

Deconstruction of the Constructions of Gender: An Insight into OTT Platforms through Super Deluxe, Kaathal – The Core, Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga, and Swag

Prof. Y. S. Sharada

Department of English language & Literature, Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Tirupati-517 502.

Abstract

The expansion of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms has transformed contemporary Indian cinema by enabling narratives that interrogate gender binaries, heteronormativity, and conventional social structures. This paper examines the deconstruction of gender identities and queer subjectivities in four significant Indian films: Super Deluxe (Tamil), Kaathal – The Core (Malayalam), Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (Hindi), and Swag (Telugu). Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Michel Foucault's discourse on sexuality, Laura Mulvey's gaze theory, and queer theory, the study analyzes how these films challenge normative constructions of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality. The paper argues that OTT platforms have enabled filmmakers to foreground marginalized identities and represent LGBTQIA+ experiences with greater complexity and sensitivity. Through textual and cultural analysis, the study demonstrates that these films dismantle patriarchal assumptions embedded in Indian cinematic traditions while reimagining family, identity, and desire. The paper further contends that OTT platforms function as democratized cultural spaces where alternative gender narratives gain visibility beyond conventional theatrical limitations. Ultimately, the study concludes that contemporary Indian cinema increasingly uses queer representation not merely for symbolic inclusion but as a critical tool for questioning the social construction of gender itself.

Keywords: gender performativity, Indian cinema, LGBTQIA+, masculinity, OTT platforms, queer cinema, , queer theory, , transgender representation

Introduction

Cinema has long served as a cultural institution that shapes and reinforces social understandings of gender, sexuality, family, and morality. Mainstream Indian cinema historically privileged heterosexual romance and patriarchal family structures while marginalizing queer identities. Gender was largely represented through binary oppositions that positioned masculinity as dominant and femininity as submissive. Non-heteronormative identities often appeared as comic caricatures, peripheral figures, or symbols of deviance. The emergence of OTT platforms has significantly altered this cinematic landscape. Streaming services have enabled filmmakers to explore themes previously considered commercially risky or culturally controversial. Contemporary Indian cinema increasingly foregrounds transgender identities,

homosexuality, lesbian desire, and fluid forms of masculinity. Such narratives challenge traditional assumptions about gender and identity while opening spaces for alternative representations.

This paper examines four films from different Indian linguistic traditions: Super Deluxe, Kaathal – The Core, Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga, and Swag. These films are selected because they engage critically with the construction of gender and queer identity in contemporary India while reflecting the growing influence of OTT culture on cinematic storytelling.

The study addresses the following questions:

1. How do contemporary Indian films deconstruct socially constructed notions of gender?
2. In what ways do OTT platforms facilitate queer and transgender visibility?
3. How do these films challenge patriarchal assumptions surrounding masculinity, femininity, and sexuality?
4. How can queer theory and gender studies explain the transformation of queer representation in Indian cinema?

The paper employs textual analysis informed by gender studies, queer theory, and film theory to examine visual representation, characterization, narrative structure, and symbolic meaning.

OTT Platforms and Changing Gender Narratives

OTT platforms have transformed the production and circulation of Indian cinema. Unlike conventional theatrical systems shaped by mass-market expectations, streaming platforms encourage experimentation and narrative diversity. Regional films now reach global audiences through subtitles and digital accessibility, enabling stories centered on marginalized identities to gain wider recognition.

This shift has contributed to a growing visibility of LGBTQIA+ experiences in Indian cinema. Contemporary filmmakers increasingly explore themes such as queer desire, gender dysphoria, transgender identity, and emotional repression. OTT platforms provide creative freedom for such narratives because they cater to niche audiences and allow more nuanced storytelling.

Digital media also disrupts the monopoly of dominant cinematic conventions. Regional industries such as Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu cinema are now able to produce films that challenge patriarchal norms and question traditional gender roles. Consequently, OTT culture has become a significant site for the reimagining of gender politics in contemporary India.

Theoretical Framework

Judith Butler and Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity forms the central theoretical framework of this study. Butler argues that gender is not an innate biological reality but a socially constructed identity repeatedly performed through gestures, behaviors, language, and cultural norms.

Gender=Performance
Gender = Performance
Gender=Performance

According to Butler, repeated performances create the illusion of stable masculinity or femininity. Gender identities therefore emerge through cultural repetition rather than natural essence. The films analyzed in this paper destabilize these assumed gender categories and reveal their performative nature.

Michel Foucault and Sexuality

Michel Foucault argues that sexuality is socially regulated through institutions such as family, religion, education, and medicine. Sexual identities are shaped by discourses of power that classify certain desires

as acceptable and others as deviant.

The selected films demonstrate how queer and transgender identities become subject to social surveillance and moral regulation. At the same time, the films resist these disciplinary structures by foregrounding alternative forms of identity and desire.

Laura Mulvey and the Gaze

Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" explains how cinema traditionally positions women as objects of heterosexual male desire. Mainstream cinema often frames female characters through voyeuristic visual pleasure.

The films discussed in this paper disrupt the male gaze by foregrounding queer subjectivities, emotional intimacy, and non-heteronormative perspectives. They challenge conventional cinematic ways of looking at bodies and relationships.

Queer Theory

Queer theory challenges fixed categories of sexuality and identity. It destabilizes binaries such as male/female and heterosexual/homosexual while emphasizing fluidity and performativity. Queer theory is particularly relevant for understanding how these films resist rigid gender norms and foreground alternative identities.

Gender Fluidity and Transgender Identity in Super Deluxe

Thiagarajan Kumararaja's *Super Deluxe* represents one of the most significant explorations of transgender identity in contemporary Tamil cinema. The film interweaves multiple narratives dealing with morality, sexuality, and social hypocrisy. The most powerful storyline centers on Shilpa, a transgender woman portrayed by Vijay Sethupathi.

Shilpa returns to her family after transitioning, confronting social prejudice and familial discomfort. Her reappearance destabilizes conventional notions of fatherhood, masculinity, and domestic identity. The film portrays her not as an object of ridicule but as a deeply human character struggling for acceptance and dignity.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity becomes particularly relevant in understanding Shilpa's character. Shilpa's identity demonstrates that gender cannot be reduced to biological sex. Her existence exposes the instability of binary gender categories and reveals gender as a socially produced performance.

The film also critiques toxic masculinity. Male characters in *Super Deluxe* are often trapped within patriarchal anxieties surrounding honor, sexuality, and social respectability. In contrast, Shilpa embodies emotional honesty and vulnerability. The film thereby reverses conventional cinematic hierarchies associated with masculinity.

Foucault's ideas regarding surveillance and social discipline are visible throughout the narrative. Shilpa's body becomes the site of public scrutiny and moral judgment. Yet the film refuses to portray her as tragic or deviant. Instead, it normalizes transgender identity within everyday life.

Importantly, *Super Deluxe* humanizes queer identity through emotional realism rather than sensationalism. The film's visual style and narrative fragmentation further emphasize the instability of normative social categories.

Queer Masculinity in Kaathal – The Core

Kaathal – The Core examines homosexuality within the framework of marriage, family, and social respectability. Mammooty's portrayal of Mathew Devassy reveals the emotional complexities of living within socially imposed expectations of masculinity.

Mathew is a respected public figure whose hidden homosexual identity creates tension within his marriage. The film critiques the assumption that masculinity is naturally tied to heterosexual desire. Mathew's internal conflict reflects the pressures imposed by patriarchal social structures.

The film engages strongly with Butler's concept of performativity. Mathew performs the role of husband, father, and community leader despite his emotional disconnection from heterosexual norms. His identity becomes an example of how gender roles are socially enacted rather than naturally determined.

The film also reflects Foucault's understanding of sexuality as regulated through institutions. Marriage functions as a disciplinary structure that compels conformity to heteronormative expectations. Mathew's silence and repression illustrate the psychological consequences of such regulation.

Unlike stereotypical portrayals of queer men, Mathew is represented with restraint and dignity. He is neither flamboyant nor comic. This nuanced representation destabilizes dominant stereotypes surrounding homosexuality in Indian cinema.

The narrative's emotional subtlety is particularly significant. Rather than focusing on spectacle, the film foregrounds silence, hesitation, and emotional distance. These cinematic choices communicate the invisibility and isolation experienced by queer individuals within conservative social environments.

Lesbian Desire and Queer Visibility in Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga

Shelly Chopra Dhar's Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga occupies an important place in Hindi cinema because it centers lesbian desire within a mainstream narrative framework. The film follows Sweetie Chaudhary, a young woman struggling to express her love for another woman within a conservative Punjabi family.

The narrative initially adopts the conventions of heterosexual romance before gradually revealing Sweetie's queer identity. This narrative strategy destabilizes audience expectations and challenges heteronormative storytelling patterns commonly associated with Bollywood cinema.

Laura Mulvey's gaze theory is especially relevant in understanding the film's visual politics. Unlike conventional Bollywood narratives that sexualize female bodies for male spectatorship, this film foregrounds emotional intimacy and subjective experience. Female desire is represented with sensitivity rather than voyeurism.

The film also critiques patriarchal family structures that regulate women's sexuality. Sweetie's silence reflects the pressures imposed upon women to conform to heterosexual expectations. Her inability to openly express desire illustrates how femininity is socially disciplined.

Queer theory helps explain the film's challenge to fixed categories of identity. Sweetie's character destabilizes assumptions regarding ideal womanhood, marriage, and domestic femininity. Her emotional journey becomes a process of reclaiming agency within restrictive cultural frameworks.

Importantly, the film frames acceptance and empathy as possibilities for social transformation. Rather than presenting queerness as alien or disruptive, it situates queer desire within ordinary family life. This normalization contributes significantly to changing cinematic representations of lesbian identity.

Transgender Representation and Gender Performance in Swag

The Telugu film *Swag* offers an important intervention into contemporary discussions of gender performance and transgender visibility. Through satire, parody, and exaggerated characterization, the film critiques rigid notions of masculinity while foregrounding the performative nature of gender identity.

A particularly significant aspect of *Swag* is its engagement with transgender identity. The film includes a transgender character whose presence challenges the binary framework through which gender is typically understood in mainstream Telugu cinema. Rather than treating the character merely as comic relief, the narrative uses the character to expose the artificiality of socially constructed gender norms.

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is central to understanding the transgender representation in *Swag*. The character demonstrates that gender is not biologically fixed but socially enacted through clothing, speech, gesture, and social behavior. The film repeatedly emphasizes that all forms of gender identity involve performance.

The satirical tone of *Swag* becomes politically significant because it destabilizes hypermasculinity. Telugu commercial cinema has historically celebrated aggressive male heroism characterized by dominance, violence, and heterosexual conquest. *Swag* exaggerates these masculine performances to the point of absurdity, revealing them as theatrical constructs rather than natural realities.

The transgender character further disrupts patriarchal assumptions regarding authenticity and identity. Through humor and irony, the film questions why certain performances of gender are socially accepted while others are marginalized.

Foucault's ideas about social regulation are also evident. The transgender character experiences social scrutiny and exclusion, illustrating how institutions and communities discipline bodies that fail to conform to normative expectations. However, the film simultaneously resists this exclusion by foregrounding visibility and agency.

Unlike earlier Telugu films that stereotyped transgender individuals, *Swag* attempts to present gender diversity as part of broader social reality. The film therefore contributes to the evolving representation of transgender identities within South Indian cinema.

LGBTQIA+ Representation and the Politics of Visibility

The representation of LGBTQIA+ identities in contemporary Indian cinema reflects broader transformations in cultural discourse. The selected films collectively challenge stereotypes that historically reduced queer identities to caricature or deviance.

Several important shifts emerge from these films:

1. Humanization of queer and transgender characters
2. Critique of rigid gender binaries
3. Destabilization of patriarchal masculinity
4. Representation of emotional complexity and vulnerability
5. Expansion of queer visibility within regional cinema
6. Reimagining of family and identity

These films demonstrate that gender and sexuality are culturally produced categories shaped by power relations. Queer and transgender characters are no longer confined to marginal roles but increasingly occupy central narrative positions.

At the same time, the films reveal ongoing tensions surrounding representation. Queer intimacy often remains visually restrained compared to heterosexual romance. Nevertheless, the emergence of nuanced

queer narratives marks a significant shift in Indian cinematic culture.

OTT Platforms as Sites of Cultural Transformation

OTT platforms have emerged as important cultural spaces for alternative storytelling. By enabling diverse narratives, digital streaming services challenge the dominance of heteronormative cinematic conventions. Several factors contribute to this transformation:

- OTT platforms allow filmmakers greater freedom to explore unconventional themes and marginalized identities.
- Streaming services enable regional films to reach national and international audiences, increasing the visibility of diverse queer narratives.
- Digital audiences often support character-driven and psychologically complex storytelling, allowing deeper exploration of gender and sexuality.
- OTT culture encourages individualized viewing practices. Audiences can engage with queer narratives privately, reducing the social stigma sometimes associated with public theatrical viewing.

As a result, OTT platforms function as democratized spaces where marginalized identities gain representation and cultural legitimacy.

Comparative Analysis

Film	Primary Focus	Theoretical Framework	Social Structure Challenged
Super Deluxe	Transgender identity	Gender performativity	Patriarchal family
Kaathal – The Core	Queer masculinity	Performativity discourse	and Marriage
Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga	Lesbian desire	Gaze theory and queer theory	Familial heteronormativity
Swag	Transgender visibility and masculinity	Queer parody and performativity	and Hypermasculinity

Together, these films reveal the instability of gender categories and challenge the assumption that identity is naturally fixed.

Conclusion

The rise of OTT platforms has significantly transformed the representation of gender and sexuality in Indian cinema. Films such as Super Deluxe, Kaathal – The Core, Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga, and Swag challenge patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks by foregrounding queer and transgender identities with greater complexity and empathy.

Using the theoretical perspectives of Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Laura Mulvey, and queer theory, this paper demonstrates that gender is not a fixed biological reality but a socially constructed and culturally performed identity. The selected films expose the performative nature of masculinity and femininity while critiquing the institutions that regulate sexuality and identity.

The representation of transgender and queer characters in these films marks an important transformation in Indian cinematic discourse. OTT platforms have enabled regional filmmakers to question dominant ideologies and create spaces for marginalized voices.

Ultimately, these films contribute to the ongoing deconstruction of rigid gender categories and encourage audiences to rethink the relationship between identity, desire, and social norms. Contemporary Indian cinema thus emerges not merely as entertainment but as a powerful site of cultural negotiation and gender politics.

1. References

2. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
3. Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge.
4. Chatterjee, H. (2021). Bodies in transition: Exploring queer sexualities in Indian cinema. *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 7(2), 95–119.
5. Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139–167.
6. Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. Pantheon Books.
7. Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
8. Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs*, 5(4), 631–660.
9. Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press.
10. Warner, M. (1991). Introduction: Fear of a queer planet. *Social Text*, 29, 3–17.
11. Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press.
12. Halberstam, J. (2005). In *a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press.
13. Gopinath, G. (2005). *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press.