CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

There is probably no area of social life today that is more volatile than sexuality and sexual identity. Every day seems to churn out debates centering on questions about sexual behavior which is not normative, projected perversion and choices, about the meaning and place of sexuality in shaping human lives. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “trangressive” (emphasis is mine) in the following way:

a. Involving a violation of moral or social boundaries; relating to art or literature in which orthodox moral, social, and artistic boundaries are challenged by the representation of unconventional behaviour and the use of experimental forms.

b. To pass over or go beyond (a limit, boundary, etc.)

Any challenge to the established boundaries of gender and sexuality that presume and preempt the permutations of conceivable and feasible gender configurations within culture, is a trangressive expression which debunks the parameters positioned within a hegemonic cultural discourse grounded in polarities and binaries, and appears in the language of universal prudence.

It is the exploration and analysis of such transgressive pockets that forms the fundamental task of my thesis, which is an undertaking aimed at examining the ways in which gender politics is depicted, scrutinised and investigated in films and to delimit the scope of such an enquiry I have made a selection of films, namely: Amol Palekar’s Daayraa (1996), Pedro Almodovar’s All About My Mother (1999), Duncan Tucker’s Transamerica (2005), and Santosh Sivan’s Navarasa (2005).
The focus will be on the problematisation (and possible destabilisation) of basic notions such as gender (in-)equality, masculinity, femininity and sexual norms, although differing from one film to another. Cinema is a major artefact for the dissemination of cultural patterns as well as for construction of meanings. In my project I have evaluated how cinema reflects and reworks institutional parameters thereby generating a processing function in audiences that is especially significant in times of social change and hence, cinema transmutes into a site where people establish, define and interpret social identities.

1.1 Cinema as an Apparatus

Since its inception, the cinematic medium has been considered a realist medium because its mechanical reproduction appears to capture the reality truthfully and convincingly. Cinema serves a crucial role in shaping the public mind with its potent apparatuses of fiction and nonfiction that delight, transform, and deceive; it carries in it dramatic visual effects, synthetic reveries, imitated emotions and predetermined spontaneity. Cinema, particularly in the narrative form, plays a major role in shaping our private thoughts and public behaviour. This ability of Cinema is exploited by the filmmakers to investigate various concerns of human struggle and strife.

The transformative capability of the cinematic medium can be attributed to its ability to reach out at once to individuals and to the masses, which sets it apart from the other art forms, especially visual. Masses comprehend the semiotic language of cinema far easier than the language of the theatre since the audio-visual has a far greater outreach and universality that enables cinema to be a socially diffused art form that permeates households, workplaces, schools, and other institutions with its accessible language of signs and codes; many plays can easily be adapted to film
form. The intimacy of watching the film because of its technical abilities of close-up and extreme close-ups and creating the surround sound has the effect of directness that the theatre lacks despite the action unfolding before the eyes of the audience. In fact, it can be argued that in the postmodern era, cinema has built a bridge between the low culture and high culture. The audio-visual culture of the present time employs cinema for learning and relating to the world. In the event of one’s worldview being restricted to the boundaries of his or her language, a language whose scope transcends verbal communication (say, cinematic language) holds the potential to change the worldview for masses. Although cinema plays a paramount role in injecting particular values into public consciousness, history of cinematic movements (e.g. Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, and Third Cinema) has shown that the medium can also be a vehicle for intervention and social change. While speaking about cinema’s role as public pedagogical machinery, Henry Giroux wrote:

A visual technology (cinema) that functions as a powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities, and experience, suggests how important it has become as a site of cultural politics. (Giroux 6)

Assuming that cinema is a form of public pedagogy, one of the greatest challenges to using cinema for social justice is accessibility to cinema that contains thought-provoking elements, which can help facilitate social transformation and become a vehicle to question essentialist and redundant cultural ideals.

The films that I have chosen for this thesis are transgressive in nature as they challenge the sexual and cinematic taboos; while promoting the freedom of expression regarding the varieties that exist on the spectra of gender and sexuality, they jolt the heterosexual viewership out of their complacent attitude towards being
unaware of the aforesaid variations. The characters embark on a progression of self-discovery, leading to sexual recognition and/or freedom by way of defying the patriarch, usually symbolized by a silent or absent father in the films. A transformation that is usually initiated by a fantastical episode occurs, which shakes the characters out of their moribund slumber of stale and oppressive status quo and thrusts them into a new way of being. The exploratory works of the filmmakers constitute specifically cinematic interventions into wider contemporary cultural debates about the status of gender, sexuality and subject-hood at the turn of the twenty-first century. These films contain (both male and female) homosexual and/or transgender characters in the lead or the supporting roles. This is done by means of de-naturalisation of the sexual spectacle or generic collage and the dislocation of ideology from genre; the heterosexual viewership is challenged.

Given the extent of problematization of gender, sexuality and identity, there is often a good chance for these concepts to be interpreted or understood in a lopsided manner, according to traditionally established parameters, especially with regard to extremely challenging trangressiveness. Therefore, before deliberating on the complexities and the configurations that I wish to explore, it becomes necessary to elaborate upon the implications and significations of the aforesaid ideas or their variegated categories.

1.2 Gender and Sexuality

1.2.1 Overview

Being socially, historically and culturally constructed, ‘Sexuality’ and ‘Gender’ (emphasis is mine) are conventions that relate not only to the physical body but also to beliefs, ideologies, and imaginations, which makes it almost impossible for
them to have singular definitions. Jeffrey Weeks states that gender, as related to “the social differentiation between men and women” (Weeks 367) must be understood as different from the term ‘sex’ (emphasis is mine), which “refers to the anatomical differences between men and women” (Weeks 367). It must be recognized that the implications prove to be much more complex than simple definitions may lead one to suppose. Notwithstanding the difference between the terms, these definitions emphasise the condition of both sexuality and gender as constructed categories, used to classify people and to prescribe a specific code of conduct. According to Michel Foucault, in *History of Sexuality I*, all identities are created in a network of power. The sex of a person, based on his anatomy, has all along been regarded as a given essence to human beings and is taken as the starting point for developing one’s identity. Sexual categorization provides the fundamental basis for constructing one’s identity. Thus, human beings always feel the need to categorize people into different categorizes - man and woman, western and non-western, and so forth.

“The notion of ‘sex’ made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures, and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle...” (*History of Sexuality I* 154; emphasis belongs to the author). Here the role of gendering process by social construction of taboos and convention ought to be mentioned, as often this consciousness itself shapes up the ‘gender-ed’ (my emphasis) behaviour in human beings rather than being guided by biological instincts. Considering sex to be physiologically determined and gender to be culturally constructed, it is well established that human beings are categorized into a binary structure drawing a line between men and women, masculine and feminine. One’s gender is developed on the
basis of the sex one is born into. Furthermore, cultural and situational factors are vital in shaping gender identity.

In cultural artefacts like cinema, all the plots, the relationships between characters and the personalities of those characters are written and enacted within a few dominant ideologies. For example, male characters are always the subjects of the narrative and comparatively, women merely serve as the (sexual) object or a submissive, passive and docile being of their male counterpart. The directors of the selected films, however, have attempted to subvert or reverse the dominant ideology of gender construction by calling into question our habitual ways of seeing sexuality and perception of gender roles through ‘mise-en-scène’ (emphasis is mine) and unconventional narrative. The concept of feminine men, masculine women and most people refusing to conform entirely to either designation, is not new; however, in contemporary times, the recognition that the concepts of sex and gender do overlap in reality, has become much greater.

Nonetheless, our expectation that men should be masculine and women feminine often obscures the variation that occurs in nature andlimits our collective ability to recognize and imagine alternative possibilities. The terms homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and heterosexual - all refer to categories of sexual identity, which unsurprisingly, are thoroughly contested terms; each has a different meaning, historical connotation and political implication. Exploring the connections between sexual identity and gender identity is one of the central undertakings of the thesis.

Next, I present a brief encapsulation of the theoretical works of some major critics, who have been seminal in discussing the various implications and patterns of the association between sexuality and gender and have been crucial in my understanding of the queer theory as the background for my research. I have
reviewed the existing literature, critically examining thoughts and ideas behind gender deviance in relation to three main perspectives - the essentialist or naturalist approach, the social constructionist position and the gender performance theorists.

1.2.2 Gender

A current preoccupation among critics like Judith Butler, is the fact that the notion of gender interacts with other concepts that constitute social relations, indicating how essentialist the social discourses that classify different individuals into the dichotomy man/woman are; such definitions informed by the patriarchal discourses assume that gendered identities are uniform, fix, and totalizing, thereby failing to account for the complexity of gendered identities. Butler explains the implausibility of the already mentioned assumption that the term ‘woman’ (emphasis is mine) denotes a common identity:

If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered ‘person’ transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Gender Trouble 4-5; all emphasis belong to the author).

Butler argues that the differentiation between gender and sex used by feminist critics is still problematic. In Gender Trouble, she demonstrates the instability of the notion of “female,” claiming that “its meaning is as troubled and unfixed as ‘woman’” (Gender Trouble xxxi; emphasis is the author’s). She refers to this problem using the
term “female trouble which is historical configuration of a nameless female indisposition which thinly veiled the notion that being female is a natural disposition” (Gender Trouble xxx). In other words, the female trouble refers to the inconsistency of the belief that the female sex is biologically determined. Affirming that sex is as socially constructed as gender, Butler defends that notions of a biological basis should never be taken for granted in the definition of gender identities and that, rather than being the source of gender differences, the notion of sex is informed by the same discursive system that informs the notion of gender (Gender Trouble 9-10).

For Butler, the construction of gender can imply determinism if it suggests the body to be “a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed;” it implies free will if it suggests that the body is the instrument through which “an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself” (Gender Trouble 12, 12). It can, thus, be perceived that the body serves as merely a medium, externally related to a set of customary cultural meanings, and this perception turns even more problematic in light of the body itself being a construction, devoid of “a signifiable existence prior to the mark of [its] gender,” (Gender Trouble 12) which makes it very difficult to dissociate the body from the tendency to be a passive instrument lying in wait to be brought to life by a specifically immaterial will. People only become “intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (Gender Trouble 22). Moreover, the same cultural matrix that determines which gender identities are intelligible also determines which ones are unacceptable. Addressing the question of how the practices regulating gender also govern culturally comprehensible notions of identity, Butler argues:

‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender,
sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the specters of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the ‘expression’ or ‘effect’ of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice (*Gender Trouble* 23; all emphasis belong to the author).

This notion of heterosexuality being the ‘original source’ (my emphasis) is yet again explored by Butler in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” where she affirms that “[t]here is no ‘proper’ gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another” (“Imitation” 722; emphasis is the author’s). She undermines the erroneous assumption that heterosexualised genders are the normal, the original ones, rendering the notion of gender its implicit qualities: phantasmatic (because it is based on an ideal), performative (because “it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express.”), compulsive (because it is constantly repeating that performance in order to be seen as real and original), and compulsory (because the noncompliance with heterosexual norms results in “ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions” (“Imitation” 725, 725).

She suggests that heterosexuality does not precede homosexuality as much as it is the very potentiality of this latter that makes possible the former’s claim of originality (“Imitation” 724). The performative repetition of heterosexuality is what renders heterosexual identity the illusory quality of being natural. That is, the more the children learn and actualize what they are taught, the more those stereotypical
gender roles are considered natural and normal by society, in that cultural and social conditioning is mistakenly related to biological predispositions.

Butler also discusses the implications of the relation between gender presentation and sexuality:

Sexuality always exceeds any given performance, presentation, or narrative which is why it is not possible to derive or read off a sexuality from any given gender presentation. . . Sexuality is never fully “expressed” in a performance or practice. . . Part of what constitutes sexuality is precisely that which does not appear and that which, to some degree, can never appear. . . That which is excluded for a given gender presentation to “succeed” may be precisely what is played out sexually, that is, an “inverted” relation between gender and gender presentation and gender presentation and sexuality. On the other hand, both gender presentation and sexual practices may correlate such that it appears that the former “expresses” the latter, and yet both are jointly constituted by the very sexual possibilities that they exclude (“Imitation” 725-26; all emphasis belong to the author).

Hence, there is no necessary continuity between gender presentation and sexuality, so that, for instance, the way a person behaves in public is not enough to express his or her sexual practices, much less his or her sexual identity (as the latter may also not be expressed through the sexual practices). The idea that gender presentation expresses sexuality is itself illusory:

[It] is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood
as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth. ("Imitation"
728)

Butler goes on to argue that the operation of thought through which heterosexual naturalises itself (sex informs gender that informs sexuality) can be inverted and displaced: the notions of sex, sexual identity, and gender are not the causes of the compulsory performance of heterosexuality, but produced or maintained by the effects of this performance. It is the notion that heterosexuality is natural and original (an idea conveyed by the compulsory repetition of heterosexuality) that informs the conception that sex, gender and sexuality are notions composed of binary categories and that they are continuous and congruent with each other.

The notion of unintelligible sexualities could be applied, then, to homosexuality and bisexuality, while the notion of unintelligible genders would relate to gays, lesbians, travestites, transgenders and cases of androgyny - possibilities contesting the idea that sex and genders are always binary (male/female, man/woman). The notion of androgyny is quite important in arguments about the complexities of gender identities. Ginette Castro discusses the androgynist point of view as a theory that developed within the new feminist movement of the 1960s and affirms that androgyny is "the most revolutionary concept in contemporary feminism" (Castro 125) that debunks the notion that the male and the female sexes are necessarily opposite and that one is privileged over the other, claiming instead that the so-called masculine and feminine traits are equally present in all individuals and consequently, arguing in favor of a "total realization of the self...a reconciliation between the sexes, with every sort of being participating in the full span of human experience" (Castro 126.) It is not a strictly codified theory but a new perspective in feminism with ontological and social implications,
The modernist writer Virginia Woolf proposes a concept of androgyny in relation to literary creation and criticism. Androgyny, for Woolf, is the condition in which the individual lives and thinks without the necessity of assuming a social position or an identity in relation to one’s biological sex and in opposition to the other sex. She argues that this fusion of the male and the female sides of the brain fertilizes the mind and permits its faculties to be used at their fullest. Nevertheless, the opinions about the concept of androgyny are not consensual. On one hand, it puts into question the necessity of a binary division of gender identities, offering a certain freedom for those who were so far constrained to choose between only one of the two possibilities of gender identification offered by cultural hegemonic discourses; it refutes the necessity of gender identification according to which the individual’s assumption of a social position and the construction of his or her personality are not informed by biological sexual differences. On the other hand, it can be argued that androgyny is a stagnant concept because it ignores issues of power which can promote individual psychological transformation through material change. The analysis of how the notions of masculinity and femininity are constructed can be useful to understand the process of sexual and gendered identification conveyed in relation to its particular time and culture.

In this context, Gayle Rubin’s concept of the sex/gender system provides a good explanation for the cultural construction of gendered ideals. According to the author, the sex/gender system, present in every society, is a set of measures by which “the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be” and that this system is the part of social life which is “the locus of the oppression of women, of sexual minorities, and of certain aspects of
human personality within individuals” (Rubin 543, 534). The notion of patriarchy being the only social system working to maintain sexism causes the other distinctions to be obscured. She argues that:

Any society will have some systematic ways to deal with sex, gender, and babies. Such a system may be sexually egalitarian, at least in theory, or it may be “gender stratified,” as seems to be the case for most or all of the known examples. But it is important . . . to maintain a distinction between the human capacity and necessity to create a sexual world, and the empirically oppressive ways in which sexual worlds have been organised. Patriarchy subsumes both meanings into the same term. Sex/gender system, on the other hand, is a neutral term which refers to the domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organise it (Rubin 539; emphasis is the author’s).

In consonance with Butler’s argument against patriarchy being essentialised as a universal structure of domination, Rubin also proposes the use of the term sex/gender system in place of ‘patriarchy,’ (emphasis is mine) as this latter implies biased and erroneous definitions about the creation and the organization of sexual practices and relations and complies with the idea of all women being subjected to a ‘common subjugation’ (emphasis is mine). Rubin’s arguments for a change in the use of the term patriarchy also relate to a cultural historical inconsistency: it refers to the specific form of male dominance represented in the Old Testament, namely, pastoral nomads (Rubin 539). Using the same term to refer to contemporary institutions, she argues, is therefore not proper.

Emphasising anthropological studies like those of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Rubin talks about the social organization of sex being generally based on gender,
perpetration of obligatory heterosexuality and the control of female sexuality. This suppression of individual characteristics under the constraint of one imposed general category also might be representative of the imposition of heterosexuality. Consequently, Rubin states that “the suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is ... a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women” (Rubin 546). She also argues that what entails the constraint of female sexuality is the asymmetry between the two sides in the binary gender relations (Rubin 548). But, as socially informed, these relations need to be contextualised in order to be contested.

In the context of patriarchal societies, the definition of the nature and social role of a woman are always relative to a norm which is typically male. Common roles prescribed to women by patriarchy are the ones of a good wife and of a good mother, and they call for precise qualities, thought to be naturally feminine, such as endurance, sentiment and self-sacrifice. The notion of biological determination of femininity, in this sense, leads to the creation of negative stereotypes for women who refuse the ideal roles patriarchal discourses assign to them. Such stereotypes are based, thus, on the idea of unnaturality or supernaturality; every behavior or personality that differs from the prescribed norms is denigrating, evil and threatening to the order that patriarchal discourses label as ‘natural’ (my emphasis.) This is also what Martha Gilbert and Susan Gubar attack when they discuss Virginia Woolf’s ideas that male authors have created two extremes images to represent women in literature, those of the “angel” and the “monster” (Gilbert 596).

Along similar lines but with a different focus, Peter F. Murphy investigates how both men and women are victimized in literary representations of gender – how the notion of masculinity is “a set of rhetorical constructions (fictions)” (Murphy 1)
and how the forms of its representation (the “construction of manhood”) (Murphy 2) are varied in literature. Such masculine roles have their source in myths about male sexuality that put frequent and strong focus on the relationship between a man and his body. An example of this relationship (and that is present in modern literature) is a man’s obsession with his penis, which becomes “a symbol of power, an instrument of appropriation, and a weapon” (Murphy 4). I believe that these characteristically manly codes of impassiveness, physical strength, sexual competence and heroism are perceived to function to protect the social unit. Like the notion of femininity for Butler, masculinity and male sexuality for Murphy cannot be understood as static, abstract, or essential. The author considers the current literary representations of manhood as dominant cultural assumptions about masculinity, in a way that this representation ends up divulging the implausibility of such assumptions. This fact too is in agreement with Butler’s argument that non-conforming gender identities (or “subversive matrices of gender disorder”) question the plausibility of the cultural matrix of intelligibility for gender identities (Gender Trouble 24).

David Glover and Kora Kaplan discuss George L. Mosse’s concept of “the manly ideal,” which emerged as a consequence of the eighteenth century revival of interest in the ancient Greek ideal of male beauty and consisted of a “fusion of the moral and the visual,” (Genders 59, 60) claiming that a person’s moral health was subject to his physical fitness (thereby proclaiming that this ideal of masculinity requires intense effort on part of the man, who must confront his own self, even perceiving his own body as an foe and harboring hostility against others) and that feminine traits had to be “kept firmly in their proper place” because in men they were a “sign of weakness” (Genders 61). According to Mosse, the definitions of masculinity and male sexuality depended on the definition of its countertypes, which
were said to be dangerous threats to the healthy body, and therefore, should be resisted (like masturbation or sodomy, for instance) (Genders 61).

Concerning the issue of the differences in the way men and women are affected by the imposition of gender roles, Glover concludes that the perception of masculinity has become both more homophobic and more equivocally playful about sexual identity, which continues idealising and marginalising women and thereby facilitating man’s continuous re-masculinisation. The author, hence, seems to agree with the idea that notions of femininity continue to locate women in a position of major victims, independently of how notions of masculinity also victimise men.

1.2.3 Sexuality

Studies about sexuality emphasise the fact that it is a social construction, which similar to the term gender, presupposes a set of behaviors and characteristics considered culturally and socially accepted and another set that consists of what is unacceptable; to the former relates to heterosexuality, while the latter, for example, has traditionally been related to homosexuality or bisexuality. However, the basis of this division between heterosexuality and homosexuality is undecided, as Nancy Chodorow observes: “Both are similarly constructed and experienced compromise formations” (Chodorow 770). In order to understand the mechanism that defines these two categories as opposite, it is necessary to return here to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality, already mentioned in relation to Butler’s notion of gender intelligible identities.

The regime of compulsory sexuality privileges heterosexuality and condemns alternative sexual practices and identities, that is, those that deviate from the socially privileged function of biological reproduction. The individual’s assumption of a position in terms of his or her sexuality relates to the idea of sexual identity, which
Maggie Humm defines as “a sense of one’s own sexuality...culturally rather than biologically determined: the public presentation of sexual aims and objectives as integrated into the personality”\textsuperscript{5}, which can lead one to conclude that sexuality does not necessarily correspond to sexual practice. The very fact that public presentation and practice may reveal incoherent aspects of one’s sexualities confirms the complexity of the individual’s position.

Chodorow argues that psychoanalytic works based on the biological assumption that heterosexuality is innate or natural lead to problems, the most worrisome being the obvious denial of the fact that so-called normal heterosexuality is as specified in its object of desire as homosexuality is said to be. She goes on to say that “the fairy tales, myths, tales of love and loss and betrayal, movies, and books that members of a culture grow up with and thus share with others” (Chodorow 771) influence an individual’s choice of an object of sexual desire. Sexual fantasies, thus, reflect the individual’s appropriations of the language of these culturally created narratives, which also inform the notions of sexual attraction and attractiveness that are culturally privileged. Consequently, such notions vary historically and culturally. The individual component of heterosexual fantasy and desire consists of “a private heterosexual eroticism that contrasts with or specifies further the cultural norm” (Chodorow 772). Biology, in this sense, cannot explain the content of either cultural fantasy or private eroticism.

Michel Foucault emphasises the notion of sexuality as a social apparatus for control of individuals, describing its development throughout history. He claims that the term ‘sexuality’ (emphasis is mine) only appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century and that the constitution of this notion follows the norms originated from the development of sciences and from social institutions, as well as
from the “subjectivisation” (*History of Sexuality II*) of these norms by individuals. While describing the history of discourses on sexuality, the author rejects the common idea that society has always worked to repress sexuality, arguing instead that it is a historical construct provided by society and hence, the reason for the deployment of sexuality is not “in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way” (*History of Sexuality I* 107). In other words, sexuality is determined and controlled through discourses that intend to examine and explain the human sexualised body.

According to Foucault, such discourses have been incited by social institutions throughout time, in order “to expel from reality the forms of sexuality that were not amenable to the strict economy of reproduction,” namely, “unproductive activities,” “casual pleasures,” “practices whose object was not procreation.” Social discourses, which vary culturally and historically, provide not only the knowledge of ways of proper sexual behavior, but also of forms of sexual transgression: when a social norm defines what kind of behavior is proper, it also describes the behaviors that characterise the subversion of the rule.

One important aspect in Foucault’s account of the history of discourses on sexuality is the nineteenth-century change of focus in what concerned the groups whose sexuality should be examined and controlled: children, criminals, mentally ill people, and gays. He maintains that sexuality was then seen as the core of those peoples’ identity. Pedagogy was concerned with preventing children from masturbation and from so-called deviant sexual practices; women’s psychology was related to their sexualised body (the term ‘hysteria’ (emphasis is mine) was created in that period from the Greek word for womb, based on the idea of a causal relation
between a woman’s biological cycle and her psychological conditions); the alleged perverts were considered aberrations that had to be studied so that the danger they represented could be made explicit and, consequently, controlled.

The term ‘homosexual’ (emphasis is mine) was also invented by the scientific discourses of that time. Those who did not conform to the economic and conservative practice of sex solely for reproduction were examined as if perversion was an innate characteristic, possible of being detected through a technology of health and pathology. For this reason, Foucault calls this new way of treating transgressive sexuality an “implantation of perversion” (History of Sexuality I 41). According to him, the intensification of discourses on deviant sexuality has the ambiguous result of controlling such deviations and intensifying their recurrence. This ambiguity can be explained by the fact that these discourses provide both power and pleasure for both those who use them to classify individuals and to those individuals being classified by them. The ones who investigate the individuals who experience deviant sexual pleasures feel the pleasure of exercising power through this investigation. At the same time, those who are investigated feel the power of being able to experience sexual pleasures that are contrary to those socially accepted. For Foucault, through this circular process, the deviant sexualities become as socially determined as the socially accepted ones (History of Sexuality I 39-46).

He also explains the relation between sexuality and morality, affirming that the former is constructed and constrained by moral rules; he argues that the definition of morality is ambiguous, meaning both ‘code-oriented morality’ (my emphasis) which is a set of values and rules of action endorsed to individuals through various prescriptive agencies such as family, educational institutions and religious organisations and ‘ethics-oriented morality’(my emphasis) which is the manner in
which individuals react to a set of rules, either upholding them or repudiating them. In this sense, sexuality is shaped by social impositions, as well as by the individual’s internalised ideas about such impositions.

The author argues that, since antiquity, people believe in the idea of the excessive force of pleasure (the power of the appetites over the soul), which the Christian doctrine of the flesh associated with man’s fall from Eden (*History of Sexuality II* 50). Among Foucault’s examples of moral approaches to this excess is the association between “the ethics of sex” and “the ethics of the table” (*History of Sexuality II* 51). This association, which the author takes from Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, postulates that eating, drinking, and sex are forms of pleasure of contact and touch, which when enjoyed in excess bring the danger of exceeding what is necessary. I would say that this idea can be related to the vampire’s blood lust, which involves drinking in excess and serves as a metaphor for excess sexual appetite.

Moral codes and moral ethics, however, according to Foucault, have served to prevent people from surrendering to this excessive use of pleasure (*History of Sexuality II* 250); in this sense, the constitution of this self-disciplined subject requires an austerity. Foucault concludes that it is more useful to comprehend the historical transformations of moral experience than the history of moral codes – “a history of ‘ethics,’ understood as the elaboration of a form of relation to the self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct” (*History of Sexuality II* 251; all emphasis belong to the author).

Some points in Foucault’s theory, however, have been frequently criticized. One of them relates to his definition of sex and sexuality. Comparing Foucault’s and Butler’s differentiation of these two concepts, Elizabeth Grosz argues that Foucault
fails for not differentiating sex and sexuality properly, taking sex as a general term used to refer to both parts of the sexual binary (male and female):

With Foucault I agree that sex is a product, an end effect of regimes of sexuality (which is another way of saying that the inscription, functioning and practices of a body constitute what that body is). With Butler and against Foucault, I want to argue that both sex and sexuality are marked, lived and function according to whether it is a male or female body that is being discussed. Sex is no longer the label of both sexes in their difference, as in Foucault’s writings, a generic term indicating sexed, as opposed to inanimate, existence; it is now the label and terrain of the production and enactment of sexual difference.

Indeed, while concentrating his discussions of the history of sexuality on the sexual ethics from the antiquity, Foucault acknowledges that such ethics have been “thought, written and taught by men and addressed to [free] men” (History of Sexuality II 22), women and slaves were excluded from it. This also occurs in Foucault’s work, as he affirms that women’s sexuality has been treated as deviant in social discourse as well as homosexuality has, but concentrates his discussion only on the latter, dismissing the particularities that differentiate each case.

Another problem pointed out by other critics in Foucault’s works is his lack of account for the issue of gender. Teresa de Lauretis affirms that his arguments against the social construction of sexuality and the sexual oppression that results from it imply a denial of the existence of gender issues (Lauretis 223). Like the critics who endorse a concept of androgyny, he is accused of refusing to recognise the implications of gender difference in life experiences based on the idea that this difference is socially created. Indeed, Foucault does not discuss gender. This fact
distinguishes his ideas from those of Butler, which are based on Foucault’s assumptions about the artificiality of the notion of sexuality but took them further to include that of gender.

Differently from Foucault, Butler argues that gender differences not only are constructs of social oppression but also impact the individual’s subjectivity. In other words, recognising gender as a social construction is one thing and assuming that this fact hinders the incorporation of this notion into a person’s subjectivity as if it were a natural predisposition, is another. This incorporation attests the efficiency of the imposition of the notion of gender as a way of social control upon individuals, but the recognition of this efficiency does not mean complacency with such imposition. This fact is what Foucault assumes in relation to sexuality but refuses to consider in relation to gender.

Another problematic issue in Foucault’s arguments is his idea of a “truth of sex” (History of Sexuality I 58.) In the first volume of The History of Sexuality, he states that since the Middle Ages, Western societies have established a way of accessing the truth about people’s experience: the ritual of confession. He argues that what social institutions knew of the truth of sex or the actual configurations of sexual practices, was apprehended through that ritual of discourse. It is still the general standard governing the production of the “true discourse on sex,” (History of Sexuality I 63) though it is not only a religious ritual anymore, but is implied in the power relationships shared by people, for instance, children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists and so forth. The problem with this argument is that it essentialises the nature of sexuality, implying that sex or sexuality is something that can be fully grasped, understood through a discourse.
Actually, sexuality can neither be totally expressed nor fully apprehended through sexual performances, presentations or narratives because it is too complex, involving not only concepts and norms that are culturally determined but also having individual, subjective contours. Although Foucault’s argument about social discourses about sexuality prescribing norms for its practice (controlling individuals in this way) seems plausible, his suggestion that these discourses intend to and do attain the truth of sex, is not.

The notion of sexuality has frequently been used in the study of literary works to create stereotypes related to the representation of both male and female sexualities. The purported transgressive aspect of female sexuality has often been represented by the stereotype of the female monster. Gilbert and Gubar argue that this representation illustrates “Simone de Beauvoir’s thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man’s ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his own physical existence, his own birth and death”9 What the authors emphasize in the use of the woman-monster stereotype is less its literary significance than the consequences it brings to women’s life experience. This becomes clearer in the following passage:

The ‘killing’ of oneself into an art object—the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odors and aging, with hair which is invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick—all this testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying not to become female monsters. (Gilbert and Gubar 608)

From this argument follows that the representation of women’s sexuality as monstrous also fulfills the social function of controlling this sexuality, presenting a model of what they should not be, opposed to the prototypical ideal represented by the
label of the ‘angel-woman’ (my emphasis.) A similar approach can be applied to a discussion on men’s sexuality as represented in literary works. In her analysis of nineteenth-century gothic works written by women, for example, Cindy Hendershot discusses a process of eroticisation of British men as the result of imperialist expansion, since men are characterized in these works as both appealing and dangerous, as “the fantasy male lover of the gothic imagination in the explicit context of imperialism” (Hendershot 165). I would say that a characterisation of this gothic male lover in contemporary gothic fiction (like that of women’s sexuality) requires a historical contextualisation, so that the implications of stereotypes of women’s and men’s sexuality can be identified in relation to contemporary discourses.

Acknowledging the use of such stereotypes in literary works provides evidences for the kind of discourses on sexuality that these works convey and provides opportunities to analyse whether such discourses side with the norms of a compulsory heterosexuality or with the reactive forces of alternative sexualities. Michel Foucault postulates:

Sexuality must not be thought of as kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check…It is the name given to a historical construct…a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies,…the incitement of discourse, the formation of special knowledge, the strengthening of controls and resistances are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (History of Sexuality I 105).

What Foucault posits in the aforesaid comment is applicable to the concept of gender as well. He suggests that sex and identity both exist in the discourse of power. “Sex is placed by power in a binary system” (History of Sexuality I 83). People are forced to
fit themselves into the categories of men or women. By historicising sexuality, Foucault made it possible to argue that all the categories and assumptions that operate when we think about sex, sexual difference, gender and sexuality are the products of cultural discourses and thus social, rather than natural, artifacts.

Adrienne Rich has extended Foucault’s theories in an essay entitled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” in which she claimed that heterosexuality is a “beachhead of male dominance” that, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution. The selected cinematic texts do not buy into such a binary, restrictive and suffocating view on sex and gender. Rather, twist around and shake the supposed stable, normative and heterosexual way of human existence. These films are polemical, taboo-breaking and transgressive and deal with sexual subversion. Transsexuals, feminised men, and masculinised people these films, which have gone much further in portraying the sheer erotic joy of sexual variation. The subversion of identity is the key subject matter these films.

1.2.4 Contemporary Debates on Gender and Sexuality

Gender studies appeared as a new field in the mid- to late 1970s and into the early 1980s, when, in conjunction with Gay and Lesbian Studies, “It turned its attention on all gender formation, both heterosexual and homosexual” (Rivkin and Ryan 677). Linda Hutcheon relates this development to the postmodernist contestation of values and ideologies that characterize Western culture as androcentric, phallocentric, and heterocentric (“Feminism and Postmodernism” 30).

The gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements placed a particular emphasis on community and a unified gay/lesbian identity-based politics. Gay liberation and lesbian feminism saw their projects as a release from hetero/homo and masculine/feminine roles. By the mid-1970s, however, people of colour – particularly
lesbians of colour - began to recognise their interests were not always adequately represented and their experiences often overlooked; they began to critique the movements' bias towards the white and middle-class, questioning whether gay liberation is a project of identity-based exploitation. Constructionist scholars and the immergence of poststructuralism provided a way to deconstruct the category of the gay/lesbian subject and recognise a dissenting voice and as such poststructuralism inspired a revolt by the gay/lesbian periphery against the gay/lesbian centre.

The notion of a unified gay/lesbian identity-based politics was now in dispute: individuals no longer had a core gay/lesbian essence that race and class only subtly affect. Individuals are simultaneously gay/lesbian, white/black/Hispanic/indigenous, and middle/working class, each shaped by and shaping the others. For example, Butler argues that feminism represents the limits of identity politics and the category of ‘women’ (emphasis is mine) by failing to recognise its own constitutive power of claims to identity. The feminist articulation of a stable, gendered subject is thus problematised as the foundational premise of a feminism that relies on a binary gender/sex discourse. Indeed, for Butler the category of women is “normative and exclusionary and is invoked with the unmarked dimensions of class and racial privilege intact” (Gender Trouble 19).

The 1970s and 1980s were also intense in relation to the public debate on sexuality and gender (among scholars, liberal groups, and society). According to Jeffrey Weeks, this period was marked by attacks on the 1960s’ liberal reform on sexual morality. Instead of diminishing the social control over sexuality, this reform only proposed new forms of social regulation as an attempt to deal with the social changes taking place then. Consequently, the “permissiveness of the earlier age was attacked both by conservatives and by liberals” (Weeks 389). The discussion was
concerned with the consequences of permissiveness to the family structure, to the sexual roles, to the classification of heterosexuality and homosexuality in terms of normality, and to the values transmitted to children through sex education (Weeks 390).

Conservatives argued that these aspects would be threatened by the new regulation of sexuality, while liberal activists complained it did not truly guarantee the rights of freedom in relation to one’s own body. I suggest that today queer culture is centred on social difference and the multiplicity of identities. In poststructuralist terms, appealing to one’s sexual, gender, or ethnic identity as the grounds for community-building is particularly problematic because of the instabilities and exclusions related to those categories. While gay liberation framed homosexuality as an issue of sexual politics, poststructuralists frame the hetero/homo dichotomy in Western culture as political itself. Sociologist Steven Seidman argues that the notion of queer unites the heterogenous interests and desires marginalised by gay liberation. For him “queers are not united by any unitary identity but only by their opposition to disciplining, normalising social forces,” (Seidman 133) maintained by the gay/lesbian center.

The films in question feature peripheral figures, as well as non-normative expressions of sexuality which makes queer theory a useful, stimulating and interesting standpoint from which to examine these films. Sexual identity has often been torn between the presumed polarities of either being a fixed feature of human personality or being fluid and changeable. While queer theory is particularly difficult to delineate or pin down due to its ideals and opposition to categorisation and to try identifying queer theory as a significant school of thought runs the risk of fixating and essentialising it, reading films queerly enabled me to analyse normative as well as non-
normative expressions of being and desire. My use of queer theory emphasises that these films build a fluid viewing experience for the viewers, enabling them to take up positions of desire and undergo processes of identification which are either absent or denied to them in heteronormative cinema.

Queer theory is beneficial for understanding the construction of notions of sexuality that go beyond ideas of “the natural” (emphasis is mine) - ideas of a genetic and fixed set of sexual categories in opposition—and for understanding and actively opposing notions of sexuality and sexual labelling that are simplistically and discursively reduced so as to ignore the role in sexuality-based description and identity construction that are played by notions of time, space, need, material condition, and class demarcations—in other words, desire not grounded in gender-object-of-choice. The anti-foundationalist, essentialism-questioning stance of this strand of queer theory is well-placed to make a valuable contribution to a re-reading of the understanding of mainstream media ‘invisibility’ and ‘partial visibility’ (emphasis is mine) of non-heterosexual sexualities that emerged from within Lesbian and Gay Studies.

The selected films call into question the playfulness, construction and artificiality of gender identity with the portrayal of numerous sexually deviant characters, which indeed could be viewed as the embodiment of Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performance in the cinema. As Judith Butler proposed in *Gender Trouble*:

...perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was already always gender, with the consequences that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all...Gender reality is performative which means,
quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed
(Gender Trouble 9; emphasis belong to the author).

According to her, gender does not exist as an objective, natural thing. By underlining
the artificial, proscribed, and performative nature of gender identity, the chosen body
of films seeks to trouble the definition of gender, challenging the status quo in order
to fight for the rights of marginalised, transgressive identities. Moreover, these films
do not stop at this emphasis on the falsehood behind sexuality by highlighting the
performative aspect of gender identity, but go a step further by successfully shedding
light on the truth of sexuality, which is, the ‘undecidedness’ and ‘in-betweenness’
(emphasis is mine) of sex and gender identities.

These films highlight that the identity is never fixed or absolute, let alone
binary. Rather, sex and gender identities always exist in a state of ‘in-betweenness’,
transgression and instability that strongly echoes Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of
“carnival body”¹¹ – a body of becoming rather than being. Moreover, the free-floating
nature of sex and gender identities is precisely the starting point where people can be
liberated from the restrictive and normative heterosexual framework.

I have found these films to have not only countered the notion of normative
heterosexuality with the bold descriptions of social outcasts including transvestites,
transsexuals, gays and lesbians but also demonstrate the un-decidability and
instability that is precisely the truth and ‘norm’ (emphasis is mine) behind sexuality.
Thus, it is the heterosexual desire, which is the subversive power that always attempts
to challenge the originally unstable sex and gender and turn it into a stable entity.
Engaging the very variety of possible sexual identifications and affiliations to
challenge gender as we commonly think of it and to expose its insufficiency as a
category, many gender critics have explored the issues raised by diverse sexualities:
homo-, hetero-, trans-, bi-and to use the term now applied defiantly and proudly to forms of sexuality that do not serve reproductive heterosexuality — queer. Queer theorists emphasise that sexuality is not restricted to homo- and heterosexuality, which are usually seen as mutually exclusive, binary opposites.

Throughout the course of this thesis, the terms normative/non-normative, normativity and heteronormativity are used often; the use of these terms refers to the widespread social assumption that biological sex decrees gender roles and sexual desire. Queer theory facilitates an understanding of the inconsistencies and problems in a society governed by heterosexual norms on part of the reader, spectator or critic; thus, my use of queer theory is inextricably linked to the concept of normativity. We can see the dominance of heteronormative discourse in projection of heterosexual couplings, primarily through marriage and children, who are portrayed as being ‘natural’, ‘right’ and ‘happy’ endings (emphasis is mine). Heteronormativity is not restricted solely to sexual practices; it extends to many aspects of cultural behaviour including work, the family unit, child-care, leisure activities and artistic expression. Non-normative, or queer, subjects question and subvert these cultural ideals, usually provoking unease and rejection by ‘normative’ members of society, thereby rendering these non-normative individuals marginal.

To accomplish an interrogation of this body of films, I have employed the critical approaches immanent in Gender Studies and Queer Theory, for an examination of non hetero-normative gender portrayals, the constructed nature of gender, and its performative nature. By means of its orientation to sexually oppressed minorities which have often been excluded from mainstream discourses, Queer Theory offers approaches and insights which are not available in other theoretical models — for example, Marxist analysis has an economic bias, and for reasons of
profit and production, is committed to hetero-normativity; an Auteurist approach is equally barren despite its intrinsic allure as it offers no concrete methods of analysis. Even Masculinity and Feminist studies, while offering intriguing insights into the nature of male-female relationships and interactions, fail because of their primarily heterosexual orientation, to address the subtleties of homosexual systems of relationships, interaction and desire.

At the same time, however, there is an ethical trigger in the term ‘queer’ as it refers to political and cultural resistance to heteronormative culture. Queer theory has been reproached of being predominantly interested in gay, white, male expressions of sexuality and theorists have argued that is in danger of becoming ‘normalised’ (emphasis is mine). This thesis seeks to argue that queer theory still has currency to understand non-normative subjectivities in the cinema.

Michel Foucault's studies deal extensively with how gender is constructed by the individual and the society around him, and its relationship to power and repression. Highly influenced by Louis Althusser's postulation of an ideological state apparatus, Foucault wrote *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction (The Will to Knowledge)* in 1976 following his book-length examination of the mental health (*Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, 1961*) and criminal justice systems (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, 1975.* ) In the course of his studies, Foucault re-examined the concept of the ideological state apparatus, refining and extending it to the concept of sexuality itself. He established sexuality as an apparatus, suggesting that sexuality functioned in the same manner as church, state or family, and this critical interpretation of human experience, transformed the Althusserian hypothesis. Equally important is his suggestion that responses to an ideological apparatus could also be resistant, even seditious:
...there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant or violent; Still others that are quick to compromise, interested or sacrificial. (*History of Sexuality I* 6)

It is this particular insight which is of greatest utility to my project - that the response to social mechanisms has the potential to obstruct or impair or dislocate the functioning of that social apparatus, even as it may seem to be operating in concordance with it. Many films, which on cursory viewing and examination may seem to support and uphold conventional definitions and implementations of the masculine may, in fact, subtly question the nature and virtue of those definitions. Foucault continued, introducing revolutionary interpretations of gender. He was among the first to suggest that gender is constructed in response to stimuli of the social system; that, indeed, it was not fixed or biological as had been previously thought, but was mutable and an artifact of various countervailing social influences.

Men and women were no longer conceived of as defined or controlled by their genitals, but beings whose gender was established in response to many other stimuli, of which biological structure was but a single element. Foucault therefore eviscerated the Church’s and the State’s bases for the control and interpretation of sexuality and sexual beings.

There is no single, all-encompassing strategy, valid for all of society and uniformly bearing on all the manifestations of sex. For example . . . to reduce all of sex to its reproductive function . . . fails to take into account the manifold objectives aimed for, the manifold means employed in the different sexual politics concerned with the two sexes, the different age groups and social classes (*History of Sexuality I* 7).
Basing her work on Michel Foucault's formulations of sexuality as cultural construction, Butler choreographed a masterly pavane of the pathways of gender formation and modification. For Butler, gender is a dance upon a bed of spikes:

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one's knowing or without one's willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint...One is always 'doing' either with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. But the terms which make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside one's self, beyond one's self in a sociality that has no single author and contests the notion of authorship itself (Undoing Gender 1; emphasis belong to the author)

Starting with Althusser’s identification of sexuality as an instrument of social control, Judith Butler extended his work on two fronts: first, in examining the nature of gender production and definition; and second by elucidating Foucault’s identification of the possible subversive nature of social compliance.

Butler theorised that gender, in all its manifestations, was a performative activity to establish and convince others of an assumed gender role. Her discussion of the nature of drag illustrates the way in which all genders are formed and established, giving us a pattern against which to judge others’ actions:

Drag...implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems there is no original or primary gender that drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself (“Imitation” 725)
Butler thus opened an elaborate lesbian-feminist discourse on the constructed nature of sexuality and its implications. While her primary focus has been as a lesbian, her insights have opened the way for further elaboration and discussion of the nature and place of masculinity and the male body.

...within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative - that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed...There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results. (*Gender Trouble* 24-25; emphasis belongs to the author)

Steve Neale, in his essay “Masculinity as Spectacle,” develops Butler’s position and combines it with elements from Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” on the nature of spectatorship and patriarchy, offering further insights into the positioning of the body as spectacle and forging a connection between Mulvey's pioneering feminist essay and studies of masculinity, specifically the representation of homosexuality:

Heterosexual masculinity has been identified as a structuring norm in relation both to images of women and gay men. It has to that extent been profoundly problematized, rendered visible. But it has rarely been discussed or analyzed as such.13

He argued that male homosexuality is constantly present as a nuance, as a potentially troubling subtext of many films and genres, but one that is dealt with covertly, symptomatically and has to be repressed. Neale's work triggered an interest in films which placed the male body on show. Mulvey identified the nature of the cinematic
gaze and spectatorship – that the point of view of the movie spectator is, and is crafted
to be, that of a heterosexual male. The view therefore, is hegemonic - and yet, as
Foucault has written, it may be something else also. In Hollywood films,
spectatorship is constituted in a potentially dangerous and transgressive manner. As
Neale posits in "Masculinity as Spectacle,"

The erotic elements involved in the relations between the spectator and
the male image have constantly to be repressed and disavowed. Were
this not the case, mainstream cinema would have openly come to terms
with the male homosexuality it so assiduously seeks either to denigrate
or deny. (Neale 14)

In particular, Neale looks at the nature of narcissistic identification and its
relationships to power, control and aggression.

Mulvey established that the standard point of view of the spectator of the
Hollywood feature film was that of the heterosexual male. Neale argues that the
spectacle of the male, the exposure to view of the male body objectifies, castrates and
reduces the male to a similar position as woman in film; he expands upon this in his
discussion of Paul Willamen’s “Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male Body,” in which
he postulates that bringing the male body to view in the same manner as a woman’s,
stimulates homosexual desire, even in heterosexual males. This tension, he insists
needs to be dispelled by removing the sexual attraction of the male body, usually by
sado-masochistic display, hence the frequency of scenes of torture and bloody combat
in films. By disqualifying the male body as an object of erotic contemplation and
desire, the cinematic discourse is made safe for patriarchal viewing (Neale 19).

Homosexuality is always a possibility, just beyond the edge of consciousness
and can with surprising speed erupt and overwhelm the unthinking heterosexual male.
The very act of disqualifying the erotic potential of the male, is itself a process of uncertain value and result. This very process becomes itself an eroticisation of the male. The performance of the male body portraying male undertakings and accomplishing stereotypical gender roles is an erotically charged spectacle, which, rather than disqualifying the male as a sexual object, serves to underscore and emphasise his erotic desirability. This attempt to negate the naturally homosexual nature of masculine display acknowledges and stimulates the homosexual latency of the male and itself places in jeopardy the image of a conventional gender role, and by extension, the nature of patriarchal society itself. Butler herself addresses this point in her own discussion of the bases for homophobia and homicide:

The desire to kill someone, or killing someone, for not conforming to the gender norm by which a person is “supposed” to live...is to court death. The person who threatens violence proceeds from the anxious and rigid belief that a sense of world and a sense of self will be undermined... Violence is a vain and violent effort to restore order, to renew the social world on the basis of intelligible gender, and to refuse the challenge to rethink the world as something other than natural or necessary (Undoing Gender 34; emphasis belongs to the author).

While technological advancement and savvy marketing strategies have enabled an easy access to the latest films and film writings round the world, these trends have also escalated scholarly and critical interest in cinema. This project situates the works of the selected filmmakers within the context of a changing cultural and social climate in contemporary times. Taking those realities as given, my purpose is to look beyond the apparent marginality of the works of these directors in order to evaluate how they relate to, or work to subvert or extend, the broad-brush depiction of...
contemporary world. Following are the films which will be used as points of reference:

1) *All About My Mother* (1999): Pedro Almodovar directed this story of a woman and her circle of friends who find themselves suffering a variety of emotional crises, which went on to be the Best Foreign Language Film at the coveted Oscar Academy Awards in 1999. The film centers on Manuela, a nurse who oversees donor organ transplants a hospital in Madrid and single mother to Esteban, a teenager who wants to be a writer. On his seventeenth birthday, Esteban is hit by a car and killed while chasing after actress Huma Rojo for her autograph following a performance of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in which she portrays Blanche DuBois.

Falling into a deep depression, she decides to return to Barcelona, the city she left when she was pregnant and where she hopes to find her son's father, Lola, a trans she kept secret from her son, just as she never told Lola they had a son. The film boasts of a very impressive list of laurels and accolades, the most outstanding being the National Board of Review Award for Best Foreign Language Film, the European Film Awards for Best European film and the Best European Actress, and the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival.

2) *Transamerica* (2005): Directed by Duncan Tucker, *Transamerica* deftly addresses a delicate topic without making a parody out of the film’s subject matter. In *Transamerica*, the long-lost father is a transgender woman, now named Bree, who is days away from having the genital operation, which will in essence be the final step in the long process of becoming a woman. Bree receives a phone call informing her that her son is in a New York jail. Up until the phone call, the man (now a woman) had no idea that ‘she’ (emphasis is mine) fathered a child. Bree knows the only sexual
dalliance she had in her life as a male was a misguided fling in college, and this teenage boy must have been the result of that brief relationship.

Unsure of what to do, Bree confides in her therapist who in turn refuses to sign off on Bree’s surgery until she deals with the situation. One of the major themes of the film is the personal journey towards self-discovery and it shows Bree as a true woman who only needs the surgery so that she can finally feel at peace in her own body. The film depicts in well-detailed terms how these people in transition from one gender to another live out their daily lives. The character of Bree is played by Felicity Huffman, who was an Academy Award nominee in the category of Best Actress for the film. She won at the Golden Globe, at the National Board of Review Awards and at the Tribeca Film Festival for the same.

3) Daayraa (1996): Directed by Amol Palekar (who won his first national award for this movie in 1996) and set in Orissa a part of India where it is common for men to play the part of women in street theatre. The word ‘daayraa’ (emphasis is mine) signifies boundaries - in this case, social codes of behaviour. The story centres around one such man, who now that his profession has become almost obsolete, crossdresses and lives as a woman. On his travels he comes across a young bride-to-be who had been kidnapped and subsequently raped by some louts targeting her for work in a brothel. He takes her under his wing and persuades her to dress as a man. On the road, they realise that their feelings for each other have grown. When they finally reach her village, she is spurned by her family and friends and driven out to be rescued by her transvestite friend. They realise that what they feel for each other transcends issues of gender. The film made waves by not only featuring on Time magazine’s list of top ten films of 1996 but also when the male lead of the film, Nirmal Pandey, established an extremely unique record for winning the Best ‘Actress’...
(emphasis is mine) Award at the 1997 France’s Valenciennes Film Festival for his laudable portrayal of a transvestite.

4) *Navarasa* (2005): There have been very few serious films, which have taken up the third gender as a subject and among them, even fewer which feature real people playing themselves. Santosh Sivan’s *Navarasa* does just that. The cinematographer-director has set his latest Tamil film in the backdrop of the Kuthanbavar-Aravan festival held in Koovagam, Vizhupuram. This is perhaps the only festival in the subcontinent, which is attended by eunuchs, transvestites and transsexuals.

National Award winner for the Best Regional Film (Tamil) in 2005, *Navarasa (Nine Emotions)* is a film directed by Santosh Sivan. The film revolves around the story of a young girl Shwetha taking her first steps towards adulthood. She discovers that every night, her uncle Gautam (a real life transgender, Kushboo) transforms himself into a woman to lead a completely different life. When Shwetha confronts Gautam on the matter, Gautam tells her he wishes to run away and marry Aravan at a local festival, the Koovagam Festival. The festival is held annually where people of the third gender regularly meet to re-enact the story of Aravan, a character from the epic *Mahabharata*. Shwetha decides to find her uncle and bring him back home, and along the way, she makes new friends of the third gender, and discovers a whole new culture.

The choice of the films rests on the ground that they have proved to be path breaking in the genre of cinema by debunking the redundant ideologies and have been recognized worldwide, across numerous illustrious film festivals, as honest and bold renditions of gender discourse.
This study is made up of four main chapters, each concentrating on specific defining issues in the chosen field.

Chapter 2 examines the study the iconography of the films to seek the particular subjects that the filmmakers are exploring. The chapter focuses on how the chosen films break taboos and make space for expression of alternative sexualities. While the monolithic film culture propagates only one kind of sexual depiction, the films in question are negotiating space for transgenders, transvestites and transgressive choice in their films, which comes as a shock to most viewers at first.

Chapter 3 deals with the theoretical framework of ‘spectatorship’ and ‘gaze’ (emphasis is mine) and an analyses of the selected films to interpret their cinematic language and style. The aim has been to compare their styles with the established canon, draw comparisons and departures, and find out the cinematic source of their specific vision. Close analysis has been annotated with screen shots and stills from the movies.

Chapter 4 studies the censorship and reception of the films under consideration. The films are polemical and challenge the established notion of gender and sexuality not only in cinema but in society at large. Far from being education, these films jolt the viewer out of the comfort zone of acceptance and compel them to question acceptability of canon. This leads to several questions regarding censorship of films and reception of these films. An extensive, academic research on these films revealed how they have been received by the wider audience and to what extent they have been successful in establishing the vision of the directors.

In Transgender on Screen, John Phillips presents an eclectic investigation of gender through representations of (and ambivalent responses to) cross-dressing, transgenderism and transsexuality in mainstream film. Shohini Ghosh in one of her
essays, has talked about the emergent sexualities in popular cinema and their relationship to the larger public discourse at the cusp of the 20th and 21st Century. She maintains that two new currents become evident as queer sexuality becomes impossible to elide or overlook. The first is the emergence of an ambivalent discourse that invokes non-normative desires through a simultaneous invocation of the erotic and the phobic. The second is the emergence of a new cinema that displaces conventional cinematic codes of gender and the inevitability of heterosexuality. New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader by Michele Aaron defines 'new queer cinema,' (emphasis is mine) by assessing its filmmakers, examining geographic and national differences, and theorizing spectatorship.

This thesis aims to situate the works of these filmmakers within the context of a changing cultural and social climate in contemporary times. The argument revolves around the way in which these films not only inform and challenge the established notions, but also examine the conventional cinematic representations of sexuality and its subversion in the Cinema of these filmmakers. These groundbreaking films are therefore invaluable for the questions they raise about the role of power and ideology in the cinema and how the existing boundaries between discourses and social practices are contravened and transformed.

Notes

1 Literally means “placing on stage”, an expression that is used to describe the design/visual of a theater or film production.

2 The critical theory emerging out of the fields of LGBT studies and feminist studies; it expands its focus to encompass any kind of sexual activity or identity that falls into normative and deviant categories. See Peter Barry, Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory (London: MUP,2010): 139-155.


6 See “The Perverse Implantation” in Michel Foucault’s The History of Sexuality I: 36-50. In this chapter Foucault describes the “birth” of homosexuality as an innate dysfunction, that is, not just an action, but rather a pathological identity.

7 The Nicomachean Ethics is the name normally given to Aristotle’s best known work on ethics. The theme of the work is the Socratic question which had previously been explored in Plato’s works, of how men should best live.


11 The grotesque or carnival body is a concept put forward by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Carnivalesque refers to a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humor and chaos.

12 Heteronormativity is the view that all human beings are either male or female, both in sex and in gender, and that sexual and romantic thoughts and relations are normal only when between people of different sexes.


14 A 1947 play written by American playwright Tennessee Williams.
