflects the human condition back to its observers. Film is unparalleled in its ability to sway people's opinions. As such, it is crucial to examine the films made inside a country to get insight into the national identity, culture, and goals of its people. India has a vast population that frequents movie theatres, making it one of the countries with the highest annual film output. Standard Indian Hindi films are the country's most extensively released films. The creation of one's own identity is a major theme in Bollywood. No one can make it without working on their sense of self. Because of all the contradictions in our culture, it is in a constant state of evolution. When one's identity is that of a person who doesn't match the norms of mainstream culture, it's a difficult challenge to construct and present that identity to the world. Slowly but surely, LGBTQ+ topics are making their way into Bollywood films. Indian filmmakers are attempting to explore new territory by veering away from stereotypical stories, but so far the

¹ 'Where We Are On TV Report - 2018' (GLAAD, 2020) <<https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv18>> accessed 23 November 2022.

third gender has not been allowed to be depicted on screen. Bollywood's treatment of their stories and problems has ranged between snark and acceptance, bigotry and comedy, criminality and stereotyping. Bollywood's portrayal and creation of trans people is influenced by mainstream gender binary thinking. Their sexual habits are the subject of research and evaluation. They are portrayed as victims of discrimination in India primarily because of their sexuality or gender identity. Exclusion from all spheres of society—social, political, economic, and cultural—has been a major contributor to their condition. LGBTTQQIA+ is an umbrella word covering the whole spectrum of sexual orientations and identities, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, intergender, and asexual people.

The film industry plays a crucial role in bringing attention to and discussion of the regional and communal concerns that arise in modern society. Prior until the early 21st century, transgender people in India were mostly neglected. *Ardhanari*, a film directed by Santhosh Souparnika in 2012 and which generated a lot of conversation in 2011, shed attention on the dire situation transgender people find themselves in. Since then, other studies have been conducted on the specific problems they've encountered, including insights into the myriad ways in which their human rights have been violated. Those who experience gender uncertainty are often overlooked in our diverse global community. Everyone just assumes that they are either "proud males" or "proud women" without question. Nonetheless, the reality remains that the concept of pride as we know it now originated as a culturally constructed broad notion that applied to everyone regardless of their gender.²

Third Gender and its Social Position

Third gender can be described as a category of people who neither fall under feminine gender nor under masculine gender straight way. Many of whom have certain physical characteristics which are expressed in morphology, and many have some hormonal or genital characteristics. Again it also includes people of opposite sexual orientation than what they are. The different categories of third gender can be described as below:

- ❖ **Eunuch:** an historic English term for a man who has been castrated to perform special social functions.
- ❖ **Intersexual:** a term referring to people who are born with a mixture of both male and female hormonal, chromosomal and genital characteristics (historically referred as hermaphrodite)
- ❖ **Hijra:** A term originating in south India referring to a person usually born male or intersex, but who uses female pronouns as dresses in feminine /women's attire
- ❖ **Transsexuals:** a term referring to someone who changes their sex through medical (surgical and / hormonal) procedure
- ❖ **Transgendered:** a term referring to someone whose gender identity is different from the one traditionally assigned to their sex category (people are born into sex categories of male and female , many but not all then become gendered masculine or feminine and into men and women). Thus transgendered person both in the female sex category may identify with the gender category man. This may or may not involve surgical operations.
- ❖ **Drag:** a term that comes out of gay culture, involving someone temporarily performing a gender not usually associated with their sex (through dress gesture and so on). Ironic humor and extravagant campiness is often involved.
- ❖ **Transvestite/Cross dresser:** these are older terms with meaning and histories—and often the term is used in a derogatory fashion. In terms of practice though, crossdressers are often not gay, but straight men who simply enjoy dressing up as women.

Although persons who identify as third gender make up a sizeable fraction of the global population, they face a number of challenges in gaining acceptance from society. Just 3.8% of Americans call themselves members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender community, according to research from UCLA. Moreover, 1.8% of the population identifies as bisexual, 1.7% as homosexual or lesbian, and 0.35 of the adult population identifies as transgender, according to the institute's findings. In Great Britain, the LGBT population makes about 1.55 percent of the total. That number is close to 726,000. The ratio of trans people to the general population in India is said to be 1:400. The percentage of the world's LGBT population that resides in India is the largest. There are 2.5 million homosexual men in the country, and 7.5% of them are HIV positive. (14 March 2012, BBC News India).

While the third gender constitutes a sizeable fraction of the population, it is often overlooked and under-resourced. It has been noticed that LGBT persons are subject to harassment in all settings, including educational institutions and places of employment. Traditional genders, such as males and women, frown upon them. People with non-binary gender identities have had it tough for a while now. They are not allowed to adopt a kid or to engage in sexual activity with a partner of the same sex. Their union is forbidden. Employment and housing discrimination are also experienced by the third gender category. Although though there has been a lot of progress made in terms of their social status, since homosexuality has been legalised in many nations, it is still not given equal acceptance in all communities. Just around a dozen nations have legalised same-sex marriage, but all nations have passed legislation protecting LGBT people from discrimination in the workplace.

² Wray, Meaghan. "Dan Levy On Pansexuality: "It's Important To Tell Queer Stories" - FLARE". FLARE, 2017, <https://www.flare.com/celebrity/dan-levy-on-pansexuality/>. Accessed 10 Dec 2022.

Despite this, third-sex inequality is still seen in a variety of forms throughout various nations. A High Court judgement in Delhi acknowledged same sex, but a subsequent ruling by the Supreme Court against same sex demonstrates the complexities involved in determining the fate and status of the country with the greatest population of transgender individuals, India.

Third Gender in World Cinema

There has been a progression in how frequently third-gender characters appear in international films, mirroring the problem of third-gender people's acceptance in mainstream culture. From the earliest days of Hollywood's depiction of homosexuality, it was clear that the heterosexual art cinema community would not welcome gay films. Homosexuality has been included in several films, but it wasn't until the 1970s that it began to be depicted in a consistent manner. While William Dickson's Motion Picture from 1895 had a scene of two men dancing, the 1919 film "Different from the Others" is widely regarded as the first gay rights film. While LGBT themes have been shown in media from a variety of nations and at a variety of times, the regular production of gay films has been most noticeable during the 1970s and 1980s, when the gay rights movement was at its peak. One of the most notable methods of the homosexual rights movement is the use of public awareness as a political tool, as seen by the proliferation of films on the gay rights struggle and their widespread distribution throughout the world. Diverse groups hosted their own film festivals, such as the BFI London LGBT Film Festival, the San Francisco International Film Festival, the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, and the New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. These events quickly became a prominent spotlight for queer cinema and activism.³

Many films from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada, and the United States have given LGBT themes significant screen time. British films like *The Leather Boys* (1961), *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), and *Nighthawks* (1978) are examples of gay cinema from the nineteenth century; French films like *Un chant d'amour* (1950) and *Une robe d'e'te'* (1996) are examples from the same era; and American films like *Longtime Companion* (1989), *Damned If You Don't* (1987), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), and *Black Swan* (2010) are also worth noting.

In the past, LGBT characters were often stereotyped as flamboyant, gender-bending, or otherwise not taken seriously. In the 1920s, when fewer people went to the movies due to the Great Depression, the LGBT problem became a popular plot point. Thus, several filmmakers choose to tackle contentious topics in order to provide greater shock value. At first, LGBT films were automatically labelled as avant-garde. The 1990s, however, saw a rise in the popularity of such films since they were the subject of an increasing number of film festivals. In the new millennium, LGBT problems in movies become more prominent. It is worth noting that in 2007, Madrid hosted Europride, and two million people attended, compared to only 5,000 in 1995. In April of 2010, India launched its first ever mainstream LGBT Film Festival.

Several different kinds of gay-themed films have been made in recent years.

In 2012, IMDB listed 94 popular homosexual movies, while in 2013, the number drops to 76. This demonstrates the growing acceptance of third-gender identities throughout the world. Disney, recognising the need of addressing the homosexual community, is releasing the first full-length animated film on the subject. Furthermore, the increasing creation, distribution, and consumption of homosexual films reflects a worldwide trend towards normalising discussions of sexual orientation beyond binary categories.

Third Gender in Indian Films

While the cinematic exploration of the LGBT experience has been documented for over a century, it wasn't until the late 1980s that India began to provide its own narrative. It wasn't until the 2000s, when a slew of gay-themed films were released, that the country began to open up about its LGBT community. *Bomgay*, a 12-minute short film, is credited as the first of its kind to focus on gay sex. The filmmakers decided against releasing the film in India out of fear that it would be banned by the country's Censor Board. *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* is the first Malayalam film to depict a love story between high school students who run away together to get even with a teacher who bullied them. The film has received largely excellent reviews for its sensitive treatment of same-sex relationships. The majority of transgender-themed movies don't appear until 1996. *Fire* was made in this year, but it wasn't released in India until 1998, sparking widespread objections from various groups and opening up a discussion about homosexuality. It was Deepa Mehta's debut film as a director, and it's widely regarded as the first mainstream film in which Lesbianism was depicted accurately and fully. *Fire* (1996), *Tamanna* (1997), *Darmiyaan* (1997), *Daayraa* (1996), *Dostana* (1998), *Bombay Boys* (1998), etc. were some of the first homosexual or third-gender-identified films to be released in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively. It's fascinating to see how many more films have been made around third gender identities since 2009. This year has witnessed the release of two gay-themed films, one in Hindi (*My Son is Gay*) and another in Malayali (*Ritu*). The narrative of an orthodox mother and her Homosexual son who struggle to accept his sexual orientation is at the heart of the film *While My Son Is Gay*. There were quite a few gay-themed movies

³ "The Censorship Of Queer Desires- Films, Television And Social Media". Shethepeople TV, 2020, <https://www.shethepeople.tv/lgbtqia/india-top-queer-films-censorship-queer-desires/>. Accessed 11 Dec 2022.

released in 2010. Yet, 2009 and 2010 are significant for India's third gender because of the Delhi High Court's ruling allowing gay marriage in 2009 and the inaugural International LGBT Film Festival in India that same year. At least five films, including *I Am* (Hindi), *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Bengali), *Donno—Y -Na Jane Kyou* (Hindi), *Goa* (Tamil), and *Pankh* (Punjabi), were released in 2010 that dealt with the homosexual rights movement (Hindi). While, *I Am* is a collection of four short films, one of which has a homosexual subject at its centre. The first film to address homosexuality since its legalisation in India in 2009 is called *Arekti Premer Golpo*.⁴

Representation in the Video Media Format and how it Displays the Queer Community

There has been a rise in the visibility of Queer people in the video media, but this has come with serious problems. Less emphasis is placed on the characters as humans and more on their comedic qualities. Their sexuality is often reduced to lust rather than desire and actual sentiments in these texts. The *Dream Boat* Netflix film is emblematic of the assumption that the community is solely interested in meaningless sexual encounters and carnal pleasure on a vacation designed for them to do so. These depictions frequently misrepresent the gay community and contribute to the widespread unfavourable attitudes about them. Many cultural allusions fail to recognise the diversity of sexuality and instead seek to confine the characters behind rigid boxes. This fact alone exemplifies how little attention the LGBTQ population receives from the mainstream media. The critically acclaimed television series *GLEE* has also received heavy criticism for its poor portrayal of homosexual characters and plots. Having the homosexual protagonist come out as excessively girly. Representations of homosexual men that skew too feminine have long been problematic. Lesbians, on the other hand, have been portrayed in a more masculine light, lending credence to the idea that homosexuals try too hard to pass for straight. Those who fit into clearly defined categories, such as the homosexual and lesbian communities, receive disproportionate amounts of media coverage. Nonetheless, even bisexuality is still often misunderstood and seen as taboo.

The characters who are portrayed as gay (an umbrella term for the LGBTQ community) are under pressure to present a narrative that will influence public opinion of the rest of the spectrum, which leads us to assume that there is a discrepancy of representation within the gay community, where gay, bisexual, and lesbians are relatively more accepted and celebrated than a lot of the spectrum lies in the dark. Here's where badly crafted characters start making things worse. Several of the homosexual characters are caricatured to the point that their whole identities are defined by their sexual orientation. As another illustration, consider the popular TV sitcom "*FRIENDS*," in which a lesbian couple's identity is mostly defined by her ex-husband and the son she had with him, and her relationship with her wife is only brought up when a joke has to be made on it. The transsexual father of one of the leads was similarly portrayed very lightly in *Friends*, with the audience only learning this through comedic moments. They are not shown as multifaceted persons with issues outside of their gender identification. Considering the character just in terms of their gender. As a result, it's crucial that these characters be cast and written in more nuanced ways to make them feel like actual individuals and not just comedy components.⁵

Numerous studies have shown that video media is a major influence on adolescents and young adults. As a result, many people who are uncertain about their own gender look up to LGBT characters in media. The number of LGBTQ characters included in videos has increased at an unprecedented rate in 2018. Tween TV series like *Riverdale* and *Schitt's Creek* demonstrate the rise of more nuanced portrayals of the homosexual community. Both series depict homosexual people with subtlety, elevating them beyond their sexuality and placing them in realistic settings that normalise their presence in society. Dan Levy, the show's main character and a writer who identifies as homosexual, stressed multiple times the need of having other gay individuals pen the stories of LGBT characters. Because of this, the LGBT experience is more accurately portrayed, as opposed to the opposite, which often occurs when straight individuals try to empathise with the experiences of the gay community. The prevalence of problematic and stereotyped LGBT narratives can frequently be traced back to straight individuals authoring queer characters.⁶

Conclusion

The above research provides simply a glimpse into why it's so important to have fair and accurate portrayals of the gay community in moving pictures. Yet, there isn't a simple answer to the question of what representation means. Cross-group dynamics and other variables complicate efforts to achieve true diversity and inclusion.

⁴ Sharma, Prateek, and Vaishnavi Sundar. "Indian Cinema And Its Misguided Portrayal Of The LGBT Community". *The News Minute*, 2016, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/indiancinema-and-its-misguided-portrayal-lgbt-community-45508>. Accessed 06 Dec 2022.

⁵ Han, Chong-suk, and Kyung-Hee Choi. "Very Few People Say "No Whites": Gay Men Of Color And The Racial Politics Of Desire". *Sociological Spectrum*, vol 38, no. 3, 2018, pp. 145-161. Informa UK Limited, doi:10.1080/02732173.2018.1469444. Accessed 11 Dec 2022.

⁶ Desta, Yohana. "Most LGBTQ Movie Characters Are Marginalized, Invisible, Or Punchlines". *Vanity Fair*, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/05/glaad-2016-movies-study>. Accessed 02 Dec 2022.

Video as a media medium has the potential to mirror cultural norms and spark progressive change, but it is also profoundly influenced by its viewers. Interactive and entertaining content is the fundamental goal of video production. With so much riding on people tuning in, the media can't risk alienating them by presenting them with shocking cultural changes. As a result, representation must be implemented gradually to provide the public manageable chunks of information with the hope that it will improve the audience's overall impression of the LGBT community. Television programmes and material created on open upload platforms have been considerably more flexible to fostering a more inclusive atmosphere than more traditional formats like cinema. There has been some great progress towards inclusive media, with films like "call me by your name," "holding the man," and "Kapoor and sons" shining examples. The next stage for other types of media, such as television shows, is to diversify their material and develop content that includes gender identities that are more complicated and do not fit into strict frames, where there has been substantial progress. While the Netflix series *Politician* made some attempts to break into this space, a lot more work has to be done before it is fair and realistic. More characters that reflect intersectionality and diversity are needed in video media to demonstrate genuine advancement and inclusion and normalise the gay community.