

TRANSGENDER NARRATIVES IN INDIAN CINEMATIC CONTEXT: A STUDY OF SUSHMITA SEN'S *TAAALI*

Manya Bhola¹, Dr Shrutimita Mehta²

¹Assistant Professor, GC Kharkhara, Rewari, PhD. Scholar, CLL, The NorthCap University

²Associate Professor, CLL, The NorthCap University

manyabhola539@gmail.com¹
shrutimitamehta@ncuindia.edu²

Abstract

Indian films reflect its society's cultural, social and political milieu. Traditional Indian cinemas have portrayed the queer community either in a comic or in a tragic manner. Resultantly, the community has been stereotyped and been devoid of realistic and authentic representation. Whether the society impacts arts or art impacts society is a different debate, but the essence is that both are interdependent. Such a connection becomes far more enticing, for the LGBTQ+ community in itself is immensely rich in its culture and is a lesser explored one. Sushmita Sen's *Taali* is a story of Shreegauri Sawant – a prominent activist of the transgender community in 1990s in India. The present research article is titled "Transgender Narratives in Indian Cinematic Context: A Study of Sushmita Sen's *Taali*" and it explores the key elements of Indian transgender and queer community by studying the life and battles of the protagonist Gauri. The research emphasizes promoting such realistic portrayals because it necessitates the value of an inclusive cinematic landscape in Indian film fraternity. The emotional and social angle of *Taali*'s protagonist and the battles and victories she achieves in her life prove inspiration for its readers and it befalls in resistance cinema.

Keywords: *Taali*, Transgender, LGBTQ+, literature, Indian films

Introduction

In every society, cinema is an important medium of expression and influence on its audience. They create visual narratives that help its audience relate and appreciate the social realities it depicts. Therefore, it is a paramount responsibility of cinema to be highly cautious while dealing with issues that are sensitive, urgent, disturbing and raw – just like when a character is shown smoking, a warning pops up, or the disclaimer saying no animals were harmed. In case of the cinematic or artistic representation of the third gender or transgender, such caution of a film's abstinence from stereotyping or caricaturing is expected. Though in the older times, stereotyping, objectifying and caricaturing was seen widely in films. But in recent times, a healthier trend is observed and such reckless imagery is discouraged and is objected at the cinematic board's censorship. Despite such initiatives and awareness, there exists a collective misunderstanding and ignorance about the third gender. Here comes the roles of films and visual cinematic narratives of the very recent times that have helped the society to gain a closer, more realistic and enlightening look into the realities of the Indian hijra communities. Cinematic works like *Being Hijra* (2011), *Guru: A Hijra Family* (2016) *Transindia* (2015), *Nagarkirtan* (2019), *Her Story* (2019), *Haddi* (2023), *Sarat* (2024), *Taali* (2024) and *Monkey Man* (2024) etc. have oriented our realistic and sincere approaches towards the world of hijras, unlike the old representation of them as either a caricatured comical character or a gruesome villain.

Transgenders like the Padma award winner Manjamma Jogathi, transgender activist Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, Mona Ahmed, Joyita Mondal, Kalki Subramaniam, Reshma Gurung etc. have all led immense help and encouragement for the hijra community that was essentially downtrodden and restricted to very inferior lifestyles and objectionable jobs. In a similar manner, cinema has enlightened the society in its own way. It has helped the audience to know

the real world and issues of the third gender. Sushmita Sen's starrer *Taali* authentically represents the life of a transgender.

Taali exudes a powerful message by the transgender community to the world - in scenes where a hijra is thrown out of a vehicle after being used, enlightens its audience about the horrid state of affairs. It enlightens people about the guru culture which is symbolically predominant of the hijra community. The presence of a guru or an initiator into the hijra community is a quintessential feature of the community. Hijras leaving their home at an early age is one of the defining characteristics of the community. Many works like *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi* by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi and A. Revathi's *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* have spoken about this aspect. Mostly hijras are unaccepted and assaulted by their families and are left with no option but to run away to a society that will accept them. The Hijra community removes itself from the society and inculcate their culture in the new hijras in secret. The article "The Third Gender and Hijras" throws light on the lives of Indian hijras and the limited social roles they perform in routine lives. They are invited in important aspects of a person's life, like marriage, childbirth and other auspicious occasions, where they dance, sing and shower blessings on the people. It is believed that their blessings contain incredible power. In fact people fear their curses and seldom disobey their demands. "The Third Gender and Hijras" says that "hijra are often treated with contempt [...] almost always excluded from employment and education outside of their ritual roles [...] they are often stricken by poverty and forced to resort to begging and prostitution to survive. They are often victims of violence and abuse, harassed by police and refused treatment at hospital" ("The Third Gender"). What arises is the significance of the guru who is teacher and a patriarchal figure of the Hijra kinship. This relationship is called a *gharana* and it provides its young and new members, called *chelas*, the safety and training about their upcoming life. The system is hierarchical and it contains a strong chain of command for mentorship and care, obedience and respect most importantly belongingness and safety. *Taali* shows the pressures its protagonist Gauri faces to prove that she is one of them and is worthy of their belongingness.

Young Ganesh in *Taali* exudes feminine attributes and likings since a very young age. He wants to be a mother in life and loves wearing the jewelry his mother owns. Eventually, as it progresses, Ganesh is now Gauri and she proudly calls herself mother of many children. She calls herself Yashoda – the foster mother of Lord Krishna who helped him rise and shine. *Taali* uses the narrative technique of flashback to narrate the life and struggles of Gauri. The narrative series, released online in 2023, shows Gauri, now a prominent figure of the hijra community in an interview, conversing with the journalist. Gauri remembers dancing to a traditional classical Maharashtrian song but the father reprimands him and insist him to come down from the stage. He also orders him against dressing up as a woman ever. It must be noted that unlike many other films, autobiographies and narratives written on hijras, the father in *Taali* is not shown as a negative character. He is an ordinary socially abiding man who is scared to face the society if his child is a transgender. Gauri's father represents a typical fear in the heart of a parent whose child is not cisgender. Gauri's life shapes up and he finds warmth and comfort around his mother and his sister. Life become stuffed up when his mother passes away, he shares with the journalist.

Issues of identity of a Hijra crops up in Gauri's life when she battles for Supreme Court's judgement on citizenship of the transgender and their fight for equality. She shares with the journalist about the threat of getting acid thrown on her face if she pursues this battle and it is shown that her faces blackened with ink when she enters the court. Later, *Taali* takes us to the fact about the treatment of hijras in police stations. Gauri shares that when she wishes to file a complaint about the harassment she faced and the calling down that happened at the station. It makes the audience contemplate, what wrong did she really do, to bear the brunt of

society? She is reminded of her clean childhood where there was no complication about sexuality and gender and when she used to be on a bike with her father and the constables would offer her food out of love. But everything has changed today because she chose a different gender thereby introducing complexity and non-normalcy.

Taali thus questions the 'normal'. Under the pressure of observing this normalcy, the father takes Ganesh to the doctor to nip in the bud the forces that are encouraging him to become a girl. He tells him that it will become certainly impossible to live in the society with such a complicated identity and that the people will not understand. It was to provide him with social protection that the father forces the medical consultations upon him. Doctor prescribed certain medicines which Ganesh is forced to take and which he eventually discontinues. Siddharth Narain in his article "In a Twilight World", published in *The Hindu* (2003) says that the hijras, in their childhood (and otherwise as well) "have virtually no safe spaces, not even in their families, where they are protected from prejudice and abuse" (Narain). He further believes that:

This prejudice is translated into violence, often of a brutal nature, in public spaces, police stations, prisons and even in their homes. The main factor behind the violence is that society is not able to come to terms with the fact that hijras do not conform to the accepted gender divisions. In addition to this, most hijras have a lower middle-class background, which makes them susceptible to harassment by the police. The discrimination based on their class and gender makes the hijra community one of the most disempowered groups in Indian society. (Narain)

Ganesh is not bogged down by social normative rules and continues to evoke his femininity. He finds answers in company of another *kinnar* who takes him under shadows and lets him feel emancipated. Ganesh learns about the world and the struggles they face in their raw form. He learns that the jobs they do are beyond imagination and the *kinnar* warns him that he has a chance to go back to the normal world and live even if he has to hide his femininity under a male guise. In an emotional conversation with his father, he chooses to leave his family for good and join the transgender community. *Taali* reminds the audience of the struggles the community goes through. Ganesh wears a frock and begs on the streets and on one occasion, meets his sister. The exchange between the siblings is sentimental and the sister makes him promise never to commit suicide no matter how tough his life might get. His sister helps him to settle in Mumbai, where Ganesh realizes that he cannot afford to be weak, gullible and meek anymore. In Mumbai, he comes out in his true self, Gauri. He finds a new side to his personality and tries his hands at various modes of employment – a waiter initially.

Gauri struggles to introduce better ways of living to her community but struggles to make them realise the need to step up their living. Here, *Taali* also underlines the psychology of the transgender community who has found normalcy in victimization. The comfort zone has weakened the spirit of the hijras to the extent that they are now reluctant to progress. *Taali* also showcases the pain of sex change surgery that is openly talked about in many trans-gender and third-gender narratives. For example, A. Revathi chronicles her surgery of the sex-change in her work *The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story* (2010). She narrates about the physical and clinical trauma during and for some days after her surgery. Like *Taali*, Revathi's *The Truth About Me* also recounts the societal stigma, family violence, oppression and exploitation a hijra faces in her life. In *Taali* also, similar emotion of overwhelm is shown when, after the surgery, Gauri emerged fully as an identity from Ganesh. The scene is shown as parallel to the rise of shakti from the earth, portraying the potent life forces in a human being who has realized and attained his true self. The beauty of the scene is accentuated with music and an excellent screenplay. Gauri celebrates her femininity by performing the last rites of Ganesh and becoming one with Gauri in every possible way. Then, the narrative shares certain typical

episodes in the lives of hijras that every hijra story shares. Gauri proceeds to do heroic deeds and becomes a savior in the lives of the community. In one of the occasions, she saves a fellow hijra, Munna, from police thrashings. Munna becomes overwhelmed and sees a father figure in Gauri, who takes him with her to her home. Eventually, Munna becomes one of them. In another incident, there is a four-year-old child being saved from selling after her mother's death. Gauri and her fellow hijras save the girl from the dealer and give her a safer life. Particularly in this scene, Gauri roars like a goddess and presents the image of the hijras in a mighty and majestic god-like manner.

Taali draws a corollary between the queen of Jhansi, Rani Laxmibai and Gauri, the representative of the hijra community. In one of the closing scenes, there is a newspaper circulating with the headlines celebrating Gauri's victory. *Taali* closes with Gauri's fame as a representative of Indian transgender community going abroad to get honoured. The series highlights the importance of education for the hijra community and how their education is the key to their empowerment and social emancipation. *Taali* also involves the role of Naveen, a homosexual man, as a supporting role in the second half of the series. He believes that as a gay, he has suffered but his condition is far better than the lives of the hijras. Anindita Dey in her article "Queer Narratives in Indian Cinema: A Comparative Study of Traditional and Modern Depictions" says that "The film's approach reflects a growing sensitivity towards trans experiences, showcasing how contemporary Indian cinema is increasingly engaging with LGBTQ+ narratives on a more personal and humane level" (2).

Taali presents Indian hijra community as a world with their battles, ordeals and victories. The approach presented by Ravi Jadav, the director, and Arjun Singh Baran and Kartik Nishandar, the creators, covers all the required aspects of Shreegauri Sawant's life, and the relentless efforts she put towards her community's upliftment. In the Indian film fraternity, movies and cinematic works like Shyam Benegal's *Welcome to Sajjanpur* (2008), *Laxmi* (2020), *Haddi* (2023) etc. have sung similar songs of the community's tenacious efforts of collective improvement. These films have been recognized for contributing towards enhancing awareness of transgender issues and hijra community, its respectful and dignified portrayal. The nuanced, genuine and deep character portrayal and a compelling storytelling of *Taali* has resonated with the audience, making it a crucial film in the context of hijra and queer narratives in Indian cinema.

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