

Breaking the Silence and Stigma on Gender & Sexuality - An Analysis of Popular Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Gender and sexuality are the identity of an individual that establishes their social status. An understanding towards it and embracing the attributes associated with them is crucial. Since ages, gender and sexuality have set qualities, stereotypes and stigmas attached and carved around them. These act as the representations in society. It is also seen that acceptance and discussion beyond the usual norm/ belief is tabooed. Communication on gender and sexuality is very subtle when it is essential to be loud. Indian cinema does play a role in gender and sexual communication. Many a times it is aligning to the established norm while few do make an effort to delicately talk about changing perspectives. Post 2020, there are few popular Indian cinemas, that tried breaking the silence and stigmas by boldly establishing the shifting perceptions on gender and sexuality. They brought in the thought process on the need to alter the societal mindset in evading the stigmas constructed around gender and sexuality. The Qualitative content analysis of three movies post 2020 reveals the initiation of conversations by the movies on the tabooed gender and sexuality. They subtly communicated on the need for coming out of the stereotypes, breaking the silence than suffering and reflected the gradual shift in the social norms.

Keywords: Popular Indian cinema, gender, sexuality, stereotypes, stigma & social norms.

I. Introduction

In our culture, conversation around gender and sexuality is tabooed and silent. They have the set attributes in identification and understanding as representations in the society. Stereotypes, a set of beliefs and stigma are attached to define the identities in the purview of social norm. Any behaviour that doesn't align to the attributes established in the social norm is unacceptable and unappreciated. Many atrocities and social issues surrounding gender and sexuality doesn't see light due to the closed societal mindset. Conversations on gender and sexuality is sensitive and controversial many a times. Despite this, slowly we can see the silence breaking in the minds of masses and finding some space for conversations. There is a gradual alteration in the societal norms and one can witness the shifts. Efforts are seen to defy the stereotypes and expose the unpleasant architecture of social norms around gender and sexuality.

In this effort, popular Indian cinema has its role in reflecting the shifts through compelling stories. Motion pictures indomitably reflect the social and cultural attitudes gender and sexuality, the roles, the societal norms, attitudes and expectations. Indian cinema, from past few years have started portraying gender and sexuality issues, their representation, issues, domestic violence and breaking the stereotypes attached. It is questioning the belief and stigmas by creating conversation. Harsh reality surrounding female sexuality, LGBTQ, toxic masculinity oppressive patriarchy and gender inequality are portrayed through established and popular actors. Indian popular cinema is definitely making a stride in reflecting the social change and acting as a driving force in breaking the silence and stigma on gender sexuality.

The present paper has qualitatively analysed the content of the popular Indian cinema post 2020. The movies were selected based on their efforts to break the silence and stigma on gender and sexuality with idolized actors. The parameters like establishing the stigma, reflecting the shifts through characters and breaking the silence and stigma are analysed.

II. The Popular Cinema on Gender & Sexuality

Three movies based on their content on gender and sexuality were chosen for the study. The movies are Darlings, Kaathal: The Core and Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye.

2.1. Darlings (2022)

Darlings is Hindi Cinema starring Alia Bhat in the lead is written and directed by Jasmeet K Reen. With women as protagonist the movie delves on the domestic violence. the characters Badru (Alia Bhatt) & Hamza (Shefali Shah), the mother daughter duo avenges the oppression by Badru's alcoholic husband Hamza played by Vijay Varma. This black comedy drama attempts to expose the reality of oppression on women, gender inequality and toxic masculinity that many suffer in marriage. The film maker through comedy has skilfully carved on how the wife along with her mother retaliates and fights against the husband.

2.2. Kaathal – The Core (2023)

Kaathal – The Core, is a Malayalam language movie directed by Joe Baby with Mammooty and Jyothika in the lead. It is a bold attempt that initiated conversation on homosexuality in the backdrop of conservative Kerala culture. The movie narrates the story of a closeted gay man in a heterosexual marriage. The protagonist Mathew (Mammooty) contesting the local election faces the divorce petition from his wife Omana (Jyothika) on his sexuality i.e., he is gay. The movie subtly threads out the effects created by the case on the family, community and his political entitlements.

2.3. Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye (2023)

Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye is a kannada film written, directed and acted by Raj B Shetty. The film explores the various intricacies of social expectations from the women and brings us to think on the stigmas attached. It draws us to see the complexities in marriage, infidelity and constraints. The movie subtly explores on seeking love beyond the marriage. It tells the story of a married woman, Perna (Siri Ravikumar), also a counsellor in palliative care who handles issues in her marriage with utmost maturity and finds love in a terminally ill patient Aniketh (Raj. B. Shetty). It delicately showcases the social expectations and norms that binds woman.

These movies started conversations on the gender and sexuality which is bound with stereotypes. The sensitive issues were beautifully brought to the society by the film makers showcasing the gradual shifts happening in the social norms. All the movies share certain commonalities in presenting the issue surrounding the gender and sexuality.

III. Emphasizing the stereotypes & stigmas

All the three movies in the initial, align the lead characters to the socially accepted norms. They ensure that the characters are bound with stereotypes and stigmas dictated by the society. In movie Darlings, Badru played by Alia Bhatt initially stays to the social code 'a good wife', tolerating the violence meted by her husband. She waits patiently with a hope that he will change and silently bears the violent tendencies while the community turn a blind eye towards it. It also establishes the toxic masculinity and inequality in marriage which is normalized in the society. The same is portrayed in the Kaathal- The Core, where the character Omana (Jyothika) though an educated and writer herself still remains devoted as home maker staying in the marriage for eighteen years. She is composed with no expression of disgruntlement at her husband's sexuality. The filmmaker clearly emphasizes on stereotypical women who are silent receivers without a complaint and stays true to the social code. In Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye, the director establishes the character Perna (Siri Ravikumar) as the conventional married woman who does the routine house hold chores ardently before she leaves to the work. It clearly depicts the social expectations from a married woman to manage all the chores of the house without any expectation of support from the man. It also emphasizes on woman's reception of married life even if devoid of love and care. her silence towards her husband's extra marital affair is labelled as maturity and appreciated.

IV. Reflecting the Shift in the social norm

The domestic violence victim Badru in Darlings was helpless in the initial part of the movie by remaining silent. Her socially accepted role sees a shift in the second half with Badru taking violence as the tool to retaliate against oppression. Mother daughter duo turn merciless by taking vengeance against Badru's husband after the intensity of abuse from him turns extreme. Though the hatred and vengeance by the filmmaker is depicted through dark comedy, there is effort to make one think and causes discomfort as the gendered expectation from women is being helpless victim. The Kaathal – The Core movie depicts homosexuality when Omana, silently married for eighteen years files a divorce on the grounds of her husband's sexuality and not fulfilling the marital duties. It shows her unwavering decision to stand firm by not withdrawing the case even while she is pressurised by her family and the community. The movie subtly speaks on acceptance in the family with daughter extending her support. The Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye director reflects the shift in the social norm while the lead woman finds love in the terminally ill patient in the palliative care. it explores on the freedom

and right a woman needs to have in seeking for love beyond marriage when she is devoid of it in marital life. the character boldly expresses her love and her moms support deflates the stereotypical role of women.

V. Breaking the Silence and Stigma

Jasmeet K Reen in Darlings breaks the silence on domestic violence and toxic masculinity in marital life through dark comedy. She hits hard by reversing the stereotypical role of woman from silent sufferer to retaliator against violence. The movie provokes one to think on the complexities that woman face trapped in abuse. It depicts strong women who can fight against the odds breaking the social stigma of being a quiet recipient of violence.

Director Joe Baby through his movie Kaathal - The Core has initiated a conversation on homosexuality in the conservative Kerala. The story of acceptance unfolds in the Christian catholic community which usually views homosexuality as unacceptable behaviour. The stigma attached on being silent on sexuality is debunked through characters coming out openly in the community. The protagonist Mammooty winning local elections after coming out as gay subtly shows the social shift and allows for a discourse on gender and sexuality.

Writer, actor & director Raj B Shetty through Swathi Mutthina Male Haniye has questioned the old beliefs and morality surrounding only woman. In the movie, he deflates the stigmas in marital life when woman has to succumb to acceptance, responsibility and silence and echoes subtly on the freedom to live, love and express. Woman's right for happiness, desire and love should not be curbed in the shackles of constrained marital life is sensitively communicated.

VI. Conclusion

Indian Cinema has played a pivotal role in reflecting the societal issues. The study reveals that popular movies have brought the tabooed issues surrounding gender and sexuality to the public glare. Through the idolized and big stars, the movies are an effort to draw the attention of the community on the sensitive themes. It is seen that mainstream cinema are exploring and exposing the stereotypes and stigmas attached. There are subtly communicating and initiating conversation on the positive shift in the social norms. The analysis of the movie's highlights on stereotypes surrounding women, homosexuality, marital issues and the importance of coming out. They have brought the perspectives on the gender and sexuality issues which lacked space otherwise. It crucially talks on the need for the social change and embracing the gradual shift in the society. The movies embark on how we are entangled in the stereotypes and suffer silently to stay in the purview of socially acceptable behaviour. It calls for an action to break the silence and stigmas through conversation, discourse, and community acceptance.

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