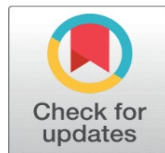
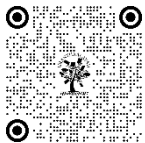


HUMOUR AND PREJUDICE: GAUGING HIJRA STEREOTYPES IN SELECT INDIAN MOVIES

Kanika Gupta ¹✉

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Humanities, Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal, Sonapat, Haryana, India



Corresponding Author

Kanika Gupta,
20620002kanika@dcrustm.org

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2633](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.2633)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

People of the third gender have been a vital part of Indian culture and society for centuries. They are known by several names in India, including Hijras, Aravani, Kinnar, Eunuchs, Jogappa, Khusras, Thirunangai, etc. Their human existence does not provide them with a valued social identity; rather, it is denigrated, disrespected, and disparaged. They face discrimination and humiliation in almost every aspect of life. The present paper attempts to read and analyse the stereotyped representation of hijra characters in mainstream Indian cinema via the prism of Zillmann and Cantor's "disparaging humour theory". Being "different" accords them a unique status that, in lieu of regard, respect, and acknowledgment, bestows upon them treatment that is worse than that of animals. In the lack of a respectful place in society, they experience harassment everywhere and endure undue pain and trauma. The present study focuses on this disparaged and marginalised aspect as portrayed in select Indian films.

Keywords: Disparaging Humour, Hijras, Stereotypes, Indian Cinema, Transphobia

1. INTRODUCTION

"If trans visibility is indeed becoming valuable, one must ask the perennial question, 'for whom and in whose interests'?" (David)

Cinema is an essential facet of establishing and sustaining cultural representations and identities. "In the case of India, Hindi cinema colloquially known as 'Bollywood' is the world's largest producer of films which reaches a massive audience not only in the country but also among the Indian diaspora" (Jha). It is generally eminent that gender identities in Indian cinema are "formed and maintained within the simple binary of masculine and feminine sex roles" (Banaji 494). Likewise, other gender identities and sexualities are either disparaged or portrayed as aberrant.

Representations for Hall are a "production of meaning through language" (28). Language here refers to a collection of semiotic cues carrying ideological significance. Therefore, a close scrutiny of Indian cinema is crucial to unveil how renditions of transphobic moulds are discursively produced and maintained in India.

Negative representations can be countered by a large number of representations of all kinds for that population segment. For instance, when a male or female is depicted in a negative light, there are a plethora of other representations to balance it out. The less representation there is, the greater the significance of these rare instances of representation, as they are the only ones an audience ever sees. In the guise of humour, the portrayal of gender stereotypes in films influences society's perspective of gender roles. The overabundance of gender stereotypes in film results in a distortion of gender roles that becomes ingrained in a person's psyche and can be passed down from generation to generation as an acceptable or appropriate stance.

Disparaging humour refers to remarks that elicit laughter by degrading humans or their social groupings. "Disparaging humour (e.g., racist or sexist humour) is humour that denigrates, belittles, or maligns an individual or social group" (Zillmann 87). Divulgence to disparaging humour has an obstructive influence on society as it raises people's leniency for discriminatory occurrences. It has profound psychological and sociological consequences. It is considered to state false and filthy conceptions, hatred and prejudice in society thus creating stereotypes. The distinguishing characteristic of disparagement humour is that it simultaneously "diminishes" and "reinterprets" its target. Due to the fact that humour conveys that its message should not be taken seriously, disparagement humour can uniquely demean its target while preventing challenge or criticism. "Bollywood movies have short comedy situations in a number of films that represents disparagement humour and often do not fit into the storyline" (Kalra & Bhugra 164). Abjection, ridicule, and erasure are the building blocks around which these films form the hijra identity. They are portrayed in a humorously exaggerated manner, leading a life of abject destitution and making appearances in the scene begging or dancing, which is intended to elicit laughter from the audience.

This may be observed in a variety of films, including *Nayak: The Real Hero*, directed by S. Shankar. The film uses the derogatory and degrading epithet *chhakka* to refer to the hijras in the sequence. When Topi (Johnny Lever), the key character in this scene, names the older guy *chhakka*, he doesn't mind; however, when Topi mentions the hijras as *chhakkas*, they become furious and beat him up, setting the scenario for the audience to laugh.

Hijra figures make brief appearances in the song scenes to provide comic relief. "Song and dance scenes comprise around forty percent of most Indian films; therefore, they are significant and stand as separate entities, often aside from the rest of the plot" (Gopinath 280). Hijra characters appear on screen in the songs, disrupting the film's cis-normative and heteronormative structure. For example, films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun?* *Welcome to Sajjanpur* and *Amar Akbar Anthony* have songs such as "Tayyab Ali," "Dhik tana," and "Munni ki Baari." Hijra characters sing, dance, and clap in their traditional style in them, which allows for a variety of gender expressions within the mainstream cisgender narrative. In such cases, hijras become the major and only representation of all non-cis affirming genders and sexualities. However, their inclusion in these songs restricts them to specific genders and sexualities. It mocks them through hypersexualization, which fails to portray the spectrum of their lives and experiences.

Working out on the representational thread in Indian cinema, four movies are analysed here that feature stereotyped hijra characters and storylines: *Laxmii*, *Sadak*, *Murder 2*, and *Super Deluxe*. All these movies have prominent hijra characters and there are distinct hues of hijra character in each movie which will give a comprehensive view of all the moulds in which the hijra characters are put in.

2. STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATION OF HIJRAS

Laxmii: The film *Laxmii*, directed by Raghava Lawrence, is categorised as a horror-comedy, however it falls flat to generate any responses that are appropriate for this genre. Surprisingly, the majority of the film's comedy and terror are centered on the perceived dissonance of seeing a cis male exhibiting behaviors that are socially labeled feminine. It narrates the story of Asif, who is possessed by the ghost of a hijra seeking vengeance on those who have mistreated him. Asif's wife and family gaze into the bathroom, terrified and perplexed, to see Asif massage turmeric powder on his face - a deed so out of character for the macho, mustachioed hero that the entire family shivers with fear. The film has numerous examples of extreme exaggeration for the aim of comic or terror, and watching these scenes was both upsetting and transphobic. These transphobic responses target transgender people who express themselves in society, and the movie somehow instills in its audience the idea that such ongoing discrimination and responses are commonplace. Furthermore, Asif's character in the film makes repeated declarations that he would wear bangles if he saw a ghost, as though "emasculatation" is the most demeaning thing a cis man could do. The actors announce, "Ab humaari baari hain" to provide honour and adherence to the hijra people in the promotional events that preceded the film's

release. This social media marketing campaign was designed to echo the film's ostensible concept of humanising and empowering hijra community. However, by the end, the film has devolved into a 140-minute disaster that causes more harm than good by maintaining rigid gender stereotypes.

Sadak: Through a heterosexual frame, the film *Sadak* produced the hijra in Maharani's persona. Maharani, like other villains in Bollywood films, appears to exemplify the lustful male gaze, seeking the woman not for himself but for a mode of resentment triggered by her remarks about her ambiguous sex. Zie consoles the terrified Pooja Bhatt saying "main kuch nahin karoongi. Main kuch kar hi nahin sakti kyunki main adha mard hun adha aurat. Mere pas kuch nahin hain...agar kuch hai to sirf dimag...isiliye main mardon ki seva karti hoo". The inference is that hijras do not seem to have a way out from plunging into the business of prostitution. But, beyond that, the film fails to bestow a realistic image of the community's economic and financial constraints in the context of heterosexual norms. Concoctions that assert on a straight linkage between sex, gender, and desire are used to create the politics of a steady and cogent gender identity. The hijra's yearning to succour males has sexual overtones, which contradict the prior assertion, "I cannot do anything". Because a hijra's sexuality (bisexual, gay, or asexual) does not evolve naturally from her sex, the film struggles to categorize it and instead shows it as confusing and unnatural. Maharani's hijra status is not only portrayed as the source of her capricious need to satisfy men by pimping women, but her villainy is imprinted on her body rather than the societal matrix that promotes women trafficking. As zie acknowledges to having nothing but mind, her identity is paradoxically reduced to her body and rendered devoid of body. Her deceit seems to be a by-product of her dysfunctional sexuality. Both zie and other hijras are depicted as physically strong, symbolizing an ongoing belief in India about the immense strength of hijras and engendering penis envy. When the male pimp (who supports the hero) threatens to declare "boloon kya tu kya hai"? Maharani, the ineffable identity of the hijra, delivers him a powerful jolt in the crotch, saying, "hum log mard nahin lekin paanch mardon ki taakat hai isme". The hijra's identity and power are understood as stemming from her discarnate status, which makes her a whimsical businessperson, as the usage of the term "dhanda" (trade) in her speech indicates and explains her desire to indulge in voyeuristic heterosexual pleasure. The third gender, Maharani, poses a significant threat to the heterosexuals in the film, eliciting deep-seated hostility and animosity against the third gender. Heterosexuals are shown as victims of Maharani's fury in the film. The film portrays most of the heterosexual characters as humane but the character of Maharani is projected as inhumane, callous, vicious and what not that further expedites the justification of viewing the third gender as the 'other'. This film also highlights the stereotype associated with the hijra community. In a scene with Maharani a group of hijras are shown singing, clapping and dancing. The sequence itself has little significance in the narrative, but it is included in the film to add a strand of entertainment. The climax of the film shows Ravi burning Maharani in her brothel, echoing the burning of evil in the Ramayana, as Hanuman burns Lanka to save Sita.

Murder 2: Mohit Suri's portrayal of a hijra character as Dheeraj Pandey in the film is probably one of the most dangerous psychopath killers of Hindi cinema. Zie calls women and brutally tortures them to death. The beginning of the movie is set in a red-light area where many hijras are being offered money. This shows that sex work is the primary vocation of India's transgender community. The next scene starts with a song where a sex worker with bruises on her arms is seducing a hijra. Near the end of the song, the hijra is shown killing the sex worker in a brutal way. This demonstrates that zie is a diabolical and psychopathic killer who enjoys torturing her victims before murdering them. In the same song, there is a scene of a sound recorder recording the shrieks of sex workers being harassed by the hijra. Even though it is evident from the beginning of the film that Pandey is the murderer and that Arjun, the hero, surrenders him to the police, Pandey shows no remorse when zie tells the cops what zie did. Zie appears comfortable and happy with what he did to the lost sex workers. Pandey also claims that zie castrated himself and now seeks vengeance on women for making her impotent, perpetuating the myth that gender deviant persons are psychopathic. When Pandit, a hijra leader, arrives at the jail to free Pandey out, zie threatens the police commissioner with a curse that will destroy his life if Pandey is not released. After Pandit's threat, the police commissioner is vulnerable from two perspectives. First, Pandit is a powerful politician who can dismiss the commissioner with a phone call, and second, "the hijra community, as well as the general public, have internalized the belief that hijras have the power to confer fertility" (Nanda). Their blessings and curses have an impact on those to whom they are given. Almost the entire film is shot in a gloomy color palette, with a lot of creepy music playing in the background, especially during moments shot in the antagonist's house. The house where zie lives is a big, secluded property with shattered sculpture parts strewn about, signaling that zie is a sculptor and butchers her victims before dumping their remains in a garbage bag and throwing them in the well. Zie murders the victims using an Indian handheld musical instrument with chimes and scorching edges, which is

subsequently shown in the film to be the same instrument used by the hijra group when singing and dancing while emasculating a hijra.

Super Deluxe: Super Deluxe, directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaj also strengthens the deep-rooted transphobic stereotype of hijras being a villain. In the story, Shilpa, a hijra character says that “all hijras have to do is clap and they are given money”. It displays begging as an easy way of getting money rather than the fact that it is the last resort and the society has forced them to beg and survive. This dialogue reinforces the notion that a hijra person has no skill sets and is unemployable. Next, zie confesses that zie has helped in the kidnapping of two kids who were later maimed and pushed into child begging. Hijras are already highly misunderstood and feared due to their earlier inclusion in Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) and such storylines in a widely watched mainstream movie are dangerous and perpetuates transphobia. Shilpa’s story is rarely told from hir own point of view; instead, it is told from the point of view of a condescending observer or a grieving wife. The sequence in which Shilpa is seen draping a saree is an example of this voyeuristic framing and consequent othering. Zie dresses in front of a mirror while hir grieving wife looks on. The soundtrack includes a mockingly discordant rendition of “Maasi Maasam Aalana Ponnu,” a song from film Dharmadurai. Shilpa is smoothing her wig, and zie gets a brief moment of pleasure that zie looks good for hir walk. The camera, of course, mocks this vulnerability all along—tantalizing noises from the sex song still running and it shifts over to the sobbing wife who says, “I don’t know what’s harder, having lived so long without a husband or having to live with a husband like this”. Also, the audience is only enabled to identify the sleazy cop’s point of view in the scenario at the police station. Of course, the character of officer is a parody, and the viewer is encouraged to feel morally above to him, while Shilpa receives no compassion other than sympathy for hir subhuman existence. The film eliminates the potential of the audience identifying with Shilpa by making hir a passive target of disdain. When Shilpa went home, she was horribly humiliated, including by Jothi (hir so-called wife), who alternates between shock, unmasked disdain, and sorrow for lost manhood in response to hir change. In the film, a hijra is insulted in such a way that the camera appears to be laughing at hir. A hijra who has been sexually abused, who has been told that asking society to accept hir is too much to ask, and who has been kicked out of every place zie wants to go, only to be told, “I don’t care who you are”. “I don’t care who you are” does not imply acceptance. Shilpa is never given basic recognition for hir gender or identity. Zie is always seen as an object, never as a person. Zie is portrayed as an abnormality, something horrible, and the progressive significance appears to be that these grotesque beings must be embraced for what they are.

3. CONCLUSION

As we can see from the above analysis hijras are portrayed only in extremes in the movies for the sake of humour and sensationalism. Many films have linked hijra identity to various sorts of monstrosity or deviancy, portraying hijra people as murderous sociopaths, aliens, helpless victims, or comedic caricatures.

Stereotypes are obtained, used, and accepted as valid assessments of humans, while the hijra community’s struggles are minimized. These perceptions become strengthened in viewers who have no other understanding of what it means to be a hijra due to the media’s limited coverage. They are portrayed either as a villain, criminal, outcast or as the focal point of mockery, laughter, eroticism and disgust. Gopinath suggests that hijras are the “most obvious and common manifestations of sexual and gender transgression in popular film” (294).

Hijra has been presented as a villain who engages in prostitution and pimping, as well as kidnapping young men to emasculate and enlist them into hijra clans. Many hijra characters have been portrayed in negative light over time, claiming that their gender identity issues have driven them to the brink of mental illness, forcing them to commit crimes. On the other hand, it has been established that they become perpetrators as a result of being marginalized, disparaged, and impoverished by society, which motivates them to commit crimes. These horrible representations of hijra characters have severely harmed their lives. Children are told to exercise caution or risk being kidnapped by the hijras.

As comic reliefs, they are mocked for their differential appearance, clothes, make-up, mannerisms, sexuality and what not. They are often shown sexually devouring the hero (almost always, without their consent). The writers appear to be unable to decide whether to show a hijra or merely a gay character, given hijra’s sexuality is not static. They can be bisexual, homosexual, or asexual. However, the directors end up having the hijra protagonist keep regular eye contact with the hero or male character.

Hegemonic Indian society has often misconstrued hijras’ way of life, gender expression, and sexuality and Indian media has its huge share in it. Exposure to these types of disparagement humour towards a group steers to higher

stereotyping and a worse group-evaluation. Whether it is imparting cultural knowledge of stereotypes, providing an avenue for subtle manifestations of prejudice, or creating hostile and discriminating conditions for others, disparagement humor has significant societal effects.

Humour generates a levity factor in speech, in which the standard principles of rationale and common sense do not apply. "The less one identifies with a social category, the more amused one should be at humour disparaging that social category" (McGraw and Warren). All these jokes and negative portrayals have been argued to serve several different functions, including validating negative stereotypes. Berlyne described the humour mind-set stating that "Humour is accompanied by discriminative cues, which indicate that what is happening, or is going to happen, should be taken as a joke. The ways in which we might react to the same events in the absence of these cues become inappropriate and must be withheld" (56).

It is quite probable that the hijra community that has been afflicted by discrimination will be further marginalised by negative depictions in film, even if this was not the filmmakers' intention. Such portrayals tended to focus on the distinctions between transgender and cisgender people, thereby eliminating transgender identity from the public arena and relegating it to marginal status when it was acknowledged at all.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Amar Akbar Anthony. Directed by Manmohan Desai, performances by Vinod Khanna, Amitabh Bachchan, Rishi Kapoor, Neetu Singh, Parveen Babi and Shabana Azmi, Hirawat Jain & Co., 1977.
- Banaji, S. "Bollywood horror as an uncanny public sphere: genre theories, postcolonial concepts, and the insightful audience," *Communication, Culture and Critique*, vol.7, no.4, 2014, pp.453-471, Wiley Online Library, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cccr.12060>.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2012.
- David, Emmanuel. "Capital T: Trans Visibility, Corporate Capitalism and Commodity Culture." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol.4, no.1, 2017, pp.28-44, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3711517>.
- Dil Ne Jise Apna Kahaa. Directed by Atul Agnihotri, performances by Salman Khan and Preity Zinta, Orion Pictures, 2004.
- Gopinath, Gayatri. "Queering Bollywood: Alternative Sexualities in Popular Indian Cinema." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol.39, no.3-4, 2000, pp.283-297, Taylor and Francis Online, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J082v39n03_13.
- Govind, Saykar Satish. "Representation of Hijras in Art and Literature: A Comparative Study." *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol.2, no.4, 2014, pp.230-233, <http://www.rjelal.com/2.4.14/SAYKAR%20SATISH%20GOVIND%20230-233.pdf>.
- Hall, S. *Representation: cultural representation and signifying practices*. Sage Publications, 1997.
- Hum Aapke Hain Koun. Directed by Sooraj Barjatya, performances by Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit, Rajshri Productions, 1994.
- Jha, K. S. *The essential guide to Bollywood*. Roli Books, 2005.
- Kalra, Gurvinder, and Dinesh Bhugra. "Hijras in Bollywood Cinema." *International Journal of Transgenderism*, vol.16, no.3, 2015, pp.160-168. Taylor and Francis Online, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15532739.2015.1080646>.
- Kyaa kool Hai Hum, Directed by Sangeeth Sivan, performances by Tusshar Kapoor and Riteish Deshmukh, UTV Motion Pictures, 2005.
- Laxmii. Directed by Raghava Lawrence, performances by Akshay Kumar and Kiara Advani, Disney+Hotstar, 2020.
- Masti. Directed by Indra Kumar, performances by Vivek Oberoi, Riteish Deshmukh, Aftab Shivdasani, Lara Dutta, Tara Sharma, Amrita Rao and Genelia D'Souza, Eros International, 2004.

- Michelraj, M. "Historical Evolution of Transgender Community in India." *Asian Review of Social Sciences*, vol.4, no.1, 2015, pp.17-19, <https://www.trp.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ARSS-Vol.4-No.1-Jan-June-2015-pp.17-19.pdf>.
- Murder 2. Directed by Mohit Suri, performances by Emraan Hashmi, Jacqueline Fernandez and Prashant Narayan, Wave Cinemas, 2011.
- Nanda, Serena. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*. Wadsworth Publishing House, 1999.
- Nayak: The Real Hero. Directed by S. Shankar, performances by Anil Kapoor, Rani Mukherjee, Paresh Rawal, Johnny Lever and Amrish Puri, Sri Surya Movies, 2001.
- Partner. Directed by David Dhawan, performances by Govinda, Salman Khan, Katrina Kaif and Lara Dutta, Eros International, 2007.
- Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya. Directed by Sohail Khan, performances by Salman Khan, Arbaaz Khan, Kajol and Dharmendra, Gumeet & Sohail Productions, 1998.
- Ramos, R. "The Voice of an Indian Trans Woman: A Hijra Autobiography." *Indialogs*, Vol.5, 2018, pp.71-88, <https://raco.cat/index.php/Indialogs/article/view/336230>.
- Reddy, Gayatri. *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Revathi, A. *The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story*. Translated by V. Geetha. Penguin Books, 2010.
- Sadak. Directed by Mahesh Bhatt, performances by Sanjay Dutt and Pooja Bhatt, Vishesh Films, 1991.
- Sangharsh. Directed by Tanuja Chandra, performances by Akshay Kumar, Preity Zinta and Ashutosh Rana, Vishesh Films and Sony Pictures, 1999.
- Somers, Margaret R. "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach." *Theory and Society*, vol. 23, no. 5, 1994, pp. 605–649. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/658090>.
- Style. Directed by N. Chandra, performances by Sharman Joshi, Sahil Khan, Riya Sen, Shilpi Sharma and Tara Deshpande, Ultra Media & Entertainment, 2001.
- Super Deluxe. Directed by Thiagarajan Kumararaja, performances by Vijay Sethupathi, Fahadh Faasil, Samantha Akkineni, Ramya Krishnan, Mysskin, Gayathrie, Ashwanth Ashokkumar, Bagavathi Perumal, Mirnalini Ravi, Naveen, Vijay Ram, Noble K. James, Abdul Jabbar, Jayanth and Rengarajan Rajagopalan, Tyler Durden and Kino Fist Alchemy Vision Works, 2019.
- Tiwari, Esha. "Distortion of 'Tritiya Prakriti' (Third Nature) By Colonial Ideology in India." *International Journal of Literature and Art*, vol.2, 2014, pp.19-24. Academia, https://www.academia.edu/27931637/Distortion_of_Tritiya_Prakriti_Third_Nature_By_Colonial_Ideology_in_India.
- Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan. *Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*. Translated by R. Raj Rao and P. G. Joshi. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Vidya, Living Smile. *I am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey*. Rupa Publications, 2013.
- Welcome to Sajjanpur. Directed by Shyam Benegal, performances by Shreyas Talpade, Ravi Kishan, Amrita Rao and Kunal Kapoor, UTV Motion Pictures, 2008.
- Wilhelm, Amara Das. *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex: Understanding Homosexuality, Transgender Identity and Intersex Conditions Through Hinduism*. XLIBRIS, 2010.
- Zillmann, Dolf. "Disparagement Humor." *Handbook of Humor Research*, vol. 1, 1983, pp. 85–107. Springer Link, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4612-5572-7_5.

AUTHORS' BIO-NOTE

¹Kanika Gupta is a research scholar at Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science & Technology, Murthal, a State University of Haryana. Her areas of interest include cultural studies, gender studies, queer theory and transgender studies. Her research is focused on the cultural and social construction of hijra characters in Indian literature