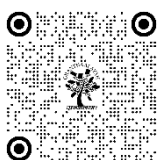


# LOVE AND AFFECTION BEYOND THE BINARY: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CONTEMPORARY TRANSGENDER FILMS

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## ABSTRACT

Judith Butler in the essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, observes " Gender is an identity through repeated bodily acts. Therefore, gender is performative, not a fixed identity" [Butler \(2002\)](#). This understanding of gender as performative challenges the traditional view that gender is determined by biology and opens up possibilities for individuals to express their gender in ways that are not necessarily tied to their sex assigned at birth. Among these gender identities, India has always stereotyped minority groups, including queer communities. Transgender people find their gender identity different from the sex determined at birth. The patriarchal systems of society are to blame for the struggle and humiliation, regardless of whether it is social, personal, or financial. Media can represent a limited array of images and ideas that could form unique versions which might differ from reality. In order to reflect the variety of people in a changing society, queer people have indeed been presented differently in popular culture. Movies can influence minds to a large extent, so representations and portrayals become crucial. Many films have failed to portray real trans lives, often drawing them as sexual objects, social outcasts, and minorities. This paper focuses on the portrayal of love and affection in Indian trans movies and how they have elevated with time.

**Keywords:** Transgender, Gender, Sex, Media, Society

## 1. INTRODUCTION

D W Griffith unleashed the power of movies as a catalyst for social change. Some movie themes have contributed to discussions, evaluations, and critical reading. Many Indian films have passed through such critical analysis due to how they present. In recent years, popular Indian literature and movies have incorporated depictions of transgender people and issues. Although this development appears to

indicate that the audience has grown more supportive of transsexuality, they nonetheless make an effort to place those characters and their physicality into conventional binary gender frameworks in order to make the character's "queerness" understandable to the public. The system of obligatory and naturalized heterosexuality controls gender as a binary relationship, allowing the masculine and feminine terms to be distinguished through the behaviours of heterosexual desire. Society perceives trans women as abandoning their power and masculinity to be feminine. There is a perception that being trans is a 'show' since cisgender who play transgender roles may instantly transform into men when their clothes and makeup are removed. This illusion frames the base for societal norms we have around. There is too much attentiveness to the trans-female characters' clothes and everyday details, including makeup. [Banu and Yasmin \(2020\)](#)

Media plays a crucial role in manipulating one's thoughts and ideas, so the content must be framed veraciously. As in framing theory, 'framing creates a gap between the truth and public awareness by making a point of view. Misrepresenting trans characters as a joke or a knave has never failed to satisfy the needs of cis-normative society for decades. It is important to note that transgender characters in Indian popular culture are often relegated to supporting roles and frequently portrayed using stereotypes and tropes. Also, transgender people in India encounter tremendous discrimination and stigma, which can hinder their ability to portray their experiences truthfully on television. [Bhattacharya \(2019\)](#)

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Jack Halberstam, transgender people challenge and disrupt traditional notions of gender based on a binary system that posits two distinct and mutually exclusive categories of "male" and "female." On the other hand, the emergence of transgender identities undermines the fundamental notion of fixed gender identities and lives outside of this binary. He also emphasizes the point-of-view scenes in these movies, which enable viewers to align their gaze with the transgender's gaze [Halberstam \(2005\)](#), 78. He makes the following argument, "In a second mode that entails fixing numerous perspectives into one, the film employs certain formal strategies to give the viewer access to the transgender gaze, allowing us to view with the transgender character rather than at him [Halberstam \(2005\)](#), 78. Halberstam critiques the limited and often stereotypical portrayals of transgender individuals in mainstream cinema while celebrating the creative and transformative potential of transgender filmmaking.

Reflecting on one of Halberstam's core concept, "queer failure," which she presented in the book [The Queer Art of Failure \(2011\)](#), the study focuses on how the concepts of love and affection have been used purposefully for the narrative staging of transgender identity in a few selected Indian films and how they have developed over time. In this book, she argues that queer culture is characterized by a refusal of dominant norms and values, and this refusal can be seen as a form of "failure." However, this failure is not a negative idea; instead, it's a beneficial force that creates new perspectives on identity and societal transformation, which is evident in several cultural forms, including literature, film, and the arts, which frequently explore different ways of existing and thinking. The paper analyses the normative inequalities that shape the gendered and bodily experiences of trans people and situate their bodily and psychological pain in connection to a notion of queer failure. Transgender people can be perceived as disrupting prevailing social systems and bringing up fresh perspectives on gender and identity by rejecting established gender norms and expectations and claiming their identities on their terms. She

explores how failure can be viewed as a potentially empowering force for change, especially within queer culture. Failure in the context of the book refers to challenging normative systems and ideas rather than necessarily failing to 'achieve' goals. [Chapuis \(2016\)](#)

### 3. ANALYSIS

This study analyzes how love and affection are portrayed in Indian trans films, with special attention given to different types of emotional ties, such as filial, maternal, and parental love as well as self-love and friendship. It demonstrates how these themes are a conceptual and functional unit in selected 21st-century Indian films, *Naanu Avanalla Avalu* (2015), *Nagarkirtan* (2017), *Nyan Marykutty* (2018), *Peranbu* (2018), *Super Delux* (2019) and *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021). The selected films are critically acclaimed, highly rated by audiences and reputed sources apart from the rest of the 21st-century Indian trans films, including *Shabnam Mausi* (2005), *Kanchana* (2011), *Karuvarai Pookal* (2011), *Ardhanaari* (2012), *Ardhanaari* (2016) and *Laxmi* (2020). *Naanu Avanalla Avalu* and *Nagarkirtan* won national awards, and *Nyan Marykutty* won the Kerala state award for the best actor category, as they could portray the 'trans character' truthfully to the audience.

"Though I identify as transgender, it does not make me unlovable." [Wachchowski \(2012\), 24:33](#)

One of the oldest plot devices in literary history, 'love' and 'romance' are used in multiple ways. Although 'stereotypical' heterosexual romance is frequently shown in popular culture, different types of love have begun to be successfully included into narratives in order to bring queer themes to a wider audience. They have personalities whose identities are fundamentally influenced by the variance between their biological sex and their chosen gender. In order to fully comprehend the context of the concept of love, it is important to consider the communicative context while analysing the term "love." Throughout human history and in contemporary societies around the world, the concept of romantic love has taken on a variety of connotations. Depiction of love in transgender films has significantly increased during the past ten years. More recent films have shown a broader spectrum of experiences and emotions, in contrast to earlier movies that might have shown trans characters as unable to find love or have satisfying romantic relationships. While there is still a long way to go regarding full representation and inclusion, the growth of representation in recent years is a positive step forward. [Dimock \(2011\), Hartner \(2015\)](#)

Romance is a stumbling block of trans films. These films can analyze a wide range of sexual and interpersonal relationships, there is no one specific way that love is portrayed in transgender movies. The hardships and discrimination faced by trans people in finding and sustaining romantic relationships, as well as the possibility of self-discovery and empowerment via such partnerships, may be some recurring themes in these movies. Ultimately, how love is portrayed in transgender films will rely on the particular tale being presented and the viewpoints of the directors and performers involved. In the movie *Nyan Marykutty*, the character played by Siddharth Siva, Marykutty's lawyer, approaches her for just sex. In *Naanu Avanalla Avalu*, the film portrays Vidya's relationship with her partner, a cisgender man, which challenges the notion that transgender individuals can only find partners from the same community. In an image of *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, Maanvi kisses Manvinder without realizing that she is trans; when he does, he immediately hurries to cleanse his mouth. This scene depicts male disgust and

revulsion and reaffirms the protagonist's heteronormative masculinity, the assumption that heterosexuality and cisnormativity are 'normal' while other kinds of desires are not. Whereas *Nagarkirtan*, a moving romantic drama, is an audio-visual delight with a score made entirely of kirtan songs that depict the love story between Krishna and Radha and Puti's clandestine romance with her flute-playing partner. The film sensitively and intensely depicts their love story, emphasizing how societal expectations and biases put their relationship to the test. Despite the difficulties they encounter, their love ultimately prevails as they work to build a life together. The depiction of love in 'queer failure' subverts the prevalent societal narratives of romance and relationships, which frequently assign greater priority to heteronormative ideals like monogamy, marriage, and nuclear families, as depicted in *Nagarkirtan*. This increasing visibility of trans characters during the 21st century has caused a shift in how romance is portrayed in transgender movies. Before, transgender characters were frequently cast in minor roles or presented as tragic and comic figures. Because of the societal stigmas attached to transgender people, their love experiences were frequently shown as prohibited or unfulfilled, which took a turn in the film *Peranbu*, where the director Ram portrayed the relationship between Amudhan and Meera as a force that transcends societal barriers and expectations by developing a deep emotional bond between them representing them as husband and wife. However, more recent transgender movies have accepted more romantic possibilities, including relationships with cisgender partners, as in *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, and *Nagakirtan*. "The person you are today is the one I truly like. The boy doesn't exist for me! I don't even know him. I've never met him" [Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui. \(2022\), 1:29:47](#). "The boy doesn't exist for me!" is the exact phrase each transgender person experiences within them, and which they need society to understand. [Horak \(2017\)](#)

The awareness of difficulties that transgender people have in dating and relationships is another significant development in how love and romance are portrayed in transgender films. Overall, the love portrayed in queer failure pushes us to go outside the box of accepted social norms regarding what love may be and encourages us to examine different types of connections and partnerships. [Johri \(2016\)](#)

This strategy recognizes that for transgender people, love and romance can be crucial to self-discovery and personal development. The depiction of romance has changed from *Naanu Avanalla Avalu* (2015) and *Nyan Marykutty* (2018) to *Peranbu* (2018), *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021), and *Nagakirtan* (2017). Regardless of gender, the characters' actual depth of love started to become apparent.

Friendships can provide transgender people with a much-needed sense of belonging and support because they frequently experience rejection and discrimination from their family and society. Certain characters around transgender people are so well-etched; for instance, in *Nyan Markutty*, Alvin represents the 'majority' among the society who at first have an aversion towards the trans community but later understand and accept them.

S I Kunjippalu: Aren't you ashamed of taking her with you?

Alvin: I hated her at first, but as I got to know her better, I saw that she has a wonderful heart." [Sankar \(2018\), 0:27:26](#)

There is Jovi, Marykutty's childhood friend with whom she stays, after being forced to leave home, represents the 'minority' among the society who stay with them from the very beginning regardless of what the society thinks. *Nagakirtan* depicts the deep and enduring connection between Puti and Madhu as they confront society's standards and family expectations. They continue to support and care for

each other despite numerous obstacles, including Puti's disapproving family and society's stigmatization of their relationship. Madhu encourages Puti to pursue her passion for singing and helps her to navigate the challenges she faces as a transgender person. The friendship between Puti and Madhu serves as the film's fundamental theme, emphasizing how crucial it is for people to have unwavering love, acceptance, and support, especially those who experience marginalization and discrimination. These films celebrate the strength and resilience of friendships and show the transformative power of love and acceptance. Apart from friendships outside the trans community, they also develop friendships inside the community.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Vidya Accompanied by Selvi to Beg [Naanu Avanalla Avalu \(2015\)](#), 1:07:32

Selvi from *Naanu Avanalla Avalu*, [Figure 1](#), from the community, understands the physical and psychological pain they go through.

In transgender movies, maternal and paternal love can be represented in various ways, from conflict and rejection to acceptance and support. These representations capture the complex reality that transgender people and their families face as they struggle with acceptance, understanding, and identity issues. Conflict and stress may arise when the parents find it difficult to accept or comprehend their child's gender identification. For example, in *Naanu Avanalla Avalu*, the protagonist Vidya, a transwoman, faces significant challenges with her family, including her parents, who refuse to accept her gender identity. Their portrayal might be more nuanced and complex, representing the difficulties and conflicts when a child comes out as transgender. In addition to battling her cultural and societal expectations, they could find it challenging to comprehend and embrace their child's gender identification. In some movies, parents are depicted as a source of love, support, and acceptance for the transgender character. [Kurlakose \(n.d.\)](#)

They might support their child against social pressure and stigma and attempt to make sure they feel loved and appreciated. Such films may depict the parents as someone eager to understand her child's experiences and perhaps actively participate in advocating transgender rights and acceptance. [Los Angeles Times. \(n.d.\)](#)

In *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui*, Kanwaljit Singh, Maanvi's father, has constantly supported her throughout her transition journey and accepted her as his 'daughter', unlike her mother. [Nagakirtan. \(n.d.\)](#)

In *Nyan Marykutty*, Shivaji Guruvayoor, Marykutty's father, portrays the typical father figure of Indian society who is forced to keep away the queer in their family due to society's pressure. [Nizam \(n.d.\)](#)



"I have always lived fearing the society and relatives. Pride or humility, I don't know. In between. I have never tried to understand you. It's only my fault. It's not because dad doesn't love you. I didn't have the courage." [Nyan Marykutty \(2018\), 1:53:51](#)

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Dannamma Accompanies Vidya and Selvi to their Nirvana [Naanu Avanalla Avalu \(2015\), 1:25:42](#)

Apart from biological parents, transgenders have a parent within the community, a 'guru' who has the perspective and knowledge required to help them through their journey and is sensitive to their hardships and obstacles, as the character Dannamma, [Figure 2](#), from [Naanu Avanalla Avalu](#). They are usually depicted as essential to the character's journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. It is important to remember that the way gurus are portrayed in transgender films has the potential to promote prejudices and preconceptions. They may be portrayed as exotic and mysterious characters in some movies, reinforcing a "magical minority" myth that is destructive and degrading. Depending on the cultural and theological backgrounds of the filmmakers, the representation of gurus may vary, which might result in unreliable or stereotypical portrayals. [Roy \(1970\)](#)

Trans women are portrayed as a parent; for instance, in [Peranbu Meera](#) takes care of Paapa more than her biological mother. As Gowri Sawat quotes, "You don't have to be a biological mother to mother a child".

Filial love, or the love between a parent and a child, is a common theme in many Indian movies, including those that feature transgender characters. While the individuals strive to manage their identities and relationships in the face of societal pressure and prejudice, filial love is threaded throughout the narrative. These films shed emphasis on the difficulties transgender individuals in India encounter and the value of family support in helping them to overcome these difficulties. In [Super Deluxe](#), Shilpa returns to her hometown after a long absence to visit her family. She has not seen them in many years and is uncertain about how they will receive her, especially given that she has transitioned. As she interacts with them, it becomes clear that they harbor deep-seated prejudices against the LGBTQ+ Community. However, she was accepted by her son, Rasooti, even though everyone else was against her. Rasooti comments, "Everyone is mocking at you, so you wanted to run away. But mom and I accept the way you are" [Super Deluxe \(2019\), 2:36:49](#)

Transgender individuals may also form new "chosen families" who provide the support, acceptance, and love they may not receive from their biological families. Friends, partners, and LGBTQ+ people who share similar struggles and experiences

make up these chosen families. Within the transgender community, the topic of filial love can be complicated and subtle. Although rejection and discrimination can strain familial ties, it is crucial to keep in mind that each person's experience is different. It is possible to overcome these obstacles and have solid, satisfying relationships with biological and adopted family members with help and understanding. [Shen \(2022\)](#)

Indian transgender movies have depicted self-love and acceptance as essential aspects of the transgender experience.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Marykutty Adoring her True Self Nyan [Marykutty \(2018\)](#), 0:8:51

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Shilpa Getting Ready to Meet Rasooti's Friends [Super Deluxe \(2019\)](#), 0:47:36

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Maanvi Applying Makeup [Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui. \(2022\)](#), 0:8:04

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Madhesh Draping a Saree [Naanu Avanalla Avalu \(2015\)](#), 0:34:49

For depicting self-love, the paper has particularly examined the shots of 'looking oneself in the mirror' as in the [Figure 3](#), [Figure 4](#), [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 6](#), which is a powerful and complex moment of self-discovery and self-love. A mirror can symbolize self-acceptance, where they find themselves in the mirror as their true selves, and as self-doubt, where they find the challenges of transitioning in a society that may not fully understand and accept them. The use of mirrors can be a powerful and poignant way to explore the complex emotions and experiences of trans individuals.

**Figure 7**



**Figure 7** Marykutty as a Police Officer [Nyan Marykutty \(2018\)](#), 2:2:42

In *Nyan Marykutty*, the movie highlights the importance of self-care and self-acceptance, as Marykutty takes care of herself physically and emotionally and learns to stand up for herself. Self-love also involves achieving a goal, as in [Figure 7](#), where Marykutty fulfilled her dream to be a police officer. Although there is still a long way to go in portraying self-love and acceptance of transgender characters in Indian cinema, some significant advances have been made. [Shewade \(n.d.\)](#)

Many transgender people do not feel "comfortable" with their natural body; instead, they feel that their biological body is the cause of the "anomaly." The main emphasis is not on how trans women change their appearance to look beautiful but on how she changes to be their true self. [Staff \(2012\)](#)

These films have been crucial in bringing attention to transgender issues and encouraging others to embrace who they are. [Subapriya \(n.d.\)](#)



Hence, the texts unintentionally demonstrate the tenacity of conventional normative conceptions of gender, affection, and family. As with any portrayal of a marginalized community, it is essential to approach these films critically and consider the impact they may have on the perception of transgender people and the broader cultural discourse around gender and spirituality. Trans women have been communicating their lives and writing their experiences for more than a decade. However, their lives are represented in limited ways according to the interests of the cis-heteronormative society. They are represented in a pre-defined box, sometimes contradicting, or erasing real-life history. Transgender movies can portray affection in various ways, depending on the film's narrative and focus. Some transgender movies may focus on the internal struggles of the main character as they navigate their gender identity and may not place as much emphasis on romantic or sexual relationships. Other films may include romantic or sexual relationships between trans and cisgender characters or between trans characters. Some films may depict relationships the same way as any other romance, while others may explore the unique challenges and complexities that can arise when a trans person is involved in a romantic or sexual relationship.

The systematic discrimination of trans people in society often draws them away from being in the director's chair or even among the crew members. This cis perspective of filmmakers focusing on the minds and interests of the cis audience carries them away from the spotlights. There will always be aspects of other people's experiences that one cannot fully comprehend or experience. While this does not imply that cis directors cannot make a trans-oriented film with depth, it does suggest that a trans director who has personally dealt with the struggle could provide a much sharper perspective. Kaushik Ganguly's representation of transgender individuals in his films seeks to promote empathy, understanding, and respect for their experiences and identities. In his film *Nagakirtan*, he portrays the discrimination and marginalization faced by transgender individuals in Indian society through the characters Puti and Madhu. He thinks it is crucial to acknowledge the human experience's diversity and act against the prejudices and stereotypes that frequently result in marginalization and discrimination.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

"I believe that the representation of trans people on television and film has given the impression that we are not real, that we are mentally ill, and that we don't exist. Nonetheless, I'm standing here. We have always been here, yet here we are" [Feder \(2020\), 0:02:26](#). Laverne Cox underlines the fact that mere representation is insufficient. Instead of depending on stereotyped or conventional representations of transgender people, having nuanced and diverse images of them is crucial. The diversity of transgender people should be reflected in media portrayals because they are not homogeneous. Cox emphasizes the value of transgender persons participating in the development and production of media rather than serving merely as subjects or objects of depiction. It needs to be ensured that transgender people's thoughts and experiences are appropriately and respectfully portrayed by including them in decision-making.

Jack Halberstam believes that transgender people frequently endure prejudice, violence, and marginalization and that this highlights the need for social and political reform to establish a more just and equitable society. His work challenges traditional understandings of gender, sexuality, and social norms and calls for a more expansive and inclusive approach to identity and social change. The changes in bodies and gender identity are positive for society as a whole and mark a turning

point in understanding marriage, relationships, family, care, etc. The over-the-top emotions, loud makeup, or outfits that are typically associated with trans people are not present in *Nyan Marykutty*. Instead, Marykutty exudes a dignity that makes us cry whenever she sheds a tear or rejoices if she succeeds. Although there has been a marginal increase in inhumane transgender roles, as in *Super Delux*, stereotypes remain prevalent, feeding homophobia and heterosexism in society. Shilpa's narrative thoroughly describes every possible manner that trans women might be made to feel degraded. She acts as a cipher and a blank canvas for writing all abuse. While some may use subtle and realistic depictions of affection, others could rely on stereotypes or tropes. However, there has been a growing trend in transgender movies towards more authentic and nuanced depictions of trans characters and their experiences, including their experiences with love and affection. Through these selected films, it is evident that we are progressing with time regarding perceptions, thoughts, and behaviour towards the trans community by adapting the idea that all are equal. We need trans movies that do not represent trans identity as a secret to be disclosed, and where the filmmakers need to consult with the members of the transgender community and involve their opinions into account when representing trans characters on screen.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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None.

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