



From Margin to Mainstream: Representation of Queer Women in Contemporary Global Cinema

Saptami Nath

Jorhat, Assam, India

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Abstract— Over the last decades, the cinema of the world has started to reveal more and more the daily existence of lesbian women in their narratives, and thus, the common obstacles of invisibility, stereotyping, and marginalization have been broken one after another. This paper looks at the subject of queer female identity in modern-day films from Hollywood, Bollywood and Europe, and it does so through the lens of authenticity, agency, and audience reception. It uses Judith Butler's *Queer Theory* (1990) and Laura Mulvey's *Male Gaze Theory* (1975) as a theoretical framework to reveal the process whereby directors and viewers deal with the line separating representation from reality. The visual and narrative techniques that are responsible for the queer storytelling are analyzed through the case studies—*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019, France), *Sheer Qorma* (2021, India), and *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013, France). The study reveals that there is a gradual movement or change in the way same-sex desire is depicted from that of voyeuristic portrayals to emotionally complex, authentic, and intersectional representations. In summary, the author asserts that despite the fact that a lot of improvements have already been done in the area of cinematic inclusivity, the representation of queer women is still a vibrant area that keeps challenging heteronormative aesthetics, politics of the industry and world cultural narratives.



Keywords— *Queer representation, lesbian identity, cinematic authenticity, male gaze, intersectionality*

I. INTRODUCTION: VISIBILITY VERSUS AUTHENTICITY

During most of film history, queer women were primarily mute or pushed into the background. Even when they were portrayed, their characters were mostly drawn as a stereotype. More often than not, the focus in rare instances of acceptance was on the heteronormative perspective, which primarily served to thrill or to shock the general public instead of sharing real life experiences. But still, the film industry has made it possible for more diverse story lines to be told and to be seen. With the coming of such films as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) and *Sheer Qorma* (2021), queer women's tales have not just gone underground but have rather become a part of the mainstream conversation and debate on gender, sexual orientation, and identity.

The article in question maintains that being visible does not necessarily translate to being genuine. Although the

representation of queer stories is of utmost importance, the quality and perspective of that representation will decide if the stories are powerful or if they are just taking the opposite route. It has been argued by the likes of Laura Mulvey (1975) that, in the past, women's roles in cinema were mostly determined by the “male gaze” and dictated by the ruling patriarchy. In the same way, the first on-screen representations of lesbians were more about heterosexual audiences getting their role as voyeurs rather than understanding the intricate lives of the depicted women.

Judith Butler's (1990) idea of gender performativity suggested that film characters could be seen as non-fixed and socially created instead of being seen as determined by nature. Therefore, the movies turned out to be a spot where the distinctions of gender and sex could easily be put to the test and, at the same time, pointed out. The theory allows us to see the current directors reclaiming the visual story as

a tool of queer self-expression rather than being cornered into the heterosexual fantasy.

Worldwide cinema has been the main player in this change. European art films have been the first ones to create close, emotionally alive images of same-sex love and the South Asian and Hollywood movie industries are slowly coming to terms with the fact that queer identities are diverse. Nevertheless, there are still things to be questioned: Do the pictures really depict the queer women's reality? Are they still 'processed' through the power of 'others' or do they truly speak for the lesbians?

This paper investigates the evolution of queer women's visibility through case studies of three different film industries, Hollywood, Bollywood, and European cinema, along with the question of whether such a visibility has led to real representation. The issue is examined against the background of the influence of factors such as audience reception, censorship, and cultural expectations, which are all contributing to the shaping of queer femininity in films.

II. THEORETICAL LENS: QUEER THEORY AND THE MALE GAZE

Judith Butler's (1990) Queer Theory had a profound impact on the re-interpretation of gender and sexual orientation and contention that only society, and not nature, could determine such categories. Butler suggested that gender is performed by means of habitual acts, gestures, and the use of language, and this results in the very illusion of stability and normality. Gender performativity thus becomes a very strong means of exploring the ways in which filmic characters are shaped by, or resist, or, maybe, even overpower the demands of society upon their gender. In queer cinema, nowadays, women loving women very often go beyond the ordinary gender categories and present new ways of desiring and being. But, still, the freeing quality of such performances is very much dependent on the filmmakers' vision and the overall film industry setting that determines the film's creation and release.

Queer Theory posits that representation is always an undermined active process; it mirrors and reinforces the existing power relations. The incorporation of queer characters in movies is considered their meanings are influenced by the commonly accepted standards of society, the viewing public's expectations, and the economy of the film industry. In this way, the representation of queerness proves to be both a cultural act and a political statement at the same time. Looking at it this way, films are not only a source of pleasure but also a social text that fights for the presence and recognition of the subordinate communities.

Laura Mulvey's (1975) Male Gaze Theory offers a complementary yet critical viewpoint to the visual politics of cinema. Mulvey posited that the typical movie viewer is male, which consequently leads to women's viewing as objects and their being the subjects of visual pleasure. The camera, narrative, and editing are all combined to bring the viewers to the viewpoint of a heterosexual man, which is a passive woman being desired rather than an active one exercising her right. The representation of queer women in this context has always led to their intimacy and sexuality being viewed as voyeuristic fascination rather than being emotional or authentic. This dynamic has been, throughout the history of cinema, a defining factor of the lesbian or bisexual women's portrayal — as fantasies for heterosexual consumption rather than as self-defined people.

The interplay between Butler's and Mulvey's theories brings up a decisive question: Is it possible for cinema to depict queer women and not copy the rules of the patriarchal or heteronormative gaze? To illustrate, one can take Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013) as an example of a film that won a lot of accolades for its emotional truthfulness but also faced critique because of its long explicit scenes. The critics take the director of the scenes—a heterosexual man—and argue that he is re-enacting voyeurism and objectifying women's bodies, thus clogging the film's authenticity. The whole argument around the film is reflection of the fact that the director's point-of-view determines the meaning in a great way; therefore, to be seen but not to have any power could so easily be turned into exploitation.

Nonetheless, sci-fi movie makers Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) takes a huge step in a new direction by using the female perspective. A queer woman, Sciamma, director and writer, decides to use her camera not for the purpose of consumption but for the purpose of connection. Her emphasis on mutual looks, restrained feelings, and recognition of one another changes the visual experience from that of a voyeur to that of an empath. The film reflects the performance of gender as a relational one, which is Butler's theory, and at the same time it disengages with Mulvey's gaze through the medium of ethical authorship.

The combination of Butler's theory of performativity and Mulvey's analysis of cinema allows us to see representation as an artistic technique and a source of power at the same time. The female gaze, when led by queer subjectivity, causes a rupture in the patriarchal narrative and thus, new ways of seeing are formed. Theory of this kind seems to be best in the context of watching as participating with people supposing the role of witnesses

rather than that of consumers. Such a background of theory supports the investigation of various situations that filmmakers from diverse cultural backgrounds are able to cope with the conflict between visibility, authenticity, and audience demand in the upcoming case studies.

III. CASE STUDIES

3.1. “Portrait of a Lady on Fire” (France, 2019)

The relationship between Héloïse and Marianne remains quite clear, yet it has artworks that have only one connection, namely to portray the painted picture, not the painter herself is demonstrated in the film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, a film by Céline Sciamma with Marianne, an 18th-century predecessor of Héloïse, as an artist. Through coverture, both the narrational and visual aspects of the film allow the lesbian love story to unfold unrestricted. The film is brilliant in not only depicting the conflict and the struggle of love amidst social containment but also in using the characters Alexandrine, Marianne, and Héloïse to map the tale of love through the different times and conditions.

The story in the film has been meticulously built up and at the same time has been candidly told by the director of the film, Sciamma, a queer female. Silence and stillness were incorporated in the production's visuals and soundscape as part of the whole feel, thus emotions came naturally focusing on looks, movements, and breaks in speech instead of words. This mode of narrating corresponds to Judith Butler's (1990) notion that gender and lust are actions done and connected rather than fixed identities.

The visual communication of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* was very important in its authenticity. Sciamma surrounded both women with symmetry and balanced compositions which treated them symbolically as equals. The process of painting turns out to be a metaphor for the politics of seeing—to paint is to see, to recognize, and to keep. In opposition to the voyeuristic inclinations of the male gaze characterized by Laura Mulvey (1975), the manner in which Sciamma is framing the film allows for reciprocity. The spectators are not allowed to consume the intimacy of the women but are rather invited to witness it in a respectable manner. The materialization of men in most of the film still further affirms this freedom, thus establishing a setting in which the feminine selfhood and love between women can emerge without outside intrusion.

Eroticism in Sciamma's movie results from emotional closeness instead of exhibitionism. The lens fixates not on sexual contacts but on the delicate nuances of touch and facial expressions. This moderation is integral to yearning

being seen as a connecting link rather than a case of depriving one of their identity. The last moment—Marianne sitting in an art gallery at Héloïse's distant view—conveys the bittersweet fortitude of affection through recollection and art. In the course of the film, Sciamma makes use of the aesthetic to illustrate the political, revealing that queer cinema, as a means of expressing totality of the experience, still does not lose the particularities.

In the end, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* becomes a solo trumpet of female gaze's victories, a lonely one among the others. It is the storytelling that enables and not the one that encumbers; it is the character's existence that looks more than just the audience's imaginings. Therefore, the film of Sciamma is still a significant factor in the expansion of queer cinematic expression regardless of the extent of the depiction and how tender, profound, and human the representation of women's love is.

3.2. “Sheer Qorma” (India, 2021)

The film *Sheer Qorma* by Faraz Arif Ansari is a roller coaster of emotions intertwined with a cultural love story, which indeed becomes a reference point in the representation of South Asian LGBTQ community.. The movie's story is centered on a non-binary character, Saira, and a lesbian Muslim woman, Sitara, who have to cope with family rejections, cultural bans on their love, and at the same time, crave for acceptance. The 30-minute long short film is good at counteracting different stereotypes that have usually marked the representation of queer women in India since history.

Sheer Qorma, on the other hand, rather than the older Bollywood movies, which showed same-gender love as humor, disorder, or tragedy, emphasizes emotional truth. The director's method here, however, does not place domestic settings of the movie—dining tables, kitchens, and family rituals—as a symbol of a deliberate reclamation of space. By placing queer love in recognizable, mundane places, Ansari proves that the idea of queerness being an alien in Indian culture is wrong. The film's visual warmth—gentle lighting, soft colors, and leisurely camera work—invites one to feel the affection and the spiritual connection of the characters instead of conflict or show. the character's confrontations but the very tenderness and the sense of belongingness.

To emphasize its place in queer theory and South Asian studies, *Sheer Qorma* is certainly an intersectional film chip of the block—one of the texts that most brilliantly delineate such a concept as elaborated by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989)—using the very notion of intersectionality in its search for explanation and theme. By showing the protagonist Sitara's queerness intertwined

with her Muslim identity and the expectations placed on women from a patriarchal religious structure, the movie places itself in the thick of the debate on the issues surrounding them. Consequently, the film reveals that queer South Asians suffer double marginalization; they are first rendered invisible by the dominant culture, and then they are made pariahs by the returning conservative communities.

The climax of the tale takes place when Sitara's mom at last sees the affection of her girl and puts an end to her rejection by giving her love back to her. This very instance can stand as a metaphor for a radical act of acceptance; it is so especially in a community where the discussion of LGBTQ+ rights and wrongs is still not settled. The mother's acceptance offers a new perspective on the household, which is based on empathy and compassion rather than on exclusion. This concurs with postcolonial queer studies which emphasize the importance of the local narratives and culturally based notions in identity-formation (Gopinath, 2005).

Ansari's authorial perspective as a queer filmmaker characterizes the film's truthfulness. The characters are not seen through the eye of a heterosexual, but rather are portrayed in their lived reality. Sheer Qorma thus aids in the decolonization of queer cinema by showing that representation based on community experiences can be both locally rooted and globally resonant. The film with its soft storytelling and cultural specificity puts South Asian queer love not as an exception but as a part of the global human connection's tapestry.

3.3. "Blue Is the Warmest Color"

In a rather tricky scenario, Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is the Warmest Color* (2013) has been placed in various complex agonies on the broader canvas of queer cinema as a practice: The film has been basked over in praise and accolades, before a rather unruly and critical public consensus—quite possibly due in part to the controversy surrounding the film. The movie presents Adèle, a girl who through a passionate relationship with Emma, a more matured art student, discovers her sexuality. The film seems to be a deep and sensitive depiction of the same-gender love and emotional growth in friendship. But the film, besides being lauded for its acting and emotional impact, was also heavily criticized for its graphic nudity and the dubious power relations of the male director to his female actors.

The heated debates around *Blue Is the Warmest Color* very clearly reflect Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory about the male gaze, which reveals how the mainstream cinema basically turns women into objects for the pleasure of the

opposite sex visually. The director or cameraman Kechiche makes the camera stay for a while on the women's bodies in the course of the long sex scenes, presenting the intimacy through a very loud and spectacular way that has nothing to do with emotional authenticity. Many critics and scholars have said that the movie literally changes the feminine love into a visual act for heterosexual audiences and, in doing so, it deprives the love of its reality and degree of connection. The two actresses, Léa Seydoux and Adèle Exarchopoulos, later on admitted that the whole shooting period was emotionally and physically tiring as they had to undergo the painful experience of the imbalance between the power of the artist and the consent of the actor.

Theoretical sex aspects in the movie completely opposed Butler's (1990) performance notion. The director Kechiche's aesthetics regarded queerness as something that could "show" and "watch" instead of being a real and personally defined identity. The bond between the two characters appears to be artificial and is present merely for the viewership, not the actual conditions of the LGBTQ community. Hence, the film, while introducing lesbian love to the global audience, still continued to be a captive of the masculine beauty norms whose impact was the opposite of that intended—supporting instead of challenging the age-old gender power play.

Still, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* can't be totally ignored. Its victory—Palme d'Or at Cannes Film Festival—streamed a lot of attention to queer stories in the cinema. Nevertheless, its legacy has two sides: it showed at the same time the way and the danger of the representation when there is no author. The movie initiated very much needed debates about gaze, consent and ownership in storytelling, thus allowing films of the type *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Sheer Qorma* to come later, who wanted to reclaim queer narratives from their very midst. In the end, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* is still a paradoxical text—visibility landmark that unveils at the same time the ethical and aesthetic limits of the male gaze.

3.4. Comparative Insights

The three films, when looked at together, depict the transformation of the representation of queer women from a perspective of voyeurism to one of authenticity. *Blue Is the Warmest Color* can be considered an initial effort at introducing the concept of lesbian identity to the public but is still limited by the male gaze. On the other hand, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *Sheer Qorma* prove the impact of queer and female directors taking over the creative control. The two movies convey that authenticity does not only come from the narrative but also from the creative

viewpoint—who narrates the fable and for whom it is narrated.

This evolution is indicative of monumental changes in the culture of both media and society. The audience becoming more selective and varied makes the emotional truth and moral storytelling to be the demands of the time. The majority of the credit for the emergence of LGBTQ+ narratives and the accessibility of the *Sheer Qorma* story to a global audience, who otherwise would not have been able to experience it, goes to the independent film festivals and streaming platforms like Netflix, since it is a minor or local production. Still, challenges exist. Censorship, unequal funding, and tokenism are among the main factors that determine the ways in which queer women are depicted. The presence of representation has increased, but the global film industry still has its share of systemic issues.

In the end, these case studies show that authentic representation arises when film-makers focus on empathy, community, and complexity instead of shock or spectacle. The change of focus from external observing to internal narrating indicates a transition from the margin to the mainstream—not through assimilation, but through artistic and ethical reclamation.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The informative comparison between French, Indian, and European queer film has shown a slow yet substantial change in the portrayal of queer women in movies. One of the main results is the very significant role of authorship and gaze in determining how authentic the representation is. Queer or women directors' films, such as Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and Faraz Arif Ansari's *Sheer Qorma*, display a very moral and humanistic approach to storytelling. These films promote through their plots the themes of emotional sharing, artistic partnership, and personal identity rather than sensationalism. On the other hand, the film, Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, had great success in terms of visibility but it still remains under the straight male point of view. The matter is not different but the viewpoint is different: when queer narratives are depicted from within the community, they get connected with emotional truth; when depicted from outside, they risk helping to reinforce the hierarchies that they intend to topple.

Another important discovery related to intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. With the help of this term, an answer was found to the question of the relationship between gender and sexuality on one side and race, class, religion, and culture on the other. *Sheer Qorma*

did not present queerness as an isolated Western concept but as a feeling deeply associated with the South Asian family, culture, and religion. The intersectional representation widens the global comprehension of queer identity, making it clear that queerness is different and changes with the cultural background. The film, by placing queer love in domestic and spiritual realms, not only refuses colonial stories that consider queerness to be a foreign concept but also contests patriarchal norms that limit its presence to the fringes.

The third insight concerns the reception of the audience and the dynamics of the industry. Internationally, queer films are coming to be recognized and gradually getting their place in the major festivals and streaming platforms. However, the positive aspect of visibility comes with a negative side. The increasing commodification of "diversity" is likely to turn queer identity into a brand that can be consumable rather than a reality that is lived. Authentic representation, hence, calls for the ethical production practices which will bring about fair labor conditions, inclusive casting, and meaningful community participation behind the camera. Representation that is not authentic cannot be so if it is separated from the experiences of and the voices of those it is going to portray.

The last thing is that the research indicates the present-day queer cinema has changed its tactics from just being seen to becoming agents. Queer women have ceased to be mute icons of revolt or sorrow; they have taken control of the tales told about them. The transition from invisibility to visibility is the major change in the cinematographic politics. The ascendance of the female and queer eyes has transformed the cinema from the site of voyeurism to that of recognition and resistance thus altering the portrayal of love, identity, and desire in international narratives.

V. CONCLUSION

The portrayal of queer women in worldwide films has experienced a deep metamorphosis. Being marginalized or depicted in a tragic way, queer characters now are the main characters in stories that delve into closeness, longing, and identity with richness and compassion. This change not only mirrors the social evolution but is also an indication of the change in film authorship—from outside the observation to the artist's self-expression.

In Butler's Queer Theory, gender and sexuality are portrayed as fluid performances that are constantly influenced by culture and film. On the other hand, Mulvey's Male Gaze concept is still applicable as a reminder of the power dynamics in visual storytelling. These theories point out that real queer representation

needs not only inclusive stories but also the transformation of power relations in terms of creators and the framing of the narratives.

A comparative analysis featuring *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, *Sheer Qorma*, and *Blue Is the Warmest Color* exemplifies that the transition from being marginalized to mainstream is a complicated process and still takes place. Visibility has gotten better, however, authenticity still has to be the main point of future cinema practices. Very much alike other women, queer women are entitled to stories that reflect their diversity—not oversimplified icons of resistance but whole, complex human beings.

Looking ahead, the future of queer cinema lies in intersectional storytelling—one that embraces race, class, culture, and gender identity as interconnected dimensions of experience. As audiences demand greater inclusion, filmmakers have both the opportunity and responsibility to create spaces where representation becomes liberation.

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