



Queer on Reel: An Analytical Study on Representation and Identity Formation of Queer Community in Indian Cinema

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Abstract: Bollywood, the Indian film industry, is known for portraying cultural values and societal conventions, but there are concerns about the portrayal of marginalised communities, particularly the non-binary community. Queer individuals often face prejudice and social isolation, leading to negative consequences such as isolation, difficulty finding work, and increased mental illness. Bollywood films' stereotyped portrayals of the third gender reinforce prejudice and discrimination against the group. From 2000 to 2023, a qualitative study of Bollywood films revealed a tendency to reduce queer identities to their sexuality or gender presentation, often portraying them as villains or unfavourable figures. However, in 2020's film *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan*, a transgender actor played a caring spouse, indicating a slight shift in the portrayal of queer characters, promoting the fight against negative identity formation in society. However, there is still room for improvement.

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Introduction

Identity formation is a complex and multifaceted process in the rich tapestry of human existence, profoundly influenced by societal norms, cultural representations, and personal experiences. The intricate interaction of their sexual and gender identities with the societies in which they live often creates unique challenges for members of the queer community on their journey to self-discovery and self-acceptance. Warner (2011) posited that 'heteronormativity' defines the concept of queerness. This term encompasses the notions, narratives, and discourses that

promote the idea of heterosexuality as the standard, preferred, or socially accepted form of sexual orientation. Indian cinema, one of the world's largest and most influential film industries, has played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural narratives and perceptions surrounding gender and sexuality in the Indian subcontinent, especially heterosexually. Dasgupta (2017) mentioned that over the decades, it has both reflected and perpetuated societal attitudes towards queer individuals. From the era of silent films to the present day in Bollywood and regional cinema, the representation of queer people and themes has developed, frequently reflecting the shifting social environment. Bakshi and Sen (2012) raise issues over the depiction of marginalised communities in Bollywood films, frequently neglecting the representation of the non-binary community. In the early 2000s, Bollywood films frequently simplified queer identities by focusing solely on their sexual orientation or gender expression, portraying them either as sources of humour or objects of sexual desire. In relation to individuals on the queer spectrum, this movie played a significant role in shaping the societal perception of the community. Due to a lack of information and communication, they gradually became a major source of information for the general public about the community. This absence of information is usually filled with stigmatisation and prejudice towards people on the queer spectrum or identified as queer (Kaur, 2017).

Erving Goffman's seminal work on stigma and identity, as outlined in his 1963 book "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity," offers a theoretical framework to understand how individuals with non-normative identities navigate a world that often stigmatises and marginalises them. Goffman's dramaturgical perspective views society as a stage where individuals perform various roles while striving to manage and protect their social identities. According to Goffman (1974), the theory of social stigma says that a stigma is a trait, behaviour, or image that is socially discrediting in a certain way: it makes people think of a person as belonging to an unwanted, rejected stereotype instead of a normal, accepted stereotype. Stigmatised individuals often face various negative outcomes, such as social isolation, job difficulties, and heightened rates of mental illness.

For a very long time, Indian films were also sources of propaganda, changing society's thought processes by breaking stigma and stereotypes, or building them. In the above context, this research paper explores the multifaceted relationship between Indian cinema and the queer community's identity formation while applying Goffman's theories of stigma to dissect the experiences of these individuals as portrayed on screen. By delving into the rich cinematic history of India, we aim to uncover how films have both perpetuated stereotypes and acted as catalysts

for change, shedding light on the dynamic intersection of art, culture, and social transformation related to the queer community. This paper will examine key cinematic milestones, iconic characters, and pivotal moments in Indian cinema between 2000 and 2023 that have contributed to the queer community's evolving sense of self, all while considering the role of stigma as a driving force in shaping their experiences. Through this exploration, we hope to shed light on the power of cinema as a tool for both oppression and liberation, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and accepting society.

Queer in Indian Cinema

Queer theory's criticism of fixed sexes, genders, and sexualities comes from how lesbian and gay scholars reinterpreted the post-structuralist idea of identity as a complex arrangement of many changing positions. Not everyone views the term "queer" as an appropriate substitute or abbreviation for the categories of 'lesbian and gay'. Numerous theorists express their acceptance of queerness as an additional discursive horizon, representing an alternative approach to conceptualising sexuality (de Lauretis, 1991).

The term "queer" not only refers to an individual's gender identity and sexual preferences, but also forms a collective identity among individuals who have faced marginalisation because of their sexual orientation (Rhoads, 1994, 1997; Jogose, 1996). This challenges the established social expectation of same-sex relationships (Hocquenghem, 1978).

Queer theory originated as a branch of critical theory in the second half of the 20th century. Its main aim is to analyse and question existing ideas about sexuality, gender, and identity. Butler (1990) argues that this perspective provides a comprehensive and distinctive approach to the subject matter, focusing on the examination of conventional categorizations and the investigation of fluid and non-binary notions. The fundamental tenet of queer theory, as expounded by Sedgwick (1990), entails the dismantling of inflexible categorizations of sexuality. Queer theory has stimulated a significant rise in the creation of queer films that depict people and storylines that diverge from the conventional heterosexual and cisgender norms in the film industry. These films often emphasise the complex and diverse character of queer experiences, giving a platform for previously underrepresented voices and viewpoints (Dilley, 1999).

Goffman's (1971) perceptive investigations into interpersonal communication unveil the various manifestations of power inside social interactions. These factors

encompass the regulation of social environments for theatrical presentations, the dynamics of respect and exclusion, and the administration and manipulation of established norms that influence interpersonal communication. Goffman's (1963) dramaturgical approach centres on the interpersonal execution of social action and highlights the capacity of individuals to successfully engage in social encounters, thus establishing a semblance of moral value (Schwalbe & Shay, 2014). A dramaturgical perspective might attribute the challenges an actor faces in attaining a position of moral value during interactions to the cost of having a lower status. It can be challenging for individuals positioned at the lower strata of social hierarchies to establish a sense of perceived autonomy and moral value (Anderson and Snow, 2001). For a very long time, cinema has restricted queer characters to side roles or supporting individuals, which have a lower status than the main characters. Limiting those characters to negative roles and comic relief restricted their representation in social encounters. The negative and comic characters often devalue queer representation on moral grounds and contribute to stigma.

According to Bakshi and Sen (2012), despite socio-political advancements, the Bollywood film industry has a long history of mocking or demonizing homosexuals. This situation raises concerns about the portrayal of queer people and the impact of cinema on general sentiment. Various films employ diverse strategies when it comes to portraying queer representation. Karla and Bhugra (2015) asserted that literature and Hindi films, which hold substantial influence not only within India but also within the Indian diaspora, have depicted hijra individuals in both favourable and undesirable ways. These portrayals frequently depict hijras as either comedic characters or nurturing mother figures. According to Bandyopadhyay (2007), certain films endeavour to "naturalise" homoerotic impulses, but others persist in depicting gay characters as anomalies, afflicted, conniving, or repulsive. Dasgupta (2018) discussed that the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in India has a historical track record of refusing certification to films that depict narratives centered on queer themes. However, in the last five years, only a handful of films that delve into queer themes have secured official certification and reached out to adult audiences. In another article exploring the movie *Dostana* Dasgupta (2015) delves into the portrayal of gay individuals in a Bollywood film, wherein the narrative employs the literary devices of "mistaken identity" and "misreading" to facilitate a discourse about queerness. This study examines the notions of "dosti" (friendship) and "yaarana" (friendship), as well as the portrayal of the homo-social triangle in Hindi cinema. The article examines the foundational aesthetic principles of mainstream Indian cinema and their impact on the global dialogue surrounding queer cinema.

However, Chatterjee (2021) examines the portrayal of queerness and gendered nationalism in a South Asian popular culture film, revealing a limited number of changes. The analysis underscores the film's emphasis on respectability politics, the significance of queerness in cultural cognition, and the inherent conflict between acculturation and women's gender norms. The film's cinematic representation of acceptance emphasises the link between queerness and the concept of nationhood. According to Harikumar (2019), the term "new cinema" refers to a variety of independent films that explore gay themes and offer a more inclusive representation of queer identity and lived experiences. This project aims to delineate various manifestations of non-conventional sexual orientations that exhibit fluidity and subversion of established norms within the realm of sexuality, primarily through visual mediums. Arora and Sylvia (2023) conducted an analysis of two Bollywood films, exploring their role in the broader context of representation. These films employ intricate strategies to normalise same-sex love and garner acceptance from mainstream viewers. The films achieve this by integrating queer identity and expressions of same-sex love in ways that mitigate any potential harm to the prevailing heteronormative societal norms.

Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research approach due to its appropriateness in investigating intricate social phenomena, such as the process of identity formation. In order to examine the portrayal of the LGBTQAI+/Queer community in Indian cinema and its influence on the development of individual identities, the researcher employed a content analysis methodology. The previously mentioned approach facilitated a systematic examination of the selected Indian films released between 2000 and 2023. We selected the films based on two distinct criteria: their degree of popularity and the presence of characters representing the third gender. We predicated the

BOX 1

1. Kal Ho Naa Ho (2003)
2. My Brother... Nikhil (2005)
3. Memories in March (2010)
4. Bol Bachan (2012)
5. Margarita with a Straw (2014)
6. Girlfriend (2014)
7. Aligarh (2015)
8. Hello Again (2015)
9. Nagar Kirtan (2017)
10. Kapoor and Sons (2017)
11. Ek Ladkiko Dekha toh AisaLaga (2019)
12. Super Delux (2019)
13. Housefull 4 (2019)
14. Laxmiii (2020)
15. Sadak 2 (2020)
16. Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan (2020)
17. GeeliPuchhi (2021)
18. Badhaai Do (2022)
19. Katra: Dangerous (2023)
20. Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (2023)

evaluation of popularity on various elements, such as a film's financial success, the extent of critical acclaim it received, and the overall public reaction.

A set of 20 films (**Box 1**) was selected to conduct the analysis. We deemed the selected sample size sufficient for comprehensively understanding the representation of queer identities in Indian cinema throughout the specified time frame. The researcher compiled a carefully selected assortment of films, comprising a mixture of widely popular Bollywood movies and Indian films, primarily in Hindi with a limited representation of regional languages. The procedure involved the observation and comprehensive analysis of films with the goal of identifying prevailing themes, character portrayals, narrative frameworks, and a broader representation of the queer community. We meticulously documented all notes and observations during the viewing process. Content analysis was the primary analytical method employed in this study. We have employed content analysis as a methodological approach to scrutinise depictions within various media platforms and genres, including popular music videos, news broadcasts, dramatic productions, computer games, and more. (Winship, 1981)

As the present study entailed the examination of publicly accessible movies, there was no requirement to seek informed consent from subjects. Nevertheless, it is important to realise that the representation of queer people in films is a topic that requires sensitivity and caution. The researcher made a conscious effort to handle this subject matter with respect and sensitivity. The study acknowledged the presence of cultural heterogeneity in Indian society, as well as the multifaceted nature of the queer population. We made a significant effort to avoid generalizations and acknowledge the complex nature of identity within this specific framework. To ensure anonymity, we gathered and revealed no personal data pertaining to individuals associated with the film production or members of the queer community. The analysis focused solely on the characters in the films rather than the individuals who portrayed them.

Major Findings

The findings of the content analysis indicate that Indian cinema tends to depict queer individuals in stereotypical and one-dimensional ways. The majority of these narratives feature either a comedic sidekick or a character with undesirable attributes. In the film *BolBachchan* (2012), the recognition of the character Abhimanyu as an alter ego of Abbas Ali extended beyond superficial attributes such as floral shorts, bent wrists, and effeminate hip sways. It perpetuated the notion that gay men are

portrayed as caricatures, deviating from the normative representation of human beings. The character heavily relied on tropes commonly associated with gay or transgender people who exhibit effeminate traits. The utilisation of ostentatious gestures, embellished language, and the representation of *Abhimanyu* all contribute to the perpetuation of prejudices around individuals who identify as queer. These representations have the capacity to continue harmful societal biases. In the film, the character 'Abhimanyu' serves as the main source of comic relief, as he is often the subject of jokes and is subjected to derision by other characters. The Indian film industry, generally referred to as Bollywood, has employed the lesbian stereotype as a strategy to generate audience curiosity, but has not made any progress in eliminating blatant preconceptions. The film *'Girlfriend'* (2014) demonstrates the excessive sexualization and depiction of lesbian women as adversarial characters with a propensity for violence. The film contained explicit moments that appeared to cater to a heterosexual male audience, rather than authentically depicting the emotional dynamics within the relationship. The study found that the film catered to a male-oriented viewpoint, portraying same-sex attraction in a way that objectified and sensationalised it, rather than offering an authentic and nuanced portrayal of lesbian characters. While the film did increase the awareness of the gay community, it did not provide enough depth and understanding to truly represent queer individuals in a genuine way in the medium of cinema. The transsexual character in the 2019 film *'Housefull 4'*, portrayed as Bob in drag, can be understood as a satirical depiction of a transgender person, intended to offer comedic relief. This mostly involves portraying the individual in overtly sexual ways. The character embodied certain stereotypes commonly associated with queer individuals, including characteristics such as effeminacy, a pronounced inclination for fashion, and flamboyant conduct. Continuing to uphold these preconceived notions has the capacity to sustain misunderstandings and further marginalise individuals who identify as queer. The 2020 film *'Laxmii'* portrays a transgender character who wants justice for the discrimination and violence faced by the community. However, the decision to use a cisgender male actor to portray a transgender character has raised issues around the appropriation of transgender stories in films. Moreover, it reinforced specific preconceived notions that are frequently linked to transgender individuals. The figure displays exaggerated mannerisms and speaking habits, which may contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypical depictions. The film tries to address specific challenges faced by transgender individuals, although it lacks the capacity to provide a comprehensive and nuanced exploration of these subjects.

The representation of queer characters in these films has a substantial influence on social perceptions of the group and its individuals. The community is subjected to prejudiced and discriminatory treatment due to the perpetuation of stereotypes, resulting in their exclusion and marginalisation. However, a more subtle and sophisticated depiction of the queer community has the ability to challenge existing beliefs and promote tolerance and comprehension. Recently, there has been a steady change in the way films are portrayed, commonly known as “new cinema.” This transformation has occurred due to the community advocating for their rights, the legal system evolving to recognise their place in society, and the removal of criminal penalties associated with Article 377. Indian cinema must cease depicting queer individuals in detrimental manners and instead provide a greater range of authentic portrayals of the community.

The film *‘My Brother Nikhil’* (2005) is notable for being one of the first instances in Bollywood cinema where the topics of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS are treated with tact and respect. The film provided significant visibility for queer folks by featuring the character of Nikhil, with a specific emphasis on the experiences of gay males. This depiction holds great importance, given the scarcity of similar portrayals in Indian cinema at that time. This portrayal humanises the character, allowing the viewer to develop empathy for his challenges and times of joy. The acceptance and affection displayed by his family members contradict the commonly held belief that families universally reject those who identify as queer. *‘Aliagarh’* (2015) is a film that is inspired by real events and portrays the life of a homosexual professor in a university, focusing on his challenges in terms of self-identity and forming relationships. This film is of great significance due to its depiction of queer representation in Bollywood. The film depicts Dr. Siras as a multifaceted individual, exhibiting profoundness and authenticity. The film extensively explores the protagonist’s inner world, emotional journey, and personal struggles under a conservative and bigoted society, specifically in relation to his sexual orientation. Dr. Siras’ depiction serves as a poignant representation of the prejudice faced by queer individuals in Indian society. The film aimed to portray the queer experience in a relatable and empathetic manner, while also challenging and addressing societal discrimination. As a result, it made a noteworthy impact in the field of contemporary filmmaking.

The film *‘Kapoor and Sons’* (2017) portrayed a family dynamic that was marked by a significant degree of acceptance, especially in regards to Rahul’s connection with his brother Arjun and his mother Sunita. This depiction contested the dominant presumption that all individuals who identify as queer encounter familial ostracism.

The film had a particular sequence in which the character Rahul discloses his sexual orientation to his family. The film depicts this revelation with exceptional empathy and understanding. Similarly, the film *'Ek Ladki Ko Dekha toh Aisa Laga'* (2019) depicted the experience of homosexuals revealing their sexual orientation to their families. The main objective of the film was to address the subject of queerness in a manner that intentionally avoids concealing its visibility through the use of ambiguity or ambivalence. The inquiry aims to determine a connection between disadvantaged entities affected by queerness, such as culture, family, nation, gender norms, and the ideas of class and caste purity and homogeneity. The film work served as a forum for further scrutiny that goes beyond the representation of queer folks in mainstream media, which frequently lacks precision and genuineness. This facilitated an analysis of how the liberal portrayal of queerness contributes to the intricate growth of queer individuals, revealing underlying anxieties and reservations impacted by national, cultural and neoliberal representation frameworks. Furthermore, the video unveiled the underlying motives and objectives it aims to achieve.

The film *'Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan'* (2020) is a significant contribution to the progress of queer representation in Bollywood since it prominently showcases a central storyline centred on same-sex romance. The film portrayed the characters of Kartik and Aman with authenticity and complexity, enabling the audience to form a deep emotional bond with their individual experiences. The film depicted the participants' experiences in a way that highlighted their ability to love, be vulnerable, and bounce back from adversity. Similarly, the film *'Badhaai Do'* (2022) made a significant contribution to the progress of authentic representation of queer individuals by exploring the emotional and personal journey of its characters, Shardul and Sumi. The film delved into the topic of familial acceptance, exploring the early challenges faced by Shardul and Sumi when they revealed their sexual orientation to their families. The distinct narrative of their romantic relationship evokes authenticity and relatability, providing insights into the intricate dynamics and gratifications of same-sex partnerships within an Indian cultural framework.

Among all the queer communities, transgender people often distance themselves from mainstream societies. The characters portrayed in such movies act as gateways to understanding them. Often depicted as sexual workers, paedophiles, transmitting sources of HIV, and over all, a stereotypical representation of trans women as sexually predatory was highly contributing to the stigmatisation of the community and the creation of their identity. As a result, they often suffer from social isolation and discrimination. However, the 'new cinema' provided a refreshing approach to addressing the stigmatized portrayal of queer identity. However, a major criticism

of all these movies was that cis-gender men and women played almost all the queer characters.

Discussion and Conclusion

The same pattern continued for other queer members, leading to the formation of clichéd identities and contributing to their stigmatization. The general public started to view them through those particular lenses and expect the same behaviour from them. The internet has had a substantial impact on the dissemination of homosexual behaviour, depicting gay men as effeminate and lesbian women as harbouring animosity towards men. However, in actuality, they are similar to us.

Research into how Indian cinema portrays queer individuals through content analysis reveals troubling trends. Several films often depict queer individuals in basic and conventional ways, perhaps limiting them to positions as comedic sidekicks or disagreeable characters. The characters 'Abhimanyu' in 'Bol Bachchan' (2012) and Karan and Rahul in 'Kal ho Naa Ho' (2003) primarily depend on exaggerated stereotypes typically attributed to those who identify as gay or transgender. This portrayal perpetuates harmful stereotypes, thus contributing to the continuation of harmful storylines. The primary purpose of employing this particular character is to provide humour by subjecting them to mockery and jokes, hence reinforcing society's prejudices. The film 'Girlfriend' (2014) occasionally presents lesbian characters in a hypersexualized manner or portrays them as antagonistic figures, resulting in a lack of genuine and nuanced portrayals. This sensationalistic approach emphasises the preference for catering to a heterosexual male audience rather than focusing on genuine storytelling. The 2019 film 'Housefull 4' satirically depicts a guy named Bob who, while dressed in drag, exhibits stereotypes commonly associated with effeminacy and flamboyance. The 2020 release of 'Laxmii' delves into themes related to transgender individuals. However, critics view its use of a cisgender male actor as perpetuating certain biases.

In these movies, a lack of depth, misrepresentation and one-dimensional representation of the above characters have significantly contributed to the identification of the queer population. Often portrayed as supporting characters, they symbolised their lower status in society. Television and cinema possess significant potential as impactful mediums for individuals across various contexts. Film has the capacity to influence individuals' perspectives, altering their worldview and attitudes towards others and various social groups. The aforementioned narratives of the films serve to demonstrate that media depictions of individuals who identify as queer

have predominantly been characterised by negative portrayals, little complexity, and factual inaccuracies (Thomson 2021). The stereotypes created by these movies through the queer characters contributed towards strengthening the stigmatised value society has towards them. Considering the commercial success and availability on various OTT platforms, it is evident that these movies have reached a wider audience. Despite a few positive reviews, the general public adored these movies. Such images contribute heavily to the stigmatisation of the queer community and their social identities.

Despite the significant progress in films like *'My Brother Nikhil'* (2005) and *'Aligarh'* (2015), we must recognize the persistent challenges that still require attention. The practice of casting cisgender heterosexual actors in queer roles and employing comedy that objectifies queer folks continues to present significant concerns within the realm of queer representation. However, the emergence of 'new cinema' offers a glimmer of hope. Raised consciousness, active support and legislative reforms like the decriminalisation of Article 377, and a progressively more accepting society propel this phenomenon. The primary goal of this transition is to confront preconceived notions and advocate for genuine and varied gay portrayal in Indian film, thereby cultivating an atmosphere of inclusivity and understanding towards the queer population.

Bhattacharyya (2016) conducted a study that sheds light on India's evolving societal perspectives towards queer films. The release of the film *'Fire'* in 1996 elicited significant and polarised responses. However, more films like *'Margarita with a Straw'* (2014), *'Nagar Kirtan'* (2017), *'Super Delux'* (2019), and *'Geeli Puchhi'* (2014) have received greater levels of acceptance and comprehension. The representation of queer relationships in films is significantly lower compared to heterosexual relationships. Gill (2014) argues that the majority of media portrayals of queer individuals and lifestyles adhere to hetero normative norms and fail to challenge the prevailing constructs of gender and sexuality. In recent times, mainstream Bollywood films and regional cinemas have exhibited a growing inclination towards depicting same-sex relationships and queer narratives with a heightened sense of seriousness. The recent changes in movies have tried to change the practices, but they have a long way to go, like the portrayal of the queer by real queer people. Rituporno Ghosh, a queer person, portrayed such characters in his movie *'Memories in March'* (2005). The drama series *'Taali'* (2023) is a contemporary documentary-style production that explores the life of *Sreegaury Sawant*, a social worker who identifies as a transgender woman. One can view this series as a vehicle for advocating for the challenges and experiences encountered by the transgender

community. In the television series *Made in Heaven* (2023), the inclusion of a trans woman portraying a character with a decent occupation and a respectable lifestyle serves as a potential catalyst for dispelling stigmatisation. In contrast, cisgender actors or actresses continue to portray the characters in the other films mentioned above. Almost all the sample movies selected for this study feature queer male and female characters. It is high time that the movies start to cast non-binary queer characters from the queer community in order to better represent the community.

Indian cinema has significantly influenced society, moulding cultural norms, beliefs, and aspirations over generations. Films reflect contemporary challenges, like poverty, gender injustice, and class strife, while also advocating ideas of unity, patriotism, and modernism. Bollywood, the preeminent film industry in the country, has significantly contributed to the global and local dissemination of Indian traditions, music, and fashion. Furthermore, cinema has served as a potent instrument for social transformation, igniting discussions on sensitive topics like as mental health, LGBTQ+ rights, and caste prejudice. Indian cinema, by integrating amusement with social messaging, persistently shapes public opinion, motivates collective action, and catalyses changes in societal behaviour and attitudes. The impact of queer theory on cinema has been significant, as it has posed a substantial challenge to traditional portrayals of gender and sexuality within the medium of film. Queer theory promotes the critical analysis of hetero normative narratives and encourages filmmakers and audiences to explore and embrace a range of varied, non-binary, and fluid conceptions of identity. There is a need for a more rigorous analysis of how the medium of cinema builds and perpetuates societal norms and expectations pertaining to sexual orientation and gender presentation. However, there is still ample opportunity for improvement to break through the existing barriers.

Note

1. The term “over-the-top” (OTT) refers to a method of delivering television and cinema material via the internet, tailored to the specific preferences and needs of individual consumers.

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