



# Francis Lee's Period Film *Ammonite*: An Exploration of Gender, Class, and Sexuality

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**Abstract**— *Ammonite* (2020) is loosely based on the life of Mary Anning (1799–1847), a palaeontologist in England. The film captures her struggles as she drudges by the seaside to collect fossils that were appropriated by the male scientists who claimed her relics as their own. Her stormy relationship with Charlotte Murchison, an upper-class woman, posits the chief ideas that the film explores— class, gender, and sexuality. Lee's story resurrects the unacknowledged achievements of Mary Anning in a patriarchal society and adds an LGBTQ dimension through their passionate erotic relationship. It is a reimagination based on the lives of two women who were ignored by the male-centric scientific community of the nineteenth century. The study critiques discrimination against women, class differentiation and the institution of marriage. It underscores the role of cinema as a cultural text to reveal how such practices have existed through centuries of exploitation and marginalization by those in positions of power. As a storytelling medium, cinema can transport audiences into a different historical time frame and give an alternate perspective to challenge the status quo. The paper examines how *Ammonite* addresses pressing issues of class and gender and offers a cultural critique through the aesthetic use of images, sound, and narrative. The film has been evaluated through Feminist Theory, Media Studies, and Queer Theory to establish how Lee's film presents alternative paradigms favouring inclusivity and representation of the less privileged.



**Keywords**— *Ammonite*; patriarchy; sexuality, women's position; LGBTQ

## I. INTRODUCTION

In her essay, 'Towards a feminist poetics of narrative voice' (1979), Elaine Showalter argues that women's stories need to be narrated; she quotes Helene Cixous from 'The Laugh of Medusa', in which Cixous challenges men's privileged position and emphasizes that women should find a voice and expression. Writing seemed to them to be the chosen medium to achieve that. Women must write about themselves and their experiences to break away from the patriarchal cultural norm that has silenced women throughout history. Women can resist oppression by reclaiming their bodies and desires through speech and writing to express their uniqueness and creativity. As a mark of solidarity, they can support and empower each other through a feminine discourse that centres on their individual experiences and those of other women. Writing, filmmaking, and popular culture are very effective tools for

bringing about social change by giving voice to unheard stories of the marginalized sections of society.

Historically, women have been disregarded, not only in the literary canon but in the areas of the arts and sciences as well. Francis Lee's film *Ammonite* (2020) narrates the story of Mary Anning of Lyme, "the greatest fossilist the world ever knew" (Torrens, 1995, p.257). "Although not properly credited with her achievements during her lifetime, in recent years, Anning has been hailed as a key figure of nineteenth-century science" (Mac Farlane, 2023, p.260). In 1812, Anning discovered a well-preserved fossil named '*Ichthyosaurus anningae*', a remarkable find that established her reputation. Though she never received any formal education, her discoveries brought Anning considerable fame, and she became a tourist attraction at Lyme. She was a fossil dealer who earned her livelihood by negotiating with other geologists. She was not included in

the mainstream scientific community during her lifetime, and her discoveries were not duly acknowledged in published papers. (ibid., p.264). There is enough documentation to suggest that her contribution as a palaeontologist remained shrouded and obscured due to women's oppression in an age that failed to recognize their contribution to the professional and scientific sphere.

Francis Lee's film is based on the life of Mary Anning and Charlotte Murchison. There is no evidence to document their romantic relationship. However, Lee's treatment of their intense love adds a very significant facet to the position of women in a highly patriarchal society in England in the nineteenth century. In one of his interviews, he explains that being gay himself, he imagined the possibility of same-sex love between the two characters in the film; he relied on existing records of letters that reveal that romantic relationships existed at that time between women. Lee admits that he was drawn to Mary's humble background; she was born into a life of poverty and was a working-class woman with no formal education, yet she rose to prominence. Through his research of the existing records of Anning's life, Lee has woven the story of a resilient woman who made a place for herself when women were mere "angels in the house". His approach to Anning's life resonates with the feminist agenda of giving a voice to the unsung, unacknowledged women whose accomplishments were clouded due to gender discrimination (*Ammonite* Q&A Director Francis Lee | BFI London Film Festival 2020).

## II. AMMONITE (2020)

According to the British Geological Society, "Ammonites lived during the periods of Earth's history known as the Jurassic and Cretaceous. Together, these represent a time interval of about 140 million years. However, we know a lot about them because they are commonly found as fossils formed when the remains or traces of the animal became buried by sediments that later solidified into rock" ("Ammonites - British Geological Survey"). *Ammonite* presents Kate Winslet as Anning. The film opens with a handwritten label for the historic "Sea Lizard, found by Miss Mary Anning" being replaced by a floridly embellished sign reading "Ichthyosaurus, Lyme Regis, Presented by H Hoste Henley Esq". It's a concise way of "illustrating both Anning's outsider status and the snobbery of an establishment averse to inclusivity" (Kermode, 2019). An article titled, 'Kate Winslet and Saoirse Ronan Find Love among the Fossils', describes *Ammonite* as a "sensational biopic of palaeontology pioneer Mary Anning" which "reimagines her erotic encounter with a woman trapped in a stifling marriage" (Bradshaw, 2021). Lee

rediscovers Victorian sexuality in this "intimate, intelligent movie" (ibid.). Reviewing the controlled and subtle performances given by the leading ladies, Bradshaw writes, "Ammonite is an absorbing drama that sensationally brings together two superlative performers: Saoirse Ronan and Kate Winslet. Combining these alpha players doubles or quadruples the screen voltage, and their passion co-exists with the cool, calm subtlety with which Lee inspects the domestic circumstances in which their paths crossed" (2021).

The 'woman question' is depicted not only through Anning, whose relics do not find a place in the museum in her name but also through the character of Charlotte Murchison. Her contribution as a Geologist has been subdued; instead, her role as a mute wife suffering from "mild melancholia" projects the drabness of a loveless marriage. Mr Murchison's demand to have his "bright, funny, clever wife back" reveals the patriarchal privilege and authority that the film consistently critiques. Mr. Murchison's condescending subjection of Charlotte, cold rejection of her need for physical contact, and control over her have been conveyed through subtly choreographed scenes that critically assess the patriarchal dividends men enjoy. In the nineteenth century, it was a common practice to prescribe "rest cure" to women who suffered from melancholia; Charlotte was also left with Mary to be reinvigorated by the fresh sea breeze while the husband travelled the continent for "work".

Similarly, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper", describes how Dr. Mitchell's treatment ruins the mental health of the unnamed narrator in the story. "In the harrowing tale, the narrator slowly goes mad while enduring Mitchell's (physician) regimen of enforced bed rest, seclusion, and overfeeding. Historians now view Mitchell's "Rest Cure" as a striking example of 19th-century medical misogyny" (Stiles, 2012). Her husband also leaves Charlotte Murchison to heal for a few weeks away from home so that her melancholia can be cured. She is compelled to walk by the seaside in fine clothes against her wishes and is later left in the company of Mary Anning; the taciturn woman agrees to take her in only because it is economically lucrative.

Lee's story captures the cultural landscape of the Victorian age; his inventiveness in introducing the love relationship presents not only the lesbian angle but also the class conflict in the film. "Lee acknowledges that there is no evidence hinting at a sexual relationship, but for his artistic purposes, those facts don't matter. Mary and Charlotte not only stand in for women of their era. They are alive on screen as individuals confined by Charlotte's marriage, by the mores of society, and by their own confusion and reticence" (James, 2000). Regarding Lee's treatment of class

consciousness, Kermode (2021) remarks, "It's a powerful point, eloquently made, although, in the end, issues of class and gender, rather than sexual orientation, seem more central to Lee's film".

*Ammonite* not only reimagines and reconstructs the life of Mary Anning but also gives the viewers a visual experience of English society by dwelling on the themes of class, gender, and marriage. The use of minimal dialogues, subtle music, natural sounds like that of the sea and the birds and the period costumes make the film a cultural text which reveals the socio-political situation of the times of Mary Anning.

### III. MARY ANNING, THE "GREATEST FOSSILIST THE WORLD EVER KNEW".

Nineteenth-century historical records do not give Anning her due credit. She was considered an amateur, although "before turning thirty, she had made three great palaeontological discoveries" (Goodhue, 2001, p.80). Her findings were bought and preserved in the name of the donors, not the discoverer. "The 5 feet long, better specimen of Ichthyosaurus was instead eventually sold to a consortium of nine Bristol purchasers, ... the names of the donors - the consortium - are carefully recorded but not, at least in the Institution's own records, the name of its real discoverer" (Torrens, 1995, p.262). Torrens quotes Cumberland from 'Bristol Mirror,' (1823) who recorded that the "persevering female has for years gone daily in search of fossil remains of importance at every tide (ibid., p.263)", she walked several miles under the hanging cliffs at Lyme, to hunt for "valuable relics of a former world, which must be snatched at the moment of their fall, at the continual risk of being crushed by the half suspended fragments they leave behind" (ibid., p.263).

Despite her discoveries, she remained overshadowed until 1931, "when a new angle on Mary appeared in the English newspaper *The Morning Post*. This piece, by Marigold Watney, broke new ground by calling Mary 'the First Woman Geologist' (ibid., p.273). In 1935, William Dickson Lang (1878-1966) published a short paper on Mary. His scholarly, well-referenced work is often referred to for information about her.

There are recent accounts of Mary, but they are often fictionalized because of few known facts, which cannot always be trusted. Torrens (1995) enumerated several challenges in getting a faithful account of Anning's contribution to the scientific community. Being a child prodigy at 12, she remained a mere "curiosity", and there were myths built around her rather than a serious scholarly recording of her work. She belonged to the working class and lived a solitary life. "The history of such people is far

less easily revealed than that of the gentry and their associates". (Torrens, 1995, p.278). Being a dissenter, she was a non-conformist and remained unmarried all her life, being solely driven by her passion for her work. She predated the camera; her appearance could only be imagined through her painted portraits, and she herself was a "doer, not a writer" (Torrens, 1995, p.278). "Apart from some letters, however, Anning left no written records of her activities. Hence, her contributions have often been ignored in accounts of the development of the subject, and her work has been incorporated into that of the men geologists with whom she collaborated so closely" (Creese & Creese, n.d., p.28).

In 2006, Patricia Pierce published her work, *Jurassic Mary, Mary Anning and The Primeval Monsters*, in which she acknowledged the substantial research conducted by William Dickson Lang, the keeper of the Department of Geology at the British Museum from 1928 to 1938, John Fowles (1926-2005), author, novelist, historian and Lyme resident, and geologist and historian Hugh S. Torrens. Pierce likens the story of Anning's life to a fairy tale about a fossil hunter. She describes Mary:

Her achievements were remarkable by any standards, but especially so because she was born and bred in lowly circumstances from which there was little chance of escape. Mary was lower class, female, uneducated, unmarried and a dissenter – one who did not belong to the established Church of England... This impoverished spinster had to earn her own living, and it was to be in an unusual – and dangerous – way: by finding, excavating and then selling fossils both to casual seaside visitors and to important collectors and museums in Britain and Europe... even though she was not properly recognised – as a socially well-placed man would have been – she did succeed to a large degree. (p.12).

Pierce describes Anning as a woman in a man's world, "In a highly sexist society, a spinster, poor and in trade, and in such an unusual trade, was someone to be pitied", (Pierce, 2006, p.134), she negotiated hazardous cliffs to locate the fossils, sketched and scraped them to sell it to gentlemen. She may have begun as an amateur but became a thorough professional to earn her living through her work. It was not a mere hobby for her like that of fossil collectors or professional geologists with the stature, money, and time to indulge themselves. Pierce writes that Charles Dickens knew about her and wrote an article about her in 1865 in 'All the Year Round'. "In it, he praised her 'good stubborn English perseverance', her intuition, her courage, physical and mental, in the face of those locals who initially mocked

her eccentricity” (Pierce, 2006, p.160). Her shop was one of the attractions for tourists to Lyme. Pierce quotes a note from one of the visitors, “In 1839, a visitor noted: A recent and powerful cause of attraction to visit Lyme Regis has arisen in the rich source of fossil remains . . . the principal collector of these fossil treasures now in Lyme, is Miss Mary Anning, whose museum [shop] is one of the chief attractions of the place. Her museum contains a large collection of fossil treasures of the spot, with which it seems constantly filled” (2006, p.168).

Some of Mary Anning’s correspondence with buyers, scientists and geologists has been preserved through which it is learnt that she had an amiable relationship with Sir Roderick Murchison (1792-1871) and his wife, Charlotte Murchison. Kölbl-Ebert (1997) recapitulates his wife’s contribution and participation in the findings of Sir Roderick. Charlotte introduced him to a world of minerals, rocks, and fossils and travelled with him to support his work (Kölbl-Ebert, 1997, p.39). She “had studied science, especially geology, and it was chiefly owing to her example that her husband turned his mind to those pursuits in which he afterwards obtained such distinction” (p.40). “A number of talented wife-assistants of some of the famous men geologists of the early nineteenth century are known to have made contributions to various aspects of their husbands’ work, treating it much as a family concern. However, although effective in the tasks they undertook (very often technical drawing), they appear for the most part to have settled for roles as general assistants” (Leppmann, 1994, pp.25-26).

There is some evidence to show that Mary Anning corresponded with Charlotte Murchison and had amiable relations with her. The National Geographic website records that Charlotte Murchison “had spent the two weeks when her husband travelled along the coast alone, sketching and fossil hunting with Mary Anning...The two women remained friends and corresponded frequently, with Charlotte acting as a go-between for Fellows of the Society who wished to purchase fossils from Anning” (National Geographic, “Letter to Charlotte Murchison from Mary Anning, 1829”).

Francis Lee has built the story of *Ammonite* using the historical and factual details available about the two women. He has taken the artistic license to reimagine a love relationship between Mary and Charlotte, which makes the film relevant from the gender point of view for the audience in the present times, apart from commenting on the woman question and class consciousness that was prevalent in nineteenth-century England.

#### IV. GENDER REPRESENTATION THROUGH MEDIA

David Gauntlett (2008) maintains that “media and communications are a central element of modern life, whilst gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we think about our identities”. The images of men and women conveyed through the media inevitably impact identity formation. It is further explained by the author, “In media studies, ‘text’ can refer to any kind of media material, such as a television programme, a film, a magazine, or a website, as well as a more conventional written text such as a book or newspaper”(p.18), and discourse, “broadly means a way of talking about things within a particular group, culture or society; or a set of ideas within a culture which shapes how we perceive the world”(p.18). Like other media material, cinema is a text that reflects popular cultural practices and beliefs and establishes the popular discourse or contravenes it to offer a fresh, path-breaking perspective. Cultural forces have also influenced the representation of gender in cinema; it plays a crucial role in creating consciousness about the woman question, class struggle, social problems of poverty, unemployment, pandemics like COVID, or as in the case of science fiction, it has touched upon AI much before it became a reality.

Media representation has also undergone a massive transformation, and social, psychological, and philosophical concepts and theories, such as post-colonialism, subaltern studies, cultural studies, gender studies and queer theory have influenced it. The visual text of cinema is experimental and thought-provoking, with a wide outreach and potential to engineer social change. Regarding gender representation in media, Gauntlett (2008) writes:

Men and women are seen working side by side, as equals, in the hospitals, schools and police stations of television land. Movie producers are more wary of having women as screaming victims and have realised that kick-ass heroines can do better business. Advertisers have by now realised that audiences will only laugh at images of the pretty housewife and have reacted by showing women how to be sexy at work instead. Gay characters have slowly started to be more prominent on TV and in the movies and discussions of the rights of marginalized groups have also surfaced within popular culture. (p.62)

The content on television, video games and online channels has shown a definite shift in the past few decades. In cinema, gender representation since the 1990s has become more inclusive. Women are no longer only caregivers, lovers, or mothers; they have been presented alongside the

male lead as parallel action heroes in films such as *Speed* (1994), *Titanic* (1997) and, in more recent examples in films like *Mr & Mrs Smith* (2005), *The Da Vinci Code* (2006) and the *Pirates of the Caribbean* trilogy (2003, 2006, 2007). Female-centric roles with a woman in the lead role have also become popular in Western and Indian cinema. *Barbie* (2023) and *Darlings* (2022) are notable examples that did outstandingly well in theatre and OTT platforms worldwide. "Women are hardly shown as brainless – on the contrary, they are amazingly multi-skilled: they are forensic scientists and electronic engineers, espionage and surveillance specialists, racing-car drivers and superhuman fighting machines" (ibid. p.76).

Gay and lesbian characters have also become noticeable in media representations. Whereas earlier portrayals were laced with comedy, often being parodic, recent trends have projected a more sensitive delineation of these roles. *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert* (1994), *The Birdcage* (1996), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985), *A Single Man* (2009), *Milk* (2008), *The Danish Girl* (2015) have depicted queer subjects with sensitivity and seriousness. Richard Dyer (2005) highlights the queer culture, its formation, and representation; he writes, "The culture of queers drew on the lifestyle, language, geographies, and traditions of queers ... In some measure, queers acted in certain ways because that's how the cultural imaginings of them proposed they/we act, but at the same time, those imaginings were based on actual practices" (p.10). Dyer's analysis aptly explains the why and how of such changes that we witness in queer discourse in popular culture, media, and films. However, cultural imaginings of the queer may not always adequately showcase the "complexity, fluidity, sheer extensiveness of reality" (p.11), yet cinema is one of the significant mediums through which filmmakers present the queer through historical characters (*Ammonite*, 2020), artists (*Sin* 2019), or the common person in films (*As Good As It Gets* 1997).

## V. CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN AMMONITE

In *The Unlikely Couple* (1999), Wartenberg traces romance in cinema between two individuals whose social status makes their involvement problematic. The source of this difficulty is the couple's transgressive relationship and consequent violation of social norms. As "hierarchies of class, gender, race, and sexual orientation are so structurally central to our society" (Wartenberg, 1999, p.7), he has critiqued films which explore love between couples across the four dimensions listed above. Such films rely on the 'narrative figure' of the transgressive couple who destabilize categories and distinctions to provide an

experience of its 'limited validity'. Such relationships challenge the regulatory norms of the society. The narrative figure of the unlikely couple serves as a "microcosmic crystallization of that basic conflict, determines the narrative possibilities of the unlikely couple film" and its potential to criticize the different positions in the conflict" (ibid.), The unlikely couple contravene the principles of hierarchy, which "portends social chaos and must either be prevented from forming or sanctioned in some way" (ibid.)

The unlikeliness between Mary and Charlotte in the film *Ammonite* results out of the categories of class and sexuality. Through the historical figure of Mary Anning, the filmmaker Francis Lee critiques normativity ascribed to man-woman relationships, comments on the social conformity that Charlotte is forced to subscribe to and unravels an alternative to pre-existing limitations imposed by class distinctions and heterosexuality. In addition, Mary Anning becomes an emblem of independence and forbearance in her uncompromising pursuit as a scientist. She emerges as a woman finding a place for herself in the "man's" world of the nineteenth century. The class-ridden society in England marginalised the working class, and Lee subtly presented such prejudices in *Ammonite* by contrasting the privileged Charlotte and her husband with working-class Mary Anning.

## VI. CLASS AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

Francis Lee's treatment of the hierarchies of class, gender, and sexual orientation in *Ammonite* subverts the normative perception of these social categories. In an interview, Lee admitted that belonging to the working class himself, he was acutely aware of the class distinctions in British society (*Ammonite Q&A with Director Francis Lee | BFI London Film Festival 2020*). He has presented this theme pertinently through his visual images, coded in clothes, social station, and mannerisms. Susan Hayward (2002) remarks that:

Film is a system of representation that both produces and reproduces cultural signification; it will ineluctably be tied up with questions of class. Debate around class in film theory has been mostly inflected by Karl Marx's definitions of class and by subsequent rethinkings of those definitions first by Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser and Herbert Marcuse and then by post-structuralist theorists. "(p.59)

According to Marx, class refers to groups of people with similar relations to the means of production. Between the workers and the owners of the means of production are the middle and the lower classes, which include trained professionals or skilled workers. Marx maintained that the

dominant class maintains its hegemony by preventing new ideas of production, for which maintaining the status quo is a pre-requisite. "Marx and Gramsci, after him, argue how cultural artefacts manifest these differences. They also make the point that culture functions to make sense of those differences. Thus, in Marxist thinking, cultural aesthetics is very bound up with the concept of class" (Susan Hayward, 2002, p.60). In cinema, class is denoted through clothes, language register, environment, and lifestyle, to name a few. Francis Lee's *Ammonite* centres around the leading characters of Mary and Charlotte, who belong to distinctly different classes, and he has captured the glaring contrast through a series of very well-crafted shots.

Films can be interpreted like novels and paintings for their narrative and visual quality. Films are also constructed through a collection of carefully constructed scenes, and each element functions to generate meaning (Michael, 2012, p.131). Michael further observes:

Narrative filmmakers tell stories with meaning, much as novel writers do. But filmmaking is different because it is a visual medium that requires very different tools and techniques for creating meaning. A narrative film begins as a story, but for the story to be realized and turned into a film, a set must be chosen or constructed, and actors must create the characters (p.132).

*Ammonite* opens with a working-class woman cleaning the floor of the London Museum, where the relic found by Mary is displayed, but the name of the presenter, a man replaces her name. The next few shots establish the central focus of the film, which is Mary Anning, played by the very versatile Kate Winslet, who is dressed in coarse working-class clothes; she goes to the rough seashore to hunt for fossils and returns home to her mother, cleans up in a very modestly done up house and eats a frugal meal with her mother. The relationship of the mother and daughter is established as a forced companionship born out of a mutual sense of duty, admirably conveyed by the actors without any dialogues; rather, it is through the look in the eyes, gestures, and body language alone. The next shot introduces a well-dressed couple, Roderick, and Charlotte. The latter represents the upper, privileged class, who have the means to purchase Mary's relics and her time to educate Roderick to find fossils of interest by the rough sea of Lyme. Despite her skill, Mary is not recognized by the fashionable London society, and she drudges on the rocky beach to find the relics for her livelihood. In contrast, the Murchisons represent the privileged class, who eat at a fancy banquet, drink wine, and enjoy high society. The fashionable backdrop where they dine stands out in stark contrast to the earlier scene of Mary dining with her mother. At the very outset, the class

distinction and its social implications are established by Lee through clothes, food, occupation, and the backdrop. It is one of the chief preoccupations of the film to present the struggles of Mary, a scientist, who does not get her due credit owing to her gender and class.

Through a series of images and shots, Lee captures the contrast effectively. Mary scrapes the fossils, her hands are rough, her nails are unkept, and her hair is dishevelled. Like her coarse clothes, her language is also unaffected, direct, business-like and matter-of-fact. Lee establishes her as a proud, self-reliant woman fighting for a place in a man's world. On the other hand, Charlotte is impeccably dressed; she wears gloves, talks softly, and eats what her husband orders for her like a compliant wife. Unlike Mary, she is a conformist, a married woman who has been advised to rest by the seashore to recuperate and bring back her feisty spirit. When her husband leaves her in Mary's charge, she appears out of place and sits quietly and glumly while Mary works by the shore. Her ladylike, well-groomed demeanour is contrasted by Mary as she eats her bread. Mary wipes her hands on her clothes and even urinates in the open. They later emerge as the unlikely couple who, despite class barriers, connect on the human plane and try to find comfort from a lonely, loveless life. At the film's end, however, Lee presents Mary's self-pride as the chief constraint that stops her from accepting Charlotte's offer to live with her. The abodes of the two women are as different as chalk from cheese. The film is open-ended, suggesting the possibility of their getting together as Charlotte and Mary meet and exchange glances at the London Museum, where Charlotte knew Mary would go to see her fossil on display. Lee imagines the destabilizing possibility of bringing the protagonists together despite the constraints of class and sexuality and presents it delicately in the film.

## VII. GENDER AND SEXUALITY

*Ammonite* subverts the notions of femininity, gender, and sexuality through the leading characters. As a nineteenth-century woman, Mary Anning was a revolutionary who lived independently and made a place for herself in the male-dominated scientific community. Using the available factual details, Lee has delineated the character of Mary in the film but has also used the artistic license to invent the romantic relationship between Charlotte and Mary. It is historically documented that the two women had met in real life and had corresponded, but Lee adds the angle of their love, which makes the characters more intriguing, multi-layered, and relevant from the LGBT+ perspective. The traditional ideas of femininity associated with softness, being delicate, and docile render women as a category with little or no agentive power, leading to gender inequality and

male supremacy. Judith Butler's concept of "performativity", enunciated in *Gender Trouble* (1990), challenges the fixed identity attributed to men and women. Butler emphasizes the fluid nature of gender, which she calls a "verb" and not a noun, which is enacted by a set of acceptable practices and behaviours in society. "Doing" gender roles may not essentially be limited to the male-female binary but may be situated anywhere in the broad spectrum, thus giving space to transgender and queer identities.

In her book *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler says, "If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing and without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (p.1). Butler emphasizes that one does not "do" one's gender alone; it is always done with or for others. The enactment of gender may be 'authored' by the person concerned, but the terms that make it up are determined by forces outside, such as society and the specific culture (Butler,2004). She further explains:

To speak in this way may seem strange, but it becomes less so when we realize that the social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood. This matter is made more complex by the fact that the viability of our individual personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms(p.2).

Human desire is also determined by the social norms of which we are constituted. "The terms by which we are recognized as human are socially articulated and changeable (ibid. p.3). Society exerts power by recognizing certain social behaviours and roles as acceptable and rejecting others as deviant social practices.

Francis Lee presents the forbidden relationship of Mary and Charlotte in *Ammonite*. The latter's complete adherence to socially acceptable norms leave her psychologically troubled and sexually unfulfilled. Within the constrictive English society, she is the obedient wife who is to be treated for her melancholia so that her husband can return the bride he married. Her desire for physical comfort and proximity with her husband is rebuffed because it is not the right time to have a baby; she is compelled to dress up and appear even though she feels dejected and gloomy. The husband shows no sympathy for her state and leaves her against her wishes in the care of Mary while he sets out to travel the continent for 'work'.

By foregrounding the hollowness of Charlotte's marriage and the mechanical, solitary life of Mary, Francis Lee builds the required tension in the script and brings together the two

leading women as lovers and sexual partners. They bond as companions emotionally, physically, sexually, and professionally. Mary is shown to be uncomfortable and uptight when Charlotte interacts with other women, especially her earlier partner, Elizabeth. The scene is eloquent through the marvellous performances of Kate Winslet and Fiona Shaw. Lee suggests Mary's encounter and past relationship with the older Elizabeth. Saoirse Ronan, as Charlotte, is very convincing; her delicate demeanour and the strong persona of Kate Winslet complement one another. Their love-making scenes are artistically shot. Through his artistic use of light, cameras, and frames, Lee presents a touching encounter between the two women who mutually intuit each other's needs and gratify one another. Their coming together is an act of human search for sexual completeness, leading to emotional fulfilment.

In *Unlikely Couples* (1999), Wartenberg traces the theme of transgressive love in Films and notes that homosexuality was not very popular initially but by the 1970s and 1980s, films started focusing on gay couples without stigmatization. He writes, "Only after the gay liberation movement had secured recognition, at least in a certain segment of the population, that a homosexual orientation was not a perversion was it possible to make popular films depicting gay relationships as nonpathological" (p.196). Lesbianism was largely absent from mainstream cinema, but of late, there have been films which present positive images of lesbian love and romance. Some recent films that have done so include *The World Unseen* (2007), *Edie & Thea: A Very Long Engagement* (2009), *Hannah Free* (2009), *The Berlin Affair* (1985), *The Four-Faced Liar* (2010), *I Can't Think Straight* (2008). The most common tropes used in such films include delicate looks and touches, the use of suffused light that envelops both partners and the relationships are often centred around mother-daughter or pupil-teacher equations. Andrew Dix (2010) notes that "interest in gay and lesbian representation in cinema is currently supported by an institutional apparatus of university courses and conferences, dedicated journals and specialist film festivals" (p.244). Compared to the recent films, earlier ones were "piecemeal, individualistic, sometimes even idiosyncratic"(ibid.). Queer Theory has impacted the gay representation on the silver screen; the negative stereotyping of homosexuality is now not accepted by the audience. There is an increased awareness, consciousness, and acceptability of gay and lesbian themes in cinema as in real life.

Annamarie Jagose (1999) writes, "Gay liberation philosophy aimed to secure more than tolerance for homosexuality. It was committed to a radical and extensive transformation of social structures and values" (p.40). It was

guided by the belief that sex roles oppress everyone and demanded recognition of legitimate identity for all forms of sexual preferences in people. Gay liberation claimed that the fight for homosexual rights could liberate forms of sexuality that need not necessarily be structured by the constraints of sex and gender. Jagose explains:

Gay liberation understood that the marginalisation and devaluation of homosexuality was affected by that dominant and rigidly hierarchical conceptualisation of sex and gender, which constituted the social norm. In order to liberate homosexuality, gay liberation was committed to eradicating fixed notions of femininity and masculinity: that move would similarly liberate any other group oppressed by what it critiqued as normative sex and gender roles (p.41).

Similarly, lesbians fought for their rights and demanded a place in the mainstream canon, which eventually led to the development of the category of 'queer'. Jagose writes that the term queer "indexes precisely and specifically cultural formations of the late 1980s and 1990s" (p.75). The present category, LGBTQI+, denotes the fluid and ever-evolving field of gender studies that resists oppressive and restrictive gender roles. The academic evolution of Queer Theory subverts identity politics which projected 'gay' as the opposite of 'straight'. It rejects the binary between sex and gender, and between homosexuality and heterosexuality, and shifts the focus from sexual identity to the fluidity of sexual performativity. "It argues that all sexual and gendered identities are complex, mutable, merely provisional. In the process, a larger number of behaviours and positionalities than before is gathered under the sign of queerness" (Dix, 2010, p.247). It has become an integral part of film studies and has also influenced filmmaking, leading to the creation of cinema that explores queer subjectivities rather than just glorifying heterosexual relationships.

*Ammonite* explores the forbidden, transgressive love between two women in the Victorian age, which may have been compulsorily closeted, but it existed as is evinced from existing literature. This kind of queerness, attributed to historical characters such as Mary Anning, also lends credence to same-sex love and erotic desire through the continuum of time and history. The film destabilizes heterosexual normativity, critiques the institution of marriage, and explores women's discrimination in a class-ridden patriarchal society.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

Regarding Mary Anning, Francis Lee admitted in an article that "what she represented instantly struck a chord with me because she was a working-class woman, born into a life of

poverty really, with no access to basic education, and then somehow ... rose to being ...the leading paleontologist of her generation" (Hammond, 2020). He was a working-class queer from Yorkshire and did not receive formal education like Mary. "I couldn't afford film school, so I didn't go. There were some parallels that stuck with me" (Hammond, 2020). *Ammonite* is a fictionalised account of the life of Mary Anning, and as a working-class, queer filmmaker Lee identified with her. The film served as an effective medium for him to raise social issues artistically and give insights into the still-existing regressive practices.

Cinema and film are embedded within culture; therefore, a complex and interesting relationship exists between film, culture, ideology, and the audience (Cloete, 2017). It is a pervasive and powerful medium for creating discourse and counter-discourse, as it is layered with cultural beliefs and its materiality. Through its narrative, *Ammonite* destabilizes the notion of women being the weaker sex and the idea of discrimination based on class and sexuality. The film ends with an unspoken possibility of union between Mary and Charlotte through which the audience is given the suggestion that existing ideologies can be rejected in favour of a more inclusive framework.

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