



Research Article

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Women in Contemporary Cinema: A Study on the Role of Lesbians in LGBTQ Films

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ABSTRACT

Women across the globe, along with various feminist outfits, have been struggling to achieve gender equality in social, professional, and personal life. Media is something where women have continuously raised their issues for not getting equal status with men. But, the media is also the place where they face discrimination like getting paid lower than their male counterparts. In Indian TV serials, the role is a little different. Women are given more preference over men, but their role is shown to be restricted to the kitchen and household only. In the world of cinema, actresses are paid lesser than actors.

In many cases, their role is just to be the pillow riders of men. Somehow, the same is the case with LGBTQ characters in films. One can easily remember male LGBTQ characters like Abbas Ali of Bol Bachchan, but the role of a woman belonging to the LGBTQ community is either erotic or negligible. In this research paper, the researcher has tried to discover the prevailing gender inequality in LGBTQ films and the preference for male characters. The researcher has used content analysis to analyze the content of four mainstream Bollywood movies. The main aim of the research is to find out if female characters get justice with their portrayal in LGBTQ films and/or if LGBTQ films also belong to just male actors.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, member countries of the United Nations set up 17 goals for the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. Among those 17 sustainable development goals, one was gender equality. It was included in the goals to help women attain equal opportunities in life and live in an environment free from discrimination and violence. Women's suppression and gender inequality has been part of every culture around the world. If a woman is of color, lower caste or minority, she has to face double suppression in society.

Gender equality means the end of all kinds of discrimination and violence against all women and girls, must have equal rights and opportunities, and be able to live a life free of violence and discrimination (Arora, 2019). Society needs to have an environment where both genders are equally educated, get equal financial opportunities, and are equally valued. Inequality and the gender gap can

never help society reach the sustainable development goal. Moreover, it is very well known that, to 'save the earth', sustainable development is the need of the hour.

One of the most important tools which can help reach gender equality is the media. Media has the power to break or make any government. Similarly, it can bring great changes in society relating to the condition of women as well. Media played an important role in the modernization of societies and greatly affected the image of women in today's modern world (Agarwal, 2014). Cinema is the most imperative form of media as cinema creates superstars, and those stars are often considered role models by people.

The new millennium has brought a number of changes in Indian cinema, especially Bollywood cinema. The topics previously made only to parallel cinema can now be found in mainstream cinema. Bollywood obsession with love stories can never die, but its obsession with heterosexual love stories is slowly making room for other kind of love

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stories. The role of women in mainstream cinema has always been blamed for being highly misogynistic or restricted to a particular part. Often, heroines are there in the movies to make the hero the lead of the story, and they are also paid less.

Cinema, especially contemporary cinema, is going bold about women's empowerment and has started producing films with women as the main and many times the only lead. Previously, even if the movie focused on the woman, it was for her beauty or her personal sacrifice for the betterment of her family or society. But now, women-centric movies have become about the boldness, braveness, and smartness of women.

For example movies like *Queen*, *Raazi*, *Pink*, *NH10*, *Hichki*, *Marykom*, *Mom*, and *Nirja* are based on women empowerment and have earned good at the box office. These movies have women as protagonists who have shared braveness, daring, and determination on screen. In mainstream Bollywood, women fought for their country (*Raazi & Nirja*), for themselves after deception in love (*Queen*), for agony and feeling of revenge (*NH10*), for her kids (*Mom*), for her career (*Marykom*), and for the right of consensual relation (*Pink*). Here the women had to fight mostly with other people or society, but there are women in society who have to fight for themselves on an individual level – struggling with their own sexual identity.

Just like women of color, lower castes and minorities, and lesbians also have to suffer on different levels. For example, a gay man, if forced into a heterosexual marriage, can hardly be forced into that relationship. But, if a woman is forced into a heterosexual marriage, then it is highly possible that she is raped repeatedly and she can never even complain about it. That is why homosexual women need to get empowered.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the paper '*Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema*', Singh (2007) discusses the role of cinema in creating cultural ideology regarding gender relations. In her paper, she claims that cinema makes a huge contribution when it comes to gender roles and identities. Also, she predicts that cinema will always remain as the top medium for imparting messages and value.

In the paper written by Arora (2019), '*Role of Cinema in Promoting Gender Equality to Achieve Sustainable Development Goals in India*', the writer discusses the role and importance of female actors in Indian cinema, especially Bollywood. In the research paper, she discusses the moving ahead of Bollywood cinema toward women's empowerment. The writer has discussed the dominant roles of women in the movies like *Kahani*, *Queen*, *Pink*, and *Manikarnika*.

'*Sensitizing Gender Parity in Urban India: A Cinematic Revolution*' is a paper written by Condra (2014), where she puts emphasis on the sensitization of gender of Indian

cinema. She has basically focused on the roles of working women in the movies. The paper discusses how women, especially working women, are represented in the movies and if the representation is justified. The researcher has analyzed the following movies: *Sri 420*, *Asli Nakli*, *Arth*, *Page 3*, and *Paa*.

In the paper titled '*New Edge of Indian Cinema: Analysis of the Treatments of Gender, Sexuality, and Matrimony in the Indian Cinema*' by Dasgupta (2006), the writer discusses the new dimensions related to gender identity, sexual inclination, and matrimony in new Indian cinema. The researcher has focused on the Indian cinema produced in the English language.

'*Role and Significance of Hindi Cinema in Gender Sensitization*' by Deva and Gupta (2022) is a research paper which is a commentary on feminist film criticism and how mainstream Bollywood has confined itself to a few stereotypical sketches of women. Its main focus is how women have been stereotyped over the years and that too from the male viewpoint. A section of their research work is entirely devoted to the cinema and its typical understanding of the world. The conclusion of the research was that though a patriarchal point of view completely dominates Bollywood, it still manages to show women in different shades.

In the research paper titled '*Bollywood, Popular Visual Media, and Sexism in India: A Critical Glance Back*' written by Mukhopadhyay and Banerjee (2021), a discussion is made on the changing portrayal of women in Bollywood and visual media with increased awareness despite the changes and there is a continuous attempt of promoting gender equality. Gender equality is promoted to build a socio-cultural narrative in the long run.

'*Between Violence and Exclusion: A Cinematic Representation of Gender Politics in Antarmahal and Water*' is a research work done by Mazid (2018), where the focus is made on the synergy of patriarchy and religion that generates a culture that is fundamentally violent against women. This paper employs Julia Kriteva's idea of sem analysis as an analytical framework. The researcher comes to the conclusion that there is a constant struggle between patriarchal subjugation and women's agency.

J. Pooja and K.P. Rekha (2018) in their paper '*Indian Cinema and Its Portrayal of Emotional Complexities of LGBT Community*', both the writer analyzed the content of Bollywood and surveyed to trace the opinion of the public regarding Indian cinema content. The finding of the survey was that there is an unrealistic representation of Indian homosexuals, which has created a loathing image of them in the eyes of the public.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To find out if female characters get justice for their role in LGBTQ films.
- To figure out if LGBTQ films belong to just male actors.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Do female characters get justice for their role in LGBTQ films?
- Do LGBTQ films also belong to just male actors?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Methodology

In order to fulfill the objectives of the research, research scholar has used latent content analysis.

Codes for Content Analysis

- Theme–If the movie revolves around a female character.
- Role–Whose role is dominant? Men’s or women’s?
- Boldness–If there are intimate scenes in the movie?
- Heroism–If the heroism is on the part of an actor or actress?

Universe of the Study

All the Bollywood movies regarding the LGBTQ community is the universe of the study.

Sample Size

The researcher has selected four LGBTQ films for content analysis. These movies are:

- Badhai Do
- Fire
- Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga
- Angry Indian Goddesses

Sampling Technique

The researcher has used the purposive sampling technique. Movies with lesbianism as a theme are selected.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Badhai Do

Directed by Harshvardhan Kulkarni, *Badhai Do* is the movie of modern times. The movie is about the lives of a gay man named Shardul Thakur and a lesbian named Sumi. Their fates accidentally meet each other’s, and both come to know about the struggle they go through every day for being homosexuals. They decide to marry each other to escape the continuous pressure from their respective families to get into heterosexual marriage. They get married and start to live as roommates.

Raj Kumar Rao plays the character of Shardul and Sumi is played by Bhumi Pedmeekar. With the help of humor, this film has done a fantastic job of explaining the life of two homosexuals in a very conservative society. The plot of the movie revolves equally around both male and female characters. Both Sumi and Shardul get an equal amount of depiction in the movie. The love life of Shardul and the love life of Sumi both have been given equal importance. Romantic and intimate scenes are shown in both the love

Table 1: Code of analysis for badhai do

Codes of analysis	Analysis
Theme	Focus is on both lesbian and gay men.
Role	Both genders have equal roles.
Boldness	There are intimate scenes on both sides.
Heroism	Heroism is on the part of both the actor and actress

Table 2: Code of analysis for fire

Codes of analysis	Analysis
Theme	The theme revolves around lesbians.
Role	Role of both women is dominant.
Boldness	There are intimate scenes between both women.
Heroism	Heroism is on the part of both women.

Table 3: Code of analysis for ek ladki ko dekha to esa laga

Codes of analysis	Analysis
Theme	The story doesn’t revolve completely around woman characters.
Role	A heterosexual man is given prominence over a lesbian woman.
Boldness	There is no intimate scene in the movie.
Heroism	Heroism is entirely on the part of man.

Table 4: Code of analysis for angry indian goddesses

Codes of analysis	Analysis
Theme	The theme revolves around female characters.
Role	Women’s role is dominant.
Boldness	There are intimate scenes in the movie.
Heroism	Heroism is also on the part of female actresses.

stories, and both the lead actress and actor have shown heroism in revealing their identity and fighting the world for their love. When Sumi is caught in an intimate situation with Rimjhim by Shardul’s mother, Sumi is strong enough to face her family and put forward that there is nothing wrong with being a lesbian. And, at Shardul’s house, when Shardul’s family is cursing Sumi for betraying them, Shardul gathers all his courage to defend Sumi by telling everyone that he himself is a homosexual (Table 1).

Fire

A classic by Deepa Mehta, *Fire* not only opened the door for many young film enthusiasts to go for same-sex love stories, but it also faced a strong protest from a few radical outfits to hold its position on the big screen. At many places, cinema halls were attacked, and screens were torn down. At places like Delhi, the audience also retaliated back at these protestors and insisted upon watching the movie (Table 2).



Shabana Azmi (Radha) and Nandita Das (Sita) starrer *Fire* is one of its kind movies. The movie was released in 1996 when people hardly felt comfortable even speaking something about homosexuality. The movie still dared to show kissing scenes between two females on the big screen. The movie's theme is strongly about lesbianism, where two women, whom their husbands reject, find love in each other. The role of women is clearly dominant and when their secret love affair is revealed, both act like real heroes.

When Radha's husband Ashok is angry over her love affair, he wants to win her back by making love, but Radha rejects him immediately, saying that she desires Sita. In the end, both lovers elope to start their new life in some other city.

Ek Ladki ko Delka to Esa Laga

Shelly Chopra Dhar has tried hard to do their best with *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga* but has failed in many ways. The story doesn't completely revolve around homosexuality, the audience comes to know about the lead actress being lesbian only just before the interval. Before that, the story goes along the lead actor Sahil Mirza, played by Raj Kumar Rao. If one sees rightly, the story is about a play director who falls in love with a girl at first sight and follows her to her home place to win her love. Upon finding that she is into women, his heart breaks but he decides to help her.

It is to be noted here that Sweetie, played by Sonam Kapoor, has a very sweet family, and her father loves her a lot. It is shown in the movie that sweetie is too weak to stand for herself and is too scared of her brother, who actually cares for her a lot. If she had tried to tell her father about her sexual identity, then he might have tried to understand her. Still, she was unable to tell him about herself and had to take help from a stranger. Heroism is nowhere on the part of female actresses. Also, the love story of the two women is shown in a very simple way. There is no boldness in the movie when it comes to homosexuality (Table 3).

Angry Indian Goddesses

Directed by Pan Nalin, *Angry Indian Goddesses* was released in 2015 but couldn't earn its deserved fame. The story is about the lives of a group of female friends struggling in their lives in one way or another. They gather at one of their friend's place who is getting married to another woman.

The movie's theme revolves around all the female actresses and is basically about what a woman can do if she gets angry. The homosexual angle in the movie has been incorporated very nicely. The role of women is highly dominant, and men have received hardly any role in the movie. There is also an intimate scene in the movie between the two women who are about to get married. Heroism is definitely on the part of female actresses as the entire movie is based on women's lives and the caliber they can show if they get angry (Table 4).

FINDINGS

Based on the analyses conducted above, the researcher has reached certain findings. These findings help in answering the research questions proposed by the researcher. Discussed below are the findings of the analyses made above.

Q.) Do female characters get justice for their role in LGBTQ films?

Female characters have received justice for the role played by them in the movies discussed above. Except for the movie *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga*, all the female characters received dominant positions, more time on the screen, and more place in the story. *Badhai Do* has equal roles for both male and female actors, *Angry Indian Goddesses* is completely about women, lesbianism, and issues of women. *Fire* is a classic that created a milestone for homosexuality in Bollywood cinema.

Q.) Do LGBTQ films also belong to just male actors?

Again, except for the movie *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga*, there has been the dominance of women over men characters in the movies. In the movie *Fire*, both the women lovers decide to elope together and restart their life from scratch. In the movie *Badhai Do*, both the characters, lesbian and gay, have an equal amount of importance and value to the theme of the movie. *Angry Indian Goddesses* is all about women, and any man hardly has any role in the movie. In the movie *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga*, the woman is shown as being extremely shy and helpless and seeks help from a man whom she has hardly met. He miraculously comes into her life only to rescue her from the invisible jail her brother has put her in.

CONCLUSION

Gender equality in cinema is something that has been investigated, researched, and looked into for a very long time. It is a known fact that male actors have always received more preference over female actresses. When the cinema had just begun, women's roles were played by feminine-looking men. When women entered the cinema, their dominance was far longer. After the 70s, the prominent roles of women were mostly confined to being mothers, sisters, daughters, daughters-in-law, and wives. Women in the frame as professional or strong independent women were nowhere to be seen.

In the new millennium, Bollywood started showing women having a life outside the household. Movies like *Pink*, *Kahani*, and *Queen* showed the world that women have the potential to fight alone against anything that comes their way.

Previously, when it came to the roles of women and men in Indian cinema, they had professional goals, a villain in particular, and many more things. Their sexual affiliation was almost the same, that is, heterosexuality. As we are moving ahead in time and society is getting more and more

civilized, the other sexual preferences (which have always been there) are getting highlighted. In this scenario, the other kind of sexual preferences is mostly shown as being gay or lesbian. Regarding homosexuality, Bollywood is more concerned with gays in mainstream cinema. Though they are often in the movies for cheap comic relief gays share the screen more than lesbians.

As discussed above, movies based on lesbianism move towards women's empowerment. As shown in the movies *Badhai Do*, *Fire*, and *Angry Indian Goddesses*, women fight for themselves on their own. *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga* was based on lesbianism but was a typical Bollywood movie where a woman was totally dependent on man even the first step was to convince the family.

It can be said, Bollywood is moving towards women empowerment in LGBTQ-centric movies. Lesbians are also getting equal space as gays, and they are shown to have the potential to stand for themselves and fight the world. Men do not steal the show any longer, and women are now shown to be more effective than ever before.

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