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Examining the Impact of Cinema on the Normalization of Queer and Sexual Minorities Through Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue*

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Abstract
This article examines the impact of cinema in recalibrating public perception of gender non-conforming individuals. It argues that the act of 'coming out' can be facilitated through cinema as it can normalize queer identities through its visual narratives. Cobalt Blue (2022), an adaptation of the eponymous novel, originally written in Marathi in 2006 and translated by Jerry Pinto into English in 2016, problematizes the traditional notions about sexuality and gender. This article foregrounds Cobalt Blue to explicate the psychological turmoil experienced by those who embody non-binary gender identities. It explores the impact of cinema in triggering broader discussions about sexual identity across a wide range of gender spectrums. The conceptual framework of queer theory has been used to elucidate how the protagonists in Cobalt Blue acquire agency by embracing their sexuality. This research postulates that 'queer cinema' can bring about gender equality, neutralize homophobia, and facilitate the normalization of the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: Gender Fluidity, Identity, Queer, Performativity, Cinema.

I.   Introduction

James Monaco (2009) articulates that the advent of cinema and electronic media has 'profoundly altered our perception of the world and our self-awareness' (p.13). He explains that the language of film communicates meaning through 'denotative' and 'connotative' means (p.306). Cinema offers such a vivid representation of reality that it can impart a level of understanding 'rarely achieved by the written or spoken word' (p.307). Renowned Indian filmmaker Shyam Benegal believes individual stories cannot be separated from sociological circumstances. In an interview, he shared that 'a film is not a mere poster. It is not just unidirectional but a part of the whole historical circumstance and, as a story, has a connection to the past, the future and the present. It's only then that it comes to life' (The Times of India, 2024). 'Indian cinema is one of the most influential and powerful tools for addressing various social issues' (Tiwari,2024, p.154). Films can transform society by upholding gender diversity and challenging discriminatory practices. Zhou (2023) also reiterates, 'The film industry, as one of the cultural industries, reflects the ideology and deeper values in people's minds' (p.980); it has a definite impact on 'people's views towards gender identity sexuality and their definition of what is an excellent human body' (p.984). However, in their study of films in different genres, Haris et al. (2023) noted that there were 'specific patterns in male and female characters' personality traits in movies that align with societal stereotypes'. They reported biases in the representation of men and women; 'men are shown to be more dominant and envious than women, whereas women have more joyful roles in movies' (p.1). Kumar et al.

(2022) analysed 'more than 180,000 sentences from movie plots across the period from 1940 to 2019' to identify 'how gender stereotypes are expressed through the cultural products of society' (p.1). Their study demonstrated the prevalence of gender stereotypes in Hollywood movies.

In his influential work, *Film and Social Practice* (2004), Graeme Turner asserts that the function of the film goes beyond being an aesthetic object of art. Instead, it is 'a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings, we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself' (p.3). Popular films dissect social issues, such as class and caste discrimination, poverty, unemployment, and women's emancipation, thereby contributing to the production and dissemination of cultural practices. Thomson (2021) writes that there has been an increase in LGBTQ+ representation in films and television in recent times. The emphasis on sexuality has gained more acceptability in society, and so have queer characters. However, Thomson adds that 'while this representation may be increasing, the question remains if this representation is accurate and enough to represent a whole spectrum of people within such a large community' (p.1).

Till a few decades back, queer representation in Indian cinema had been caricatured and stereotyped; gays and lesbians were presented as perverts or as the butt of jokes. But recent films like *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga (2019), Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan (2020), and Ajeeb Dastaans* (2021) have brought the queer narrative into the mainstream. Films and other digital content on OTT have made a phenomenal difference; there is far more exposure and availability of informative programs for the audience, which can be enjoyed from the comfort of their homes. With the emergence of internet-enabled technology, digital content has become available to viewers through diverse platforms that can be consumed on television, smartphones, iPads, etc. This has brought about a growing awareness and acceptance of the audience towards issues no longer considered taboo, like sexuality, gender diversity and inclusivity.

Considering the enormous impact of cinema on reinforcing gender stereotypes and its potential to change public perception, this article aims to show how films like *Cobalt Blue* can contribute to the acceptance of gender diversity. *Cobalt Blue* (2022) showcases an unusual story of the siblings Tanay (Neelay Mehendale) and Anuja (Anjali Sivaraman) falling in love with the same man, the unnamed paying guest (Prateek Babbar) in their house. The theme of the eternal love triangle becomes far more complex here, as the situation also underpins issues of bisexuality, homosexuality, and resistance to gender norms in a traditional middle-class Marathi family in India. The narrative raises questions concerning identity, personal freedom, femininity, and masculinity in the backdrop of a family that adheres to rigid gender roles and patriarchal structures. Through an analysis of *Cobalt Blue*, this article examines the representation of gender and sexuality in cinema and evaluates how films can bring sexual minorities into mainstream discourse.

II.   Queer Representation in Indian Cinema

Thomson (2021) states, 'The term 'queer' was once used as a derogatory hate-filled word that LGBTQ+ communities and individuals have now reclaimed, and it serves as a powerful tool to assert their identities' (p.1). Queer films narrate stories of characters who 'negotiate events typical for their lived collective experiences: alienated youth and unrequited crushes; sexual awakening and coming out; the trials and tribulations of gay and lesbian communities' (Mennel, 2012, p.2). There has been an upsurge of queer representation in Indian cinema. These films explore the emotional complexity of the characters, who do not fit into the binaries of male and female roles. This research investigates whether queer cinema can normalize queer relationships in popular culture by engaging the viewers in critical discussions?

Singh (2023) examined how Indian cinema 'reflects and influences perceptions of gender and sexuality' (p.21). He states that cinema has the potential to shape public discourse, challenge existing norms and bring about social change. Despite offering a rich tapestry of engaging stories and captivating themes, Singh concludes that Indian cinema still offers a

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stereotypical representation of the queer community. Most films present heteronormative narratives, while the marginalized identities continue to be sparsely dealt with. Chatterjee (2021) notes that representations of alternative sexuality in popular culture are 'conspicuous' through their 'absence and invisibility' (p.95). Chatterjee remarks that 'representation of sexuality in mainstream Indian cinema is circumscribed to the heteronormative, more specifically to cater to the (perverted) sexual fantasies of the cisgender, heterosexual male' (ibid.). Such portrayals reinforce patriarchy and masculinity while the gender non-conforming characters remain on the margins.

The Supreme Court decriminalized homosexuality on 6th September 2018, which was a turning point in the legal history of India. Gender has been represented in Indian cinema since the 1920s, but its depiction has evolved over the decades from mere stereotypes to multi-dimensional sensitive portrayals. Roy (2017) has outlined the chronology of queer representation in India by broadly dividing it into three segments (p.131), which include:

i)   Portrayals till the Independence
ii)   Portrayals from Independence till the 1970s
iii) Portrayals from the 1970s till the 1990s
iv)   Recent Portrayals

The earliest queer character figured in 1922, in the film *Bhishma Pitamah,* in the role of Shikhandi. For decades queer only included the eunuchs in public understanding, and the discourse about non-binary identities remained overshadowed by heteronormative narratives. LGBTQ+ community remained closeted due to the lack of legal rights and inhibitions fed by prejudices, which also controlled the audience's preferences.

Roy remarks that queer subjects remained invisible in Indian cinema or were presented 'as eunuchs and later as cross-dressers or drags or transvestites', which reflected 'the heterosexist attitude of the majority that pushes queer people deeper into their unspoken, invisible space' (p.132). Crossdressing was often used as a dramatic device to offer comic relief in films like *Half-Ticket (1962), Rafoo Chakkar* (1975)*, and Lawaris*(1981). Films till the 1990s followed the template of its predecessors with transvestites limited to comic roles. However, Sadak (1919) *and Tamanna* (1998) were notable for delineating eunuchs in significant roles. These films presented a more truthful picture of their privation and poverty. It was only in 1998 that a gay character appeared openly in *Bombay Boys.* The film depicted the closeted world of the gay people in a heteronormative society. *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta was a daring story of lesbian couples performed by Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das. Indian films were maturing gradually and had begun to respond to issues of sexuality and gender in a more realistic light.

Recent portrayals include films like *Kay Kool Hain Hum* (2005) and *Apna Sapna Money Money* (2006)*,* in which gay characters were presented in cliched, effeminate roles. *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2005) *and Dostana* (2008) used gay characters to evoke humour without touching on more serious subjects such as their real lives and day-to-day struggles. However, filmmakers like Madhur Bhandarkar succeeded in breaking such stereotypes through films like *Page 3*(2005) and *Fashion* (2008). *Honeymoon Travels* (2007), *Life in a Metro* (2007) and *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) gave more space to issues faced by queer people. *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha To Aisa Laga(2019), Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan (2020), Ajeeb Dastaans (2021), and Lust Stories (2022)* have been pathbreaking ventures as these films presented gays, lesbians, transgenders, bisexuals with emotional gravity and the seriousness they deserve.

Lingam et al. (2023) researched both on-screen and off-screen gender representation in Bollywood films. Since media and films play a significant role in building audience perception, the authors observe that 'Gender representation both in terms of how men, women and genderqueer are depicted in cinema as well as in terms of the numbers that are present, visible, and have a voice in various professions related to filmmaking is crucial in promoting gender

equality in the media' (p.8). Owing to its far-reaching impact on society, the researchers highlighted that the entertainment industry should 'assesses its performance not only on aspects of revenue and growth but also on issues of gender representation, diversity and inclusion within films and filmmaking processes' (ibid.)Their study revealed that 72% of characters in films are played by cis-males, 26% by cis-females and 2% by queer characters; the majority of the leads in blockbuster films were men from the upper caste, women were found as co-leads in romantic films or women-centric films, ageism was found to be blatantly prevalent with most characters being represented in the range of 21-45 years. Disability was found in a mere 0.5% of the films. Other parameters, such as employment, colour, clothing, women's experience behind the camera, etc., were also studied. The report demonstrated glaring gaps in the Indian film industry regarding equal opportunities and diversity in representation, which is much required to promote Sustainable Development Goal 5, 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment' (Lingam et al.,2023, p.8).

III.   Gender and Performativity

In her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (2002), Judith Butler challenged the 'presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender that restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity' (p.viii). Butler denounced 'habitual presumptions' that limit the expression of gender and offered insights that could legitimise marginalised sexual practices. She asserted that gender is constructed through the act of 'performativity', which is an attempt to attain a particular 'gendered essence' which is determined by external socio-cultural factors. It is 'not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual' which attains naturalisation through the embodiment of attributes validated within a given temporal framework. By itself, gender is independent of the sex assigned at birth, and "what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts posited through the gendered stylization of the body' (p.xv). The term performativity connotes that gender attributes are constructed through bodily actions that may produce the 'hallucination' of natural actions and gestures. Butler challenged the naturalisation of sex, gender, body, and heterosexuality and threw light on 'phallogocentrism' in the production of these categories.

        Jaggers(2008) argues that 'gender is a kind of enforced cultural performance, compelled by compulsory heterosexuality, and that, as such, it is performative' (p.21). Compulsory heterosexuality reinforces sustained repetition of actions and conventions, which creates the illusion of naturalization. Filipowicz (2014) remarks, 'Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity has proved to be particularly influential; her books now function for many feminist scholars as both a philosophical buttress and a formal model' (p.8). Filipowicz adds, 'Playing on the double sense of the word performance; she concludes that instead of being understood as a role being acted out, gender must be understood as an act that constructs the reality of gender entirely through its performances, as in a performative speech act' (p.8). Terill Carver (2018) summarises the idea brilliantly by stating that men and women are 'constructed conceptually through hierarchical conceptual binaries that make such social and physical identifications as possible as they are' (p.178). Men and women are thus 'stylised and scripted, naturalised and inscribed, such that concepts of voluntary action and agency exist always and already within this apparent core of personal identity' (ibid).

IV.   Queer Theory and Gender Non- Conforming Identities

Queer Theory: An Introduction mentions that the term 'queer' was earlier used as a term of 'homophobic abuse' (Jagose,1999, p.1). However, it is now used as an 'umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications'. It refers to the "theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies" (ibid.). 'Its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics' (ibid.) that imparts inclusivity to the term and those who embody it. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick gave an apt and functional definition of queer in her work *Tendencies* (1994); she describes it as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning

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when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality, aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (p.7). Sedgwick explains that the term queer is not limited to sexual expression alone, as there are multi-dimensional possibilities that could define a person's identity. There are multiple 'identity fracturing discourses' (Sedgewick,1994, p.7) that crisscross, such as race, ethnicity, and postcolonial nationality. Her acclaimed *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) delves into realms of sexuality that had remained ignored or overlooked. The metaphor of a 'closet' suggests the concealment of one's gender identity and sexual orientation. She unravelled the relationship between language, power, and identity formation. Garcia remarks, 'Sedgwick brought traditional literary scholarship together with poststructuralism to intervene in and build upon the emerging feminist and gay studies of the eighties' (2017, p.14). Sedgwick drew upon diverse literary texts to develop her idea, which illustrated her belief that the representation of critical themes and archetypal characters in literature reflects the broader society. Her ' work helped to lay the foundations of what is today known as Queer Theory, an analytic framework that blends various methodologies, including psychoanalysis, semiotics, literary analysis, and grassroots activism, in order to think through the complexities of sexuality, gender, and intimacy' (Garcia, 2017, p.15).

Sedgewick refuted the simplistic conceptualisations offered by the binary of heterosexual/homosexual identities. She argued that, in either case, an individual relies on a conscious act to establish the chosen identity. *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) made a significant contribution to gay and lesbian studies through its premise that same-sex relations need to be understood along the axis of sexuality and not gender. She argues that 'it is unrealistic to expect a close, textured analysis of same-sex relations through an optic calibrated … to the coarser stigmata of gender difference. The idea of being closeted is closely related to the act of performativity' (Sedgwick, 1990, p.32). 'Sedgwick insists that the very idea that certain acts and people can be grouped into either/or gay/straight categories structure the broader epistemological fabric of modern culture' (Garcia,2017, p.21). The queer theory maintains that sexual identity is far more complex than the assumption that some people are born that way; it is deeply layered and cannot be described as an innate quality. It rejects the essentialist framework about sexuality because such a universalizing view obscures the complexity of sexual experience.

In *Queer Theory and Social Change* (2013), Max Kirsch suggests that queer is the dismantling of accepted notions about gender and sexuality as represented in films, literature, and other art forms and situating these concepts in academic areas of physical and social sciences. Regarding its subversive agenda, Kirsch remarks:

> The activity of "queer" is the "queering" of culture, ranging from the reinterpretation of characters in novels and cinema to the deconstruction of historical analyses. As activity, we have seen the assertation of identity of "queers," notably held as lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and transsexual, as variants of human behavior that have rights on their own terms. As a theory, queer's derivation from postmodernism and poststructuralism leads to the rejection of all categorizations as limiting and labelled by dominant power structures (p.33).

The entire project of queer theory is to aim at dismantling dominant power structures that lead to unequal treatment of individuals based on their sexuality and gender identity. The category queer opens opportunities to embark on a journey of self-discovery and not be curtailed by sexual and gender identities that are discursively manufactured by hegemonic forces. 'The act of performativity is a mere repetition of the gendered act, which leaves little agency for the person embodying these acts. The repeated performative act is a trap' (Hall, 1999), and the only way out is 'resignification, which, if done appropriately, can turn this iterability on its ugly head and betray its constructed nature' (ibid., p.186). Queer studies aim at subverting essentialist signification and offer space for the expression of diversity.

V.   *Cobalt Blue*

Cobalt Blue marks a significant foray into gender and sexuality with tremendous aesthetic sensitivity. The characters performed by Prateek Babbar as the unnamed paying guest and Neelay Mehendale as Tanay embody the suffocation of being closeted as gay men. Prateek Babbar emerges as the mysterious man who abandons Tanay and elopes with Anuja, played by Anjali Sivaraman, a state-level hockey player who does not subscribe to socially imposed roles that limit women to being the archetypal female who is delicate and unquestioningly docile. Kundalkar's film explores the issues of same-sex love, bisexuality, patriarchy, and female emancipation through the complex play of emotions in a narrative about self-liberation and sexual expression.

Jerry Pinto translated *Cobalt Blue* in 2012. In his translator's note, he remarks, 'I was struck by its simplicity, symmetry and daring. Its basic story is simple: a young man arrives as a paying guest and catalyses the lives of two siblings: a brother and a sister' (Kundalkar, 2016, p.99). The film retains the same simplicity and adds to its charm with its lyrical treatment through visual images, music, and actors' performances. Regarding its artistic appeal, the article, 'Of Male Gaze for Another Male, Love and Longing; The Film Is Like a Painting' mentions that it is about the 'male gaze towards another male … Just through shots and suggestions, one understands what the character must be feeling... The cinematic or camera gaze also feels restricted, just like the feeling of forbidden love*'* (Parande, 2022). The writer likens this brilliantly artistic visual cinematic wonder to a painting. The review further adds that the 'film works lyrically and is not so much about what will happen next but the feeling of love itself - forbidden love' (ibid.) Sharma remarks that there is a 'dearth of representation' of the queer in Indian mainstream cinema. With a few exceptions, films in India have not been able to present the 'queer question' adequately. The 'multitudinous experiences of the Indian Queer Community' remain untouched (Film Companion). While there is such a dearth, it is commendable how Kundalkar's film represents the queer experience and feminist concerns through its layered narrative.

VI.   Subversion of Gender Norms in *Cobalt Blue*

Tanay and Anuja, the leading characters in the film, grapple with emotions ranging from the ecstasy of love to the trauma of abandonment. There is a purposeful enigma attached to the identity of the paying guest, which allows the audience to focus on the contrast between the siblings' reactions, as both deal with the emotions of love and betrayal in distinct ways: the former as a gay man and the latter, a free-spirited, tomboyish girl, who is ignorant of her brother's attachment and relationship with her lover till much later. Both the characters travel their respective emotional journeys in search of liberation from the prison of the restrictive norms that limit them to traditional roles prescribed by heterosexual normativity. The colour cobalt blue, perhaps, symbolizes the in-between shade, which is distinct and different, like Tanay and Anuja, who refuse to submit to the conformist society that deters them from exploring the whole spectrum of human experience.

Kundalkar deals with queer embodiment through the characters of Tanay, the enigmatic paying guest and Tanay's English professor. These characters offer an insight into the repression experienced by the gay community in the 1980s and 1990s in India. The English professor, played by Neil Bhoopalam, reveals the double existence that the gay community was forced to lead due to societal restrictions. He depends on Tanay for love but feels rejected by him when Tanay falls in love with the artist who has rented a room in his house. Tanay was drawn to his professor for his intellect and attracted to the paying guest for his artistic pursuits, free spirit, and youthful charm. Tanay is so blinded by love that the latter's relationship with his sister goes unnoticed till he is deserted.

Apart from homosexuality, the film also presents a picture of a patriarchal traditional Maharashtrian family in the backdrop of Kerala. The imposing figure of the father controls his wife, whom he threatens to relocate to Kerala at the beginning of the film to appease his sexual

appetite. He dictates his will over the two sons and his daughter. Such overpowering control compels Tanay to live a secluded life, with only his tortoise 'Pablo Neruda', named after the famous poet, in whom he confides the secrets of his heart. His relationship with his sister Anuja also displays a close bond till she elopes with his lover.

Anuja is a tomboy; she plays hockey, challenges male supremacy, and follows her dream of having a career and not just marrying the man her father chose. The audience is jolted by her sudden elopement with her brother's lover, the paying guest. On returning, she refuses to file a police complaint for rape and deception because she feels the paying guest made her discover her body and her sexuality. In India, it is unusual for a girl to make an admission to her father about her sex life and physical desires. Anuja's character subverts the idea of femininity; she holds no grudges against the man and decides to take charge of her life. However, she fails to comprehend the reason for Tanay's withdrawal until she sees his pictures with 'their' lover. But, by then, she has broken the shackles of tradition and forceful marriage and has escaped her confinement in search of a job. Her economic independence enables her to escape her father's authority and control. Tanay, too, breaks free from the stifling environment by lying about a scholarship. He is finally shown to have established himself as an acclaimed author. The unnamed paying guest continues to be a mystery, his role being that of a catalyst through whom both Tanay and Anuja experience sexual awakening.

Cobalt Blue portrays the queer characters represented by Tanay, his English professor, and the paying guest. They remain closeted on account of the prevailing heteronormativity, which invalidates same-sex love, compelling them to lead a secret life. The associated sense of isolation, guilt, and anxiety causes Tanay to withdraw; his solace is his sole confidant- the turtle, which we never see in the film. It could imply his own mirror image in the pond with whom he feels safe interacting without fearing judgment. He feels free to speak with Pablo, the turtle, and narrate his fears, joy, love, and loss. His dialogues mostly comprise his diary entries or 'conversations' with Pablo. The joy and fulfilment he gets from the character played by Prateek Babbar, the paying guest, is transitory since he too 'slipped' (Kundalkar, 2016, p.7) away mysteriously. In her book review, Lucie Shelley writes, 'There is a specific kind of loneliness in having to hide love, particularly love that was thought impossible in the first place. Tanay is forced to keep his relationship with the artist a reality that only they inhabit, so of course, his feelings are riven with insecurity' (2016). There is an unspoken understanding that he shares with his former lover, the English professor, who too embodies the burden of a secret life led by a gay man in Indian society in the 1990s. He gracefully respects Tanay's decision to move on and helps him escape from the patriarchal figures of his father and brother. The paying guest's character comes across as the most mysterious when the audience discovers that he has been carrying out a secret affair with Tanay's sister, Anuja. The film daringly presents the subject of bisexuality without a trace of hatred or resentment from Tanay or Anuja. Tanay feels betrayed and becomes withdrawn from Anuja, but he decides to pursue a career as a writer. Tanay's published book 'Cobalt Blue' in the film is autobiographical; it marks his act of 'coming out'; by gathering the courage to narrate his own life experiences, he attains release from the closet of secrecy. He comes out, accepts his sexuality, follows his dream, and heals himself in the process.

Regarding audience engagement in deciphering the content of the film, Turner, in the book *Film as Social Practice* (1999), states that 'The film's meaning is not simply a property of its particular arrangement of elements; its meaning is produced in relation to an audience, not independently…Within film studies and cultural studies generally, it is now more customary to talk of 'meanings' than of Meaning. Meanings are seen as the products of an audience's reading rather than as an essential property of the film text itself' (p.144). Chatterjee (2021) asserts, 'Cinema has played a multifaceted role in Indian society: if it operates as an ideological state apparatus, it also serves as a political tool intended to undermine structural hegemony' (p.99). *Cobalt Blue* achieves both these facets. It offers a picture of the patriarchal

structure which compels men to be masculine decision-makers, who should marry a girl like Aseem, Tanay's brother, does, and women to be compliant wives and daughters. The father's figure threatens his wife to move against her wishes to Kerala to meet her conjugal duties, which depicts the authority of the males within the household. Tanay is sneered at for being so unmanlike, but Kundalkar's male protagonist easily makes 'rotis' in the kitchen; he loves poetry and paintings and is sensitive and gentle, unlike his brother and father. The film critiques the hegemony of the male figure through the two contrasting presentations.

Anuja is a rebellious girl, unlike her mother. She plays hockey, sports short hair, gives a firm handshake to his brother, and remains unflustered when the paying guest hands her over the brassiere, which has fallen on the ground from the clothesline. She is contrasted with the other feminine girls through her tomboyishness. Her act of pulling off the wig of long hair, removing the jewellery and the saree and hopping onto the scooter to flee from the constrictive household are all symbolic acts of a woman who chooses to be free and relies on economic freedom, autonomy, and agency. She returns after being abandoned by her lover, but her resilience is remarkable. Instead of holding grudges against the man who lets her down, she feels grateful that he enabled her to discover her body and sexuality. Tanay feels betrayed by his lover; he is flummoxed at how the man he loved could simultaneously be having an affair with his sister. The male and female reactions to the same emotion are contrasted through the responses of the two characters.

Bisexuality is touched upon delicately in the film. The mysterious disappearance of the unnamed character of the paying guest suggests that it causes emotional turmoil in the lives of Anuja and Tany. Still, Kundalkar manages to reserve the audience's sympathy for the character. His presence in the film adds the dimension of bisexuality; his charm is riveting, and his sexual appeal is artistically presented. He is sensitive towards art, life, and people.

All the principal characters in the film discover themselves through their journeys. Kundalkar's film normalises queerness and allows the viewer to think and rethink sensitively about sexual minorities who also struggle in similar ways in real-life situations. The story is empowering, inspiring, and reassuring to the LGBTQ+ community. As Brecht says, the artist does not hold a mirror to reality but rather hammers it into shape. That is what the film under study accomplishes.

VII.   The Impact of Queer Cinema in Challenging Compulsory Heterosexuality

The LGBTQ+ is a sexual minority community which has found a voice through the narratives of cinema globally. In *Queer Cinema: Schoolgirls, Vampires, and Gay Cowboys* (2012), Barbara Mennel notes that queer films present the "lived collective experiences" of gays and lesbians that chart stories about 'alienated youth and unrequited crushes; sexual awakening and coming out; the trials and tribulations of gay and lesbian communities' (p.2). Representation of 'defamed desires' allows the audience to engage with the subject matter, making the medium and the message political. The delineation of queer characters elicits varied responses in the audience, ranging from empathy to a deeper understanding of the psychological trauma that the queers go through due to their dual existence. It is empowering for the viewer belonging to this non-normative sexuality and gender to see the characters overcome the stigma and take ownership of their bodies, inclinations, and desires. Mennel reiterates that ' 'Queer' has come to function as a short-hand, an umbrella term signifying a range of non-normative sexual and gender identities, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, cross-dressing, transvestite, transgender, transsexual, intersex, effeminate men and butch women'. (p.3). It implies subversion of gender and sexual identities that are assumed to be cohesive, such as gay and lesbian.

Craig et al. (2015) hypothesised that LGBTQ youth 'have the potential for considerable resilience. Positive media representations may mediate negative experiences and foster self-esteem'. The above researchers conducted a study to establish the relationship between media portrayal and resilience. They concluded that the 'participants articulated four major ways in which media was a catalyst for resilience by buffering discriminatory experiences. Media provided participants with opportunities for (a) coping through escapism, (b) feeling stronger,

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(c) fighting back, and (d) finding and fostering community' (p.262). The first two indicate passive absorption, while the last two indicate more active engagement with media content. Their study established that media 'may be a catalyst for resilience among LGBTQ youth' as it helped them to 'cope with discrimination and navigate the turbulence of adolescence and young adulthood as LGBTQ individuals' (ibid. p.269). Pooja and Rekha (2018) point out that there is a need to present the characters belonging to sexual minorities, not merely as stereotypes who offer comic relief in an otherwise heterosexual narrative. They add, 'Instead of merely portraying them as the main protagonist or giving them a space in mainstream movies, portraying their emotional complexities should be given utmost importance…There should be a real and accurate portrayal of the homosexual lives rather than portraying homosexuality as odd' (p.2868).

VIII. Conclusion

The medium of the film allows a realistic representation along with the deconstruction of cohesive and stable categories of gender and sexuality. Queer films undermine cinematic conventions by introducing non-normative physical desires into public discourse. 'Queer film aesthetics challenges the cinematic conventions based on gender-normative heterosexuality' (Mennel,2012, p.4). Queer films bring taboo subjects into the mainstream and normalise the supposed inconsistencies in sexual identities. These films explore novel approaches to reveal what is possible in gendered life, which had traditionally remained 'foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions' (Butler,2002, p.viii) about phallogocentric heteronormativity. Queer theory has given the necessary conceptual tools to reimagine and reconfigure the narrative in the social and cultural paradigm.

Therefore, it is asserted that cinematic representation of queer narratives mitigates the trauma of marginalisation, isolation, and victimisation through catharsis of negative emotions. Empowering narratives impart confidence and help to reinforce self-belief and resilience in the marginalised community. It also engages the audience's critical thinking through stories of characters like Tanay, Anuja, and the unnamed paying guest in *Cobalt Blue.* They are not treated as deviants but as real people who experience complex emotions because of their non-conforming gender identity. Though these characters grapple with isolation, rejection, abandonment, and betrayal, they finally emerge as much stronger individuals by embracing their sexuality and their chosen paths unabashedly, unapologetically and with a flourish.

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