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Portraying Third Gender: A study of select Bollywood Movies

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Abstract

Over the years the portrayal of third gender in Bollywood movies has been under scanner for their typical stereotyping. The third gender in Indian subcontinent most commonly is identified as “Hijra” over the period of years through media representations and misrepresentations has come to be associated with either as neither male or female, impotent men who dress as females or deceitful characters. Adding the dismal socio-political and economic conditions of third gender in India and their traditional way of earning through alms, the stereotypical character of “Hijra” gets further institutionalized. This paper will however try to break from the stereotypical clutches of portraying the typical clichéd third gender on celluloid and try to analyze some path breaking movies which have been successful in representing very realistic aspects of third gender. The reference period for the study will be more than two decades from 1990-2010, whereby two representational movies from each decade and will studied and critically examined. The paper will seek to focus on the less stereotypical portrayals of third gender and will try to find if there is a gradual shift from the stereotypical generalizations in portrayal of third gender on Indian celluloid.

Key Words: Third Gender, Bollywood, Stereotype, 1990-2010

Article

Understanding Third Gender

The understanding of the “third gender” along with its connotations and manifestations are deeply disguised under the constructs of gender binaries and at the same time over-crowded with understandings spanning to includes lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders and Queers. The mainstream understanding of “identity” is broadly based on two terms Sex and Gender that are unfortunately used synonymously. While **Sex** refers to biological differences; chromosomes, hormonal profiles, internal and external sex organs; **Gender** describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine.

Simone de Beauvoir famously claimed that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, and that “social discrimination produces in women moral and intellectual effects so profound that they appear to be caused by nature” (Beauvoir 1972 [original 1949]) One way to interpret Beauvoir's claim that one is not born but rather becomes a woman is to take it as a claim about gender socialisation: females become women through a process whereby they acquire feminine traits and learn feminine behaviour. Masculinity and femininity are thought to be products of nurture or how individuals are brought up. They are *causally constructed* (Haslanger 1995): social forces either have a causal role in bringing gendered individuals into existence or (to some substantial sense) shape the way we are *qua* women and men. And the mechanism of construction is social learning. For instance, Kate Millett takes

gender differences to have “essentially cultural, rather than biological bases” that result from differential treatment (1971). For her, 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 1971). The gender binary, hence further leaves no room for transgender people, which further alienates and hampers the transgender identity; as gender is a socially constructed and perpetuated.

Following the Indian supreme court guidelines on giving legal recognition to Third Gender and for the sake of comprehension and brevity; our understanding of Third Gender will be a term that will be describing a diverse community of people whose gender identity differs from that which they were designated at birth; 2) Expressions and identities that challenge the binary male/female gender system in a given culture; 3) Anyone who transcends the conventional definitions of man and woman and whose self-identification or expression challenges traditional notions of male and female.(JAC Stringer,2013). The focus will be particularly the Transgender community also known as Hijra in India. Now that we have a structured definition of third gender along which we be structuring this paper; the fact that no particular definition can completely explain the idea of gender has also to be kept in mind. The supposedly solid categories of masculine and feminine are not solid categories which never touch one another. These categories are always being expanded by the way in which people perform, or do their gender. Gender is not, in other words, a solid state, or an inflexible category, but instead a category that expands and contracts, and runs into other categories. It is not a category that can be made stable and specific.

Third Gender In India

Hijra is often referred to as third gender of India. They are a complex and internally varied group of mostly male born and few biologically intersex persons who cross dress and may or may not undergo voluntary castration. Stigmatized and confined to the outskirts of mainstream society, the main and traditional source of income for Hijras has been by collecting alms and receiving payments for performances at weddings, births and festivals.

In Indian society, the term eunuch/ hijra is broadened to include homosexuals, sexually abused men, hermaphrodites (intersexed), men who are sexually impotent and emasculated men. ‘The term in India refers as much to a societal role as it does to one’s anatomy.’ This is because men who are different, whether they are homosexuals, impotent or hermaphrodites, do not feel comfortable to express sexual identity in the normal society because they will not be accepted society as it is not the norm. The only place eunuchs can freely express themselves and be normal in their own way is if they join the *hijra* community. Many men turn into hijras because their families have disowned them because they were infertile; and because of that, they have no choice but to behave like women. Some of them ran away from home because of the undesired marriages with females. ‘None of us can envisage a life where we are forced to marry females and have children by them. So, the only way out is to cut off our manhood and become hijras. This is the only community, which will accept us and let us live our lives the way we want to. (Hindocha, 2004)

In addition, men who are sexually abused from a younger age turn to the hijra community because that community has the same level of understanding as them and they can be and feel comfortable and most importantly have a society that will accept and sustain them. ‘Once we found other people like us, they helped us understand our place in society. For the first time, we felt belonged somewhere.’ (Balaji, 2000) As such the third gender in India lives

mostly a closeted life, often ridiculed and not accepted socially. The confinement of the community within themselves has further led to economic oppression as there is no real source of income other than the traditional means.

Portraying Third Gender

Adding to the ambiguity both in terms of defining and understanding of the third gender specifically in context of Transgenders; media representations of them has further shrouded the community into the shadow of ridicule, fear, stigma and oppression. The transgender is a shadow in the margins of hetero-patriarchal narratives of Bollywood films and is a source of comic relief or more often lumped along with all sexual 'deviants' such as the gay, the effeminate or the crossdresser. The *hijra* identity and body is produced through the crosscurrents of hetero-patriarchal power relations and appears to be a troubled and abject body drawn primarily within the framework of the horrific or the comic (Pattnaik,2002). Portrayal of transgender in mainstream Bollywood oscillates between two extremities of complete erasure or stereotypical of a community with brassy make up, maniac clapping, crude gestures, villainous and often revenge seeking. Many of them have been the brunt of crude jokes especially in the song sequences in an attempt to evoke laughter.

These media representations do in fact stem out of the societal position and acceptance/rejection of Transgender community in India, but the representations portray them in clichéd roles or appearance that have no realistic perspective and institutionalizes the transgender as the other.

The extant literature on the hijras is scant, confusing, contradictory, and judgmental. With few exceptions (Salunkhe, 1976; Sinha, 1967) it lacks a basis in fieldwork or intensive interviewing. A major dispute in that literature has been whether or not the hijra role encompasses homosexuality. In Nanda's view, the essential cultural aspect of the hijra role is its asexual nature. Yet, empirical evidence also indicates that many hijras do engage in homosexual activity. This difference between the cultural ideal and the real behavior causes a certain amount of conflict within the community (Nanda, 1999). Further some members like to associate themselves as males and other as females and resist from identifying themselves as "third gender"; this further creates an ambiguity regarding the identity of third gender and goes back to asserting the idea of gender fluidity, when it comes to understand the third gender. This lack of real understanding of the community has led to skewed understanding and stereotypical representations based on hearsay, presumptions and word of mouth. The Bollywood representations further institutionalize these understandings with the stereotypical roles assigned to transgenders in movies; thereby limiting the viewer acceptance as well as understanding of the community. This paper tries to highlight the few of the Bollywood mainstream movies who have broken the stereotypical clutches of representations of Transgender community on celluloid. The select movies have showed though while representing the community in the stereotypical way of brassy make up and loud behavior; the content of the roles shows the layered characters, complexity of the community and as well as the conflict the transgenders endure both at social as well as personal level.

Sample Studied

- 1. Sadak (1991)**
- 2. Tamanna (1997)**

3. Shabnum Mausi (2005)

4. Welcome To Sajanpur (2008)

Sadak (1991): Directed by Mahesh Bhat, the movie is romantic thriller film. It stars Sanjay Dutt and Pooja Bhatt. The film was the second highest grossing Hindi movie of the year 1991. The plot of the movie revolves around Maharani (Sadashiv Amrapurkar) is an evil madam running a brothel that employs many girls like Pooja (Pooja Bhatt) and Chanda (Neelima Azeem). Ravi (Sanjay Dutt) a taxi driver is a distraught young man who works day and night by driving a taxi in order to forget his horrible past. He visits a brothel with his friend, Gotya (Deepak Tijori) and falls in love with a prostitute by the name of Pooja. Pooja becomes Ravi's obsession. Ravi put's his entire life's savings at stake and sets out to free pooja from the brothel. The second night when Ravi comes alone in the brothel while Gotya and Chanda wait outside Ravi comes to take Pooja out for the second night, but maharani refuses because he thinks Pooja and Ravi are in love and they'll run away. Maharani says no to Ravi and Ravi stabs maharani with a knife and runs away with Pooja, while Gotya and Chanda come with them. Gotya and Chanda are killed by maharani's men, but Ravi and Pooja escape. Pooja is, however, captured again by Maharani, after Ravi is tortured and left for dead. Ravi remembering the fate of his sister and Pooja are the same regains his lost strength. He fights his way back to Maharani by setting ablaze to Maharani's Brothel and finally killing Maharani and rescuing Pooja.

Tamanna(1997): Directed by Mahesh Bhat, It stars Paresh Rawal, Pooja Bhatt, Sharad Kapoor and Manoj Bajpayee in the lead roles The screenplay was written by Tanuja Chandra. The movies is placed in year 1975, the place is Mahim, Bombay. The movie is the story of Tikku (Paresh Rawal), a eunuch, the only child of yesteryear Bollywood actress Nazneen Begum. She has fallen upon hard times, is virtually destitute and is dependent on Tikku, who does makeup/ Hairdressing of Bollywood actresses. When she passes away, Tikku is beside himself with grief. After the funeral, he witnesses a woman leaving a child in a garbage bin. Tikku picks up the girl, longing for human company, decides to keep her, names her Tamanna, and brings her up on his own with the help of a close friend, Saleem (Manoj Bajpayee).

When she is old enough, he arranges for her education in St. Mary's High School's hostel. When she completes school, she returns home to find Tikku in the guise of a hijra and shuns him, but subsequently relents. Then Tikku finds out that Tamanna (Pooja Bhatt) is the daughter of Ranvir Chopra, an up and coming politician. He tells her, and she goes to their palatial house, however the biological family doesn't accept Tamanna and throws her out of their home. Finally Tamanna confronts her father on why he abandoned her and records his confession, after which her father (Ranvir Chopra) assaults her and Tikku and members of his Hijra community save Tamanna. The movie ends with the biological mother coming to take Tamanna home, where she chooses to live with Tikku rather than with them.

Shabnum Mausi(2005): Directed by Yogesh Bharadwaj, the movie is based on a real-life character shabnum and her struggle to enter politics. The movie starts with a child born in a police officer's house and eunuchs coming to his home to celebrate and give blessings. It is at the same time that the eunuchs realize the baby is of their gender and take the child with them. The child is named Shabnum and is raised in the close knit Hijra community, until the

Shabnum is falsely framed in a murder and runs away to Anupur (Madhya Pradesh). It is here that Shabnum saves a young girl from getting raped and becomes famous and well accepted in the village. The local political leaders convince Shabnum to stand up for elections, which she accepts and finally wins.

Welcome to Sajjanpur (2008): Directed by Shyam Benegal, it is a comedy film starring Shreyas Talpade and Amrita Rao in the lead roles. The movie is a satirical, but warmhearted. Mahadev (Shreyas Talpade) is an unemployed graduate with a Bachelor of Arts from Satna college, who is forced to make a living writing letters for the uneducated people of his village. His real ambition is to become a novel writer. portrait of life in rural India.

Among Mahadev's customers are: Mahadev's childhood crush Kamla (Amrita Rao) who is desperate for communication from her husband Bansi Ram (Kunal Kapoor), who works as a labourer at a dockyard in Mumbai. A hurried mother (Ila Arun) who wants to get her *manglik* daughter, Vindhya (Divya Dutta) married. A landlord whose wife is a candidate for the village Sarpanch, and who wants all her political rivals eliminated from the race. A eunuch Munni who is contesting the elections for the village Sarpanch but fears the threats from the landlord. A lovelorn compounder, Ram Kumar (Ravi Kishan), who is crazy about the widowed daughter in law Shobha Rani (Rajeshwari Sachdev) of a retired army soldier. Mahadev manages to get his friend engaged, police protection for Munni. However Munni is seriously injured in the head, and he learns a shocking truth about Kamla's husband. It soon turns out that the story was a fictional novel written by the real Mahadev, but it is mostly based on his own experiences.

As Mahadev, under pseudo name Sukhdev, reveals that Munnibai became a successful politician, becoming an MLA, or a Member of the State Legislature, with high connections and powerful people surrounding her. It is also revealed that Kamla and Bansi are happy in small house in Mumbai, who come to visit Sajjanpur every Diwali. In midst of all these good news, Mahadev notes that Ram Kumar and Shobha Rani were lynched because members of their community opposed a widow getting remarried. Mahadev also notes that he got married to Vindhya, the manglik, after wooing her by writing 40 letters. While most people consider a manglik to be a great misfortune, Mahadev notes that he became successful due to his marriage, as he paid down his farm land mortgage, built a wonderful house and realized his dream of writing a novel.

Analysis & Conclusion

Taking the context of Judith Butler's performativity theory, we find that all the movies taken in the sample construct the third gender via movie representations. Butler explains that Gender is not that it is a performance (or something false), but that gender is something that is made by doing. Butler's idea is that gender comes to exist as it exists because it is done in a certain way, and this doing gender in a certain way makes it so. For example, when a woman wears a skirt, the skirt is made feminine. This feminization does not happen because women are "naturally" made to wear skirts, or because male anatomy is more conspicuous when a skirt is worn, but because, according to Butler, the female body belongs (always already) to a specific social category which gives it the power to assign its prescribed meaning (or sign) to the things that it does.

So when a woman wears a skirt, she marks it as feminine. Or when a woman allows a man to open a door for her, this is also marked as feminine. These behaviors then marked in this way are then actualized as components of, or symbols of, the larger category of femininity. But these things are made symbols of that category not because of some appointed meaning given to them, but through a body which passes on its larger categorical meaning to the things that it does. These behaviors are then assimilated as a compulsive part of that categorical meaning, and become a conglomerate of that meaning. So when a man wears a skirt he does not automatically make it feminine, as the skirt is still associated with the female body. But he also isn't denied the power to make the skirt masculine, or to expand the boundary of what is allowed under the label masculinity. His body, just like the female body, has the power to inscribe and can change what the object means. But the object, carrying a label, also has the ability to affect what his body means, and herein lies the trouble (Koeke,2014). The trouble is the point that in order to give space to third gender identity, we have to break the manifestations and understandings of centuries of social category of masculine and feminine; on which our basic system of identity is formed. Therefore when third gender is portrayed on celluloid it often relies on the symbols appointed to a particular social category to highlight the "otherness" of third gender. Like the use of loud behavior, cross dressing and brassy makeup. The paradox is that in order to break the rigid structures of gender binaries, one has to rely on the very same rigid structures to develop an understanding and identity for the third gender.

Analyzing the movies taken in sample, it was found that the movies tried to bring third gender identity, issues and relationships from sidelines of mainstream Bollywood to the centre. All the movies though moved away from the clichéd portrayal of Hijras used mostly as fillers or in comic settings, without any real characterization and challenged the stereotypical notions of third gender in India, portraying them in a humanistic way and even sometimes with shades of grey like the role of Maharani in *Sadak*. Mahesh Bhatt's directed movie *Sadak* came as a revolution in the portrayal of third gender, as in this movie the third gender is being brought to the centre from the periphery. The movie not only breaks the mould by bringing third gender to the centre, but also shattered the norm of a masculine villain of Hindi cinema by casting a villainous eunuch Hijra)

The film came to the notice of the audience due to this unfamiliar and dramatic projection of the villain. The character of the villain as a eunuch is something which was quite shocking to the Indian audience. The depiction of the eunuch villain as cruel and anti-heterosexual is a way of vindicating the age-old satirical portrayal of the third sex. No doubt the character of Maharani as a eunuch and role of the villain together arouse a deep rooted abhorrence and annoyance towards the third sex but certainly a change was at the doorstep of Bollywood. For the first time people belonging to third gender community who have a shunned existence and were victims of Heterosexuals are projected as the leading role in the movie (Panda, 2016). The portrayal of a eunuch as a villain casts a strong irony, as the discourse constructed around third sex has that been of impotency who are not capable of doing anything. And at the same time also tries to break the very same discourse, which is intensified by the powerful performance of Maharani (Sadashiv Amrapurkar)

Similarly in the movie *Tamanna*, directed by Mahesh Bhatt, the clichéd version of Hijras dancing in ceremonies and giving blessings has not been showcased as the main theme. The movies very realistically shows varied humanistic emotions and experiences a Hijra has to face in a society that shuns the third gender. The movie highlight several

key points like the inability of third gender to rightfully acquire a share in the parental property- a legal right. Or the continuous struggle third gender has to face in order to get accepted in the society. The sequence in the movie, where the main protagonist, Tikku dresses up in a suit to hide his natural body on the occasion of his appointment with the principle of Tamanna's School or the hiding of Tikku's identity as a hijra from Tamanna and eventual rejection of Tikku by Tamanna on knowing that he is a Hijra; highlights the social oppression, ridicule and lack of acceptance third gender community faces in the society. The discourse that has constructed is that a hijra is biologically incapable of producing a child and this impossibility has also substantiated the very possibility of rearing any child, the movie breaks away from this discourse and shows how Tikku instinctively develops parental feelings towards the baby who has been abandoned and rears her as own. The movie also shows the lack of economic opportunities the community goes through and its consequences. With the little bit of earning as a hair dresser of the heroines he tries to manage education and space for her. But he fails to keep pace with the fast moving society due to lack of education and any other alternate means of livelihood. He loses his job and continues to live in penury. Tikku's changing role points out the impact of westernization on the traditional mode of earning livelihood. Tikku having lost his job and left with no other alternate means of earning money now decides to celebrate his sexuality to earn money. He says "Ab aap dekhiye, iss hijre ke haddiyon main kitna dam hai (you just see, what this hijra can do). He plays the traditional jobs like dancing in the marriage party, dancing on the occasion of new born baby or blessing the people. This was a profession which he has long back abhorred but now it appeared to be the only way to earn money. Having decided to play the role of hijra he dresses up himself with kajal, powder and lipstick, ill-fitting blouses and colourful saris (Subhan, 2013). This deeply resonates with the discrimination third gender faces in the society that pushes them to the clichéd structure and never allows them to come out of it. Mahesh Bhatt not only beautifully captures the dilemma of Tikku whose love for Tamanna makes him hide his identity as a Hijra and at the same time in order to pay for her expenses and upkeep, Tikku decides to celebrate his sexuality to earn money; but also makes a dual statement in a sense that coming out as Hijra liberates Tikku from hiding his real identity. In a nut shell, the film through the character of Tikku and Tamanna deconstructs sexist ideology of the Indian society. Tikku by challenging the gender roles assigned to third gender expands the discourse and understanding towards the Hijra community and Tamanna by finally deciding to live with Tikku instead with her biological mother, further shatters the gender roles and assumptions that hijras are not capable of fulfilling various societal roles.

While the movies *Sadak* and *Tamanna* were critical in giving space to third gender community and bringing them to centre from the margins, the movies mostly focused on breaking the stereotypical discourse around third gender community. However the movie *Shabnum Mausi* (2005) directed by Yogesh Bharadwaj played an instrumental role in inspiring a lot of eunuchs to participate in mainstream activities giving up their traditional roles of dancers, prostitutes and beggars. The movie inspired by a real life story, narrates the story of eunuch Shabnam who when is forced to run away from her hijra community, finds her true identity as a peoples representative and a good politician. The movie manages to realistically shows the journey of Shabnum, the trial and tribulations third gender community faces at every step and how the third gender community is much more than just their gender. The movie starts with family giving up their child to local hijra community after coming to know its gender, which points to

the stark reality of how third gender babies are abandoned. The director then shows how the members of local hijra community rear the child as their own and in one sequence even shows how the kid is ridiculed in school due to which the kid stops going to school. Sequences like these establish the oppressed narrative of the third gender community but the director doesn't weave the entire story around it, he successfully manages to highlight not only the politics within the hijra community with the leader of the community running a covert prostitution racket which Shabnum and her mother opposes to but also shows how Shabnum eventually finds her identity beyond the rigid structures of gender identity imposed on third gender. In another sequence in the movie, when Shabnum goes in to file the nomination papers, there is a very powerful scene where Shabnum writes and marks her gender as a "Kinar" (Hijra) besides the two given options of male and female. The powerful scene simply breaks multiple rigid structures and identities that third gender community faces and brings a sense of liberation and acceptance of one's own self.

Moving on to the movie *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008), directed by Shyam Benegal; the movie unlike other movies mentioned doesn't make an attempt to build the entire narrative around third gender community; rather it showcases the community within the society trying to find an equal plane and not just categorizing and highlighting the otherness. This is wherein the victory of movie lies. Set in a Maharashtra village, the plot revolves around the people of Sajjanpur and tackles a number of socio-economic issues like casteism, superstitions, gender and politics.

However, the film to a greater extent reflects the plight of the hijra vis-a-vis the dominant sexual as well as power discourse. Sexual discourse, formulates the identity of people of different sexual orientation and it is seen that on the basis of biological sex gender roles are given to the hijra. The power discourse on the other hand differentiates and excludes the hijra from the mechanism of power operating in the society. The film debates over the question of identity formation of the hijra in a bi-sexual society. Benegal presents a democratic environment on the one hand and gender politics of the larger sexual discourse on the other and tries to come out with the possibility of a true recognition of identity of the hijra in the society. There are five scenes that deal with the issue of hijra i.e. first a short meeting with Mahadev (the hero of the film) then an election campaigning scene, at Mahadev's house after the threat to her life by her opponent, at the time of election result and the final scene of murder by Ram Singh and his men (Subhan,2013) A very powerful scene in the movie is where Mahadev asks Munni which community's support will she be getting in elections. As in India politics is often fought on caste, religion and region. The question raised by Mahadev highlights a very important concern vis-à-vis the denunciation the community goes through. What Benegal has succeeded in the movies is the struggle for proper recognition of the identity of third gender community by themselves. Munni Bai is seen fight for a fair treatment of her people in the socio-cultural set up and not trying to hide their identity or forcing to change as per the norms of the society. The victory of Munni Bai in the end is an attempt to showcase the changing attitudes of the people but murder of Munni Bai by men of Ram Singh further iterates the position of third gender in the Indian Society and imprints psychological fear of dominant discourse among the hijras.

All in all, we find that though movies have been successful in breaking as well as challenging the rigid gender structures around third gender communities but the low commercial success of these movies also points to the stark reality of the situation on ground. As mentioned sexual discourse often sets the identity of the people, the discourse

around the third gender has that been of impotency, something incomplete, unable to function within the structures of gender binary, something as a deviant, not to be trusted and ridiculed. The movies make an attempt to change the narrative and portray the community in a more humane and realistic setting, which shows different, shades of character of the community like that of any gender. The movies have also been successful in highlighting the poor socio-economic conditions that the third gender people live and which further forces them to live and earn through the traditional way of dancing and begging. While the movies still represent a fringe segment of mainstream Bollywood, the attempt is commendable and a welcome from the either silent treatment with no representation of third gender community or passing them off a comical trope; something to be laughed at.

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