

**Media Portrayal of Same-Sex Love and  
Popular Opinion: A Study Focusing  
on LGBTQ Community**

**ABSTRACT**

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# *Abstract*

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## *Title – Media Portrayal of Same-Sex Love and Popular Opinion: A Study Focusing on LGBTQ Community*

### **Introduction**

Bollywood is not only the largest film producer in the country but is also among the largest centers of film productions in the world. It is defined by excessive visuals, elaborate songs and dance routine (Heckman, 2020). By looking into the golden age (early 1940s to early 1960s) of Bollywood cinema, one will find that the period is surrounded by a number of social issues. During the period, movies that made hit on box office were mostly connected to issues such as poverty, dowry system, child marriage, widow remarriage and more. These social subjects were always the hot topic in both mainstream cinema and alternate cinema.

In spite of making all the efforts in introducing social issues on big screen, there was an issue which always remained untouched – homosexuality. Same-sex love was considered a big taboo and no one took it up as the main theme of the movie. It was in 1996 when for the first time ever in Bollywood cinema, a movie was released with lesbianism being the main theme. Deepa Mehta took a bold step and released the movie *Fire* which explicitly dealt with a romantic relationship between two women.

The purpose of this study is to understand how mainstream Bollywood has been with the portrayal of LGBTQ community overtime, how the advent of LGBTQ centric films has changed the portrayal from head to toe and what is the popular opinion among people regarding the portrayal of LGBTQ community. Some of the important scenes from the LGBTQ centric films have also been studied in order to understand the visual representation of the community in the films.

### **Review of Literature**

**Pushpinder Kaur** in her paper '*Gender, Sexuality and (Be) longing: The Representation of Queer (LGBT) in Hindi Cinema*' analysis the content of Hindi cinema and writes that with time, Hindi cinema is evolving and queer being

represented in positive manner. There have been many changes in media portrayal of LGBT community and it finding an eminent place in cinema.

*Carson Cook* in his thesis '*A content analysis of LGBT representation on broadcast and streaming television*' finds out that in American culture since 2001 LGBT community has made its prominent place and gaining more acceptance day by day. He notices that there has been a shift in jokes on community and display of love and affection has increased.

**J. Pooja** and **K.P. Rekha** in their paper '*Indian Cinema and Its Portrayal of Emotional Complexities of LGBT Community*' analysis the content of Indian cinema and share the results of the survey which was conducted to find out the opinion of people on Indian cinema content. Their findings state that satirical and unrealistic representation of queer community gave them a loathing image and attached a stigma to their identity.

**Shawn Paul Harmen** of University of Iowa in his thesis '*Love and marriage and local TV news: an analysis of news coverage of same-sex marriage during elections since legalization in Iowa*' analyzed the content through framing analysis. In his paper, he discussed contribution of news packages and their contribution of audio and visual communication.

**Andy Stephen Silveira** in his study '*The Screen; In the Streets: Queer "Indian" Film and Media Representations*' discusses that the portrayal of queer in modern Indian cinema has become more positive and there has been shift from them being the 'hero' of the theme.

In their study '*Portrayal of Sexual Minorities in Hindi Films*', **Sanjeev Kumar Sabbarwala** and **Ritika Sen** use the method content analysis to understand the portrayal of LGBT community in both mainstream and alternative cinema. In their study, they find out that queer are finding their place in Indian cinema slowly and gradually and their positive portrayal has increased significantly.

**Roman Kuha** in his study '*Media Representation of Homosexuality: An analysis of print media in Slovenia*' analyze the texts of media through '*critical discourse analysis*'. The author used the media texts to relate to historical context and

represented history an overview of the history of different gay and lesbian centric movements in Slovenia.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Media is expected to work as a ladder for the marginalized ones. It has always been considered as the mirror of the society and is expected to be the voice of the ones who always remain unheard. Unfortunately in India, media has not been able to do justice with the LGBTQ community. Exploring the role of media with the portrayal of LGBTQ community, a thorough investigation will help to understand what necessary steps must be taken to bring LGBTQ community to justice in social aspect.

### **Research Gap**

While going through different literature on media and LGBTQ/homosexuality, researcher found out that India has not contributed much in the field. There are a few researches conducted on the subject but all are largely restricted to analysis of Indian cinema content. Popular opinion on the subject is also confined to certain population, especially students. Opinion of the members of LGBTQ community on their portrayal is somewhat completely missing. Also, talking about the analysis of media content, it is also restricted to just content analysis.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research will help in understanding the content of the Indian cinema and how significant have been the movies produced with LGBTQ theme. The researcher aims at finding out the stand of LGBTQ community on media which can further help media to alter and execute their content accordingly. Also, the findings of research can contribute to form hypothesis for future researches.

### **Objectives of the Research**

- To trace the portrayal of LGBTQ community in Indian cinema.
- To find out the differences in the depiction of members of LGBTQ community in LGBTQ centric movies and non LGBTQ centric movies.
- To know if there are any significant changes in the portrayal of members of LGBTQ in Indian cinema.

- To know the stand of LGBTQ community on media portrayal of their community.
- To know the stand of people (not belonging to LGBTQ community) on media portrayal.
- To find out if media has been able to influence public opinion on LGBTQ community.
- To study how visuals have been used to emphasize the importance and advocacy of scenes.

### **Research Questions**

- How LGBTQ community has been portrayed in Indian Cinema over time?
- How significant is the portrayal of LGBTQ community and their role in LGBTQ centric movies and non LGBTQ centric movies?
- How portrayal of LGBTQ community has changed in Indian Cinema significantly overtime?
- How members of LGBTQ community see media when it comes at the portrayal of their community in media?
- How people (not belonging to LGBTQ community) see media's portrayal of LGBTQ community?
- Has media been able to influence people's opinion and attitude towards LGBTQ community?
- How significantly have visuals been used to mark the importance and advocacy of scenes?

### **Methodology**

**Survey method** will be used to find out the opinion of members of LGBTQ community and people not belonging to the LGBTQ community on media portrayal of LGBTQ community.

**Semiotic analysis** will be applied to study the significant meaning portrayed by important scenes of LGBTQ-centric movies.

**Content analysis** will be employed to perform a comparative analysis between LGBTQ-centric and Non LGBTQ centric films.

### **Universe of the Study**

Lucknow, the capital city of Uttar Pradesh is the universe of the study and the young adults from age group from 18-35 years are population of the study. The population is further divide into four categories – Service persons, Housewives, Students and Business Owners. For the purpose of surveying LGBTQ community, people of the community living in Lucknow are the population.

For the purpose of semiotic analysis, entire Bollywood cinema is the universe of the study and the LGBTQ-centric films produced is population.

### **Sample size**

#### For Survey:

- 50 members of LGBTQ community.
- 400 people not belonging to LGBTQ community. The sample is further divided into 4 strata.

Strata	1:	100	Students
Strata	2:	100	service men/women
Strata	3:	100	Housewives
Strata	4:	100	Businessmen/women

#### For Semiotic Analysis:

Significant scenes of 5 LGBTQ centric movies will be studied to analyze the visual contents of the movie.

### **Sampling techniques**

For Survey: Stratified Purposeful Sampling for Non-LGBTQ community and snowball sampling for LGBTQ community.

For Semiotic Analysis: Purposive sampling.

For Content Analysis: Purposive sampling.

## **Tools and techniques of data collection**

Primary data: **Questionnaire** is used to collect information from people.

Secondary data: Secondary data is gathered through books, movies, previously done researches, articles, research papers and television content.

## **Answers to the Research Questions**

### **How LGBTQ community has been portrayed in Indian cinema (Bollywood) over time?**

In the third chapter of the research work, researcher has defined some stereotypes related to portrayal of LGBTQ community in Bollywood. Researcher analyzed the content of non LGBTQ centric movies and on the bases of which, stereotypes were created. Based on the analysis of the movies, some stereotypes are:

- Gays are mostly represented as feminine.
- Homosexuals are sex predators and they go after straight men or even married men.
- They are mostly shown as villains, which somehow represent that their negative character is due to their sexuality. For example in the movie *Sadak*, the villain is intersex who looks evil due to his sexuality.

*Fire* was the first to be produced with LGBTQ as the main theme of the movie and it was released in the year 1996. The production of LGBTQ themed films accelerated only in new millennium. Before that, audience was entirely based on non LGBTQ centric films to learn about them. So, it can be said Bollywood has stereotyped homosexuals and have always shown them in comic or non-serious or evil roles.

### **How significant is the portrayal of LGBTQ in LGBTQ centric films and non LGBTQ centric movies?**

In the third chapter of the study, researcher employed content analysis to compare the content of LGBTQ centric movies and non-LGBTQ centric movies. As it was qualitative content analysis, researcher created a tool to label the movies under some

category. She named the tool 'Pride meter' which had five labels or Grade or parameters.

- a.) Brilliant (Grade I): If the film has the plot or theme which is based on the LGBTQ community and the removal of the character would affect the plot of the movie. Protagonist should be the person from LGBTQ community.
- b.) Decent (Grade II): If the LGBTQ character somehow effects the plot of the movie. Plus, it does not have any stereotypical qualities as mention by the researcher.
- c.) Satisfactory (Grade III): If the character is remotely related to the plot of the movie and does not have any stereotypical qualities as mentioned by the researcher.
- d.) Poor (Grade IV): If the person somehow contributes to the plot of the film but possess some or all the stereotypical qualities.
- e.) Disappointing (Grade V): If the LGBTQ character has any stereotypical quality as mentioned by the researcher and doesn't contribute to the plot of the movie.

The comparison was made between five LGBTQ centric films and five non LGBTQ centric films. *Aligarh, Fire, Badhai Do, Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* and *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga* were analyzed and all of the five films, except for *Ekk Ladki Ko Dekha to Esa Laga*, were labeled as Brilliant (Grade I) on the Pride Meter. *EKKk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga* was labeled Decent (Grade II).

On the hand, none of the other movies even ranked Descent (Grade II) or Satisfactory (Grade III) on the Pride Meter. *Partner, Golmal Returns and Dishoom* ranked Disappointing (Grade V) while *Bol Bachchan* and *Student of the Year* ranked Poor (Grade IV).

### **How portrayal of LGBTQ community has changed significantly in Bollywood overtime?**

Since the advent of same-sex centric films, stereotypical representation of homosexuals have been shifted to natural portrayal. As found in the content analysis of the movies, films are now produced regarding the lives of homosexuals entirely,

stereotypes have somehow been left behind. For example, in the film *Badhai Do Shardul* is all masculine and even wears mustache which is the symbol of masculinity or 'alpha males' in India.

Similarly in other movies like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* or *Fire* or *Aligarh* or *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga*, no one can tell by just looking at them that they are queers. So, it can be said that with the advent of LGBTQ centric films, portrayal of LGBTQ community is changing.

### **How LGBTQ community sees Bollywood when it comes to the portrayal of their community in Bollywood?**

Researcher surveyed 50 people from LGBTQ community to know about their stance on their portrayal in media (films). Here are the important findings of the survey that explain how LGBTQ community sees Bollywood films.

- Most of the respondents from the LGBTQ community believe that portrayal of homosexuals is negative and orthodox. Sadly, none of the respondents said that the portrayal is positive in any way. 4% of the respondents said that the portrayal is neutral and 4% of the respondents said that it varies.
- Still many of the respondents agree with the power of media. 78% of the respondents said that media can influence the opinion of people regarding homosexuality. Just 4% of the respondents answered in negative while rests were not sure. People also believe that media can do much better with the portrayal as 40% of the respondents answered positively. 30% said it cannot do better and the rest 30% said may be it can do better.
- *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* is the movies which admired the most by the researcher.
- 100% of the respondents say that in the LGBTQ-centric movies the portrayal of LGBTQ community is more positive than their role in non LGBTQ centric movies.
- Well, half of the respondents say that there has been no shift in the portrayal of homosexuality on the big screen. 34% of the respondents say that there has been a shift while rests are not sure about it.

- Again, 100% of the respondents say that more movies should be produced with same-sex love theme. 70% strongly agreed while 30% agreed.
- Most of the respondents (86%) of the respondents say that Indian cinema has somehow failed with the portrayal of LGBTQ community as they have not done their job whole-heartedly.

### **How people not belonging to LGBTQ community see media's portrayal of LGBTQ community?**

400 people were surveyed with the aim to understand the opinion of people towards media and homosexuality. Among the 400 respondents, 100 were students, 100 were servicemen/women, 100 businessmen/women and 100 housewives. Here are the key points of popular opinion of people.

- There were two general questions asked regarding the potential of media. Most of the respondents are of the opinion that media has the power to bring changes in society and to influence the attitude of a person. 80.5% of the respondents said that media has the power to bring changes in society. 70% of the respondents said that media has potential to influence the attitude of a person.
- When asked about the favorite genre of the respondent, maximum percentage (35%) was in favor of romantic genre. When asked about their opinion on same sex love stories, 39% of the respondents said they like them and appreciate them and 16.3% of the respondents said that some of them are nice. It means that people understand the sensitivity of the subject portrayal of same-sex love stories and that's why they see them important even though they prefer some other genre.
- LGBTQ community has mostly been used in the movies for comic relief or for weird negative roles. But with *Fire*, a new trend started. A few movies were produced but they were not able to grab attention of the audience as it remained a taboo. It is recently that LGBTQ community has made through main Bollywood cinema. With movies like *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga*, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* and *Badhai Do*, people are paying their attention to same-sex love stories. These movies have big names like Anil

Kapoor, Raj Kumar Rao, Sonam Kapoor, Ashutosh Khurana and more. People go to watch movies for their favorite stars. Stars grab the attention of people.

- More than half of the respondents (57%) said that they know what LGBTQ stands for. This is a kind of progress. 43.3% of the respondents said that they have learned about it from internet and 21% of the respondents said that they have learned it from movies. As it is an information age, people use internet to learn about new things. Google can provide information regarding anything at a click. But people getting curious about something is in itself a great thing.
- On the impact of cinema being more effective than any other medium, 68% of the respondents agreed with the statement. It can be said that most of the respondents believe that cinema has a bigger impact on people than any other medium.
- No doubt that there has been a rise in the production of LGBTQ related movies. On the question of having watched any movie related to same-sex love, most of the respondents named the movies which have not been taken up by the researcher for research work. Among the movies which research has focused, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* was named the most followed by *Badhai Do*. It is also to be noted here that people mentioned many movies which have just a little part related to homosexuality.
- When asked about if they admire any movie related to same-sex love, almost half of the respondents refused. 51% of the respondents responded positively and 20% of them mentioned *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, followed by *Aligarh* (12%) and *Badhai Do* (7.8%).
- 57% of the respondents say that LGBTQ community has mostly been portrayed as comic characters and 52% of the respondents say that there has been a shift in the portrayal from comic to more serious roles. Half of the respondents are of the opinion that LGBTQ community has mostly been portrayed as comic characters but they also say that now-a-days, there has been a shift in the portrayal.
- 46% of the respondents say that Bollywood cinema has influenced their views on homosexuality. Just 8% responded negatively while others were unsure.

9.5% of the respondents say that they have not been influenced by Bollywood at all. 21% of the respondents said that they have been influenced by cinema to a great extent. It can be said that almost 90% of the respondents say that they have been are influenced by cinema in a way or other.

- In the third chapter of the research work, researcher has performed a comparative analysis to understand the difference in the portrayal of LGBTQ community in LGBTQ-centric movies and non-LGBTQ centric movies. The difference was huge. When the respondents were asked the same question, 61% of the respondents said there is a difference in the portrayal of both kind of movies.
- It was good to find out that more than half of the respondents know that homosexuality is a natural variant of homosexuality. Still, 22 % of the respondents say that it is an illness which cannot be treated. Just the 20% of respondents say that they friends any person belonging to LGBTQ community. Half of the respondents said that they are not friends with anyone belonging to LGBTQ community. It means that people are getting influenced on the opinion of homosexuality weather they are friends with anyone from LGBTQ community or not.
- 57% of the respondents say there same-sex couples have to struggle more to get equal status in society. Just 10% of the respondents said that the same-sex love couples do not have struggle while rests were unclear.
- Almost 44% of the respondents say that Indian cinema has not done justice with the portrayal of same-sex love. It means that it is expected from cinema to do more for the LGBTQ community.
- Though 60% of the respondents say that homosexuality is a natural variant of homosexuality, just 51% of the respondents say that more movies should be produced with homosexuality as main theme. It is good to see that just 10% of the respondents answered negatively. 24% of the responds said may be which means they are not completely against the idea but they are not just sure about it. Almost 55% of the respondents say that TV shows should also be produced

with homosexual themes while 27% of the respondents are neutral while 17% disagree.

### **Has media been able to influence people's opinion on homosexuality?**

When asked about if the media had an impact on them, almost half of the respondents (46%) of the respondents say that Bollywood cinema has influenced their views on homosexuality. Just 8% of the respondents said that they are not influenced by media. Rests were not really sure about the influence of media on them.

Talking about the extent by which they are influenced, 21% of the respondents said that they have been influenced by media to a great extent. 20% of the respondents said they are influenced to a moderate scale and 30% of the respondents said they are influenced by some extent. 18% of the respondents said that they are influenced by a very small scale and rests said that they are not influenced at all.

### **How significantly have visuals been used to mark the importance and advocacy of scenes?**

In the semiotics analysis performed by the researcher, it was found that visuals have been used very significantly by the films to represent the plight, fear, romance and the things that would be not so much effective by the words. movies with same-sex love as theme have used visuals very significantly to portray things like the rightness of the same-sex love (*Fire*), romantic relations between two homosexuals (*Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa laga* and *Badhai Do*), not being shy of their sexuality (*Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*), being scared of coming out of the closet (*Badhai Do*), and the horror faced after coming out or being forced out of the closet (*Aligarh*).

*Fire* is the classic debut for same-sex love stories. The scene analyzed by the researcher is very important as it justifies the title of the movie. At the end of the movies, Radha's saree catches fire and her husband leave here there to burn. In the scene, she is shown standing midst of flames but still survives miraculously. The entire scene signifies Radha's going through '*agni-parikhsa*' which she manages to survive.

*Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa laga* has given a small portion to portray the romance of same-sex lovers but in that small part, they have done a lot through visuals. They are

shown roaming around the garden with hand in hand and finding serenity in each other away from the world. This is something which is mostly shown in heterosexual movies. Similarly, Shardul and Kabir's relation is shown like any other heterosexual relation where they both are enjoying far away from the world.

The boldness of confessing their homosexual feelings and taking pride in that is shown in the scene by Ayushman Khurana in the film *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*. And, in a scene of the film *Badhai Do*, Raj Kumar Rao can be seen being scared of the gaze of the people which clearly describes that how afraid he is to come out as gay.

### **Other Findings of the Research**

- The research work was done with the aim to find out the answers to the research questions. Apart from the answers to the research questions, more findings were made. These findings are:
- LGBTQ centric films are trying their best to portray the plight and condition of homosexuals in every way possible. Five movies were analyzed in the research and those five movies were based on five different aspects of homosexuality. These movies are written, directed and produced in such a way that they speak directly with the audience. *Fire* speaks for righteousness of love. *Ekk Ladki ko Dekha to Esa Laga* shows the plight of a homosexual while growing up. *Badhai Do* is about the social pressure and fear in which homosexuals live in and *Aligarh* is about the horror a person has to go through when his sexuality is exposed. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* is about the does great job by explaining the feeling of love in medical terms and portraying the social stigma in a comic way.
- The comparative analysis of the movies shows the huge difference in the portrayal of homosexuality in two kinds of film. The difference is huge and the non LGBTQ-centric movies have to do a lot better in portrayal of homosexuality.
- Survey of the non LGBTQ community shows that students tend to have more liberal and progressive attitude towards homosexuality. It can be said that the

younger generation which is well educated have open mind towards things. Businessmen/women showed the most regressive attitude towards homosexuality. It was good to know that people have the faith in media and they trust it.

- A sheer difference was found between the opinion of LGBTQ community and non LGBTQ community on struggle of same-sex couples. 100% of the respondents of LGBTQ community said that same-sex couples have to struggle more to get equal status in society, just 57% of the respondents say the same. The similarity between them was *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*. *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* is admired the most by the respondents of both the surveys.
- The survey of the LGBTQ showed that they are not very happy with the media but still have faith in it and believe that it can do better with the portrayal of their community. Most of the respondents also say that Bollywood has failed immensely when it comes to the portrayal of homosexuality.

### **Suggestions**

- Stereotypical portrayal of LGBTQ community should be eliminated completely.
- They should no more be used as comic characters and should be assigned with some serious roles.
- Television should also incorporate LGBTQ community more. More shows should be produced and news channels should also give some space to LGBTQ Community.
- There is a huge difference in the portrayal of LGBTQ community in LGBTQ centric films and non LGBTQ centric films. This gap should be reduced and the LGBTQ community should be given more significant roles in non LGBTQ centric films.

### **Suggestions for Future Studies**

- The media portrayal should not be confined to film portrayal. Television and OTT shows should also be focused.
- It is very important to understand the opinion of LGBTQ community. Therefore, they should be the main focus of the study.
- In depth interview with the members of the community should also be considered.
- More research should be done on homosexual relationships.

### **Suggestions by the LGBTQ Community**

- The portrayal should be more positive.
- They should also be represented as heroes and should be given more similar roles.
- The aim of representation should be educational.
- There should be proper representation of all the members of LGBTQ community so that people can understand the differences among all the members.
- Theme of the movie can be other than lover story but the protagonist should be queer.
- Plights of members of LGBTQ community should also be discussed.
- TV series or OTT series should also be focused on so that the community can be represented in a better and detailed manner.
- Queer related jokes should be eliminated completely.
- The community should not be represented in a loathsome state.
- The representation or the story of the films should be inspired from real life stories.

- Importance of same-sex marriages should also be discussed so that the unwanted or forced heterosexual marriages can be avoided in real life.

### **Limitations of the Study**

- The researcher wanted to understand the take of both LGBTQ community and of people not belonging to LGBTQ community. Due to time constraints and unavailability of sufficient resources, she has to restrict her sample size in both the surveys.
- Non-probability method of sampling is employed for both survey as the vast population was highly unmanageable with limited resources.
- Only limited, but significant, significant visuals are used from the five films as the selection of mores scenes would have made the study much lengthier.
- Researcher had to face a lot of difficulty in surveying the LGBTQ community as people were not comfortable in coming forward. She could survey only those who were either friends with her or her friends or were bold about their identity.