

**GENDER REPRESENTATION IN POPULAR FICTION: CONFRONTING TRANSPHOBIA
AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN THE NETFLIX ORIGINAL FILM *THANGAM***

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Abstract

The mass media, particularly cinema and television, are critical tools for establishing and reinforcing male and female roles in societies. Gender representation in media is critical because individuals learn about gender roles through socialization. Masculinity, like feminine identity, is constructible, and fictional male characters in films and television shows communicate messages about the inherent element of hegemonic masculinity and the inherent transphobia in our society. The paper *Gender Representation in Popular Fiction: Confronting Transphobia and Hegemonic Masculinity in the Netflix Original Film *Thangam** attempts to understand why there is such hatred for transgender people in a society that encourages men to violate them. The paper employs an analysis of the film *Thangam*, which is included in the anthology *Paavai Kathaigal* and addresses critical discrimination, apathy, and gender bias through the fictional character Sathar.

Keywords: socialization, masculinity, hegemony, transphobia, transgender, gender bias

Introduction

The recent trend that is highly noticeable in the media is the flourishing of alternative narratives. Alternative narratives such as web series/anthologies serve as a new area of study, although they are a relatively new field of study and critical analysis. According to the auteur theory, just as films are viewed as reflections of a society imbued with the storyteller's imprint, web series are viewed as an audiovisual work of art woven into a narrative. The academic paper focuses on the movie *Thangam* from the anthology *Paavai Kathaigal* aired on Netflix, a sensitive portrayal of a transgender man Sathar who had to bear the brunt of society only because of his identity. Sathar was forced to confront a male-dominated society motivated by transphobia. The paper looks at how hegemonic masculinity affects transphobic prejudice, influencing anti-trans views and behaviors.

Definitions of Popular Culture

Popular culture collects actions, beliefs, and objects encapsulating the social system's most widely accepted meanings. According to Raymond Williams, the term popular has multiple definitions, including "work that is well-liked by a large number of people," "inferior types of work," "work done to gain favor with the people," and "a culture created by the people for themselves" (237). Thus, the engagement of cultural theory with popular culture can be defined as a history of diverse cross-temporal and cross-cultural connections. Raymond Williams defines culture in three broad terms. Firstly, culture is defined as "a comprehensive process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development" (90). Second, culture can refer to "a distinctive way of life, whether of a people, a period, or a group" (ibid). Finally, Williams believes that the "works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" are inextricably linked to culture (ibid). In other words, culture is a collection of texts and behaviors that serve as a signal, a producer, or an occasion for a meaning generation. The term popular culture has numerous definitions. It could, for example, relate to an 'authentic' culture of 'the people,' such as folk culture: a culture created by the people. In the words of Bennet, "it is, in essence, a romanticized version of working-class culture as the primary source of symbolic protest in contemporary capitalism" (27). According to John Storey, "another term for popular culture is mass culture, which conveys that

it is hopelessly commercialized. It is manufactured in large quantities in order to be consumed by a large number of people. Its intended audience is a diverse group of non-discriminating consumers "(8).

Society's Perception of Transgender People

The phrase transgender is a catch-all term for transitioning from one gender to another. The term trans is frequently used colloquially to refer to transgender individuals. Some other forms of transsexual are transperson, transpeople, transwomen, and transmen, as recorded in *National Center for Transgender Equality, 2009*. In contrast to transgender, cisgender identify with their gender at birth. When it comes to gender identity and expression, this term describes people whose identity and expression are congruent with the sex they were assigned at birth. A transsexual is a trans person who has had surgery, hormonal treatment, or a legal procedure to change the sex assigned to them from their birth. A period during which a transgender person must learn to act inversely to their birth sex is a transition (transhealth.ucsf.edu, 2013).

Transgender people have been an integral part of Indian history, as evidenced by Indian mythology and legends. These texts are full of stories of true hermaphrodites who lived throughout history, thanks to their third sex (an alternative sexual identity). According to N. S. Ranade', castration of males to subject them to particular jobs began mainly after the Arab conquest of the eighth century.' Centuries ago, to prevent royal wives and guards from cohabiting, kings' guards were castrated. The castrated eunuchs were established as the third sex. Realizing that society has many perversions, these sexless marvels vowed to do everything in their power to fight them. Many men found them incredibly attractive. Thus the Femme Fatale was born. There are nearly 4,000 years of documented history for transgender people. In ancient stories, they are attributed supernatural qualities that would help bring good fortune and increase fertility. Despite their claims to be authorized appropriately in Indian culture, they face intense discrimination and bullying from mainstream society and could not earn an income without any organization providing them funds. They are also assaulted by police who arrest them for begging, which is one of the few means of subsistence.

The media's portrayal of transgender people reflects society's attitudes toward a transgender identity and the changing and evolving public perceptions about them. Media images depict only a small proportion of the transgender population, implying that the perspectives and ideas depicted by them are the only ones available to the social system. Since they defy the underlying gender binary, transpersons are regularly singled out for people's frustrations and worries regarding gender and sexual orientation (Serano, 2007; Davis, 2009; Rubin, 1987). A person's appearance reflects how others view sex, sex categorization, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation from a sociological perspective. As a result, non-conforming transpeople's expression and non-straight opinions question the validity and normalcy of behavior patterns congruent with this expression.

Transphobia: A Reflection of Society's Attitudes towards Transgender Identity

The transgender community was under the scanner for varied representations in literature or movies over the years. Transphobia is paranoia, aversion, hostility, resentment, fury, or unpleasantness directed toward individuals who do not comply with socially prescribed gender roles. It is frequently associated with homophobic ideas and is frequently interpreted as a manifestation of homophobia. Transphobic author and critic Jody Norton believes that transphobia continues homophobia and misogyny. Transgender people, like gays and lesbians, are despised and feared for questioning gender stereotypes and binary sexual orientation. According to Norton, the "male-to-female transgender incites transphobia through her implicit challenge to the binary division of gender upon which male cultural and political hegemony depends."

Portrayal of Transgenders in Movies

Although many more people candidly discuss identity, gender identity, gender non-conformity, and other associated problems such as non-binary identities and sexual orientation, the trans community is a marginalized part of society in many countries. As a result, how the transgender community is depicted in films becomes significant. Transgender characters appear in a large number of films around the world. Trans persons have portrayed trans characters in *Transparent*, *Boy Meets Girl*, and *New Girls on the Block*, conveying realism to their portrayals. The depiction of the trans community through such characters in such films has gotten positive reviews.

On the other hand, transgender activists banged films like *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* and *Dallas Buyers Club* to represent trans people and allowed cisgender (non-transgender) people to play trans people. Because few cis people engage or communicate with members of the trans community, their depiction or portrayal in Indian cinema is critical. Over the years, the portrayal of the transgender minority in Indian cinema has been nuanced. Few movies about them stuck close to reality and strove to tackle the matter compassionately and truthfully, while others were created merely for comic effect. None of these films could succeed in challenging conventional thought and breaching taboos. In a country with an estimated 4.9 lakh transgender people, as identified in the 2011 census, their image or portrayal in Indian Cinema is crucial. Tamil cinema, often known as Kollywood, is one of the country's most profitable industries. People flood the theatres, and movie stars attain cult status, generating a surge in fandom. In such a situation, Tamil films portraying trans persons become crucial. The majority of films give transgender characters modest, pivotal roles with little substance, and as a result, the characters do not add anything to the story. They are utilized for comic relief; hence, the characters are written to match the relief theory of humor. Male characters in films occasionally dress up and pretend to be female ones. It is problematic because it does not reflect a transgender person and is only a case of transvestism. Crossdressers dress in attire that is generally associated with the other gender. We can observe this in several films featuring Vadivelu, such as Vivekh's character in *Guru En Aalu* (directed by Selva) and Bakkiyaraj Kannan's *Remo*, directed by Bakkiyaraj Kannan, in which the male lead dresses up as a lady nurse in order to form an intimate rapport with the female lead. Male characters in movies occasionally disguise up as female characters. It is troublesome because it does not represent a transgender person but rather a transvestite. There are exceptions in movies like *Narthagi* (2011), written and directed by Vijayapadma, *Paal* (2008), directed by D Sivakumar, *Appa* (2016), directed by Samuthirakani, and movies such as *Bombay* (1995), and *Chithiram Pesuthadi* (2006), which had represented transgender as genuine characters.

Transphobia in the movie *Thangam*

In an interview with Scroll, Sudha Kongara, the director of *Thangam*.In:

I discovered the script written by Shan Karuppusamy and began crying. I read it before leaving to shoot Soorarai Pottru. In the section where Saravanan embraces Sathaar, orders him to quit chewing betel-lips, and gives him lipstick to make him look like a Hindi film heroine from the '80s, who were both fair and beautiful and the last scene in which Saravanan finds lipstick neatly wrapped had an impact on me.

The film follows Sathar, a transgender man who saves money to travel to Mumbai for gender reassignment surgery. The film's opening scene encapsulates the director's message. Sathar is awaiting the collection of supplies for the villagers outside the ration shop. Everyone in the hamlet despises her and strives to avoid catching her attention or interacting with her in any way. It is a foreshadowing of what is to come for her. No one is willing to see her purity and kindness, which is a rarity in today's world. Every moment in the film exemplifies the basic transphobia inherent in our culture, reflecting

everyone's disdain or her father's ill-treatment of her. Sathar finds solace in her relationship with Saravanan, which is one of "pure love." Saravanan is her sole companion in the village. She longs to be near him and casts glances his way to express her feelings for him. There are hints in the film that she has been saving money to undergo gender reassignment surgery, which would allow her to realize her dream of marrying Saravanan. When she discovers Saravanan's solid emotions for her sister, Sahira, she puts her sorrows away and brings them together when both families are opposed to their relationship due to religious differences. Sathar helps the couple flee to Chennai and donates her entire savings.

Sathar's identity formation and the objective cultural gaze are subversive in the film. The film serves as a vehicle for challenging dominant and oppressive gender and sexuality constructs and increasing public awareness of transphobia and violence against trans people. For instance, when her family realizes that she had assisted the pair in their elopement, they shun her. On the night when vandals chased her, no one in the community allowed her to stay indoors. When she knocks on her parents' door, terrified, even they refuse to open it. On the same night, she was brutalized and murdered by the goons in the village. By observing Sathar through the eyes of his village's inhabitants, a viewpoint representative of the cultural gaze becomes apparent. These are based on dominant ideas and constrained visual lexicons, hitherto contributing to the development and perpetuation of transphobia. Sathar's death happens due to the violence perpetrated against transpeople caused by the conceptual constraints imposed by gender binaries. These divisions are based on the belief that biological sex and gender are inextricably linked, and individuals who violate these boundaries threaten the natural order. To give an illustration, her father becomes enraged when he finds Sathar holding a saree in his hand. His animosity is geared at her sexuality rather than at her. The intrinsic hatred illustrates that even parents can acquire hatred towards their children. He does not attempt to comprehend her or integrate her into the household. His animosity for her reflects a broader animosity toward women. The hypothesis is that her father searched for an opportunity to ostracize Sathar and used it when he found out about Sahira's elopement. The movie prompts the viewers to reflect on how knowledge is generated, who generates it, and how knowledge shapes dominance and resistance in social relationships. When Sahira and Saravanan realize the villagers' apathy towards Sathar, they leave the village forever. By leaving the village, they emphasize that there is still hope. They do not even condone the thought that their child may become like Sathar but are willing to do anything under their control that offers him a peaceful life. Thus the movie ends on a positive note highlighting the importance of the normalization of gender preferences.

Reinforcing Hegemonic Masculinity in *Thangam*

The concept of hegemony has been identified as how dominant groups exert control over others using intellectual and moral leadership (75). According to this theory, popular culture is neither mass culture's standardized culture nor the culture of "the people." Instead, it is a mix of resistance and inclusion marked by interchange and negotiation. Gramsci (1971) describes popular culture as operating in a 'compromise equilibrium' (161). Hegemonic theorists are viewed as participants in ideological warfare of dominant and subordinate classes and dominant and subordinate cultures.

The urge for people to define themselves and others in terms of gender has affected how people interact throughout history. Gender formation has amplified the negative characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, particularly among young men. These negative characteristics have frequently been linked to increased violence and hostility in male-on-male homophobic hate crimes. Connell (1987) defines hegemonic masculinity as a societal pattern in which "the culturally idealized form of [the] masculine character" is identified with stereotypical male traits are idealized (p. 83). It is further emphasized that the importance of violence, dominance, and toughness in men's identities cannot be ignored (Anderson, 1999; Kimmel, 2000; Messerschmidt, 1993).

The evaluation of the short film *Thangam* demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity has a detrimental effect on gender and sexuality and creates transphobia. At the film's start, the protagonist Sathar stands in line for rations. Men and women mocked her and compelled her to stand in the last row. Here, the hostility toward anyone who is 'different' is evident. In another scene from the film, she visits her friend Saravanan's shop, chased away by Saravanan's father. He cautions his son against interacting with anyone like Sathar, bringing him a disgrace. Although Saravanan conforms to expectations of masculine behavior, Sathar would never aspire to have that kind of behavior. Society encourages men to have short hair, speak in a low voice, and dress masculinely, whereas Sathar subverts gender binary expectations and prefers to dress in female garb and feels at ease in their company. Sathar's brutal rape and murder demonstrate how violence is used to subvert anyone detached from the regular. Even society endorses such violence in order to conceal the 'blotch.'

Conclusion

In 2014, the Honorable Supreme Court of India had delivered a landmark Judgment titled National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India, observing that a transgender person is different and distinct from a Male or Female, which was referred to as the 'Third Gender.' This has been included in the interest of transgender people, which results in transgender employees receiving equal treatment at work, restoring their dignity. This judgment speaks volumes about the discrimination prevalent in our society regarding them. When the Indian Constitution was drafted, its framers envisioned a future India that would nurture a society free of discrimination based on caste, religion, color, sex, or region, establishing an egalitarian society. Regrettably, this does not appear to be the case in the context of India's 'transgender community. As time passes, sexual minorities gain acceptance in Indian cinema, as envisioned in the short film *Thangam*. Because of the multiple stigmas, they endure in Indian society, a transperson's life is complicated. Although the third gender is legally recognized, the community is predominantly marginalized and regularly subjected to hatred and prejudice. It is worth emphasizing that people's reactions to the existing community are sometimes contradictory: on the one hand, they are despised and alienated, but on the other hand, they are seen as spiritually/religiously superior, leading people to believe that the community's blessings will benefit them. Neither of those contradicting views helps normalize the group or society's ability to examine how they exist in the cis community. The majority of the ostracism, backlash, and hatred directed at the trans community stems from a few factors, including a lack of knowledge about non-binary gender identities, a lack of understanding of gender expression, and thus the undeniable fact that a sizable portion of the cis population believes trans people survive by begging or prostitution. Their desire to communicate their identity and sexual orientation freely is hampered by their fear of being discriminated against by mainstream society. As a result, it is critical to recognize and stress the issues that transgender society faces. Like the film *Thangam*, several film depictions are critical in providing a much-needed arena for discussion on transgender problems that are still prohibited.

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