



POTRAYAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN MEDIA

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Abstract:

Media is a very powerful means of dissemination of ideas and an empowering modus operandi of conducting new ideas into the conventional fold of the social system. Society is dynamic and it has a steady rate of assimilating changes, slowly transforming its socifacts in the direction of the desired change. One of the milestones of change in our modern society has been the acceptance of Sexual identity defeating the heteronormative social values stigmatising same sex relationship. It is interesting to note how media serving as a reflection of the value consensus of the people has changed its way of depicting homosexuality from a silly stereotypical presentation to the actual showcasing of real life scenario. The paper aims at analysing all doctrinal reports and analysis works towards a better formulation of the present day scenario. This topic is of high relevance in the present context when homosexuality is getting integrated with heterosexuality not as an exception but as another category of sexual orientation.

Key Words: Media, Socifacts, Change, Stereotype, Homosexuality & Heteronormative

Conceptualising the Situation – Past and Changes:

Media has an enormous influence in shaping our thought processes and in reflecting the consensus of opinions which the people in society share. Homosexuality has been traditionally snubbed down as being a stigma and a taboo, an unnatural development in people with a distorted sexual orientation. The heteronormative moral standards of society have pictured the image in the people that same sex relationship is a prohibited relationship. This has obviously resulted in degrading of people with such an orientation and at the same time we find Indian Penal Code has also criminalised such a relationship.

In the television we find a distinct attitude in which characters depicting homosexuality are either the subject of ridicule or are sidelined, away from the mainstream society.

Since the 1990s, Hollywood has improved its portrayal of gay and lesbian characters. The popularity of films such as *The Birdcage*, *Philadelphia*, *To Wong Foo Thanks for Everything*, *Julie Newmar*, *Flawless* and *In & Out* demonstrates that audiences can and do enjoy films with gay and lesbian characters. Despite these advances, however, the industry is still cautious in its portrayals of gay themes, characters, and experiences. With Hollywood films designed to appeal to as large an audience as possible, producers fear that focusing on gay and lesbian themes may risk offending a significant portion of the audience, not to mention potential investors.

In 2005, *Brokeback Mountain* grossed over \$178 million proving that movies portraying queer people could be lucrative for large studios. That said, the film has received mixed reactions from within queer communities on the grounds that a movie about "straight-acting" gay men who barely have sex and who cannot even accept their own desires is hardly a gay movie at all.¹

The term "queer" designated the strange sexual conduct and the way they are felt to be beyond the borders of normalcy rather abnormal. Their portrayal in the television is dotted with stereotypes concerning their ways of talking and communicating, at the same time showing gays as effeminate, projecting them as separate from the so called normal characters. Nothing can actually be classified as queer or strange, when the perspective theory of C H Cooley or the looking glass self theory is brought into consideration. The designation of abnormal comes from the yardstick of normal and the demarcation of queer comes from the boundary of social acceptance. It is however high time that dynamism at the macro level in pioneering changes in legislations decriminalising homosexuality percolate down at the individual level as well. This reflection of the change can be most appropriately be gauged by the changing attitude of media towards the issue. Before 1970, almost no gay characters could be found on television, and their relative absence from the screen continued until the 1990s (Wyatt, 2002). In recent years, the number of shows with leading or recurring gay characters has varied from 16 in the 1997-1998 season to 29 in the 2000-2001 season (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, n.d.). Although these numbers represent an increase compared with the past, they are still quite small compared with the overall number of characters appearing on television shows broadcast each season.²

¹ Queer Representation in film and Television, <http://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/diversity-media/queer-representation/queer-representation-film-television>

² Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Content on Television: A Quantitative Analysis Across Two Seasons Deborah A. Fisher, PhD, Douglas L. Hill, PhD, Joel W. Grube, PhD, and Enid L. Gruber, PhD, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2000838/>

Feeling accepted plays a large role in the lives of most people, and feeling as though others do not accept us or are judging us negatively can be painful. All young people deal with issues of acceptance, and analytical psychiatrist Carl G. Jung's concept 4 of individuation provides an informative viewpoint on this topic. As defined by Jung (1983), individuation is "the journey toward wholeness" (p. 19). Many LGBT teens struggle with the process of individuation as an aspect of growing up, because a feeling of difference due to an unconventional sexual orientation along with rejection by their peers is not conducive to the acceptance of oneself that leads to wholeness, or individuation. Social media has become a staple for many youths in today's society, and they access multiple social media outlets each day.³

However as previously stated changes kept creeping in slowly initiating a process of change. This change was quick and better assimilative in case of the western developed countries and slow, less appreciated in India provided the existing penal provision around homosexuality.

In case of India, a landmark step would be attributed to the film –Fire, starring Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi in which the innate homosexual desires of a married housewife was showcased much to the anger and condemnation by the contemporary society. The stifled parameters of judgement quite easily rejected the film but its making and exhibition opened floodgates of scope and invited more initiatives in this regard. The film emerged as a spate of modern thought being actively repressed by the by gone ideological parameters of analysing a situation. It did create its own imprint on the contemporary period.

The research conducted by Glaad, an LGBTQ media advocacy organization, found that 4.8% (43) of the characters expected to appear on primetime scripted broadcast TV will be LGBTQ, a record in the 21 years it has been tracking such numbers.

The report, titled *Where We Are on TV*, analyzes the overall diversity of prime-time scripted series on broadcast, cable and streaming services in the US.⁴

This clearly shows the increasing interest of content creators to bring in more of homosexual content to not only clear the stereotypes that media had formulated erstwhile but also to normalise this sexual orientation of people. The so called liberal western countries do have trends of demeaning a fair representation to homosexuality. It is often seen that actors and actresses are not comfortable in essaying homosexual roles and even if they do, become overly conscious, paranoid in answering questions about their roles. Main leads in series and movie are seldom shown gay, and often the portrayal of gay characters simply add to the sensual taste of the audience by either an excess expression of sexuality or showing them as asexual so as to avoid complications of showing a same sex bond.

In Indian television the serial "Maryada- lekin kab tak" was a landmark as it introduced a gay character for the first time in a daily soap opera. One of the male leads had a homosexual role and since such an offbeat theme was introduced, the serial aired at late night slots, invited much contempt and the character and storyline of the gay lead had to be cut short. It has been a long way since then. Today the web series have made phenomenal progress in showing their artistic liberty and have finally succeeded in clearing the stigma around it. This is evident by the growing demand of online series and the amount of investment being done on them. Alternate channels of media, reduction in censorship, wider acceptance of the tabooed topics and a free discussion towards appreciating differences as parts of normal and not beyond borders of normal have led to this significant development to be precise.

The best example would be an Amazon Prime TV original show – *Made In Heaven* in which a gay character is embodied-

Playing Karan Mehra in *Made in Heaven*, Arjun Mathur does something unprecedented. He portrays the gay man with nuance. A departure from the mostly comic (*Dostana*) and sometimes villainous (*Sangharsh*) representation of homosexuality in Bollywood, the Amazon Prime platform allows Mehra his childhood trauma and adult guilt. Something radical seems to be afoot on online streaming platforms. Even though *Made in Heaven* is not altogether subversive-all its gay characters are uniformly tall and lean-there is an empathy here that is fresh and novel.⁵

Conclusion:

The following studies have hinted at the evaluation of the entire scenario- *Brown (2002) argued that TV representation has a lack of gay family representation or same-sex couples with children. Shugart (2003) pointed out that effeminate gay characters are frequently reflected as having feminine interests. Chambers (2009) where stated gay and lesbian characters have the image of a sexual representation on television, which mostly is negative. Scholar Bond (2014) however, seems not to agree with this statement and argues that sexual depiction can contribute to the understanding of sexuality of the audience towards gay and lesbian people.*

³ Exploring Positives and Negatives of Social Media and Their Effects on LGBT Youth in America Norton, Shelby.

⁴ The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/nov/03/lgbt-characters-tv-largest-percent-glaad-study>

⁵ Web series are beating films. TV in handling homosexual relationships with nuance, Chandni Doulatramani, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/leisure/story/20190408-a-post-377-plotline-web-series-1489208-2019-03-29>

Quoting from the blog, Equal Writers, Feminism and Gender issues in Princeton University, “It’s still somewhat of a novelty to see lesbian characters in films and television shows, and when we do see lesbian characters, we see them as lesbian characters, not characters who happen to be lesbians.”

It all comes down to the breaking of stereotypes, acknowledging homosexuality as just another kind of sexuality and not an exception or an abnormality. It is only when the real and true selves of a gay or lesbian is appreciated on screen that the portrayal of homosexuality will be beneficial.

Stereotype breaking⁶

-Every gay person is not a “designer — type”: I’m talking Alexander the Great and Harvey Milk.

– Every lesbian female is not a promiscuous, drug addict with unstable relationships and career: Haven’t you seen Ellen DeGeneres rocking her prime-time show, and don’t you know she’s in a happy marriage?

– Every transgender is not a loud and awkward person

The above mentioned note aptly summarises how media feeds our conceptions and at the same time how it can enforce opinions, create what is real and make homosexuality a better accepted aspect of sexuality. With time, portrayal of homosexuality has indeed changed and thereby has affected mindsets of people in varying ways at the same time. However it is interesting to note that Media needs to be sensitive while sensitising people and society on any particular issue. Being considered to be the voice of people, media should be able to give expression to not simply what people think but also mould opinions towards a more modern and increasingly liberal direction. This study has been able to analyse such a timeline of progression whereby a trend of correlation between people and media become flagrantly noticeable.

⁶ The Irresponsible Stereotyping of LGBT Community in Mainstream Media, Alisha, <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2014/06/youre-gay-dont-even-like-boys-irresponsible-stereotyping-lgbt-community-mainstream-media/>