THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND ITS REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND QUEER IDENTITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dual role of media as a moulder of society and a reflection of that society. Media, whether it be Ads, Films, or Books, has become a deeply embedded part of an individual's daily routine. The media possesses agenda-setting power, which is essential to shape the public perception of what is important and relevant to society as of now by coverage, framing, and other presentation techniques. The media often sets the stage for a deep discussion on an important issue that they have emphasised through repeated coverage. According to Kepios' analysis, there are 5.31 billion active social media users, which is equivalent to 64.7% of the world's total population. GWI reports that an average individual spends 18 hours and 41 minutes on social media each week, which would amount to the world spending roughly 590 million years consuming content on social media each year. This routine of engaging with media repeatedly leads to shifting and creating global perspectives. This paper delves into the sub-themes of how women and members of the LGBTQ+ community have been represented in India and globally, and the evolution and the effects on society due to such representation.

Keywords: Media, Women, LGBTQ+ Community, Influence of Media on Society.

INTRODUCTION

A sociologist's twist to the fitness mantra "you are what you eat" might be: "you are what you see". Media- be it advertisements, books, TV shows, or films- are seen as a mirror and a mould of society. It is often seen as a creator and a reflection of the same.

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Media, in its role of being a mirror, also reveals the hidden, deep-rooted problems that a society faces, which can become apparent through a deep inquiry. A 13-year-old infamous ad from the skincare company Fair and Lovely is one such representation of the colourist mindset of Indian society at the time. The ad showcased two female coworkers who were portrayed comparing their skin tone, which led to the darker coworker being teased by the fairer coworker and being urged to apply the cream twice to achieve fair skin. The ad ends by revealing the darker coworker being significantly fair and, as a result, happier. Now we fast track to 2020, when demands for inclusivity were at an all-time high, the parent company Hindustan Unilever decides to rebrand the "Fair and Lovely" cream into being called "Glow and Lovely". One may think in hindsight that society is ready for a deep transformation, but it also presents another deeper issue in media representation. Despite such tolerant ads, society still faces discomfort in acknowledging the deep-seated belief system of colourism. In this case, the media represents the discomfort of facing deeply ingrained issues disguised as the illusion of a progressive society through soft language and hypocrisy.

Media also plays an important role in moulding the society it reflects. To prove this, we have to turn to the Nazi Regime, or the Third Reich. Germany at the time was at the height of economic crisis and public humiliation. At a time of this vulnerability, the manipulation of theories to make them fit into ruthless narratives was far more feasible. They manipulated the theory of the concept of survival of the fittest from Charles Darwin. This theory of evolution, with heaps of evidence, scientifically proves that organisms that are better adapted to their environment are going to reproduce and live for longer periods than those who do not. Nazis linked this concept to their racist ideology of stating that the Aryans were biologically superior and better fit than the Jews and that they had to maintain their purity, build their strength and rule the world. The idea was to "scientifically" justify genocide and concentration camps. Media, like radios, posters, and films like "Triumph of the Will" and the "eternal jew" were used to spread widespread hate and division among its people.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study explores how media shapes and reflects society and how women and queer communities were and is treated.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary sources such as books, articles, journals, research papers, websites, and other sources.

MEDIA AS A MIRROR AND A MOULD

Media has two purposes- one that constructs society and the one that reflects society. This approach of the media can be understood in its reflection of stereotypes that are perpetuated against various groups in society. The stereotype is a generalised belief about a group of people, which is negative, that is not based on individual contributions but rather focuses on a distorted image of the people that is often overly simplified. Stereotypes can be of different types, such as:

Gender Stereotypes: It is a preconception of both genders on the roles, characteristics, attributes, and more, which invariably limits the scope of roles that they can take up.

Racial Stereotypes: A racial stereotype is when a group of people in a set racial group is attributed with certain characteristics and not evaluated through individual contributions.

Sexuality Stereotypes: These types of stereotypes focus on sexual minorities and make assumptions about the community.

The media reflects the state of society. This can be seen when we examine the state of Germany during the nazi regime. Before the rise of Adolf Hitler, hatred for Jews in Europe was common. They were ridiculed and mocked for the rejection of Christendom. They saw Jews as an inferior and dangerous race.[1] As Adolf Hitler rose to power, Anti-Semitism evolved to become a formulated ideology. As the Weimar Republic was eliminated, it took numerous newspapers of outlawed political parties with it. One of the strategic moves employed by the Nazi`s to embed more hatred into the minds of the citizens of Germany was to establish total control over the Press.

The nazis had established full control of the independent press organization.[2] The nazi regime started the first few weeks of 1933, fear mongering of a particular "communist uprising". This

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[1] 'Nazi Germany and the Jews 1933 – 39' (*Yad Vashem*) <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/nazi-germany-1933-39.html> accessed 17 May 2025

[2] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 'The Press in the Third Reich' (*Holocaust Encyclopedia*) <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-press-in-the-third-reich> accessed 17 May 2025

created anxieties in the public, which were duly taken advantage of. The storm troopers and the members of the nazi elite paramilitary force took to the streets brutalizing the members of opposing parties and destroying newspaper prints as well as their offices. Many independent printing organisations complied with printing within the narrative of the regime. Franz Eher, a nazi executive had also owned a publishing house. Many journalists had fled the country, fearing death. Soon, the propaganda ministry assumed power over the Reich Association of German Press. This organisation was part of regulating members into the profession of journalism. A chilling amendment to the editor's law said that the registry should only contain those who are "racially pure" and rejected Jews and persons married to Jews. The ministry also expected the members to avoid any statements that would weaken the strength of the Reich abroad or at home. The nazis used various methods to glorify Adolf Hitler and his ideologies. The 1935 movie "Triumph of the Will" was a key piece in showing the propaganda. The film, through its storytelling, cinematography, music, and editing skills, became an essential part in promoting Hitler as the saviour of the German people. This shows us how societal sentiments were actively reshaped to make. This example showcases the immense power of the media, not only reflecting ideas but helping them turn from hatred to institutionalised beliefs.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN MEDIA

In Indian cinema, according to K. Moti. Gokulsing and Wimal Dissnayake, women have been limited to two roles- the mother and the wife.[3] These roles are stereotyped and were widely used as it was seen as a cheat code for success, as they never had to dig deep into the complexities of a woman`s mind. The motherly roles were devoted to their family and fiercely loyal to their filial relationships. Deewar (1975) and Mother India (1957) were groundbreaking hits that made the audience familiar with the motherly tropes. The wife is a trope that shows a woman who is utterly devoted to the service of her husband. She subjugates her desires and lives within the realm of her husband. Any woman who does not fit the narratives of these roles is seen as a "bad character". She is seen as the black sheep – the arrogant one. When we observe Indian serials, it is evident that when a female character establishes boundaries and takes up some herself, she is seen as the villain. More often than not, it is the other female characters that perpetuate such cruelty on the "villainous character", while the devoted wife, who lives

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[3] Wimal Dissanayake and Ranjith Krishnan K R, 'Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change' (*ResearchGate*, July 2020) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343206085_Indian_Popular_Cinema_A_Narrative_of_Cultural_Change> accessed 20 May 2025

within a set boundary made for her, is seen as the "good character" which prompts the audience to root for her. Beauty standards also come into play here; Indian movies prefer actresses who have a lean build and fair complexion, while the dark skinned, obese, or curvy female characters are sidelined to be comic.[4] According to Laura Mulvey (1975), the female figures are the fantasies projected by the male gaze. The woman displayed has only two functions: she is to be an erotic figure to the characters within the story, and also as an erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium. Budd Boetticher has once said that the heroine provokes or inspires fear and love in the heart of the hero, or makes him act in a way due to his feelings for her. In herself, she has no significance.[5]

When we look at the current scope of Bollywood movies today, there has been a huge rise in female-dominated films. With movies such as "The Crew" starring Kareena Kapoor, Kriti Sanon, Tabu, and Diljit, the story of three women navigating life and its hurdles is told. The audience is visibly more accepting of female-centric movies than they were before.

Now let's investigate the impact it had on audiences. One study reveals that even though people have started watching more women-centric films, most of them still think that women are mere attractions for a film. However, when talking about the preference, 66% opted that they prefer watching both female and male-centric movies, while 25% preferred women-centric films, and the rest of 9% opted for male-centric films.[6]

REPRESENTATION OF MEMBERS OF THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

Schiappa and his colleagues experimented to test the parasocial contact theory; a group of college students enrolled in a television studies class were repeatedly exposed to the movie, Six Feet Under, featuring the story of a gay couple. After 5 weeks of engagement with the movie, it was found that the participants had a better reception of homosexual relationships.[7]

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[4] Priyanka Joshi, 'What "she" was…': Representation of Women in Films – A Historical Perspective – The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2022 Official Conference Proceedings' (*The International Academic Forum,*2022) <https://papers.iafor.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/acah2022/ACAH2022_62607.pdf> accessed 20 May 2025

[5] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema: Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look' (Columbia University) <https://www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/feminism/mulvey.pdf> accessed 20 May 2025

[6] Katyayini Mishra, Sakshi Jha, Muskaan, Ajay Kumar Jha 'A study on 'Women Centric films': Are they improving status of women in society?' ISSN No. 2278 – 6414 (Online) https://patnawomenscollege.in/upload/Explore%20vol%20XI%202/detal/d32-min.pdf accessed 20 May2025

[7] Edward Schiappa, Peter B. Gregg, Dean Hewes, 'The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis' (*ResearchGate,* March 2005) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254948662_The_Parasocial_Contact_Hypothesis> accessed 22 May 2025

This proves that the representation of this sexual minority impacts the real world. LGBTQ+ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, transgender, queer and the "+" denotes all the gender and sexual identities not denoted in the acronym.

Indian cinema has lacked representation of queer identities. Movies like Kal ho nah noh (2003) present a mockery of the community. The rise of homophobia is often linked to colonialism. The Indian Society was socially accepting of the queer communities. Khajuraho temple, built between 885 CE and 1000 CE, had depictions of erotic scenes between a man and a man and a woman and a woman. The third gender, or the Hijra, was considered a part of society.

Chanthupottu, a 2005 Malayalam movie, shows the story of a "feminine" man who is banished from the land because of his "feminine ways". He returns to his land, attacking and almost murdering a previous bully, thus reclaiming his masculinity in the eyes of the villagers. The transgender community in Kerala was often mockingly called "Chanthupottu." In 2018, Njan Marykutty, by actor Jayasurya, was released. This time around, the movie dealt with sensitive topics and the real struggles of transgender community. It also represented the main character as a person with their ambitions, even though she was not accepted altogether by the society around her.

Shows like Made in Heaven (2019) portray the character Karan`s struggle with his identity and pressure to accept his sexuality due to the pressure of his family and the fear of persecution of the society he lives in. In 2018, the supreme court removed section 377, decriminalizing consensual homosexual acts, which was widely celebrated in media, which prompts for a cautious visibility of queer narratives in mainstream Indian content.

For meaningful representation of the LGBTQ+ community, a few progressive movies and films can only go so far. The next step for the successful integration of LGBTQ+ into the mainstream and making them more acceptable is to tell their story through a lens that revolves around their sexuality, the entire time. They should be able to do side roles as well as main leads in movies without making their sexuality their whole identity. Media should be ready to hear their experiences and how they would like to be portrayed without an ounce of manipulation of their story. It is common to see the media diluting the intensity of their lives through censorship to make it more digestible. I suggest that their voices and stories should be told as it is and they should be seen just like any other character and should not be taken as special cases or a joking stereotype.

CONCLUSION

Media not only reflect society, but they also actively help in shaping it. From the roles of mothers to wives to vilified independent female characters, the media, through repetition, seeps into the collective consciousness. Representations like these have powerful ways of keeping and maintaining power structures. As time passes by, we see a shift in the collective consciousness. They start craving for women-centric films that portray them as human beings rather than one-dimensional beings, and they face discomfort in the old, traditional, redundant ways of representation. The media is still a powerful tool to instil change in the people. They have to explore the extensive spectrum of human feelings and what makes them complex characters rather than a side character deemed to help.