



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

GENDER AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT: THE REPRESENTATION OF TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES IN INDIAN ADVERTISING AND CINEMA

Dr. Shayini O

Associate Professor

Department of English

Nehru Arts and Science College Kanhangad

Kasaragod, India

Abstract

Nowadays, concepts of sex, gender, and gender identity have become fundamental to contemporary discussions of identity, culture, and social justice. While biological sex is generally understood as a physiological characteristic, gender is often conceptualized as a social and cultural construct. This distinction has led to evolving understandings of gender identity and transgender experiences. Simultaneously, media institutions such as advertising and cinema play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of gender diversity. This article critically examines theoretical debates surrounding gender as a social construct and analyzes the representation of transgender identities in Indian advertising and cinema. Through case studies including advertising campaigns by major brands and films such as *Paava Kadhaigal* and *Njan Marykutty*, the study explores how media representations can both challenge and reinforce existing stereotypes. The article argues that authentic transgender representation requires greater participation of transgender individuals in media production and a shift away from narratives that cater primarily to cisgender audiences.

Keywords: gender, gender identity, social construction, transgender representation, Indian cinema

Introduction

A foundational concept in contemporary gender studies has been the difference between sex and gender. Sex is normally understood as a biological and physiological quality like hormones, chromosomes and reproductive organs, whereas gender is considered a psychological, social, and cultural phenomenon. This difference allows for the option that an individual's gender identity may differ from their biological sex. Gender identity can thus be understood as a person's deep inner sense of being male, female, both or neither. Simone de Beauvoir has also echoed this thought saying "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (*Second Sex*, 1949). Subsequently, gender is often described as a social construct—a set of meanings and expectations produced by society rather than determined solely by biology.

The idea of gender has been both enlightening and controversial. While it gives an outline for understanding diverse identities and experiences, it also raises complex theoretical questions regarding the relationship between biology, culture, and individual selfhood.

Media plays an important role in disseminating information among people. It plays an important role in spreading public awareness about certain social or political issues. It is considered as the most powerful tool to create awareness in society. There are different types of media available now, modern media manifesting in different formats including print media (newspaper, magazines, and books) television, movies, video

games, music, cell phones, social media, various kinds of software and also the internet. Media affects the way we have a tendency to act and assume, it offers a profound influence on the behaviour of its audience. It affects the physical self, emotions, the psychological side, and even the spiritual stand of many individuals.

There are several communities that suffer misrepresentation by stereotyping in the media. One among them is transgender community. In the past, representation of transgender characters was so prejudiced that many a times they were presented as criminals, and as people who are mentally unstable. Since then, trans representation in the media has shifted drastically. Now a days there are so many shows that highlight the complex humanity of transgender people.

This article examines these questions and explores how they intersect with contemporary depictions of transgender identities in Indian advertising and cinema.

Theoretical Perspectives on Sex, Gender, and Gender Identity

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), sex refers to a person's biological status and is usually either male, female, or intersex. On the other hand, gender refers to behaviors and attitudes associated with biological sex according to culture. Gender identity can be defined as an individual's deep personal understanding of his/her gender and feelings. It can either match or differ with the biological sex one has.

However, there seems to be a contradiction where gender is described as a construct of society and at the same time a personal attribute of an individual. If gender is totally a social construct, then it would be hard to understand why gender identity is considered a deeply personal aspect of an individual. However, if we acknowledge that gender identity is an inherent quality, then we will have difficulties understanding the argument that gender is totally socially constructed.

As per the encyclopaedia, "Transgender is an umbrella term used to refer a diverse group of individuals who challenge socially and culturally constructed gender norms." Historically, the term has been used to refer to transvestites or cross dressers (those who long to wear clothing associated with the other gender). In contemporary contexts, the term has expanded to include a number of gender variant groups: male-to-female transgender (MTF); female-to-male transgender (FTM); transgenderists (those who live in the gender roles without gender reassignment surgery); bigender persons (those who identify as both men and women); drag queens and kings (typically gay men and lesbian women, respectively, who dress in women's and men's clothing); and intersexed persons (those born with ambiguous genitalia). Though commonalities among the groups exist, there are several characteristics that render them distinct gender identities.

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes "transgender" as an umbrella term that identifies those whose gender identity as an expression do not conform to the norms and expectations traditionally associated with the gender assigned to them at birth. It includes people who are transgender, transsexual, or otherwise considered gender non-conforming, for example, a transgender person may identify as female despite being born with male genitalia

Transgender representation in Indian advertising

Representation is an important tool for mainstreaming historically and systematically marginalised voices. It is a way for minority communities to get a seat at the negotiating table. Affirmative action through reserved seats and representation is effective in politics and institutions. However, when it comes to film and pop culture, representation has been tokenized and seen as just a checkbox that can be ticked to deter critics. In the case of Trans folks, cis gender actors do not hesitate to play them and show no respect for them, thus denying them any representation. This is what makes the debate about representation less straightforward. It must be questioned why integration is less straightforward. It must be questioned why integration into mainstream media has become a more important pursuit than Trans and queer liberation.

Recent trends show that many companies based in India have been using transgender storylines in their advertising campaigns. These include such firms as Bhima Jewellery, Vicks India, Ralco Tyres, Brooke Bond Red Label, and Nykaa. In spite of the widespread belief that these advertising campaigns aim at promoting diversity and inclusivity, they often attract negative reactions from transgender communities and researchers in the field. For example, according to Biraja Mishra, who is both a transgender woman and a student of gender studies, advertisements tend to construct transgender characters within the context of mythology and spirituality.

The next problem related to the use of transgender characters in advertisements is an excessive focus on the issue of medical transitioning. Adverts sometimes assume that transgender persons always go for surgery or hormone therapies, ignoring the various experiences of transgender people. Medical transition can involve hormone therapy, laser hair removal, gender confirmation surgeries, facial feminization, and others. However, all transgender people do not necessarily go through medical transition.

Many transgender persons prefer social transition rather than medical transition, whereby they use their preferred names and pronouns and express themselves without undergoing surgery. Campaigns focusing only on before-and-after stories might ignore such experiences. Moreover, it is common for such campaigns to target cisgender audiences. For instance, the advertisements feature transgender people who have successfully met stereotypical ideals of masculinity or femininity while ignoring gender fluidity.

According to Aryan Somaiya, a transgender clinical psychologist, such challenges arise because there is no involvement of transgender voices in the process. Adverts lacking transgender involvement are likely to perpetuate stereotypes while claiming progressive nature.

Similarly, movies play a vital role in influencing societal norms pertaining to gender and sexual orientation. The depiction of transgender people in Indian cinema has been based on stereotypes, depicting the subject as an object of ridicule or pity. While some contemporary films try to break out of these representations, several hurdles lie ahead.

Case Study 1: *Paava Kadhaigal and Thangam*

In the Netflix original anthology series called *Paava Kadhaigal*, stories of caste, gender, honor, and violence are told in four interconnected segments. Thangam is one of the segments that explores the life of Sathaar, a transgender Muslim woman living in rural Tamil Nadu in the 1980s.

In this segment, the movie focuses on the story of Sathaar's unfulfilled love for her childhood sweetheart Saravanan and her sacrifice for his sake and that of her sister. Although well-received due to the portrayal of the marginalization of transgender people, the movie was also criticized for its treatment of the LGBTQ community.

The first criticism arises from the choice of actors in the movie. While Sathaar is played by a cisgender actor, Kalidas Jayaram, she should have been played by a transgender woman. Such casting promotes misunderstandings about the role of gender in transgender women, namely, that transgender women are simply men playing as women.

Moreover, the storyline itself seems to follow a well-worn path whereby the transgender character gains their dignity through pain and sacrifice. Indeed, Sathaar's death acts as the emotional high point of the story and plays into the trope called "the tragic transgender." Finally, many people criticized the choice of masculine pronouns used by the creators when talking about Sathaar.

Case Study 2: *Njan Marykutty*

Njan Marykutty, a 2018 Malayalam film, stands out as an important development in transgender representation in Indian cinema. The film was directed by Ranjith Sankar and features Jayasurya as Marykutty, who is struggling to find herself some employment.

In contrast to the many other films on transgender individuals, *Njan Marykutty* emphasizes the issue of legal rights and social discrimination. There are mentions of the famous NALSA judgement, and issues of identity, use of public utilities, and employment discrimination are touched upon.

The film is credited with offering a multifaceted and fully developed character rather than a tragic or comical one. Marykutty's longing to become a police officer speaks volumes about citizenship and equality in the eyes of the law.

However, despite some positive comments, the film has also received its fair share of criticism. The casting of a cisgender male as the leading role and the focus on relatively privileged members of the community are seen as major flaws. Issues such as poverty, homelessness, begging, and sex work, which plague many transgender individuals in India, have been overlooked.

Mainstream Bollywood cinema has been unable to depict trans identity in a respectful light on multiple occasions. For example, the films *Laxmii* and *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* provide an insight into both the progress and shortcomings of representation.

In *Laxmii*, trans feminine identity is portrayed in terms of horror and supernatural possession. In doing so, it reinforces stereotypes rather than challenges them. Additionally, there is a conflation of the ideas of gender and performance, leading to misconceptions around transgender women.

Furthermore, *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* makes an attempt at transgender representation yet depicts transgender identity through the lens of deceit and truth. This is further emphasized by the protagonist's reaction to his discovery that his love interest is transgender, perpetuating the belief that trans women are deceitful.

One trend among Bollywood films that has been criticized is that of cisgender actors being casted as trans characters.

Media, Social Responsibility, and Gender Representations

The media and film industry are one of the most influential cultural entities. The UNICEF research indicates that Indian advertising tends to stereotype women by promoting gender norms.

As influential entities within society, the media industry holds considerable accountability when it comes to the fair representation of marginalized groups. It is not enough to be socially responsible; the industry needs to practice ethical communication as well. In order to achieve authentic representation of marginalized groups within the media, there needs to be greater involvement of the members of these groups. Simply including transgender actors in media content is not enough to achieve that.

Cinema as a Social Mirror

Besides serving purely as entertainment, film is also an instrument that helps to reflect social realities and serves as a mirror of culture. Cinema mirrors social attitudes, ideologies, and power relations as well as helps to shape them in the course of time.

Under the paradigm of structuralism, the concept of mainstream identity is often based on the definition of minority identities. In other words, for defining its position, the mainstream must have minorities. In this context, representations of transgenders show society's understanding of what is normative, deviant, included, and excluded from mainstream.

Therefore, it is necessary to study how transgender identity positions are situated in mainstream contexts, whether they are presented as pathetic, sacrificing characters or real people.

Conclusion

The issue of separation among sexuality, gender, and gender identity still needs clarification from a theoretical standpoint. On one hand, the social constructionist view of gender has brought many opportunities into the study of identity; on the other hand, there is an urgent necessity to address the question of socialization's impact on identity.

The use of transgender individuals in Indian advertising and cinema has become quite common lately due to significant cultural transformations. Nevertheless, many depictions still resort to stereotyping, negative storytelling, and cisgender points of view. Inclusion should be based on authentic involvement of transgender individuals in film production. Such movies as *Njan Marykutty* and *Thangam* are indicative examples of both successful and problematic depiction of transgender individuals. Both films can serve as inspiration for further development of media portrayals of gender diversity.

References:

- [1] Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw: On men, women, and the rest of us*. Vintage Books.
- [2] Connell, R. W. (2002). *Gender: A short introduction*. Polity Press.
- [3] Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>
- [4] Green, J. (2004). *Becoming a visible man*. Vanderbilt University Press.
- [5] Harding, S. (1986). *The science question in feminism*. Cornell University Press.
- [6] Hausman, B. L. (2001). Recent transgender rage. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7(3), 465–490.
- [7] Hines, S., & Sanger, T. (Eds.). (2010). *Transgender identities: Towards a social analysis of gender diversity*. Routledge.
- [7] Hird, M. J. (2002). For a sociology of transsexualism. *Sociology*, 36(3), 577–595. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038502036003007>
- [8] Meena, V. V. (2022). *Treatment and typecasting of the transgender in media* [Unpublished master's dissertation]. Kannur University.

- [9] Sankar, R. (Director). (2018). *Njan Marykutty* [Film]. Dreams N Beyond.
- [10] Kongara, S., Menon, G. V., Vetrimaaran, & Shivan, V. (Directors). (2020). *Paava Kadhaigal* [Film]. RSVP Movies; Flying Unicorn Entertainment.
- [11] Smith, S. G. (1992). *Gender thinking*. Temple University Press.
- [12] Wallbank, R. (2004). Re Kevin in perspective. *Deakin Law Review*, 9(2), 461–502.
- [13] Yasin, Z., Batool, S., & Naseer, I. (2020). Exploring transgender's representation, perceptions and experiences: An analytical study of portrayal of transgenders in Bollywood movies and its effects on transgender community of Lahore, Pakistan. *Global Mass Communication Review*, V(III), 95–108.
[https://doi.org/10.31703/gmcr.2020\(V-III\).08](https://doi.org/10.31703/gmcr.2020(V-III).08)

