THE DYNAMICS OF IN-BETWEENNESS: TRANSGRESSIVE DEPICTION OF GENDER ON SCREEN (WITH REFERENCE TO ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER, TRANSAMERICA, DAAYRAA AND NAVARASA)

Summary

The overall aim of my research has been to examine, analyse and argue the case for the evolving portrayal, cultural conception and, most importantly, the redefinition of gender in the chosen films, namely: Amol Palekar’s Daayraa (1996), Pedro Almodovar’s All About My Mother (1999), Duncan Tucker’s Transamerica (2005), and Santosh Sivan’s Navarasa (2005). Cinema can be considered as a reflection of social values, ideas, morals and changes – the reflections of which can be transported through the filmic narrative arguably resulting in processes of contestation and change in not only the minds of the spectators in the auditorium, but in the mind of society as a whole.

The challenging of foundations and breaking of boundaries, stereotypes and engrained ideals pertaining to patriarchal, phallocentric society has been crucial to this analysis of representations of gender as reflected in the films. Psychoanalysis has also been used as a tool, in the midst of a gender-based theoretical framework, to not only provide a contemporary insight into these director’s works; but to deconstruct, analyse and gain in-depth insight into strategies used by them in order to challenge these repressive stereotypes of gender and sexuality.

From Foucault and Butler to the film-makers selected, they have been enthusiastically engaged in churning out a body of work that demonstrates the concept of a “true sex” to be just a historical and cultural construct and fantasy. The recognition of the fluidity and plurality of sexuality and gender, transcending the restrictive and discriminatory codes still
operating in the society has been the primary issue tackled by the chosen film makers as well as the thesis. The point to consider here is that there is not one ‘true sex’ (my emphasis) which stands in wait for us to discover, no specific or constant ‘I’ (my emphasis) forming the core of one’s existence as a man or a woman.

These films on one hand, are considered to largely subvert normative heterosexuality with daring portrayals of apparent social outcasts including transsexuals, transvestites, gays and lesbians; on the other hand, they reveal that instability and undecidability are the precise truth and ‘norm’ (my emphasis) behind sexuality. Thus, it has been considered quite plausible to interpret that that it is actually the heterosexual desire that always attempts to challenge and subvert the originally unstable sex and gender and turn it into a stable entity.

Through regulatory institutions and mechanisms of patriarchy, alternative lifestyles like the ones discussed in this thesis are usually theorized as nothing but a chain of poor choices and deviant behavior made by an ‘otherwise normal’ person; the third gender becomes representation of identifiable individuals who manifest predictable physical characteristics and inevitable behavioural patterns. Thus, the transgenders do and do not exist at the same time – sometimes they are considered persons and sometimes, merely a practice.

In this concern, it should always be taken into account that the subversive influence is always there, and more significantly, the subversion always comes from within. If sex and gender are nothing but a mere act as suggested by Butler in Gender Trouble, there always a potent possibility of people discarding the customary script and playing several roles in the limitless journey of reconfiguration and resignification. Bonnie Bullough notes that calling these people who do not fit neatly into the two gender boxes labeled “‘male’ and ‘female’ nonconformists, sounds as if they violated the norms of society on purpose.” (Bullough 312; all emphasis belong to the author), going on to argue that “there needs to be a rethinking of
the whole concept of gender boxes in society and, with this, a recognition of the androgynous or gynadrous tendencies present in all humans.” (Bollough 364)

Having now analytically looked at the chosen films and their reviews, I can see the ways in which these texts performed culturally, in a much clearer light. Chris Holmlund in *Impossible Bodies* comments that “…because visibility frequently translates to social acceptance and correlates with political clout, ‘deviant’ looks and bodies- though by no means solely queer looks and bodies- are definitely, often defiantly, present.” (Holmlund 5, all emphasis belong to the author) Social attitudes have undergone a definite and considerable change since the early 1990s, when transsexual people first started the crusade for their rights to respect and equality.

However, it appears that “repeated and limited representations of some social groups…has a relationship with their social status and power.” (Long & Wall, 290) Thus, inspite of having gained a greater visibility in popular culture than they enjoyed about a decade ago, the trans-population still has a seemingly lengthy ordeal ahead in re-educating concerning matters of gender ‘otherness’ (my emphasis) - the varied manifestations on the continuum of gender and sexuality. Angel Lin so eloquently puts it in *Problematizing Identity*:

> As long as there is social inequality and as long as the powerful groups of people in society continue to fix essentialist identities for others (or conversely, ignore or deny the existence of others who are different from them), there will still be the need for identity struggles and identity politics.

(Lin 213)

Even though the media can be said to have been instrumental in etching deleterious, stigmatizing and lop-sided backdrop in the past regarding the lives trans people’s for a sufficiently long period of time, the role that those very channels for news, entertainment and
opinion have played in the course of change, has been fairly significant. Steven Marsh and Parvati Nair have stated that cinema is an apparatus to convey social messages, having the capability to reinforce, counter and threaten configurations of identity, signifying that it puts forth boundless potential to change, refract and rupture the imagined horizons of social identity. I believe that this argument summarizes the work of the film makers that I have chosen, especially with respect to the representations of gender and sexuality in their films; such portrayals provide a means capable of permeating the social fabric and the subsequent social configurations in relation to the representations of gendered and sexual identities. A continual deconstruction as well as reconstruction of identity, performance and coded discourse seems to have resulted in these new images of gender representations, which concentrate majorly on the tension between personal experience and the larger social collectivity, the film-makers have sought and endeavoured to expose and explicitly dare and contest the prevailing patriarchal standards, oppressive stereotypes and restrictive practices.

Queer theory and cinema has ascertained for me, that there can be manifold dimensions of sexuality and gender; to accept, understand and embrace the plurality of these approaches of identification and looking, is up to us as an individual. Through the course of this thesis, my belief in the inevitable fluidity of gender and sexuality was strengthened and I realized that can this ambiguity elicits diverse responses from many different people; the truth regarding gender and sexuality is disputed and there is no single delineation possible. The Queer Gaze and theory have been successful in evoking “an impassioned, even angry resistance to normalization” and even the word ‘queer’ is “a rejection of the compulsory heterosexual code of masculine men desiring feminine women.” (qtd. in Bornstein 238)

I would like to close with Jacques Derrida’s plea for an idealistic world with regards to sexuality, which I am in complete consonance with:
Beyond the binary difference that governs the decorum of all codes, beyond the opposition feminine/masculine, beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality which come to the same thing. As I dream of saving the chance that this question offers, I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual marks each ‘individual,’ whether he be classified as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ according to the criteria of usage (Derrida and Kamuf 200; all emphasis belong to the author).

The kinesis and free-floating essence of this utopia imagined by Derrida is strongly reminiscent of Herculine Barbin’s “happy Limbo of non-identity” (Being the Recently Discovered 14) the condition where one stands liberated from the burden of being allocated a ‘true sex’ and ‘true gender.’ (my emphasis)

The chosen films and many more like them validate the fact that the depictions of transgenders are already producing fresh and new ideas regarding the formation of a self increasingly defined in terms of the an upsurge of multiple sexualities and genders past a reality, a self that conforms to no single, meaningful delineation. Instead, what needs to be sought is “a world at home in a postmodern cacophony of multiplicity, pastiche and pluralities that marks the death of the meta-narratives of gender which have dominated the modern world.” (Ekins and King xvi)