

Research Proposal

On

**Representation of Queer Community in Indian subcontinent fiction films
especially in Bangladeshi film**

Prepared by

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Queer community representation is less in media, especially in cinema or films. The terms *third gender* or *third sex* or *intersex*, or most commonly used *hijras*, describe individuals as neither males nor females. The third gender is treated as the *eunuch* in most of the world. This community is mistreated or neglected by society for so long even though they have the right to have a healthy and normal life like normal people (male & female). The media has made significantly less effort to represent their normal life rights. The media constantly portrays them in a neglected way. The people of the society always discriminate against them to get their rights. This paper is an effort to shed light on the representation of queer community in media. Also, this thesis will try to explore the cultural discourses about the transgender of Indian subcontinent fiction films especially in Bangladeshi films.

1. Introduction:

The third gender has no formal definition in Bangladesh. On 11 November 2013, *hijras* were recognized as a separate gender by the Bangladeshi Government in a cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. *Hijras* were a group to be admired and accepted in Indian culture; eunuchs, with female and male characteristics mentioned in the ancient Hindu texts. Eunuchs were played a vital in the court administration as royal guards during the Mughal phase. After the destruction of the Mughal Empire by the British, their sanctioned place has been changed in Indian culture. Eunuchs were respected by the Mughals but neglected by the British. Eunuchs were considered criminals during the British colonial period (Bisen, 2015).

Even though the supreme court of Bangladesh has formally acknowledged the existence of the third gender, still the family is being ashamed and hated by society if a third gender is born in a family. A 2017-2020 *World Values Survey* showed that 77.3% of Bangladeshis would not accept a homosexual neighbor, compared to 19.5% that would. The same survey found that 89.4% of Bangladeshis said homosexuality was unjustifiable, compared to just 0.2% who said it was. The same survey also found that 75.4% of Bangladeshis disagreed with the statement "homosexual couples are as good parents as other couples", while 6.5% agreed. A 2013 *Gallup* poll showed that 28% of Bangladeshis thought that the area they lived in was not a good place for homosexuals, while 19% thought it was. Hochemin Islam, a transgender woman, faced exclusion from the North South University (NSU) women's carnival, as university authorities cited security concerns. Moreover, a group of students issued threats of unrest and pledged to boycott exams if her inclusion was pursued. Notably, during student rallies, there were banners explicitly expressing "no transgender" sentiments.

Media text always plays a significant role to construct our identity (Gates, 2018). As a form of mass media, the film works for reflecting, constructing, and reinforcing reality. It also works to construct a culture (Paralik, 2017). The film can do it as media have the power of influence on its audiences (Gates, 2018). Therefore, a negative representation of a group in a film can be a cause of damages to the group (Reitz, 2017). Hence, accurate representation of a group, culture or society in the film is important.

As film works to reflect, construct, and reinforce the reality (Paralik, 2017) and negative representation of a group in film hampers the everyday lives of the group in a society (Reitz, 2017) that is why it is important to know how the transgender people are represented in Bangladeshi film. The representation of the queer community in Indian and Bangladeshi cinema is significantly less. Like other countries, India started to produce films on the gay issue in the late eighties of the twentieth century. *Bomgay* (Riyad Vinci Wadia and Jangu Sethna, 1996) was the first film known to focus on gay sex, a short film of 12 minutes. However, the film director could not release the film in India because he believed that the film might not get the certificate from the censor board. LGBTQ has always been represented as a ridicule object in cinema Indian cinema. The presence of the third gender in our society is always being a question. Society and the media always try to represent them as aliens of society. In Bengal, the cinemas on the third gender issue are found mainly in the 21st century. Some films are based on the third gender, such as *Memories in March* (2010), *Chittrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012), *Nagarkirtan*(2017), and *Samataral*(2017). In Bangladesh the number of this type of films are very few. *Common Gender* (2012), *Ghetuputra Komola* (2012), *Shikhandi Katha* (2013), *Roopbaan* (non-fiction film, 2014), *Alpha* (2019). Are the Bangladeshi films misrepresenting transgender people like the films of India, UK, and the USA or not? This thesis paper will try to find these answer. It will be analyzed *Representation of Queer Community in Indian subcontinent fiction films especially in Bangladeshi film*.

2. Research Objectives

This thesis studies the *Representation of Queer Community in Indian subcontinent films especially in Bangladeshi film*. The objectives of the thesis are will be established by the basis of the films are *Bomgay* (Riyad Vinci Wadia and Jangu Sethna, 1996), *Memories in March* (2010), *Chittrangada: The Crowning Wish* (2012), *Nagarkirtan* (2017), *Samataral* (2017), *Common Gender* (2012), *Ghetuputra Komola* (2012), *Shikhandi Katha* (2013), *Roopbaan* (non-fiction film, 2014), *Alpha* (2019) and *Taali* (2003). The objectives of this research are:

- To explore the stereotypes thought and representation style of queer people in the film;
- To explore the power relations among queer people and other groups of Bangladeshi society in this film;
- To explore the similarity or dissimilarity about queer people between the representation of film and the reality;
- To explore how the third gender characters are represented in terms of their costume, make-up, body movements, dialogues etc;
- To explore the attitudes towards them by the family members and the problems they face and
- The message the film is giving.

Research Question

Based on the research objectives, this thesis will analyze previous mentioned film to explore the following research questions:

- How these film has represented the queer community?
- How the Bangladeshi stereotypical thoughts about transgender and queer people have been reflected in these film?
- What is the relationship between Indian subcontinent dominant culture and film?
- What is the relationship between Bangladeshi dominant culture and film?
- What are the power relations among society's majority group, minority group and media?

3. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is inherently essential in every research work, particularly in qualitative researcher studies. Theories in research are designed to develop a link between theoretical propositions and data analysis approach. Miles & Huberman (1994) explained the importance of a theoretical foundation in qualitative research while using mind-mapping techniques to represent the linkage to the conceptual framework.

Queer Theory

Dix (2015) in his book titled 'Beginning- Film Studies' writes that queer theory has a correlation with the 'New Queer Cinema'. The term was first coined by the academic B. Ruby Rich in Sight & Sound magazine in 1992 to define and describe a movement in queer-themed independent filmmaking in the early 1990s. This new wave of filmmaking is marked by formal variety- from camp to self-conscious intellectuality, narrative obliquity to melodramatic excess- has correspondingly diverse ideological implications. Queer theory challenges the existing rigid definition of 'gay' and opines that all gendered identities are complex, fluctuating, and merely provisional. Apart from homosexuals, bisexuals, cross-dressers, transgendered people etc even heterosexuals can also be considered queer i.e straight queer because as per queer theory the term queer represents all human sexual practices while rejecting the gender binaries that govern of society. Queer filmmaking with the help of queer theory evokes a riot of sexual and gender identities because it exceeds the definitions of gender proposed by the society by and large.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s queer theory started to be applied in various film studies in various research journals and anthologies (de Lauretis 1991; Fuss 1991; Gevertz 1993; Creekmur 1995) through various ways like 'positive or negative' image analysis of third gender people in various films employing psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. A lot of critics have used this theory to explore the various nuances of queerness across cultures of the world and its reception (Doty, 2000). Some critics opine that it is necessary to understand some films as queers because film genres like horror films, musical films, film noirs, and animated films construct third gender in unreal manner (Benshoff 1997; Farmer 2000; Griffin 2000).

In the present study it is important to understand what messages the society receives through films related to third gender. This theory is important to the current study because of how general public uses the information from films. It is also critically important because young third gender people use this information to discover their identity which helps them to shape a new identity.

Media Representation Theory

Theory of social representation was formulated by Serge Moscovici and has influenced media researchers as well. This theory offers a new approach about processes of collective meaning making which results in common cognitions among masses. Media Representation Theory specifically talks about how media constructs perceptions in the minds of the audience. It sets focus on the importance of media so much resulting in debates, strong feelings, conflicts, ideological clashes and changes in the collective perception of the society. Distortions in media significantly affect the real world of the audience. This can lead to destructive casual dynamics. There might be a numerous reasons as to why media patterns are distorted e.g. producer bias, incorrect assumptions about the audiences, audience preferences, media landscape, social/historical context, lack of input from different constituents, political motivations to traffic in stereotypes etc. Media re-presents things to the audiences through careful mediation. These representations will be meaningful only when there will be shared recognition of people, thoughts, ideas, and situations. Therefore, there are ideologies behind every representation. Media deliberately encodes some messages into texts and leaves out some for audience to representation (Levi-Strauss, 1958).

One of the ways at looking at the representations is in terms of stereotyping. Media has a long history of establishing stereotypes whether it is a super hero, a house wife or a workaholic person. In extreme cases stereotypes can lead to comic, criminal, helpless representation of the characters. Power imbalance is the evident reason for stereotyping. Stereotypes are usually used to enhance realism in various mediums like news programming, documentaries, and films. These mediums usually use conventional images that are associated with reality to the audience. Barker (1989) condemns stereotyping for tweaking the reality and misrepresenting the real facts. He further opines that stereotypes tend to be too close to real world at times and works only when it gets audience recognition and acceptance. Dyer (1977) exemplifies stereotyping as if we are told that the film we are about to see is about an alcoholic we tend to assume it as a story of sordid decline or of an inspiring redemption. There is a potential use of stereotypes, in which the character is constructed, at the level of dress, acting, etc. as a stereotype but is deliberately given a narrative function that is not implied in the stereotyped character, thus throwing into question the assumptions signaled by the stereotypical iconography. As a part of stereotyping technique, television theorist John Hartley (1982) said that the voice of the presenters in televisions are modified to make them sound dramatic, jolly, sad etc. This means that the presenters are trained to create certain characteristics which later become stereotypes for the audiences.

This theory links society and individual, media and public. This theory is crucial in media and communication as it explains how ideas and thoughts are transformed through media. This theory further stresses on how media neutralizes different perceptions into common cognition.

Formalist Film Theory

Formalist film theory approaches to study a film through its structure and form i.e. the story, the lighting, sound, set design, cinematography, editing and so on. While the other theories use some external element to analyze a film, this theory totally relies on internal evidence. This theory considers that the plot or story in a film forces the audience to see the film in a certain way and thus generate perceptions which may vary from viewer to viewer. It is one the major theory to study film nowadays.. This approach usually reveals how different elements shape the film, creates new aesthetics and forms ‘virtual realism.’ Theorists also explore the meaning derived from the narratives of the film. The filmmakers exploit the two dimensions of films- its confining frame and its fragmented time-space continuum- to produce a world that resembles the original world but only in a shallow sense.

Rudolf Arnheim, a gestalt psychologist, put forward an important theory of cinematic formalism in his book *Film as Art*, originally published in German in 1933. His book basically talks about the perception of experience. In real life, we see things around us in depth and can penetrate the space that is around the objects our naked eye sees. While as in films, space is just an illusion in two or three dimensions giving enough space to the filmmakers to manipulate things and perception in the mise en scene. For example, filmmakers place the important objects where they can be noticed easily in the frame whereas the less important objects are either kept at the edge or the rear of the frames. Formalism tends to favor the concept of superficial realism with the emphasis on special effects and the visual appeal like shapes, lines, textures, and the colors of the images. Time and space are experienced in continuum in real life while as in real life filmmakers can chop up space and time through editing in order to derive more meaning out of details. Filmmakers juxtapose fragments of time and space to create a continuum that doesn’t exist in raw nature. A scene can be possibly shot in hundreds of different ways but the formalists select that camera set up which best captures the symbolism and the psychological inferences.

4. Research Methodology

Given that this is the first comprehensive study about Representation of Queer Community in Indian subcontinent films especially in Bangladeshi film, the study will be both in exploratory and descriptive. It will try to strive to gather insights into the representation of queer community in above mentioned films. As this research will be following qualitative and textual (as in films) approach, the content analysis method will apply to analysis data. Additionally, it will analyze the mass media content or text; this research will also follow the method of film narratology. The analysis will be consisted of representation, acting and performance and the narrative clues to the representation of the queer community. How we understand them, what our culture (Indian and Bangladeshi) portrays as representing masculinity and femininity and what tells us about our understanding of gender, sexuality and society.

The research will undertake multimodal discourse analysis of select films by taking into consideration not only different modalities of a film but also their linguistic perspective. Undertaking the guidance of systematic functional grammar and visual grammar, the study attempts to explore the relationship of queer characters with other elements in the film by analyzing how various semiotic modalities make meaning and how they contribute in understanding a film. Thus, multimodal discourse analysis by virtue of linguistic and non-linguistic analysis (visual and audial aspects) provides a new perspective in understanding a film and thereby improving audience's level of film appreciation. The study adopts Halliday's (2004) Systematic Functional Grammar, Kress and Leeuwen's (1996, 2006) Grammar of Visual Design, and the emotion level of analysis from Cohen's (2001) Cognitive Framework for understanding musical soundtracks in film, respectively. This research study adapts and extends O'Halloran et al.'s (2011) model of multimodal discourse analyses to study films. It will help to examine how multimodal codes at micro and macro level work together to derive and create multi-layered meanings in films and form discourses.

The analyses will include:

- Film Synopsis- Characters, Character Development and Character Complexity.
- Cinematography- The art of photographing a film. It includes camera angles and shots.
- Sound- Diegetic and non-diegetic sound.
- Mise-en-scene- Lighting, costumes, makeup and acting.
- Editing.

5. Review of Literature

It is an established fact that media representations influence people's opinion about transgender people (Butler, 2003). In the same way cinematic representations of transgender people cannot be ignored. Russo Vito (1987) in *The Celluloid Closet* (1995) points out those films portraying transgender characters are not only meant for transgender people but also to the majority of the people. It is through these films that straight people see the real LGBT people. Mainstream cinema has a great power and ability to influence popular perception about transgender individuals.

In Hindi cinema, portrayal of queer communities is very complex because there is no clear demarcation between different sexual orientations, for example, the term Hijra is an umbrella term for Eunuchs, Intersex and Transgender people (Reddy, 2006). Their presence in song and dance sequences in Bollywood is because of their prescribed role in Hindu religion of blessing newborns and newlywed couples (Kalra, 2012; Bakshi, 2004).

Ishikawa, T. (1995) in his book *The Third Gender of India* writes Hijras have been present in Bollywood since 1970's. While the initial portrayals showcased Hijras in minimalistic roles, later in 1990's a lot of films came up with Hijra characters sharing screen with heterosexual people.

As a form of mass media, the film also influences its audiences. Acknowledging this thought, hooks (1996) added; the film not only reflects the culture but also constructs the culture. Supporting hooks (1996), Paralik (2017) added; the film works for reflecting, constructing, and reinforcing reality. So, it can be said that the ideal representation of a group in the film is important for the betterment of the group. In Bangladesh, transgender is a minority group (Stenqvist, 2015) and they are fighting to achieve their basic rights (Aldama, 2019). Scholars said, the negative representation of a group in film hampers the everyday lives of the group and it will be worse if the group belongs to a minority group (Reitz, 2017). Besides it, previous research said, Hollywood, Bollywood and British cinema all misrepresent transgender people and for this misrepresentation, they have to pay for it.

6. Outcomes and Impact

To find out the queer community's representation style in Indian subcontinent films especially in Bangladeshi film, this research will examine the mentioned films. After analyzing film, this thesis will try to found; how films has represented queer community the same way that the Bangladeshi dominant society thinks about transgender people. Is there any dissimilarity between the representation of film and reality or not.

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