# Representation of Transgender in Indian Cinema through the Socio-Normative Lens

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## Abstract

The necessity for representation is not just to have representatives but also to have their voice. Hence the existence of transgender people in society raises the need for their appropriate space and authentic representation in mainstream media. However, the massive power imbalance in hetero-normative society, which is constructed upon the structure of gender binary, mainly outcasted the non-binary people who defy gender norms and conventionality. Thus, the transgender community are significantly marginalised in the organisation and in popular media, which cisgender heterosexual men dominate. Nonetheless, the presence of transgender people in society raises the need for their participation and contribution to the mainstream media. As a result, transgender people are portrayed in the cinema as exposed through the perspective of cisgender, which depicts them with a sense of otherness to evoke sympathy and pity among the majorly targeted cisgender audience. The inclusivity of media is seen through the representation of the transgender community through the cis-het narrative and performed by cishet actors who intended to portray the transgender characters positively but are often demoralised, objectified, and objectified, sexualised trans feminine that, intentionally or unintentionally, led to transphobia and transmisogyny. This paper explores the representation of the transgender community in mainstream media through the cisgender lens.

**Keywords**: Gender-binary, Transgender, Hetero-normative, Representation, Cisgender lens, Trans feminine, Transmisogyny etc.

## Introduction

What is a representation without an authentic representative? Well, a carefully played strategy is in the case of the transgender community. Human society has been predominantly categorised into the gender binary, where transgender is an umbrella term that includes people who transgress gender conventionality. Therefore, they are considered a social taboo and outcasted from modern society. Even in the Indian subcontinent, where the third gender community has been a part of the culture since ancient times is still marginalised and exploited. Hence, they were also secluded from the media representation for a very long time and were occasionally seen as portraying the traditional stereotypical image of transgender.

Such cinematic representation has gradually progressed and attempted to bring the pain and suffering of the transgender community to the modern psyche. As a result, several movies were produced from the cisgender perspective and marketed as transgender movies to show the oppression and exploitation of transgender people. However, the primary yet significant disadvantage is how authentic it is for cisgender people to narrate and portray the lives of transgender people. How could they relate and empathise with something that they never in a million years had to experience? How would they be able to deconstruct their gender privileges and imagine themselves in a world that is non-existence for themselves? How is it justifiable for transgender for not to be able to voice their narratives? Hence it is crucial to understand that these transgender-labelled movies are artistically imagined by cisgender creators and primarily intended for cisgender spectators. So that when cisgender encounter transgender people, they would become more sympathetic, feel pity for their life struggles or be curious about their body and identity rather than questioning the social construction of gender; that why do their gender privilege is perceived as inherent, and their gender identity as natural and normal hence deserved to be at the centre because queer theories do not preach to see the world from a different angle but to deconstruct the politics of gender normativity.

Therefore, the paper is categorised into segments which start with a brief explanation of sex and gender to understand the foundation of hetero-normative society and transgender people being outside the construction of binary. The following section talks about the social condition of the third-gender community in the Indian context. The third section throws light on the representation of transgender identity in Indian cinema through the cisgender lens and how the narratives have changed throughout the journey of cinema. The fourth section explains the concept of the cisgender gaze and how it is applied to the portrayal of transsexuality. The final portion brings in the idea of transmisogyny and victimisation of trans women.

### Sex and Gender: The Atomic Structure of Hetero-Normativity

To understand the structure and function of human society, it is crucial to know the basic yet complex terms sex and gender. There is a common misconception that sex and gender are the same. Therefore, it is predominantly believed that one's gender is determined by their respective sex and thus appointed to be their presumed gender identity and expression.

### Primary Sex Traits

"Sex" is a biological term that refers to whether a person is physically female or male. According to Ardel Haefele Thomas, "the physical traits which are mostly taken into account for describing "sex" are biological in origin (e.g., sex chromosomes, hormones, reproductive systems, genitals, and so forth), there is a tendency to see sex as being a "natural" aspect of gender." (Thomas, 2019).

### Secondary Sex Traits

Secondary sex traits are the social criteria for reading an individual's sex. These include remarkable physical transformation through dominant hormone levels after puberty, for instance, body proportions, fat distribution, body hair, etc.

## What is this, Gender Blender?

Gender is a social term to identify whether a person is physically, socially or legally male or female. In other words, it determines an individual's gender identity, whether they identify as male or female, gender roles and expression as masculine or feminine, a combination of both or defy such gender binary. It also includes social perception, expectation and assumption of gender or privileges and restrictions one faces based on gender.

## Gender Identity

Since the categorisation of gender is primarily based on the assigned sex, which falls into the binary (masculine and feminine), sex and gender are commonly believed to be the two sides of a coin. Those who identify as the opposite of their assigned gender or reject the constructive system of gender binary are regarded as non-binary, gender fluid, third gender or transgender, etc.

## Gender Role

The concept of gender roles is a predetermined set of behaviour one is expected to follow according to the assigned gender in society. However, it is always arguable the normative and performativity of such roles and how they are cleverly constructed to maintain the cisgender hetero-normative culture and marginalise the non-binary.

## Gender Expression

Expressing one's identified gender includes physical attributes and appearance to present themselves in the public sphere. It is culturally distinctive for males and females and strictly supervised by the hetero-normative society. "While sex is biological (male or female), gender is often defined as the ways culture and society reinforce what is masculine to go with the male sex and what is feminine to go with the female sex"(Thomas, 2019).

## Transgender: Questioning the Binary

The binary of sex and gender as either male or female solely based on genitals and reproductive organs tends to outcast the non-binary or intersex. The term transgender is used as an umbrella term to define those people who challenge gender norms and identify themselves outside the binary. "The transgender and trans categories can therefore include individuals who embrace a genderqueer, nonbinary, gender-variant, gender-expansive, or agender identity. Trans is an overarching term that includes transgender, transsexual, nonbinary, and multiple gender identities" (Thomas, 2019). It was a political effort to unite sexual minorities against the dominant hetero-normative society. However, this broad spectrum blurs the diversity and complex issues regarding sex and gender within the community; e.g., transsexuality and transvestism defy gender normativity, but their respective points are distinct. Several terms were used to describe non-binary people. One of the most ancient terms is hermaphrodite originated from Greek and, in the modern context, is known as intersex to define people with DSD. The Western medical terminology stands for disorders

of sex development which got disregarded for being too offensive as it indicates intersex people as abnormal and diseased that need compulsory treatment to be considered normal (Thomas, 2019).

**Third Gender in India: The Hijra Community**

In India, transgender people are officially recognised as the third gender and also popularly known as the hijra community; they have always maintained their presence in the Indian culture. Although the hijra community has been acknowledged and held their space from an ancient period, they are significantly marginalised in the social hierarchy. Hijra is generally considered to be men who are impotent or unable to reproduce. According to Nanda (1986), "the term hijra is often used to refer to intersex impotent men belonging to an institutionalised third gender order"(as cited in Ghosh, 2017). The traditional belief is that they possess some mystical power of fertility and prosperity; hence their prominent presence in marriage functions and birth ceremonies is considered auspicious, which is still prevalent; however, they are yet to be respected and dignified as human beings in modern Indian society. Such popular beliefs and stereotypical representation could be easily traced in Indian cinema, which focused on the monolithic side of their life and showed them in a monotonous light relatable to most of the audience. It manifests the traditional idea of transgender people earning their livelihood through performing in ceremonies or begging and often as sex workers. They are marginalised and stigmatised due to their third gender identity and subjected to social oppression and humiliation throughout their life, whether in terms of social recognition, legal authorisation, inaccessibility to public facilities, and being deprived of their right to live love and dignity in society. "In hijra conceptualisations, constructing a feminine appearance and enacting gendered practices were some of the foremost determining criteria of gender and sexuality; to a certain extent, such performative (gendered) attributes defined hijras' sense of self" (Reddy, 2005, p122). The aspect of embracing femininity and castration of masculinity becomes the target of humiliation and exploitation. The internalised misogyny combined with the transphobic nature of society led to transmisogyny, which held masculinity to be superior and ridiculed femininity as inferior. Movies like Njan Marykutty (Jayasurya, & Sankar, 2018) and Naanu Avanalla Avalu (Garani, 2015) project such ideologies where the transgender characters were ridiculed and questioned for declining male privileges and willingly embodying an inferior and suppressed identity.

**Representation of Transgender in Indian Cinema**

The most technical and advanced representation of human life would be cinema due to its visual and sound effects, which successfully managed to evoke multiple forms of pleasure and emotions into the spectators' consciousness. In this context, it is equally important to understand who is being represented and who these respective audiences are because their interest is mainly taken into account, influencing the entertainment industry's production. The visual representation induces a sense of pleasure and emotions by looking at identifiable yet fantastical and enchanting things. Hence the frame and camera angle resonate with the way of looking and provide a perspective to the spectator about how to perceive the cinema. Thus, the viewpoint should be relatable to the influential audience to make meaning out of the film. Since the transgender community belongs to the minority groups, they are mostly secluded from such representation and contribute to the production structure of entertainment where

both the creators and viewers are cisgender heterosexual people. Such exclusivity and marginalisation reflect the dominant nature of society where the hijras are not considered to be ideally suitable for hetero-normative society; hence the mainstream media often ignore them.

However, the existence and oppression of the transgender community can no longer be neglected in modern society. The emergence of queer theory brought the need to question the construction of hetero-normative society into modern consciousness. The establishment of the LGBT organisation has had an enormous impact on the portrayal of the transgender community and brought significant changes in their narrative and representation in the popular media. In earlier cinemas, transgender characters were given minor roles, subjected to mockery and ridicule for the sole purpose of comedy value and negatively portrayed as immoral, ill-intended or mentally unstable. The structure of such narratives and characters is carefully constructed to promote the idea of cisgender hetero-normative society being saner and more rational. Such a negative and stereotypical portrayal transgender community further legitimises and reinforces the transphobic perception of society.

**Misleading Appropriation of the Third Gender**

In the history of Indian cinema, transgender representation was barely brought into the mainstream media. However, there are many instances of crossing gender boundaries and norms through the concept of cross-dressing in several movies. However, these were not an explicit representation of the transgender community because of the idea of breaking gender conventionality through cross-dressing as the opposite gender by the male actors, which is purposely done either crudely or exaggerated deliberately to appear as a caricature of femininity so that their masculinity is still recognisable under the drag. Such concepts were highly problematic because, in most movies, the concept of cross-dressing dealt with the idea of deceiving and tricking others into achieving their respective goals. Later this became a popular trend in many movies, mainly in comedy films where one gender disguised and pretended to be another gender for comedy purposes. This particular concept of disguise significantly affects the transgender community and transwomen in general who are accused of their transgender identity being fake and pretentious, their process of transition as an act of fraud for either to gain certain social privileges or fulfilling their sexual fantasy. Hindocha, in her work Eunuchs in Indian Cinema (2015:1), states that "There are different types of portrayals of eunuchs in Indian cinema, such as transsexuals, homosexuals and hijras, which are all part of mainstream cinema. They are usually objects of derisive comedy or disgust" (as cited in Ghosh, 2017). In the cinematic platform where cisgender heterosexual males dominate, the transgender characters are presented through cis-het perspective and narrative; for instance, in movies like Sadak (Bhatt, 1991) and Murder 2 (Bhatt, 2011), where the transgender characters play the role of antagonist. Still, the most highlighted aspect of these characters is their transgender identity, which profoundly impacted the spectators. Initially, the nature of Maharani was shown to be strong and assertive of her identity, almost equivalent to the image of a cisgender male protagonist, degraded pathetically. In Murder 2 (Bhatt, 2011), Dheeraj Pandey is shown as the psycho-serial killer. Similarly, the portrayal of the aggressive, vengeful spirit in Laxmi (Kapoor & Khan, 2020) is not justifiable because, in a society where transgender people are feared and hated for their identity and appearance,

such characterisation furthers deepens those pre-existing beliefs. Nonetheless, such a negative portrayal of transgender people promotes stereotypes and stigmatises their image, making them unfit for civilised society. However, these movies were released before introducing the Rights of Transgender Persons Bill in 2014. Therefore, no serious efforts were taken to uplift them in society. Since then, modern narratives have become broader and inclusive and provide more disclosure to the conservative ideologies of society.

## Cisgender Lens: The Politics of Representation

The concept of the male gaze was introduced by Laura Mulvey (1989), who mentioned that "the asymmetry of power majorly controlled and constructed cinema for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses"(Mulvey, 1989). It operated at three levels; one is that of the character, the creators and the targeted spectators. Hence, females are portrayed as objects of pleasure because men produce content for men, suggesting that the male viewer is the targeted audience. Thus, the power imbalance in society is also visible on screen, where the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze.

Similarly, in the case of transgender portrayal, the creators are dominantly cisgender; hence the viewpoint becomes from the perspective of a cisgender because the film is being targeted to the majority cisgender audiences, therefore taking in their interest, the transgender characters are placed as the object of spectacle. They are viewed as the 'other' for being different and shown as fantastical and exotic beings, which build up the hierarchy of the majority cisgender being superior to the minority transgender. Such imbalance of power directly affects the portrayal of the transgender narrative, which is focused on their lives that is shown to be distinctive from that of a cisgender person. Hence the plot generally revolves around their complexities and difficulties while transitioning from their assigned gender to their identified gender and the sufferings of transgender people for facing discrimination and humiliation. It highlights their struggle during the transition, for instance, the difficulty of clothing, appearing closer to their identified gender, interacting with people, or the physical process of change through hormone treatments and surgery; such portrayals sensationalise their body and identity. Another crucial aspect is the exploitation by society for rejecting gender norms and how cisgender people do not typically face these problems regularly. As for the cisgender spectators, such narratives of transgender lives appear to be outward and not relatable to the majority audience; hence seem as fantastical, a subject of curiosity, as if getting an insight into the unknown side of the world. Such movies aimed to portray transgender lives as significantly different at both personal and social levels from cisgender people to generate sympathy and pity. Even though it represents explicit transgender characters in a positive light, it tends to emphasise the aspect of being 'other'. Cisgender creators do most of the films about the transgender community; their stories are narrated through cisgender perspective, played majorly by cisgender actors and targeted at cisgender audiences but commercialised as 'transgender movies'.

## Targeting Transsexuality: Fabricated Femininity and Manipulated Masculinity

Transexuals identify themselves opposite to their assigned sex and opt for transition, whether through a surgical procedure or gender expression, e.g., trans men (female-to-male) and trans women (male-to-female). The concept of "cisgender gaze" (Earl, 2020) becomes more

prominent while focusing on a particular type of transgender who could be glamorised and objectified, i.e., trans women. Such ideas were explicitly explored in Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (Kapoor P., Kumar B., Kumar K., & Nayar, 2022) and Pati Patni Aur Panga (Mehta & Sahani, 2020), where the role of trans women is played by cisgender female actor and not by actual transwomen to be glamorised, sexualised and quickly passed as ciswoman. However, they were marked as traps for the straight male characters who get deceived by their femininity. The revelation of their transexual identity is a significant plot twist there, theatrical and problematic, since it turns out to be a traumatic shock to the male counterpart as it provokes both transphobic and homophobic emotions in character and simultaneously to the audience. Due to not being biologically born as a female, their femininity is considered synthetic and regarded as a male body in female attire. Similarly, in Chitrangada (Mohta &Soni,2012), Rudrajit desired sex reassignment surgery to lead a normative life but got abandoned by Partho, who would instead choose a ciswoman partner over an artificial trans woman. However, the movie ended with the triumph over social expectations and not conforming to the gender binary. Eventually, it raised an important idea that in a patriarchal society, women's worth is determined by their ability to be sexualised and reproduce; thus, trans women are dismissed for their inability to produce. Hence these so-called heavy terms of authenticity and artificiality of womanhood are the by-products of patriarchal oppression, which not only disgrace the transgender community but altogether reduce the essence of women folk to their stereotypical gender role.

**Hyper-Feminisation**

"The popular media tends to assume that all transsexuals are male-to-female and that all trans women desire to achieve stereotypical femininity" (Serano, 2007). That is why the first thing that comes into mind while mentioning the term transgender is their feminine identity; such ideas have been popularised by the entertainment industry, which released the majority of the films on the trans feminine spectrum and secluded the non-binary and trans men. According to Serano, "the media often dwells on the specifics of the feminisation process, showing trans women putting on their feminine exteriors"(Serano, 2007). Thus, they became a victim of hyper-feminisation by the camera focusing on the process of appearing traditionally feminine, e.g., dressing up, makeup, hairstyle, etc., which is the commercial element in most of the movies to introduce the transgender characters from Sadak (Bhatt, 1991) till Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (Kapoor P. et al., 2021) the vast gap in the timeline is linked with the common element of hyper-feminisation of their feminine identity. It is often used as an opening or introductory part of the character, such as in Naanu Avanalla Avalu (Garani, 2015) and Njan Marykutty (Jayasurya et al., 2018), and Nagar Kirtan (Ganguly, 2017). However, the specific act of feminisation delegitimises the authenticity of transfeminism while giving the impression that their feminine identity is artificial as an act of putting on paraphernalia. Since they are not born female, they are either hyper-feminised for expressing femininity or defeminised for not acting or being feminine enough.

**Hyper-Sexualisation**

"The media often hypersexualised trans women by impersonating them as sex workers or sexual deceivers and also asserting that the purpose of their transition is primarily for sexual reasons (e.g., to prey on innocent straight men or to fulfil some kind of bizarre sex

fantasy)"(Serano, 2019). Such elements are explicitly observed in Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui (Kapoor P. et al., 2021) and Pati, Patni Aur Panga (Mehta et al., 2020), where the trans women characters are accused of hiding their 'real identity from their respected cisgender heterosexual partners for their sexual desire. They also get sexualised by the male characters as an object of their sexual fantasy and described as pleasurable in their sexual intercourse, which is the only factor that brings them closer to ciswomen. Similarly, Naanu Avanalla Avalu (Jayasurya et al.,2018) provides a similar narration of transgender people who are sexualised and forced to engage in prostitution after attaining nirvana (getting castrated) to earn their living as sex workers. In Njan Marykutty and Super Deluxe, Marykutty and Shilpa were accused and speculated to be sex workers due to the prevailing stereotypical image of transgender people. As mentioned by Serano, "such narratives not only depreciate motives of trans women for transitioning but implicitly indicate that women as a whole have no worth beyond their ability to be sexualised"(Serano, 2019).

## Objectification of Trans Femininity

According to Serano (2019), "the media often objectifies the anatomy of transgender reduced to their male sexual organ to dismiss their feminine identity and personality". The primary focus is on the physical aspect rather than exploring psychological disruption or issues like body dysmorphia or gender dysphoria, which many transgender people commonly face, except during their transition period. It degrades and reduces transsexuality to an illusion or mere fantasy.

## Effemimania: Threat to Masculinity

Movies like Nagar Kirtan (Ganguly, 2017), Naanu Avanalla Avalu (Jayasurya et al., 2018) and Chitrangada (Mohta et al., 2012) bring forth the social pressure to fit into their assigned sex and gender expression and how taking an interest in conventional feminine attributes and activities is considered to be a significant threat to the pride associated with masculinity. Even in Laxmi (Kapoor, T. et al., 2020), where Asif, a cishet man possessed by a spirit of a transgender person, indulged himself in conventional feminine activities like dressing up and grooming, his exaggerated feminine behaviour was considered taboo and disgraceful to his masculinity.

## Transmisogyny

The term transgender includes people disobeying cultural and social ideals, expectations, assumptions, and gender norms. Therefore, they became victims of social stigmatisation, but the "overwhelming majority of societal fascination, consternation and demonisation is targeted at the trans feminine spectrum" (Serano, 2019). They get doubly victimised for transgressing gender normativity and their feminine identity. Thus, the marginalisation of the trans feminine spectrum is a combination of transphobia and transmisogyny, which believe that femininity is inferior to masculinity. Boys are generally restricted from taking an interest in conventional girly activities, whereas girls are encouraged to participate in masculine activities. Regarding gender expression, women are now given a wider field and allowed to explore the men-dominated areas. It symbolises power and glory and is considered the

archetype of modernity and progress. In popular media, most transphobic jokes and slurs are indicated toward the trans feminine. Therefore, men who fail to appear traditionally masculine are ridiculed and mocked as a disgrace to humanity.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the authenticity of the transgender community must include their narratives through their voice because cisgender history displays their ordinary aspect of life in an extraordinary way that further manifests their image as others. Such depiction introduced them to the audience first as transgender and then as human beings; people focused more on their gender disparity than psychological and emotional distress. These movies have attempted to show transgender characters being dissatisfied with their physical formation and questioning their identity rather than trying to dismantle the construction of hetero-normative society, which is the leading cause of these social issues. Such categorisation of transgender movies limits their area of creativity. It mainly focuses on the typical plots and narration that solely emphasise the social issues of transgender rather than showing them as a part of the mass. Transgenders are defined as what cisgender people think they should be depressed, emotionally distorted, frustrated and struggling with themselves, desired to fit into body normativity, mentally unstable, superstitious, etc. Such descriptions are general public beliefs which are just artistically portrayed by cisgender creators to cater to the majority of cisgender audiences and proclaim the title of inclusive and progressive as the modern society. However, these movies could not be completely qualified as authentic enough, even if they represent a positive portrayal of the transgender community. They intentionally or unintentionally disenfranchised the transgender community by not allowing them to express themselves and voice their narratives.

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