



Indian Cinema's Queer Gaze: Portrayal of LGBTQIA+ Narrative on Screen

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Abstract

Cinema has a profound impact on the people of India. As a result, the substance, narrative, and portrayal of characters in movies are of the utmost significance. As Friedrich Nietzsche once said, "Art is the proper task of life," and the film is an expression that contains innumerable arts. Despite the fact that Indian cinema is almost a century old, homosexuality and the queer community have gotten little favorable attention in films and television. Cinema is an all-encompassing medium that reaches so many people at once and challenges society's conditioning; yet, if members of the queer community are presented as manipulative, nasty, and frightening characters, it only reinforces the existing hostility in the real world. The representation of the sexual minority population in Indian cinema has come under scrutiny over the years. There has been a consistent exhibition of homosexual and trans characters in Indian cinema, some for humorous effect, while others have stayed true to reality and attempted to approach the subject in a sympathetic and realistic way. When it comes to mainstream cinema, there are surprisingly few films containing LGBTQIA+ narratives. In contrast, alternative cinema, which is mostly limited to film festivals and a select set of viewers, shows sexual minorities in a more realistic manner and is more successful in raising, expressing, and providing possible solutions to their problems than mainstream cinema. India and Indian cinema have come a long way since decriminalizing homosexuality, however, there is a great need for improved representation in cinema, which can give a much-needed platform for dialogue between people who are still in the closet. This research paper aims to analyze the representation of the queer community in Indian cinema over the years.

Keywords- Indian Cinema, Queer, Sexual Minorities, Homophobia, LGBTQIA+, Television, Homosexuality, Mainstream, Heteronormative, Representation.

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Introduction: Mapping the Context

Cinema has been a component of popular culture for a long time. It has amazed, entertained, and inspired people to go beyond their expectations and imaginations on a wide range of topics. Films have a subtle influence on society's way of thinking and also have been considered as a potent tool for catalyzing social change. Because Indian films must appeal to a wide range of viewers, they are said to have multi-layered genres. The themes have gone through a steady paradigm shift. At the beginning of cinema, there were different epics, myths and legends, and retellings of secondary stories. Later, themes of independence movements and Gandhian ideology were reflected in the films. Lately, real-life occurrences were incorporated, and performers in the films took up the struggle for social justice. Cinema, like other kinds of art, is

both a part of social reality and a means for portraying it. They began to showcase a major transformation in which they affected politics and other political dramas through vast promotion. Similarly, the subjects for the films are largely drawn from society, and vice versa at times, demonstrating a vicious cycle.

The term queer is an umbrella term that encompasses a wide variety of sexual identities that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual, non-heterosexual, and non-cisgender. Cinema has unquestionably made significant contributions to India's Queer Movement. The Indian Queer movement, like many other new social movements, is centered on the idea of bringing about a societal transformation; a change in our perception of sexuality from a peripheral stage rather than the traditional one. It aims to tear down the groomed walls of dominant ideas that define the sexual universe of the average adult. But, unfortunately, in India, homosexuality is still considered blasphemous. The LGBT community in India suffers numerous challenges on a daily basis, ranging from social rejection to discrimination. Non-queering of gender is undoubtedly evident in Indian culture and mythology amidst the chaotic homophobic societal rants. The struggle is to find a place in society where gender nonconformity is not stigmatized. As society establishes notions about gender and identity through the medium of cinema, erroneous gender stereotypes in films result in the distortion of gender roles. Because of their perceived atypical sexual and gender identities, they have been assigned alternative gender roles as a result of this 'exclusion.' Foucault's 'The Order of Discourse (1981)' describes the politics of 'exclusion' extremely effectively. Cinema is viewed as a reflection of society, but gender and sexuality continue to be central to how we think about our identities. When analyzing the function of film in the construction and negotiation of gender and sexual identities, the writings of social theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler on identity provide us more to work with. While diverse concerns are forming the foundation of Indian filmmaking, the LGBT community has not occupied much room in Indian Cinema, particularly in commercial films. Representation of queer characters has been either neutralized, overstated, or frequently appeared in commercial Hindi films as part of a film to introduce comedic elements.

Quest for Acceptance: Misguided and Erroneous Representation of the Queer

The representation of the queer community in Indian cinema has come under scrutiny over the years. When members of the LGBTQIA+ community are cast in stereotypical and negative characters in films, it merely replicates the prejudice that exists in the real world. The homophobia we observe today in society manifested in beatings and murders of gay people in the West, public executions in the Middle East, violence against gay people, and calls to persecute them in many countries, including India, is a product of modernity, not the ancient or primitive past. What was once a tiny strain of homophobia in Indian traditions became the mainstream ideology during colonial power. The British imposed a statute criminalizing homosexuality in India, as they did in most of the countries they colonized. Stereotyping queer characters in Indian movies has done little to alleviate uncertainty, anxiety, or general hostility toward the community. Indian filmmaking has seen a steady display of LGBT+ characters, some for comedic effect and others who have remained true to reality and made an effort to portray the subject in a sensitive and realistic manner, but to a large part, these efforts were futile. Films were unable to question old myths and hence failed to break the 'taboo'. These characters were typically depicted as companions to heroines or heroes during the so-called 'Golden Era' of Hindi cinema, which lasted from the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s. Some of the actors would purposefully cross-dress to elicit chuckles. "Mere Angane Mein," a song from the 1981 movie *Lawaaris* in which Amitabh Bachchan was dressed as a woman to be mistaken for a eunuch; Rishi Kapoor cross-dressed as a woman in the 1975 movie *Rafoo Chakkar* are few instances amongst many. Commercial cinema has a long history of including humorous moments or songs starring cross-dressing male actors.

As a society, we are conditioned to regard films about the LGBT community as a picture of their lives as they are; oppressed, secluded, pariah lives. Though films that portray reality are vital in terms of raising awareness, it is also critical that we begin to crave films with characters who belong to the community, live a regular life, and face normal societal or personal challenges rather than discriminatory/oppressive ones. Realistic films depicting the LGBTQ+ community will undoubtedly have a significant positive impact on people's views in a country like India, where cinema has the capacity to mold the perception of the majority of the population. But unfortunately, in most of the movies, they suffer the brunt of crude jokes and are frequently depicted as objects of mockery. Almost every Hindi film portrays the trans person as either a terrifying villain or as a comedic character with foul transphobic humor directed at them, on the other end of the spectrum, the trans person is viewed as being outside the norms of 'normal,' such as a sexual predator, a child molester, or someone trying to prey on the (cis) male or female protagonist.

For the first time in Hindi cinema history, a trans character 'Maharani,' a eunuch was seen as the leading antagonist in the film *Sadak*. The actor won a Filmfare award for his portrayal, but the role did little to enhance the image of eunuchs in society. With so much screentime for the trans character, there was a persistent reiteration of the negative beliefs associated with the trans community, eventually forming a stereotype in Indian mainstream culture. In their own way, Indian films have attempted to reconcile with the homosexual theme but sadly, the characterizations have remained a farce of a serious subject matter even after all these years. Except for a few examples, the scenario hasn't changed significantly even today, especially in the mainstream space. The majority of transgender characters are mistreated. They are frequently shown as sexually preying on the male protagonist (almost always without their consent) or as exaggerated 'effeminate' caricatures designed to provoke chuckles. Queer images were rarely prominent in commercial enterprises, but when they were, it was in the guise of comic relief, which could be found in a huge number of Hindi films. Gay depictions in these films have taken various forms. The first is in the form of hijra, the second is in the form of humor, the third is in the shape of mental illness, and the final is in the manner it depicts the intricacies of queer people's life. For some time now, there has been outrage over the lack of representation for the LGBTQ+ population in mainstream cinema. There have been misrepresented portrayals in *Dostana* (2008), *Mastizaade* (2016), *Bol Bachchan* (2012), *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), etc which did nothing but fuel hatred and mock homosexual rights. 'Indian cinema must be guilty of depicting LGBT characters in derogatory ways. Such films may be entertaining, but whether they provide a fair picture of the LGBT community on the big screen remains an open subject. We've all witnessed the shocked realization of two male characters being discovered in a "compromised" position by a possible parental authority. We've also seen the silliness of portraying a gay character whose obvious life aim is to hit on random strangers. Finally, there's the tried-and-true cross-dressing joke. If you come up with a very unfunny catchphrase, have a man speak it in a squeaky voice while dressed in women's attire and wait for the laughter. The same reason why people in India don't say "He is gay," but rather "He is a gay," explains why such nonsensical depictions seem to work in Indian movies. Dissociation from homosexual individuals received cultural approval a long time ago. It migrated to younger attitudes, with people whenever they encountered someone who was gender-suspicious. While there is still much ambiguity about what constitutes gender and what constitutes sexuality, and how they are not interchangeable, filmmakers bear weight in being sensitive, empathic, and rational while striving to make films on the subject. And, as complicated as it may appear, the core concepts of treating others with respect and equality are self-evident and require no special expertise.

Making the Shift: Change in Queer Narrative

Indian cinema and the audience have evolved tremendously since the constitution of India has decriminalized homosexuality in 2018 in portraying LGBTQ+ love tales as 'mainstream couples'

in its cinema. The debate over queer love narratives in Indian cinema has been a long one, full of twists and turns and ups and downs. Homophobia persists in India, with heterosexuals harboring prejudices against homosexuals. But in recent years, there has been a shift in the attitude towards homosexuality. In the Indian media and movies, there has been an upsurge in representations and discussions of the queer community. There has been a transition and transformation in recent Indian films, with LGBTQ+ themes and depictions becoming slightly more visible and fluid. The emergence of queer politics in India is one of the main reasons for such visible gay depictions in the current cinema narrative. However, it has to be seen whether true queer possibilities are emerging here, or whether they are simply being absorbed into the mainstream heteronormative workings of Indian cinema. As the times change, sexual minorities are gradually finding a place in mainstream or commercial movies. Positive representation of lesbians, homosexuals, bisexuals, transgenders, hijras and those who identified as 'queer' in films has been a salve for the community. Indian society is evolving, and so is the people's thinking. Few directors have attempted to make films on queer people and their issues, but there are still many uncharted territories. The community is looking forward to seeing a more holistic depiction in films. It is critical to recognize and highlight the current difficulties that our society is facing. Many people in India are terrified of freely discussing their gender identity and sexual orientation for fear of being discriminated against by mainstream society. Far more representation in films is needed to provide a much-needed space for discourse between individuals who are still in the closet. Only until the queer characters in the films are treated equitably can the community gain mainstream acceptance.

Mainstream filmmakers are increasingly accepting of non-heterosexuals in supporting parts, frequently as the 'gay best friend' character, intelligent and sympathetic, who may assist guide the main character to happiness. There have been a handful of 'arthouse' films containing queer characters or themes, but it is safe to assume that their impact on the general public consciousness will be limited. Few Indian Queer Film Festivals, such as Kashish: Mumbai International Queer Film Festival; Nigah Queer Fest, Delhi; Bangalore Queer Film Festival; Dialogues: Annual Kolkata Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Film and Video Festival; and Lesbian and Gay Film Festival at Punjab University, Chandigarh, are critical in bringing queer cinema to both queer and mainstream audiences. While Indian cinema can be credited with making the LGBT community visible on the big screen, it is the movie screened at festivals that highlights the plight of the community as real, credible human beings. It is here that stories are conveyed with compassion, with the intention of touching people's hearts rather than taking them on a voyeuristic tour.

Previously, homosexual people were depicted in films as effeminate characters who provided no significance to the storyline and were just included to add insensitive humor to the plot. However, the narrative has shifted, and we now see queer characters who are crucial to the plot of the film or series. From *Fire* in 1996 to Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui in 2021 or *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* in 2020, the queer projection of characters in Indian cinema has witnessed a tremendous transformation, with characters used as a tool for comic relief and mockery to now, where they can come out of the closet and display their genuine selves. Previously, even the release of such films was fraught with peril. For example, with the release of *Fire*, there was a lot of political unrest, but soon after its release, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* generated millions at the box office, demonstrating how today's age is more welcoming. While there have been inappropriate portrayals of the queer, there have also been films that dealt with the issue with the highest honesty, empathy, and maturity. For instance, *Aligarh* (2015) delves into numerous facets and poses topics such as what it means to be gay in India and the ill-treatment meted out to the LGBTQ population in the name of morality and the purity of society. The film, based on the true account of Prof. Ramchandra Siras (Aligarh Muslim University), who died in 2010 after a

video of his sexual relationship with another man went viral, demonstrated how pre-existing preconceptions can have such a negative impact on people's lives that they end up dying.

Not many of the filmmakers and audiences alike are aware that the queer community stands for LGBTTTQQIIA+, Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, intergender, and asexual. An in-depth understanding of all of these terms, as well as the '+' at the end of the acronym, gives an idea of how incomprehensible sexuality truly is. While we have only scratched the surface of the first two to three letters, and that with homophobia and transphobia, we still have a long way to go before we can sketch the deeper, unexplored expressions. Homosexuality is an issue that is rarely discussed openly, and many people avoid it. It has created numerous controversies. We often blame the movie industry for the country's societal woes, owing to its impact on the lives of individuals who live in a country that consumes cinema with all heart. What is often missed is that our entertainment industry is helping to bring about fundamental changes in society by demonstrating that homosexuals aren't any different from regular people and that they simply have different sexual preferences, which is helping to make society a little less homophobic.

Conclusion: Since Article 377 Annulment

The groundbreaking judgment by the Delhi High Court on 2 July 2009 to decriminalize homosexuality as a consequence of a petition filed in 2001 by an NGO called NAZ Foundation focusing on HIV/AIDS and gay rights brought joy to the LGBT community. On 6 September 2018, after years of judicial proceedings and grassroots activism homosexuality was decriminalized by the Supreme Court of India. The judgment was a pathbreaking step towards accepting the queer community's social and constitutional rights. It has also impacted cinema and cinephiles at a broader level. Considering the popularity of Hindi cinema, the industry is helping to mainstream queer culture in India. With films like *Aligarh* (2015) and *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), India has witnessed cinematic greatness, but it has also seen crass generalization and biases when depicting a queer character. In several modern films, homosexuality is addressed as no longer being taboo. In addition, many regional languages film industries have begun to incorporate LGBTQIA+ themes. Unlike in the past, the word "gay" is not stated openly in their promotional features while advertising such a picture, which is to be viewed as a paradigm change. When the current research's recommendations for filmmakers are taken into account, the filmmakers may also need to lend a greater voice to the queer depiction in the movie. Filmmakers should be considered in addressing the emotional complexities of the community while portraying these characters. Cinema apart from being entertaining should be aimed at bringing a positive and progressive development in society.

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