

## TRANSGENDER PORTRAYAL IN THE SELECTED FILMS: ANALYSING THE MAJOR SHIFT

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### ABSTRACT

Gender, race and sexuality have become a major criteria or social problem now a days. In our society, transgender, gay, lesbians or the whole LGBTQ+ community are considered as a sensitive or discriminative topic of discussion. As a result, Indian Cinema seems to have fared worse from blatant sexual objectification to glorifying stalking and harassment when it comes to the portrayal of transgenders community. In spite of the portrayal as villains or comedians, there has been a sustained 'Othering' in the representation of transgenders. But today things have changed and this so called 'Othering' in the representation or the grappled prejudices about transgender seems to have widened while tracing the evolution of their portrayal through the selected Indian films such as Sadak by Mahesh Bhatt, I by S. Shankar, Njan Marykutty by Ranjith Sankar, Super Deluxe by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui by Abhishek Kapoor and Thittam Irandu by Vignesh Karthick. The selected films show the shift towards the more normalised portrayal of them. This paper titled "Transgenders portrayal in the selected films: Analysing the major shift" presents how the selected recent films craft a pathbreaking portrayal of transgenders from that of the conventional representation and also carry the power to alter the sensibility of the society.

**Keywords:** Transgenders, Evolution in portrayal in Indian films, Analysing in major shift.

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## INTRODUCTION

Human beings are inherently social in nature, who most probably live in groups and consider interactions as an integral part of their everyday lives. They try to spend time together and exchange their thoughts, ideas and opinions, which are influential in shaping the way they think. Another important factor that moulds or shape their thinking and perspective is media, it can be any forms of media. Today, social media has created new styles of communication for us, which made huge impact on everyday lives of the people. An important and popular media that have become an inevitable part of human life is films. People often love watching and discussing films and nowadays it continues to influence the minds of the people, as a result of which representations and portrayals become crucial.

Films are given ample freedom to portray a problem, a person, a community or a country. Indian Films apparently give more room to address the social problems like violence against women, unemployment etc and try to be reflective of the attitudes of people as well. But when it comes to the portrayal of gender it has always been polemical. Though the female characters were mostly portrayed within a patriarchal framework, it is possible to trace a transition on the contrary. This is reflected in presenting transgender community in films. Historical representations of transgender people have featured stereotypical and negative portrayal that seldom tantamount to reflect the reality of transgender people. However, on analysing some select Indian films, it is possible to view a more positive transition in the portrayal of transgender community.

## Portrayal of Transgenders in selected films

Cinema constitutes the part and parcel of society. Identity construction is one of the most significant issues in the film industry. Without identity construction one cannot survive. There is a lot of inconsistencies in our society and hence it is always in a flux. It is an exigent task to build up and portray one's identity when the identity is of someone who does not fit into the mainstream society. For many years, people have been producing films about transgenders or featuring them. But the ways these community was represented were often misrepresentations: they were not accurate, realistic, or empowering, and were often one dimensional, stigmatising, and actively harmful. The portrayal of their life and issues had veered between the sarcasm, denial, biased, comic and stereotyped. But when we consider the last two decades, we have witnessed a change in the role of the sexual minorities by breaking the moral shackles and creating tolerance towards the gender variant community. There has been different trends in the Indian film industry when it comes to portraying the transgenders.

- **Sadak by Mahesh Bhatt**

The film "Sadak" is considered as a revolution in the portrayal of transgender, as the movie chose a Hijra as an antagonist. The film "Sadak" is considered a revolution in the portrayal of transgender, as the movie chose a Hijra as an antagonist. On a multimodal discourse analysis of the character Maharani who played the role of the antagonist, the stereotypical portrayal of the transgender seems evident. Clad in a saree, adorned in bangles, long hair, sporting a big red bindi, the evil Maharani in "Sadak" is nothing like an average Bollywood antagonist. The first look is enough to send chills down the spine of the audience. Having crude gestures and shaving while wearing a saree surely made the character scary. The language Maharani uses in the film seems very crude. She uses words like 'Aye, haye, haan, chal phut' symbolizing her unsophisticated

nature. Maharani has been shown in the film as devoid of any human feeling. In another scene, Maharani is seen wearing a blue saree. This is in fact the only scene where she is dressed in a saree. With her hair pinned with flowers; make up done, wearing jewellery and fake breasts. Throughout the film she is seen wearing a dress coloured black and red symbolising power, evil, death and dominance.

A suspense music played In the background whenever Maharani appears on the screen creates tension and fear in the film. She has been constructed as an impotent and reinforces the stereotype of beauty. In the first meeting with Pooja, Maharani tells her 'Kamal hai qudrat ka! Kya khoobsurati! Kya cheez banayi hai upar wale ne! Dekh dekh mere toh baal khade ho gaye haath pe, jaan hi nikal gayi meri! Oh, kya rang! Haye re yeh badan, aye haye!' Translated as:

'Beautiful! A wonder of nature! I am wonder-struck! I am almost dead out of wonder! Such a fair skin... And a curvaceous body!

'Darr matt meri jaan, darr matt. Main kuch nahi karungi, main kuch kar hi nahi sakti. Janti ho kyun? Kyunki main aadha mard aur aadhi aurat hun. Dekh na, na roop na rang- dekh yeh kismat ka khal toh dekh (while clapping her hand-typical of a hijra). Agar kuch haina mere paas toh wohai dimag. Haan, kamal ka dimag hai mere paas. Isliye mardoun ke sewa karti hun aur auratoun ka danda. Yahan ka raja, is jism ke bazaar ka maharaja aur naam Maharani'. Translated as: Don't be scared, darling! I will do nothing! In fact, I can't do anything at all. That's because I am half man and half woman. I have neither looks nor glow; a cruel joke of destiny. All that I possess is a great brain. A great brain! No wonder I serve men and sell women. The king of the flesh trade and the name is 'Maharani'.

Another scene in the film projects, the ridicule that transgender people face due to the dominance of heterosexual people in the society. Attempting to console Pooja after capturing her, Maharani opens to Pooja after hearing her sobs:

'Kya row rahi hai? Tamasha karti hai, che! Aai ladki! Row matt ladki, main bol deti hun. Kuch nahi hota rowne dhowne se! Apni Taqdeer nahi badalti, samjhi kya? Agar rowne dhowne se taqdeer toh main rowti, main nahi apni taqdeer badal leti? Main bhi bohat royi thi jab logoun ne mujhe namard kaha, hijra kaha! Lekin meri takdeer mein likha tha hijra banna toh main hijra bangayi! Teri taqdeer mein hai randi banna toh tu randi banegi! Aur top ki randi banegi, bolti hun! Apne aap se samjhota kar le, nahi toh pashtaogi! Taqdeer se nahi khelna kabhi'.

Translated as: What are you crying for and creating a fuss? Stop crying, girl! It won't change your destiny! Wouldn't I change my lot if it happened? I also cried a lot when people called me a Eunuch. But I was destined to be a Eunuch so I am one! You are destined to be a whore... and you will be one! A top one on that! I promise. Come to terms with yourself or you're going to regret it! Never play with your destiny.

Undoubtedly, Maharani is given a lot of screen space in the film but "Sadak" also justifies the negative portrayal of the transgender. Maharani as a transgender seems to pose a threat to the heterosexual in the film thus evoking a deep-rooted anger and hatred towards the transgender community. The film shows heterosexuals as victims of the wrath of Maharani as a Eunuch. Mahesh Bhatt through the film "Sadak" brings the character of a transgender into an open and serious space. Though it was for the first time in Bollywood that a transgender character got a serious character in the film but unfortunately, the projection has been full of annoyance and hatred. Such offensive representation of transgenders has widely seen in the later films and various media. These characters were later exploited for comic elements where a transgender character is artificially inserted to become the butt of ridicule.

• **I by S. Shankar**

"I" was one of the most awaited Kollywood film directed by S. Shankar. It is undoubtedly a unique story and it could have been a scathing attack on the way society models itself on physical looks. But the portrayal of one of the primary character, Osma Jasmine, a transgender makeup artist in the film has stirred up huge controversy. This character is portrayed in the film as one among the other antagonist characters and is said that she is one of the worst transgender stereotypes seen on film in recent years. She is been portrayed as a lecherous sexual predator who embodies the worst stereotypes of LGBT characters in Indian cinema.

The reason why Osma became an offensive character in the film is because of the way she is presented in the film. When we dive deep into the plot of the film, we'll get to know the strange characterisation of Osmo as a transgender. When Diya enlists a stylist to help fashion Lee, a small time model into a model-worthy look, Osmo enters. The way the first scene is shot, it itself indicates where the movie is going. There we see a shot of her legs in tiny shorts and stilettos, setting her up to be a vixen. Then we get a glimpse of her face and one of those protracted moaning soundtracks which Indian cinema loves so much plays. Her Tamil is anglicised in an effeminate manner that regurgitates the worst LGBT cliches in India. In total, we are supposed to look at her as an object of ridicule.

On the next scene, we could see that Osma openly lusts on Lee and she greets him with a kiss on each cheek. Then Diya left Lee with Osma for styling and while styling him, Osma slides her hand intentionally into his shirt. All of a sudden, Lee feels so uncomfortable and his look of horror and befuddlement is one that the audience is also expected to share. He and his friend then get up and do a song and dance routine to mock her. At that point, you hope she's a minor character who will exit the frame after that scene. Sadly that is not the case.

Then the scene shift to China, where the plot gets more worse. When Lee and Diya spends more time together, it becomes more than enough for Osma and her behaviour gets more and more outrageous. At every turn, she finds a way to violate Lee's personal space and initiate unwanted physical contact. She tried to create a rift between Lee and Diya.

Her outfits are also an important topic of discussion as it gets increasingly garish. Without any doubts, we could say that the costumes designed for the heroines in the movies are breathtakingly stunning and perfectly modelled, but Osma's costumes in this film are even more egregious that seem like fashion school rejects. Additionally, she appears next to the heroine who aside from the modelling shots and dream sequences, appears in chaste Indian clothes. At one point, Osma is wearing this extremely short skirt and see through shirt, which had one audience member derisively laughing and exclaiming "Look what she's wearing man!"

After Lee and Diya have a rift, the things gets more worse and Lee goes out with Osma for dinner. Now Lee is almost heart broken and Osma utilize this situation as she can by giving him too many drinks which makes him extremely drunken. She dances with him and her behaviour gets more and more sleazy. Lee fend her off when she tried to kiss him. But on her request, he drags her along to her room. There they fall together on the bed and she tries to have sex with him. But the worst happen when Lee pushes her away and admonishes her for her behaviour. Hethen tells her one of the most insulting things a man can say to a transgender. "You are not a human."

Later on, Osma joins a roster of villains in taking revenge on Lee by making him a disfigured creature with a hunchback. She is the archetype of the vengeful female spurned lover, except in this case it's played by a transgender. When Lee takes revenge, he switches her cosmetics and the chemicals make hair sprout all

over her body. Every other villain's form of disfigurement deals with a burnt face, giant warts on the body or elephantine legs. Hers is the only one that deals with what is considered an aspect of feminine beauty – the lack of bodily hair; as illogical as that is in itself.

Throughout the film, the portrayal of Osma Jasmine as a transgender, a human, a lover and a stylist is a utter failure and moreover delivers a negative message to the audience. They automatically produce a tendency to think like transgenders are lecherous, strange and for some, even less than 'human'.

#### • **Njan Marykutty by Ranjith Sankar**

The Mollywood movie "Njan Marykutty" which projected the transgender community in a positive light. This film directed by Ranjith Sankar paved a new path in portraying the transgender on screen. The titular role is played by Jayasurya who is considered to have done justice to the role. The film portrayed the real life of the transgender community and the problems they face in their everyday lives. The bold and determined protagonist conquers her prejudiced family, fights social discrimination and breaks all hurdles.

"Njan Marykutty" unravels the transformation of Mathukutty, enacted brilliantly by actor Jayasurya, into a transsexual woman, Marykutty. She, despite of the rigid opposition from the dear and near ones, she changed her identity. Mathukutty's attempts to dress himself as a girl were trampled down by his father. However, Mathukutty gets educated and lands in a good job.

The problem worsens when the topic of his marriage is arised. Mathukutty leaves home to consult a doctor for his reassignment surgery since he realizes that marrying a girl will ruin both of their lives. After the surgery, Mathukutty becomes Marykutty, thereby establishes her true identity.

Marykutty continues to lead her life as a normal woman though she has to encounter transphobic attitudes in the public sphere. On an instance, she was arrested by the police under a fabricated charge of drunken driving. The police even accuses her of paedophilism which left her homeless. The only support Marykutty enjoys is from the local priest. She then manages to become the RJ under the pen name RJ Angel in which she finds some sort of peace and hope.

Meanwhile she aspires to become a police officer and begins to join coaching and training to appear to the SI selection test. It is at this place where she has met with lots of insults and humiliation.

Marykutty asserts herself as a transsexual woman when he rejects the proposal of an advocate who gets attracted to her. Her encounter with the local police officer, Kunjipalu who is cruel enough to get her stripped and put in prison, reflects the harsh reality faced by the transgender community. She is being tortured and even prevented from attending the PSC examination. Later her chance meeting with the District Collector changes her life for the better. Even when situations turn bleak, Marykutty never gives up and continues her job as the RJ. She gets societal acceptance through the talk show as RJ Angel. When the character played by Aju varghese named RJ Alwin Henry give her some money as revenue for her song, few men near started to mock and insult Marykutty as a sex worker and calls her 'Ompathu'. Ironically her father who rejected her is awestruck by the magical influence of RJ Angel. On the meeting with her family, she again gets scorned by her father. Eventually everything turns out better when Marykutty clears the SI selection test and gets accepted by her family.

"Njan Marykutty" has enabled to bring about a transition in the portrayal of transgender community by unfolding much of their predicament and the insensitive attitude of people toward them. The film also seem to convey a

message that through education, empathy and social support, marginalized people are able to get rid of the clutches of prejudices against them and lead meaningful lives and contribute to society.

- **Super Deluxe by Thiagarajan Kumararaja**

Thiagarajan Kumararaja crafts a path- breaking move in the history of transgender films. Though "Super Deluxe" is not a complete transgender film, the character Shilpa played by Vijay Sethupathy is considered to be an honest portrayal of a transgender in a long time. She is humanised and the film unfolds the reasons behind the apathy of the society. Her character evokes empathy among the audience when she says about her sexuality: "Serupa mathi podra mathiri" .

Shilpa has left her wife and new born son seven years ago. As a kid, Rasukutty pines for his father's love, but when he finally meets him, he has transformed into a woman. It never changes his love for his father. He asks, "Should I call you my dad or mother?" A perplexed Shilpa says, " Oh no, I've never given it a thought till date." Rasukutty takes his father to his school where Shilpa gets humiliated by Rasukutty's friends, the principal and the watchman. But the young boy continues to support his father. All he wants is Shilpa and her love towards him. His innocence and his way of dealing with a transperson teach volumes to the society.

"Super Deluxe" draws humour from the most unlikely places. When Shilpa demonstrates how transgenders earn money, with a sharp clap, Rasukutty, her son says, "Ae . . . super pa nee." This scene invokes empathy rather than laughter. Here her son brings about hope and acceptance which reiterates the message that family support and social inclusion is crucial for the transgender community to form a part of the mainstream society.

Shilpa, like Marykutty , faces humiliation from a frightening police, Bhagavathi Perumal. The scenes between him and Shilpa make the skin crawl that mirrors the atrocities against the transgender people. However, Shilpa seems to be a person who does not care about what the society thinks of her and lives on her own terms. Yet, she is a human being who feels rejected by the society that belittles her. In a scene, Shilpa asks a florist, " What wrong did I commit? I wanted to live as a woman so I underwent that change? Is it so wrong to live a life that I envisioned [for myself]?" These questions seem to address the society on behalf of the whole transgender community. The florist gives a befitting reply which is worth pondering. She says, " What you feel is justifiable. But, it is different from what is practical?"

"Super Deluxe" paves a new path by explicitly addressing pressing issues about the transgender community. It throws light on the fact that transpersons do not need the sympathy of the society but acceptance with respect. It is considered to have shocked the conscience of the conservative culture that showed reluctance to endorse the transgender community as part of the society.

- **Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui by Abhishek Kapoor**

The Bollywood movie "Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui" directed by Abhishek Kapoor tries to tell the story of a transgender protagonist with dignity and care, without using them for comic relief. It is a sincere attempt to explore what a love story between a transgender woman and a cisgender man could look like. With much care, he portrayed before us the troubles and problems that are facing by transgender community now a days and also the film conveys the message that, what they have born like is not their fault and they do have feelings and emotions just like the so-called 'normal' people in the society.

Maanvi Brar, the protagonist trans-heroine in the film is a Zumba teacher from Ambala, who has moved to Chandigarh after her gender affirmation surgery. She was denied from her whole family and the only acceptance that she got is from her father. She has faced so much social and emotional harassments from the society. Growing a thick skin might not prevent her from getting hurt but it has taught her how to survive in a world that is hostile to trans people. With her own effort, she has been fleshed out as an endearing person who commands the respect of the viewers and she does not hanker after anyone's pity or sympathy.

The plot gets more crucial when she started her new career as a Zumba teacher in the gym owned by Manu, the cisgender hero in the film. Gradually, they fell in love with each other and began a new intimate life together. But the things get worse when Maanvi reveals her identity as a trans-woman to Manu as he eventually expresses his intention of wanting to marry her. Manu shout at her and blame her for cheating him. Manu tells her that he's going to seek revenge. He feels shame and disgusted with himself because he keeps thinking that he had "had sex with a man" and the next scene itself shows us his (or even society's) bad attitude towards transgenders when he took a bath as he return from her.

Then in the proceeding scenes we could see Manu's attitude towards Maanvi as he mock at her and compels her to leave this city and says that "Take your ugly, manly face and get lost!" otherwise he'll reveal her identity and will create a bad image in the society. Then he says that he don't want to get caught up in this trans-homo crap!. He want a normal, he want everything normal! A normal sex, a normal life. He is a normal guy, Normal!. She replied that he have no idea whom he is messing with. One scratch on his nose and he was howling like a baby. Imagine what she has cut off and what her body had endured. Think of the pain she must have gone through. So now nothing scares her anymore.

The music played on the background and the emotional shaky voice of Maanvi is enough for us to understand and feel the pain and suffering that this community is facing.

Gradually as the film goes, Manu started to think about Maanvi and educates himself about trans-women by watching videos, interacting with a trans-woman, and seeking counselling along with his friends to come to the conclusion that his relationship with Maanvi is not "abnormal". Eventually, he realizes that being born in a male body was a biological defect that Maanvi had rectified via surgery, and only Manu had to step up and accept her for who she was (Wikipedia). But when Preet and Meet find out the truth about Maanvi, they insult Maanvi in public. Out of public humiliation, she decides to leave Chandigarh but she got a phone call saying that his father is hospitalized. She rushes to the hospital and Manu accompanies her. He tells her that he wants to be with her and stands up to his family for Maanvi. In the end, we could see that Maanvi is accepted by her mom, Manu's family and everyone around her.

Maanvi (played by Vaani) has been presented in a manner that is quite different from the trans characters seen before in Bollywood. This is an important film not only from the standpoint of trans representation in Bollywood but also because of what it says about the support that parents and partners of trans people need. Vaani Kapoor says Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui tries to break stigma that there is 'something abnormal' about trans people.

- **Thittam Irandu by Vignesh Karthick**

"Thittam Irandu" is a Kollywood film directed by Vignesh Karthick aims to deliver an important social message about trans community. It tries to convey a message that trans people are normal, they do have a life and freedom to live in this society in the way they like. The thing going for Thittam Irandu is that it holds

up the suspense that this movie focused on the problems of trans community until the final reveal.

During a bus travel, the leading character named Athira, a cop in Chennai meets an aspiring actor named Arjun. Gradually they fell in love and decides to get marry. When she got a call Surya's husband Kishore saying that her childhood friend Surya was missing. She started an investigation regarding the same and later it gets revealed that she died in an accident. But Athira senses some foul play in it. Athira's efforts to find the killer and the motive for all this are what Thittam Irandu is showing us.

But while reaching its climax, a twist in the plot is revealed. Surya is actually transgender from children who always wishes to live like a man and was attracted to women. Also from the childhood itself, she fell in love with her childhood bestie, Athira. But whenever she reveals her identity truth to her family, they assaulted her and was forced to cover his identity and was forcefully married off to Kishore. After marriage, even though she tried to be his ideal wife, but as long as she is a man, she can't be that. One day, Surya bursts out to Kishore about this problem. Then she revealed the story of Barani. As a doctor and a good friend, Kishore understands her problems and helps her deal with the situation and supports in her transformation as a man. Surya undergoes the necessary procedures and successfully transforms into Arjun, a man.

Arjun comes clean to Athira and asks her to accept his love for her, as a man. Athira is overwhelmed at the sudden turn of events and miserably leaves without an answer. Despite his attempts to convince her, she cuts off all contacts with Arjun for a while and tries to process this mammoth revelation. One year later, she meets with Arjun with an answer to his proposal, but the viewers are left hanging as to what her decision would have been. The director leaves it to the

audience, they're free to fill her dialogue according to their own thoughts and acceptance towards the community.

The film uses the dialogues like in a world where rapists live freely, you can too because it's not your fault and men who raped young children are forgiven, but transpeople aren't accepted. Vignesh Karthick seems to have created a thriller around the socially relevant theme he wanted to convey.

### **The Major Shift Analysis**

The gradual change in the perspective on the transgender community seems obvious while analysing the selected films. The paper has tried to analyse the viewpoints of society and the space provided to the transgender community through the select films.

The presentation of transgenders in the films "Sadak" and "I" shows the narrow mindedness and little knowledge of the society about what is transgenders? and What is their true identity?. It's obvious that since nineties, Indian Cinema has given space for the transgenders and tried to make their voices heard, but the way they presented them was pathetic and questionable.

But by time, a change in the film industry occurs and that strongly improve the social, economic, and cultural relationship of the society with the transgenders. The marginalized transgender has braved to enter the mainstream space in Indian Cinema which is evident from the films that encompass transgender as the lead character. It's part of an attempt to stay away from the usual, stereotypical image of trans people. The films "Njan Marykutty" "Super Deluxe" "Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui" and "Thittam Irandu" paves the way for a new thought and beginning. The life story of a transgender has become the main plot of a film and started to tell their story with all its emotions and depth. In spite of those who believe in the stereotypes as seen in the attitude of the police

officers in " Njan Marykutty" and " Super Deluxe", a change can be noted in the perspectives on transgender community.

The select films help analyse the shift in the portrayal of transgender which can beconsidered as paving the path for a social inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper named " Transgender portrayal in the selected films: Analysing the major shift" shows the importance of normalisation in the representations of marginalized groups. The mind-set and problems of the society could be solved if the transgender identities of the characters were merely treated as normal. No character would be ridiculed, feared, or pitied simply for being transgender if the films treated their identities as legitimate and normal.

Everyone is normal. Just like heterosexuals or so-called 'normal' people, transgenders or the whole LGBTQ+ community do have the right to live their life in the way they want and enjoy the freedom and rights in the society. Compared to the past days, today society know whatthis community is and they are also a creation of god. So that the acceptance of this wide community in the society or among the people is increasing day by day.

Just by analysis these films released in different years itself, we understand how far thiscommunity have travelled, from nothing to something.

They are not different, they are one among us, one among those brothers and sistersmentioned in our National Pledge.

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