

Chapter 32

Voicing the Voiceless: Representation of the Excluded Transgender Community in Tamil Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Cinema always represented the society, and any visual representation about ‘not so commonly discussed’ topics becomes crucial as they are the image blocks for the future generation. The power of cinema is high among Tamil audience, which is evident from the emergence of two great political leaders who are byproducts of it. It is essential to understand how sexual minorities are represented in a culture-specific society. In India, representation of the third gender was insensitive, and Tamil cinema is no exception. These representations cannot be ignored as ‘just in screen’ as screen represents reality. Nevertheless, few fair images are making a significant impact on the audience about transgender. Studying representations about sexual minorities in Tamil cinema is important in today’s context, where young minds are exposed to digital platforms. This chapter explains the description of the transgender community in Tamil cinema and analyses its impact on society.

INTRODUCTION

Tamil cinema has been an integral part of the lives of Tamil people and culture ever since its inception. A look around the city which carries huge billboards and wall posters of films and favourite heroes will convey the message that Tamil cinema has occupied an influential position in the Tamil culture. A further in-depth look on Tamil Nadu politics gives a better picture on how the heroes and heroines of Tamil cinema are given the demi-god status and have been chosen by the people to rule them (Pandian, 1992). This importance given to Tamil cinema by its audience is not something which happened overnight. This phenomenon is part of Tamil culture which is very expressive by its nature. It accompanied with bright colours, rampant emotions and free social interaction among its most intimate circle or

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relationships. In this context, Soudhamani (2005) opines that Tamil cinema has been the most productive cinema culture in India for a long time. It is also most colourful and expressive, with its authentic visual language and message.

Tamil Nadu enriched with the right amount of traditional folk forms. These folk forms -*Therukoothu*, *Karagaatam*, *Nadagam*, *Folk theatre*, *Silambaatam*, *Bommalaatam*, and oral storytelling, etc., have been the roots of Tamil culture since time immemorial. Another exciting feature of Tamil cinema is that unlike other cinemas in the rest of the world, it's not split into different streams like the mainstream cinema which is commercial or entertaining cinema and parallel cinema or art cinema. This specific feature of this cinema industry has allowed it to explore the vibrant and expressive nature of its culture while still giving a fierce competition to other films in the mainstream matrix. While other cultural forms are targeted to a specific community and own a strict social hierarchy, this cinema can be a socio-cultural revolution. It acts through carefully scripted dialogues, which are the samples, showing the flavours of versatile Tamil audience and their culture.

Since cinema is to feed the senses of the mass, it mostly represents the mass culture. Popular cinema caters to the needs of the people in large numbers and because of this; the minority group often gets underrepresented or sometimes misrepresented. One such under-representation or misrepresentation is that of the 'third gender' or the transgender people in Tamil cinema. Popular cinemas have blurred the real image of transgenders and have mostly given a false copy of their lifestyle, their habits, their ambitions and above all their dignity. Most of the transgender characters are stereotyped, and that image is widely accepted among the audience because, in Tamil culture, cinema is a great teacher. In this context, Biswal (2017 & 2019) the disabled are represented as marginalised and politically incorrect in cinema. Kusuma (2018) finds that women marginalised in South Indian cinema and their portrayals are inaccurate. However, Bhatia (2016) asserts that even though LGBT marginalised, there are specific LGBT communities which are digitally active and are mobilising public opinion in favour of the legalisation of their sexual preferences.

DOES IT MATTER?

A transgender person referred to as a person who has a different gender identity. Such a person's sex changes over some time. It can be either female to male who refers to as trans-men or male to female who refers to as trans-women. So, why should their life be of any concern to the 'normal' men and women? How much of the population do these transgender people constitute so that we have to worry about them? Or is it even worth spending the time and energy to know about them? It seems these questions have never posed to many people in society for a long time. It is only in the year 2014, transgender people have given an identification of the 'Third gender' in the landmark judgment of the Supreme Court. It took so many years for the transgender community be recognised.

Only after the legal definition in 2014, it felt necessary to find out the number of transgender community people in the country, and the census conducted showed five lakhs people who identified themselves as belonging to the third gender. This number, however, is said to be incorrect by several activists and they feel that the real number would be at least six or seven times higher than the actual census report (Nagarajan, 2014). There are reports which show that the people belonging to the *hijira* community, that is the transgender community in South-Asia is significantly higher in number than those reported in the census. Hence, understood that India consists within itself a lot of people from the transgender

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