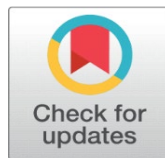# VISUAL STORYTELLING AND TRANSGENDER IDENTITY IN BOLLYWOOD: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MISE-EN-SCÈNE IN "LAXMII"

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the Mise-en-scène of the 2020 Bollywood movie "Laxmii", focusing on the transgender protagonist's journey towards self-acceptance through visual elements like clothing, accessories, makeup, and hairstyles. Employing content analysis and drawing upon queer and representation theories. This research explores the visual elements that reflect both Laxmii's internal and external struggles, emphasizing the cultural and spiritual dimensions that influence her transformation.

The analysis shows that Laxmii's shift from a white shirt and blue shorts to a red saree symbolizes her progression from societal conformity to self-empowerment. Accessories like red bangles, earrings, nose pins and anklets reinforce her traditional femininity, while her medium-length hairstyle reflects her fluid gender identity. The transition in makeup, from natural to bold, emphasizes her acceptance of her true self and spiritual awakening. The film's integration of cultural and spiritual motifs enriches the portrayal of transgender identity, blending traditional symbols with Laxmii's personal journey. Laxmii movie employs powerful visual storytelling to not only portray transgender identity but also foster a deeper understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by transgender individuals in Indian society.

Keywords: Mise-en-scène, Transgender Representation, Bollywood Cinema, Visual Storytelling, Cultural Symbolism

1. INTRODUCTION

Mise-en-scène is French term and its origins in the theatre. Literal translation of mise-en- scène means "to put on stage" (Gibbs, 2002). In Cinematic terms, mise-en- scène can be referred to as all the elements that we see in front of the camera and the way it is arranged in a frame of a movie. It involves a combination of what the audience views on screen as it is and the way the audience is invited to view it. It is a mean of communication by which narrative pattern are expressed (Joseph, 2019). Mise-en-scène enhances meaning and message in a scene by examining how setting and visual aspect of a scene is handled (Murray, 2019). The movie's design encompasses several crucial elements, including costume, makeup, hairstyle,

setting, decor and lighting, all of which contribute to the film's overall aesthetic (Monahan, Barsam, & Barsam, 2010).

In Mise- en- scène costumes are prominent elements like set and props. It not only covers the covers the body of actor/actress but also play a big role in visual aesthetics of a film (Uzor, 2018). Costumes, including clothing and accessories, are the most noticeable part of Mise-en-scène for most people (Purwati, 2021). It plays a key role in constructing cinematic identities. Costume designers study the character and translate their observation into fabric. The clothing of the character indicates the cinematic world (real world or fantasy), time and social status. Closer examination of costumes reveals subtle details such as how the character wishes to be perceived and their state of mind (Andersson, 2011).

The audience observes the characters from head to toe, so their appearance needs to convey significant aspects of the story. Therefore, costumes and makeup are crafted by designers and makeup artists to match the character's traits and personalities. This approach provides the audience with crucial background information about each character (M & T, 2021). Normally costumes and makeup complement each other. However, the narrative defines the form of makeup required (Uzor, 2018). Many directors prefer to have natural makeup, but it is also used to create unusual or fantastic character. Hairstyle helps transform the character, enabling the actor to play different roles. Both hairstyle and makeup are complex processes. Discontinuity in hair color or haircut can result in bloopers (Monahan, Barsam, & Barsam, 2010).

2. OBJECTIVES

- To explore the transgender character's journey and expression as conveyed through mise-en-scène elements.
- To analyze how clothing, accessories, makeup, and hairstyles contribute to the portrayal of Laxmii's transgender identity in the film Laxmii.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
3.1. QUEER THEORY

This study applies queer theory, which challenges binary views of gender and sexuality, emphasizing fluidity and diversity in identity. Queer theory deconstructs societal norms that enforce rigid gender roles and highlights the spectrum of human experiences. In the film Laxmii, this framework is used to analyze the portrayal of transgender identity, focusing on how mise-en-scène elements such as clothing, accessories, makeup, and hairstyles reflect Laxmii's transformation. The film aligns with queer theory's view that gender is fluid and evolves, depicting Laxmii's journey toward self-acceptance amidst societal pressures. By using queer theory, the study examines how Laxmii challenges traditional gender norms and provides visibility to transgender individuals, exploring the cultural and spiritual dimensions shaping her evolving identity.

3.2. REPRESENTATION THEORY

This study also draws on representation theory, which examines how media portrays different social groups and identities, particularly those marginalized in society. Representation theory focuses on how these depictions shape public perceptions and reinforce or challenge stereotypes. In the case of Laxmii, representation theory helps to analyze how the film portrays transgender identity

through visual elements like clothing, makeup, accessories, and hairstyles. The study explores how these elements reflect the complexities of Laxmii's character and the societal struggles she faces. By applying representation theory, the research investigates how the film challenges conventional portrayals of transgender individuals in Bollywood and contributes to their visibility in Indian cinema. This framework allows for a deeper understanding of how Laxmii constructs transgender identity, highlighting the cultural and social influences that shape the character's journey and the broader implications of such representations on audience perceptions.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a content analysis approach to explore the Mise-en-scène elements in the film Laxmii, with a particular focus on how visual storytelling communicates the transgender identity of the protagonist. As a qualitative research method, content analysis enables the systematic examination of visual and symbolic elements within the film to uncover patterns and meanings related to transgender representation. The data for this study comprises selected scenes from Laxmii that prominently depict the protagonist's journey towards self-acceptance. These scenes were chosen for their use of costume, accessories, makeup and hairstyles that contribute to the portrayal of Laxmii's transgender identity. Each of these visual components was categorized and analyzed to provide a deeper understanding of how they shape the character's identity and transformation throughout the film.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION
5.1. MOVIE SYNOPSIS

"Laxmii" is a 2020 Indian horror comedy film directed by Raghava Lawrence, starring Akshay Kumar as Asif and Sharad Kelkar as Laxmii. The story follows Asif, his wife Rashmi, and his nephew Shaan as they visit Rashmi's parents for their anniversary. During their stay, strange supernatural events occur, leading to Asif being possessed by the spirit of Laxmii, a transgender woman who was brutally murdered. Laxmii uses Asif's body to seek revenge and kill her wrongdoers. When Rashmi's family realizes Asif is possessed, they call in an exorcist. Laxmii then shares her tragic story of being murdered alongside Chintu and Abdul. The exorcist traps Laxmii's spirit to prevent further possession, but Asif, moved by her plight, allows Laxmii to possess him again. With Asif's help, Laxmii exacts her revenge, and Asif fulfills Laxmii's dream of constructing a hospital. In the end, it is revealed that Laxmii now coexists symbiotically within Asif's body, ready to assist him when needed.

S.No.	Scene	Analysis and Interpretation
1.	**Scene Description:** Laxmii is reprimanded by her father for grooming herself as a girl and is subsequently thrown out of the house. 	This scene vividly portrays the conflict between personal identity and societal expectations. Laxmii's white printed shirt and blue shorts symbolize her innocence and the pressure to conform to rigid gender roles. The white shirt represents purity, highlighting her true self, while the blue shorts emphasize societal imposition of masculine norms. The absence of makeup underscores her

	Elements: **Clothing and Accessories:** Printed white half shirt, blue short pants **Makeup (Loud):** None **Hairstyle:** Medium long hair	authenticity and focus on inner values rather than external appearances. Her medium-long hair, situated between conventional masculine and feminine styles, visually conveys Laxmii's internal struggle and fluid gender expression. This hairstyle challenges binary perceptions and underscores her journey of self-acceptance amid familial and societal rejection.
2.	**Scene Description:** Laxmii brings Geeta to Abdul's home, asserting her commitment to care for Geeta and support her education. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories:** Yellow kurta, maroon paijama, taweez (amulet) **Makeup (Loud):** None **Hairstyle:** Medium long hair	The yellow kurta and maroon salwar symbolize warmth, protection, and empowerment. An amulet adds a spiritual dimension to her appearance, symbolizing protection and blessings. The absence of makeup emphasizes Laxmii's authenticity and focus on inner values. Her medium-long hair maintains her gender identity and resistance to traditional norms. The scene also highlights Abdul's support for Laxmii. In Abdul's home, Laxmii freely dresses in traditionally feminine clothes, reflecting Abdul's acceptance and allowing her to express her true self.
3.	**Scene Description:** Laxmii confronts goons who insult her transgender identity at the market. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories:** Red saree, black blouse, red bangles, taweez, earrings, nose pin, anklet **Makeup (Loud):** Big red bindi on the forehead and natural makeup **Hairstyle:** Long hair with a central parting	The red saree symbolizes femininity and strength in Indian culture, allowing Laxmii to assert her identity and embrace the cultural meanings of red as passion, power, and defiance. The contrasting black blouse emphasizes her boldness and resilience. Traditional female garments and accessories, such as red bangles, earrings, nose pin, anklet, and taweez, affirm her place as a woman within her culture, highlighting her connection to traditional feminine aesthetics. Her long hair with a central parting reinforces her female identity and aligns with cultural norms of beauty and womanhood. Her big red bindi and natural makeup highlights a powerful statement about feminine and cultural identity.

4.	**Scene Description:** Geeta and Laxmii receive appreciation at the award function for their community contributions.	The combination of the red saree with a yellow blouse adds vibrancy and contrast. Yellow, often associated with positivity and enlightenment, enhances the celebratory tone of the occasion. This choice of colors signifies joy, recognition, and the positive impact Laxmii and Geeta have made in their community. The red bangles, earrings, nose pin, anklet, taweez, and two finger rings further embellish Laxmii's traditional and feminine appearance. These accessories highlight her connection to cultural norms of beauty and signify the importance of the occasion. The taweez, an amulet, may symbolize protection and blessings, adding a spiritual dimension to her appearance. Laxmii's long hair with a central parting continues to reinforce her expression of her female identity. This hairstyle and nig red bindi aligning with cultural standards of beauty, accentuates her femininity and pride in her identity.
	Elements:	
	Clothing and Accessories: Red saree, yellow blouse, red bangles, slippers, taweez, earrings, nose pin, anklet, finger rings	
	Makeup (Loud): Big red bindi on the forehead and natural makeup	
	Hairstyle: Long hair with a central parting	
5.	**Scene Description:** Asif drinks the tea, and Laxmii's spirit takes over his body for the first time.	By maintaining Asif's usual appearance, the film effectively portrays the theme of internal transformation and the power of the spirit. His consistent blue hoodie and jeans, along with his earring and bracelets, maintain his everyday identity. It shows that Laxmii's influence is deep-rooted, affecting the core of Asif's being rather than merely altering his exterior. This approach adds a layer of depth to the narrative, emphasizing the psychological and emotional dimensions of the possession.
	Elements:	
	Clothing and Accessories: Blue hoodie, blue jeans, earring on one ear, bracelets	
	Makeup (Loud): Natural makeup	
	Hairstyle: Short hair	
6.	**Scene Description:** Asif tries the red saree over his clothes to see how it looks at the saree shop.	Asif donning the red saree over his usual attire serves as a poignant visual metaphor for Laxmii's dominion over him. The red saree symbolizes Laxmii's strength and desire for retribution, becoming a powerful emblem of her presence. By layering the saree over Asif's blue shirt, jeans, and accessories, the film vividly illustrates the merging of Laxmii's identity with his own.
	Elements:	

	Clothing and Accessories: Light blue shirt, blue jeans, watch, sunglasses, earring on one ear, bracelets **Makeup (Loud):** Natural makeup **Hairstyle:** Short hair	Despite the addition of the saree, Asif's original outfit remains visible, indicating he is in a transitional phase rather than fully transformed. The unchanged hairstyle and natural makeup preserve Asif's core identity, signalling that the transformation is primarily internal and spiritual.
7.	**Scene Description:** Asif plays with the red bangles on the rooftop terrace. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories:** Red bangles, black t-shirt, blue jeans, earring on one ear, no bracelets **Makeup (Loud):** Black makeup under eyes **Hairstyle:** Short hair	The introduction of red bangles and black makeup amplifies Asif's transformation under Laxmii's influence. The red bangles, symbolizing femininity in Indian culture, signify Laxmii reclaiming her identity through Asif. His initial interaction with the bangles represents a moment of connection with Laxmii's spirit, indicating his gradual surrender to her influence. His clothing and single earring subtly distinguishes Asif, maintaining his individuality. The absence of bracelets directs attention to the red bangles, underscoring their pivotal role. The black makeup beneath Asif's eyes adds depth, representing possession of Laxmii's spirit. Despite these changes, Asif's unchanged hairstyle preserves his original identity, emphasizing that Laxmii's possession is primarily internal and spiritual.
8.	**Scene Description:** Asif, possessed by Laxmii, goes to the factory and murders Pankaj. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories:** Dirty clothes resembling a joker **Makeup (Loud):** Creepy joker makeup **Hairstyle:** Short hair	Asif's transformation into a joker-like figure symbolizes a profound descent into madness and chaos. The dirty clothes, creepy makeup, and untidy hair collectively portray a fractured psyche and moral degradation. By assuming this joker persona, Asif/Laxmii sheds their previous identity, fully embracing a more sinister and violent alter ego. This joker-like appearance serves both literal and symbolic purposes. Literally, it marks a significant change in Asif's outward appearance, aligning with Laxmii's influence. Symbolically, it represents the character's moral decline and descent into darkness. The dirty joker clothes, creepy makeup, and untidy hair evoke horror and chaos, amplifying the impact of the murder scene.

9.	**Scene Description:** Asif's attire transitions from a joker-like appearance to his original clothing during Pankaj's murder. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories**: Red bangles, black t-shirt, blue jeans, earring on one ear, no bracelets **Makeup**: Black makeup under the eyes, big red bindi on the forehead **Hairstyle**: Short hair with a central parting	The visual changes in Asif's appearance reflect the merging of identities between Asif and Laxmii. Each element—the black makeup, red bindi, and hairstyle—communicates Laxmii's increasing dominance. The red bindi on the forehead signifies Laxmii reclaiming her identity and power through Asif, linking her quest for vengeance to her cultural and personal background. The juxtaposition of Asif's joker-like appearance with Laxmii's more controlled and culturally significant look creates a striking contrast. This transition from chaotic to purposeful attire underscores Laxmii's shift from random violence to a directed quest for revenge.
10.	**Scene Description:** Rashmi and her family confront Asif about his behaviour, leading to Laxmii possessing Asif's body and revealing her presence. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories**: Blue t-shirt, grey track pants, earring in one ear, bracelet **Makeup**: Black makeup under the eyes, big red bindi on the forehead **Hairstyle**: Short hair with a central parting	Asif's casual blue t-shirt and grey track pants contrast with the black makeup and red bindi, highlighting Laxmii's possession. His earring and bracelet hint that asif is not fully controlled. The black makeup under his eyes symbolizes and the red bindi on his forehead represents Laxmii's spiritual presence and authority. Asif's central-parted short hairstyle adds depth to Laxmii's presence, emphasizing the transformative impact on his identity.
11.	**Scene Description:** Rashmi and her family confront Asif about his behavior, leading to Laxmii leaving Asif's body, which is then possessed by Abdul's spirit. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories**: Black kurta pajama, earring in one ear, bracelet **Makeup**: Black makeup under the eyes	As Laxmii's spirit departs and Abdul's spirit takes over, Asif's attire and appearance undergo significant changes. His black kurta pajama reflects Abdul's cultural background, contrasting with Asif's previous wardrobe and signaling the shift in possession. The earring and bracelet hint at remnants of his original identity. The black makeup under his eyes symbolizes the lingering presence of the spirit. The absence of the red bindi and the return to a normal hairstyle illustrate the dominance of Abdul's spirit over Laxmii's possession.

Hairstyle: Returns to a normal, short style

12.	**Scene Description:** Rashmi and her family confront Asif about his behavior, leading to Abdul leaving Asif's body, which is then possessed by Chintu's spirit. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories**: Printed coconut designer pajama set, spectacles, earring in one ear, bracelet **Makeup**: Black makeup under the eyes **Hairstyle**: Short hair, normal hairstyle	Asif's attire and appearance change as Abdul's spirit departs and Chintu's spirit takes over. The whimsical printed coconut designer pajama set reflects Chintu's youthful presence, contrasting with Abdul's traditional wardrobe. Spectacles add a playful touch, indicating Chintu's looks. The lingering black makeup under Asif's eyes symbolizes spirits presence. Asif's return to a short hairstyle and the absence of the red bindi marks the complete departure of laxmii's spirit and Chintu's establishment.
13.	**Scene Description:** Asif goes to kill Angad at the hotel. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories**: Green shirt, blue jeans, anklet, earring in one ear, bracelet **Makeup**: Black makeup under the eyes, big red bindi **Hairstyle**: Short hair with a central parting	The casual nature of the clothes juxtaposed with the supernatural elements highlights the tension between Asif's ordinary life and the extraordinary circumstances of possession. His casual green shirt and blue jeans contrast with the black makeup, short hairstyle with a central parting and red bindi, highlighting the laxmii's possession. The anklet, a feminine symbol, signifies Laxmii's power and adds an eerie touch with its sound. This choice underscores that while Laxmii's spirit dominates, Asif's external appearance remains unchanged, emphasizing the internal nature of the possession and the ongoing internal conflict.
14.	**Scene Description:** Rashmi and her family bring Asif to Darga peer baba to help him get free from Laxmii's spirit. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories**: White kurta pajama, earring in one ear, bracelet **Makeup**: Black makeup under the eyes, big red bindi **Hairstyle**: Short hair with a central parting	Asif's attire and appearance highlight his family's attempt to seek spiritual help. The white kurta pajama represents purity and reverence, indicating their belief in divine intervention. An earring and bracelet add personal touches, reflecting Asif's individuality. The black makeup under his eyes, red bindi on his forehead and short hairstyle with a central parting represents the laxmii's presence.

15.	**Scene Description:** Baba visits the home to free Asif from Laxmii's spirit.	Asif's maroon full-sleeve shirt and black pajama blend comfort and seriousness, fitting for the solemnity of Baba's intervention. The anklet signifies Laxmii's continued influence and the ongoing battle for control. The black makeup under Asif's eyes, the red bindi on his forehead and short hairstyle with a central parting maintains continuity emphasizing laxmii's presence.
	Elements:	
	Clothing and Accessories: Maroon red full sleeve shirt, black pajama, anklet, earring in one ear, bracelet	
	Makeup: Black makeup under the eyes, big red bindi	
	Hairstyle: Short hair with a central parting	
16.	**Scene Description:** Asif allows Laxmii to take over his body at the hospital.	Black cloth symbolizes surrender and mourning, mirroring Asif's decision to let Laxmii take over. The earring and bracelet add personal touches, subtly connecting to Asif's identity. The black makeup under Asif's eyes, the big red bindi on his forehead and short hairstyle with a central parting maintains continuity emphasizing laxmii's presence.
	Elements:	
	Clothing and Accessories: Black kurta pajama, earring in one ear, bracelet	
	Makeup: Black makeup under eyes, big red bindi	
	Hairstyle: Short hair with a central parting	
17.	**Scene Description:** Asif, possessed by Laxmii, dances to the "Bum Bhole" song.	This scene powerfully illustrates Laxmii's intense possession of Asif through clothing, accessories, makeup, and hairstyle. Asif's red saree symbolizes Laxmii's power, passion, and feminine identity, while the black blouse complements the intense makeup under his eyes, creating a stark contrast that emphasizes Laxmii's bold presence. Red bangles, Taweez, earrings, and a nose pin enhance the authenticity of Laxmii's character, reflecting her cultural and feminine presence. The extra dark black makeup under Asif's eyes intensifies the haunting nature of the scene, underscoring Laxmii's supernatural energy. The wiped red bindi on the forehead and blood mark suggests at violence. Asif's long hair with central parting and the absence of a moustache, reinforcing Laxmii's complete possession.
	Elements:	
	Clothing and Accessories: Red saree, black blouse, red bangles, Taweez, earrings, nose pin, anklet	
	Makeup: Extra dark black makeup under eyes, wiped red bindi, blood mark on forehead	
	Hairstyle: Long hair with central parting, no moustache	

18.	**Scene Description:** Asif visits the Laxmii foundation center and becomes possessed by Laxmii again when informed about trouble. **Elements:** **Clothing and Accessories**: Black kurta Pajama, earring in one ear, bracelet **Makeup**: Black makeup under eyes, big red bindi **Hairstyle**: Some part of hairstyle like Laxmi and other part is normal hairstyle.	Asif's unchanged clothing, combined with symbolic black makeup, depicts Laxmii's continued presence within him. The single earring and bracelet reflect Asif's identity alongside Laxmii's. The mix of Asif's usual hairstyle and a central parting hints at the deeper, ongoing influence of Laxmii's spirit, illustrating their shared impact on his body and consciousness.
19.	**Scene Description:** Laxmii's spirit leaves Asif's body and manifests in front of everyone. **Elements** **Clothing and Accessories**: Black clothing **Makeup**: Not visible as the face is covered with long hair **Hairstyle**: Long hair	This scene uses black clothing, a face covered with long hair, and a long hairstyle to emphasize Laxmii's powerful and mysterious presence outside of Asif's body. The black clothing symbolizes Laxmii's dark energy and supernatural nature, aligning with themes of vengeance or justice and enhancing her impact in the narrative. The face obscured by long hair adds mystery and intrigue, emphasizing the supernatural aspect of Laxmii's independent manifestation and contrasting with her previous presence within Asif. The long hairstyle contributes to Laxmii's ethereal quality, suggesting freedom and spiritual power, and deepening her character's otherworldly nature and narrative impact.

6. CONCLUSION

The Mise-en-scène analysis of the film "Laxmii" underscores the profound interplay between personal identity and societal expectations. Through meticulous attention to clothing, accessories, makeup and hairstyle, the film vividly portrays Laxmii's journey of self-acceptance and the struggle for identity. Laxmii's attire, transitioning from a white shirt and blue shorts to a red saree, symbolizes her journey from innocence and societal imposition to empowerment and self-assertion. The use of accessories like red bangles, earrings, nose pins, anklets, and taweez imbues her appearance with cultural significance, reinforcing her connection to traditional feminine aesthetics and the protection and blessings she seeks in her journey. The medium-long hairstyle serves as a visual metaphor for Laxmii's fluid gender expression, bridging conventional masculine and feminine styles. The natural and minimal makeup choices emphasize authenticity and inner values, while the dramatic use of black makeup under Asif's eyes and the red bindi

signify Laxmii's spiritual presence and dominance. Asif's transformation under Laxmii's possession is marked by the layering of traditional female garments over his usual attire, symbolizing the merging of identities. The visual changes, such as the joker-like appearance with creepy makeup and untidy hair, illustrate the psychological and emotional dimensions of the possession. The film uses contrasting attire and accessories to depict the internal conflict and transformation of Asif, maintaining elements of his original identity while highlighting the overpowering influence of Laxmii's spirit. The film "Laxmii" effectively uses Mise-en-scène elements to explore complex themes of gender identity and its expression. The film goes beyond just telling a story; it shows the struggle and strength of a transgender individual in a traditional society. It highlights how cultural symbols and metaphors can be used to express complex identities and experiences, making "Laxmii" an important film in the representation of transgender people in Indian cinema.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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