Original Article

Equal? Not Yet: The Politics of Gender And Sexuality In India

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Abstract - *An individual's sexuality and gender remain a taboo subject even in postmodern Indian culture, where honour killing is planned for gay men or corrective rapes for lesbian women. Literary and film medium became the agents for conversations to flourish and break the gender status quo in society. This research paper is a discourse analysis of how two creative artists have tried to gender sensitize and create a space for dialogue and discussion for gender equality in the society. It will draw its framework for the study from Michael Foucault's 'The History of Sexuality' and Judith Butler's 'Gender Trouble'. Amrita Patil, India's first woman graphic novelist, disturbed the myth of conventional feminist narratives with 'Kari', the tale of a tenacious lesbian who battles with her existence in an advertising agency and maneuvers the vagaries of a heteronormative modern smog city. 'Aligarh' the 2016 Indian biographical film talks about the story of Dr Srinivas Ramchandra Siras who was suspended from his job as a Professor at Aligarh Muslim University after a video went viral exposing his homosexuality. The narratives strive to unmask the truth of hegemonical structures of culture and tradition still prevailing in modern India.*

Keywords - *Gender, graphic, hegemonic, heteronormative, homosexuality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

What determines one's destiny is a big question for many, the answer to which can be reduced to one word: anatomy. Freud's assertion in 1924 that biology is the key determinant of gender and identity, is not a defunct notion even in the postmodern world. Adherence to gender norms and societal structures still reiterate that the bodies we are born into govern lives of women and men around the world. The reality of one's identity is not only dependent on individual physical determinants per se or any societal guiding markers, but the structures by which a person identifies and becomes identified with a set of social values. It is therefore also important to acknowledge the presence of a cultural perspective when looking at gender. The transition of the impression of gender nonconformity from that of a sinful act to criminal engagement and finally a pathological aberrance to one of a variation in human sexuality occurred in the late 20th century. In 1973, The American Psychiatric Association, as well as in 1992 the World Health Organisation recognized officially its normal variant status. Since then many countries have decriminalised homosexual behaviour and some have recognised same-sex civil unions and marriage. Medicine and psychiatry started employing terms like homosexuality, heterosexuality, bisexuality and trans-sexuality to encompass all related issues, while the recent additions in socially accepted terminology supports inclusive terms like lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual which focuses on identities and recognises human sexuality as a spectrum. This research paper focuses on the identity of this nonconforming community in the context of India and analyses how they have been represented in popular culture. The emphasis will be on the study of two literary forms, a graphic novel '*Kari*' by Amruta Patil and the movie '*Aligarh*' directed by Hansal Mehta, and how these artists have through their realistic representation curated a discourse to bring to the forefront the angst of the marginalised and ostracised nonconforming people.

"Why is it that, as a culture, we are more comfortable seeing two men holding guns than holding hands?" asked Ernest Gaines. Human sexuality is complex. The acceptance of the distinction between desire, behaviour and identity acknowledges the multidimensional nature of sexuality. Sexuality like other aspects of human behaviour at any given point of time and place has been controlled by the power of the society. This is probably the reason why Michael Foucault came to a conclusion that the realm of sexuality throughout social history has its own politics, inequities and modes of oppression. The befitting example is the fact that since India's pathbreaking decision to decriminalise homosexuality, the Lower House of the Parliament passed a bill which denied the trans community's right to self declare and determine their gender preference. The country propagates the manadate of listing one's gender as a prerequisite to enjoying the right to employment, healthcare facilities, voting cards, and other essential services. The bill however expects the individual to undergo a gender affirmation surgery and a screening committee to

acknowledge or deny the gender identity of the person before being eligible for any rights and privileges. This biased and controlling mandate disregards those who are in the social fringes of society and are unable to afford such medical intervention, or even those who do not want their bodies to be mutilated; it also stands in contrast to the landmark 2014 ruling by the court that gave trans people the right to self-identify their preferred gender without medical intervention.

Historical and mythical texts from the world over document instances of gender nonconformity and India is not an exception to this. Ancient Greece reports once of the first evidences concerning homosexual relationship, where same sex relationships were common occurences. Homosexality was a general norm accepted in many lower class communities during the preindustrial era, although members of the upper classes in most societies considered it immoral. However, with the rise of urbanization and the nuclear family, homosexuality became much less tolerated and even outlawed in certain communities. Alexander the Great, Plato, Hadrian, Virgil, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Christopher Marlowe and many more were known to have been engaged in a relationship with people of their own gender. Evidences of homosexuality are available in Hindu mythology. Ancient texts such as the Manu Smriti, Arthashastra, Kamasutra, Upanishads and Puranas refer to homosexuality. In a study submitted to the West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences, the researcher discusses that religion has played a role in shaping Indian customs and traditions. While homosexuality has not been explicitly mentioned in the religious texts central to Hinduism, it has taken various positions, ranging from positive to neutral or antagonistic. Rigveda one of the four canonical sacred texts of Hinduism says '*Vikriti Evam Prakriti' (what seems unnatural is also natural),* which some scholars believe recognises the cyclical constancy of homosexual/transsexual dimension of human life, like all forms of human diversity. Throughout Vedic literature, the sex or gender of a human being is clearly divided into three separate categories according to *prakriti* or nature. These are: pums- prakriti or male, stri- prakriti or female and tritiya–prakriti or the third sex. People of the third sex are analyzed in the Kamasutra and broken down into several categories that are still visible today and generally referred to as gay males and lesbians. While gay males and lesbians are the most prominent members of this category, it also includes other types of people such as transgenders and the intersexes. The third sex in *Kamasutra* is described as a natural mixing or combination of the male and female natures to the point in which they can no longer be categorized as male or female in the traditional sense of the word. The cultural residues of homosexuality for instance can be seen even today in certain communities, for example a small village called Angaar in Gujarat is amongst the Kutchi community where ritualistic transgender marriage is performed during the time of the Holi festival. This wedding which is celebrated every year, for the past 150 years is unusual because *Ishaak*, the bridegroom and *Ishakali*, the bride are both men.

Lord Macaulay introduced Section 377 as part of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) which basically dealt with maintaining this idea of heteronormativity. That this law was seamlessly and silently incorporated into the legal structures of the postcolonial Indian state disturbingly reflects dominant nationalism and normative sexuality. Section 377 of the IPC punishes "unnatural offences" with imprisonment for life or a term which may extend to ten years, and a fine. However, what qualifies as an "unnatural offence" is rather vague—the section merely defines it as any voluntary "carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal". Even though the law directly does not hint at ostracizing the community of homosexuals, the hegemonical societal contructs have designed the negative perception around the same resulting in the formalization and legalisation of heteronormative attitudes in India. The binary thus established by the law is that of homosexuality being unnatural or "against the order of nature" and heterosexuality regarded as part of the natural order, linked to the biological binary of male and female, and procreation. One of the grounds that the British colonizers used to introduce section 377 was that homosexuality acts against the order of nature and was condemned by the Bible. It was mostly the act of sodomy that was looked down upon. The Britishers stated the story of Sodom as depicted in Genesis 19 as a ground of teaching people that homosexuality was unnatural. Perhaps no postcolonial nationalist myth on sexuality is more pervasive than the belief that homosexuality is alien to India and is the outcome of Mughal invasions and westernization. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru even went to the extent of claiming that "homosexual behaviour was an aberration introduced into India in the British colonial period."

In India, over the past many years, however, sexuality is a question of silence. And like gender, sexuality is also political. It is organised into systems of power, which reward and encourage some individual activity, while punishing and repressing others. Drawing on Michael Focault, there is a focus on the conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality in India. Guardians of the social order proclaimed the idea of 'heteronormativity' which asserted that heterosexuality was the only norm in sexuality. In the Indian society, keeping with the conventional, traditional sacrosanct rituals and customs, marriage is declared as a constant heterosexual sacrament. Even in this postmodern era in India, the existence of sexual minorities and their identity is disregarded or held with disdain, many a times paralleling the same sex phenomenon as a western, uncouth behaviour. Thus, dominant social discourses and narratives established heterosexuality as the standard against which all other sexualities are perceived and treated as abnormal, unnatural, even abhorrent, categorizing it as a bodily aberration to be treated, an ailment to be cured, or an offence to be

disciplined. The ground reality is that sexual minorities in India are largely stigmatized and disempowered socially, culturally, politically and often legally and economically too.

The real danger of section 377 lay in the fact that it permeated different social settings including the medical establishment, media, family and the state. The criminalization of homosexuality, by condemning into perpetuity an entire class of people, forcing them to live their lives in a shadow of harassment, humiliation, and degrading treatment at the hands of the law enforcement machinery, denying them the right to a full moral citizenship. It is pertinent to look at how such criminalisation affects the emotional health and social lives of the innumerable homosexual adults in the country who live with the disconcerting knowledge that they are at risk of being arrested, prosecuted, subjected to corrective rapes and convicted each time they choose to express their sexuality with another consenting adult. In this context, the relationship of the state with its homosexual subjects can be examined through the Foucauldian frameworks of disciplinary power through surveillance—as represented by the panoptic watchtower—and 'biopower', which literally means having power over bodies. This concept of the panopticon was used as a metaphor by Michel Foucault in his 1975 work *Discipline and Punish* to illustrate the disciplinary power of societies to normalise through observation. In fact, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explicitly extends this concept to the realm of sexuality. This regulatory action becomes not just a means to discipline bodies by treating sex as an act, but also a powerful political tool to control individual sexual identity. The Indian state has consequently pushed this vulnerable population deeper into the closet, with disastrous social repercussions ranging from dangerously low self-esteem to the breakdown of family units, and infidelity within the facade of heterosexual relationships to suicides.

Tracing the trajectory of the movement against subjugation, we see that the first known protest for gay rights was held 45 years after India gained independence from imperialist regine, on August 11, 1992. An organization known as 'AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan' (ABVA) held its first demonstration outside the Delhi police headquarters to object the discriminate arrest of individuals from Connaught Place's Central Park on allegations of homosexual behaviour. Although there was no effective result of this protest, the queer communities in India continued to organise themselves demanding rights of 'hijras' (transgender) and same-sex desiring people not only to live free from violence, but also to access rights such as the ability to provide medical histories to their doctors without shame or fear from legal authorities, to possess a passport, and to be free of discrimination in offices, schools & colleges, and homes. In 1994 the ABVA activists challenged Section 377's constitutionality by filing a public interest litigation in Delhi High Court, which became the first legal move to legalise the rightful presence of

homosexuality in India. In 1991, a report titled 'Less than Gay', was released by ABVA, documenting the discriminatory attitudes faced by the community. These minor protests paved the way for the first ever Gay Pride Parade held in 1999 in Kolkata, West Bengal. Despite being attended by only 15 members, the parade which commonly came to be known as the 'Calcutta Rainbow Pride' sent out a very strong message to the nation, a message for recognition and acceptance i.e., being queer and being proud. 1999 also witnessed a Delhi-based organization called CALERI (Campaign for Lesbian Rights) releasing the 'Lesbian Emergence', the aim of which was to bring to the fore the lives of queer women, who were in fact extremely marginalized and discriminated against than queer men. The law and police forces came down heavily against the community, an instance of which was seen in July 2001, when the Lucknow police eager to enfoce the harsh Section 377, brutally raided and took to task few men in a park for alleged homosexual activities, thereby resurfacing the subjugation faced by the community. Another NGO, 'Bharosa', involved in healthcare and rehabilitation was targeted by the police, and nine volunteers were detained as well as documents withheld. They were accused of sex racketing and also refused bail. Later, the 'Lawyers Collective', a legal aid organization supporting the gay rights activists, fought the case, released the members and all allegations involving racketing was proved false. Following this incident, in 2001, the 'Naz Foundation' and the 'Lawyers Collective' filed an appeal to the Delhi High Court to support the movement and repeal the law. A temporary reprive in the form of a verdict by the court in 2 July 2009 was achieved which decriminalized homosexuality. It had only a short-lived status because as the Supreme Court of India, in a span of two years, revoked the decision. The argument was that Section 377 was not unconstitutional in its framing and that the support by the Delhi High Court was legally not binding. The many years of effort and fight by the supporters, the 'Naz Foundation' and the 'Lawyers Collective' was dismissed and judgment in favour of the community was annulled by the apex court on 11 December 2013. After the ruling, the 'Christian Apostolic Churches Alliance' (CACA); an umbrella of 22 churches in Delhi and a disciple of Baba Ramdev moved the Supreme Court raising objections to the ruling on the ground that it would have a 'catastrophic effect on the society's moral fabric.' After the Supreme Court ruling of 2013, fundamental organisations and the conventional societal structures treated the third gender community as criminals leading to a renewed mobility of protest movements for the cause of the LGBTQA+ community in India. In the mean while, the ministry of health was facing a different problem, an resurgence in HIV affected population, statistically more than any other country, more than even South Africa. The harassment that the community faced due to the medical outbreak was unimaginable and the health ministry was at a loss in stopping the discrimination and harassment meted out

on the community by the police as well as the common public. Finally, after multiple petitions, support from political leaders and active dissent on the part of the community, the Supreme Court overturned the law that ostensibly criminalized both homosexuality and gender nonconformity. September 2018 brought the landmark judgement which established that Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code violates fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution. But regardless of the reform, bias and anti-homosexual sentiments fostered by sociopolitical as well as religious leaders reinforced the discrimination and prejudice rampant in Indian society. Nothing changed, and the Indian government continued its discriminatory stance against the LGBTQA+ people as evidenced in July 2019, when India refrained from voting at the UN Human Rights Council on the resolution put forward by Latin American states aiming at renewing the directive of independent expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on 'Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity' (SOGI). What was truly disappointing was that ahead of the voting, there were widespread campaigns in favour of the mandate, and dialogues with the authorities to vote in support of the resolution since by then the Supreme Court of India had revoked Section 377, thereby decriminalizing homosexuality in India. Thus, even in this postmodern postmillennial era, the societal and judicial prejudices shrouds the lives of the LGBTQA+ community in criminality and constant fear. They constantly face social discrimination, disdain and are subjected to the shame of being their very natural selves.

II. GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN INDIAN CINEMA AND POPULAR CULTURE

Dominant heteropatriachial systems that infiltrate the society perpetuates gender-based and sexual violence against those who deviate or nonconform to the social codes and succumb them to cruel atrocities, submission and silence. Owing allegiance to the community, the art world has many a times used its vibrant and influential medium to support, and represent the realities of the gender nonconforming people in India, challenging the binaries of gender representations and traditional views of constructed sexuality. Through compelling stories and canvasses, the issue of gender nonconformity has been kept alive in the public consciousness. Even though the attitude of self identification and the concept of "coming out" is a very recent Indian phenomenon, that of the 1990s, evidences of authors and poets of the colonial and even earlier period have expressed their sexuality through their creative narratives, like Firaq Gorakhpuri and Michael Madhusudan Dutt to name a few. Literary works like '*Lihaaf*' by Ishmat Chughtai, revolving around homoerotic themes, garnered a lot of controversy giving it a glaring visibility, but what was also ironic was the fact that many artists and authors also concealed their own preferred identity, never 'coming out' and disclosing their true self. The fear of prejudice and discrimination was deep seated and the practice continued in postcolonial India. Despite the presence of authors to depict the "foreignness" of homosexuality, like the 1965 Hindi novel '*Machhli Mari Hui'*, by Rajkamal Chaudhury, India was home also to pathbreakers who were bold and brave to illustrate their sentiments through their autobiographical narratives, the likes of which were witnessed in the fiery and explicit iconoclastic feminist writer, Kamala Surayya's '*My Story'* and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's 'Shabdangal'. India's very first academic text on homosexuality was '*The World of Homosexuals'* by the "human computer" Shakuntala Devi. It aimed to explore the political, social and legal realities of the LGBTQA+ of India, as opposed to countries were the civil rights movement for the cause of gender equality and acceptance of the spectrum was gaining momentum. The book interestingly also revealed that Ms. Devi's creative piece stemmed from her husband's doubtful sexuality, and hence representing homosexuality in an acceptable and welcoming light. Postmodern literature witnessed the emergence of authors giving voice to gendered identities and societal problems faced by them because of their sexuality like Mayur Patel's 'Vivek and I', R. Raja Rao's 'The Boyfriend', Anita Nair's 'Ladies Coupe' and Vasudhendra's 'Mohanaswamy'. It was definitely suprising to witness however that the academic realm which was an epitome of supporting all kinds of literature vis-a-vis Feminist, Dalit, Marxist etc had a huge reservation when it came to Queer literature. The constant denial by the Board of Studies who refused to include queer literature in the curriculum, led to the refusal to start the course and declaration that "Indian students do not need it". In some time however, it became identified as Dalit literature and was incorporated under the area of Alternative Literature.

Cinema is a popular medium in India acting as a catalyst to social change. It has the power to create a positive and piercing impact and hence the erroneous gender stereotypical representations in cinema often results in the distortion of gender roles and gender identity. In most representations, the nonconformity is portrayed as an aberration and subjected to satire, ridicule and spoof. In the milieu of a skewed portrayal of sexuality in Indian cinema, there have been movies which have subverted the common mode of representation both through form and content. Movies like '*Queens! Destiny of Dance*' by David Atkins, Deepa Mehta's '*Fire*', Ligy Pullapally's '*Sancharam*', Kaizad Gustad's '*Bombay Boys*', Buddhadev Dasgupta's '*Uttara*', '*My Brother Nikhil*', Onir's '*I Am*', '*Margarita with a Straw*' by Shonali Bose, '*Chitrangada: The crowning wish*' by Rituparno Ghosh, are a few of the many movies that held a realistic mirror to the progressive society about notions of gender, identity and nonconformity. *"Njan Sanjo"* ("I'm Sanjo" in Malayalam) is a telling narrative of Sanjo Steve, a Malayali, young, trans man. The 15-minute long video, represents Sanjo's passions in life for mathematics, food, sports, travel etc., and then his tryst with darker elements of society in the significantly transphobic state of Kerala. His accounts discuss among many anecdotes, the meeting with a religious pastor, who

seeing him cross dressed, tried to convince him that he has a mental disorder. Among one other humiliating experience, he recollects how he was subjected to intimidating, and intrusive questioning and snarky comments by the authorities despite having furnished all necessary documents regarding his sexuality and gender. In another segment, he narrates the repeated defamation and misrepresentation of the community by the society as well as media, thereby not acknowledging their identity. This bias and misrepresentation over centuries in India wherein the heterosexual patriarchial structure is the cornerstone of the ideal and real, has resulted in the perception of any radical deviation or nonconformity, as antisocial, antireligious and antinational.

'Aligarh' released in 2015, written by Apurva Asrani and directed by Hansal Mehta was a pathbreaking biographical film based on a true incident that brought out the skeletons of discrimination and subjugation faced by community of differently gendered. Revolving around the life of Professor Ramchandra Siras, the Head of Classical Modern Languages faculty at Aligarh Muslim Uiversity, the movie won rare reviews and critical acclaim for its raw portrayal of the anguish and trauma experienced by the gay people. Prof Siras a 64-year-old Professor of Marathi, brilliantly brought to life by the actor Manoj Bajpai, was suspended from his position when the media secretly invaded his privacy and filmed him having sex with a rickshaw puller. The video went viral and soon Prof Siras was condemned and stripped of his identity and dignity. The film won a standing ovation when premiered at the 20th Busan International Film Festival, and also won Bajpai The Filmfare Critics Award for the Best Actor in 2016. The movie discusses how a journalist, played by Rajkumar Rao, fights his case in court, braving all odds and supporting the voice of this ostracized Professor, who is unfairly forced into the limelight. Prof Siras wins the case and his suspension is revoked, but all the trauma, negative attention and contempt, drives Prof Siras to commit suicide. The movie received critical acclaim from across the world for a timely and telling portrayal of an old man who is hounded out of his job because of his sexual orientation. Siras is a man of letters and likes poetry, immersing himself in the musical world of Lata Mangeshkar's songs. He is alone, and his loneliness leads him to an occasional tryst with another human being who just happens to be of the same sex. Deepu is a Delhi based reporter who stumbles upon Siras' story and pursues it. The hectoring tone of the legal eagle in the public prosecutor depicts the general castigation brought to bear upon the LGBTQA+ community. What was also surprising was that the incident happened a year after the momentous judegement on Section 377 of the Delhi High Court to decriminalise homosexuality. One of the scenes in the movie portrays the overarching power of social institutions, especially marriage. "This can be explained as when the journalist inquired about the Professor's past life, he claimed that he was married due to continuous family pressure. On the contrary, an undertone of this scene can be a projection of cultural ignorance. To put it in perspective, the

protagonist revealed that since he belonged to a small town in India, being gay was not an option." (Bhatia, 2017). "Hence, he submitted to the societal conventions, got married and continued to 'perform' his masculine duties" (Butler, 1993). "Furthermore, when the journalist asked Professor Siras about his partner, he replied: "*Why are you so obsessed with the word lover?... but at least try to understand what actually love is? Love is a beautiful word. You are making it sound like a dirty word. I have a problem with this*!". This means that the protagonist, with regards to his old age, is unhappy when the word 'love' is degraded to just sex. In his eyes, love is about companionship and because of the so called moral codes of the society, he is unable to spend time with his partner without judgments" (Bhatia, 2017). In the Indian society, heteronormativity was established as the dominant discourse, with the intention to achieve a normative society. The film was also evidence to the religious moralities and expectations that control individual freedom and expressions. Siras mentions his muslim partner as "friend", not disclosing the religious affiliation, and other customs like not sharing food with a person of a diffirent religious/ social background, all point to the centuries old prejudice and superstitions that colour societal norms. Even though Professor Siras successfully won the case at the Allahabad High Court, his subsequent death sheds light not only on the rights of the LGBTQA+ community, but it is also a narrative of brutal targeting, cornering, marginalizing, ostracizing and ultimately driving the individual to succumb to the pressure. "The rickshaw puller still lives in constant fear of losing his livelihood, being recognised on the streets or even killed for being the professor's gay partner. The horrible incident has stayed with him ever since and he misses his partner. "*He loved me*," says the father of five daughters, adding that "*a bit of greed*" may have guided his relationship with the professor. "*Had he been alive, my children would be studying in good schools. I would be running a business*," he says (Why a Gay ndian Professor's death inspired a film, 2016). *Aligarh* is thus a powerful character study, an incisive social commentary, a tragedy of harrowing proportions and a cautionary parable about a society rife with contradictions. In the representation of Siras as the gay man, he is neither ridiculed or subjected to pungent joke. Th joke is infact reversed on the social institution of policing the sexual act which in the Indian scenario is considered an extremely private and taboo subject. The movie *Aligarh* brought to light the ridiculous nature of legislating a very personal and consensual sexual affair. The incident found a very large army of rainbow spectrum of people who came out of their closets to fight against this marginalization and subjugation by a heteronormative society.

Harriet Bradley in her *"Fractured Identities: Changing Patterns of Inequality"* uses an intersectional framework to discuss about social fracturing and polarisation witnessed through inequalities related to class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age. She calls for a renewed approach to

potentially suppress these social inequalities, wherein applying postmodern theories and contextual re-engagement with local narratives is crucial. Literature, being a mirror to society, replicates the narratives of individuals who are entwined in this milieu of social and cultural fragmentation and are caught in the hegemony of social power structures. "Popular culture has the power to deliver political messages. This truism is evidenced in the overwhelming popularity that comic books and graphic novels have garnered in the contemporary era. From *Maus* through *Citizen 13660*, *Radioactive Forever*, *The Ukrainian and Russian Notebooks*, *Bhimayana*, *Hush* and *March*, the graphic novel, much more serious than 'comics', has been instrumental in raising the critical literacy level about events in history and present-day issues"(Nayar, 2017). The graphic novel landscape has witnessed a significant change with innovative and revolutionary changes in visual image technology. The impact that visuals have in the minds of individuals is extremely direct as compared to prose and they have a great recall value too. The new age writers of the graphic novel express divergent attitudes towards social and cultural issues realising how images possess a shaping force over how identities are performed and understood.

"India's first woman graphic novelist, Amruta Patil, busted the myth of 'straight' stories with full force with the release of the first lesbian story *'Kari'* in 2008. *'Kari'* is the story of a dark, tenacious, forlorn lesbian who struggles in an ad agency and battles the complexities of her estranged love life with Ruth during the day, but transforms into a Danger Chorri–a vigilante–at night" (Mathai, 2018). It is the fractured reality of a homosexual woman in a heteronormative culture. "The story is a vivid exploration of a women's psyche and her sexuality" (Mathai, 2018). The images that Amruta Patil paints, speaks volumes about the dilemma individuals like Kari face daily in the heteronormative landscape of the modern city. The novel begins with a failed suicide attempt by Kari and her lover Ruth, who is saved by a safety net. Kari, on the other hand finds herself in the sewers. Disillusioned and alienated, she rises from the dead resolving to return the favours by unclogging the city sewers. "The symbolism used reminds one of Eliot's 'The Wasteland'. The author skilfully represents the contradicting aspects of her personality reflective of the 21st century woman. The world of urban dichotomy is skilfully represented in the black and white images, thereby addressing the gender queer and identity crisis in the modern smog cities" (Mathai, 2018). Amruta Patil lends a magic realism element in the novel when she intersperses her dark images with colourful elements and names this world her Crystal Palace. "The few coloured fantasies expose the commoditisation of women in society who are caught up in the frenzy of urbanization" (Mathai, 2018). The character Kari, says, "Interesting that my postal address in the smog city sounds like a pit stop in a fairytale". Anne E Duggan in her study "*Queer Enchantments: Gender, Sexuality and Class in the Fairy-tale Cinema of Jacques Demy*", discusses how fairytales can be used to communicate heteronormative and bourgeoisie ideologies and can function as psychological constraints which imposes this normalcy. Kari's spatial experience of the city is infused with heterosexual romance as portrayed in the image panel where Kari reminiscences her time with Ruth and the background image carries the poster of the movie "Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge", a Bollywood movie which epitomises all that is fairytale and 'normal'. Kari's story thus unfolds in a culture that is permeated with heterosexual romance. "Patil also employs irony when she sets Kari in an advertising firm, where the 'ideal woman' is created. Advertisements create gender specific roles and women in society are expected to emulate and construct their identities around this 'ideal woman'. Kari's inability to define her own gender in an advertising world which defines gender roles remains paradoxical. The identity crisis she undergoes exemplifies the problems faced by nonconforming individuals in a heterosexual milieu. It corroborates what Vandana Joshi in her article Gender Discrimination at Work Place: A Significant Barrier For Women Empowerment discusses and argues stating the hostile work spaces that result in psychological trauma. Kari's alter ego role of a boatman, clad in a PVC suit, trying to clean the sewers symbolise the need for purgation and liberation in the modern world" (Mathai, 2018). The accepted societal normative representations, that are naturalized and prevelant is portrayed in various instances in the narrative. The two male partners of Kari's friends try to convine her to search for a suitable male partner, as is the norm. They opine that, "*eventually a woman needs a man and a man needs a woman*". Another example of the heteronormative view is when she is questioned by Lazarus, her superior, if she is a "proper" lesbian. The absolute naivety of the question depicts how the idea of heteronormativity is ingrained in the fabric of the society, and any conversation on an alternate is also completely negated. Patil interweans in her narrative, images of dissent using the painting of western artists like Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas,* Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, and Gustav Klimt's *The Virgin*. Kari is a young, deeply introverted, asocial and queer woman, a counterpoint to the hyperfeminine prototypes that one keeps coming across in Indian representations of the ideal woman. "Kari thereby stands out as an agent for change and the hope for acceptance of a fractured identity, a nonconformity" (Mathai, 2018).

III. THE POLITICS OF GOING BEYOND BINARIES

Sexuality is a key focus of power because through its regulation, power can control both population and people. Michael Foucault's '*The History of Sexuality*' enabled conversations around the constructed nature of sexuality and the role of power, culture, and society in this construction. Foucault points out how 'silence' has been assigned a significant role to play as far as the expression of sexuality is

concerned. This is particularly true in the context of India, where silencing of the nonconformed on the basis of culture, religion, politics and social milieu create inescapable tropes of power that controls society through sexuality, by means of repression and incitement. Judith Butler is her seminal work "*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*" (1999) discusses about how gender is a social construct and how society through its patriarchal structures conform individuals to a world of binaries. In August 2015 a video titled "Hum Bhi Hain" (We are also there) went viral. The depiction of the seven transgenders in the video celebrating the national anthem, is witness to the poignant fact of alternate careers these individuals might have had other than being reduced to begging and subjecting themselves to the social fringes. Following the landmark verdict, India is waking up to the idea of safeguarding nonconforming citizens from the myriad attacks of subjugation. The legal affirmation and acceptance furthered the momentum of religious and social groups, as well as media campaigns, colouring the LGBTQA+ community's integration as lawful and rightful citizens into the national fabric in a defamatory and negative light. This is a dangerous turn of events which raises the question of whether performing 'acceptable' normative nationalistic attitudes is the only way to claim Indian citizenship. If an individual's identity and expression depends on the laws that determine the commonly recognized dos and don'ts, then it is time to reform and inculcate a refined mindset. The need of the hour is to build a society that does not restrict itself to policy changes, but a culturally sensitive people open to a positive and empowering discourse, ready to break free from traditionally established social and nationalistic constructs. Otherwise, in the corridors of political gimmicks and religious fanaticism, the nonconforming human beings will continue to suffer and be relegated to the margins. The characters, Kari and Prof Siras in the discussed narratives symbolise such individuals who do not conform and of all nonconforming individuals' hyphenated existence in this world of binaries. The research paper, by introducing these narratives wishes to emphasise the power of popular culture to become a valuable vehicle to discuss social inequalities and fractured identities by engaging with the so called 'not so grand' narratives. Through a visual-verbal rhetoric, these narratives try to break the current status quo, by engaging in gender representations that are neither national nor communal and establish their identity in the corridors of power and privilege. The literary world should acknowledge the obvious agency in the culture of these movies and graphic narratives and raise it from its own fractured existence to one of literary standing and merit that incorporates a multimodal approach to facilitate an enhanced world view.

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