



---

REPRESENTATION OF RURAL GENDER IDENTITIES IN  
CONTEMPORARY MARATHI CINEMA A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF  
*JOGWA* (2009) AND *NATRANG* (2010)

---

Dr. Mahesh Thakur

Associate Professor, Karve Institute of Social Service, Pune

---

**Abstract**

The onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was a promising one for the Marathi Film industry. Films from all spheres of life were produced and appreciated by the audience. For regional cinema in India, generally overshadowed by the giant film fraternity based out of Mumbai, the success of Marathi cinema can be attributed to one particular genre – ‘Rural Culture’. Marathi films on rural culture not only did exceptionally well at the box office but also gained international recognition. Unlike popular cinema, this genre explores themes that need reform and challenge the prevalent structures by addressing grass-root level issues. The paper aims at analysing the theme of gender identity and queerness through two important films, they are - *Natrang* (2009) and *Jogwa* (2009). It focuses on issues of identity repression and sexuality through cultural norms and traditions and how queer identities are thus represented in the aforementioned films. It finally argues how representations are normative in the context of films but can further aid and re-structure regional viewing practice. The focus of the study is to gauge the importance of such regional yet mainstream films that have managed to tackle socially sensitive themes, represent prevalent gender issues and have thus left a significant impact on its audiences.

Keywords: *Marathi Cinema, Rural Culture, Queerness, Gender, Representation*

**Introduction:**

Cinema has evolved and become a powerful tool for understanding distinct cultures, providing education, leisure and sometimes as propaganda. People sought cinema as means to escape from day-to-day life or to just admire their favourite stars on the screen. Regardless of the reason why people watch films, the depictions portrayed on the screen have the ability to leave a significant impact on an individual's perceptions. The onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought us the invention of the motion picture recorder and has since explored functions beyond providing mere entertainment. Thus, film has become the interpreter of the world. It informs the audience of what is true and what is history, and it also provides a constructed view of different ideologies. However, it is important to note that representations through films are incomplete or limited versions of reality wherein they are often distorted (Baudrillard, 1994, pp 6-7).

India is a country of diverse cultures each with its own significant features like language, music, folk dance, cuisine, fashion etc. A distinct feature of these different cultures today are films. Despite Bollywood being a huge industry representing Hindi Cinema that produces over 1500 movies every year (Yasin, 2013, *Index on Censorship*) one cannot ignore the growing popularity of Indian regional cinema. These films differ from a stereotypical Hindi film that caters to a specific audience. The oldest form of regional Indian cinema that is Marathi cinema will hence, be the focus of this paper. The Marathi film industry has been producing thought-provoking films since the boom of Indian Cinema and has gained immense popularity in the past two decades. This popularity is associated with an era termed by Wani (2013, pp 27-28) as "The New Marathi Film". Throughout the years, the industry has tried to depict the regionally diverse colours of religion, culture, customs, beliefs, attire, food, custom, various Marathi dialects with a variety of accents etc, and characters played by a diverse cast (Ingle, 2017, p 202). The industry, therefore, has put forth raw narratives that tackle issues ranging from gender to farmers' suicides to even commodification of religion. These are real stories that are now appealing to not just the local Marathi population but people across the country who are otherwise accustomed to mainstream big budget, Hindi cinema. Films like *Shwaas* (2004), *Fandry*

(2013), *Sairat* (2016), *Court* (2014) etc. have garnered international recognition reflecting the potential of Marathi Cinema. The nature of movies like the aforementioned ones is that they are stories of real people, experiencing real issues and trying to present an understanding that challenge the prevalent structures. Though its start was a bit turbulent, the beginning of the new phase with movies like *Shwaas* (2004) presented a promising array of films that explored spaces and stories beyond the middle-class Marathi man. Marathi cinema is thus, beyond the depiction of a middle-class man, flashy action movies or slapstick comedy.

A huge number of films within the industry looks closely at the rural (*gramin*) culture. Out of the total Maharashtrian population, approximately 60% live in rural areas (Census, 2011). Rural society is characterized by traditions and values that are different from those of the urban. It is the preserver of culture and is considered as the main source of civilization (Slama, 2004, pp 9-12). A Maharashtrian rural society is characterised by agrarian economy, distinct socio-cultural and political systems in place. The representations of remote areas through cinema have been well received by the local Marathi population thus, competing with the popular Marathi and Hindi cinema.

O'Dowd (2003, p.41) believes that social constructs spaced out across time and culture are responsible for identity constructs like ethnicity, class, gender, nationality and sexual orientation. With respect to sex and gender, these constructs are rooted within history and culture giving rise to a determined set of roles that are often associated with masculinity and femininity. The onset of the reactionary 'men's movement' aimed at reassessing these traditionally assigned gender roles. Queer identities are often pitted against conceptions of masculinity, and it is essential to study their representations in order to dissect how we as a society perceive individual identities. Cultural queer identities that exist are as Halperin (2005, pp 419-20) stresses "contemporary western phenomena" and are not found globally. He also states that queer identities develop in urban areas rather than rural spaces. Statements like these, disregard the rural queer identity which has in fact shown traces in the past and continues to do so. Traditional practices in rural Maharashtra present cases

wherein homosexuality is the norm or even forced at times. The focus of this paper will be how homosexuality in certain communities is driven by the notion of servitude and entertainment

*Tamasha*, a Marathi folk theatre tradition engages in cross-dressing and always has a male character playing the role of a homosexual cousin. Emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the practice of *Tamasha* revolves around a female dancer performing the traditional “*Lavani*”. The recent development of a new form i.e., “*Bin Baykancha Tamasha*” has an all-male dramatis ensemble that cross-dress and perform *Lavani*. Not all these men are queer but believe it is a form of expression. The perceptions of the ‘said’ cis male audience are completely different when the performers are on and off the stage. The issues of identity repression and oppression faced by the performers are thus addressed in a couple of Marathi movies. The repression of identity is also seen through traditional rural practices of servitude prevailing in rural Maharashtra. Despite being banned by the government; these practices still exist in communities wherein individuals are forced into dedicating their lives to a goddess and men are subjugated to serve the goddess and live as women. They are prohibited from creating a livelihood and are often victims of sexual abuse, harassment and years of trauma. This dichotomy of voluntary queer expression and forced homosexuality through practices is the focus of this paper. It will thus aim at analysing these issues through two popular Marathi movies - *Jogwa* (2009) and *Natrang* (2009). This paper, therefore, looks at the nature and critical aspects of queer Maharashtrian rural culture in 21<sup>st</sup> century Marathi movies. The purpose of this study is to understand how both protagonists navigate their sexualities and identities while struggling to cope with a detrimental external environment.

**Research Question:**

In order to understand the genre of “rural films” and their social representation, the paper assesses queerness and issues of gender expression as represented in Marathi movies. It therefore, tries to delve into various issues regarding the different forms of gender representation and its associated socio-cultural cogitation as portrayed in the selected movies. This study also seeks to specify in detail how masculinity (heterosexual as well as homosexual) is inscribed with

respect to the particular films and the social structures, problems or contradictions it may involve. Therefore, the research question is - How does contemporary Marathi cinema portray the gender expression and queer issues prevailing in a rural setting?

### *Marathi Cinema*

In order to understand how Marathi cinema evolved to the form it proudly showcases today, it is necessary to trace its history. Khopkar's (1977) dissertation on "*A Brief History of Marathi Cinema*" provides a detailed account of the chronological history of Marathi cinema since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dissertation not only conceptualises the social and historical background of early Marathi films but also presents its achievements and failures. Khopkar (1977, p 3) calls his survey an 'autopsy' due to its keen inspection of Marathi cinema. A note on the emergence of various important production houses and actors that shaped the industry is made. This will help in understanding its turbulent beginning and why it took Marathi cinema decades to reach its own population.

A lot of visual media is often inspired by textual forms in history. Hrishikesh Ingle's (2017) article, "*Marathi cinema: Notes towards a liminal history*" puts forth an understanding of historical texts and their audio-visual interpretations and how it reflects within the Marathi regional identity. He also tries to situate the development of Marathi cinema in comparison to the giant Hindi film industry. The important question Ingle tries to answer is how these two industries co-exist in the same city i.e., Mumbai. He therefore, navigates the potential of Marathi cinema that has emphasized on archival material, biographies etc. *Jogwa* is based on two novels and an understanding of this article will further aid how Marathi cinema is incorporating texts (pp 19 -215).

Kale (1979) studies the early market of Marathi films and the beginning of rural expression in the industry. The genre is traced back to Kolhapur in 1919 when Maharashtra Film Company was founded. The article, written almost four decades earlier, speculates a downfall of the industry and compares it with other Indian regional cinemas. The constant use of historic and rural narratives with redundant themes in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century Marathi cinema had resulted in stagnation of Marathi film making, Kale (p 1520) notes. Wani's (2013) paper on

The New Marathi Film, however, explores the new dimensions within the industry and proves the aforementioned article wrong. The writer addresses how the new movies have touched upon changing lifestyles of middle-class people and their concerns around it, issues of raising family in a metropolitan city, class struggles and finally rural struggle. The nature of films selected for this research project is constituted within the “The New Marathi Film” genre. The economic impact due to international critical acclamations and the subsequent quality of films are noted in the article (pp 27-30).

In Maharashtra, a major aspect of cinema was furthered by the theatre culture. Political and social movements across the region have paralleled the growth of Marathi theatre. Adarkar’s (1991 pp 87-90) article “*In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843 to 1933*” not only traces the history of Marathi theatre and to its peak but also documents the contribution of women that helped sustain the industry. While doing so, the article highlights how early theatre had men playing the female roles (for e.g., *Balgandharva*) since women were prohibited from being on stage. The idea of a “*Bin Baykancha Tamasha*” and cross-dressing thus, has roots from the early theatre in Maharashtra. However, the situation now is more expression oriented.

#### *Rural Maharashtrian Cultures of Lavani and Jogtin*

“*Tamasha : The vanishing folk art form of Maharashtra*” Panda (2019) aims at tracing the history of the famous *Lavani* dance and its theatre practice – *Tamasha* . From the characters to costumes to the lifestyle of the artists and even drawbacks of the folk art are encapsulated by the author. *Lavani* as a means of expression of sexuality of the artists has been reduced to mere objectification by the spectators. As a result of this transition, folk art is now observed in a demeaning light. The reason for this can be attributed to popular Marathi cinema portraying the *Lavani* as the infamous “item” songs. Panda (2019, p 134) hence notes that, like many other traditional art forms *Tamasha* is also fading away .

Sharmila Rege (2002) writes about Popular culture with special emphasis on the *Lavani* and *Powada* folk art of Maharashtra for the Economic and Political Weekly (p 1038). This article highlights the concerns within these artforms that

have struggled to find their place in national culture and national identity. The writer also links them to the prevailing caste-based issues in the region. Throughout history, such forms of art and entertainment that stem from the socio-economic situations of the lower-castes, have been systematically marginalised by the bourgeois artforms i.e., popular culture. Rege's paper particularly looks at caste-based socio-cultural and political strifes in contrast to popular culture that continues to live on and has gradually become relatable.

*Representations as Social Constructions:*

As mentioned earlier, films have become the interpreter of the world and therefore play the role of reflecting reality, however, as argued by feminist theory, the representations within these films tend to be selective and reinforce patriarchy (Nelmes 1999, p.273). In order to understand why these representations within films convey different meanings it is important for this research to study approaches to representation itself. Benshoff and Griffin (2009, p 426) describe it as a progression responsible for telling a story or communicate an idea through the image of something. The constructionist approach as put forth by Lacey (2009, p.147) explains that representations in media have the ability to construct meaning, although this meaning can be the basis of material reality. Representations encompass the aspects of culture, meaning and knowledge and with respect to this, Barker (2000, p 390) states that representations are depiction of objects or practices inspired from reality.

Study of representation through media accounts for more than just analysing what it portrays. It is therefore a process as explained by Jones (1999, p 308) in which the interpreter of the media and the media itself interact with each other. This in turn puts forth notions and attitudes that are a result of signs produced. Jones (1999, p 308) thus, elucidates that the organisation or the setting of the film, the mise-en-scene, dialogues, song sequences, editing, narration etc. are taken into consideration while studying representation. Hence, film texts adopt a certain structure so that the representations being expressed are perceived by the audience. Through representation comes identification. Films play an important role in shaping momentary personalities of its audience. They significantly contribute in developing self-identity (Cohen 2001, p.246). Cohen

also explains that the perceptions one may develop through media helps them to differentiate as well as experience a social reality that is not theirs (2001, p.246). This further assists the audience to develop their own identity and social attitudes. If representations are responsible for such crucial developments it is necessary to assess what message are films conveying and whether it is shaping the society positively or negatively.

*Habitualisation and Gender Construct:*

The above mentioned material on representations as social constructions is important to note as these social constructions help us understand our own realities. According to Berger and Luckmann (1967), these constructs are formed by social interactions, institutionalisation, habitualisation along with primary and secondary socialisation. People are shaped by the society they are born into and individuals -*“cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they were shaped”* (Berger et al 1967, p 50). The concept of habitualisation as proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1967) describes how these aforementioned notions engrave themselves in the society. Habitualisation therefore is when a certain action is repeated by an individual which is then followed by others. This process later snowballs into becoming a pattern, similar to a habit. Habit further situates itself into the society by transmission of knowledge and through institutionalisation. Essentially, social interactions give rise to constructions which get heavily ingrained into people’s lives and thus, as a result societal norms and expectations arise. Majority of these definitions of reality are dominated by the superior groups. Institutions, hence, *“control human conduct by setting up predefined patterns of conduct, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible”* (Berger and Luckmann 1967 p 55). Therefore, institutions are regulating human conduct by making individuals act a certain way that favours the dominant and superior group’s interests. The representation of men belonging to public sphere and women to the private prominently exists in the film industry and has also become institutionalised. Benn and Luckmann’s ideas are further supported by Lorber (1994) who highlights on how gender itself is a social construction. Thus, the writer defines gender as *“a process of social*



*construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state, as well as in sexuality, language, and culture”* (Lorber 1994, p 5). Her book “The Social Construction of Gender” emphasizes on the notion that neither masculine nor feminine traits are inherent and there is no ‘right’ way to be male or female. However, the traits attributed to genders inevitably lead to typical recognition. This is furthered by Benshoff and Griffin (2004, p 205) when they elaborate on how society equates femininity with dependence and in turn reinforces patriarchy subsequently discouraging women from gaining power.

*Male Gaze theory:*

Laura Mulvey in her ground-breaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) presents a feminist critique of gender-specific representation in film and hence attempts to put forth a theory that emphasises on the portrayal of women in movies. This “male gaze” theory deals with prevalent patriarchal society wherein women are seen as (erotic) object solely being perceived by the male gaze. Mulvey observes how the male characters are often attributed to strong and active personalities while women play a passive part. Thus, the theory on male gaze provides an explanation on how on-screen female portrayal acts as means of sexual pleasure in males. This approach to film analysis prominently incorporates feminism, Freudian psychoanalysis as well as Marxian thought (pp 14-26). Subsequent work on Mulvey’s theory presents a wider outlook on gazes that are not just masculine. The LGBTQ+ dimension to the theory is significant for the analysis of selected films.

**Research Methodology:**

This qualitative study applies the method of content analysis through two Marathi movies that are produced in a rural setting. They are selected on the basis of their focus on queer issues. The movies selected are:

*Jogwa* (2009) – Is the love-story of two individuals forced into servitude of goddess *Yellama*. It is a story of their struggle trying to free themselves from this tradition. Tayappa’s (played by Upendra Limaye) gender identity is repressed and is forced to live as a trans woman due to his illness. The film is an eye-opener about the orthodox practices that still prevail in rural Maharashtra.

*Natrang* (2009) – Is the story of a young man, Guna (played by Atul Kulkarni) and how he joins a *Tamasha* troupe. Due to the circumstances, Guna is forced to play the role of a “*Naachya*”, the gay cousin of the main female performer. The film encapsulates how despite loving his work, Guna experiences physical and mental harrasment, struggles with gender dysphoria, denial and poor mental health. The idea of “*Naachya*” is to bring a comic element to the play which is inherently homophobic. These nuances are therefore addressed in the film.

The analysis of these films is based on specific coding categories each examining variables that assess narrative discourses it engages its audience in, characterisation, frequency of representations tones, dialogues etc. Additionally, secondary sources providing inputs on Marathi cinema in general will be studied in order to facilitate relative understanding.

#### *Coding Categories*

Religion and servitude – Religion plays an inseparable part of rural life which has explicit and/or implicit impact on individuals. The conceptualisation of this code was solely based on the movie *Jogwa*. This is because the image of a *Jogtin* is intertwined with the individual’s dedication towards the Yellama goddess. Thus, scenes throughout the movie wherein the *Jogtin* is portrayed as the Goddess’ slave or were called the Goddess’ “whore” has been used as a variable.

Acceptance – Instances with protagonists negatively accepting their fate or are rather forced to accept a lifestyle change were used as variables for this code. If someone was shown defeated due to their circumstances it was accounted as a variable.

Forced cross-dressing – The focus on the protagonists’ bodies and the emphasis on their transformation has been closely coded for this research. To elaborate on the impact cross dressing on identity, both films delve into sequences that are prolonged and descriptive.

Frequency of the use of derogatory terms for *Jogtin* and *Naachya* – The idea of a homosexual male in India encompasses a matrix of different identities. Generalised terms that are used in the West cannot be situated in the Indian context. Therefore, other terms, albeit derogatory like *kothi*, *panthi*, *phalkya*, *hijra* etc. which are frequently used in the local context have cultural

connotations. For the purpose of this research's analysis of Jogwa and Natrang, terms referring to the third gender are noted. These terms form a cluster of identities that Guna and Tayappa must situate themselves within. Time stamps for terms like *phalkya* (eunuch) *hijra* and their frequencies are noted.

Gender Roles – A similar research that examined gendered characteristics was modelled for this study. Courageous, decisive, forceful, competitive, independent, ambitious, and confident were the traditional traits associated with masculinity and emotional, submissive, chatty, affectionate, gentle, and sympathetic characteristics were associated with feminine stereotypes (Gilpatric, 2010 pp 734-746). In case of this study, instances wherein these traits were attributed to the protagonists as well as the other characters in a derogatory sense were used as variables. Similarly, song sequences showing the female characters conforming to the assigned and constructed gender roles were also considered (*Apsara Ali, Mann Ranat Gela Ga, Mala Jaudya Na Ghari,*)

Objectification – On-screen objectification of the female actors continues to be a topic of contention among scholars. However, in case of the selected films it is important to note that despite there is evident objectification of the female actors (specifically through songs) it also presents itself when the male protagonists are 'man-handled' when they are cross-dressed. Various instances throughout movies highlight objectification of the queer characters. "*Jogtin la sagle hyach nazre ni baghtat*" ("Everyone looks at the *Jogtin* with only one intention").

Repulsive Reactions – This code was particularly designed in contrast to study the protagonists' hegemonic masculinity and how they reacted to homosexuality. The fear of turning into a queer was evident in the scenes, further giving rise to repressed sexuality of their own.

#### **Analysis:**

The following overarching themes were determined after collecting data from the films, coding and finally analysing them. The themes present a broader narrative of rural representation as observed in the films, they are:

#### *Impact of socio-cultural and economic conditions on sexuality:*

Both protagonists, Guna and Tayappa, find themselves in a compromising situation due to the lack of resources or due to societal stigma revolving around

certain medical conditions. Despite loving art and theatre Guna is forced to adapt to a lifestyle completely different than his previous one as a body-builder and wage-worker. The cultural connotation of a “*jut*” (untangled hair) results in Sulli’s family forcing her into Goddess Yellama’s servitude. Sulli is one significant character whose sexuality is regulated by the external conditions, specifically the rigid boundaries of the cult. Sulli is forced to dance and beg along with other *Jogtins* and has to also protect herself from prostitution. Her body is thus, perceived as the site of the cult’s cultural existence. Heterosexuality while serving the goddess is forbidden, inherently depriving Sulli the freedom of choice of her gender and sexuality.

The folk tales and myths revolving around local deities is a characteristic of our region. These same stories further have several versions across different states. Goddess Yellama is a prominent deity and is worshipped throughout southern and western India. Each state has its own interpretations of myths surrounding the Goddess. One such myth is that Yellama is a healer of endemics like chickenpox, measles and other diseases, including various cattle infections as well. Despite the advancement in the medical sciences, these centuries long beliefs continue to prevail. Thus, we see Tayappa’s family approaching the cult rather than a doctor after discovering his medical condition. The Yellama faith is so deeply ingrained in the people of the village that they refuse to seek medical help. This further leads to Tayappa’s forced transformation and his body thus becomes a site for the cult’s cultural relevance.

*Masculinity:*

Both films explore two different yet contextually similar sites of tradition and art. They do so by portraying ambivalent and fluid masculine identities of not only the protagonists but also of the other characters. The repeated contrast of genders among the characters presents a malleable identity. However, this contrast is portrayed as sign of distress among the characters. Throughout both films, the stereotypical masculine traits are observed to have an upper hand against all other forms of gender. Reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity in case of Jogwa is observed as Tayappa is in a constant conflict, both internally and externally, with the practice of *Jogtin*. The final scene where him and Sulli

run away from the village can be seen as Tayappa freeing himself from the emasculating tradition. In Natrang, on the other hand, the visual emphasis on Guna's transformation into an effeminate character and his habitualisation after this, fails to protect him from getting sexually assaulted. The rape scene shows how since Guna stopped being a body builder he lacked the strength to fight his perpetrators, but it is also important to note that he was fighting against four other men. The sense of regret in his eyes is because he is not strong enough anymore or is not 'masculine' enough anymore.

*Repression of Identity:*

As mentioned earlier, both selected films do not solely look at identity issues of the main characters but also present the challenges faced by other characters. The story of Yamnya from Jogwa, a fellow jogta is particularly crucial for studying the repression of identity. At a very young age, Yamnya was abandoned by his mother and was conferred to Goddess Yellama. He was drugged and sexually harassed since the young age. Over due course of time, his character admits that he started to like what was happening to him. However, it is important to bear in mind that throughout the film he was intoxicated. His repeated oppression took away his sense of being a man. This particular scene perfectly encapsulates how Yamnya was forced into conforming to something he is not. The subsequent fear in Tayappa's eyes that he may end up like Yamnya is again a threat to his identity. Simultaneously, with Natrang, it is interesting to note how not only different sexual identities but also theatre art customs are addressed through layers of references. Guna, thus cautiously attempts to navigate his new identity through justifying a narrative of artform.

*Problematizing Sexuality:*

'Jogwa' specifically creates a space wherein one can observe 'engendering' of the cult's belief and further presents an array of possible gender roles within the community. These gender roles as described by Judith Butler, are socially sanctioned and restrains the individual to specific activities (Butler, 1990, p 79). However, despite maintaining a rigid gendering, the cult transcends actual praxis of Butler's gender role theory. It does so by giving men, who are neither eunuchs nor castrated trans-genders, nor intersexed; the ability to break away

from a taxonomical classification and hence they do not fall under the modern categories within LGBTQ+. As a result, they are marginalised and ‘othered’ in multiple ways (Dharmadhikari, n.d pp 5-6).

Jogwa reflects on the ground reality of prostitution observed in the Yellama cult, while Natrang deals with sexual exploitation of artists by influential closeted individuals. When Tayappa is confronted with homosexuality and prostitution he not only embodies what is mentioned above as ‘hegemonic masculinity’, but also classic homophobia. Similarly, Guna’s repulse when his fellow troupe mate touches him inappropriately and assumes he is a homosexual, leads to an eventual loss of heterosexual masculine normativity. These aspects of the films, further delineates the narrative that both makers are conforming to heterosexual hegemony.

#### **Discussion:**

On the basis of the formulated themes and subsequent analysis, it can be said that both selected movies try their best to represent the rural gender identities and sexuality along with their issues. However, they both have their drawbacks in terms of representation. The repression of identity and forced sexuality noted above, can be explained by the Foucaultian ‘Othering’. While explaining the position of prisoners in his *Groupe d’Information sur les Prisons*, Michel Foucault puts forth conditions wherein the said prisoners can have their own stand hence providing a same platform for both the investigators and investigated (Foucault, Eribon 1991, p 228). While drawing parallels in case of Jogwa, the director could have shown the members of the cult speaking for themselves and are empowered thus, dismantling the segregation and gender ‘othering’. The forced sexual reorientation would therefore have been addressed more prominently. Natrang, in contrast empowers the protagonist and displays his ability to raise voice against his exploitation. Patil’s description of a marginalised community through Jogwa solely based on his knowledge of the cult has led the community to assume the position of the object. Such a description further alienates them, subsequently making them a part of the ‘other’ and finally blocks them perpetually into the subaltern position.

Natrang and Jogwa are special because they introduce the audience to a different gaze as opposed to the 'male gaze'. This gaze can be attributed to a 'transgender gaze' because of the nature of the films. Laura Mulvey while talking about the gaze states that, *"it takes as a starting point the way film reflects, reveals, and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle"* (1975, p 14). Her study of 'gaze' highlights the directedness and relationships of looking in visual media. Here, she applies the Freudian term 'scopophilia', the pleasure of looking, which involves a subject who takes control as they gaze at an object. In its basic and principal form, gazing at others is considered as an activity wherein the said object remain passive. Mulvey suggests that the role of this passive object is traditionally taken up by women due to the classic narrative of women belonging to the private sphere while the active-looker is identified by a male. *"Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium"* (Mulvey, 1975, p 19). From a Freudian perspective however, no matter how appealing this passive object is to the male gaze it is also threatening to them due to the evident lack of a phallus. The representation of both protagonists is perceived by the audience where they are involved in a process of losing their phallus. This gradual absence becomes the reason for their oppression. Additionally, it can be observed that Guna and Tayappa's characters are accompanied by this transgender gaze throughout the films. It does so as both protagonists are battling identity crises in a setting that looks beyond heteronormativity. Guna responding to the politician's gaze (albeit for his ulterior motives) while also partaking in heterosexual relationships puts emphasis on this transgender gaze. Similarly, in the case of Tayappa who is perceived as male only through Sulli's gaze. Both directors, Jadav and Patil keep their audience focused on the seriousness of the protagonists' masculinity and the authenticity of their performance by deploying the transgender gaze and connecting it to an empowered female gaze. Hence, the films establish the legitimacy and durability of Guna and Tayappa's performance as a cross-dresser by forcing the spectators to their own confused as well as other characters' gazes.

As a result, the representation of both main characters destabilises the sex and gender binary that is pivotal in the construction of gazes.

The assessment of the theme - *Impact of socio-cultural and economic conditions on sexualities* was crucial for this study since it provided an outlook on our perception of the 'rural'. The sexual reorientation carried out by processes that are institutionalised further problematises sexuality and puts Michel Foucault and Judith Butler's discourses of sexuality and gender into perspective. Gender already being a social construct, is further reconstructed by the cult's and the *Tamasha* troupe's reorientation of gender for its male devotees and artists (*Nacchya*). Gender cannot be normative, nor heterosexuality be the norm; Foucault discusses this in the *History of Sexuality Vol I* (1978, p 53). Similarly, Judith Butler's plurality of genders highlights on the choice of gender (1990, p 79). These notions when applied to films tend to challenge the rigid structures prevalent in the Indian society, governed by religious symbols, customs and practices. The effect of such institutional and expansive forces on the body have also been presented in the *History of Sexuality Vol I*. Foucault suggests that, various discursive forces have the body at its locus therefore making it the site on which discourses are performed and debated upon (1978, pp 13-16). The bodies of not just the protagonists but also other characters hence become the sites on which their respective communities perform their gender narratives.

Hall (1997, p.12) contests, that identities are positions that we, as subjects adapt despite knowing that they are mere representations. These representations have been , structured as a result of differences in history. *"It is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are"* (1997, p.30). Guna and Tayappa's gender identities when compared to other actors' characters are observed to be carefully scripted. Guna is shown preparing for femininity when he notes how Naina walks, talks, makes gestures etc; he is also shown to have become skinnier than he was before. Not only this, but in order to deconstruct his forced femininity even further, Tayappa continues to act aggressively; reinstating heterosexual, hyper-masculine features. Hall (1997, p. 6) says that "identities" have been so thoroughly deconstructed that they are functioning "under erasure" and we as



audience have failed to replace them. This is because they are significant to our history and hence, they are operational. Representations are as much constructions as they are reflections. They are as much material as they are imaginary (Esposito, 2003 p. 236). Unlike other identities, gender is not an individual realisation and achievement. Interactions within the society and subsequent collective meanings act as driving force for gender in order to produce itself as “normal” or “natural”. Jadhav and Patil in their respective films, have made an attempt to present constructions of masculinity, and to confront the idea of hegemonic masculinity. As subjects, in the initial scenes, Guna and Tayappa were already perceived as “male” even before the audience reviewed their performances. The hypermasculinity of the protagonists was thus developed against the type of female masculinity. Heteronormativity is addressed through hegemonic constructions of gender and power, however there is no attempt to criticise it by the films.

**Conclusion:**

A rural society today, has been characterised by inadequate education, socio-economic backwardness, a suppressive political and cultural setting, dominance of religion and blind faith, and denial towards modernity. In spite of this, a majority of Marathi films have been successful in portraying the rural ways of life, while simultaneously depicting the dichotomy between traditionalism and modernity. However, these films do not aim at just portrayals but also try to engage its audience in discourses that have subtle agenda for change. In the last two decades, the Marathi film industry has visualised a traditional backward Maharashtrian rural society and has intentionally made efforts to address how the said society is being persistently disadvantaged. It is deprived of mass attention and social progress. Ravi Jadhav's *Natrang* and Rajiv Patil's *Jogwa* even after over a decade since their release continue to leave a significant impact on the audience. The films selected for this study are special because they created a vital and necessary space for critical discourse in re-examining the sociologies of gender. Apart from systematically breaking down its characters' identities they immensely contribute towards the work of creating and spreading awareness of human rights, the ground reality and artist exploitation. *Jogwa*

actively addresses the prevailing superstition and blind faith in India, especially in rural cults. *Natrang* aims to describe a platform that is sacred but at the same time violates moral boundaries.

Both films adapt representational strategies that promotes regional film studies and can be re-examined and reclaimed through a queer lens. These same representational strategies however fail to adequately portray homosexuality but instead problematises it. Simultaneously, they also glorify the masculinities of their respective protagonists while overlooking the female characters and their identities. In their own respective ways, however, both films tackle issues prevalent in rural Maharashtra. Several ethnographies conducted on the Yellama cult of Saundatti, have shown that individuals in the servitude of the goddess are often victims of sexual exploitation and in order to support themselves financially, engage in prostitution. (Bradford, 1983 pp 307-322). On the other hand, *Tamasha* today is perceived as a dying art and since these artists do not have enough resources are further subjected to exploitation. These issues are therefore addressed by the films. The rural gender identities observed in the films have negative connotations primarily because of forced sexual reorientation. The protagonists' personalities further tend to trivialise the existing queer issues among the other characters. Nevertheless, they shed light on the existing queer issues in rural India. The onset of such films focusing on rural issues has thus, not only provided a wider outlook in the development of Marathi cinema but has also made the masses aware of the ground realities.

### References

1. Adarkar, N (1991). *In Search of Women in History of Marathi Theatre, 1843 to 1933*. Economic and Political Weekly, 26(43), WS87-WS90. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4398220>
2. Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and Simulation*. (S. F. Glaser, Trans.) (14thed.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
3. Benshoff, H.M. & Griffin, S. (2009). *America on film*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
4. Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*.

5. Bradford, N. (1983). *Transgenderism and the Cult of Yellamma: Heat, Sex, and Sickness in South Indian Ritual*. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 1983 39:3, 307-322
6. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Abingdon: Routledge.
7. Cowan, G., & O'Brien, M. (1990). *Gender and survival vs. death in slasher films: A content analysis*. *Sex Roles*, 23(3/4), 187-196
8. Dharmadhikari, R (n.d). “*The ‘Engendering’ of Faith, Superstition and Identity as a Visual Discourse in Rajiv Patil’s Marathi Film Jogwa*”. Department of English. LAD and Smt. R P College for Women.
9. Esposito, J. (2003). *The Performance of White Masculinity in Boys Don’t Cry: Identity, Desire, (Mis)Recognition*. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 3(2), 229–241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708603003002007>
10. Felluga, D (2002). “*Modules on Butler: On Gender and Sex*”. *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*.
11. Foucault, M. (1978). *The History of Sexuality*. New York :Pantheon Books, 19782021.
12. Hall, S., & Open University. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage in association with the Open University.
13. Halperin, D.M. (2005). *Is there a history of sexuality? The lesbian and gay studies reader*, ed. D. Halperin, and M. Barale, 416– 31. New York: Routledge.
14. Hansen, K. (2001). *Theatrical transvestism in the Parsi, Gujarati and Marathi theatres (1850 – 1940)*. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 24, no. 1: 59 –73.
15. Ingle, H. (2017), *‘Marathi cinema: Notes towards a liminal history’*, *Asian Cinema*, 28:2, pp. 199–218.
16. Jones, C. (1999). *Lesbian and gay cinema*. In J Nelmes (Ed.), *An introduction to film studies* (2 nd ed.) (pp. 307-344). London: Routledge.

17. Kale, P. (1979) "*Ideas, Ideals and the Market: A Study of Marathi Films.*" Economic and Political Weekly 14, no. 35: 1511-520. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4367902>.
18. Keienburg, A. (2017). *Court. Spectacular Success of a Fairly Unspectacular Movie.* Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/35892357/Court Spectacular Success of a Fairly Unspectacular Movie](https://www.academia.edu/35892357/Court_Spectacular_Success_of_a_Fairly_Unspectacular_Movie)
19. Khan, S. (2000). *Kothis, gay and other MSM.* Delhi: Naz Foundation.
20. Kosambi, M. (1991). *Images of Women and the Feminine in Maharashtra.* Economic and Political Weekly, 26(25), 1519-1524. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41498380>
21. Khopkar, A. (1977). *A Brief History of Marathi Cinema.* Khopkar, Arun. 'Marathi Cinema.' in Maharashtra, *Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar Felicitation Volume.* Ed. Achyut Keshav Bhagwat. Kolhapur: V. S. Khandekar Amrit Mahotsava Satkar Samiti, 1977, 292–323.
22. Lacey, N. (2009). *Image and representation: key concepts in media studies.* (2nd ed.). Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
23. Lorber, J., & Farrell, S. A. (1991). *The Social construction of gender.* Newbury Park, Calif: Sage Publications.
24. Mulvey, L. (1975.). *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema.*
25. Nelmes, J. (1999). *Women and film.* In J. Nelmes (Ed.), *An introduction to film studies* (2nd ed.) (pp. 265-306). Londong: Routledge
26. Schumacher, E. H., Elston, P. A., & D'Esposito, M. (2003). Neural evidence for representation-specific response selection. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 15(8), 1111–1121. <https://doi.org/10.1162/089892903322598085>
27. Slama, K. (2004). *Rural culture is a diversity issue.* *Minnesota Psychologist*, 53(1), 9– 12
28. Tambe, A. (2009) *Reading Devadasi Practice through Popular Marathi Literature.* Economic and Political Weekly, April25, 2009, Vol. XLIV No. 17, p.92
29. Thrippangottur. (2011) *Census of India.* Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India.

30. Vanita, R., and S. Kidwai, eds. 2000. *Same-sex love in India: Readings from literature and history*. New York: St. Martin's Press
31. Vasudevan, R. (2010), 'Geographies of the cinematic public: Notes on regional, national and global histories of Indian cinema', *Journal of the Moving Image*, 9, pp. 94–117.
32. Wani, A. (2013). *The New Marathi Film*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(11), 27-30. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23391414>
33. Yasin, S. (2013). *What is Bollywood's role in changing Indian attitudes to women?*. Retrieved from <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/01/bollywood-india-gender-women-new-delhi-salman-khan/>
34. *Court* (2014). Directed by Chaitanya Tamhane. Zoo Entertainment Pvt Ltd
35. *Fandry* (2013). Directed by Nagraj Manjule. Navalakha Arts. Holy Basil Productions
36. *Jogwa* (2009). Directed by Rajiv Patil. Mumbai: iDream Productions
37. *Natrang*.(2009) Directed by Ravi Jadhav. Mumbai: Zee Talkies
38. *Sairat* (2016). Directed by Nagraj Manjule. Aatpat Production