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Representation And Portrayal Of LGBTQIA Individuals In Indian Cinema

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Abstract: The study examines LGBTQIA representation in Indian cinema and its effects on society. The study uses a qualitative approach to contextualize narration trends from the 1990s to the present, highlighting the major milestones that marked this transformation from stereotype and negative to subtle and realistic portrayal. The study shows that cinema can reinforce negative bias or promote inclusivity and acceptance. Positive representation in cinema has countered stereotypes and helped change social attitudes toward the LGBTQIA community. The study acknowledges that negative portrayals persist and that they only apply to mainstream Indian cinema.

Index Terms - LGBTQIA, Indian Cinema, Societal Perceptions, Media Influence, Inclusivity, Social Change.

Introduction

“Cinema is the most beautiful ever encroached deception. (Jean Luc Godard)” This marvelous quotation by the immortal filmmaker Jean Luc Godard sums up something of the deep effect of cinema in constructing and reflecting the great gifts of society (Dabek, et. al., 2011). Thus, it becomes very crucial in India when filmmaking has become a huge part of culture, how LGBTQIA characters are portrayed and represented. The research becomes relevant to comprehend how such stories have developed and how the Indian film industry permeated society to foster inclusiveness and acceptance.

LGBTQIA stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual. The term is a successor of the initials LGBTQIA, which were first used to update the use of the term “homosexual” in conjunction with the LGBTQIA network in the middle to late 1980s, coming into common use in. LGBTQIA does not encompass individuals who were once referred to by the term “gay network”, according to the activists (Marwah, & Mitra, et. al., 2023). The way people are represented in media, more so in Indian cinema, can make or break a popular perception about the fostering of understanding and inclusivity. Honest, respectful portrayals can empower the LGBTQIA community; on the other hand, negative stereotypes only perpetuate discrimination and marginalization. Dubbed the Indian cinema, Bollywood has vastly been expansive and influential both at home and worldwide (Raja, et. al., 2018).

Since time out of mind, Indian films have been known to entertain, educate, and guide the normalcy of society. As far as the LGBTQIA community is concerned a community explicitly associated with stereotypical roles, caricatures, and misrepresentation in early Indian cinema either completely avoided LGBTQIA themes or presented them as negative stereotypes of their character. Characters were reduced to comic relief and deviants who fed societal prejudices. Films like Mast Kalandar (1991) and Raja Hindustani (1996) were some of those that just perpetuated such stereotypes. Towards the late 20th and early 21st centuries, films pioneered to break these norms. In 1996, Deepa Mehta's Fire was one of the very pioneering

films portraying a love relationship between two women. The LGBTQIA community had lots of controversy and debates (Gopinath, et. al., 2018).

The nature of Indian cinema concerning its portrayals of LGBTQIA people has displayed an identifiable change over the last few years, with a culmination arising as a result of shifts in society, legal change, and digital platforms springing up. Onir's 'My Brother...Nikhil' which was released in 2005 is an earlier example in a sensitive portrayal of the life of a gay man combating HIV/AIDS. Margarita with a "Straw" 2014 by Shonali Bose a bisexual woman suffering from cerebral palsy "Aligarh" 2016 by Hansal Mehta, based on the real-life story of Professor Siras, who brought about issues of privacy and dignity (Prasitha & Bhuvaneswari, 2024). At a time when Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ Hotstar were at their peak, it gave impetus to a platform that allowed more diversity and inclusivity in storytelling. Web series such as 'Made in Heaven' and 'Four More Shots Please!' give their audiences the taste of realistic portrayals of LGBTQIA characters for an increased and heterogeneous audience (Dey, et. al., 2024).

The representation of the LGBTQIA community in Indian cinema has its pros and cons. Authentic and respectful portrayals in movies over the years have embarked on empowering LGBTQIA people, making them visible and valid. Such films have helped to educate audiences and evolve acceptance. For example, Aligarh raised debates on the question of the right to privacy and dignity of LGBTQIA people. Even positive representations have helped support advocacy toward the larger struggle for LGBTQIA rights and equality within India (Rashmi, et. al., 2018). On the other hand, negative portrayals and stereotypes have continued to perpetuate damaging prejudices and stigmas that help in marginalization and discrimination against LGBTQIA individuals. The misrepresentations affect the self-esteem and mental health of LGBTQIA people, further entrenching biases within society and leading to retrogression in the fight for equality. Some films have an LGBTQIA character merely as a token of diversity without meaningful storylines or development; in effect, this could be superficially ticking the box of diversity (O'Brien, et. al., 2020).

When Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga was released in 2019, this was the first for Bollywood, to have a same-sex love story in the mainstream. While the film garnered praise for its audacious storyline and deft handling, some people criticized it for playing safe. Critics felt that the makers did not go far enough in challenging societal norms, tamping them down for mass appeal (Bala, et. al., 2022). This mixed reception underlines the continuous tug of war between progressive storytelling and ultra-conservative mores of society, a straddle that most filmmakers are usually asked to make between artistic expression and wider social acceptance (Bhardwaj et. al., 2022).

The study is focused on the portrayal of LGBTQIA people in Indian cinema and, hence, how media can build perceptions and attitudes regarding LGBTQIA communities. It highlights improvement in authentic representations and challenges to the same, and how cinema furthers social change. Such a study could be used in policy and advocacy to make a case for more diverse stories to be told in Indian cinema. This study empowers LGBTQIA people with a voice. There is more visibility and authenticity within the media. It is part of this discourse, which is current and hot about media representation and LGBTQIA rights in India, teasing out an analysis of historical and contemporary portrayals of LGBTQIA people in Indian cinema.

Apart from the introduction, the rest of the study is organized as follows: section 2 covers the literature reviews of various other scholars, section 3 states the aim or problem of the study, section 4 reviews research methods used for the study, section 5 contains research results and findings, section 6 provides the discussion and section 7 offers the conclusion including recommendations for Further Studies: research limitations, theoretical and practical implications. Finally, references are presented.

I. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The time series monthly data is collected on stock prices for sample firms and relative macroeconomic variables for the period of 5 years. Review related to the history and evolution of LGBTQIA representation in Indian cinema.

Movies like *Badhaai Do*, *Kapoor & Sons*, *Dear Dad*, *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*, and *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* represented the LGBTQIA community in Hindi cinema (Bhardwaj et al., 2023). In this way, Bollywood films went a long way in supporting the LGBT cause within India through various sexual identities and social justice (Jain et al., 2022). While portraying gender equality and sexuality through films, the Latin American nations outdid India and showed an increasing trend of more humanitarian expression post-2000 (Banerjee et al., 2023). The portrayals of queer sexualities in Indian cinema were perceived as being bound within heteronormative fantasies, thereby retaining the patriarchal aim of social power relations and sexual hierarchy (Chatterjee et al., 2021). While elements of performance and character conflicts were common to both Indian and American popular cinema and web series, with a similar goal of instructiveness, major differences lay in the way they were depicted and received by Indians (Mehraj, et. al., 2020).

Indian films exhibited a favorable depiction of the emotional intricacies of the LGBT population, despite biases and the prohibition of homosexuality under IPC section 377 (Pooja et al., 2018). Indian regional cinema, particularly Marathi, Malayalam, and Bengali films, clearly and distinctly defined queer identities and desires, breaking from the pervasive orthodox narrative of homosexuality as a Western import (Labade et al., 2023). Queer film festivals in India deconstructed cinema as an apparatus to inscribe sexual identities, breaking and reconstructing the sensual experience of the viewer (Mokkil, et. al., 2018). Most depictions of homosexuality in Hindi cinema were negative and represented the societal mindset regarding homosexuality in India, which was shaped by British colonialism (Bhugra, et. al., 2015).

The representation of LGBTQIA+ people in Indian cinema has come a long way to reflect changing mores. Early portrayals were often stereotypical, but recent depictions have become nuanced and assertive. This shift is influenced by the complex history of queer identities in India, informed by early Hindu teachings, British colonial influence, and modern legislation. (Yeminedi et al., 2024). However, despite the increase in discourse on LGBTQIA+ issues in India between 2009 and 2019, disparities continue regarding health inequities and mental health challenges. (Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2020). Bollywood is the largest film producer in the world and, as such, it has considerable influence on shaping cultural attitudes. Representations of homosexuality in Hindi films have been negative, carrying over from the negative attitudes that were developed during British colonial rule. As societal perspectives continue to evolve, the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ themes in Indian cinema may further reflect these changes and quite possibly affect viewers' attitudes (Gauram, & Dugaje, 2024).

2.1. Review related to the impact of LGBTQIA portrayal in Indian cinema on public perception.

A media portrayal of gay teen characters that initially offered hope and engendered positive emotions for LGBTQ youth instead devolved into heightened negative attitudes among heterosexual and cisgender young people (Gillig, et. al., 2016). Community-based theater interventions improved attitudes and raised awareness toward LGBTQ+ groups in India, primarily among young adult heterosexual audiences (Pufahl, et. al., 2021). Hindu, Islamic, and Christian religious writings in India illustrated varying images of LGBTQIA+ persons, which led to social attitudes and discrimination against this minority (Bashid, et. al., 2023). The media furthered knowledge about and acceptance of the stigmatization of the LGBTQ population in many countries (Randev, et. al., 2022).

According to Gupta et. al. (2023), the Amazon Prime Video web series reflected and positively affected the LGBTQIA+ community by increasing awareness and acceptance of their rights and culture. The Malayalam film advanced its representation of LGBTQIA+ desires through three major tropes: closeted, stereotyped, and visible. Malayalam cinema questioned heteronormativity through queer aesthetics (James et al., 2022). While Indian and American popular movies and web series shared parallels in performance, character conflicts, and instructional goals, the differences in depictions and audience reactions in India were significant (Mehraj, et. al., 2020). LGBTQ+ cinema represented the struggle of LGBTQ+ people across the globe from 1910-2019 through various media and drew attention to the need for social acceptance and political representation

(Hernández-Pérez et al., 2023). The media promoted awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ people stigmatized in many countries (Randev, et. al., 2022).

Furthermore, the image of Bollywood has also witnessed the shift from that of stereotypes to credible, subversive portrayals, commensurate with the changing social attitudes. The increasing popularity of the typical homosexual characters also helps Indian society become healthier and more balanced. Movies such as “Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga” and “Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan” have a converging focus of wanting a family’s approval in these matters which is different from earlier focused narratives. The film is considered one of the most formidable agents for bringing about social transformation, and the implications are also considerable for the LGBTQ+ movement in India which has drawn upon cinematic images aimed at deconstructing normative traditions related to sexuality in India (Jain,2022).

2.2. Objectives of the study

- To examine the historical evolution of the representation and portrayal of LGBTQIA individuals in Indian cinema, identifying key milestones and shifts in narrative styles.
- To assess the impact of Indian cinematic representation on societal perceptions and attitudes towards the LGBTQIA community in India, considering both positive and negative portrayals.

2.3. Research Question

- How has the representation and portrayal of LGBTQIA individuals in Indian cinema evolved, and what are the key milestones and shifts in narrative styles that have defined this evolution?
- What is the impact of Indian cinematic representation on societal perceptions and attitudes towards the LGBTQIA community, and how do positive and negative portrayals contribute to these perceptions?

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study on “Representation and Portrayal of LGBTQIA Individuals in Indian Cinema,” is descriptive, relying heavily on secondary sources of information for studying representation in Indian films. The details of the methodology involve a critical literature review by referring to academic journals, books, and scholarly papers to build up a formidable theoretical framework. This method of secondary data collection helps to understand the historical and contemporary representations that have been portrayed through Indian cinema. Descriptive and thematic analysis is conducted as a method in this study to identify the main themes and trends in the portrayal of LGBTQIA individuals. These cinematic portrayals are compared with each other between different time eras to identify points in history where significant milestones and shifts in narrative styles have taken place. This comparative approach traces the development from early, primarily stereotypical portrayals to subtle and realistic representations. Furthermore, thematic analysis focuses on how these representations are used in public perceptions and societal attitudes toward the LGBTQIA community. For this reason, such influences explored in the research would amply show how Indian cinema has been shaping and reflecting the view of society over time. Such an analysis underlines the reinforcing role of media regarding stereotypes and challenges, while at the same time contributing to a broader debate on the cinematographic potential for instigating social change.

III. RESULTS

Aspect	Results
Historical Evolution of Representation and Portrayal	The way LGBTQIA individuals are represented and portrayed in Indian cinema has changed radically. First, the LGBTQIA community was used either to laugh at someone or to become a bad guy with no depth and layers. The early portrayals often reinforce prejudice and stigma against LGBTQIA individuals. Crucial milestones of the evolution include gradual shifts into more nuanced and sensitive portrayals, starting from the late 1990s and early 2000s. Among many other defining shifts in representations are the multidimensional characters with eclectic experiences and emotions. LGBTQIA trend where the films take the lead on themes of identity, struggle, and acceptance, thus reflecting the change that is taking place in the world at large by adding to a more inclusive representation. Such trend shifts changes to increasing recognition of the rights and identities of LGBTQIA persons in Indian cinema.

Impact on Societal Perceptions and Attitudes	The cinematic portrayal of LGBTQIA people in India has worked both ways on the perception and attitudes of society. Sensitive portrayals through movies preconditioned an atmosphere of better understanding and acceptance toward LGBTQIA. The subtle and dignified presentation of LGBTQIA characters, free from stereotypes, by such films has challenged the stereotypes of people and built empathy to a large extent, hereby changing attitudes to become more inclusive. Films such as "Aligarh" and "Badhai Do" have received rave reviews because of their tender and realistic treatment, setting the tone for discourses and discourse-making on the questions of LGBTQIA rights. On the bright side, negative depictions, as in some films, continue to perpetuate stereotypes, harmful attitudes, and stigma. Normally, the portrayals demean or sensationalize LGBTQIA characters, thus reinforcing prejudices against them and hindering full acceptance. The overall effect of cinematic representation thus remains mixed, representative of advances in social attitude and of continued difficulties in fighting discrimination and prejudice.
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IV. DISCUSSION

The study was undertaken to find out about the evolution of LGBTQIA in Indian cinema and the effect it has created on society's perception. The guiding questions for the research were on how these cinematic narratives have changed with time and how the portrayals led to shifts in public sentiment. On the other hand, initially, representations of LGBTQIA+ characters in Indian cinema sometimes depended on stereotypes and caricatures that perpetuated societal biases. However, there has been a considerable transition towards more nuanced and respectful representation, mirroring the changing social attitudes towards these groups (Pooja & Rekha, 2018). Groundbreaking films such as "Fire (1996)" and "My Brother Nikhil (2005)" initiated the dismantling of boundaries by introducing inclusive narratives into general awareness. These films confronted topics long deemed taboo, upsetting cultural standards and paving the way for future filmmakers.

This evolution in Malayalam film may be observed via various significant works. "Njan Marykutty (2018)," directed by Ranjith Sankar, was pioneering in its depiction of a transgender woman's quest for acceptance. "Moothon (2019)," directed by Geetu Mohandas, is a poignant and visceral examination of identity and love, depicting homosexual relationships with profundity and empathy. Earlier films such as "Ka Bodyscapes (2016)" contributed by exploring LGBTQIA+ challenges, censorship, and societal resistance. As early as "Randu Penkuttikal (1978)," Malayalam cinema delicately examined same-sex relationships, representing initial endeavors to portray LGBTQIA+ subjects, albeit in a more implicit fashion due to the era's limitations. Recent films like "Kaathal - The Core (2023)" and "Bheeshma Parvam (2022)" perpetuate this trend by dismantling stereotypes and advocating for more inclusive storylines that mirror the evolving perspectives of society, particularly among the youth (Chugh, 2022). As Indian film progresses, it aligns with global discussions on LGBTQIA+ matters, aiming not only to entertain but also to educate and promote acceptance (Jayadev & Mohan, 2023).

These findings from the research gesture towards the critically indispensable role that cinema plays as a creative vehicle in the shaping of public opinion and in contributing to social change. Positively embedded authentic representations about LGBTQIA persons have the potential to be personally empowering for the community, serving to further visibility and acceptance. In contrast, negatively veiled representations further negative misconceptions; hence, it all involves deliberate and responsible storytelling in cinema. On the contrary, the research confirmed such findings but went the extra mile in establishing that transition into a more honest presentation in recent years. The earlier studies had recorded in detail accounts of how such stereotypical presentations in early Indian cinema had affected their mindset. The study is second to none in literature (Bhardwaj, 2023). These findings are indicative of the really important role that cinema plays in shaping public opinion and bringing social change. Positive, authentic representations of LGBTQIA persons have a possible personal impact: they empower the community, making it more visible and acceptable.

On the other hand, negatively veiled representations further negative misconceptions and, therefore, underline an imperative for deliberate and responsible storytelling in cinema. The study postulates that such recent progress should be utilized to further drive the message for increased social and legal recognition of LGBTQIA persons' rights in the country. Stereotypical portrayals earlier studies recorded in detail how they impacted their mindset with such stereotypical portrayals in early Indian cinema.

The study supported such findings but went further in establishing this transition to more honest representation in recent years. Such uniqueness is attached to previous work on the literature, which gives prominence to a relevance emerging from the increased influence of digital platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime and lays open spaces for different and inclusive storytelling (Tiwari, 2023). The present study raises a very pertinent concern that emanates from the increasing influence that digital platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime have, hence exposing wide-open spaces for narratives so varied and inclusive. A study on such platforms offers an interesting dimension regarding how current media influences the attitude of society in general. (Gupta, 2023).

V. CONCLUSION

While the study narrates the representation of LGBTQIA individuals in mainstream Indian cinema, it has completely remained silent about the immense contribution of regional and independent films. These sections of filmmaking may provide different and perhaps more subtle representations of LGBTQIA characters, reflecting varied cultural and societal perspectives. By confining its focal interest to contents viewed on digital platforms willy-nilly, the study overlooks the rich diversities found in regional and independent cinema, where filmmakers often find themselves creating themes and narratives different from those that characterize mainstream films. Future research might expand that scope to include regional and independent films, considering how those films reflect the contribution of LGBTQIA individuals. This would unfurl an array of experiences and perspectives, and thus allow for deeper insight into what LGBTQIA representation means in different cinematic contexts. A comparative study placing Indian cinema's construction of LGBTQIA characters within an international framework might prove instructive. That would involve, firstly, an examination of the way this portrayal in Indian films compares to portrayals in movies in other countries, placing such findings against the broader backdrop of the global media and their influence on the views of society.

The major findings of the study are that there has been a sea change in the way Indian cinema portrays LGBTQIA people—from negative stereotype portrayal to authentic and affirmative portrayals. This shift has helped bring about changes in societal attitudes toward greater acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQIA people. Nevertheless, it has to be said that the struggle for fair, accurate, and diverse representation goes on. The present study underlines the fact that though cinema as an art is mainly a medium of entertainment, it also forms a strong tool for bringing about changes in society and forms the changing societal attitudes against these ostracised groups.

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