

## Portrayal of Lesbian Narrative on Indian Screen

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### Abstract

*Over the past few decades, modern Indian cinema has seen significant transformations. Some Indian filmmakers have tried to stray from the typical romantic fare in an effort to explore forbidden and even contentious subjects like homosexuality. There seems to be an aggressive argument that Indian society as a whole has grown and is prepared to address such delicate and possibly troubling subjects in movies that overtly engage with female sexuality including lesbianism. In actuality, however, our society still views discussing female sexuality openly as taboo, let alone exposing the topic on the big screen. When it comes to mainstream cinema, there are surprisingly few films containing LGBTQIA+ narratives. It is critical that we begin to demand films with characters who belong to the community, live a regular life, and face typical societal or personal challenges rather than ones that are discriminating or oppressive. Cinema is an all-encompassing medium that touches so many people at once and challenges society's indoctrination; but, when members of the queer community are presented as manipulative, nasty, and frightening characters, it merely reinforces the existing hostility in the real world. Despite the fact that Indian cinema is almost a century old, homosexuality and the queer community have received very little favorable attention in films and television. As a result, it can be seen how homosexuality has been represented in mainstream Hindi cinema during the last few years. But, fortunately, there is a transition in characters and their characteristics, especially in their way of coming out of the closet, how homophobia and the stigma associated with it is tackled, the level of societal acceptance, and the human rights perspectives therein in present times and it is evolving at a higher pace but still there is room for acceptance on a larger scale.*

**Keywords:** Indian cinema, Queer, Homosexuality, Homophobia, Lesbianism.

### Portrayal of Lesbian Narrative on Indian Screen

Female sexuality has never been a serious subject for discussion in Indian movies. 'Fire' (1996) by Deepa Mehta, country's first publicly released lesbian-themed movie was regarded as a cultural milestone in the history of Indian cinema. The debate around the movie marks the rise in India of a political position founded on the notion of the lesbian as a distinct cultural presence. Hindu nationalists condemned the movie as proof of the 'corruption' of 'Indian' culture by the west, based on Mehta's diasporic status and the movie's finance by western sources, outraged at the perceived 'alternative' to heteronormative that women were presented. They said that lesbians "do not exist in India" and that the lesbian can only symbolize a "inauthentic" Indian, labelling lesbianism as "western" and just a "upper-class" phenomena in India. Along with these rhetorical ploys, there was also genuine physical violence, including the destruction of movie theatres showing the films and threats against the director and actors' lives. Additionally, Mehta was accused of vulgarity by the nationalists. In response to these attacks, a group of feminist activists coined the term "Indian and lesbian"

and launched an activist campaign based on the notion that as Indian women, those who were in homosexual relationships or desired them should have legal rights, along with the right to protection from violence should they decide to come out publicly with their relationships. Indian identity was asserted by the activists to refute the nationalists' allegation of cultural inauthenticity, a point that female writers' essays complicated. Attitude towards sexual identity changed as a result of the 1980s and 1990s consumer class boom and the 1990s economic liberalization. According to academics, the 'new woman' who appeared during the time marked a change from earlier decades in which she was renowned and praised for her sexual conservatism. She was symbolized by and celebrated for her sexual overtness. The whole concept of the "new woman" is redefined by the lesbian's sexuality. Even when hidden, her sexuality signals a break with heterosexuality, even though heterosexual marriages and motherhood still take place. When we look at the terminology used in the nationalist attacks, it is obvious what is at stake when women's sexuality is restricted to heterosexuality. Lesbianism was seen as a particularly interesting threat by the Mahila Aghadi, the women's section of the right-wing nationalist Shiv Sena, which launched the initial attack on the movie. In a petition to have the movie banned, they claimed that if "women's physical wants be fulfilled by lesbian actions, the institution of marriage will collapse" and "reproduction of human beings will stop". The fundamental worry and concern is that lesbian relationships and want would undermine patriarchal authority and work toward broader sexual equality in the country, endangering both the supremacy of male desire and women's access to the paid public arena. Brinda Bose mentions that Fire, in "the raising of discomfort levels about [the] so-called regular, happy home and family lives...emerges as some sort of a site of feminist resistance"(Bose, Brinda. "The Desiring Subject: Female Pleasures and Feminist Resistance in Deepa Mehta's Fire". Indian Journal of Gender Studies 7 (2000): 249-262.)The movie portrays heterosexual partnerships as meaningless and devoid of the nurturing touch necessary to grow any relationship.Two of the family's daughter-in-laws, Radha and Sita, grow close and intimately involved. Due to the complete rejection of the admiring masculine gaze from the males in their lives, both women seek solace in each other's arms. The decision Radha and Sita make at the end to choose each other over their respective husbands makes them the "queer" characters in the movie.

Girlfriend (2004) by Karan Razdan, has a central theme dealing with lesbianism. This film provides the clearest contrast between a female director's and a male director's perspective on the subject. It is one of the first Hindi cinema to explicitly use the word "lesbian" in its dialogue. At the conclusion of the film, Tanya's character declares, "Yes, I am a lesbian!" Girlfriend features numerous stereotyped representations of what it means to be a lesbian right from the start. Tanya is a strong-willed woman who harbors affections for Sapna. Tanya cuts her hair and dons a haircut that resembles a man later in the film.Tanya is the stereotypical lesbian who continuously reinforces unfavorable notions about homosexuality in women. The film's intended audience and the narrative it seeks to convey about lesbianism are both evident in the seduction sequences in Girlfriend. In order to achieve sensational goals, Razdan has exploited the homosexuality of women. With the promise of skin-shows throughout the movie, female homosexuality is utilized as an erotic method to draw raunchy audiences, and at best, the justification for lesbian sex is offered as being driven by experimentation. Tanya goes on to declare that she despises men and that she is a male trapped in a female's body after declaring that she is a lesbian. Here, the notion of a lesbian is grossly misapplied, to the point where lesbian sexuality is construed similarly to that of a heterosexual guy, and is even mistaken for transgenderism. The idea of the lesbian as an "invert" dates back to the beliefs of the nineteenth century that may be found in books like

Paul's Case by Willa Cather. Girlfriend can be compared to books like these to demonstrate how radically retrograde the movie actually is. The urban settings in the movie are crucial in reducing lesbianism to a flippant mentality brought on by a westernized, urban, and contemporary milieu. Female homosexuality in Girlfriend is consistently presented to the viewer as a perplexed mental state brought on by external influences of a westernized way of life. The audience is consequently given the impression that lesbianism in Indian society is a result "of 'Western liberalization', rather than associating [it] with older pre-patriarchal cosmological figures or with the later autonomous Kali spectrum of goddesses" (Thadani, 93). This shows that different sexualities are present in Indian society naturally but are not even acknowledged. Lesbianism being portrayed as a "Western" phenomena suggests a fixed perception of culture and history that is closed to changes that have occurred over time. The metropolitan cities that serve as the backdrop for these movies also ascribe a class-based queer sexuality, with middle-class and upper-class women being portrayed as lesbians. This advances the idea that alternative sexualities generally constitute a sort of aristocratic fashion statement, where lesbianism is connected to exhibit of western luxury.

Lesbianism in a rural area outside of a cosmopolitan city is not supported by such a class-based conception, a point that was made in Ligy J. Pullappally's 2004 Malayalam film Sancharram or The Journey. In the movie, two young girls Kiran, a Hindu, and Delilah, a Christian—become friends when they are very young. As they get older, they realize they have been in a lesbian relationship for their entire lives. In an interview, the director said that a young Kerala lesbian woman's suicide served as the inspiration for her film. Additionally, Pullappally made it clear that she intended for her movie to serve as a constructive contrast to the movie Girlfriend, which pathologizes female homosexuality. The movie suggests that lesbian love could exist in small towns and in rural regions with little metropolitan impact. Pullappally demonstrates that, as opposed to a scandal with historical origins, the controversy surrounding Kiran and Delilah's relationship is primarily based on how society and how family members perceive them. A movie like Sancharram demonstrates that queer sexualities and desire do not have the same ancestry and history as the West. A variety of sexual orientations have existed and continue to exist in India without any clear-cut definitions, such as lesbian or homosexual, as evidenced by the hijra community. Even after being tailored to the social environment of India, the movie has been successful in presenting a positive paradigm for discussing lesbianism. It makes an effort to resolve the conflicts between Indian society's homophobia, western conceptions of homosexuality, and a more positive representation of lesbians in India.

The 2019 film Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga included Regina Cassandra and prominent actress Sonam Kapoor in the key roles. It tells the tale of a lesbian who comes out to her traditionally conservative Punjabi family. Though the film garnered negative reviews about the screenplay but to watch two women in a romantic relationship in mainstream Hindi cinema was a step ahead in the right directive. The film showcases lesbianism representation despite its clichés and unwillingness to represent same-sex desire in all of its unadulterated complexity. The movie did, in fact, address a number of pertinent themes, such as homophobia still being regarded as a medical disorder, bullying in schools, the complete lack of conversation about sexuality in upper caste and class households, and the violence women endure as a result of their decisions. Each of these topics was mentioned, but not in depth. The inclusion of a play within the film furthered this association by obfuscating the boundary between the play's audiences and the audience viewing the film. Both the play and the movie worked toward the same objective of increasing awareness. The film portrays this love in an

almost apologetic manner, but again, it is unquestionably positive that a mainstream Indian cinema is openly discussing same-sex relationships.

Laila Kapoor, a teenage girl with cerebral palsy, falls in love with Khanum, a blind activist of Pakistani-Bangladeshi origin, in Shonali Bose's 2014 film *Margarita with A Straw*. The film exposed important issues regarding women's sexuality and disabilities in India. It also revealed the extent to which Hindi cinema has misrepresented identities and exalted femininity by enhancing the stigma attached to women's disabilities in India. The plot demonstrated how we frequently ignore the sexuality of people with disabilities, classifying them as asexual or highly sexual individuals who do not need privacy or physical integrity, among the numerous films that have raised the stigma applicable to disability and damaging social situations. In his research on Crip theory, McRuer (2012) discusses on how the unwillingness to recognize the disabled as sexual beings cause them to remain disillusioned about their sexual identity. Cinematic representation is heavily reliant on how social power systems function and, in turn, establish social standards. As the nation that gave birth to *Kamasutra*, wherein sexuality was overtly depicted as a manner of life, there has been a noticeable shift in the taboo around talking about sexuality. According to Foucault (1976), cultural representations have through time made issues related to sex and sexual orientation repressed and humiliating, frequently silencing its consciousness. The movie made an effort to revisit the numerous shades of systemic oppression that are pervasive in society. It explored how the polarities of conventional and unconventional, heterosexual and homosexual are constructed through the conceptions of ideal and desirable through its repeated attempts to normalize the lives of disabled people in India.

The emergence of OTT culture has given people a platform to examine a wide range of topics. The digital arena has been brave in telling stories of lesbian love. Ajeeb Daastaans (2021), a collection of short films that centered on the love stories of Indian women, a subject rarely covered in cinema included 'GeeliPucchi'. Four short films cover a variety of subjects, including a loveless marriage, the hierarchy, the status of women in society, and romantic love between two women. It is a stirring film, directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, that follows the romance of two women from different social strata in a factory that employs mostly males. The only female employee in the factory up till Priya Sharma (Aditi Rao Hydari) is recruited as a data operator is Bharti Mandal (Konkona Sen Sharma). Bharti is upset with Priya since she got the job Bharti wanted but was turned down because she is a Dalit. The two ladies eventually grow to know one another in the factory, but Bharti's pride compels her to lie to Priya about her caste. Bharti finds herself split between emotions of annoyance, fury, helplessness, and vulnerability as they get closer and a romance quickly begins. Even though Bharti is aware that Priya will find it tough to accept, she still decides to reveal about her identity. The two women in this tale are bonded by their homosexuality but separated by their social position. *Bombay Begums*, *The Married Woman*, *Four More Shots Please* are few other series on these platforms which created a stir due to the portrayal of lesbian characters and lesbian romance part of their narrative.

These movies deserve recognition not only because they bring attention to a taboo topic in the society, but also they broke the taboo of lesbianism outside the realm of "art cinema," where there were only films about male homosexuality but none about lesbianism. Female same-sex desire was slowly beginning to appear on the big screen after being outright suppressed.

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