



## Gender and Media: Tracing the shift in portrayal of LGBT in selected Indian and Western films.

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After 1960s sexual revolution swept through the western world and found its liberation through culture, media and literature. Gay Rights movements of 1970s were eye openers for media and film makers who soon explored the possibilities of the theme of sexuality. But it took another four decades for Indian cinema to even consider the theme of homosexuality. Even now our movie fraternity have very less to boast about in handling queer themes with maturity, liberal thoughtfulness and unprejudiced gaze. While in projecting homosexuality and gender problems Indian film industry still appears confused. At a time when Hollywood started experimenting with newly found theme, focus of Indian films was more on creating realistic family movies and romantic blockbusters.

India is the largest film producing and film viewing nation in the world. It is the liveliest assessable art form here and is most powerful in terms of influencing people. Still it is astonishing to understand that there are only a handful of films that genuinely portray homosexual problems out of commonly viewed stereotypes. A film worth mentioning is *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta; one of the early Indian films which openly dealt with theme of homosexuality. *Fire* won world wide acclaim and bagged fourteen international awards. It is the story of two sister in laws, elder one *Radha* (played by Shabana Azmi) and younger *Sita* (played by Nandita Das) who mutually fall in love with each other. Sita tells Radha that she cannot find a word in Hindi for the kind of love they share and they did not term it lesbian. Radha and Sita had issues with their spouses; neither love nor desire bound them but a knot of marriage, 'duties of a wife' that comes for free afterwards and clear gender defined roles of society. New bride Sita tells Radha:

Isn't it amazing we are so marked by customs and rituals? Somebody just has to press my button, this button marked tradition and I start responding like a trained monkey. Do I shock you? (Bedi and Mehta, 1996)

The relationship slowly encourages them to surpass all restrictions around them as women and wives including their marriage. The story transcends all views of family and relationship in a conservative society. *Fire* was first mainstream film that dealt with frustrated desires, love starved women and the shifting bond of tradition in a typical Indian patriarchal household. The film has extreme feminist trend with the supporting theme of homosexuality. Anjali Gopalan, human and animal rights activist and founder of the group Naz Foundation and a petitioner against Article 377 that criminalises homosexuality in India said to The News Minute about the film:

What can be more challenging to patriarchy than women saying they don't need men? ...The issue of lesbianism hasn't been accepted like male homosexuality. Unlike men who are gay, women who see themselves as lesbians... are still at the bottom of the totem pole. The film helped because a lot of people who were thinking of rights got together to... talk about inclusiveness. (Gopalan, 2007, p.3-4)

What would have been the responses of Indian society to such a path breaking leap? Their relationship does not come without consequences both in film and in reality. In film it ends as a hopeful love story. After 1998 release in India there were protests by several groups and theatres in Mumbai and Delhi was attacked by Hindu Fundamentalists and received a ban for religious insensitivity. News papers reported that when it was showed in International Film Festival of Kerala in 1997 delegates gatecrashed the theatre to watch it. Filmmaker and her team were happy about its first public screening, but when the film began she said they were shocked by the response. Nandita Das said she saw the audience, mostly male clapping, laughing and cheering at all wrong places. And she added that it was the most disappointing reaction anywhere in the world.

Same year another film which portrayed gay relationship appeared titled *Bomgay*, with the caption 'THE FIRST 'GAY' FILM FROM INDIA!', an anthology of short films directed by Riyad Vinci Wadia. It consists of six parts each based on poem by Indian writer R. Raja Rao. It deals with emerging gay community in Bombay in 1990s. It also portrays gay identity issues faithfully. Amol Palekar's *Daayra*(1996), Kalpana Lajmi *Darmiyaan* (1997) and *Tamanna* (1997) had queer protagonists. All such films opened the initial phase of perception and depiction of themes of LGBT in Indian cinema.

A shift can be seen in films that deal with LGBT themes that came much recently. The novelty was added by taking biopics of LGBT groups. *Naanu Avanalla...Avalu*, a 2015 Kannada feature film based on Living Smile Vidya's autobiographical on life of transgender group left a stir in otherwise conventional industry. This film (directed by B. S. Lingadevaru) is based on the life of Living Smile Vidya, a transgender individual who grew up male but later embraced her feminine identity. The film premiered at the Melbourne International Film Festival in 2015, and lead actor Sanchari Vijay earned a National Award for his moving performance. *Aligarh* is 2016 film earned accolades for its sensitive depiction of the controversial real-life case of the late Dr Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a former professor at Aligarh Muslim University directed by Hansal Mehta, The British Film Institute called *Aligarh* "probably the best film yet on the Indian gay male experience."

Until 1950's Hollywood saw its queer characters as nothing but flamboyant laughing stocks. 'Queers' were bullied and treated violent in the majority of such productions all around the world. Development of Poststructuralist theoretical paradigms since Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences", alternative sexualities have found a strong theoretical basis for the first time to argue for their place in the society. Until then homosexuality was a deviant sinful sexual practice. It was the inferior element in the binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality, and they have to be suppressed. After a while Judith Butler's postulation of gender as a social construct and gender as performative were propounded. With this strong theoretical basis, homosexuality became slowly accepted in the intellectual circles. Heteronormativity was accepted and normal all around the world. To subvert these binary queer critics introduced the word and idea of Homonormativity.

Hollywood film *Milk* (2008) is the first to portray Homonormativity genuinely with all its pangs, pressure and crisis. It was also the first genuine attempt to normalise what was looked down by a vast majority as not normal. The existence and the very being of a gay activist are pictured in this biopic. Harvey Milk, a prominent American gay rights activist in the 1970s who became the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California. *Milk* is Harvey's story of overcoming bigotry and prejudice to inspire others and effect change in the existing trajectory of taboos surrounding sexuality and identity. As a member of the gay and lesbian community Harvey faced challenges. Police brutality, fear of violence, death threats, suicide and anti-homosexual hysteria fuelled by the religious right were all aspects of Harvey's life. *Milk* is also a fascinating examination of the political process of his monumental fight by which California is now a heaven for homosexuals. The reach of media in propagating the theme of homosexuality is well evident by the world wide acclaim the film got and the Oscars and other innumerable accolades it bagged.

Hollywood saw many films with queer themes like *Moonlight*, *Call Me by Your Name*, *Prayers of Bobby*, *C.R.A.Z.Y.* and thousand others to its hit list. A study in the way we use a strong medium like film to propagate themes of LGBT and the attitude to such films has to go way far beyond what it is now so as to shed our narrow minded perceptions concerning sexuality. The history of homosexuality in films is to see how far we have come in disinfecting cinema off its subjugation towards LGBT.

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