

Analyzing the depiction of transgender individuals in Tamil films in relation to actuality

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Abstract:

Despite the proliferation of other types of entertainment due to technology improvements, film as a medium nevertheless maintains a significant and dedicated fan base. Movies exert a significant influence on people's ideas, making the way individuals or groups are shown and represented of utmost importance. Indian movies have faced criticism in the past for their insensitive and/or misleading depictions of the lives of those belonging to the third gender. Portrayals of individuals from the transgender community in everyday situations are typically rare, resulting in the perpetuation of unapologetic preconceptions. This paper will employ case studies and in-depth interviews as research methodologies to impartially examine the depiction of the third gender in Tamil cinema. It will also explore the significance of representing gender and sexual minorities in society, particularly in the present era.

Keywords: *Portrayal, Transgender, Film, Society*

Objectives:

1. In order to get insight into the representation of the transgender population in Tamil movies, we will examine a few specific examples and thoroughly analyze them.
2. To assess the perspectives of individuals from the transgender community and professionals involved in the community regarding these portrayals.
3. To examine the influence of such portrayal in films and its significance within a societal framework.

Introduction:

Humans are inherently gregarious creatures that reside in communities and regard social interactions as an essential component of their daily existence. They actively engage in listening to the views, opinions, and ideals of those in their vicinity, which frequently influences their own thinking. Additionally, many were led astray by various forms of mass communication such as social media like Facebook, videos, newspapers, and Instagram. Cinema is regarded as a medium for effectively transmitting or communicating information to a wide audience. It is the responsibility of educators in real-life to teach about queerness in a way that challenges stereotypes and adds complexity to the sex/gender system. This is important because the media, which often reinforces harmful or damaging portrayals, has a significant impact on education.^[1] Although there is growing awareness of this portrayal, there is still a dearth of study on the viewpoints of LGBTQ children/youngsters about representations of transgender individuals in modern media.^[2] Merriam Webster defines a transgender or a trans person as “a person whose [gender identity](#) differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth.”^[3] This definition include both trans men (individuals assigned female at birth who identify as male) and trans women (individuals assigned male at birth who identify as female). Several studies have attempted to ascertain the prevalence of transgender individuals in various nations. In a significant move, the Pakistani government has made the decision to incorporate the transgender community into the national census for the first time. This would enable individuals to self-identify their gender identity^[4]. In 2014, a groundbreaking judgment in India legally recognized transgender as the third gender. This underscores the significance of accurately portraying them in mass media platforms, such as films, that are viewed by audiences on a national and international scale. Cinema had a major impact in the lives of ordinary individuals. They emerged as the determining elements and the vital sources of nourishment for numerous individuals. In the past, humans acquired knowledge and learnt about society through the guidance of their family, teachers, and the broader community. Mainly drawn from the Family. In modern times, we, as individuals, devote significant attention to Mass Media Communication. We adhere with and embrace the messages conveyed by our favourite celebrities and directors on the silver screen. Cinema is a comprehensive source of knowledge.

Transgender in Tamil Cinema:

Transgender individuals have consistently been depicted in Indian cinema, specifically Tamil cinema, as mere objects of gratification. They were shown primarily as a sex worker or as a somebody with unpleasant dispositions. The presentation of characters in Tamil movies similarly influenced the thoughts of the audience. Due to inherent inequalities among individuals, when someone attempts to commit theft, we typically direct our disapproval towards them or, to a lesser degree, their family, rather than condemning the entire human species. Similarly, there can be a group of individuals who engage in such abhorrent actions as a means of ensuring their own survival. Individuals rush to theatres and movie stars attain a revered position, evoking elevated levels of devotion from their fans. In such a situation, it is evident that the significance of Tamil cinema and their portrayal of transgender individuals cannot be overstated.

Representation in Tamil Cinema

Transgender characters in the majority of movies are typically assigned minor, important roles that lack substance and fail to contribute significantly to the film's plot. These characters serve the purpose of providing laughter and their characteristics are specifically developed to align with the relief theory of humour^[6]. Sometimes, male characters in a movie dress up as and pretend to be a woman. This is again problematic as it does not actually represent a transgender and could actually merely be a case of cross dressing. Cross dressers are those who wear clothing that is usually associated with the opposite gender. This can be witnessed in many Tamil cinemas, starring Mr. Sivakarthikeyan, (Late).Mr. Vivekh made their appearance as a cross dresser in the movies named Dir Selva's *Guru En Aalu* and Dir Bakkiyaraj Kannan's *Remo*, which were released recently, in which the male protagonist just wears the clothing of a female nurse to form a strong connection with the female protagonist.

Directors have the power to depict transgender characters in a positive or negative light. On the big screen, they might play the role of the hardcore bloodsuckers. Many individuals internalize the message that the transgender population is no different from any other group when they see figures like these on film. The first instance I can recall of witnessing a transgender character on screen was in Director Vasanth's film *Appu* (2000). The movie is a modern version of *Sadak* (Hindi, 1991) and focuses on Maharani, a transgender lady

portrayed by Prakash Raj, who operates as a ruthless procurer in Mumbai. She engages in the practice of trafficking women as sex workers in return for monetary loans provided by males. She is a resolute antagonist who kills whomever she deems as a danger. The movie had a profound impact on the impressionable minds of young individuals. This was evident when my Tamil teacher in elementary school posed a question to the class about their emotions upon encountering trans women on the streets, to which the entire class responded with feelings of “fear” and “awkwardness”. [5]

As a Comical Element

The daily existence of transgender individuals in India is littered with challenges, ranging from a lack of comprehension to societal prejudice. The utilization of transgender characters solely for comedic purposes in films not only devalues their humanity, but also contributes to the contempt and degradation they face in actuality. “Oororam Puliyamaram...” a composition penned by Snehan for Ameer’s critically acclaimed *Paruthiveeran* (2007), derides and verbally assaults transgender women. Male actors who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. The act of cross-dressing as a woman for comedic purposes is frequently misinterpreted as a portrayal of the transgender population. Cross dressers are individuals who choose to wear clothing often associated with the other gender, without necessarily possessing the physical or psychological characteristics of a transgender person.

As Low, in Character

Osma Jasmine, a trans woman make-up artist in Shankar’s 2015 film ‘I’, was initially depicted as a strong-willed, successful professional. However, as the plot developed, she was revealed to be a sexual predator who harbors jealousy toward the hero, Vikram, and takes extreme measures to get revenge when her feelings are not returned. In the recent venture cinema ‘Thittam Irandu’ starring Ms. Ishwariya Rajesh, an another intriguing plot about a Trans people. Where a Trans Man manipulates the heroine of the story by erasing her past and portrayed as a dead one. Why such kind of portrayal still exhibits in the live of transgender person in cinema?.

Promoting Progress in Transgender Representation

While Tamil cinema has not frequently depicted trans individuals in a sincere manner, there have been a few instances of positive representation. Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995) is among the pioneering films that depicted trans women as compassionate and supportive characters. Although it has some cliches, *Muni 2: Kanchana* (2011) is a film that effectively portrays the trans community with an awareness. Thiagarajan Kumararaja's *Super Deluxe* (2019) depicted an intricate bond between a transgender mother and her infant son with compassion and simplicity, surpassing previous portrayals. The character Sathaar in the film *'Thangam'* *Paava Kadhaigal* (2020) is likewise portrayed as a loyal and devoted individual. However, these widely popular films generated discussions over the need of having transgender performers portray transgender roles, rather than cisgender ones.

Thenavattu (2008) is a film directed by VV Kathir. In addition to the main actors, transgender Revathi portrays a character that has the power to significantly alter society's understanding of transsexual individuals. Seenu Ramasamy's film *Dharmadurai* (2016) depicted the potential for a trans woman (portrayed by trans actor Jeeva) to live a dignified life when provided with the love and respect that is legitimately owed to them. One of my preferred transgender actresses who portray transgender characters is Anjali Ameer, who played Meera in Ram's *'Peranbu'* (2019), and the deceased Sherin Celin Mathew, who portrayed Sylvia in Pa Ranjith's *'Natchathiram Nagargiradhu'* (2022). These depictions are uncommon instances of queer happiness, in which these transgender women discover love and enter into marriage with the person they love most.

Conclusion

The influence of mass media, especially films, can have a profound impact and inspiration on people, as filmmakers begin to portray transgender people in a positive light and recognize the importance of accurately portraying diverse characters. While films sometimes use real-life references to highlight the roles of characters, the growing acceptance of this change in the Tamil film industry is encouraging. Amid this transformation in the industry, it is also important that society evolves its perception of the community.

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