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Article

Reel Representation: Fostering Justice and Empowerment for the LGBTIQA+ Community Through Indian Cinema

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Abstract:

Media representations hold a significant place in contemporary times, with cinema emerging as one of the most influential and widely consumed mediums. As an ideological state apparatus, cinema has the power to shape discourse and public consciousness. Historically, Indian films have portrayed the LGBTIQA+ community in a negative light, often reinforcing stereotypes and reducing individuals to caricatures used for ridicule, mockery, or villainy. These portrayals reflect the deep-rooted homophobia in Indian society, where, despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the community continues to face discrimination in education, employment, legal rights, and daily social interactions. They remain marginalised as 'others' within a predominantly heteronormative framework. However, Indian cinema has witnessed a gradual shift—from stereotypical portrayals to more nuanced and empathetic representations of LGBTIQA+ lives. By showcasing complex characters and their struggles within a cis-gendered society, films have the potential to foster empathy, validate identities, and create awareness. Cinema, therefore, emerges not just as a source of entertainment but also as a vital pedagogical tool that sensitises audiences by bringing to light the lived realities of the LGBTIQA+ community. The objective of this paper is to examine three Indian films that authentically depict the challenges faced by the LGBTIQA+ community. It seeks to highlight how cinema can act as a catalyst for social change, promoting justice, inclusion, and empowerment. Through thoughtful storytelling, films can play a transformative role in building a just and equitable society by normalising diverse identities and encouraging meaningful dialogue.

Keywords: LGBTIQA+, Homophobia, Justice, Films, Empowerment, Sexuality, Social Change

1. INTRODUCTION

For most of the people in India, cinema is equivalent to entertainment and leisure. It is a tool to escape mundane aspects of one's life, to experience something that is not always possible in real life. Media representations hold a paramount place in contemporary times, especially cinema, which is the widely consumed and powerful medium of society. In a world where people are more into watching than reading, cinema has become a more popular and powerful tool of the contemporary times. To say films are only meant for entertainment is a very reductionist approach towards cinema as an ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 2001). Sociologically speaking, cinema, being part of the superstructure of the society, has the power to create discourse in the society on a wider scale. However, the discourse can be positive, negative, or both, as the reception aspect of any medium of art, let alone cinema, is totally a different question. Any piece of art does not exist on its own exclusively; the imagination comes from the real-life experiences, which in turn get shaped into a form of art, be it cinema, literature, poetry, or painting. Cinema also comes from the people and their lived experiences. Sociologically, lived experience is a subjective social phenomenon of the society. According to Demerath III (1981), a good film can provide emotional immediacy and probing. Films not only portray social conditions, but they also tap the personal conditions and sensitivities of their individual viewer. Every individual in the society has their own share of

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experiences in the world, which are formed and shaped by the environment, culture, and beliefs that are part of their socialisation process. In other words, everyone has their 'lifeworld.' Whatever we see as an audience on screens is actually the reflection of the lifeworld of the filmmaker; it is not the universal reality but a subjective reality. Building upon the same point, one can say that cinema has produced certain kinds of misconceptions in the society, especially regarding the minority sections.

The concept of sexuality has normative aspects; in a country like India, where sexuality is labelled as a taboo topic, the concept of homosexuality is something that is against the norms of sexual conduct. It is something that is 'unnatural' or 'abnormal' in the society. As stated by Epstein (1994), moving from natural and unnatural acts, now the sexual experiences become more of normal and abnormal identities. Thus, sexuality becomes the prime site for the construction of subjectivity. The 'unnaturalness' of homosexuality flows from many reasons; one of the major reasons is its inability of procreation and reproduction. The discourse of homosexuality was hidden in the Indian society for a longer time; it is not only invisible or invalidated, but it was also labelled as something which is 'imported' from the west, something which is 'alien' to the traditional society like India. However, history says otherwise. Many temples in the Indian subcontinent have sculptures that depict same-sex desires; for example, Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh, the Shiva temple in Bagali, Karnataka, and the Sun temple and Rajarani temples in Orissa. "Even folktales, myths, and stories of various gods, goddesses, kings, and queens and their relationships within the Hindu religion are indicative of the acknowledgement of same-sex desires" (Narrain & Chandran, 2016, p. 314).

Further, For Puri (2002) The *Kamasutra* is treated as the ancient text in India that provides evidence of a sexuality that is non-Western, that not only tolerates but also celebrates different sexual desires and relationships. It is indeed a text that provides a "serious and scientific study of sexual behaviour" (p. 4). The *Kamasutra* is the evidence that shows that India had a more open and honest attitude towards human sexuality as compared to the Western world. In contemporary times, where homosexuality is treated as a 'foreign idea' imported from the West, the *Kamasutra* acts as a strong example of the ancient Indian Hindu traditions that not only exist but also provide permission to the expressions of non-normative aspects of sexuality.

Although homosexuality was decriminalised in India in 2018, there is no substantial change which can be found in the societal attitudes against the LGBTIQA+ community. They continue to face discrimination on a daily basis; they are denied opportunities and rights in education; they face discrimination in workplaces; they do not have marriage rights or adoption rights. Last, but not least, they are often subject to homophobic slurs; in other words, they are treated as the 'others' in a heteronormative society (Singpho, 2022). Therefore, one can say that there is a huge gap between legal laws and societal attitude. Legal validation does not always equate to societal acceptance.

1.1. Cinematic Discourse of Homosexuality

The discourse of homosexuality in Indian films is full of stereotypes and prejudices, which puts the sexual minority at the margins of the society. For a long time, Indian films have portrayed the LGBTIQA+ community in a negative light with stereotypical characters, reducing them as objects of ridicule or mockery or weaponising them as villains. Further, they are the supporting character, a good friend of the protagonist. It is undeniable that Indian cinema has homophobic tendencies. This homophobic tendency also flows from the society, which continues to govern sexual relations among individuals through the heteronormative gaze, which leads to the 'othering' of the sexual minorities of the society. The cinematic discourse of sexuality was exclusively tied to the heteronormative idea of sexuality. With films like *Sangharsh* (1999), which portrayed a transgender character as the main villain of the story, and movies like *Pyar Kiya Toh Darna Kya (1998), Student of the Year* (2012), *Dostana* (2008), and many others, gay characters have been depicted in a stereotypical way. Thus, creating prejudices in the society. Then there are some movies that have depicted gay characters as fashion designers, for example, *Fashion* (2008). Further, the discourse of lesbianism is under-represented in Indian films (Arya, 2023), shedding light on the fact that within the spectrum of homosexuality, there is also a hierarchy of power in which the sexual experiences of women are again sidelined and are made invisible.

Srija Sanyal (2023), in her edited book Gender, Sexuality, and Indian Cinema, has attributed the 1975 film *Rafoo Chakkar* as the first reference of homosexuality in Bollywood films. *Mast Kalander* (1981) is another film that has represented a gay character, but these films again produced misconceptions regarding homosexuality. However, regional cinema was way ahead of its time, which has not only depicted lesbianism with films like *Fire* (1996), but it was also sensitive in its portrayal of homosexuality; for example, Rituparna Ghosh's film *Memories in March* (2010), etc.

Regional cinema in India has often been ahead of its time, largely because it remains more deeply rooted in social realities compared to mainstream Bollywood films. Directors such as Rituparno Ghosh and other pioneers of art house cinema have been instrumental in bringing marginalised voices and sensitive social issues to the forefront. Unlike commercial cinema, art house films are not driven by profit or box office success; their primary objective is to educate, provoke thought, and initiate dialogue around topics that are often ignored or suppressed in society. Arthouse cinema aims to present these issues in an unfiltered, realistic manner—free from the glamorisation or dramatisation that typically defines commercial films. These films are built with the intent to reflect the truth, to depict lived experiences with honesty and depth, without exploiting them for entertainment and commercial value.

However, one of the key limitations of art house cinema lies in its limited reach. In Indian society, films are generally perceived as a medium of leisure and entertainment rather than a source of education or social reflection. As a result,

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many viewers tend to find art house films slow, complex, or "boring," and often avoid engaging with them. This poses a significant challenge for filmmakers who wish to use cinema as a tool for social awareness, as their work may not receive the viewership or impact it deserves despite its critical importance. Therefore, Bollywood has often represented sexuality—particularly alternative sexualities—in a stereotypical and caricatured manner, reducing queer identities to objects of mockery or exaggeration. In contrast, art house cinema approaches these themes with far greater sensitivity and depth. For instance, filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh, who openly identified as queer, brought an authentic and deeply personal perspective to his work. His films reflect the emotional complexity and lived realities of queer individuals, offering nuanced portrayals that challenge societal norms and foster empathy.

Saying that, Indian cinema, especially mainstream Bollywood films, has gone through a paradigm shift from stereotypical representation to more authentic and sensitive portrayal of the LGBTIQA+ community. Indian films, through their diverse storytelling, have the potential to play a transformative role in fostering a just society for the LGBTIQA+ community. Further, with the coming up of OTT platforms, one can see stories which are based on the struggles and challenges of a homosexual person. Bollywood films like *Aligarh* (2015), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) *Shubh Mangal Zayada Saavdhan* (2020), and *Ek Ladki ko Dikha toh Aisa Laga* (2019), etc., are some movies that have tried to depict homosexuality in a positive and sensitive manner, shedding light on their struggles and challenges in a cisgender society.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology and employs an exploratory research design to examine how films can be utilised as tools to create awareness and foster education regarding the LGBTIQA+ community. Being a qualitative study, a non-probability sampling method has been used, specifically the purposive sampling technique. In purposive sampling, the selection of units is based on the researcher's informed judgement about which units will be the most useful and representative for the study (Bryman, 2012). The rationale behind selecting this method lies in the nature of the research, which focuses on alternative sexualities and their representation in Indian cinema.

The three films chosen through this method were selected deliberately because they fulfil a dual purpose. Firstly, each of these films explicitly deals with themes related to alternative sexualities. Secondly, they not only depict the homophobic attitudes entrenched in Indian society but also portray the lived experiences of LGBTIQA+ individuals in a cis-normative world. Through these portrayals, the films subtly initiate the process of social change by allowing audiences to engage with the realities of non-normative individuals. This exposure fosters empathy and, over time, contributes to a shift in societal attitudes. Hence, these films were purposefully selected for their ability to both reflect societal prejudice and catalyse change.

Furthermore, content analysis was employed to examine the selected films from a sociological perspective. The process involved identifying key themes, coding the content, and breaking down the data into meaningful components. Within these codes, recurring patterns were explored, and interconnections between different themes were analysed to gain deeper insights. Additionally, secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books, journals, film magazines, reviews, and blogs were consulted to supplement the primary data and enrich the study's analytical framework. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the subject matter, academic credibility, and contribution to existing discourse on the LGBTIQA+ community and its representation in Indian cinema.

The primary reason for incorporating secondary sources was to ground the research within an established scholarly framework. Peer-reviewed journals and academic books were chosen for their reliability, theoretical depth, and methodological rigour. These texts provided essential insights into queer theory, media representation, and sociological interpretations of cinema. Film reviews and critiques—particularly those published in reputable film magazines and well-known digital platforms—were included to capture public reception, critical interpretations, and cultural discourses surrounding the selected films.

To ensure credibility, only sources written by individuals who have expertise in gender studies, film studies, sociology, or related fields were considered. Preference was given to materials published by recognised academic institutions, well-known scholars, and established media platforms. Sources were assessed based on publication reputation, citation frequency, and alignment with the research objectives. Blogs and non-academic sources were used selectively and only when they offered unique perspectives or firsthand accounts that enriched the understanding of the films. In sum, the selection of secondary sources was both strategic and discerning, aimed at providing a well-rounded, multi-dimensional analysis that supports the study's exploration of cinema as a pedagogical and transformative medium for LGBTIQA+ advocacy.

3. INDIAN FILMS AS POWERFUL CATALYSTS FOR FOSTERING JUSTICE AND EMPOWERMENT FOR THE SEXUAL MINORITIES

As said earlier, films are not merely a tool of entertainment and leisure in society, but they have the power to spark conversations in society on a wider scale, especially in the current times where we live in a hyper-connected world. It is undeniable that cinematic discourse of homosexuality has gone through a paradigm shift where one can find stories which are exclusively based on the LGBTIQA+ issues and challenges. By depicting nuanced characters, their struggles, and challenges in a cis-gender society, films can normalise the LGBTIQA+ community, thereby fostering empathy and understanding among the masses, which in turn leads to the validation of their identity, promoting visibility, and creating a dialogue that will serve as a powerful advocacy tool in providing acceptance, which will finally lead to

building up a just society of the LGBTIQA+ community.

Therefore, this paper will examine three Indian films that have depicted the struggles and challenges faced by the LGBTIQA+ community. Thus, highlighting how films can serve as powerful catalysts for fostering justice and empowerment for the LGBTIQA+ community. These people still lack social acceptance and acknowledgement in the society because the discourse of homosexuality was always under the carpet in the Indian society. It is very necessary for the cis- gender individuals to get firsthand experiences about the struggles and challenges of the homosexuals. As a result, films can provide that first-hand experience to know about the lived experiences of the LGBTIQA+ community, which in turn can impart empathy, understanding, and acceptance for the sexual minorities.

4. THE PROCESS OF OTHERING AND ENCROACHMENT OF PRIVACY— ALIGARH (2015) BY HANSAL MEHTA.

Aligarh is a film which has talked about social exclusion and othering of a non-normative person living in a heteronormative world. The film is based on a real-life story where a Marathi professor, Srinivas Siras (Indian Cinema, 1995), at Aligarh Muslim University was suspended and was forced to leave the premises of the campus when his identity was 'exposed' and his privacy was invaded when he was being recorded while having sex with his partner in his home. The rest of the film follows his social ostracism and the struggles he faced of being a homosexual in the society. At the end of the film, he was found dead in his room under 'mysterious circumstances.' It was not revealed in the film, whether he committed suicide or was killed. His death symbolises the homophobic nature of the Indian society. Whatever the case may be, *Aligarh* was one of the rarest films in Indian cinema, which has very sensitively depicted the lived experiences of a homosexual person. Manoj Bajpai, who played the role of a protagonist, was not stereotyped; he was a common man like any other cis gender male. But, in the film, one sees how his sexual orientation becomes a weapon, which is responsible for his social exclusion and finally death. The film has tried to advocate gay rights, especially in the time when homosexuality was a crime back in 2015.

Moreover, the film is based on a real-life story, which in turn also increases its credibility in sparking conversations about homosexuality. Aligarh has also shown how the life of a homosexual person has become public property for the rest of the society when his personal space was invaded by the goons, who not only beat him but also humiliated him and recorded him. Thus, shedding light on the fact that, even in contemporary times, the people from the LGBTIQA+ community are forced to live within the closet out of fear. Aligarh not only breaks stereotypes of homosexual persons, but it has also depicted their struggles and challenges, thus advocating for protection measures and rights like any other cisgender person.

5. THE CASE OF LAVENDER MARRIAGE AND ADOPTION-*BADHAAI DO* (2022) BY HARSHAVARDHAN KULKARNI

Badhaai Do is the mainstream Bollywood commercial film that has advocated for marriage rights for homosexual couples. The film deals with the story of a gay and a lesbian person who were forced to enter a lavender marriage to avoid social stigma and ostracism in the society (Rakshit, 2023). A lavender marriage is a kind of heterosexual marriage between two homosexual persons who decided to live together as husband and wife for various reasons; it is also known as a marriage of convenience. In this film, the protagonists, Sumi and Shardul, decided to live together as a married couple, at the same time continuing their respective relationships with their partners. The kind of relationships that both Sumi and Shardul share with their partners are very much normal, like any other heterosexual relationship; they have the same issues of fear, insecurity, and fights. Thus, the film breaks many stereotypes of homosexual couples. Further, in the climax of the film, where both the families got to know about the truth, the couple got extreme reactions, where homosexuality was equated with mental disease and illness without any cure, thus highlighting the homophobic tendency of the Indian masses. Further, at the end of the film, Sumi and Shardul choose to live together as a married couple in order to adopt a child. Thus, shedding light on the need to provide adoption rights to the homosexual couples.

Bollywood, for a longer period, has constructed distorted perceptions against the non-normative individuals. *Badhaai Do* was a fresh take which has aptly depicted the struggles and challenges of homosexuals within the context of marriage and companionship. It has shed light on the fact that the institution of marriage is a heteronormative institution where marriage can only happen between two opposite genders. Moreover, Indian laws also do not allow same-sex marriage for the very same reasons. As a result, homosexuals are forced to enter lavender marriages in order to live life on their own terms. Further, adoption rights are also tied to the institution of marriage, as in the end the protagonists choose not to divorce in order to adopt a child together. Therefore, in the end, one can say that *Badhaai Do* is a fine attempt to advocate for the marriage and adoption rights of the sexual minorities in Indian society, fostering justice and empowerment for the same.

6. URBAN FEAR AND QUEER EXPERIENCES: *I AM* (2010), DIRECTED BY ONIR

I Am is an anthology directed by Onir that deals with different short stories dealing with child sexual abuse, Kashmir conflicts, sperm donation, and homosexuality. The last short film of the anthology, named ***'Omar'*** deals with the violence committed against homosexual persons. Set in 2010, when homosexuality was not decriminalised in India, the film follows the story of a rich gay person, 'Jay,' and his encounter with 'Omar' in a restaurant. The short meeting forms an instant bond and connection, which leads to an intimate session in a car in a deserted place. However, both were caught by a policeman, who not only

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beat and humiliated them but also blackmailed them in order to extort money from them. Omar went to get the money, and in the meantime, the policeman raped Jay. It was later revealed in the film that Omar was also part of the plan, and with the help of a policeman, he trapped Jay in order to extort money from him.

The film *I Am Omar* was selected for this study due to its powerful and honest portrayal of the realities faced by individuals who identify as gay in Indian society. The narrative delves into the emotional and psychological struggles of living as a non-normative individual, particularly before the Supreme Court's verdict of decriminalising homosexuality in 2018. The film highlights how societal attitudes remain deeply entrenched in prejudice, forcing the nonconforming individuals to continue to live within the closet out of fear of discrimination, rejection, and violence.

What makes *I Am Omar* particularly relevant is its sensitive exploration of why individuals from the LGBTIQA+ community often conceal their identities. The film portrays how the fear of being ostracised by family, harassed by authorities, or marginalised by society at large compels them to suppress their true selves. This internal conflict is central to the lived experiences of many queer individuals living in India, making the film a vital cultural text for understanding the ongoing challenges they face, before the legal verdict and even in a post-decriminalisation context.

Moreover, the film is part of a larger anthology that addresses various pressing social issues in India. The director, Onir, known for his bold and socially conscious storytelling, uses cinema as a platform to confront taboos and bring marginalised narratives to the forefront. His cinematic direction and nuanced storytelling provide a realistic and empathetic lens through which the struggles of the LGBTIQA+ community are both humanised and made visible to the broader public.

This particular film shows that not only the common masses but also people who are the flag bearers of justice and law harass and exploit the non-normative individuals. This shed light on the fact that a person's sexual orientation and identity make them more prone to crimes like rape. Further, this film shows that queer experiences in a metropolitan city like Mumbai are covered with fear and homophobic tendencies. Sociologically speaking, any space is socially and culturally produced, and an individual experience with a particular place is dependent on various factors like caste, class, gender, religion, and, in this case, one's sexual orientation. As Rao (2018) in his book has talked about the city of Mumbai, people of non-conforming individuals do not always find the city space homofriendly in nature, structure, or outlook. "This (Mumbai) city fosters angst, amnesia, and absurdity in equal measure" (Rao, 2018, p.32).

This film again does not portray gay people in a stereotypical manner nor depict them as an object of mockery. Instead, the film represented the lived experiences of gay persons and their vulnerabilities of living in a heteronormative world. Therefore, *I Am* not only represented the homophobic attitude of the Indian society, but it has also exposed the double standards of the law and order of the country.

7. CONCLUSION

Even after homosexuality was decriminalised in India in 2018, the sexual minorities continue to suffer various challenges and obstacles in their day-to-day life. Legal validation means nothing until and unless there is a change within the mindsets of the people. Therefore, it is necessary to have gender sensitisation workshops and sexuality workshops in schools, colleges, workplaces, etc., in order to gain acceptance and empathy for the LGBTIQA+ community. Although, due to social media in the contemporary times, the discourse of homosexuality is very much evident, but again the question comes: what kind of knowledge or information is there regarding the concept of alternative sexuality? Even when one talks about the films, especially the mainstream Bollywood cinema, there are still some films that continue to produce stereotypes against the homosexuals in one way or another. The films that are discussed in this paper are very exceptional pieces of cinema that have actually depicted homosexuality in a sensitive manner. These films not only represented the blatant homophobic attitude of the Indian society but also, in turn, advocated for various types of rights and protection measures for the LGBTIQA+ community. Thus, shedding light on the fact that decriminalising homosexuality is not enough, people from non-conforming sexual identities also need and deserve the same kind of rights that are available to any other cis-gender individual.

In a world where the culture of reading has badly diminished, films can provide a good source of knowledge to know about the lived experiences of other minority communities. Sociologically speaking, films on the themes of homosexuality can act as a knowledge production tool, which, in turn, can provide justice and empowerment for the LGBTIQA+ community. When the common masses see non-normative stories on screens, it will not only give validation to their existence, but it will also foster empathy and social acceptance for the sexual minorities. Saying that, one cannot deny the fact that reception of any piece of art, let alone cinema, is a totally different thing. Therefore, it is important to recognise the limitations and challenges that come with using cinema as a tool for social change, especially in a country like India, where mainstream Hindi cinema—particularly Bollywood—is primarily consumed as a source of entertainment and leisure. The average viewer does not approach cinema or OTT platforms with the intent of being lectured or educated on sensitive and taboo topics such as sexuality. Films addressing these issues often face resistance or indifference, as audiences may prefer escapism over engaging with uncomfortable realities.

Moreover, a growing number of contemporary directorial ventures have begun to commercialise themes of gender and sexuality without a genuine understanding of the lived experiences they portray. This performative inclusion, commonly referred to as *rainbow capitalism* (Schneider, 2021), involves exploiting queer identities for aesthetic or marketing purposes, merely to project a progressive and inclusive image. In such cases, representation becomes

superficial, reducing complex realities into marketable narratives that serve commercial interests rather than social awareness.

Another critical factor is audience reception. Even when a film offers a nuanced and authentic portrayal of non-normative identities, how it is received and interpreted by viewers varies significantly. As cultural theorists like Stuart Hall (1980) have emphasised, the process of decoding a media message is influenced by the audience's own social positioning, personal experiences, and cultural conditioning. In the context of sexuality, an issue long suppressed in Indian society audiences may resist or reject narratives that challenge heteronormative norms, often perceiving them as 'shameful' or inappropriate. These are some of the significant challenges that limit the transformative potential of cinema, despite its capacity to spark dialogue and foster empathy. However, saying this, Indian films, through their nuanced depiction of homosexuality, have deconstructed many stereotypes against homosexuals, thus creating new cinematic discourse around homosexuality that is more sensitive and authentic in nature. Therefore, LGBTIQA+ cinema acts as a powerful advocacy tool in gaining social acceptance and visibility, which will finally lead to building up a just society for the sexual minorities of the country.

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Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

The study did not involve any clinical interventions or experiments requiring formal ethical approval.

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