



Perception, Portrayal, and Possibilities of Gender Fluidity in Indian Cinema

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Abstract

This research paper embarks on a nuanced exploration of gender fluidity in Indian cinema, tracing its historical trajectory, current state, and future possibilities through the lens of technological advancements, with a particular focus on the potential of immersive Virtual Reality (VR) experiences.

The methodology employed involves a meticulous critical analysis of five influential Indian films—*Fire* (1996), *Margarita with a Straw* (2014), *Aligarh* (2015), *Nagar Kirtan* (2017), and *Moothon* (2019)—each intricately woven around the theme of gender fluidity. Additionally, a survey was conducted among 20 individuals from the theatre/film industry who had viewed one or more of the aforementioned films. Participants were then asked to experience the immersive VR film "Body of Mine" (2013), which explores similar themes, and provide feedback on their comparative experiences.

The objectives of this study are threefold. First, to examine early portrayals of gender fluidity in Indian cinema, highlighting societal attitudes and prejudices prevalent during different eras. Second, to analyse the contribution of technological advancements, social media, and online streaming platforms in amplifying the voices of the gender-fluid community and fostering inclusivity. Third, to investigate audience perceptions of traditional film versus immersive VR experiences in conveying the complexities of gender fluidity and fostering empathy, as revealed through the survey responses.

In conclusion, this research traces the evolution of gender fluidity in Indian cinema, from early

portrayals to contemporary, nuanced narratives shaped by technology. Analysing influential films reveals cinema's role in reflecting and influencing societal attitudes. The study underscores the power of emerging technologies, especially VR, to foster empathy and understanding, contributing to a more inclusive society that embraces diverse gender expressions.

Keywords: gender fluidity, Indian cinema, virtual reality, gender fluid, socio-cultural impact, immersive experiences

I. Introduction

Indian cinema, with its vibrant storytelling and far-reaching influence, has long served as a mirror reflecting the socio-cultural realities of the nation. It has the power to shape perceptions, challenge norms, and initiate dialogues on critical issues, including those related to gender and identity. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness and acceptance of diverse gender identities and expressions, challenging the traditional binary understanding of gender. This shift in societal attitudes has also found its way into Indian cinema, with filmmakers increasingly exploring the complexities of gender fluidity through nuanced narratives and compelling characters.

This research delves into the evolving landscape of gender fluidity in Indian cinema, examining how it has been perceived, portrayed, and the possibilities it holds for the future, particularly in light of emerging technologies like Virtual Reality (VR).



1.1 Defining Gender Fluidity

Before we embark on our exploration, it's crucial to establish a clear understanding of what constitutes gender fluidity. Gender fluidity is a concept that recognises gender as a spectrum rather than a fixed binary. It acknowledges that an individual's gender identity and expression can change over time and may not align with the sex they were assigned at birth. This fluidity can manifest in various ways, including fluctuations in gender expression, identification with multiple genders, or a rejection of gender labels altogether.

1.2 Significance of Studying Gender Fluidity in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema holds a unique position in shaping societal perceptions and sparking conversations on critical issues. Analysing its portrayal of gender fluidity is crucial because:

- **Influence:** Films can challenge norms and foster empathy towards marginalised communities, reflecting and influencing societal attitudes on gender diversity.
- **Diversity:** The range of genres and regional variations in Indian cinema offers a rich landscape for understanding the multifaceted nature of gender identity and challenging stereotypes.
- **Tradition and Modernity:** Studying gender fluidity in film illuminates the ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity in India, and the evolving understanding of gender roles.

This research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of gender fluidity in the Indian context and highlight cinema's role in shaping perceptions and fostering inclusivity.

1.3 Research Objectives and Scope

This research is driven by three core objectives:

- **Perception:** To examine the historical and cultural perceptions of gender fluidity in Indian society and how these perceptions have been reflected in early portrayals of gender-fluid characters in Indian cinema. This involves analysing how societal attitudes and prejudices towards gender fluidity have evolved over time.

- **Portrayal:** To analyse how technological advancements, social media, and online streaming platforms have contributed to changing portrayals of gender fluidity in Indian cinema. This includes investigating how these factors have amplified the voices of the gender-fluid community and fostered greater inclusivity in storytelling.

- **Possibilities:** To investigate the potential of immersive VR experiences in conveying the complexities of gender fluidity and fostering empathy among audiences. This will be explored through a comparative analysis of audience responses to traditional film narratives and immersive VR experiences, based on the survey conducted for this study.

The scope of this research is limited to the analysis of five selected Indian films that prominently feature themes of gender fluidity and the comparative analysis of audience responses to these films and the VR film "Body of Mine." While this study provides a focused analysis, it contributes to the broader discourse on gender representation in Indian cinema and the potential of emerging technologies to promote inclusivity and understanding.

1.4 Structure of the Paper

This research paper is structured to provide a comprehensive and coherent exploration of gender fluidity in Indian cinema. Following this introduction, the paper delves into a literature review, examining existing research on gender fluidity in Indian society and cinema, and the role of technology in shaping its portrayal. The methodology section details the film selection criteria, critical analysis framework, survey design, and the rationale behind incorporating the VR experience. The subsequent sections present a detailed data analysis, research findings, and a discussion of challenges and future possibilities. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary of key findings and their implications for future research and filmmaking practices.

1.5 Expected Outcomes

This research aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on gender fluidity in Indian cinema in several ways. It is expected to provide:



- A deeper understanding of the historical and cultural context of gender fluidity in India and its reflection in cinematic narratives.
- Insights into the evolving portrayals of gender fluidity in Indian cinema and the impact of technology and new media on these portrayals.
- An understanding of audience perceptions of gender fluidity in film and the potential of VR to foster empathy and understanding.
- Recommendations for filmmakers and content creators to promote more nuanced and inclusive representations of gender fluidity in Indian cinema.

Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to a more inclusive and accepting society by promoting greater understanding and acceptance of gender diversity through the powerful medium of cinema.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Historical and Cultural Understanding and Perception of Gender Fluidity in Indian Society

Understanding the historical and cultural context of gender fluidity in India is crucial for analysing its portrayal in cinema. Contrary to the notion of gender as a rigid binary, Indian society has historically recognised and accepted diverse gender identities and expressions. Ancient texts like the Kama Sutra and the Mahabharata feature characters who transcend traditional gender roles and embrace fluidity. Hijras, a transgender community with a long history in India, have been recognised and even revered in certain cultural contexts. Shewade (2020) explores this historical perspective, highlighting how societal attitudes towards gender fluidity have been shaped by religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and social structures.

However, despite this historical acceptance, contemporary Indian society often grapples with reconciling traditional values with evolving notions of gender identity. Singh (2012) delves into this socio-cultural analysis, examining the complexities and contradictions surrounding gender fluidity in modern India. While there is growing awareness and acceptance, stigma and discrimination persist,

particularly for individuals who challenge traditional gender norms.

2.2 Evolution of Gender Fluidity in Indian Cinema

The portrayal of gender fluidity in Indian cinema has undergone a significant evolution, mirroring the changing societal attitudes and perceptions. Early portrayals often relied on stereotypes and caricatured representations, reinforcing societal prejudices. However, in recent decades, there has been a shift towards more nuanced and complex portrayals.

Verma (2016) examines the representation and identity of transgender characters in Indian cinema, tracing the journey from marginalisation to more central roles. Datta (2019) provides a broader perspective in "Queer Asia," exploring the intersection of Bollywood, gay rights, and transgender lives. Films like "Fire" (1996) and "Margarita with a Straw" (2014) marked a turning point, presenting more realistic and empathetic portrayals of gender-fluid characters. Jain (2022) analyses this shift in their edited volume, "Indian Hindi Cinema and Queer Gaze: Presentation Of LGBTQ+ In Bollywood" highlighting the contributions of independent and art cinema in pushing the boundaries of representation.

2.3 The Role of Technology and New Media (VR focus)

Technology and new media, particularly virtual reality (VR), have emerged as powerful tools for representing gender fluidity and promoting empathy. VR's immersive nature allows viewers to experience the world from different perspectives, potentially creating a deeper understanding of diverse gender identities. Martingano (2023) explores the potential of VR in representing empathy towards characters in "Virtual Reality Improves Emotional but Not Cognitive Empathy: A Meta-Analysis."

While research on VR and gender fluidity in Indian cinema is still limited, studies in other contexts suggest that immersive experiences can challenge stereotypes and promote understanding. The use of VR in films like "Body of Mine" (2013) demonstrates



the potential of this technology to create powerful and transformative experiences for viewers. This research aims to build upon these findings by examining the impact of VR on audience perceptions of gender fluidity in the Indian context.

III. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining critical film analysis with a survey of audience responses to explore the perception, portrayal, and possibilities of gender fluidity in Indian cinema.

3.1 Film Selection Criteria

Five influential Indian films were meticulously selected for critical analysis, each offering a unique perspective on gender fluidity:

- **Fire (1996):** A groundbreaking film that challenged societal norms and sparked debate on same-sex relationships and gender roles.
- **Margarita with a Straw (2014):** A coming-of-age story that explores the complexities of disability, sexuality, and gender identity.
- **Aligarh (2015):** Based on a true story, this film portrays the discrimination faced by a gay professor and raises questions about societal acceptance and prejudice.
- **Nagar Kirtan (2017):** A Bengali film that delves into the transgender community and the challenges faced by individuals navigating their gender identity.
- **Moothon (2019):** This Malayalam film intertwines themes of gender fluidity, sexuality, and violence, offering a raw and unflinching portrayal of marginalised communities.

These films were chosen for their critical acclaim, diverse representation of gender fluidity, and their impact on societal discourse. They represent different genres, regions, and time periods, providing a comprehensive overview of the evolving portrayal of gender fluidity in Indian cinema.

3.2 Critical Analysis Framework

A critical discourse analysis framework was employed to analyse the selected films. This

approach involved examining the films' narratives, characters, dialogues, and visual elements to identify recurring themes, patterns, and representations of gender fluidity. The analysis focused on how the films portray gender identity, challenge societal norms, and contribute to the broader discourse on gender diversity in India.

3.3 Survey Design and Participant Selection

A qualitative survey was conducted to gather audience perceptions of gender fluidity in traditional film versus immersive VR experiences. Twenty individuals from the theatre/film industry, who had viewed one or more of the selected films, participated in the survey. Participants were purposefully selected based on their engagement with cinema and their potential to provide insightful perspectives on gender representation.

The survey consisted of open-ended questions, allowing participants to express their views freely and provide detailed feedback on their experiences. The questions focused on their perceptions of gender fluidity in the selected films, their emotional responses, and their comparative experience after watching the VR film "Body of Mine."

3.4 VR Film Selection ("Body of Mine")

"Body of Mine" (2013), a German VR film, was chosen for its immersive exploration of gender fluidity and body dysmorphia. This film allows viewers to experience the world through the eyes of a transgender person, offering a unique and empathetic perspective. The selection of "Body of Mine" was based on its thematic relevance to the study, its critical acclaim, and its potential to evoke strong emotional responses and stimulate discussion on gender identity.

By incorporating this VR experience, the research aimed to investigate the potential of immersive technology to enhance audience understanding and empathy towards gender fluidity, going beyond the limitations of traditional cinematic storytelling.

IV. Data Analysis



This section analyses the data gathered through the critical analysis of the selected films and the qualitative survey responses. It aims to identify key themes and patterns in the portrayal of gender fluidity in Indian cinema and explore audience perceptions of this portrayal in both traditional film and VR experiences.

4.1 Thematic Analysis of Film Content

The critical analysis of the five selected films revealed several recurring themes and patterns related to the portrayal of gender fluidity in Indian cinema:

- **Challenging Societal Norms:** The films consistently challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, portraying characters who defy societal norms and embrace their true identities. "Fire" (1996) boldly confronts patriarchal structures and explores lesbian relationships, while "Margarita with a Straw" (2014) portrays a woman with cerebral palsy exploring her sexuality and gender identity.
- **Internal and External Conflicts:** The films depict the internal struggles and external challenges faced by gender-fluid individuals in a society that often stigmatises and discriminates against them. "Aligarh" (2015) poignantly portrays the isolation and persecution faced by a gay professor, while "Nagar Kirtan" (2017) highlights the struggles of a transgender woman seeking acceptance and belonging.
- **The Search for Identity and Acceptance:** Many films focus on the journey of self-discovery and the search for identity and acceptance in a world that often rejects or misunderstands gender fluidity. "Moothon" (2019) explores the protagonist's struggle with his gender identity and his journey to find acceptance in a marginalised community.
- **The Power of Love and Relationships:** Several films emphasise the importance of love and relationships in supporting and validating gender-fluid individuals. "Fire" (1996) portrays the power of female friendship and love in the face of societal oppression, while "Margarita with a Straw" (2014)

explores the protagonist's journey of self-discovery through various relationships.

- **Evolving Portrayals:** The analysis reveals a shift towards more nuanced and complex portrayals of gender fluidity in recent Indian cinema. While earlier films often relied on stereotypes or used gender fluidity as a plot device, contemporary films delve deeper into the emotional and psychological complexities of gender identity.

These thematic findings highlight the evolving landscape of gender fluidity in Indian cinema and its role in challenging societal norms, fostering empathy, and promoting greater understanding of gender diversity.

4.2 Qualitative Analysis of Survey Responses

The qualitative survey responses provided rich insights into audience perceptions of gender fluidity in traditional film and VR experiences. The analysis of participant feedback revealed the following key themes:

- **Emotional Impact:** Participants reported a deeper emotional connection with the characters and narratives exploring gender fluidity in both traditional films and the VR experience. They described feeling empathy, compassion, and a greater understanding of the challenges faced by gender-fluid individuals.
- **Increased Understanding:** Many participants expressed that watching the films and experiencing the VR film broadened their understanding of gender identity and challenged their preconceived notions about gender norms. They reported gaining new perspectives on the complexities and nuances of gender fluidity.
- **Immersive Power of VR:** Participants who experienced the VR film "Body of Mine" highlighted its immersive nature and ability to create a sense of presence and embodiment. They felt more connected to the protagonist's journey and gained a visceral understanding of their experiences, which they felt was more impactful than traditional film.



- **Shift in Perspective:** Several participants mentioned that the VR experience, in particular, allowed them to step outside their own perspectives and see the world through the eyes of another. This shift in perspective fostered empathy and challenged them to question their own biases and assumptions about gender.

- **Call for More Inclusive Storytelling:** Participants expressed a desire for more inclusive and diverse representation of gender fluidity in Indian cinema. They emphasised the importance of authentic storytelling that avoids stereotypes and portrays the lived experiences of gender-fluid individuals.

These qualitative findings suggest that both traditional film and VR experiences can effectively convey the complexities of gender fluidity and promote empathy among audiences. However, the immersive nature of VR appears to offer a unique potential for creating deeper emotional connections and facilitating perspective-taking.

V. Research Findings

This section presents the key findings of the research, drawing upon the data analysis presented in the previous section. It highlights the significant insights gained from the critical film analysis and the qualitative survey responses.

5.1 Portrayal of Gender Fluidity in Selected Films

The analysis of the five selected films reveals a complex and evolving portrayal of gender fluidity in Indian cinema. Each film offers a unique perspective on the challenges, triumphs, and nuances of navigating gender identity in a society deeply rooted in traditional norms.

- **Fire (1996):** This groundbreaking film challenged societal taboos by portraying a lesbian relationship between two women trapped in unhappy heterosexual marriages. It highlighted the restrictive nature of patriarchal structures and the courage it takes to defy societal expectations.

- **Margarita with a Straw (2014):** This coming-of-age story follows Laila, a young woman

with cerebral palsy, as she explores her sexuality and gender identity. The film sensitively portrays Laila's journey of self-discovery and her challenges in navigating relationships and societal acceptance.

- **Aligarh (2015):** Based on a true story, this film depicts the discrimination and ostracization faced by Professor Shrinivas Ramchandra Siras, a gay man, in a conservative Indian university. It raises important questions about privacy, prejudice, and the struggle for acceptance in a society that often punishes those who deviate from the norm.

- **Nagar Kirtan (2017):** This Bengali film delves into the transgender community, following the journey of Puti, a young man who identifies as a woman. The film portrays the challenges faced by transgender individuals in accessing basic rights, finding love, and seeking acceptance in a society that often marginalises them.

- **Moothon (2019):** This Malayalam film tells the story of Akbar, a young boy who embarks on a search for his elder brother, who left their island home years ago. The film interweaves themes of gender fluidity, sexuality, and violence, offering a raw and unflinching portrayal of marginalised communities and the challenges they face.

These films, collectively, demonstrate the growing prominence of gender fluidity as a theme in Indian cinema. They showcase the diverse experiences of gender-fluid individuals, challenge societal norms, and contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of gender identity.

5.2 Audience Perceptions and Attitudes

The qualitative survey responses revealed nuanced and insightful perspectives on audience perceptions of gender fluidity in traditional film versus VR experiences. The analysis highlighted the following key findings:

- **Emotional Resonance and Empathy:** Participants consistently reported experiencing a strong emotional connection with the characters and narratives exploring gender fluidity in both film and VR. However, the immersive nature of VR appeared



to amplify this emotional response, with many participants describing a deeper sense of empathy and understanding for the challenges and triumphs of gender-fluid individuals.

- **Enhanced Understanding and Challenged Perspectives:** Exposure to both traditional films and the VR experience led to an increased understanding of gender identity and challenged pre-existing notions about gender norms. Participants expressed a newfound appreciation for the complexities and fluidity of gender, recognising it as a spectrum rather than a binary. The VR experience, in particular, facilitated a shift in perspective, enabling participants to step outside their own viewpoints and experience the world through the eyes of another.

- **The Power of Immersive Storytelling:** The VR film "Body of Mine" was lauded for its ability to create a sense of presence and embodiment, allowing participants to feel as though they were inhabiting the protagonist's body and experiencing their emotions firsthand. This immersive quality was perceived as particularly impactful in fostering empathy and understanding, surpassing the capabilities of traditional film in this regard.

- **Desire for Authentic Representation:** Participants expressed a strong desire for more authentic and diverse portrayals of gender fluidity in Indian cinema. They emphasised the importance of moving beyond stereotypes and clichés, advocating for narratives that reflect the lived experiences of gender-fluid individuals with sensitivity and nuance.

- **Potential for Social Change:** Many participants recognised the potential of both film and VR to contribute to social change by promoting greater understanding and acceptance of gender diversity. They believed that these mediums could play a crucial role in challenging societal norms, fostering empathy, and creating a more inclusive society.

These findings underscore the power of storytelling, both traditional and immersive, to shape perceptions, challenge biases, and foster empathy towards

marginalised communities. They highlight the potential of both film and VR to contribute to a more inclusive and accepting society where gender diversity is celebrated and embraced.

6. Challenges and Future Possibilities

While Indian cinema has made significant strides in portraying gender fluidity, challenges remain. Exciting possibilities lie ahead, particularly with the advent of immersive technologies like VR. This section explores these challenges and possibilities, offering recommendations for future filmmakers and content creators.

6.1 Remaining Stereotypes and Misconceptions

Despite progress, the portrayal of gender fluidity in Indian cinema still faces challenges. Some films rely on stereotypes, like portraying gender-fluid characters as comedic relief or conflating gender fluidity with homosexuality or transgender identity, as highlighted by Singh (2012) and Verma (2016). This can reinforce societal prejudices and hinder a nuanced understanding of gender diversity.

Another issue is depicting gender fluidity as a phase, rather than a valid identity, potentially undermining the experiences of gender-fluid individuals, as Datta (2019) argues.

Furthermore, misconceptions about gender fluidity persist in society, often fueled by a lack of awareness and understanding. Filmmakers have a responsibility to challenge these misconceptions through sensitive and informed storytelling, promoting greater acceptance and inclusivity.

6.2 The Potential of VR for Fostering Empathy and Understanding

By enabling viewers to "walk in someone else's shoes," VR can challenge biases, break down stereotypes, and promote greater acceptance of gender diversity. It holds immense potential for fostering empathy and understanding towards gender fluidity. It can also provide a safe space for individuals to explore their own gender identity and expression without fear of judgement or discrimination.



However, a significant challenge lies in the limited development of VR films in India, particularly those exploring complex social themes like gender fluidity. This research, while highlighting the power of VR through the analysis of "Body of Mine," is restricted by the lack of comparable Indian VR films. Had there been Indian VR films exploring gender fluidity, the comparison and analysis would have been richer and more nuanced, reflecting the specific cultural context and societal challenges faced by gender-fluid individuals in India.

This gap in VR film development presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It underscores the need for greater investment and support for Indian filmmakers to explore the potential of VR in addressing social issues and promoting inclusivity. Imagine the impact of VR experiences that portray the lives and struggles of gender-fluid individuals in India, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in their stories and develop a deeper understanding of their realities.

By bridging this gap and fostering the creation of Indian VR films on gender fluidity, we can harness the full potential of this technology to promote empathy, challenge norms, and contribute to a more inclusive and accepting society.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Filmmakers and Content Creators

To further advance the portrayal of gender fluidity in Indian cinema and harness the potential of VR, the following recommendations are offered:

- **Embrace Authenticity and Nuance:** Strive for authentic and nuanced portrayals of gender-fluid characters, avoiding stereotypes and clichés. Collaborate with gender-fluid individuals and communities to ensure accurate and sensitive representation.
- **Utilise VR for Immersive Storytelling:** Explore the potential of VR to create immersive experiences that foster empathy and understanding. Consider creating VR films similar to "Body of Mine" that are specifically tailored to the Indian context, reflecting the cultural nuances and societal

challenges faced by gender-fluid individuals in India. This could involve collaborating with Indian filmmakers and incorporating narratives that resonate with the Indian audience.

- **Promote Diversity and Inclusion:** Include diverse representation of gender identities and expressions in films and VR experiences. Showcase the multifaceted nature of gender fluidity, moving beyond binary representations and embracing the full spectrum of gender identity.
- **Educate and Raise Awareness:** Use film and VR as tools for education and awareness-raising. Create narratives that challenge misconceptions, promote understanding, and promote acceptance of gender diversity.

By embracing these recommendations, filmmakers and content creators can contribute to a more inclusive and accepting society where gender fluidity is recognised, respected, and celebrated.

VI. Conclusion

This research journeyed through the landscape of gender fluidity in Indian cinema, exploring its historical perceptions, evolving portrayals, and future possibilities, particularly in light of immersive technologies like VR. By analysing five influential films and surveying audience responses, the study unearthed valuable insights.

The research found that Indian cinema, while rooted in tradition, has increasingly embraced narratives that challenge gender norms and portray the complexities of gender identity. Films like "Fire," "Margarita with a Straw," and "Nagar Kirtan" demonstrate a growing sensitivity and nuance in depicting the lives and struggles of gender-fluid individuals.

However, challenges persist. Stereotypes and misconceptions continue to hinder a complete understanding and acceptance of gender fluidity. Filmmakers must strive for authenticity and avoid simplistic portrayals that perpetuate harmful tropes.



The study also highlighted the immense potential of VR technology to foster empathy and understanding. The immersive nature of VR can create powerful experiences that enable viewers to connect with diverse gender identities on a deeper level. However, the lack of VR film development in India, especially on topics like gender fluidity, presents a significant challenge and an opportunity.

Indian filmmakers are encouraged to embrace VR and explore its potential to tell impactful stories that promote inclusivity and challenge societal norms. By creating VR experiences tailored to the Indian context, they can contribute to a more accepting society where gender diversity is celebrated.

This research underscores the power of cinema, both traditional and immersive, to shape perceptions, challenge biases, and promote empathy. By continuing to push boundaries and embrace innovative storytelling approaches, Indian cinema can play a crucial role in promoting a more inclusive and accepting society for all.

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