

Cinema and the Discursive Construction of Alternate Sexualities

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Abstract

Cinema acts as a visual discourse which constructs identities and shapes our perception in a particular way. Popular cinema works in accordance with mainstream tastes and propagates its ideologies. This discursive constitution of identity is particularly problematic in the representation of subaltern groups, who lack discursive privilege and hence are fated to bear the burden of mainstream representations. Alternate sexualities appear under the purview of subalternity. Michael Foucault has extensively theorized on the discursive construction of sexuality by the operation of latent forms of power. Alternate sexualities get systematically othered in discourses, which serve as sites of operation of power. This is especially true in the case of mainstream cinema. Stereotype and spectacle are dominant tropes used in representing non normative sexualities on screen. Theory of social construction propounded by Moscovici and queer theoretical framework propounded by theorists like Butler could be used as effective tools to deconstruct the re-presentations of alternate sexualities, which could be a political and social strategy.

Keywords- *Cinema, Discourse, Representation, Alternate Sexuality, Social Constructivism*

Cinema is often conceptualized as a visual discourse, which creates its own reality. Discourse shapes our perception of reality. It does not attempt to reflect an external reality but rather constructs one. Discursive framework has emerged as essential to the tropes of human subjectivity and identity. Generally cinema is perceived as an extension as well as a metaphor of socio-political context of its production. Cinema necessarily originates from a particular context, i.e. the milieu of its production. Hence cinema has a polydiscursive engagement as well as dialogic relationship with the context of its production. Generally popular cinema attempts to validate the dominant ideologies and value systems of its milieu of production. This is primarily on account of the fact that it operates under a capitalist production framework. The success of popular cinema is measured in terms of commercial success and box office ratings. In the pursuit of box office success it becomes necessary for popular cinema to

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appease mainstream interests and ideologies .Cinema exists on two tropes-perception and representation. Perception in the literal sense refers to the act of apprehension; how audience makes sense of moving images on screen.

The aspect of cinematic representation is at once a highly problematic concept. The constructivism underlying the aspect of representation makes it a much debated topic in the academia as well as the larger cultural milieu. Representation could be in the form of images, reproductions, performances or simulations. Above all the term representation involves a substitution or a standing in the place of something else. In the cinematic context representation involves simulated images replacing a reality of experience. Apart from the aspect of simulation, representation becomes an ideologically charged process, wherein the aspect of who represents whom and for what purpose becomes crucial questions alongside an analysis of the representation itself. Thus while conceptualizing cinema as a discourse; unraveling the politics of its representation becomes essential. Ella Shohat's view becomes significant in this context.

Each filmic or academic utterance must be analyzed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address (173).

This aspect of representation becomes highly problematic in the representation of historically marginalized groups who could be categorized as the subaltern. These groups are outside the purview of discourse and lack power over representation. Hence they are fated to bear the burden of images imposed on them by the mainstream, who wield the discursive privilege. It is notable that such negative representations often compliment subjugation of subaltern in the socio-political context. In such cases, representation acts as a double-edged sword in the oppression and marginalization of subaltern identities.

As Foucault puts it, photography promotes 'the normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish. It establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates and judges them' (Foucault 1977, 25). On the other hand scopophilia, refers to the pleasure associated with looking, in subjectifying others with a controlling and curious gaze. Laura Mulvey in her seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' argued that the primarily the pleasure afforded by popular cinema is scopophilic. Mulvey opines that various features of cinema viewing conditions facilitate for the viewer both the voyeuristic process of objectification of female characters and also the narcissistic process of identification with an 'ideal ego' seen on the screen.

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Subsequent Film theorists have extended the concept of scopophilia to speak of the voyeuristic looking relations of a mainstream, who controls and objectifies the subaltern subject.

The power of representation which rests with the dominant could alternatively be viewed as the discursive privilege, used to validate the dominant identity, culture and belief systems. Both Film studies and cultural theory has emphasized the role of representation in the construction and validation of dominant identity. Discourse, more than playing a crucial role in the construction of dominant identity, acts as instrumental in maintaining social power relationships and in the subjection of subaltern. The creation of self or dominant identity in discourses inevitably involves the othering of subaltern identities. Othering is a way of defining and securing one's own positive identity through the stigmatization of an "other." In the context of imperialism, othering, describes the process of justifying the domination of individuals or groups in the periphery to facilitate subordination. The creation of the other is done by highlighting their weakness and inferiority, thus extenuating the moral responsibility of the stronger self to educate, convert, or civilize depending on the identity of the other. By declaring someone "Other," their radical difference from the self is highlighted and this very difference helps the dominant in assigning them a collective identity. Discourses thus fabricate a negative identity to the other by projecting the mainstream desires, dreads and fantasies on the silenced other. The logic of reductivism is also employed in the configuration of subaltern identity as the other by attributing them with monolithic identities through stereotypical images. In the representation of subaltern groups, often some trope of their identity-be it race, class, gender or sexual orientation is highlighted.

Stereotype and spectacle form the usual strategy of subaltern representation in mainstream cinema. These can be viewed as tools in the maintenance of a social and symbolic order. These act as part of the regimen in naturalizing difference- in categorizing insiders and outsiders of a particular culture. As part of the strategy of othering , individuals or groups who are outside the purview of mainstream culture and belief systems or belonging to subaltern groups are portrayed as deviant, owing to their difference from their mainstream. They are objectified by highlighting their difference and their very identity is charted out around this difference.

Stereotypes are characteristics ascribed to groups of people involving gender, race, national origin and other factors. These characteristics tend to be oversimplifications of the groups involved. Such generalizations ascribe a false collective identity based on difference to a heterogenous group. Stereotypes act as instrumental in the result in stigmatization and discrimination of groups as they

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connote largely negative qualities to them. Stereotypes also serve as fixities which are unchanging and definitive of a particular social group, which serve in naturalizing their difference and in the conceptualization of their identities by the mainstream. On the other hand spectacle refers to putting a social group on display by highlighting their looked-at ness, which usually comprise their differences from the mainstream. Popular cinema abounds in stereotypes and spectacles from the lascivious Negro and black Mammy to the perverted hijra. The silenced others who are yoked to bear the burden of societal contempt and discursive violence.

Popular cinema by conviction is regarded as the phantasmagoria of popular interests and taste, and is often criticized as an escapist farce. Popular cinema as represented by the Hollywood production model possesses an enormous reel power to shape and influence audience's ideas and preferences, as well as enjoys a dialogic interaction with their social perception and perspective. Commercial success does matter a great extent for popular cinema, hence its representationality is often attuned to dominant ideals and belief systems. Keeping in view the fact that popular cinema does possess a subversive potential and afford multiple readings, in keeping with Volosinov's poly accentuality of sign, however we should admit that such attempts are few and far in between. Nevertheless, popular cinema which enjoys a wide mass appeal, in turn becomes a highly potent discursive tool in a capitalist industrial society.

Apart from culture and identity another aspect of human existence which is discursively constituted is that of human sexuality. Foucault has famously theorized as to how human sexuality is systematically constituted, by various intersecting discourses like that of normativity, culture and science. A historical knowledge of how sexuality became the subject of discourses would be helpful in this respect. Since World War I sexuality has become a topic of increasing concern among social theorists. In the 1920s popular culture in Europe and the United States witnessed a radical change from the pre-war Victorian morality to a unprecedented openness with regard to matters of sexuality. The emergence of the Freudian school of psychoanalysis with its repressive hypothesis and foregrounding of sexuality, an entire generation started rejecting Christian and bourgeois asceticism and heralded a revolutionary transformation in sexual behavior. A path-breaking deviation from the Freudo-Marxist theories of sexuality happened with Foucault's extensive theorization on the subject, collected in three volumes of *The History of Sexuality* were published in 1984. In the first and most referenced volume, *The Will to Knowledge*, he attacks the "repressive hypothesis" of sexuality put forward by the Freudo-Marxian theorists of sexuality. He proposes that what is thought of as

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"repression" of sexuality actually constituted sexuality as a core feature of human identities, and produced a proliferation of discourse on the subject. Hence it is a through an ever-increasing range of intersecting discourses derived from the fields of medicine, psychiatry, pedagogy, criminal justice and social work on sexuality that the institutional control over sexuality was established. Another revolutionary concept brought in by Foucault is the constructionist nature of sexuality, or sexuality as discursively constituted rather than being a natural phenomenon. This discursive constitution is through a variety of practices across social institutions and the fields of law, medicine, health and education. Foucault repeatedly stresses on the interrelationship between sexuality, power and knowledge as well as the attempts of the social order to sanitize heterosexuality at the cost of delegitimizing alternate practices of sexuality.

Though discursive attempts to curb sexuality proved to be unsuccessful and unconventional modes of sexuality thrived, such sexualities were systematically othered by discourses on sexuality. Non-conjugal, non-monogamous and unorthodox sexualities were discursively constructed as aberrant, perverse the criminal or pathological other. This explains in a way the positing of the heterosexual family setup as the norm sanctioned social legitimacy acceptability and the placing of modes of alternate sexuality as the deviant other, which need to be censored and censured, lest it would disrupt the conventional societal setup. This in a way explains the origins of the age old stigma attached to alternate sexualities as well as its negative conceptualization in discourses.

In the technologized world of mediated realities, visual media with its immense discursive potential acts as a site for the proliferation of discourses concerning sexuality. In this respect, popular cinema, the production of which is controlled by the mainstream, often attempts to validate the prevalent ideas and ideologies regarding sexuality and its practice. In an attempt to basically cater to prevalent societal and capitalistic preferences of the times, popular cinema often does injustice to alternate sexualities by misrepresenting them. It also acts as a site of discursive violence on alternate sexualities by objectifying and thereby distorting their lives and identities, basically for the titillation of the mainstream audience.

Queer theory, which evolved in the 1990s from gay/ lesbian studies attempts to articulate the voice and concerns of alternate sexualities champions the cause of a wide range of marginal sexualities like those of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual(LGBT) groups. This field aims to subvert the essentialist claims of sexual identity and orientation. They attempt to foreground the view of sexual identity as a matter of social construction rather than of being purely biological and of

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sexual orientation as a matter of choice rather than being natural. Queer theory offers a political critique to the notions of normative and deviant sexual behavior and thereby unsettles the claims of heteronormativity. Queer studies also challenge the constructivist nature of social discourses and institutions which attempt to validate heterosexuality. Moreover, it also constantly attempts to champion the cause of cure groups and actively advocates for the rights of a third gender.

The cinematic representation of alternate sexualities can be considered as discursive construction or re-presentation, which entails, selective perception and strategic representation. There is an interconnectedness of such representations with the cultural context and dominant ideologies of the times as well as to expose the incongruities underling such representations. popular cinema could be regarded as a site of misrepresentation of queer identities.

In such strategies of representation, often the dominant identity gets inscribed as the cultural identity and their culture gets elevated to the status of normative culture .On the other hand, minority cultures are accorded a marginal status through strategies of erasure or misrepresentation. In this respect, Cultural theory has the primary task of negotiating such representational strategies, which act as misrepresentative of subaltern identity and culture. The aspect of identity is based on many tropes like that of gender, culture, race religion and nationality. In the case of subaltern communities, this trope becomes definitive of their very identity, by which they are socially and culturally subalternized. For the sexually marginal, their sexual identity becomes a fundamental concept determining their social positioning and subjectivity. In the contemporary scenario alternate sexualities provide a paradigmatic instance of this phenomenon, in which the identity of these groups, hinged on their sexual orientation, accords them the subaltern status.

Theory of social representation, a methodological tool from social research is adopted to decipher the social construction of queer identity as well as its cinematic representation. Social representation, in the basic sense refers to a corpus of values, ideas, beliefs, and practices that are shared among the members of a society or community .The concept of social representation was originally propounded by Serge Moscovici in his book entitled *La Psychanalyse, son image, son public*(1976).

At a practical level, the concept of social representation is about how general public make sense regarding scientific knowledge and how knowledge about any phenomenon is built and circulated on the twin tropes i.e. one of scientific theory and the other of general public's commonsensical notions regarding the subject. Moscovici describes two processes through which

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unfamiliar phenomenon is made familiar: Anchoring and Objectification. Anchoring involves the ascribing of meaning to new phenomena – objects, relations, experiences, practices, etc - by means of integrating the object being represented into existing worldviews. In this way, the threat of the strange and unfamiliar is removed. Thus the process of objectification turns abstract phenomenon into concrete reality. On the other hand, objectification is the means whereby abstract concepts and ideas are transformed into concrete knowledge and perceptions.

Theory of social representation helps in enabling us to understand the way in which alternate sexualities are perceived by the mainstream and as to how the common beliefs about these groups work towards the shaping of their identity. Though various modes of alternate sexuality have existed throughout history, increasing discursive attention on these groups emerged in the late Nineteenth century. With sexuality attaining the status of a science, increasing discussions were being made about propriety of sexual conduct, psychological dimension of sexuality, family health and sexual disorders. In the twentieth century with the liberalization of sexuality, there was still an increasing proliferation of discourses on sexuality, which included those on aberrant sexuality, safe sex and significantly the HIV/AIDS discourse. Paradoxically the heterosexual family setup still held sway while alternate modes of sexuality existed simultaneously. Alternate sexuality was perceived as a threat to the sacrosanct family setup, and significantly these groups were increasingly criminalized and/ pathologized by the ethico-medical and socio-religious discourses of the times. In the case of cultures like those of India where notions of conservatism in matters of sexuality as well as cultural Puritanism prevail, alternate sexualities faced an increasing societal contempt and marginalization. Queer cultures, which formed an essential part of the socio-cultural fabric of India, was falsely categorized as a ‘foreign cultural import’ intent on destroying Indian cultural purity. Thus the increasing discursive othering along with the societal fears of the times led to the conceptualization of queer identity as the deviant/aberrant other. In mainstream media and cinema these images found increasing proliferation. The emergence of queer activism and queer studies has made tremendous efforts to the societal acceptance and positive depiction of alternate sexualities. However, the stereotypical conceptualization of queer in discourses and public imagination still reigns. As in the contemporary world of mediated realities, cinema acts as a primary site for the discursive othering of marginal sexualities, a deconstructive analysis of cinematic representation becomes essential.

Poststructuralist theory and gender studies also emphasize constructivist approach to identity, i.e. identity as a social role play rather than an essence. Judith Butler while stressing the constructivist

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nature of gender identity, observed that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results (1990). The idea of identity gender and their performances being culturally constituted is especially significant in unraveling the cultural representation of alternate sexualities. In a majority of cultures and social systems the heterosexual family setup has held sway and was deemed as the acceptable order for long centuries. Alternate expressions and modes of sexuality have continued to exist simultaneously and have enjoyed a separate existence along with the heterosexual setup. In course of history, with the Western cultures ascribing a purely scientific dimension to sexuality, the alternate sexualities often came under surveillance and social policing. A radical shift in perspective appeared with the liberalization of social values and the emergence of new social order which gave acceptance to diverse practices of sexuality. However these groups still lack the discursive privilege and are constantly victims of mainstream desires and dreads enacted upon their silenced images.

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