SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF QUEER REPRESENTATIONS IN INDIAN CINEMA: AN INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

Anee Bhattacharyya[1], Kakoli Das[2]

[1]Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai, India
[2]Department of Psychology, Sikkim Central University, Sikkim, India
[1]aneebhattacharyya@gmail.com

Abstract- There are many subject matters that are concealed under the veils of invisibility and ignominy by the society and the issues revolving around sexuality and gender rightly qualifies under this category. Such is the overwhelming presence of stigmatization around the topic that any analytical study attempted on it opens up another Pandora's Box of troubles owing to its spillovers into other quarters of the society. India too is not an exception from this social set up where heterosexuality is viewed as the only form of organizing sexuality invisibilising all the othercategories i.e. homosexuality, transgender, etc. which does not fallin the normative one. Protests against such essentializing tendencies have taken various forms within the sub-continent. In this paper, we focus onone of most influential tools of resistance, i.e. cinema. We proceed in doing this by taking the cases of a few movies and analyzing its impact on the fulfilling the larger objective of bringing about inclusiveness in the society. The conceptual framework of this research is designed to evaluate the subject matter through a qualitative research methodology which is mainly based upon secondary sources. While doing so, we start with an interpretative analysis of queer cinema in India and look at the larger debate of queer theory in understanding its impact; we also try to understand the larger queer movement in India and the role of cinema in it. We use both social and psychological dimensions of representations of queer sexuality in the Indian cinema. Hence, on the basis of an interpretative analysis,we make a case for the presence of queerness in Indian cinema as the first stammering steps towards bringing about inclusiveness in the Indian society from a social and psychological perspective.

I. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There are many subject matters in our society that are concealed under the veils of invisibility and ignominy; the issues revolving around sexuality and gender undoubtedly are one of these subjects that need to be unveiled and discussed. Such is the level of stigmatization around the topic that any analytical study attempted on it opens up another Pandora's Box of troubles owing to its spillovers into other arenas of the society. Infact, our social structure is compounded with such ideals and norms that anything that does not fit the normative standards is termed abnormal and isthus stigmatizedand excluded from the mainstream. The structure of heterosexuality is nothing but one of thatideal creation of the state and society which represented a dominant strand of thought at a particular juncture of time. However, its overarching presence in society symbolizes its influence in preserving the heteronormative mindset of the society and regularizing a specific kind of sexuality as normal and acceptable. Now, the presence of alternative sexualities, like homosexuality, asexuality, etc. challenges this heteronormative social set up and that is where queer movement comes into the picture. Queer movement is a movement of 'the different', of the ones that are not regular; and the ones whose very identity problematizes normative sexuality and gender.

Ironically, "The idea of sex and sexuality as a dangerous and corrupting force, that needs to be contained within the structures of family and marriage was both Indian and Victorian in its origin" (Kapur, 2001). It is because though gender-fluid identities and homosexuality marked its presence in many ancient texts and scriptures, it was always treated as an evil which came to India with the advent of the British rule. Further, it was the British regime who tried to regularize sexual behavior under several codes like the section 377 of the present IPC list. Thus, regularization of bodies and desires went hand in hand.

However, the untamable and volatile nature of the subject has made its way towards limelight only since the last two decades. With the surfacing and re-surfacing of alternative sexualities in various areas of the society, the universalized categories of heterosexuality, male-female binary, etc. have come under critical scrutiny.

Besides the legal protests like organizing pride parades and filling petitions for repealing section 377 of IPC, movies, documentaries, novels, paintings, photography, etc., have become an important and innovative way to communicate the resistance against the naturalized categories of sexuality and gender by the society and state. However, before embarking upon a detailed study of the representations of queerness in Indian cinema, let us first understand the queer theory.

II. QUEER THEORY: AN ANALYSIS

Queer theory is a brand-new area of study and theoretical speculation; it has been named as an area only since about 1991. Queer theory largely followed the premises of post structuralism. Infact, it is in the context of deconstruction and post-structuralism that the category of gender gives way to queer theory (S. Seideman, 1994). In simple terms, queer means something which is unique, weird or different from the rest. However, it is at present closely associated with the increasing LGBTI activism which aims at dismantling the universalized binaries and rejecting heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and heteropatriarchy which seem to dominate ones understanding of sexuality. Teresa De Lauretis coined the term queer and proposed a post-gender theory (Lauretis, 1988). The importance of her theory in conceptualizing transgender lies in its emphasis over 'semiotics of gender' and the process of 'engendering'.

Lauretis believes that sex and gender besides being social constructions are also a semiotic system whereby the construction of gender is both the product and the process of representations. It is a chain of meanings that through a continuous process of semantic connections and usual association produce the subject and their bodies in addition to sex-gender co-relation (Lauretis, 1987). The representation of sex and gender and their connections become concrete reality when they become self-representation. This self-representation takes place when the subject himself/herself assumes an identity through the 'technologies of gender'[1] (*ibid*).

Thus gender is produced within such representation and self-representations as the result of which the subject is engendered. Engendering is a continuous process of attribution of meanings and assimilation that is always reviewable and changeable. This process produces the body which is an abstract social form that is realized when individuals take on representations of their own self (ibid).

Thus queer theory, taking the understanding of gender one step ahead, questions the entire process of how bodies derive its meaning through the interpretation of signs and symbols associated with it. And the entire process of creation of a reality about bodies become further concretized when individuals themselves choose a representation for them guided by the overarching systems that speak about the discourses on sexuality.

III. INDIAN QUEER MOVEMENT: ROLE OF CINEMA

Narrain and Bhan (2005) in their famous work Because I Have a Voice, argues that the term queer represents a deep personal identity and a defiant political perspective, which means it is personal and political at the same time. It exemplifies a rejection of the primacygiven to heterosexual, patriarchal family as the cornerstone of our society. It not only captures and validates the identities and desires of gay, lesbian, bisexual, *hijra*, *kothi* and transgender peoplebut also represents, for many, an

---

1 Technologies of gender is a term used by Lauretis in her famous work Technologies of Gender, 1986. It means the theories and systems that articulate discourses on sexuality.

understanding of sexuality that goes much beyond the categories of heterosexual and homosexual. In fact, it creates alternative ways of being and ventures into new ways of viewing life.

Queer politics speaks about the issues of these communities as 'minority issues'. It also takes into consideration and questions the larger understanding of gender and sexuality in our society that affects all of us regardless of our sexual orientation. It speaks of sexuality as a politics intrinsically and inevitably connected with the politics of class, gender, caste, religion and so on, thereby both acknowledging other movements and also demanding inclusion within them (Narrain and Bhan, 2005: 3-4). Narrain and Bhan, thus also highlights the intersectional character of sexuality with other categories like class, caste, gender, etc. and it is only through a systematic study of the intersections of all these factors that a clear picture of the discrimination that sexual minorities face in the society can be understood.

In the context of India, it must also be said that it was only in the 1990s when the issue of sexual minorities came into the limelight. Previously, though several steps were taken on individual and collective level to educate the masses,like bringing out journals, documentary, novels, etc., yet it was only when Naz Foundation filed a case in the supreme court to repeal section 377 from the constitution, that the debates around sexuality became inclusive enough to factor in the experiences ofsexual minorities into the arena. However, it also must be acknowledged that the very 1st Gay protest happened in India on 2nd August 1992 when a group of gay men and activist assembled in front of Delhi police Head-quarterand shouted slogans about the police harassment incurred upon gay people (Dave, 2012).Nevertheless, it was the release of the bollywoodmovie Fire (1996) which is recorded to be the 1st mainstream queer cinema in India. The moviewas the first of its kind to break the silence about lesbian desires. It sparked waves of reaction all around the country some of which were even hostile like burning of theatres where the movie was screened.

Cinema has always acted as important tools for articulating and dissimilating ideas upon the general masses. The influence of cinema can be felt in each and every corner of the Indian society. Besides the legal dimension of the Indian Queer Movement, Cinema has developed to be an influential creative tool of resistance towards the heteronormativity of Indian society. In fact,

as already been stated, it was the movie Fire which for the first time bought the plight of lesbian lovers in the silver screen pushing the topic of alternative sexuality into the forefrontat the level of commercial cinema.

The importance of this release were many but the most important change bought by this was that the topic of homosexuality was, for the very first time, articulated on a much bigger scale for a national audience. The movie represented the visibility of alternative sexualities by bringing them to the public realm through cinema.

With the coming of the21st century, several other movies celebrating alternative sexualities hit the silver screen. Sridhar Rangayan, one of the award-winning directors of India, highlighted the sexual stereotypes existing within the Indian society by making movies like *GulabiAaina* (2003), Yours Emotionally (2006) and 68 Pages(2007) which were a leap forward in the field of queer Indian cinema. The self versus other (us versus them) battle is intricately exhibited in the characters portrayed by the director in these movies. He meticulously tries to encapsulate the "othered" treatment imparted to the sexual minorities under a heteronormative social set up (Bhattacharyya, 2016).*GulabiAaina*is said to be the first Indian film to extensively center on Indian transsexuals with the entire story illustrating the lives of two transsexuals and a gay teenager's attempts to seduce a man - Samir (RufyBaqal). The film explored the outlawed subject matter of transsexuals in India which is still much misinterpreted and looked down upon. The film has received tremendous support and critical acclaim from reviewers, festival directors and global audiences for its successful portray of one of the most marginalized section of the society. It has screened at more than 70 international film festivals and won a couple of awards (ibid).

IV. REPRESENTATION OF QUEER CINEMA: SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

From the discussion above we can safely infer that the presence of queerness in Indian cinema has given a new dimension to the social representation of queerness as a subject in the society. Cinemas are considered one of the largest medium of reaching out to people and the very way that the audiences reactto movies can portray the mindset and understanding of the society.

The very first social dimension of queer representation in Indian Cinema is the very manner in which the audiences receive or react to the movie. They either view it as something completely alien to Indian culture and hence derogatory, or as something they would want to see considering that people with alternative sexualities exist in our society and has been existing since a long past. It is the second attitude, i.e. of seeing it differently and in a much more tolerant manner is what is cultivated in recent times. We can understand this changing tolerant attitude with the help of the following example. When Fire was released back in 1996, the reaction to it was a drastic one. But, it is not the same case when two decadesafter its release, *Angry Indian Goddesses and Margarita with a Straw*, two movies dealing with lesbian love were released in 2016. Dealing with the subject matter of lesbian marriage, these movies problematized many other social issues like rape, eve teasing, sexual objectification of women in cinema, sexual desires of autistic individuals, etc. which revolved round the life of a gender non-conforming or homosexual individual. Hence, the changing attitude with which the cinema-goers have started to view movies with queer elements in it, speaks much about the fact that the society hastaken steps towards a more tolerant way, if not inclusive, with their approach towards the subject.

The second social dimension of representing queer cinema in India is the very entry of queer subject into mainstreamBollywood movies. Though initially approached in a much lighter way to add the fun element in the movies, movies like *Kal Ho Na Ho* have portrayed same-sex relationship in the past decade. However, there isa shift in the approach of dealing with the subject at recent times. The 2016 release of mainstream Bollywood movie Kapoor and Sons from the same director as *Kal Ho Na Ho*, deals with the issue of gay love in a much more serious manner where the elder son of the family is portrayed as a gay whose family is devastated to know his sexual inclination. The movie deals with different kinds of family turmoil, one of which is presented as the same-sex inclination of the eldest son of the family. Besides this, there were several other movies in the same year which bought the subject of queerness and the struggles of queer individuals into the Indian silver screen like *Angry Indian Goddesses, Margarita with a Straw*,etc.

Hence, cinema has played a very important part as a creating a creative tool of resistance against the subjugating forces of heterosexuality and heteronormativity in the society. By representing various gay characters in the silver screen movies have been able to portray the plight of sexual minorities within the country and their stories of rejection from the mainstream.

V. REPRESENTATION OF QUEER CINEMA: PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Cinema is a form of illustration which to a large extent is able to represent novel topics and discover spaces from where one can speak of those topics. Queer cinema in this matter has contributed immensely in bringing about that awareness about the lives, struggles, and self-dependence of specially-abledindividuals. Individuals who are not within the societal standards of normal are rarely the subject of discussion in movies and serials. They are never portrayed as they general peoplewho take part in everyday life chores like any other individuals and even if they are part of the story-line, the focus is generally on their impairment (Reeve. D, 2006).

In this essay, we have tried to understand the psychological dimension of queer cinema through the lenses of 'psycho-emotional disablism'. Carol Thomas have given an extended social relational definition of disablism whereshe says 'Disablism is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being.' (Thomas, 2007: 73).

Negative cultural images and the rejection and exclusion of the so-called 'different' bodies from mainstream society have an effect on how people see themselves and also how they are perceived by others. Thus psycho-emotional disablism can be found in many disabled people who internalize the negative social and cultural images about disability inflicted upon them or experienced within their relationships with family, friends, professionals or strangers (Thomas, 1999). This is one of the foregroundswhere sexually deviant people feel themselves to be isolated from the mainstream society and often tend to face depression and isolation. However, it must be mentioned here that in the case of homosexuality or any other gender non-conforming identity, the feeling of oppression leading to psycho-emotional disablismis not based on any disability or impairment of the body but on the negative cultural and social images attached

to such bodies the internalization of which makes sexual minorities suffer emotionally and mentally.

Infact, a 2009 summer report from the University of South Florida on LGBTQI2-S says that about one-third of the total suicides attempts among lesbian, gay and bi-sexual communities occur within the same year of their self-identification of being sexually deviant from the mainstream. This feeling of non-acceptance from the mainstream society creates various kinds of mental pressures within the queer community which often leads to a condition called psycho-emotional disability which sometimes leads to even suicides. Infact, Donna Reeves (2014) argued that there are important interconnections between psycho-emotional disablism and disablist hate crime - acts such as hate speech have a clear association with hate comments from strangers. Disablist hate crime covers a range of actions from intimidating a disabled person, vandalism/graffiti, to kidnap, rape, torture, and murder (Quarmby, 2008; Reeves, 2014). The same ancestry which nourish psycho-emotional disablism also fuel disablist hate crime – prejudice and contempt for disabled people. Such treatment is 'rooted in the view that disabled people are inferior; in some cases less than human' (Quarmby, 2008: 8; Reeves, 2014). In the case of queer individuals, such hate crimes are ample in number and clearly visible in all the records. However, the sad reality is that most of such crimes take place in the open streets and often by the very policeman who sworn to protect the people from crimes.

Now, when it comes to creative cinema, it gives a kind of familiar feeling to the queer community where they can associate themselves with the characters portrayed in the silver screen. This gives a feeling of belongingness among the queer community where they no more feel isolated and different. One of such movies is *Margarita with a Straw*. The movie tries to explore the sensitivity and boldness of the lead character named Laila. It tries to explore different abilities of an individual who is physically ill but is not ready to give up or stop hoping for a better future. Instead of dealing with Laila's physical and psychological problems, the plot revolves more around her queer identity, her confusion about her sexuality, her cancer and how her sexuality liberates her from her cocooned self. Despite all odds, Laila is presented as a strong character that acknowledges her lesbian identity and is not at all uncomfortable with it. Such characters, when are portrayed in the movies, can thus inspire queer individuals to fight the battle within themselves and their psycho-emotional disablism.

The experiences of exclusion and prejudice can adversely affect anyone's emotional well-being. In that case, one can prioritize the presence of such creative tools like queer cinema that has throughout time help queer individuals. Queer movies have helped individuals to inculcate in them the relatability with the lead characters which have given a representation to their identity in the silver screen. In that case, the feeling of isolation and exclusive, when is expressed through creative channels like cinema; it not only helps in creating a space for gender non-conforming identities but also help in giving an agency of expression to them.

VII. CONCLUSION

Hence, we can conclude the discussion by stating that queer cinema, though of recent origin; have contributed immensely in bringing queer individuals into the table of discussion. By portraying them through such creative means like cinema, which has a large audience base from different quarters and sections of the society, it have been able to visibilize one of the most stigmatized and invisible sections of the society.

It must also be acknowledged that the very representation of queer bodies in silver screen is very difficult. Be it queer bodies or queer desires, its portrayal becomes utmost important because it not only provides an opportunity to represent the plight of queer individuals but also helps the queer individuals to relate themselves with the characters portrayed.

However, the way they are portrayed raises another difficulty of being misrepresented or wrongly presented. For example in the movie *Sadak* released in 1991, a transgender was presented in the character of "Maharani" who ran a brothel to make a living. With her loud and fierce make-up coupled with the red bindi in her forehead, transgenderism was represented as a freak and villainous character. The same goes with the 1999 release movie *Sangharsh* where a transgender was presented as a child-abductor who sacrifices' children to attain immortality. Thus, the presentation of transgender as a criminal psychopath have though paved way for their visibility, yet have only added to the negative imagery of queer individuals. It has presented trans bodies as a cite of crime and mystery and sometimes even hurt.

It is these representations of queer bodies (that includes trans-bodies) and desires that have marked a shift in Indian cinema at the beginning of 2000s. Movies have become more attentive towards queer desires and its representations. It has started addressing the perspective of queer individuals about their lives. It has been able to portray the alternative ways of 'being' and experiencing life. Further, the coming of queer film festivals in different cities like Chennai and Mumbai has valuably illustrated their space of self-expression. The same bodies and desires which were presented as a site of mystery, evil and abnormal came to be seen withmuch more inclusiveness.

Queer cinema not only has proved to be an important and creative tool of resistance but have also provided for a queer space within the mainstream society. It is a space where queer individuals can relate themselves with the many others like them and thus do not suffer in isolation and depression.Infact, amidst the different kinds of resistance towards the essentializing techniques of the state or the heteronormative society, queer cinema with its increasing audience base and its effect on queer individuals themselves, can be seen as one of the first stammering steps towards inclusivity of sexually deviant individuals within the Indian society.

VIII. REFERENCES

Bhattacharyya A (2016). The Variation in the Depiction of Queer Sexuality in India and the Question of Social Change. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development*, 5(5), 81-84.

Dave N (2012). *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics*, Duke University Press.

Kapur R (2001). Postcolonial Erotic Disruptions: Legal Narratives of Culture, Sex, a Nation in India. *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law*, 10(2), 333-84.

Leuretis, T (1988). Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation. *Theatre Journal*, 40(2), 155-177.

Leuretis, T (1987). *Technologies of Gender*, Indiana University Press.

Narrain A and Bhan G (2005). *Because I Have a Voice*, New Delhi: Yoga Press.

Quarmby K (2008). *Getting Away with Murder: Disabled People's Experiences of Hate Crime in the UK*, London: Scope.

Reeve D (2006). Towards a psychology of disability: The emotional effects of living in a disabling society. *Disability and Psychology: Critical Introductions and Reflections*, London: Palgrave, 94-107.

Reeve D (2014). Psycho-emotional disablism and internalised oppression. *Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments*, 3rd Edition, London: Sage, 92-98

Seidman S (1994). Queering Sociology, Sociologizing Queer Theory: An Introduction. *Sociological Theory* 12(2), 166-177.

Seidman S (1996). *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Thomas C (1999). *Female Forms: Experiencing and Understanding Disability*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Thomas C (2007). *Sociologies of Disability and Illness: Contested Ideas in Disability Studies and Medical Sociology*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan.

Online sources:

"*Asset-Based Approaches for LGBTQI2-S Youth and Families in Systems of Care.*" University of South Florida, College of Behavioral and Community Sciences (2009).

http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=fmhi_pubretrieved on 3rd January, 2018.

Film Impressions

http://www.filmimpressions.com/home/2010/04/list-100-queer-films-of-indiapart-3.html retrieved on 1st April, 2016.

Redlich, Margaret. Something is happening: Queerness in the Films of Karan Johar. (2014).

http://www.unive.it/media/allegato/dep/n25-2014/RICERCHE/06_Redlich.pdf retrieved on 21st August, 2015.