CHAPTER 4
CENSORSHIP AND RECEPTION

Freedom of expressions regarding sexuality and gender are surely more evident in popular culture than they were about a decade ago. But has this increased visibility really necessarily led to increased acceptance or are the media achievements made to stand in for real, political achievements? The underpinning intention of this study is to examine the ways that the trans images portrayed in these films function politically, and to decipher to what extent the effects of these portrayals have on furthering acceptance of gender diversity in society and on countering cultural transphobia. Far from being just educational, 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.

4.1 Censorship

In disciplinary societies, observation of one's self and of others (in the form of constant assessment, regulation, and classification in institutions like schools, hospitals, factories, and prisons) is a key to the accumulation of knowledge and the exercise of power. In such a system, it is presumed that the more you observe, the more you know, and the more power you can exercise, while at the same time structuring your observations according to specific guidelines, capturing knowledge in forms and tables, and allowing the rules of the institution to guide disciplinary actions.

As Michel Foucault and others have observed, vision and knowledge are invested by relations of power, and they are often part of a larger undertaking that
aims to control, to regulate, and to discipline (Discipline and Punish, 216-217.) Foucault uses the example of the Panopticon, a seventeenth century prison model in which prisoners are continuously exposed to the unverifiable gaze of a guard, to formulate a theory of a disciplinary society. In the disciplinary apparatus of constant surveillance, both the observee and the observant are therefore part of, as Foucault puts it, "the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power" (Discipline and Punish, 217). Hence, at the very least, knowledge and vision interact and determine each other—one might only see something because one already knows of or about it, or seeing something might reaffirm previously existing conceptions of what one sees. Foucault observes, "repression [operates] as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there [is] nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (History of Sexuality 1 4.)

Before embarking on the empirical part of my discussion, it may be helpful if I first address the concept of censorship and how the regulation of films is made pertinent and necessary through this agency before their public viewing/screening.

The issue of censorship is neither new nor is it exclusively confined to literature. It has not only been around for centuries, touching the fields of politics, music, art and many other disciplines but also has followed the free expressions of men and women like a shadow through history; this makes the question of how censorship was dealt with in the ancient world, an important one to be considered. In primeval societies, such as those of Israel or China, censorship was considered a justifiable instrument for regulating the moral and political life of the populace. The origin of the term ‘censor’ (emphasis is mine) in English can be retraced to the office of censor instituted in Rome in 443 BC. Resembling the system followed in the ancient Greek communities, censorship in Rome fashioned itself to be the saviour of
the principles of virtuous governance and included modeling the character of the people. This ratified censorship as an honourable task.

Mette Newth in his article *A Long History of Censorship* says that it was in China that the first censorship law was introduced in 300 AD. He goes onto state that it was taken for granted in the ancient Greek and Roman communities, that citizens would be formed in perfect consonance with the character and requirements of the regime. This did not prohibit the emergence of strong-minded men and women, as may be seen in the stories of Homer and of the Greek playwrights. While Greece was notorious for its liberal approach to literature and lifestyle in general, its capital city Athens was even more free minded, which is quite evident in the unrestrained discussions of politics that the Athenians were evidently accustomed to, that the plays of Aristophanes bring forth. Of course, even the progressive Greeks had limits to observe (Newth par. 3).

A classic case of censorship in ancient times is that of Socrates, condemned to ingest poison in 399 BC for his corruption of youth and his acknowledgement of unorthodox divinities. According to USABB, Plato’s *Republic* dating back to 360 B.C shows a clear account of a system of censorship, chiefly of the arts. Not only was the worship of various Gods forbidden, but also certain political issues were not to be discussed under any circumstances. The Greeks meant strict business. As England gradually set out to adapt to a more tolerant and comparatively lenient establishment, many issues were proposed and discarded.

The most important and controversial of these was the deliberations over the English Bible, translated by John Wycliffe, a good friend of the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt; the English Bible was eventually banned by Edward II in the late 14th century which serves to be another noted example of censorship. However, with
England embracing Protestantism in the 16th century, the English Bible was brought back in. But according to the USABB, there were still some texts forbidden; during the conversion, possessing anything related to the Vatican or the Pope was illegal. They go on to cite the example of Henry VIII accusing his second wife, Anne Boleyn of having been in possession of a censored book during the reformation. These censoring rules, hence, were not meant to be played around with.

Censorship of literary works continues till date. One of the recent controversies is the one concerning literary mania surrounding J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series. The series of Potter books, which are a rage amongst a huge faction of young adult and teen readers, deal with sorcery and magic. Some fundamentalist Christian groups, caught in the 18th century redundant notions of witchcraft being sinful and satanic and heedless of the notions of karma, justice and kindness religion deeply underscores religion, are trying to ban the Potter books, saying that they encourage witchcraft. No one has yet been successful in getting the Potter books outlawed, but there are still active efforts all over the place.

This serves to be indeed a good illustration to exemplify how awry the entire concept and process of censorship seems to be going. To ban the magical and fantastical is to ban all fairy tales, which make up a good chunk of the primary educational material for kids all over the world. None of the people supportive of the potter books being banned might have even considered the possibility of asking the Christians who actually read and enjoy these books, about their opinions. As one of the readers has been quoted commenting by the USABB, “They’re fiction! Anyone who takes them literally has some problems!” (Newth Par. 3)

The invention of the printing press in Europe in the middle of the 15th Century added fuel to the fire, with books becoming the arenas for religious ordeals. In
Western history, the very term ‘censorship’ (emphasis is mine) takes on a whole new
meaning with the introduction of the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* - lists of those
books issued by the Roman Catholic Church, which were banned for their heretical or
ideologically hazardous content; the Sacred Inquisition as the self-proclaimed
guardians, went about outlawing and burning books and sometimes also the authors.
The most famous banned author was beyond a doubt, Galileo in 1633. History is
littered with the destruction of library assortments, and libraries themselves being
turned into blazing pyres on everywhere, the deliberate burning of a library recorded
in China as early as in 221 BC (Newth par. 16). In the lengthy and multihued history
of censorship, multitudes of supposed classics have either been thrust into flames or
made targets of interdiction. The Nazis were notorious for their ‘strong inclination’
(my emphasis) for burning books, provoking Heinrich Heine to pronounce famously,
“Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings” (qtd. in
Newth par. 21). This, sadly enough, came true.

Censorship thus seems to be not so much about books or literature as it is
about power and authority. The Nazis may have comfortably believed that they were
burning mere books; in reality, they were setting fire to freedom of thought instead.
Unfortunately, censorship in the literary world, since long, seems to have become
synonymous with bantering anything that comes in conflict with established ideals,
either of the state or of a particular faction of society, at that particular moment of
time. First established in France in 1464 and equally vital to proliferation of
information as the art of printing was, the postal service soon became the most widely
used medium of communication on a person-to-person and country-to-country basis.
It acquired and still plays an important role as an instrument of censorship in many
countries, in many countries by regulating the import of ‘prohibited’ literature and magazines (emphasis is mine).

Censorship traversed from paper to performance with the advent of mechanical recording. The maximum thrust of control is usually directed towards the performing arts since they are easy, soft targets. Recent history has clear indications of authoritarian powers having started to aim first at controlling the performance arts rather than the print media since the latter are more vulnerable to manipulation. Beate Muller in *Critical Studies: Censorship and Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age* affirms that a major portion of the past five hundred years has seen restrictions on public theatrical performance as an oft-practiced manifestation of censorship. The reason might be conceived to be the possibility and perception of the theatre (and may be even film and broadcasting) as a distinctively potent apparatus for influencing emotions and delivering seditious ideas, it often being viewed as a space in which people of all social orders mix. Therefore, and perhaps as importantly, it was open to censorship:

...through the licensing of commercial venue, prohibitions on commercial performances outside those venues and pre-performance examination and licensing of texts, with subsequent monitoring of theatrical productions. (Muller 25.)

There are umpteen instances of music recordings, scores and live performances having been censored on a plethora of grounds including:

...obscene, subversive or otherwise offensive lyrics that feature bad language or satanism, incite racial hatred or promote drug taking, necrophilia and bestiality; scores that incorporate or allude to banned music like a reference to a revolutionary song; musical style with the jazz and rock & roll prohibited because they were decadent; the
supposed behaviour of audiences and performers as in the tango banned because it involved "lascivious movements" by dancers (Muller 27).

After hitting theatre and music, regimes for formulating parameters of decency (as far as films were concerned) appeared soon after the conception of the silent moving image. Initial provisions were grounded in licensing of exhibition venues other places of public performance. Demands for wider regulation arose from the discernment that the genre called cinema was outstandingly powerful in comparison to print, and that it was principally attractive to the some orders, women and children—presumably the strata of people more emotional and with lesser self-control. As a result, by the outbreak of war in 1914 most nations had established film censorship regimes that embraced film production, circulation and exhibition.

Vito Russo, in *The Celluloid Closet*, explored the production, or more specifically the ‘inclusion’ (emphasis is mine), of non-heterosexuality in mass-circulation film. In terms of the 1968 overturning of the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code that banned the ‘direct and inhibited’ portrayal of gay/lesbian themes or characters, or sexual practices, Russo showed the way in which homoeroticism and non-heteronormative sexualities can be viewed as ‘hidden’ interpretation-reliant elements in initial films, and as based in ‘negative’ typecasts in post-1968 productions (emphasis is the author’s).

The Hollywood Production Code (a self-censorship mechanism that regulated the content of Hollywood films from 1934 to the mid-1960s) actively forbade the representation of what it called “sex perversion.” Any kind of queer “heterosexual” sex was also banned—the Production Code demanded that Hollywood films depict married,
procreative heterosexuality as the only proper sexuality (*Queer Images* 9; all emphasis belong to the author).

Laws against obscenity and locally enforced edicts compelled Hollywood to cloak references to any and all forms of sexuality. It’s not easy to come across queer images in early American films, and even if they are found, more than often the degree of dissimilarity between them and those produced today is quite striking because at the time, even the cultural meanings and implications of simple terms such as ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘homosexuality’ (author’s emphases) were in a state of flux. Harry Benshoff comments in *Queer Images* that sexuality and its insinuations, however, have always been an irrefutably vital constituent of classical Hollywood and that there must be few Hollywood productions which did not showcase at least one heterosexual romantic tale, even though the undercurrents were kept fairly hushed and at the same time, off-screen heterosexual couplings were strongly suggested by adopting subtle means like blazing fireplaces, sky-rocketing fireworks, bells tolling loudly and so on.

Images like these served to be the means to suggest what several censoring decrees prohibited to be explicitly shown. But even now, appearances of any homosexual couplings, whether obvious or figurative, were virtually nowhere to be detected in the classical Hollywood frame (almost always implied) and promoted specific stereotypes, which eventually not only limited the spectrum of representation of sexuality, but also projected queer sexualities in a monstrous light. These practices of inference lead to such characters and moments in Hollywood feature films that can be described to be more queer rather than homosexual, gay, or lesbian.

Unlike a novel, which gives the author tremendous liberty of space and time to craft psychologically complex characters, films have to adopt drastic techniques to
rush through telling a story and still, making it come across as complete, entertaining and artistically intricate; stereotypes are the quickest way to provide instant characterisation and that’s the reason why all sorts of cinematic spaces have to allow a certain permissibility to stereotypes. Film theorist Richard Dyer proposes that the purpose of stereotypes is “to make something invisible visible,” (qtd. in *Queer Images* 15) or to provide an alleged vision.

Dyer says that stereotypes summon a common outlook and in the process, make people think they ‘know’ (emphasis is the author’s) a group; in reality; all they know is just the stereotype. This is aptly exemplified by an unsurprising crisis in categorisation, which occurred when sex researcher Alfred Kinsey suggested in the 50s that the round figure of ‘normal looking’ homosexuals in America was not that small after all; people grew paranoid and apprehensive about the man or woman or friend next door one because the idea of ‘invisible’ (emphasis is the author’s) queers on the ‘prowl’ (emphasis is mine) disturbed the national, social and individual equipoise much more than the sight of an effeminate man or a butch woman. The 1960s saw American ethics about gender and sex change configuration to become more permeable. The Stonewall Riots were just a part of the apparent sexual revolution that was interspersed throughout the 1960s; the movement brought queer sexualities forth, declaring that homosexuality was “…now itself a civil rights issue and not a medical one.” (*Queer Images* 131)

Films outside Hollywood, however, exhibited a greater tendency to problematise human sexuality. Since the Weimar era, German Cinema has been instrumental in innovating gay and lesbian cinema, providing a tradition in which the representation of the gay and lesbian content is not fettered to age-old stereotypes. For example, the Swedish film *Vingarne* (*Wings*, 1916) directed by homosexual
filmmaker Mauritz Stiller, was perhaps the first film ever to have homosexual love as its theme (New German Critique, 6-7). Weimar Germany also produced Anders als die Anderen (Different from the Others, 1919) which was the premiere film to put forth a plea for homosexual rights and freedom. In addition to Anders als die Anderen, the most recognised German film of this era, Leontine Sagan’s Maedchen in Uniform (Girls in Uniform, 1931) was one of the earliest films to be rediscovered from a lesbian perspective. (Queer Images 24)

The Production Code was revoked and swapped for a ratings system; as Hollywood grew inclusive of subjects and style resembling that of American avant-garde film, European art cinemas, and even exploitation and adult films, the boundaries between these forms started to fuse. Younger, foreign film-makers displaying a counter-cultural spirit were engaged to reach out to younger, foreign, and countercultural spectators. New concepts about homosexuality and other queer identities (not to mention gender and race) came into play, and in search of “its missing audience, Hollywood of the late 1960s and early 1970s became very diverse, producing work that was arguably more radical and experimental than it had ever produced before.” (Queer Images 131.)

India has the biggest film Industry in the world, releasing roughly 1000 films per year to an world-wide audience of 3.7 billion. Despite love and romance figuring persistently on the thematic fabric of the Indian film industry, homosexuality has hardly been openly and unambiguously represented. The mid-1990s, however, bore witness to new trend- queer images began to appear on film and TV. This new visibility can’t be comprehended unless the dramatic changes that the scope of the urban media underwent in the 1990s are charted. In 1991, the Congress government introduced economic reorganisation with globalisation as its main imperative. These was supplemented by a policy that brought about the mushrooming of satellite TV
channels and in doing so, breaking down the government’s monopolizing hold over television. These two developments ran parallel to the rise of the Hindu Right managed by its political face, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The speedy proliferation of new media and telecommunications technologies caused a drastic and complete transformation in the cultural system of the urban middle class- as people got acquainted with fresh, newer images in the comfort of their own homes, they responded anxiously as well as enthusiastically. Shohini Ghosh comments that:

...due to its reach, popularity and psychological presence, television came to haunt the public imagination as an ominous and uncontrolled force causing deviant behaviour and corroding ‘Indian cultural values (“False Appearances” 419.)

This led to extensive demands for rigorous legislative regulations, more censorship and control and even impositions of ban on private TV channels. The apprehensions were a straight result of the growing popularity of TV which was snow-balling fast, with the expanding space being dedicated to the manifestations of sex and sexuality. Throughout the 1990s, the Hindu Right targeted the more transgressive depictions of women’s bodies and sexualities and unfortunately, the moral alarm and terror was shared by several groups including some feminist organizations.

Despite public apprehension and panic, sexual speech blossomed and queer spaces appeared in electronic and print media. Talk Shows, newscasts, sitcoms and TV shows dared and defied conservative family ideals and sexual normativity. Sitcoms featured characters who were clearly queer, challenging heterosexual assumptions. A number of mainstream films, like Daayraa (The Square Circle, 1996), Darmiyaan (In Between, 1997) and Tamanna (Desire, 1997) have been credited with
Fire is a love story about two married sisters-in-law who become lovers. Since Fire was released in the commercial circuit, the film’s promotion and marketing helped circulate a hitherto unmatched measure of speech and representation regarding queer issues. The posters, created through special photo sessions, showed the two women inhabiting the same diegetic space that had conventionally been reserved only for heterosexual lovers. The film’s chiefly destabilising and subversive element is the fact that the relationship matures within the stronghold of a Hindu middle-class family that is typically representative of customary family values, including monogamy and heterosexuality. Moreover, the film ends with the lovers happily united.

A fortnight after the release of the move, extremist members of the Hindu Right in Delhi and Mumbai attacked and wrecked theaters showing the film. Defending the action of its allies, The BJP government claimed that the film discredited and sullied Indian Culture and commented that if women started to turn to other women to fulfill their ‘bodily needs’, the institution of marriage would fall and the reproduction of human beings would discontinue. This illogical argument as well as the attack on Fire met were strongly opposed by feminists, queer, human rights, and cultural groups. On 6 December 1998, 32 organizations and troubled citizens held a peaceful demonstration in front of New Delhi’s Regal cinema. This permitted a nationwide visibility of sexual politics in India. Most of the national newspapers described the event prominently and affirmatively. The film was eventually re-released and enjoyed a successful commercial run.
“Fire not only makes visible the ‘invisible’ lesbian by representing her on screen but also facilitates the reclamation of other texts by validating an interpretive strategy that visibilises lesbianism.” (“False Appearances” 420) By explicitly crossing the line between female bonding and the female homosexuality, Fire brings a fresh revelatory tactic into play. Gayatri Gopinath in “On Fire” has noted how the film produces a complicated relay between female homosociality and female homo-erotic practices. Commonplace homosocial actions like putting out clothes to dry, cooking together, giving each other a hair or a foot massage become suffused with erotic and sexual energy; it can no longer be presumed that things are as ‘straight’ (emphasis is mine) as they seem to be.

The influx of this fresh manner of seeing has unlocked older texts for novel readings. The pal- melodramas, for example, could now be read in a queer-friendly way to be suggestive of homoerotic love. Popular cinema rarely represents romance through sexual explicitness. In films like Anand (Joy, 1971), Namak Haram (Traitor, 1973), Anurodh (Request, 1977) and even the masculinist Sholay (Embers, 1975), homoeroticism can be traced between the intersecting lines of love and friendship. Therefore, the cinematic strategies used to signify love are similar, sometimes even identical, to those representing friendship. The heterosexual love interests are so peripheral to the plot that they cease to matter. In these tales of love and consequent loss, the ‘feminized’ (emphasis is mine) man dies in the arms of the distressed partner.

Since the mid-1980s, India has also been a witness to the advent and rise of a politicised autonomous documentary movement that circulated its films through non-state networks and videotape dissemination. Activist-practitioners, whose nonconformist views were disregarded by state-owned TV channels, fronted this movement. “Unlike the confident queer-identification of independent films, popular
cinema’s engagement with queer identities remains deeply ambivalent.” (“False Appearances” 422) In this sense, it is more accurately indicative of the public predicament around queerness in India. The most visible public dilemma around queer sexuality is the legal challenge to Section 377 of the IPC.

Taking a specific note of censorship in the Indian sub-continent, a mention has to be made of the The Rangachariar Committee Report of 1927, which was drafted for censorship in cinema. According to the Indian play-wright and director, Ramu Ramanathan, the report maintains that:

Censorship is necessary in India, and is the only effective method of preventing the import, production and public exhibition of films which might demoralize morals, hurt religious susceptibilities or excite communal or racial animosities7.

Innumerable Committees have come and gone, but the Maharashtra censor board sticks to the aforesaid report firmly. In fact they uphold the law of the land at all costs.

Hence, throughout history, the act of censorship (when a work of art articulating an idea flouting current conventions is seized, mutilated, withdrawn, confiscated, disregarded, denigrated, or otherwise made inaccessible to its audience) has essentially been used as a disproportionate tool to trample the ideas or the trends that either lack the popular sanction or are perceived as a threat to the existing and established paradigms of society. In the past decade, we have witnessed widespread anarchic protests by various groups against anything that tries to penetrate the comfort zone that the society has built around itself in the name of safeguarding the Indian tradition – right from curbing the women’s movement manifested in protests against many important feminist works as obscene or pornographic, some of which include the examples closer home like Lal Kitab, women’s publications from the Women’s
Development Programme, Rajasthan and more recently, Eve Ensler’s path breaking performance on violence and sexuality *The Vagina Monologues* having been prevented from being performed in Chennai by a ban on grounds that it would cause deterioration of law and order and breach of peace.

Further acts of unabashed censorship can be witnessed in incidents like the random and public bashing of young couples on the Valentine’s Day, disparagement of a contemporary painting of Hindu Goddess Saraswati by M. F. Hussain, obliteration of books at the Bhandarkar Institute at Pune to express discontent against James W. Laine’s book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* released by Oxford University Press in 2003 (which allegedly carried some supposedly offensive remarks against Shivaji) and questioning songs like ‘Choli ke Peeche’ from the Bollywood movie *Khalnayak* (*Villian*, 1993) that are parts of purely fictitious and commercial ventures.

This brazen prohibition also engages in preventing and sabotaging the making or screening of movies that have unconventional themes and try to make people think out of the box like Shekhar Kapoor’s *Bandit Queen* (1994) that dared to sketch the life and struggle of the Indian female dacoit, Phoolan devi on the silver screen, Deepa Mehta’s *Water* (2005) which exposed the ill-treatment meted out to the widows, mainly from Bengal, whose sojourns in the temple institutions in the holy town of Benares are meant to whet the appetite of stagnant Indian traditions, warmed on the embers of exploitation or Mehta’s earlier project, *Fire* (1996) which expounded homosexuality as just another normal instinct, which was perceived by many as an alternative sexuality that threatens the notion of the Indian family, are not unfamiliar.

There are plural sites of censorship but in Indian context, the scepter of censorship seems to be held by the dominant castes, and mainstream patriarchal communities
who brutally and indiscriminately use it to hush alternate sexualities, abstruse religious identities and marginal cultures, peoples and languages.

Often held liable for causing moral pánics around cultural anxieties, sexuality becomes a crucial showground for imposition of censorship by the moralist brigades (particularly in literary genera, print, visual media and actual practices.) When it comes to alternate sexuality and its portrayal through films, the absence of acceptance of alternate sexualities in the society leads to discomfort with sexual explicitness in public and hence it all boils down to two levels: censorship by the government and censorship by the public or the commune. The censorship regimes all over India have toiled under the constant obligation of specifying the parameters that specify the ‘typically regular’ (emphasis is mine) person in the community, whose likes, dislikes and tastes are quoted recurrently for evoking censorship, when an entity like an average person just doesn’t exist.

There have been multiple instances of the ‘proactive heads’ (emphasis is mine) of various social institutions defending their ethical and political policing by citing the reaction of 'an average Indian' who resides in a small town and requires protection against everything that is likely to threaten and disturb his moral fibre. Essentially, all defense of censorship is the justification of the moral and political agendas of the most conservative sections of the middle class.

Thus, this notion of images causing harm and the possibility of media leading people to exhibit anti-social behaviour and indulge in harmful activities becomes noteworthy. Implicitly stated, the image might cause harm by influencing people to behave in a certain manner or the image itself be as the harm, in aiding the degradation, and commodification of the ideals of the society. While that may remain open to debate, one has to agree that media images do in fact have a profound impact
on the psyche, although the manner in which this influence is played out is unclear. This ambiguity of effect ends up prompting the government to take unduly unfair actions:

In the summer of 2003, more than two hundred documentary and short filmmakers from across India displayed unprecedented solidarity to come together under the banner of the ‘Campaign against Censorship’. The spark that triggered off this collective protest was the attempt by the then BJP-led government to introduce censorship for Indian films at the Mumbai International Film Festival (MIFF 2004), the premier documentary and short film festival of the country. Through a new clause that required only the Indian filmmakers to submit censor certificates while submitting their films to MIFF...films critical of the state communal violence, environment, politics, globalisation, sexuality related issues had to be kept out (emphasis is the author’s).8

To this Rakesh Sharma adds:

MIFF managed to strike back through backdoor censorship – its selection committees found our films substandard. Films for Freedom, a collective of over 250 film-makers was born and an alternative screening space – Vikalp was created, which has by now held hundreds of screenings countrywide, even while facing police action at the behest of the Congress-led Ministry of I & B in cities like Bangalore and Chennai and extralegal censorship by rightwing goons. The ‘liberal’ UPA regime now wants to introduce tighter censorship at film festivals, something the BJP-led government tried and failed to do (emphasis is the author’s).9
In “The Troubled Existence on Sex and Sexuality” Shohini Ghosh stated that the nineties debate on censorship reflected inevitably a dilemma around sex and sexuality and that the failure to “distinguish between discrimination and desire, coercion and consent, all representations that denote or connote sex came to be damned and degraded thereby erasing the crucial separation between sexual explicitness and sexism.” (“Troubled Existence” 238) On similar lines, the queer perspective in relation to the debate of censorship versus freedom of expression has been erroneously elaborated with respect to the dialog on pedophilia, drug abuse and organized crime coming to represent all homosexuals, which leads to the dissemination of a certain kind of homophobia. It is unfortunately, through this media representation, that the jargon we use to talk about the politics of sex, sexuality and homosexuality, has come to be stamped as a social menace.

In the colonial period, same-sex attractions or any other hints or display of eroticism were seen as a hallmark of decadency and obscenity. A similar line of thought seems to be carried on and stated by the The Information Technology Act, 2000; according to the act, publishing of any information which is obscene in electronic form, is an offence punishable by law. Under this clause, “whoever publishes or transmits or causes to be published in electronic form, ‘any material which is lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or [is likely] to deprave or and corrupt’ in electronic form, is liable to be punished with imprisonment and hefty fines.” (qtd. in “Looking in Horror” 32 ) Making it worse is Clause 79 that allows police officers and other central government officers to enter and search ‘any public place’ and ‘arrest’ without ‘warrant’ anyone who is ‘reasonably suspected of having committed, or of committing or being about to commit any offence under this ‘Act’ (all emphases belong to the author).
Similar restrictions were imposed by the amendment in the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995. In addition to imposing a highly censorious ‘Programme and Advertising Code’, the government introduced pre-exhibition scrutiny and censorship for all TV programmes by bringing it under the Cinematograph Act of 1952. In order to ensure conformism towards its various censorship edicts, the BJP- led government revived the obsolete Central Monitoring Cell in Delhi where TV shows were monitored for anti-India propaganda and other violations. Shohini Ghosh says that originally an army installation, the Central Monitoring Cell became a “state panoptical and surveillance machine” (“Looking in Horror” 34).

Thus clearly, the objective of regulating sexual speech is closely tied to the regulation of morality that in turn, is by default, assumed to be pre-specified and commonly agreed upon. Although the urban centers are said to have woken up to a strong gay and lesbian movement, the larger reality in the Indian context is starkly different. The crucial need here is to be able to visualise and acknowledge straight and gay people as two different facets of society. However, the same-sex desire is assumed to not be an aspect of personhood as yet; it is still an aberration, a leaning towards something immoral and abnormal.

With respect to the public outcry against homosexuality and homosexuals or their portrayal onscreen, the strategies of vandalising cinema halls and closing them down, blackening hoardings, tearing down posters, burning effigies of directors or actors, rallies, demonstrations, fiery protests with a sense of overwhelming outrage along with umpteen incidents of gay bashing, excommunication and social or familial segregation of gay and lesbian couples and the mounting number of suicide attempts or suicides on the part of the gay community are commonly sighted and cited. Deepa
Mehta’s *Fire* (1996) which, after an initial ban on its release in India, took a fairly good opening in theatres after the name of the protagonist was changed to ‘Nita’ instead of ‘Sita’ (emphasis is mine), the revered Hindu goddess and the ideal Hindu woman. The film, however, suffered terrible wrath of various winged groups like Shiv Sena and Bajrang Dal, under the pretext of demoralizing the status of woman in the Indian society and portraying the Hindu women in a bad light.

Newspapers and magazines abounded in articles debunking Mehta’s venture and the moralists cried themselves hoarse at the deterioration of the society’s moral fabric and the Indian culture. Karan Razdan’s *Girlfriend* (2004) was bashed by not only the moralists but also by the lesbian activists, accusing the director of concentrating more on sensationalism and eventually reducing the lesbian character to being nothing more than a sleazy depiction of a frustrated and desperate woman. Perizad Zorabian, the Bollywood actor of *Mumbai Matinee* (2003) and *Jogger’s Park* (2003) fame, refused to work in a film titled *When Kiran met Karen* (2008), an English language Bollywood film dealing with lesbianism. Reportedly, Perizaad thought it to be awkward and unnatural to play a part she was not comfortable with. The film now features the Indo-American actress Purva Bedi and was released in 2008. Purva stated in one of her later interviews that she wanted to do the movie so that the actresses here (in India) could start to play those parts and not be so scared. A response like Perizaad’s makes undisputed heterosexuality as the norm, within an unquestionable heterosexual space.

When we mention Bollywood, we witness a constant and vehement reinforcement of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ (emphasis is mine) and the only structure for sexual expression, anything outside it being a deviation which either culminates in ridicule as in movies like Vikram Bhatt’s *Ghulam* (1998), Sohail Khan’s *Pyaar Kiya
Toh Darna Kya (1998), Sangeet Sivan’s Kya Kool Hain Hum (2005) and many others, or is shown to be an obsessive hazard as in Razdan’s Girlfriend (2004). Some filmmakers, in fact, include a gay character in their movies only to being in an element that can be made the butt of repulsion and mockery, thereby consciously or unconsciously representing the homophobia that is inherent in the society. At random, movies like Sohail Khan’s Maine Dil Tujhko Diya (2002), Nikhil Advani’s super hit Kal Ho Na Ho (2003) with the very famous ‘Kantaben’ (emphasis is mine), Apurva Asrani’s Out of Control (2003) and Indra Kumar’s Masti (2004) serve to be examples portraying fairly strong homophobic characters.

Probably, such widespread tendencies of rage and hatred against homosexuality and its explicit portrayal is also the reason why many film makers, who muster the courage to portray a homosexual at par with the rest of the society and not as someone effeminate or conspicuously unusual, choose to place these characters in side roles rather than in the main lead. A safer option still is expressing homoeroticism or same-sex bonding through introduction of inseparable friends of the same sex as in movies like Rakesh Kumar’s Yaraana (1981), Yash Chopra’s Silsila (1981) and Mahesh Bhatt’s Saathi (1991) or subtle homoerotic subtexts as in Basu Chatterjee’s Rajnigandha (1974), Kamaal Amrohi’s Razia Sultan (1983) and Girish Karnad’s Utsav (1984) instead of open and vivid depictions of homosexuality and homosexual acts onscreen. Some of the recent examples of mainstream Hindi films dealing with the theme of alternate sexuality and homosexual undertones (explicit/implicit) include Corporate (2006), Dostana (2008), Fashion (2008), Kya Super Cool Hain Hum (2012), Heroine (2012) and Student of the Year (2012).

Implicit and explicit mechanisms of censorship have been used since long to replenish the existing dynamics of society by means of updating the indigenous
patriarchy and a proclamation of a collective heterosexual identity. Laura Mulvey, in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” commented upon the “determining male gaze” (“Visual Pleasure 15) and the voyeurism which according to her, caters to a patriarchal society. However, in words of Sue Ellen Case:

Not all men are gazing erotically at women, some women are gazing erotically at women...some women who are gazed upon look like women, some men gazed upon by men look like women (qtd. in “Looking in Horror” 50).

Spanish history embodies some similar complexities as are found in a multicultural society like India. The last years of the Franco regime in Spain (the early 1970s) were marked by the final “violent throes of cultural censorship, including battles with the press leading to newspaper closures” (qtd. in A Spanish Labyrinth 8). After the death of the dictator in November 1975, the limits of the censor were pushed back with the release of films and books prohibited under Franco, some of which held mythical status. Roman Gubem notes how censorship was officially created in 1913 to spread the official culture and dominate the rhetoric of the regime in control (qtd. in A Spanish Labyrinth 26). At the beginning of the Civil War, The Supreme Board of Film Censorship was formed by the nationalists as a tool to "dignify and rehabilitate" all the materials which were being confiscated in the occupied territories (qtd. in A Spanish Labyrinth 26). It proclaimed itself to be the answer to Spain’s the need for a political and moral education for its people.

Yet, a board that began as a wartime directive continued during the forty years of the dictatorship. Making criticism impossible, censorship operated both to control political opinion and to defend Catholic morality. Especially in the early days of the dictatorship, any attack on Catholic morals or suggestion of eroticism invited
repression. This strict censorship affected Spanish cinema, from production to distribution and exhibition. In a country where the cinema was extremely popular, the government was fully conscious of both the potential influence and dangers of film. The government used the film industry, desperately in need of government subsidies, for its propaganda purposes. The prescriptions of the government overshadowed the taste of the public. Producers and directors were willing to comply with the official preference for patriotic and religious films. Thus, until the 1960s the dominant genres were the folkloric films, historical epics, religious films, and child star vehicles which created what Diego Galan characterizes as a "mixture of genres and characters [which] made the priests Andalousian, the nuns or true believers folkloric figures, and men asexualized" (qtd. in *A Spanish Labyrinth* 45).

On 1 December 1977, film censorship was abolished altogether (Torres 369). Predictably, this led to a veritable avalanche of films with themes hitherto unimaginable. As Peter Evans puts it, “...for the first time in thirty years, questions of history, politics and government, religion, ethnicity, regionalism, family, and sexuality could all be discussed openly and directly.” (“Back to the Future” 326) Film historians take a note of the way in which veteran and young filmmakers used the opportunity to engage with difficult themes and voice their opinions about controversial issues using a variety of stylistic approaches, after the dictator's death.

After the abolition of censorship, Spanish filmmakers rushed to express the unspeakable, confronting the actualities of everyday life. The body of films produced can be grouped according to political and sexual subject matter. Political films meant a direct engagement with issues from the past – mainly the civil war and the post-war years - which had been previously ignored or allegorized. Nonetheless, the majority of
directors who had relied heavily on metaphor continued to do so. As Juan Antonio Bardem comments:

We felt that when political censorship ceased to exist, cinema would blossom forth the way that Italian cinema had after the fall of fascism. . . [but instead] the majority of the films made in Spain since 1977 are films that could easily have been made in the late Francoist era (qtd. in *A Spanish Labyrinth* 37).

Almodovar was one of the first to make the most of this new freedom. He symbolized free and democratic Spain – as its chronicler and as its ‘agent provocateur’ (emphasis is mine) – to the extent that Spain’s most prominent national newspaper was driven to speculate in its main editorial why Almodovar had become the symbol of Spain’s rupture with Francoism (qtd. in *A Spanish Labyrinth* 17). The director’s clear identification with Spain’s ‘movida’ (the explosion of pop culture which followed Franco’s death in 1975) partly explains his iconic status. The nature of Spain’s transition to democracy – a gradual process of constitutional reform rather than a radical break with the past – necessitated a cultural revolution to compensate for the absence of a political one.

Almodovar was present in the right place at the right time, capturing with his films the excitement of a liberated nation. His films’ disavowal of Francoism provided not only an image of Spain consistent with the national will towards collective memory loss (‘desmemoria’), but also a colourful, festive image of Spain which appealed to foreign audiences. The cultural conditions in which Almodovar has worked throughout the 1990s are much the same as those of most other European nations. Though Almodovar’s style has been appropriated by the rest of the world as
emblematic of post-Franco Spain, his later films have more universal themes, and even non-Spanish origins.

Almodovar’s first three films *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (1980), *Laberinto de Pasiones* (1982) and *Entre Tinieblas* (1983) can be seen as a manifestation of disregard of all the taboos that were barred under Franco’s regime: there is ‘abnormal’ (emphasis is mine) sexuality, drug use, adultery, crude language and religious irreverence. The films clearly mirror the new autonomies enjoyed by a generation of film-makers belonging to Spain’s ‘La Movida’ movement of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s.

In spite of some dark elements, Almodovar’s eighth film, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* can be described as a romantic comedy, and the director’s most distinct love story. Nevertheless, the film was the subject of heated debate; it was decried by feminists and women’s advocacy groups for what they perceived as the film’s sadomasochist undercurrents. Its release in the United States was marked by further scandalous storms. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which controls film ratings in the U.S., side-lined its distribution with the stigma of an ‘X’ rating. The company handling the film’s distribution Miramax, filed a lawsuit against the MPAA over the ‘X’ rating, but lost in court. Nonetheless, several other filmmakers had protested against the ‘X’ rating awarded to their films, and in September 1990 the MPAA dropped the ‘X’ rating and replaced it with the NC-17 rating. This was particularly helpful to films of explicit nature that were previously regarded unfairly as pornographic because of the ‘X’ rating.

After having looked at the way representations of trans characters were depicted in the chosen films, and how they impacted culturally, analysing their reception is also of great importance when interpreting whether, in fact, they made any real
political or social impact at all. It is evident that these films highlighted various transgender issues, but surely the main concern should be whether they have made any impact on societies overall perception of trans people and whether they have contributed in the acceptance of gender-diverse people within that society?

Regulation and censorship of sexuality was and continues to be under the ‘red eye’ (emphasis is mine) of the state’s scrutinising management, aimed at enforcing and fortifying hetero-normativity by demonising homosexuality. In a world where we can’t love whom we wish to, articulate what we believe in, express our desires or delve in our ambiguities of desires or sexualities, love, pleasure and sexuality have found alleys to tear down the fetters of codified systems, subverting the modes of standardization and the possibility of deviance from the accepted and expected has increased. Law, as a strategy, apparently has many loopholes in addressing the issue of censorship because undeniably, dominance of any one group, class or wing can never do justice to the pluralistic society we live in. Incidents of violence against homosexuality (gay bashing) and the tendency to turn a deaf ear to the acknowledgement of existence of varied and alternate sexualities in the society not only evoke a sense of horror, helplessness and agony of being perpetually being a prey to ‘moral policing’ (emphasis is mine) but also a serious breach of individualism to which, every person is entitled.

What may be intolerable to some may not be objectionable to others – the classic argument of erotica (‘what I like’) versus pornography (‘what you like, but I object to’) is an illustration (emphasis is mine). Also, as Ramu Ramanathan comments:

What would our reaction be to a rich man who takes a vulnerable woman from a nearby slum as his constant companion? We would perceive it as a crude power relationship based on lust. Is there any reason to view it differently just
because it centers on two or more males? Nor is there any reason to put a stamp of approval on reckless promiscuity, just because it involves gays (Ramanathan par.5).

It is very important to be understood that terms like vulgarity, obscenity and objectionable are highly subjective to culture, class and interpretation. Thus, the imposition of any one norm of decency on society, coupled with exploitation that has social sanction of the majority, is totally uncalled for and the courtroom is a limited and unequal arena to contest what people read or watch.

4.2 Reception

Our words are never neutral; infact they are politicised, even if we are not aware of it, because they carry the power that reflects the interests of those who speak. Newspapers, courts, government, editors, even family and consumer scientists, play a crucial part in shaping issues and in setting the boundaries of legitimate discourse.

Critical discourse analysis aims to help understand social problems that are mediated by mainstream ideology and power relationships, all perpetuated by the use of written texts in our daily and professional lives. Oppression, repression, and marginalisation go unchallenged if the text is not critically analysed to reveal power relations and dominance. In analysing the reviews and the reception of the films, I aim to the illuminate ways in which the dominant forces in a society construct versions of reality that favour their interests, whether politically or culturally. I have also taken into consideration the first-hand account of the experiences that the makers of some of the chosen films had.
4.2.1 Selected Reviews and Interviews (with excerpts)

For *Transamerica*, two reviews have been chosen from the British newspapers *The Independent* and *The Observer* respectively. I have selected two interviews of the writer and producer of *Daayraa*, Timeri N. Murari. The first interview is with Sara Wallace that featured *Premier* and the second is by Mukund Padmanabhan published in the *The Indian Express*. For *Navarasa*, Malathi Rangarajan’s review in *The Hindu* and Shobha Warrier’s interview with the director Santosh Sivan have been picked. For *All About My Mother*, I preferred to take Peter Bradshaw’s review in *The Guardian* and Roger Ebert’s review that appeared in *The Chicago Times*. For the purpose of supporting my analysis, I have chosen and quoted certain excerpts from these reviews and interviews to look at the following questions: What are the typical features at large in the reviews of both the trans-topical films? Why are these features being used? What has been purposely omitted and why? What has been the intent of the filmmaker behind making a film on trans character and the problems faced while making and showcasing of the film? And, most importantly, how are these reviews used to influence perception of the people and acceptance of trans people?

The language used by most of the media, and indeed, in these reviews of *Transamerica*, seem to ignore the problem of gender stereotyping. As Liebes and Curran state in *Media, Ritual and Identity*, ‘close’ to the heart of our cultural and political system is the pattern of roles associated with our conceptions of masculinity and femininity, of the ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and ‘moral’ attributes and responsibilities of men and women that children learn and adults are “discouraged from toppling as expectations and beliefs about what is possible and proper for men and women” (Liebes and Curran 91; all emphasis belong to the author).
The Observer refers to cross-dressing, a misleading start as Bree is in fact a trans woman. The review also makes fun of those who cross-dress implying to the reading public that transgenderism is something to be laughed at:

In my distant schooldays we were amused by a joke about itinerant lingerie salesmen said to be ‘travelling in ladies’ underwear’... There is in the cinema a tradition of people doing this and of course wearing women's outerwear as well...the film is tempered by a self-mocking humour (Philip, Observer; all emphasis belong to the reviewer).

It also refer to Bree as undergoing “sexual reassignment surgery” (Philip, Observer) when she is in fact having ‘sex reassignment surgery’ (emphasis is mine). The mistakes apparent in the first few paragraphs show the lack of understanding and lack of willingness to understand trans issues. The reviewer suggests that the discomfort Bree feels at having stumbled upon a transgender meeting is ‘amusing’ (emphasis is the reviewer’s). Marginalising and using trans people as the butt of a joke is what is being conveyed throughout.

The trans people have often been victimised by the strong cultural belief of being ‘deceptive’ and by stating that Toby (Bree’s son) ‘discovers the truth’, The Observer strengthen this cultural ‘necessity’ to ‘expose’ trans people (emphasis belong to the reviewer):

But Toby discovers the truth by way of the rear view mirror while Bree is having a pee. His reaction is not merely hostile but positively malevolent. He feels confused and betrayed, his nature and manhood brought into question (Philip, Observer).

Discursive formations organise the manner of thinking and narrating that reinforce the already “taken-for-granted notions of identity and difference while limiting alternative
constitutions.” (Neale 5) Besides being reflective of social associations, practices and structures, discourse also plays a major role in their formation, reproduction and dissemination.

It is interesting to note that while *The Observer* refers to Bree as 'he' (my emphasis) throughout the entire review:

Bree, who is still in the process of determining what is to be ‘his’ new identity... ‘he’ has been undergoing hormone treatment for a while...But mistakenly ‘he’ reveals to his therapist at a centre for psychological welfare that ‘he’s’ had a phone call from out of the blue. The caller is the son ‘he’ never knew... (Philip, *Observer*, emphasis is mine.)

*The Independent*, however, does not:

Bree Osbourne, a gawky, anxious male-to-female transsexual who's about to achieve ‘her’ heart's desire...back in college, when ‘she’ was a guy named Stanley... [Bree] presenting ‘herself’ as a Christian missionary - as if ‘she’ needed another mask to complicate the imposture.” (Quinn, *Independent*, emphasis is mine.)

The way these reviews underscore Felicity Huffman's performance as Bree, digressing the writing away from the meatier (and apparently the main) issues at play, is fascinating. While one reviewer states that *Transamerica* is “…only the second occasion in which a woman has received an Oscar nomination for playing a man... [it is] Felicity Huffman who dominates the movie” (Philip, *Observer*), the other one posits that:

*Transamerica* [has]...a magnificent, unrepeatable lead performance...superbly modulated ...body language as taut as a
tightrope-walker's...prissy, fastidious way with words....Too bad. Huffman's super-subtle performance remains the best reason to see it.”

(Quinn, *Independent*)

By veering the attention towards the actor’s skill, it seems as if the seeming outcome of the review is to spell out the morbid interest of the transgender world in what gender change would be like for them and their pre-disposition to explore it in a second-hand mode, comparing follow-ups with another transgender who has experimented with it, for the purpose of the film.

Although the review in *The Independent* approaches the subject in a serious manner, yet it has certain flaws like using stereotypical terms such as ‘bloke’ to emphasise a vivid division between the binaries; it is clearly stated that “...she's desperate to keep quiet about being a one-time bloke.” (Quinn, *Independent*) Such an assertion sides with the view that gender is what the genitalia is and thus, inferring that by undergoing the surgery that will make her “all woman” (Quinn, *Independent*), Bree will become happier. However, the review salvages itself in last few sections by identifying that Bree “expresses a terrible sadness in her yearning to be other than she is, and at the same time a dread of being ridiculed for just that reason.” (Quinn, *Independent*) and thus, expressing an understanding about the problems real trans people face. When looking at trans related concerns within the print media, one needs to look close and read between the lines to find out the actual meaning that lies behind the spoken and written language in the hopes that the understanding gained might bring about more parity, justice, liberty, reconciliation and hope.

*All About My Mother* can be touted as Almodóvar’s endeavour to explore the healing effects that a performance can have on a spectator. The film deals, among various other concerns, with the power of live enactment to create camaraderie among
women. It seems to operate on two basic levels: the first is that of female bonhomie and the second is “bizarre, shrill, freakish high-camp” as quoted in the excerpt below:

The first is an intelligent and affecting movie about women’s experience of love, companionship and loss - and the second is a bizarre, shrill, freakish high-camp operetta whose apparent claim to an ultimate moral and emotional seriousness is ill-founded... Neither gay nor heterosexual love is especially dramatised in All About My Mother; the motif is rather the eternal power of female companionship and sisterhood. (Bradshaw, Guardian)

However, by showcasing drag, Almodovar brings into active consideration the intrinsically performative nature not just of phenomena as allegedly altered as transgenderism and theatricality, but also of sexuality and gender in general, and this is reiterated by the reviewer who says:

The Barcelona scenes reflect Almodovar’s long-standing interest in characters who cross the gender divide. Esteban’s father is now a transvestite prostitute...Manuela, seeking her former lover, finds an old friend named Agrado...The name means “agreeable,” we’re told, and Agrado is a person with endless troubles of her own who nevertheless enters every scene looking for the laugh. (Ebert, Chicago Times)

The reviewer in The Guardian remarks that, “…it is difficult to see how the central, exuberant presence of transsexuals does any more than ironise and alienate the real emotional issues raised in this film, but it leaves open the question of how precisely the experience of transsexuals is supposed to speak to the lives of non-transsexual women and me.” (Bradshaw, Guardian)

Almodovar’s early films were said to depict the manifestations of cross-dressing, drag and and sex changes as laden with a tremendous and unquestionable
subversive charge. However, queer theorists opine that *All about My Mother* (and some of Almodovar’s later cinema) seem to have internalised the normalizing thrusts that attend to heteroormative paradigms. This, in the context of the movie, might be interpreted to mean that in forms of representations like Agrado’s monologue, drag performances (even though still marginalised) have progressively started to occupy a greater public space, but in this they seem to have been ‘brought forth’ (emphasis is mine) by and for a capitalist and consumerist entertainment industry. However, Agrado owns the public space that she inhabits, and she owns it with confidence which clearly shows:

Manuela is the heroine of the film and its center, but Agrado is the source of life. There’s an extraordinary scene in which she takes an empty stage against a hostile audience and tries to improvise a one-woman show around the story of her life...[saying] ‘I’ve paid my dues to be who I am today. Have you?’ (Ebert, *Chicago Times*)

*Time* anointed Daayraa as one of the ten best of the year 1997. In an interview to Sara Wallace, screenwriter of the film *Daayraa*, Timeri Murari laments:

A film like mine would be hard pushed to gain distribution in India. Bollywood is absolutely formulaic. Films have to be three hours long and they contain no less than six songs and dance routines. Bollywood is in such a rut, it is looking to Hollywood for inspiration rather than drawing on Indian experience. (Murari, *Premier*)

He continues:

...despite celebrating 50 years of independence, India is in a state of crisis. We’ve had 50 years of corrupt politicians, AIDS has reached epidemic proportions; infanticide of girl babies takes place on a real
scale; and yet India is culturally unable to look at these problems.

(Murari, Premier)

The ending of the film wherein the transvestite gets killed seems like a punishment for cross dressing. Why is the transvestite killed off in the end? Is there no place in the society for a marginal identity like him? Is he being ‘weeded out’ because he poses as a threat to a heteronormative society and ‘normalcy’ has to be restored at the end? Or does he die because he ‘becomes a man’? (emphases is mine) He was alive till the time he dressed up as a woman, does his dying at the end satirize the supposed fragility of a woman in the society? (In contrast to the scene where he convinces Sonali to dress up as a man so that she will be ‘safe’ on the road.)

In his interview with Mukund Padhmanabhan, the Chennai-based author says he is "ninety percent happy" with Palekar's rendering of his screenplay and thinks that Nirmal Pandey and Sonali Kulkarni were "brilliant" in the lead roles. The residual "ten percent" unhappiness relates mainly to the film's ending. He says:

I had always meant the film The Square Circle (Daayraa) to be a love story between two people trapped in opposite identities. It’s an intriguing essay on the nature of real and assumed gender identities and cultural proscriptions. It’s also an exploration of sexual identity in an Indian context where love has nothing to do with marriage and sex has little to do with love. As I was unhappy with the film director’s interpretation, I re-worked it as a stage play which I directed at the Leicester Haymarket theatre. The main leads were Parminder Nagra and Rahul Bose. The theme remained the same, though not the ending.

In the play, I returned to my original ending. (Murari, Indian Express)

Beneath the hard and bitter carapace of Daayraa, however, lies an underbelly of wit and tenderness. Despite its profanity and violence, Murari’s script appears
intended not so much to shock but to undermine our notions of normality. The ‘natural’ love between the young girl and the transvestite is pitted against the ‘abnormal’, malevolent, male-dominated, and misogynistic society they live in. The script succeeds in weaving a web of empathy for the couple as their relationship— which seems founded on a shared loneliness and a sense of being unloved and unwanted - blossoms into an odd but convincing love (emphasis is mine).

The beauty of the film is a mixture of the story's simplicity and the more complex issues it draws upon. What does it mean to be a man or a woman? Can we quell sexual longing in favour of companionship? A moving and meditative film, Daayraa, plays quiet testimony to the talents of filmmakers on the fringes of commercial cinema. The film is mostly a sensitive exploration of sexual identity in a country where such issues aren't open to negotiation.

Santosh Sivan belongs to that group of filmmakers who just show- the agenda, solutions or messages are upto the audience to decipher. He chooses a brilliant premise (a middle-class family, a 13-year-old and a conflicted transgender) and uses it fantastically to explore the predicaments of the third gender; in this, Navarasa transforms into much more than just a faithful raconteur of a myth (the Myth of Aravan.) In an interview, Santosh Sivan was quoted as stating that he:

...thought it would be interesting to make a film on [the Aravanis], in the form of a documentary...[and] was also fascinated by the Koovagam festival...later [I] decided to give the film the look of fiction, documentary, period drama, and fantasy” (Rediff)

Navarasa works at two levels: on one hand, it shows how Shweta becomes attentive to her uncle's sexuality and on the other, it records the Koovagam festival as a documentary would but retains the level of interest and concern to match Shweta’s story. “Sivan's strong storyline is what helps 'Navarasa' transcend the level of a
documentary — although shots of the festival, and the Miss. Koovagam beauty contest do give a documentary feel.” (Rangarajan, Hindu) Even though the dance performances at the beauty contest have been found to be bordering on obscene by some, the documentary mode doesn’t mortify you by virtue of close proximity with the third gender, instead it beckons you to take a closer look at a reality that remains hidden besides being so blatantly conspicuous - the social stigma, the pain of being excluded and ostracised, having to struggle for a living and having to face ridicule throughout life.

Sivan also commented that quite erroneously, “some also suggested [to me] to take the film to a gay festival, which is not what the film is all about.” (Rediff) He adds that the transgenders who agreed to act in the movie, did so only when they realised that they were not going to be ridiculed and hoped for a representation that would project them in the light of their own reality- that is exactly what Navarasa does and that is exactly what the reviewer reiterates:

Camera captures the garish and gaudy ambience in all its stark reality.

Nowhere does Sivan try to camouflage things... The 95-minute sojourn into the minds of a gender you may never comprehend has a message... so the next time you see one in real life you would probably think twice before you make a grimace. (Rangarajan, Hindu)

The ability of small but resourceful interest groups to manipulate the media and public debate is among the less appetising features of any democracy. It is quite possible that our squeamishness with sexual explicitness on the big screen is rooted either in sexuality or one of its facets that we are unwilling to address.
Notes


2 USABB is the acronym for United Students Against Book Banning, which is a Canadian coalition of students against the censorship of literary materials.


4 Stonewall Riots are hailed as the birth of the modern gay and lesbian rights movement. They were a series of spontaneous, violent demonstrations by members of the gay community against a police raid that took place in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, at the Stonewall Inn, in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. For details, see Banshoff and Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (US: Rowan Inc., 2006): 130.

5 Weimar culture was a burgeoning of the arts and sciences during the Weimar Republic (between Germany's loss at the end of World War I in 1918, and Hitler's upswing to power in 1933). This period is often alluded to as an era one of the highest level of intellectual production in human history.

6 An exploitation film refers to any film which is generally considered to be low budget as well as low moral or artistic merit, apparently aiming for financial success through “exploiting” a current trend or a niche genre.

