

Understanding Sexuality: Portrayal of Sexual Minorities in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

Sexuality is a very complex and an unconventional concept. In a country like India, where talking about sex is a taboo where sex education is still struggling to become part of the mainstream education curriculum. Talking about the expression and exploration of one's sexuality is subjected to moral/religious sanctions and social control. It is an unexplored territory and learning about sexual discourse is a stigma existing in the society from a very long time owing to the cultural scripts which judges sexual conversation as "immoral." On the other hand, like food, cloth and shelter sex is also the basic need for the people. Human beings are inherently sexual creatures. No matter how one denies it, but sexuality is pervasive since the starting of the human civilization. The term 'sexuality,' in its contemporary meaning of 'possession of sexual powers, or capability of sexual feelings,' first entered the English language in 1879 according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Although sexuality and sex are a very intimate and private aspects of one's life but sociologically it is very much embedded in the social and political sphere. Building upon this point, one can say that cinema is also the superstructure of the society. Cinema is not only a popular and a powerful vehicle for leisure, education, culture, entertainment, and propaganda within the society but it creates a debate, discourse, a conversation, an atmosphere of thoughts in the society. Thereby, one can say that watching a film becomes a sociologically significant event. Cinema has the power to create, recreate and dismantle existing meanings in the society. Representations of sexuality in films are normatively heteronormative and do not always highlight the deviations in sexual orientations and expressions. Media representation holds a very paramount place in today's world. Thereby, this paper will deal with the concept and meaning of sexuality and how cinema depicted alternative sexuality with a two – way process. Firstly, how it depicted society's inherited attitude and bias towards individuals of alternative sexuality but at the same time, addressing those preconceived notions of homophobia and offering us a new perspective of looking at the world from a non-heteronormative lens.

Keywords: Sexuality, alternative sexuality, sexual minorities, films, gender

Sexuality is a very complex and unconventional concept. In a country like India, where talking about sex is a taboo where sex education is still struggling to become part of the mainstream education curriculum. Talking about the expression and exploration of one's sexuality is subjected to moral/ religious sanctions and social control. Learning about sexual discourse is a stigma existing in the society from a very long time owing to the cultural scripts which judges sexual conversation as "immoral." The term 'sexuality,' in its contemporary meaning of 'possession of sexual powers, or capability of sexual feelings,' first entered the English language in 1879 according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Although sexuality and sex are a very intimate and private aspects of one's life but sociologically it is very much embedded in the social and political sphere. For sociological purposes, it is important to differentiate between sex, gender, and sexuality. The term 'sex' refers to the physical differentiation between the biological male and the biological female. Gender, on the other hand, refers to describing the behavioural differences between men and women, which are labelled as "masculine" and "feminine." Catherine Mckinnon asserted that "Gender is the social interpretation of sex" 1989.

Gender is "the sum total of the parents the peers,' and the culture`s notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (Millett 1970, 31).

'Sexuality' is defined as how people experience and feel about their bodies, pleasures, and desires, as well as their sexual identity. Stephen L. Goettsch (1989) Sexuality is an individual capacity arising within each person, not originating from external source. The awareness about one`s sexuality is externalized through the societal and cultural manifestations.

According to Abbott et al (2005) Sexuality is usually taken to refer to the social experience and expression of physical bodily desires, real or imagined, by or for others or for oneself. It encompasses erotic desires, identities, and practices.

According to David M. Halperin (1989) Sexuality contains three domains. First, sexuality defines itself as a separate, sexual domain within the larger field of human psychophysical nature. Secondly, it is demarcated by other social and personal life aspects such as carnality, vengery, libertinism, virility, passion, amorousness, eroticism, intimacy, love, affection, appetite, and desire. Finally, sexuality generates one's sexual identity or sexual orientation. Individuals are different to each other in terms of their sexual orientation.

Sexuality has four aspects: (1) sexuality is an individual capacity, (2) sexuality is experiential, (3) sexuality is body-oriented, and (4) sexuality is genitally oriented (Goettsch, 1989). Sexuality is a modern phenomenon which has emerged in the 18th and the 19th century but not to say that individuals do not engage in sexual or intimate activities before, but the perspectives around the understandings of sexual experiences has been changed since the modern times.

Sexuality is not one universal fixed or stable entity. Instead, there are different and diverse types of sexualities or sexual orientation. Sexual orientation refers to attraction towards other either romantically or sexually or both. There are many different types of sexuality but broadly we can state the following types. *Heterosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of the opposite sex; *homosexuality*, the attraction to individuals of one's own sex; *bisexuality*, the attraction to individuals of either sex; and *asexuality*, no attraction to either sex. Sexual orientation is a fluid concept. An individual sexual orientation can change over times. Drawing from this one can say that there can be sexual experiences, practices, attractions etc which may or may not always align with one's gender or sex and people can experience varied sexual attractions and can have various sexual identities. Thereby, we can say that sexuality is a socially cultural phenomenon. After providing a brief overview of the concept and meaning of sexuality. One can proceed to the second section of the paper.

Different perspectives on Sexuality

There are four perspectives on sexuality. These are as follows:

Essentialist perspective of Sexuality

According to the essentialist perspective of sexuality, sexuality is the result of biological and psychological essence. Sexuality or sex is the basic human drive of human beings and it exists within the human body like a property of the individual. The essentialist or pre social model of sexuality sees one's sexual identity as fixed, stable and is determined by the biological or psychological factors. As a result, sex is a natural activity of the human beings, only heterosexual sex i.e., between two opposite sex is natural that ideally takes place within the institution of marriage and only genital sex is the driving force of the society. According to this perspective, only those sexual acts or encounters which falls in the domains of the above-mentioned categories are deemed as "normal" sexual behaviours and others are just socially deviant sexual acts.

Within the essentialist theory of sexuality one can discuss the work of psychologist Sigmund Freud. According to Freud, sexuality is the result of drives and instincts i.e., libido. According to Abbott et al (2005) sexuality according to the psychoanalytic perspectives is determined by the childhood experiences or arrested libidinal development. The experiences of childhood will determine which acts can be classified as normal and abnormal sexual acts. Therefore, lesbianism is seen as mother fixation and gay men are the result of a strong mother figure in the house and submissive father figure or the absent of a father figure altogether. Therefore, one can see that heterosexuality is treated as the dominant and normal sexual act and homosexuality is something which is abnormal, deviant or something like a gender related disorder according to this perspective.

Modernist perspective of Sexuality

The modernist perspective of sexuality is identified with the concept of Sexology. According to Abbott et al (2005) sexology is concern with establishing what is normal and natural in terms of

sexuality and sexual identity in accordance to the scientific logic and proof. It eliminates sexuality from the domains of religious and moral doctrines and attempted a scientific study of sexual behaviour. But on the ground level, sexology has provided scientific justification to the essentialist theory of sexuality meaning, only heterosexual sex is normal and natural rest are just deviant acts. The modernist perspective of sexuality has provided patriarchal definitions of sexuality, it is highly gendered where male sexuality is the ultimate form of sexuality and projected women as sexually passive and submissive creatures. The sexology is highly gendered it represents sex from the men 's gaze, control of women by men within the institution of marriage which is heterosexual. "Normal" sexuality is one which is monogamous, between two opposite sex and for the sole purpose of reproduction. This perspective serves two purposes one is the sexual objectification of women. Women sole purpose is to satisfy men's sexual needs and desires and marginalization of sexual minorities like gay, lesbian, bisexual etc.

Sociological perspectives on Sexuality

According to this model, sexuality is socially constructed. The sociological model of sexuality begins in the 1960s and 1970s. The social constructionist approach to sexuality begins with the works of William Simon and John Gagnon who introduced the concept of sexual scripts. Sexual scripts can simply be defined as social rules, regulations, roles, and cultural factors that serves as a guide to a sexual behaviour. Sexual scripts decide the conduct of individuals with reference to sexual acts. There are three major forms of sexual scripts:

1. Personal scripts are those in our heads – telling us, for instance, what turns us on.
2. Interactive scripts are those which emerge from sexual relations – between partners or groups, for instance, and which tell us what role to play.
3. Historical–cultural scripts are those which exist in culture and society, and which tell us what is expected of us sexually in any given society (Abbott et al, 2005, p. 204).

Basically, the social constructionist approach sees sexuality not as a fixed or stable entity pre-determined by biological or psychological factors but instead it is the result of the interaction that occurs between the individual and the society or the larger social, economic, and political factors. According to Longmore (1998) sexuality is socially constructed and individuals learn about different and diverse sexual behaviour within a particular cultural context and the location in the underlying social structure which determines the social construction of reality which also includes conceptions of sexuality and sexual acts. A social actor defines the situation differently and attach different meanings. For example, for some bathroom parks can be used for the sole of sanitation but for a homosexual individual it can used for covert homosexual gratification (Longmore, 1998). Foucault in his work which is titled as *The History of Sexuality* (1979) has talked about how sexuality is created through discourse. Discourse can be defined as any public framework of thinking at a particular time. To understand his views on sexuality it is important to shed light on

the concept of Repressive Hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, during the middle age free attitude prevails with reference to sexuality. Then in the 17th century, the bourgeois repressed sexuality on the account that they did not want to waste their energy on sexual acts and solely wanted to focus on the economic production. Also, during the 17th century only, the discourse on sexuality also changed with the coming up of science or sexology. This relates to the concept of power and knowledge, according to it power is everywhere and is not always destructive but creative too. According to Foucault, power is not something which repressed sexuality but has created and constructed the concept of sexuality. Any kind of subjectivity is the outcome of discourse thereby, the view that sexuality is constructed and reconstructed through discourse. As a result, an idea of “healthy sexuality” emerged due to the scientific study of sexuality which puts emphasis on heterosexuality and marginalizes alternative sexualities.

Feminist perspectives on Sexuality

The feminists see sexuality as the outcome of power relations in the society. They rejected the sexology views that represents male sexuality as the ultimate form of sexuality and heterosexuality is the only standard, universal and normal form of sexuality. They see sexuality as the complex interplay of various relations of power such as class, caste, gender, ethnicity, religion etc. feminists' views heterosexuality as the norm of controlling women bodies and labour by men which leads to further sexual violence and exploitation. It also leads to the negative labelling of women.

Under this theory one can discuss the work of Judith Butler (1990). According to her, sexualities are created and lived through the act of performance. Gender is not something one is, rather what one does. It is product of repeated acts of gender performance. She has given the concept of gender performativity which gets repeated either through manners, walk, style etc makes a person either “man” or “woman.” According to Butler (1990) there is no one identity instead we have different identities which we as social actors “performs” in different social contexts. This view also emphasized the fact that heterosexuality is not natural or normal but merely an act of performance amongst different alternatives. The feminist perspective sees how the concept of sexuality is itself gendered as society as double sexual standards in regulating the sexual acts of both men and women. Overall, from a feminist standpoint, sexuality is the terrain of dominant patriarchal relations and the forced enforcement of compulsory heteronormativity which needs to be challenged and addressed at the earliest.

Representation of alternative sexuality/ sexual minorities in Indian Cinema

Cinema is a popular and a powerful vehicle for leisure, education, culture, and propaganda within the society. The influence and reach of cinema are far greater than any other medium like books, newspapers etc. The cinema is a unique form of art created with a specific narrative and representational aspects. Films acquire social, cultural, and historical significance not just by the fact that they entertain people. It is because they can reach a mass audience and connect with

some part of the conscious or unconscious experience of the public. Films are about stories and discourses which comes out of the people, the ideas and the thoughts that are existing at a particular time. Thereby, films are the reflection of the society and the society also reflects the film culture. As films has the power to exercise influence on the individuals. However, the influence can be both positive and negative. Films are not only the source of entertainment but they create a debate, a conversation an atmosphere of thoughts in the society. According to the theoretical perspectives, the film is not the product of an individual artist but the underlying cultural patterns, social location of the maker and the discourse which has been existing in the society. As social actors, we exist within social institutions and social processes of the society. Therefore, films necessarily tell us something about the aspects of life in the society. The narratives, visuals and the themes and the content of a film can be examined from the sociological lens. Thereby, one can say that watching a film becomes a sociologically significant event. Cinema has the power to create, recreate and dismantle existing meanings in the society.

Simply speaking, Alternative Sexuality is defined as behaviours, personalities, and groups that differ from and/or oppose communally and traditionally dominant sexuality perceptions. In popular perception, lesbians, transsexuals, gays, queer, and bisexuals, queer, asexual, and intersex among others, are all part of the fabric of alternative sexualities.

As already mentioned, films are the reflection of the society but at the same time films also create certain types of discourses within the society which eventually has an affect (positive, negative, or neutral) on the wider scale. Representations of sexuality in films are normatively heteronormative and do not always highlight the deviations in sexual orientations and expressions. Biased or stereotypical perceptions about alternative sexualities, exist especially because society decides to believe them, and because such stereotypes are also disseminated by the medium of cinema. Therefore, one can see that it is a two-way process.

Even women' sexuality was mostly misrepresented in Indian cinema let alone alternative sexuality. Mostly, in Indian cinema women are projected as passive and submissive sexual beings whose sole purpose is to satisfy the men's sexual needs and desires or simply as a sex object. However, one can talk about representation of women' sexuality in alternative cinema for examples movies of Shyam Benegal "*Ankur*" (1974) and "*Nishant*" (1975) has not only through light on the social and political injustice but the women of his films are strong, self-assertive in terms of their sexuality and at the same time owning their faults and weaknesses. His films triumph the agency of women, they own their sexual needs and desires especially of the lower strata of the society as a response to the existing status – quo.

The first film which one can talk about is **Deepa Mehta's *Fire*** (1996). The film is loosely based on Ismat Chughtai 1942 story "*Lihaaf*" (The Quilt). It was one of the first films in Indian cinema which has talked about homosexuality and particularly Lesbian relationship explicitly. The

movie revolves around two women Radha and Sita played by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das respectively. Both women are unhappy in their respective married life. Radha is a barren woman who could not perform the roles which a patriarchal society assigns to women i.e., of a procreator and a mother. On the other hand, Sita suffered from infidelity from her husband. As a result, both being shunned in their married life by their respective husbands as a result, find solace in each other. They find the love which they truly deserve. *Fire* is an apt representation of women exploring their sexuality and exercising agency over their bodies. The female characters are not stereotyped or ridiculed or mocked up in the film. Instead, it is shown that homosexual relationship or a lesbian relationship is very much normal like any other heterosexual relationship. Although, the movie explored female sexuality but it has been critiqued on the ground that the homosexual relationship was the outcome of their failed marriages and it propagates the view that when women can't find happiness and fulfilment of desires especially sexual desires they turned towards other alternative forms of relationships. Although, Deepa Mehta herself clarified that her movie was about women making choices and taking control over their agency. Whatever, the case may be *Fire* is one of the fine portrayals of female desire and Lesbianism in Indian cinema which eventually served as a form of resistance to the dominant heteronormative discourse of the patriarchal society.

Another film which projects same sex relationship is **Shelly Chopra Dhar 's *Ek Ladki Ko Dikha Toh Aisa Laga*** (2019) Starring Sonam Kapoor as the female protagonist, it tells the story of young introvert girl of coming out as a lesbian in an orthodox Punjabi family. Sweety (Sonam Kapoor) has a secret relationship with another girl whom she loved ardently. The film is about finding love and acceptance and holding that love has no gender. It is about the journey of a girl who faces various struggles within herself and to the larger society in coming up to the terms of her sexual identity. Although, the love interest of Sonam Kapoor is rarely shown in the film occasionally for a few shots in the films. The movie was more about the struggles and psychological and emotional pressure which a homosexual woman faces in a heteronormative society. It is quite appreciating that a mainstream commercial cinema is taking up such controversial and sensitive topics without ridiculing and producing stereotypes against the sexual minorities.

Shonali Bose 's *Margarita with a Straw* (2014) is another important film which has talked about the sexual desires of a disabled woman. At the same time other such challenging issues like of inclusion of a disabled person, their struggles in a society of abled people are addressed in the film. The film also projected the view that how being an individual of non – conforming sexual orientation interplays with other types of marginalization i.e., disability. The film revolves around a girl named Laila (played by Kalki Koechlin) who is suffering from cerebral palsy. Laila, is a lively girl despite her disability, she studies in Delhi university and is a lyricist. In Indian cinema, the sexuality of able – bodied women are a startling idea let alone the sexuality of a disabled woman. The film showed how Laila, like any other girl has sexual needs, she masturbates, watches porn, and openly fantasies about men and women. When Laila, went to New York for a

creative writing programme, she got attracted to another blind woman and embarks on a tremulous same sex affair. But within the course of time, Laila discovered that she is bisexual. The film is about a disabled woman exploring her sexuality and discovering that she is a bisexual woman. It can be said that her lovers and her sexual encounters become tools in her quest for self – actualization. The movie first, is commendable for its projection of a cerebral palsy individual and at the same its representation of women sexuality. Like men, women too have sexual needs, a disable also has sexual needs and desires like any other abled individual. It is about a woman who accepts and acknowledge herself, who exercises her agency whether in professional matters or sexual matters. She knows what she wants, what she desires, outspoken about her sexuality and accepting herself as a bisexual woman who refused to be boxed in a heteronormative world.

So far, we have discussed female same-sex relationships in Indian cinema. Let us now look at how gay characters are portrayed in Indian films. Gay characters in mainstream commercial cinema are mostly portrayed as amusing elements to be mocked. They are not “real men,” as they exhibit feminine traits, dress like women, and make advances to any other man they encounter. *Dostana* (2008), a film directed by Karan Johar, is an excellent example of a stereotypical prejudiced film that contributes to societal homophobia. But there are some films which are worth mentioning here for its apt, fine and a sensitive portrayal of gay characters and their issues, life, and struggles.

The first film which one can discuss is *Aligarh* (2015) directed by **Hansal Mehta**. The film is based on the real-life account of a Marathi professor in Aligarh Muslim University named as Ramchandra Srinivas Siras. (Indian Cinema, 1995). Professor Siras was a gay who was suspended on the grounds of morality when his privacy was invaded and he was filmed having sex with a rikshaw puller who was apparently Muslim, the love interest of the professor. He was ridiculed, called names, and was forced to leave the town and the university. The film advocates gay rights and the loneliness of a homosexual person which he is subjected to owing to his sexual identity. Like, one’s religion identity sexual identity is a personal affair but we have seen how professor Siras private moments were filmed and his personal space was invaded. Professor Siras was found dead under mysterious circumstances. His death was not an individual act but a social act. (Durkheim, 1897). Society’s homophobic attitudes has contributed to the death of professor Siras. Professor Siras time and again refused to be called upon as gay, this reflects the notion that he prefers to remain outside the binary of sexual orientation and prefers to explore his individuality. *Aligarh*, portrays the life of a gay man like any other man of cis- gender. instead, of being a parody of a gay character, the film reflects the real-life struggles of a gay person and it manages to remove the image of homosexuals as perverts. The ostracization of professor Siras by the society in the film, has very finely depicted society attitudes towards sexual minorities in the real world, the homophobic structure of the Indian society. It tells us that as a society, we have a long way to go in accepting people of different sexual orientations and preferences. *Aligarh* is a

fine example of art which aptly describes the power relations in the society pertaining to one's sexual orientation.

Salim Kidwai who was the first and pivotal writer of the LGBTQIA+ movement in India has talked about people from this community are forced to live an isolated life. The writer has discussed the problems of the LGBTQIA Community and how being gay and being Muslim in a society like India is a challenging task itself. He has also talked about HIV aids is seen as spreading homosexuality in the society thereby, through light on the ignorant and arrogant nature of the society. He has also hinted at the homophobia of the homosexual people too. Its high time that one should accept and recognize alternative families of the new emerging sexual identities. (Indian Cinema, 1995.)

Kapoor and Sons (2016) by **Shakun Batra** is another film which projects a gay character in a dignified manner. Although, the film was about interpersonal family conflicts. The element of homosexuality was introduced when one of the sons, played by Fawad Khan comes out as gay. One aspect of the film deals with Rahul (played by Fawad Khan) in hiding his sexuality from his family, at the same time the journey of getting acceptance from his family. The film manages to normalized gay characters like any other cis gender. The film also projected how gay individuals are forced to live in a closet out of fear of being stigmatised, ridiculed, and misunderstood. The film depicted that being gay does not mean the person exhibits feminine traits, it is not out of choice but instead it is natural, like any other heteronormative relationship.

My Brother.... Nikhil (2005) directed by **Onir** is another film which depicts gay relationships are like very much normal and similar as that of cis- gender relationships. It was one of the first films which deals with HIV Aids and same sex relationships. The story was settled in Goa, when the male protagonist who was a swimming champion was diagnosed with Aids his whole world comes to collapse. Only, his sister and his love interest, remained by his side. Based on the real-life experiences of Dominic D 'Souza, a champion swimmer who was gay, the film had tackled homosexuality without treating it as an ugly joke, a dirty alliance, or an aberration. The film very aptly showed how same sex relationship goes through the same ups and downs like any other heterosexual relationship. They were shown to be as intimate, as insecure, and as jealous in their interaction like any other heterosexual couple. The film does not depict gay characters as objects of fun or mockery but instead reflected real life struggles of a gay couple when one of them was diagnosed with HIV Aids. The film not only projected homosexuality in a fine manner but also taken up a topic like Aids that was much of a taboo in the existing society at that time. The film also addressed the issue that HIV Aids has nothing to do with the homosexual relationship of the male protagonists. Thereby, debunking the fallacy that being gay and HIV positive are synonymous.

One can also talk about Bengali film director **Rituparno Ghosh's** film "**Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish**" (2012) with reference to same sex relationship. The film revolves around

the character Rudra played by Ghosh himself who lived life against the societal conventions. He is a choreographer against his father wish of being an engineer. He falls in love with a drug addict percussionist Partho and soon they developed their passionate love affair. The problem arises when the couple wanted to adopt a child but they could not as same sex couple are not eligible for adoption in India which is why Rudra decides to undergo sex reassignment surgery to be a woman, to be eligible to adopt a child with Partho. Thereby, the film depicted the patriarchal idea of society that motherhood is only for women. The film depicts the daily struggles of a queer man, his relationship with his parents, and the society around him. It does an excellent job of highlighting the loneliness and selflessness of a homosexual person while also educating the audience on the various difficulties faced by members of the LGBTQ community. The film very finely depicted the patriarchal attitudes which were prevalent in the society i.e., family unit is only for heterosexual people and how a person who does not prescribe to the binary sexual identity is forced to adopt or fit into the heteronormative structure of the Indian society.

Methodology

The methodology which is used in this paper is secondary in nature. Various research articles, journals and books have been studied and reviewed to comprehend the concept of sexuality and the various theoretical perspectives of sexuality. The researcher used the Non- Random Purposive Sampling Method to select the films that were analysed in this paper. Along with it, data has also been collected from various film magazines, film reviews and other such web resources.

Conclusion

Sexuality although, a very unconventional and a taboo topic to be openly discussed in the society is longer a dormant concept. Many studies are coming up in order to investigate the complexity and approaches of sexuality through various prisms. Like any other need, sex is also a basic need for human beings and every human has the right to exercise their agency over their bodies, sexuality, and life. At some point of time, gender and sexuality were treated as one domain of study but eventually we see sexuality requires its own body of knowledge. As the various theories discussed in this study proves this point. We are living in a postmodern society, a society of fragmented identities, disjuncture, or liquidity as Bauman said. Similarly, sexuality is not universal, there is no one sexual identity instead we have alternative sexualities. Heteronormativity is not the only standardised norm of the society. The world is ceased to be seen in binary categories, the society is now bombarded with infinity of meanings and identities. Its high time we as sociologists, researchers, academicians and above everything else as humans, understand the uniqueness of every human being, move beyond tolerance to acceptance and should pay respect to the difference and diversity of the people and at the same time honour the otherness of the other i.e., the sexual minorities of the society.

Media representation holds a very paramount place in today's world. This paper has discussed how cinema depicted homosexuality/ alternative sexuality with a two-way process. Firstly, it depicted society's inherited attitude and bias towards individuals of alternative sexuality but at the same time, it addressed those preconceived notions of homophobia and offers us a new perspective of looking at the world from a non-heteronormative lens. When talking about and representing any minorities let alone sexual minorities mediums like cinema should adopt ethics of care in their projection and depiction of non – conforming sexual identities or any other type of identities that do not prescribe to the dominant discourse.

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