Films that feature transgendered characters often problematize the traditional theories of the spectatorial gaze. The theories of the male gaze posited by Laura Mulvey and other feminist film critics break down when gender identity of the subject on the screen is unfixed and shifting, since the transgendered subject poses a potent threat to the conventional dynamics of sex and gender power and this doesn’t allow ‘fetishization’ and ‘voyeurism’ (emphasis is mine) to function properly. The questions that I have tried to explore, deal primarily with the manner of perception adopted by the society and the mainstream audiences with regard to queer and transgender characters within film and the way in which the gaze and queer theory associate with the ideals of ideological edifice and the prevailing patriarchal order. In relation to these questions, I have looked at and analysed the chosen films in order to understand how they try to rework and generate a different perspective regarding the ideas of traditional hetero-normative spectatorship.

Of all existing theories that can help us comprehend the process by which viewers form meaning, the psychoanalytic theory has been the most direct in addressing the pleasure we derive from images and the liaison between our desires and the visual world. Theories of spectatorship have crucially affected the understanding of how the pictorial address of cinema endows it with the ability to achieve a specific corpus of relational meanings for spectators and offer us system to analyse the subject positions that a certain film text builds for and proposes to, the viewers. Psychoanalytic film theory is neither preoccupied with the singular viewers’ approval or dismissal of ‘labels’ (emphasis is mine) or representations, nor with the
manner in which specific viewers respond to films. Instead, this approach considers
the spectator “to be shaped, in a relationship of the gaze, within a network that
includes the film text and its institutional context, as well as the spectator him-herself”
(Sturken and Cartwright 120). Spectatorship theory underscores the role of the psyche
– chiefly the unconscious, fantasy and desire – in the exercise of looking; the term
‘spectator’ (emphasis is mine) neither characterises a real individual viewer made up
of flesh, blood and bones nor a participant from a specific viewing audience- a
spectator is treated as an ‘ideal’ (emphasis is mine) subject:

Independent of individual identity, the spectator is socially constructed
by the ‘cinematic apparatus’ (the traditional social space of the cinema
that includes a darkened theatre, projector, film, sound) and by the
ideologies that are a part of a ‘given’ viewing situation. It can be said
that particular films, targeted towards ‘specific’ categories of viewers
during particular periods (the genre of women’s films of the 1940s, for
example) create and offer to their viewers an ideal ‘subject position’
(Sturken and Cartwright 73; emphasis belong to the authors).

Christian Metz and other French theorists who wrote about film in the
twentieth century (in the 70s to be precise), generally described act of spectatorship
as the process leading the viewer to indulge in ‘suspension of disbelief’ (emphasis is
mine) in the fictitious world of films- the onlooker aligns himself not only with the
characters in the film but more significantly, also with the film’s general ideological
fabric, the film’s narrative arrangement and visual point of view which consequently
makes the viewer’s unconscious bring into play fantasy constructions (such as an
imaginary ideal relationship.) The path-breaking work of Jacques Lacan (which
emphasises the part that desire plays in creation of the subjects) is often employed by
film theorists, to explicate the persuasive appeal of the film images in our culture. Instead of ‘individual’, ‘person’ or ‘human being’, Lacan deliberately alluded to his object of enquiry as ‘subject’ (emphasis is mine) - an entity he believed to be erected by means of the contrivances of language, desire and the unconscious. These theories were subjected to the positive criticism of many feminist film theorists in the late 1980s, who came up with the thought-provoking suggestion that unlike the assumed perception of being an individual, undifferentiated unit, the film viewer is already marked by culture as either male or female; speaking of a universal spectator, then, becomes an implausibility because the conditions in which the act of viewing occurs, are affected by the cognitive structures that impact our development as gendered subjects. This important intermediation in interrogation of desire and the image led to a subsequent focus on the ‘gaze’ (emphasis is mine).

In 1975, writer and film-maker Laura Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” deployed the theory of psychoanalysis to put forth the view that it was in fact, the patriarchal unconscious that was responsible for configuring the conduct of popular narrative cinema, by placing women represented in films as objects of a male gaze. Mulvey made use of the body of work credited to Freud and Lacan to develop her thesis of the male gaze, starting with Freud’s idea of scopophilia⁴. In describing the pleasures of the cinema, Mulvey elaborates the connection of the gaze, the cinema and Freud as she talks about the number of possible pleasures that cinema offers, one of which is scopophilia:

There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic
zones...he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze (Visual and Other Pleasures 16).

Mulvey also explains the role of mainstream film in programming the erotic (and hence scopophilia and the gaze) into the semantics of dominant patriarchal order, a conclusion that was supported by Clifford T. Manlove who said that scopophilia was one of “several drives making up the patriarchal sexual order” (Manlove 86.) Specifically fusing the concept of Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’ with Freud’s theory of scopophilia, she centres on the process of identification and the concept of the ego in the pleasure of looking; this is vital to Mulvey’s conceptualization of the gaze because according to her, the mirror stage produces subjectivity that forms a major part of all ensuing familiarities in life, including the cinematic experience:

The fact that is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity. Hence it is the birth of the long love affair/despair between image and self-image which has found such intensity of expression in film and such joyous recognition in the cinema audience (Visual and Other Pleasures 18).

Mulvey’s conceptualization of the relationship of the pleasure of viewing and the act of identity formation establishes scopophilia arising from pleasure via another person being used as an object of sexual stimulation through sight, and the formation of the ego occurring as a result of identification with the images seen (and through self-admiration.) Having traced such a clear connection between image and self/sexual identity, Mulvey’s successfully substantiates her claims about the precarious nature of the patriarchal gaze in cinema.
Various circumstances of being a part of the process of cinema viewing act as a facilitation agent for the viewer to engage in the voyeuristic process of ‘objectification’ of female characters as well as the narcissistic practice of ‘identification’ with an ‘ideal ego’ (emphasis is mine) seen on the screen. Thus, the dominant forms of cinema are clearly reflective of pleasure in looking having been “split between active/male and passive/female” (“Visual Pleasure” 27) in a patriarchal society where conventional narrative films apparently in the classical Hollywood tradition not only stereotypically focus on a male protagonist in the narrative but also presume a male spectator; in identifying with the lead male protagonist, the viewer relocate his look onto that of “his screen surrogate” (“Visual Pleasure” 28) so that the authority of the male protagonist concurs with the active control of the erotic look, both providing a satiating feeling of invincible omnipotence.

It was Laura Mulvey who first coined the term “the male gaze” (“Visual Pleasure” 28). Traditional films presenting men as active, monitoring subjects and treating women as submissive objects of desire for men in the story as well as in the audience and hence, disallowing women to be desiring sexual subjects in their own right, cause women to be objectified in relation to the controlling male gaze, presenting woman as “image or spectacle” and man as “bearer of the look” (“Visual Pleasure” 27). The cinematic decorum of popular films is compulsively subordinated to the obsessive desires of the male ego and so, men indulge in the ‘looking’ while women are present to be ‘looked at’ (emphasis is mine).

The objections to the fixedness of passivity being associated with femininity and activity being aligned with masculinity and the consequent failure to account for the female spectator, have been numerous. A major hostile stance was against Mulvey’s argument being seemingly essentialist in its apparent predisposition to treat
both spectatorship and maleness as homogeneous cores, presuming only one kind of spectator (male) and one kind of masculinity (heterosexual). This “extraordinarily bold generalization” (Merck 7) has been accused of restraining the capability of females to obtain power or pleasure within visual consumption and been branded damaging to women due to its limiting discourse of female subordination. Kaja Silverman questions Mulvey’s definition of male subjectivity and desire for visual pleasure arguing that she makes no effort to challenge the notion that for the male subject “pleasure involves mastery” (Silverman 80). In one of his articles, Robert Schultz upheld Mulvey’s work stating that male gaze theorists have considered our culture’s man-made images of women as the products of male sexuality, scrutinizing them to see how their configurations expose the fears, desires and “strategies of obsession” (Schultz 367). Thus, the visual culture constructed by the male gaze showcases more concerns related to men than it can ever have related to women.

Contemporary feminist scholars including Katie Roiphe, Christina Hoff Sommers, and Nadine Strossen have focused on a discursive endeavour to counteract the propensity to repeatedly define ‘woman’ within a continuing “cult of victimhood” (Schultz 370; emphasis belong to the author) such as the narrow passive/female characterization of women in Mulvey’s work, the chief ground for objection being Mulvey’s standpoint to “cast women too narrowly in the role of object, with masochistic female spectators and actresses colluding in their own exploitation” (Schultz 370). At the heart of Mulvey’s hypothesis lies the thorough obliteration of the idea of pleasure. Clearly contesting the role women play and the way in which male gaze functions in society, she gives the female no authority whatsoever with regard to the pleasure in looking as she believes that being constantly subjected to the male gaze prevents the woman from creating her own identity outside of the male
fantasy and hence, thwarting any efforts on their part to experience pleasure in exhibiting a visual appetite:

Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning (“Visual Pleasure” 15).

Cultural analyst Camille Paglia has a more radical interpretation of male gaze theory; she observes that male gaze theory is a “stale cliché” and alleges academic feminism of having a “man problem” (Paglia 89). Such perspectives are in consonance with the third wave of feminism that interrogates feminism as an affluent, able-bodied construction. Mulvey’s essay launched more than a decade of writing about modes of spectatorship. Some theorists retorted that gendered viewing relations are fluid and viewers use fantasy to occupy the ‘wrong’ gender position in their spectatorial relationships to films, with a willing ease (emphasis is mine). For example, women can identify with the male position of mastery or employ voyeuristic leanings and men can be looked upon with pleasure and desire. Both E. Ann Kaplan and Kaja Silverman argued in favour of the possibility of gaze being adopted by both male and female subjects - the male is not always the controlling subject nor is the female always the passive object.

Teresa de Lauretis in one of her works asks, “What happens, I will ask, when woman serves as the looking-glass held up to women?” Lauretis introduces a complex cultural identity of homosexual womanhood into a power relationship that according to Mulvey was narrowly delineated in a heteronormative background with woman only as the passive visual consumer. Lauretis’ claim puts forth the argument
that the female spectator does not unproblematically adopt a simplistic, masculine reading position but is always involved in a ‘double-identification’ with both the passive and active subject positions (emphasis is mine). This is supported by Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright:

One of the most powerful set of claims in the spectatorship theory of the 1990s was the proposition that looking practices and pleasure in looking for any human subject are not tied to the spectator’s biological sex or social gender position...To look ‘as a man’, ‘as a woman’ or ‘as a lesbian’ for example, may be performed by a human subject of any sexual and social identity through processes of fantasy and identification (Sturken and Cartwright 132; emphasis belong to the author).

The Gaze theory has been fairly explored in and researched on, in a queer context as well. Contemporary visual culture is inclusive of a highly composite array not only of images and spectators but also of gazes. Steve Neale ascertains the gaze of mainstream cinema in the Hollywood tradition as not only ‘male’ but also ‘heterosexual’ (emphasis is mine) in the course of his observation of a voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze directed by some male characters at other male characters within the text. Neale argues that in a heterosexual and patriarchal society the male body cannot be marked unambiguously as the “erotic object of another male look”; that look must be “motivated, its erotic component repressed”9. Both Neale and Richard Dyer also challenged the linearity of the notion that the male is never sexually objectified in mainstream cinema and argued against presuming the male to always be the looker in control of the gaze.
It is widely noted that since the 1980s, the arenas of mainstream cinema, television and advertising have been witness to an increasing display and sexualisation of the male body. Gay and lesbian theorists have also contributed significantly to the ‘rereading’ (emphasis is mine) of film spectatorship. For example, Judith Mayne in one of her works entitled “Lesbian Looks: Dorothy Arzner and Female Authorship,” argued in favour of the need to account for the lesbian spectator in the gaze (Mayne 123). Teresa de Lauretis, Andrea Weiss, and Patricia White among others, suggest that lesbian spectatorial desire counters the traditional heterosexist prototype, creating a dynamic of desire outside of previously theorised notions of spectatorship. On the other hand, certain critics find any notion of gay spectatorship as a distinctive form, by definition, “essentialist …which turns on a deformative logic of exclusion and normalisation” (Farmer 33). According to them, speaking of gay spectatorship is to endorse the “disciplinary pretensions of the hegemonic hetero/homosexual binarism” (Farmer 33) and, by so doing, to decline the plurality of differences that inevitably frames and works through social practices and experiences like cinematic reception.

Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman argue that “work which has addressed gay and lesbian spectators… is flawed by the essentialism of the terms that frame the debate.” They contend that by virtue of identity itself not being stable, it is incongruous to postulate any singular identification with images. If the subject undergoes deconstruction, the subject’s reading/viewing position must also be deconstructed. Disagreeing with the apparently essentialist idea of “relations of looking” (Evans and Gamman 40) being determined by the biological sex of the individual/s one chooses, “anti-essentialist discussion of identificatory processes
actually challenges the fixity of notions about gay, lesbian or straight identities” 
(Evans and Gamman 40.)

Instead of initiating a premise with predefined categories of sexual identity and seeking how those categories concur with or influence spectatorship, many film critics suggest to look at the ways in which pleasures and forms of spectatorship triggers a displacement of sexual identity- a rupture of its disciplinary system. Judith Mayne offers an eloquent representation of this argument by proposing that Film theory has been blind-sided by the scheme of heterosexual symmetry (that purportedly runs Hollywood cinema) to such an extent that it has snubbed the possibility of a “safe zone” (Cinema and Spectatorship 97) in which homosexual as well as heterosexual desires can be fantasized and acted out and that this may as well develop to become one of the distinct pleasures of the cinema:

I am not speaking here of an innate capacity to ‘read against the grain’, but rather of the way in which desire and pleasure in the cinema may well function to problematize the categories of heterosexual versus homosexual (Cinema and Spectatorship 97; emphasis belong to the author).

Not surprisingly, ‘queer’ (emphasis is mine) has been widely upheld in this context as a fecund ground for theorizing the sexual displacements and vacillations of spectatorship. Within film studies, many critics have heartily accepted queer as the perfect corrective to the supposed limitations of theorising spectatorship through categories of sexual identity. Evans and Gamman advocate queer as a counteractive to what according to them is the manifest essentialism of gay/lesbian spectatorship, asserting that queer offers the space to reconsider difficulties arising out of the notions of cohesion of identity or identification through viewing, while providing
opportunities to look for more fluidity in terms of explanation. As heterosexual-identified women, they argue:

…We are as perverse in our looking habits as many ‘essentially’ gay or lesbian spectators, and only by introducing some queer notions can we begin to explain our experiences beyond the dogma of ideas associated with the meaning of specific sexual orientations…From the female spectator’s virtual ‘transvestism’ to general spectator’s ability to ‘cross identify’ psychoanalytic film theory (and not only psychoanalytic film theory) has attributed a fluid, and often transgressive position to the otherwise conventional and conventionally gendered viewer (Evans and Gamman 42; emphasis belong to the author).

New Queer Cinema’s impact upon mainstream cinema can be measured not only in terms of the greater inflow of lesbian and gay film-makers, or of rebellious characters or queer themes, but in terms of the audience’s agreeable entanglement with gender and sexual ambiguity within some of the most popular texts. New Queer Cinema has surfaced as the result of queer theory and queer theorists whom have broached this new theory of spectatorship because there was no way of identifying or even recognising a queer gaze before they did so. Queer theory and queer cinema have downright dismissed the hitherto prescribed theories of straight-jacketed, linear heterosexual forms of ‘looking’ and has introduced a fresh concept of the ‘queer gaze’ (emphasis is mine).

Evans and Gammon state how it has become apparent that an increasing number of images in contemporary culture address more than one audience using multiple permutations of address and allowing the probability of multiple
identifications by the spectator. Our culture consistently demands an clarification of our desires and this serves to be the consistent thrust in making the theorists continually come up with models and theories of the way we ‘look’ (emphasis is mine) and identify with others in order to be able to gratify society’s need to sort and categorize every variation of gender and sexuality.

Within mainstream cinema, according to Judith Halberstam, “the queer characters... or any and all lesbian characters in films about homo triangulations... will function only to confirm the rightness of the heterosexual object choice” (Halberstam 85). Apparently, some mainstream films that feature homosexual characters are allowed to contain them, either by rendering them harmless or by punishing them, for example:

Sometimes the masculine character will be a woman... and the narrative thrust will involve her downfall or domestication. Sometimes the feminine character will be a man... and the narrative will compel him to either become a male hero or self-destruct. And sometimes, the transgender character will be evoked as a metaphor for flexible subjecthood, but will not be given a narrative in his/her own right. (Halberstam 85)

Here, I would like to reiterate that the traditional spectatorial gaze is problematized in films featuring transgendered characters as owing to the indeterminate gender identity of the on-screen subject, theories of the male gaze by Mulvey and other feminist film critics disintegrate as the agencies of fetishization and voyeurism are not allowed to function properly because the transgendered subject threatens the conservative gender and power dynamics.
Amol Palekar’s *Daayraa* and Santosh Sivan’s *Navarasa* not only present a ‘queer gaze’ but a transgender mode of ‘looking’ (emphasis is mine) and identification. The transgenders in these films reveals the ideological content of the male and female gazes, and it disarms temporarily, the compulsory heterosexuality of the romance genre. By presenting a crossed-dressed man (Nirmal Pandey) trying to pass as female, Palekar provokes an even more complex argument about sexuality, identification and gender. Although the films have given mainstream viewers access to transgender modes of looking, the films also convey a homophobic society’s resentment to gender ambiguity and cross-dressing in order to pass as a different sex.

In *Navarasa*, we look at the character of Gautam through Shwetha’s eyes. In Shwetha’s journey from revulsion to acceptance of her uncle’s sexual ambivalence, lies the film’s integrity and sensitivity. Similarly, throughout *Daayraa* the viewer observes how Sonali Kulkarni begins to notice Nirmal’s manly features such as when she watches him shave his facial hair (Fig: 3.1) or sees him bare-chested but she decides to ignore what she had seen and denies Nirmal’s masculine attributes. This is especially reflected in the scene where he is seen shaving and the scene is important because it sets the stage for how we as spectators are asked to view gender in the film.

As Judith Butler says:

> Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealization to the heterosexual bond (“Imitation” 310).

The juxtaposition of the act of shaving with the interrogative comment brings us to the theme of biology, providing a sort of confirmation to the viewer that it really is a man. It further sustains the idea that his identity is only a performance and reinscribes the dominant idea that one can only be what one’s sex denotes.
Every day I must erase traces of a man’s face

Figure: 3.1

Figure: 3.2
Therefore, to us, Nirmal is a man ‘acting’ or ‘performing’ (emphasis is mine) like a woman. We are introduced to the performative element of Nirmal’s gender portrayal from the outset as a result of the ‘makeover’ (emphasis is mine) scene. Our attention is immediately drawn to the components that make up his gender performance as he embarks on a mission of ‘substitution’ and ‘concealment’ (my emphases.) The fact that we actually witness Nirmal replacing body parts associated with one gender with those associated with another and concealing body parts which might be seen to conflict with the intended gender display is effective in demonstrating that the female garb is essentially a costume.

In a similar fashion, the audience in Navarasa becomes a voyeur to the process of Gautam’s transformation into a woman (Gautami). Clothes, objects and gestures contribute to his changed persona as a woman, urging the audience to look at the constructed nature of gender. The audience, a part of the heterosexual cultural hegemony, is made to confront their own anxiety to locate Gautam’s ‘true self’ (emphasis is mine) as his sexuality or gender cannot be categorically placed within the binaries. The films therefore play on the narratives of sexual disguise where misidentification is ultimately exposed bringing about an order affirming the audience’s knowledge of the truth. If gender is the cultural meaning that the body assumes, then gender does not necessarily have to follow from sex.

In accordance with the ideas of Butler and Foucault, it can be argued that in putting on drag and acting like how he supposes woman to act, Nirmal ‘does’ (emphasis is mine) the female gender as it is defined by heteronormative society and presumes that the self he feels himself to be accords with this physical depiction of woman as society purports man to be, essentially supposing an inherent link between being genetically female and female gender performance.
Butler writes:

If gender is drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate...then gender 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.\(^{10}\)

If gender is an illusion, as is suggested by Butler, then Nirmal’s and Gautam’s confusion lies in his acceptance of that illusion and of the heteronormative assumption of a ‘true’ and ‘natural’ (emphasis is mine) identity. In opposition to Butler’s proposal of gender being an imitation that creates the very impression of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself, Nirmal arguably subscribes to the idea that his mimicry is the imitation of something that has an original, that there is an origin of unambiguous truth in his female gendering; admittedly it is problematic to accept the idea that there is no performer prior to the performed. We are programmed by society to accept that gender is illustrative of some pre-existing self-hood that is inherently linked to our biological sex.

Butler asserts however, that this denial of the “priority of the subject” ("Imitation" 318) is not the denial of the subject but instead, the rejection to combine the subject with the psyche marks that the psychic, which surpasses the sphere of the conscious subject. It is this extra which then explodes within the “intervals of those repeated gestures and acts that construct the apparent uniformity of heterosexual positionalities, indeed which compels the repetition itself and which guarantees its perpetual failure” ("Imitation" 318) Thus, in her proposal that imitation only serves to
reinforce an illusion of an original, Butler exposes the instability of the heterosexual identity, suggesting that the original only maintains its validity through repetition.

If an identity is only valid through it being constantly instituted again and again then that identity is extremely precarious as it vulnerable to becoming de-instituted at every interval. This is illustrated in Daayraa through the constant reminders of Nirmal’s biologically male sex. Reminders are a common element of films involving drag. In film like Mrs. Doubtfire (1993), Tootsie (1982) and Some Like it Hot (1959), we are constantly reminded that the actions of the protagonists are in fact gender performances and that these components of performance do not correspond to their biological sex and are therefore ‘unnatural’ (emphasis is mine). This is indicated by the scene in Mrs. Doubtfire where Robin Williams’s character is caught going to the bathroom by his son who consequently freaks out or when his stockings fall down to reveal hairy legs.

In Daayraa, we are deliberately made to recall Nirmal being biologically male both when he shaves and the scenes in which he appears bare-chested. Nirmal questions the spectator’s need to be constantly retold of the characters biological sex, asserting that such reminders only strengthen the essentialism of gender even if the protagonist’s (relatively) easy disguise confirmed its performativity. The reminders make the gender play and especially the homoerotic implications arising from it ‘safe and valid’ (emphasis is mine); they exploit transgression only to heighten the return to order; in other words, they problematize gender identity and sexual difference, only to endorse the absoluteness of both. Essentially then, these reminders serve to undermine the notion of performativity in their assertion that the persons biological sex constitutes their identity. We suspend our disbelief in imagining that Nirmal is biologically female, as that’s what he wants to be and could be, if he had the money.
These reminders spoil the illusion and set up the gender performance as somehow being false.

In the scene where Nirmal is dancing/performing on the street, Sonali (along with other men on the street) shares the scopophilia that the medium of cinema enables. Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” declares that the male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, marking the women as erotic objects of the characters on screen as well as for the spectator in the audience. In Navarasa, Asha Bharti, the founder President of the Tamil Nadu Aravanigal Association is fast and clear to correct the photographer who addresses her as “Mr. Asha Bharti,”; “I need a small correction. Address me as Miss...do not mis-spell it.” (Navarasa; Fig: 3.3) Thus, the image on screen necessitates a ‘masculinisation’ (emphasis is mine) of the spectator, irrespective of the actual sex or gender.

Nirmal’s presence in this case becomes an ambiguity in the fabric of male bourgeois cinema where the woman is always an object of desire and consumption; he is evidently a disruption in the pro-filmic audience and the spectator watching the final event and his own performance resists the masculinisation of the camera or the audience at the street he is already playing out her multiple identities as a man, a cross dresser and a woman. Hence, by not fitting into the ‘imaginary signifier’ ‘safe’ (my emphasis) of the film structured by the unconscious of patriarchal society, Nirmal’s punishment becomes inevitable as he intrudes into the heterosexual world of the narrative. The film brings out these nuances of the form as it teases the questioning viewer’s notion of gender in a heterosexual economy of which the film is also a part. Nirmal’s ‘masquerade’ disables the construction of the female object, the ‘other’ (emphasis is mine) who is the subject of the gaze of camera in an imagined masculine space.
Figure: 3.3

Correction. Address me as Miss. Don't mis-spell it.

Figure: 3.4
The transgenders in *Navarasa* also narrate and depict a poignant tale of how they are ‘looked at’ differently (emphasis is mine). While Bobby Darling is harassed by some young men from the village more than once in the film (the title of Miss Koovagam seems to add to her misery rather than honour), Revathy recounts how being a subject of a continuously judgmental heteronormative gaze makes them miserable denying them even the choice of being rightfully angry. She says:

...[the eunuchs] are frustrated and angry. Because their parents thrust them out of their homes...when they come to the city, they are ill-treated. They can’t even rent a room; they have no means to earn their livelihood. So they take to begging...when not granted the minimum, they retaliate with violence....I have been beaten and tortured, sir...Have you been made fun of? People always make fun of us *(Navarasa).*

This is reiterated by Asha Bharati in her concluding speech at the festival:

In Bihar, when a eunuch dies, before the burial slippers are flung at the body and slogans fill the air saying “no one should be born this way.” Problems are a part of everyone’s life but for us, life itself is a problem *(Navarasa).*

By using the transgender gaze and tethering it to an empowered female gaze in *Daayara* (Nirmal’s introductory scene that the film opens with), director Amol Palekar for most part of the film makes the viewer believe in the gravity of Nirmal’s femininity and the authenticity of his appearance as opposed to its components of masquerade. *Daayara* establishes the rightfulness and the resilience of Nirmal’s gender by not only narrating the heartrending story of his death but also compelling the spectators to assume, if only tentatively, his gaze— the transgender look, which
exposes the ideological content of the ‘male’ and ‘female’ (emphasis is mine) gazes. Nirmal’s gaze, naturally and unfortunately perishes with him at the end in the film’s brutal close and Palekar’s failure to sustain a transgender look unleashes a volley of questions regarding the inescapability and authority of both male/female binary in narrative cinema.

Thus both Daayraa and Navarasa unlock the possibility of a non-fetishistic approach of ‘seeing’ (emphasis is mine) the transgender body-a manner that looks with, rather then, at the transgender body and fosters the multidimensionality of an unquestionably transgender gaze (Fig: 3.4). Within the films the directors establish a ‘transgendered gaze’ (emphasis is mine) which evolves through various characters and reveal the ideological content of the male and female gazes, allowing the audience to examine both the male/female and the hetero/homo binary in narrative cinema.

Agrado’s onstage confession in All about My Mother serves as the emblematic moment of revelation and confession for women—and for men. In Agrado’s words:

It’s not easy being genuine. But we mustn’t be cheap with anything relating to our image. Because the more a woman resembles what she has dreamed for herself, the more genuine she is (All About My Mother).

After announcing the suspension of a show, Agrado attempts to appease the audience’s disappointment by narrating the tale of her transformation from man to woman. Agrado’s act is apparently spontaneously conceived, though in effect it is clearly something she has been prepared for, since a long time. Given the ignorance and intolerance that still tarnish popular understandings of transsexualism, the diegetic audience’s considerate, empathetic and cheerful response (Figs: 3.6, 3.7) to
Agrado’s performance (Fig: 3.5) transcends mere identification with Agrado and the trials that transformative surgery has put her through; it is indubitably more of a demonstration of Almodovar’s own standpoint towards the ambiguity of gender; it nonetheless scripts a response for the extradiegetic audience that would be similarly cheerful and sympathetic. Agrado’s experientially designed description of the volatility of the body and its availability to (re)construction denaturalizes the grounds on which identification and identity normally rely—without spelling the end of either of the two (if anything, Agrado amplifies the field of identity.)

*All about My Mother* is consistently performance-oriented, with much of the action occurring in theatrical contexts with parallels drawn in the performative mode of characters even when not on the stage. The aesthetic mapping of the two sequences in which Manuela is shown as a spectator, is virtually identical. In the first one, in Madrid, Manuela sits next to her son and emotionally shaken by reminiscences of the past, cries during the performance. A second level of spectatorship is attained as she becomes the sight/spectacle of her son’s gaze.

Her crying goads her son to ask about his father and triggers her decision to tell him ‘all about his father’ and, by implication, ‘all about his mother’ (my emphasis) when they arrive home. Her decision, as noted, comes too late, reinforcing the melodrama. In her second viewing of the play in Barcelona, she sits in exactly the same area of the theater, close to the front, only this time next to a vacant seat. Once again she cries, but with even more reason than before. Between mother and son, multiple emotions burst forth—curiosity (on part of the young Esteban), concealment, conflict, and angst diffuse into the spectatorship of Williams’s play.
By performing the role of Stella once again, Manuela’s relatively inactive, unobtrusive and understated position as spectator turns into a vigorous and public working through of her personal distress and duress. By actively reenacting her past through the play, Manuela facilitates the work of mourning and begins to reintegrate herself in the daily realm of the living.

*All about My Mother* deals, among other things, with the power of live performance to activate agency and to foster cohesion and solidarity among women. The feminist version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in which Stella leaves her obnoxious and abusive husband in support of her sister Blanche, speaks not only of Manuela’s real-life fortitude but also of the camaraderie that springs from her affection towards her figurative sisters Huma (Blanche in the play), sister Rosa (her double in as much as she bore a child by the same man) and Agrado, a transgendered ex-prostitute who is an old friend of Manuela and a new assistant to Huma. The rehearsal and enactment of the play within the film decree the interactions of the female characters in their varying roles as performers and spectators.

Live performance, as Catherine Elwes argues, carries in itself the potentiality for unsettling the conventional arrangement of spectatorship that is not possible in depictions that offer fixed, linear and objectified images of women, most notably in the cinema itself. Almodóvar plays with the links and tensions between the cinema and the theater in ways that support Elwes’s argument that the live woman performer can effectively alter the role of the male spectator by stripping away “his cloak of invisibility” and making his spectatorship “an issue within the work.” Overlaid on the curtain in *All about My Mother* is, moreover, a dedication, not just to the ‘mothers’ (emphasis is mine) of the film’s title but also to “all the women who perform and all the men who perform as women” (*All about My Mother*). The curtain
throws into relief the critical nature of performance and spectatorship in the film and reasserts Almodovar’s belief in the potential transference of female solidarity to male bonding—a new take on the transgenderism that characterizes so much of his production.

Throughout *Transamerica*, Bree, the male-to-female character whose experiences are the focus of the narrative, is constantly conscious and apprehensive of the gaze, going to great lengths to ‘pass’ (emphasis is mine) as a woman but never purged off the fear that too close a gaze may rupture the illusion. As spectators, not only are we unable to gaze at the female figure embodied by Bree unproblematically because of our knowledge of her ‘true sex’ (my emphasis), but we also become hyper-cognizant of the influence of the gaze. In this way, the colossal power of the male gaze crumbles in favor of a fluctuating, alternating transgendered gaze.

Bree is not principally queer under the rulebook of contemporary queer theory; her character occupies comparatively identifiable positions of ‘otherness’ (my emphasis). The representation of transsexuality in *Transamerica* is based on fairly normative conception of this identity and category, familiar to most viewers; it is rather stereotypical. The character of Bree is also shown to be engaged in some sort of a personal quest and is quite disinterested in exploring the political dynamics of its otherness; neither does it probe the foundation of the dominant society that defines its otherness, nor is it involved in occupying the margins of intelligibility.

In the opening scene we watch Bree embellish herself with all the accessories of high femininity. The director, Duncan Tucker employs props and backdrops in which racial dissimilarity figures as the medium to contextualise and politicise what this performance means. The first thing we notice on the screen, is Bree exercising her vocal chords to adapt a feminine pitch, immediately establishing her transsexuality,
and particularly, her identity as a transsexual woman intent on “going stealth.” (Transamerica) The diegetic soundtrack then takes over from Bree. She puts a record on the phonograph, and significantly, it is the South African diva Miriam Makeba crooning a traditional Zulu battle melody. With the cacophonous music resounding, we watch Bree pack her pink handbag, into which she places a copy of Civilizations of Black Africa by Jacques Maquet. Both the book and the song present Bree herself as a combatant preparing to go to war (possibly, the war of facing the outside world each and every day of her life, given her unease at the gaze that she is so conscious of.) This is underscored by the scene’s attention on Bree’s dressing and make-up ritual (Fig 3.8). She is putting on her ‘armor’ (emphasis is mine) readying herself to fight and win- she is seemingly fighting for the cause of the subjugated, the victims of repressed.

It is not long before we are introduced to the nature of Bree’s battle, for shots of Bree in a psychiatrist’s office are interposed with her dressing ritual. She wants the psychiatrist to authorise her sex change surgery, and performs as a ‘woman’ (emphasis is mine) as best she can to win his approval and convince him. Furthermore, the quick shots of the walls of Bree’s home show them adorned with pictures and objects from ‘other’ (emphasis is mine) cultures.

Images of black women with rows of neck rings, for example, seem to parallel Bree’s own bodily transformations; as she speaks to the psychiatrist, she gives elaborate details of all of the intensive cosmetic operations she has undergone to feminize her appearance. Oddly, the overdose of the colour pink in the introductory scenes (Fig: 2.6), especially as a part of Bree’s process of dressing herself up (shots of Bree smearing her pink-tinted make-up, putting on her pink clothes, sliding into her pink high heels, painting her nails pink) seem to be an attempt at parodying female or
feminine performance resonant more with drag performance than with transsexual self-presentation. This becomes chiefly apparent when she leaves her house to step outside. Bree’s white and pink femininity contrasts sharply with the people she passes on the streets; the entire neighborhood, with the exception of Bree, is working class Hispanic. She conspicuously looks like a drag queen up against this background-hyper feminine, overdressed, taller than everyone she passes on the street, although her neighbors don’t even bat an eyelid (Fig: 3.9). Nevertheless the performance works for the (white) psychiatrist; he tells Bree that she looks “authentic.”(Transamerica)

Bree is repetitively juxtaposed against and takes an interest in people of color throughout the course of the film. Not only does she live in a Hispanic neighborhood in Los Angeles, but she does the dishes in a Mexican restaurant, flirts with a Native American man later in the movie and her sole friend is her therapist Margaret, a latina woman played by Cuban-American Elizabeth Peña. In a sense, Bree is framed by elements that signify “boutique multiculturalism,”14 an uncritical assortment of objects and images of a variety of ‘racial others’ (emphasis is mine) whose display is meant to demonstrate Bree’s personal and political positions. I would certainly call this a form of cinematic ‘white vision’ (emphasis is mine); these depictions of ‘the racial other’ within Transamerica might suggest something extra-diegetic related to the position of transsexuals in contemporary United States. The constant arranging of Bree up against this framework of racial difference operates analogically, with the message to be conveyed being that to be transsexual and white is like being racially other.

The institutional agencies of medicine and law regulate the limits and factors of the sex-change process and act as ‘self-designated caretakers’ authorised to decide not only who counts as a ‘real’ transsexual, but also to declare that a ‘real’ transsexual
is, by conventional definitions, sick (all emphasis is mine). One ought to stick to a much skewed and narrowly delimited concept of transsexualism to receive the requisite medical treatment. Those whose identities and desires as ‘the opposite sex’ (emphasis is mine) most closely align with normative conceptions of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexuality more easily pass through the mechanisms of control. Therefore in terms of current radical queer theory, traditional transsexuality (the kind of transsexual identity with which Bree is characterised) maintains and validates a two-gender system and relies on the existing standards of gender roles and sexual normativity.

In other words, there is nothing ‘queer’ (emphasis is mine) about this kind of transsexuality, in the contemporary sense of ‘queer’ as questioning and revaluing the foundational (gendered, sexual) narratives of the status quo. Thus the relation between a transsexual and the medical establishment is founded on a rather strange premise: the establishment primarily delineates transsexuality as a (historically) queer identity, and then provided the transsexual treatment (cure) to even out that queerness, all the while necessitating within the person in question, the need to maintain this ‘queer’ label in the form of pathology. Bree is one such traditional transsexual, and indeed in one scene, where Bree unsuspectingly stumbles into a transgender congregation that includes all kinds of gender queers, the film marks gender queer people (in this case, transsexuals who are not interested in passing or going stealth) as freaks. Within this economy, then, visual evidence of Bree’s queerness requires an external signifier, for, in most instances she prefers to be simultaneously visible (as woman) and invisible (as trans).

It is in fact, Toby who is presented as possessing the most indeterminate, queer sexuality of all the characters in the film. He is a male prostitute and we see him in
one scene with a john; in another scene we watch him kiss a young girl; towards the end of the film he even hits on Bree after he has discovered she is a transwoman and still has her penis (thought he doesn’t yet know that Bree is his father). Bree’s revelation thrusts a queer identity upon her, which she has to accept: she is Toby’s father and not mother, thus upsetting her dream of attaining ‘unadulterated womanhood’ (emphasis is mine). The child/boy is and forever will be, a constant reminder of her past as a man and thus acceptance of Toby is also an acknowledgement of her own status as a queer parent, at least in the eyes of the larger culture. Her identity as ‘father’ (emphasis is mine) certainly calls attention to the indeterminacy of gender roles; she will never be Toby’s mother, nor will she fit the image of the father. In claiming Toby to be her son, Bree moves into a more queer identity in relation to him. Bree begins to call herself his ‘father,’ which also produces an incompatible picture, as Bree is a thoroughly pink-clad woman, an exaggeratedly feminine ‘father’ (emphasis is mine)

The potentiality of the body to change, shift, alter and become fluid is a compelling fantasy in modern cinema. In films like the ones chosen, the transgender character carries in itself a sense of astonishment, with his/her ability to remain striking, appealing and gendered at the same time as presenting a sense of self that’s not a derivative of the body, a gender at odds with sex, and an identity functioning within the heterosexual compendium without endorsing the inescapability of that system of dissimilarity. Creating a different future while rewriting history, is the dilemma that the transgender character is constantly subjected to. Engaging in several ways of looking into one, the films use certain formal techniques to allow the viewer to access the transgender gaze, thereby proving the chance for us to look ‘with’ the transgender character instead of ‘at’ him.
In remaining committed to the transgender gaze unlike other transgender films that steadfastly support the straight gaze, the films unlock a fresh style of visualizing gender mobility and demonstrates its ability to takeover make and female gazes, replacing them stealthily with “transgender modes of looking and queer forms of visual pleasures” (Halbestam, 83). To the extent that cinema depends on the power to activate and attract desiring relationships (between characters, between on screen and off screen subjects, between images and subjects, between spectators), it also depends on a “sexual and gendered economy of looking, watching and identifying” (Mulvey qtd. in Halbestam 85).

As viewers we always watch knowing that this is a performance, but the characterisation in the films chosen, is neither the stereotypical prototype of Dustin Hoffman and Robin William’s contributions, nor the semi-acceptable privileged cross-dressing playfulness of Victor Victoria or La Cagé Aux Folles. This is a context where the reliability of the performance matters — as representation, since the viewer has to find the passing believable, and in the life that is being represented, since to be discovered would (and does) have high costs. Passing here is not an opportunity for tacky humour, but rather an opening to observe the possibilities and limitations of traditional gender identities. For example, there are moments where the freedom of being male bestowing particular pleasures and excitements is evident; but this is no simple celebration of ‘claiming power’ ((emphasis is mine) since the links between this form of masculinity and misogyny at worst, and disrespect for women at best, are also depicted.
Notes

1 Fetishization is the erotic attachment to an inanimate object or a nongenital body part whose real or fantasized presence is necessary for sexual gratification. See Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism,” Vol. 5 of Collected Papers. 5 vols (London: Hogarth and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1927): 198-204.

2 Voyeurism is the practice of obtaining sexual gratification by looking at sexual objects or acts, especially secretly.

3 Suspension of disbelief or willing suspension of disbelief is a term coined in 1817 by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who suggested that if a writer could infuse a "human interest and a semblance of truth" into a fantastic tale, the reader would suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative. See The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms, ed. Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray (New York: Macmillan, 2003): 469.


11 Transgender gaze is “a look divided within itself, a point of view that comes from (at least) two places at once.” See Judith Halberstam (2005: 78).

12 Diegetic refers to that, which occurs as part of the action (rather than as background), and can be heard by the film’s characters. For example: diegetic audience, diegetic sounds etc.
