

Ars Erotica Persona: Unveiling the Closeted Trajectory of Stigmatized Feminine and Queer Representations in Select Asian Films

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ABSTRACT

Asian cinema being “a recognisable visual and aural assembly of culturally-loaded images that appear on screen” (Pugsley 1) the cinematic output from Asian countries, foregrounding the feminine and queer representations, is discussed in the paper. Notwithstanding the orient status of Asian silver screen, it does now emerge as an influencing force in the global film market. The harmonious blending of myth and tradition is successful in bringing forth the cultural identities and a sense of Asian aesthetics through the images displayed on the screen. Even though Asian cinema is noted for the prolific output focusing on the themes of localization, nationalization and globalization, the representation of feminine and queer people on the screen is minimal in number. Since the film engages at cognitive level of the onlooker through the sensory perceptions it is essential to analyze the ideology of culturally constructed notions of gender and sexuality augmented through the films.

In the conventional two-sex system men and women form clearly distinguishable categories. Lesbians and gay men, transvestites, and persons of indeterminate sex challenge the absolute nature of the binary opposition and hence are being dismissed from the mainstream of the cinema. An intense investigation of the visual representations of such marginalized categorizations of people through the microscope of Kate Millet's theory of social conditioning, Judith Butler's ideas on Gender Performativity, Laura Mulvey's propositions on Gaze and Catherine Hakim's sociological stance on Erotic capital would open up new vistas of learning.

The situations from *Mother India* (Indian 1957), *Umrao Jaan Ada* (Pakistani 1972), *Umrao Jaan* (Indian 1981), *Fire* (Indian 1996), *Sutradharan* (Indian 2001), *My Brother...Nikhil* (Indian 2005), *Umrao Jaan* (Indian 2005), *I Am* (Indian 2010), *Magnificent Century* (Turkish 2011), *Parched* (Indian 2015), *Poshida* (Pakistani 2015), *The Handmaiden* (South Korean 2016), *Malila: The Farewell Flower* (Thai 2017), *Njan Marykutty* (Indian 2018), *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Tho Yesa Laga* (Indian 2019), *Song Lang* (Vietnamese 2019), *Super Delux* (Indian 2019), *Patal Lok* (Indian 2020), *Subh Mangal Zyaada Saavdhan* (Indian 2020), *The Empire* (Indian 2021) are selected on the modus operandi rooted in cultural proximity of the regions wherefrom these films produced. Utmost care has been taken not to cling on to the commonly used divisions or physical groupings of national and regional boundaries. Since Indian film industry materializes the towering production house of Asian cinema face, majority of the films are picked out from Indian languages. *Pose* (American 1987), *Perks of Being a Wall Flower* (American 2012) and *the Life and Death of Marsha P Johnson* (American 2017) have also been examined to set forth a global appeal to the study.

Key words: Visual culture, *Tawaifs*, Erotic capital, Gaze, Power Politics, male sex deficit, hetero-normativity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Visual culture legalizes the collaboration of complex pictures to direct the spectator's attention away from the structured, formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in everyday life. Visual means have been consumed as a part of domestic life rather than as the sole activity of the viewer. In *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, visual culture is defined as:

[P]art of an emerging body of post-disciplinary academic endeavors from cultural studies, gay and lesbian studies, to African-American studies, and so on, whose focus crosses the borders of traditional academic disciplines at will. In this sense, visual culture is a tactic, not an academic discipline. It is a fluid interpretive structure, centered on understanding the response to visual media of both individuals and groups. (Mirzoeff 7)

The visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to exterior reality at particular moments of modernity. The filmed or photographic image no longer indexes reality because they can be undetectably manipulated by producers; so a visually-dominated culture could be interpreted as schizophrenic. Although

visual culture secures a place in the academic establishment, there is still a strong suspicion of visual pleasure in intellectual circles. The prejudiced decorative visual images are used to orchestrate the audience. The textual dimension of the visuals opens a new scope for interpretations. Having been a common household entity, television with its various means like films, soap operas, fictional series, and documentary programs never live a stone unturned to map out the stereotypical dimensions of the society. In the present pandemic scenario over the top films has also been significant in the dissemination of conformist ideologies. As reported in *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, “for the sake of the perpetuation of capital cinema, certain contradictions (gender and sexual divergences) and possibilities do not cross the threshold of cinematic consciousness” (Beller 194). Moreover, such orthodox portrayals ease the process of social conditioning and patriarchal programming rampant in the society.

The intellectual engagement in visual culture seeks to unveil the blending of the historical, artistic and filmic perspective in the deployment of feminine and queer images. The strategic reinterpretation of such amalgamations results in the fragmentation of macrocosmic disciplinary structures like film, television, art and video into micro analytical units. The scrutiny of visuals would likely to reveal the coexistence of culture with power in the conventional representations displayed on the celluloid. Modern investigation discloses the preoccupation of visual culture with gender, sexuality and racial criterion. Since visual culture is a mode of believable as stated in *Film Language*:

Films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spectacle—to a much greater extent . . . figurative painting. Films release a mechanism of affective and perceptual *participation* in the spectator (one is almost never totally bored by a movie). They spontaneously appeal to his sense of belief—never, of course, entirely, but more intensely than do the other arts, and occasionally films are, even in the absolute, very convincing. They speak to us with the accents of true evidence. (Taylor 45)

The unbridled imagination of the spectator clubs with the commercial formula of the films to demean the women and queer people as minority groups.

II. MINORITY REPRESENTATIONS

In films gender transactions have always been situated within the conventional discourses of sexuality and hetero-normativity. The presumed natural categories ensure the marginalization and stigmatization of divergent sexualities. The intersectional status of gender remains sidelined as an abstract ideology on the celluloid. The colonial strategies that are used to suppress gender variations solely within the framework of prototypical figures in mainstream cinema are to be subverted. The process of knowledge production regarding women and queer people needs to be reconstructed since films are “a series of seamless simulations” (Gehlawat 29).

The conceptualization of femininity and queerness in films has permanently been executed under the close scrutiny of male biased knowledge system and traditional binary gender system. The formation of gender and sexual identities are enhanced by such celluloid realities. The way knowledge is embedded and implemented in the social fabric promotes patriarchal norms of gender stereotypes which in turn influence the film making industry. The identity of the gazer is constituted by the object which is gazed at. The object becomes a part of the spectator and shapes his or her identity. The apparatus of the cinema is used to propagate the prejudiced ideologies of the society. The feminine and queer representations are not expected to encourage the diverse sexual and gender orientations. Arbitration of desire and sexual personhood is suppressed in the pervasive cultural and sexual environment of visual narratives which ended up solely as the articulation of the “grievances of minoritized persons” (Fuhrmann 85). Laura Mulvey opines that the divergent gender and sexual orientations are treated by film makers as Pandora’s Box and are kept concealed in the generic structure of films. According to her the “iconographies of the feminine is coded and has to be deciphered through theory” (96). Mulvey advocates the use of Psychoanalytical theory for the interpretation of films because she:

[F]ound it impossible to begin to untangle the significance of the "dialectics of inside and outside" that permeates Pandora's iconography without having recourse to psychoanalytic theory, so that the process became almost like a test case for the use of Freudian ideas for feminist aesthetics. (96)

The definite narrative of films presumes the dissimilar voices as lawbreakers and hence such divergences are misinterpreted in visuals. The archetypal images propagated through films accelerate the debasement of all antithetical images. Asian cinema with its enigmatic signifiers stands firm in the depiction of stereotypical populace. To put it in simple terms, it is estimated that films produced in Asian countries possess a uniqueness as well as universal appeal owing to their culturally distinctive traits and theoretical paradigms. An analysis of Asian cinema is significant as it is “transcultural to itself as well as to others and, in this way, its universality is exceptional” (Teo 14).

ASIAN CINEMA

The various traditional, cultural and national identities present in Asian cinema provide a site for the maintenance and growth of (national) identities. They unite and differentiate. Importantly, they reflect the realised dreams and aspirations of a range of filmmakers across the region with a variety of access to the tools of the filmmaking trade. And increasingly, these filmmakers from Asia are producing films that deservedly reach audiences on a global scale. (Pugsley 9)

South Asian matrix comprises of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afganistan, Maldives and Bangladesh. China, Japan, North and South Koreas and Thaivan are included in East Asian grid.

Films, Asian films to an extent, conceptualize sexual personhood and feminine images in orthodox and doctrinal frames of thought. The attribution of features of puzzle, enigma and riddle endangers the position of visual feminine and queer figures. The vituperative images of such marginalized and highly controlled people which get disseminated through the media are consequential in the construction of Asian nations and their identities. The meanings are associated with the spectacular celluloid images on the basis of sporadic, ideologically dangerous or simplistic frames where “advertising (consumerism) and sexual ‘obscenity’ are vocal concerns across the political spectrum” (Banaji 58).

Reasoning of Asian cinema as a monolithic entity would spill the beans of sidelined feminine and queer portrayals on the screen. Although the prima facie of such perusal addresses issues of religious fundamentalism, economic collapse and dormant stereotypical ideologies, one must not miss out the negotiation of tradition and modernity in Asian films. A self-reflexive approach is needed to revise the conventional images of women and queer people on the Asian silver screen. It would not be wrong if one assumes that a “continual unhinging of certainties and the systematic disturbing of the familiar” is needed to peg down the cultural structures (Giffney 17) embedded in such visuals.

A handful of regional films and television series have been selected for scrutiny in the present perusal. Generally, the society is patriarchal and heterosexual which recognizes all divergent images as strangers and criminals. Since “the nation’s borders and defences are like skin; they are soft, weak, porous and easily shaped or even bruised by the proximity of others” (Ahmed 44), the films are chosen appertaining to the demeaned treatment of feminine and queer persona in them. A Turkish television series titled *Magnificent Century* has also been discussed since Turkey is a Middle East country that shares boundaries with both Asia and Europe. In addition to the geographical features the said Turkish film is abundant with conventional and slanderous feminine and queer images.

A close scrutiny of the select films reveals the reasons of the misrepresentations of sexually divergent groups on the Asian celluloid. The causative factors like nationalism, gaze, power politics, erotic capital and culture catalyze the suppression of counter hegemonic personages in the visuals. The on-screen women and queer people prefer to get confined in four walls to saunter freely in a conventional society. But an organic upgrading is explicit in the recent films and such films invalidate the ensuing impetuses of entrenched and habitual replica of women and queer people.

REASONS OF BEING CLOSETED BEGINS WITH NATIONALISM

In the era of postmodernism visual images are no longer treated as visuals but regarded as strategies to circulate the orthodox gendered notions globally. A scanning of Asian films would put forward the ensuing factors for the abusive sketches of minority groups like women and queer people on the screen. The list begins with the idea of nationalism which categorizes minorities under the same political and communal framework that used to designate the upper strata of the society. The romanticization of history facilitates the fettered figures of women and queer people. To safeguard the emblem of nationality, the multiple sexual traits are shown as unnatural transgressions.

The structuring of sexualities within the temperaments of nation and capital is evident in the visual narrative titled *Magnificent Century*, a historical Turkish soap opera. The show had been successful in manipulating the Turkish people’s fascination with the Ottoman past and Arab’s fascination with Turkey. The television series is dealing with the personal life of Ottoman Sultan, the Magnificent and his marriage with a slave from Ukraine, Alexandra. The show catalyzes Arab tourism as it opens up a new arena of Turkish history to the world generally and Arabs particularly. The mise-en-scene of the film is emanated from the delightful and elaborate costumes of the characters and the flamboyant setting. The velvet colored cushions and the glittering chandeliers spice up the scene with the sparkling dome shaped structures. The spatial dimension is enriched by the glistening robes and dazzling ornaments worn by rich aristocrats and poor slaves, irrespective of their cultural status in the Harem. In the series Daye Hatun, a female slave, commits suicide as she could not disclose news of grande dame Valida’s demise to Sulaiman, the magnificent, Valida’s son. On the other side of this flimsy female character one would find daring Ibrahim Pasha who, despite being the brother-in-law of Sultan, is seen as fighting chance for the crown. The king and his tantrums are supposed to be admired and entertained by women and queer people in the series. The male characters are portrayed as venturesome and audacious enough to take risks in their life and female and queer people find themselves busy in framing deceptive strategies to

sabotage others. In other words women have no role in administration and governance. It is because, “the seclusion of the women was quite common in eastern and western civilizations” (Altekar 252). Hence, in many South Asian films *tawaifs* (the rich influential erudite dancers cum occasional sexual workers who helped Mughal emperors with their intellectual advices and counsels) have been misrepresented to block the threat imposed by them on misogynist society. Films portray *Tawaifs* as frustrated human beings with a nostalgic past. The disease and deprivation is magnified by brushing aside the glamour, glitter and luxury of their sparkling lives. The examples are abundantly found in South Asian films like *Umrao Jaan*, *Umrao Jaan Ada*, *Devdas*, *Paakeezah* and many more.

The show *Magnificent Century*, wherein one would find explicit love-making scenes, intimate kisses and sensual images abundantly, has not failed to carry on with the customary and degenerative declarations on diverse sexual orientations. There are innumerable scenes where queer people are treated as subordinate persons and negligible identities. Even the financially deprived slaves are seen as taunting queer people pinpointing their allegedly incomplete sexual identities. The queer people are not given a respectable position to rule over slaves either. The intense erotic passion of queer people in the show is interpreted not as the autonomous status of their erotic capital but as a desperate call for an erotic, human touch. The sexuality of the queer characters in the series is represented as a nationally driven social convention. Hence some of the characters like Sumbul Aga are shown as manipulating the hegemonic figures by means of their sexual drives. Contrary to such malign manifestations of queer sexuality the characters like Gul Aga are seen as extending their benevolent hands in support of the destitute. It is clear that the imperialistic strategies in the society prevent the reciprocation of divergent discourses. The Indian web series *Patal Lok* underlines the entrenched societal notions of sanctity of binary sexuality and gender system. The didactic principles of the film maker have propaganda of knocking the queer people down for implementing a unified morally upright nation. In the story, the perverted society prods queer people into the deep pit of stigma, crime and silence.

A more seemingly real life of queer community is shown in the television series *Pose* created by Ryan Murphy. The series, which in fact could be regarded as a tangible attempt to explore the erotic life of queer community, showcases the marginalization of queer community not only on the basis of their sexual orientation but also on the premises of their ethnic backgrounds. The genre of drama is utilized by the creators to foreground the necessity of ball culture. As a countercultural movement, ball culture promotes the assemblage of queer people without being intimidated by the stereotypical canons of the society. Blanca and her friends participate in drag competitions more as a measure of defiance than are blessed with a platform for contesting. Despite being sidelined owing to their divergent sexualized behaviors the Trans community is seen as confronting the binaries and hierarchies imposed on them. The derivative affirmative of the society that finalizes the criminalization of queerness is challenged by the characters that encourage cross-dressing and advocate gender legitimization. Fuelled by the past fantasies, the erotic visions of the characters provide them with a “sense of belonging to an alternate culture with its own visual heritage (Padva 14).

POWER- STRUCTURED RELATIONS

The power structured relations in a misogynistic society could be ranked as the next reason for the abominable portrayal of female and queer images. They gain special visibility in the chassis of sexual iconographies. Through the emblems and images displayed on the screen the minorities are repressed and boxed out of the conventional social status. The orthodox notions of power structured sexual relations “involves constant denial of the value of women’s . . . sexuality in private life” (Hakim 102).

Since heterosexuality remains the dominant form of sexuality and the fundamental dimension of existence, queer relations have been lampooned by the film makers. Having been treated as the measure and frame of all actions, the deep, prolific preoccupation of society with hetero normativity is instrumental in the stigmatization of queer relations. Thus, one would find in *I Am*, the humiliations faced by the gay character Jay seem to be justified as a response to the violation of sanctified heterosexuality.

Power in sexual relations is operationalized in terms of the criminalization and abnormalization of queer relations. The film makers try to implement the binary segmentation of aggressive masculinity and submissive femininity even in queer relations as well; to ascertain the hegemonic structure of traditional sexuality and power. Hence one would find the two lady characters trying to imitate the accepted gender norms by disguising themselves as *babu moshay* and *ghar ki bahu* in *Fire* within the harsh structure of family. Quotes from *Sexual Politics* would spill the beans of the function of family in the “socialization of the young into patriarchal ideologies” and its dictatorial “attitudes towards the categories of role, temperament and status” (Millet 33). Films have been acting as agencies for valorizing and disseminating the colonial power structures of diverse social institutions like family, education, marriage and religion. The religious parameters that strangle the lives of women are unveiled in the film *Suthradharan* where women deck themselves during Janmashtami festival to solemnize Lord Krishna and his relationship with Radha.

Despite claiming to be progressive, modern-day cinema is trapped within the linear, one-dimensional and profane regime of heterosexual, masculine gender. Judith Butler opines that the queer culture is “embedded in the larger structures of heterosexuality even as they are positioned in subversive and signficatory relationships to heterosexual cultural configurations” (Butler 58). The affixing of masculinity above and beyond the temporal and spatial dimension of humanity instantiates the power relations and poses a threat to the other divergent aspects of sexuality. *Magnificent Century* bears testimony to the fact. The film depicts man as the sole providers of orgasmic pleasure to women and queer people, setting aside the homosexual relations as insignificant. There are scenes when women are denied of sexual pleasure owing to the emotional frustration of Sulaiman, the macho Sultan. The idea of absolute heterosexual powerful man is manifested in Sultan.

On the other hand, *The Handmaiden* is a South Korean film which glorify the lesbian relationship of two characters namely Lady Hideko and her maid Sook-hee. Contrary to the existing notions of sexuality, the film portrays queer relations as a means of liberation and empowerment. Yet, the film deliberates the deadly past of the protagonist as a foundation for her sexual divergence. Notwithstanding, the film has been successful in terminating the reproductive discourse of sexual acts and epistemological discourse of sexuality. The director, Park Chan-Wook has done a commendable job by delineating the powerful male characters as manipulative and cynic rather than the lesbian partners. The alterations in sexual orientation are normalized by the film maker. Hideko and Sook-hee find solace in each other challenging the glorification of single sexual entity of heterosexual power relations. Although, the reportedly primary queer concern of nostalgia is permeated through the plot. According to a renowned film, media and sexuality scholar Gilad Padva, nostalgia has always been pivotal in Queer cinema wherein:

Controversial social fighters are converted into cool poster boys, ideological resistance is turned into photogenic discontent, high ideals become slogans and jingles, dogmatism turns into opportunism, and anarchism is converted into hedonism. (75)

POLITICIZING THE EROTIC CAPITAL

Erotic capital could be treated as the next reason for the subalternized position of divergent minorities on the celluloid. A censored discourse of sexuality results in the displacements of feminine and queer images on the screen. The aspects of fetishism and voyeurism are collaborative in the exclusion of women and queer people from the mainstream of the society. The dogmatic moral ideology is deeply embedded in films that it appears normal and natural. Thus, one would find the implementation of erotic capital as a measure to judge the morality of a person rather than being treated as a qualifying benchmark for the evolution.

Even though Catherin Hakim defines erotic capital as “nebulous but crucial combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills” (Hakim 7) it is still preserved as a key to lock in the social harmony safely. It is ironic at this point to note down that the erotic capital remains a personal asset for men. Hence in *Ramleela: Goliyon Ki Rasleela* the male lead is seen as blowing his own trumpet of autoeroticism, “agar meri mardaangi ke baari main poochna hai tho, gaav ki kisi bhi ladki se pooch sakthe ho”, (If you have any queries about my sexuality, ask any girl of the village) and his dialogue picks up a big round of applause from the bystanders. But, to the surprise of a sensible spectator, the same Bollywood conceal the sex appeal of women and queer people in a fog of morality. Thus, the *tawaifs*, who had once been the repositories of erotic capital and autoeroticism, are represented as sexually frustrated women. The orthodox ideologies trivialize women’s erotic capital, and they are prohibited to capitalize it. Similar is the case with the queer people. The Bollywood *tawaif* films are significant in the deployment of certain queer characters as assistants to the prosperous and powerful *tawaifs*. Notwithstanding the supreme position of queer people in *Kothas* and *Harems*, very little has been spoken about their sexual life. Such flirtatious misrepresentations are used by film makers to propagate the concept of stigmatization of sex. To put it in simple ways, the erotic capital in men is a distinguished social value, whereas in women it is stigmatized and shameful which is to be restrained to prevent their upward movement in the social ladder. It is saddening to listen to the words of women when they underestimate their erotic capital as shown in the film *Devdas* where Paro says, “rishto ki duniya mein tawaifo ki keemath hi kya hoti hain” (what is the value of *tawaifs* in the world of relationships?). Such nefarious dialogues would tear down the desirable aspects of femininity and queerness along with bidding groping hands, constant sexual invitations and lewd remarks from the society. The distorting social constraints restrict women’s sexual lives and activities.

The detestable portrayal of *tawaifs* is apt to explain the suppression of erotic capital in the lives of women. The denial of erotic capital is attributed to male chauvinist ideologies which deploy the beauty and sex appeal of women and queer people stupid. The criminalization of queer people and women who use their erotic capital for commercial purposes ensures the harassment of sexually divergent groups. The process of stigmatizing people "who do not confirm or do not submit to male authority by labelling them as wanton" (Hakim 23) shows the sexual double standards of people. The hidden agenda of such salacious representations is the patriarchal logic that "men should get what they want from women for free, especially sex (56). The film

Fire shows the exultant celebration of lesbian sex, sexuality, and female orgasmic pleasure and is censored by the board. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* has also faced censorship from the board which sanctions films like *Dostana* and *Kal Ho Na Ho*. The film *Parched* shows how female pleasure, beauty, and sexuality are presented as invitations to sin. The male hetero- sexist domination and manipulation is instrumental in imposing restrictions upon the abandoned, closeted female and queer people. The way the privileged minority controls assets of women and queer people is accurately measured in *Subh Mangal Zyada Savdhan*, wherein the gay character is victimized for being a homosexual. Later he, having been forced by his antipathetic parents, voluntarily puts patriarchal heterosexist chain on him. Even then, the film seems to question the insidious practice of restricting sexual activity to marriage.

The various factors like rituals, culture, religion and custom fortify the hetero-sexual matrix and subsequent procreation. The male child is so desirable that women tend to undergo many rigid religious formalities for a male child. Hence, the epitome of womanhood in Indian cinema is equated to the epitome of motherhood in *Mother India*. The polyvalence in gender seems to be muted by the univocal masculine signification. As reported in *Gender Trouble*, the idea of sex and gender are “discursively produced and circulated by a system of significations oppressive to women, gays, and lesbians” and she advocates to “overthrow the entire discourse on sex . . . as an essential attribute of humans and objects alike” (Butler 79). But divergent representations are also available in films like *Song Lang*.

Song Lang is a Vietnamese film directed by Leon Le focusing on the relationship between two men and standardizing the homogenous sexual acts. Setting in the background of a traditional Vietnamese fading art form, the film sketches the love relation of two apparently opposite men who cross path accidentally. The endless recycling of the contemptuous theme of criminalization of homosexuality and queerness is questioned by mainstreaming the relationship of Dung and Linh Phung. The fundamental and essential philosophy of sexual binaries seems to have a tough competitor in the smoking relationship; in fact, it is untainted by the standardized conglomeration of sex and procreation. The conventional void created by such same sex love is ridiculed by the film maker by calling the attention of the audience to the intimacy of two leading men in the film. The happy, passionate, and cheerful life of gay men initiates conflicts with the stereotypical, heterosexual, macho men to appease the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience. The erotic images in the film are “accompanied by erotic commentary and memories of the interviewees, and their excited experiences are peppered with countless superlatives” (Padva 83). The film attempts to take exception to the homosexual relations by defying the negativity thrust on such intimacies since the notion of negativity brings in a sense of ontological and psychological existence characterized by the “impermanence and (their) desire is always already destined to fail”. The most unfavorable aspect of negativity is that it is “vitaly connected to sexuality, for it is desire and attachment that exemplify primary instances in which the truth of impermanence manifests” (Fuhrmann 72).

GAZE

The theory of gaze and spectacle unveils the next reason for the distorted representations of women and queer people. The eroticized image of the women braces the scopophilic draw of the cinema to enthrall the spectators. The female and queer seductiveness conceals the conservative ideologies inserted in the films to distract the audience. The danger and deception of the one-dimensional, patriarchal, misogynist representations are whitewashed by highlighting the libidinalized feminine and queer images on the celluloid. At this juncture one would have the same opinion as expressed in *Masculinity, Psychoanalysis, Straight Queer Theory*, “women would not be the only ones who are made to bear the burden of representation, embodiment, and sexual objectification. Obviously (or perhaps furtively), straight men do gaze at other men” (Thomas 28).

The Castration Complex urges men to wrap all minority groups up in a blanket of Voyeurism. The scopophilic pleasure, that stems out of the commoditized figure displayed on the screen, provides impetus not only to the onlookers but also to the on-screen co actors. The spectators’ interest is sustained by the spectacular performances of women. Thus originate many item numbers in films like *Ek do teen*, *beedi jalaile*, *chikni chameli* etc. The vituperative representations of LGBTQ and women are generated from the male gaze; to be precise, the gaze of the onlooker who adorns himself or herself with the subject position to gaze at the objectified images shown on the screen. Laura Mulvey, the noted British feminist film theorist, analyses the omnipotence of the spectator, who “is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (Furstenau 243).

The audience plays a vital role in the business of film making. The spectator is transported to the status of an omnipresent and omniscient onlooker in the darkness of the theatre. Satisfaction of the spectator’s libidinal drives seems to be the primary concern of the film maker. Hence, the feminine and queer images are displayed keeping in alliance with the traditional notions of voyeuristic pleasure. Such disgraceful representations pave way to block the threat posed by divergent communities in the society.

The Pakistani Khannum Jaan is seen as glorifying the role of education in the lives of *tawaifs* as, “*tum log pathar ke tukade utake lathe ho; aur hum log use tarashkar heera banathe hain*”, (we metamorphose your

stones into diamonds by our education and hardwork) in *Umrao Jaan Ada*, only to be nullified by the presence of lewd male characters in the following scene. Hence, it would not be wrong to assume that the film makers try to maintain the fetish character of womanhood by consistently projecting her as an object to be gazed at. The continuous disavowal of her expertise aims to sustain the “to be looked at ness” misogynist structure of the society (Furstenau 244). Stepping into the shoes of Laura Mulvey would reveal the fact that the visualized feminine and queer images are “artificial, made up, cosmetic”. The minority representation is “made, not born” and it is “a lie, a deception” and the “appearance dissembles” (Mulvey 245).

Reminders about the commoditization of womanhood and queerness have been supplied by film makers incessantly through abominable phallogocentric dialogues. One instance is found in the movie *I Am*, a film which is noted for muting majority of the abusive remarks, when the gay character in the film, Jay, is humiliated by a police inspector. Despite being entrusted with the duty of preventing crime and disorder in the society, the police officer is seen as lampooning the legal structure of the society as, “law is law”. The same law authorizes him to use loathsome words like ‘item’ to abuse Jay so as to trivialize him to a fetishized object forsaking his position as the managing director of a firm. The Policeman seems to derive some sort of sadistic pleasure and excitement in the discovery of a gay person in his night patrolling. Since the LGBTQ existence is synonymous with enigmatic and mysterious riddle, the interference of the society in the life of Jay and Omar leads to explore the relationship between commodity, labour and capital. The iconographies of masculinity glorify prototypical femme fatale women and counter hegemonic structures would be objectified. Consequently, the female character Khanzada Begum, who is an erudite scholar and an aggressive warrior, is exchanged as ransom in lieu of her trifling younger brother Babur’s freedom in *The Empire*.

THE DICHOTOMY OF CULTURE AND NATURE

The binary system of culture and nature has persistently been a significant aspect of society which attributes a superior position to culture and inferior to nature. It is an eye-opening exercise to locate such marginalization and their manifestations in visual narratives.

The gender transactions have always been culture specific. The orthodox customs and traditional practices disguised as culture adds fuel to the depiction of stereotypical images on the screen. It is evident in the dialogue of the father figure in the film *My Brother. . . Nikhil*. He is quite astonished in the discovery of his son being a gay as he was “polite, disciplined and well-behaved”. The same father seems to advise his wife to give Nikhil (the gay character) the cold shoulder or else she will make a “sissy out of him”. As reported by Hakim, culture emphasizes “morals, values, personality, intelligence, kindness, social cohesion, good manners or on basic competences such as cooking and carpentry skills” (244). Hence Nikhil is despised by all when they find out that he has gone against culture, “against God”.

The portrayal of educated female characters as devoted housewives and submissive, nurturing, emotional, weak figures testimony the superior and unquestionable position of culture in the lives of individuals. To exemplify this argument many films produced under the big banners of Bollywood like Yash Raj Films, Rajashree films and Dharma Productions could be taken into consideration. Through the portrayal of festivals like *Karva Chauth*, traditional functions performed in relation to marriages and religious rituals the sexiest film making industry confine the celluloid women in the structure of the family solely limiting the movement of women inside the sphere of the family structure. Phallogocentric language is being employed by the filmmakers to assert the inferior status of women. An example is found in *Hum Sath Sath Hain* where an Advocate never fails to box women within the household chores highlighting only their culinary skills and tending nature. The feelings are mutual when Valida Sultan in *Magnificent Century* says “we don't want girls to be clever but well behaved”. In films women are excluded from decision-making roles, politics, academia and the corporate world. If one borrows the words from *Critical Theory Today*, it would not be wrong to assume that such visuals seem “to deprive women of a sense of their individuality as well as of their independence and autonomy” (Tyson 22).

In the Indian film *Njan Marykutty*, the Trans woman’s father apologizes to her in the climax scene for not being a caring and supporting father. As he lays his head on the shoulder of societal taboos and culture, he seems to postulate that problematizing gender is demanding since:

The core problem with gender is that it is based on a binary, mandatory system that attributes social characteristics to sexed anatomy . . . Many people assume that the binary basis of gender is, in fact, encoded in basic biological processes. “Biological” is often assumed to be synonymous with “unchangeable” and “natural”. . . Gender assignment is given at birth and normally centers around the presence or absence of a penis. (Nagoshi 29)

A similar case is found in the film *The Perks of Being a Wall Flower*, written and directed by Stephen Chbosky, which illustrates the production of subordinate sexualized bodies in the society under the operation of Power and discourse. In the film Sam, who is an avowed homosexual, is closeted who shares a sexual bonding with Patrick. His romantic naivety gets interwoven with his pubescent memories to develop in him a feeling of otherness or transgressiveness. Sam’s sexual orientation is shaped less by his closet than by the hostility of the

society towards sexual differences. Sam has emotional disturbances and forces to relinquish his sexual identity after being beaten up by his father who in turn is guided by the deadly comedy of binary gender prevalent in the society. The suppressed feelings of Sam manifest the queer people's efforts to get appropriated to the universal code of sexuality. He is gifted with friends who are scoundrels and vagabonds and are seen as attacking people. The villainous roles assigned to queer people accelerate the deterioration of their cultural status in the society. The love interaction of queer people is situated in the context of loss to assert the monopolized status of heterosexual intercourse.

The film *Subh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* shows that gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent cultural presumptions. The repulsive representations of homosexuality in *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana* endeavor to wield a new discourse of truth to seal the closeted queer relations. Taking Judith Butler's words into credit it happens because society "delineates the performative construction of gender within the material practice of culture" (Butler 114). The dichotomy of culture and nature operates in accordance with the "dictates of compulsory heterosexuality" and "emergence of homo sexual desire . . . transcends the categories of sex" (115). The film *Super Delux* could be interpreted as an inversion of the orthodox reading practice of queerness where the son is seen as accepting his father who is now a Trans woman.

The conceptualized formation of sexuality as an emblem of traditional knowledge is satirized in the documentary film *The Life and Death of Marsha P Johnson* directed by David France. The film talks about the accepted suicidal narrative of gay activists Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, whose lives had been the articulation of homoeroticism and naturalness of divergence and could be considered as a late investigation of their demise. Keeping in alliance with the stigmatized ideologies of the society, the queer people are seen as disturbed and agitated for having been lived through a deadly past. The general media culture disseminates such schizophrenic images to epitomize the commonly accepted binaries of sexual orientations and to politicize the controversial sexual orientations.

III. CONCLUSION

A radical disavowal of absolute heterosexual norms is essential in deconstructing the notions of biological essentialism, hetero-normativity, and hegemonic sexual relations. A benevolent gesture of mutual respect for all divergent sexual orientations and dismantling of misogynistic discourses need to be restored as fundamental principles in sexual relations. The valorization of the hitherto unrepresentable absence is specified by the inhibition and fear exhibited by the queer characters. To certify the autonomous status of women and LGBTQ people, a critique and disruption of the obsolete hegemonic conceptual scheme is the need of the hour. The old-fashioned gender representations are deconstructed in recent films like *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Tho Aisa Laga* where a girl is seen as supported by her family members for her queer sexuality. Moreover, in the film one of the iconic songs of Bollywood is employed to mainstream the lesbian relationship of two female leads. Correspondingly *Malila: The Farewell Flower* glorifies the pure love story of two gay lovers, Shane and Pich who had been separated due to some unfortunate situations. *Poshida: Hidden LGBT Pakistan* substantiates the situation of Pakistan in this regard. The theoretical reformulations need to get dissociated with the male sex right and patriarchal notions of biological essentialism. The ritualistic importation of women and queer people within the cultural sphere is to be forbidden by encouraging the counter hegemonic studies like this, which in fact is politically needed.

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