

## Feminist and Queer Interventions in Literary and Visual Culture

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### **Abstract**

Moving beyond simple visibility, this study explores how “disruptive aesthetics” in 21st-century literary and visual culture function as active political interventions rather than mere representation. The analysis first addresses literary interventions, specifically the subversion of the traditional “marriage plot” and the reclamation of domestic spaces. By utilizing non-linear temporalities what Jack Halberstam defines as “queer time” these texts reject heteropatriarchal milestones of birth, marriage, and reproduction. Instead, they offer narratologies that mirror the fluid, often fragmented lived experiences of queer subjects, forcing a re-evaluation of how stories are told and for whom. In the realm of visual culture, the study examines how the “oppositional gaze” is used to deconstruct the male-centric lens of historical art and digital media. Through the lens of “glitch feminism,” the paper argues that the intentional disruption of the image serves as a refusal to be “legible” or “consumable” within capitalist frameworks. The body is reimagined as a site of performance and resistance, rather than a fixed biological essence. Ultimately, these feminist and queer interventions do more than represent marginalized identities; they offer a fundamental critique of the “naturalization” of desire and power. By fostering a queer phenomenology, these works create a transformative space where gender and sexuality are perpetually negotiated. This paper concludes by suggesting that as digital and physical realities merge, the tools of disruption will increasingly rely on hybridity and the radical erasure of binary distinctions.

**Keywords:** Heteronormativity, Queer Theory, Oppositional Gaze, Feminist Aesthetics, Visual Culture, Gender Performativity

### **Introduction:**

In contemporary India, feminist and queer narratives have moved beyond struggles for legal recognition and social acceptance toward deeper cultural interventions that challenge

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fixed ideas of gender and sexuality. After the landmark judgment in “Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India”, literature and cinema began to move past simple inclusion of marginalized identities and instead disrupt heteronormative forms such as the marriage plot, linear life narratives, and the patriarchal family. Influenced by thinkers like Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, and bell hooks, works such as *Bombay Talkies*, *Badhaai Do*, *Kapoor & Sons*, and *Aligarh* reshape narrative structure through fragmentation, non-linear time, and a critical gaze that questions male-dominated visual culture. This marks a shift from “visibility” within existing systems to “intervention” that actively critiques and transforms them, using disruptive aesthetics to rethink desire, gender, and power in 21st-century Indian cultural production.

### Queer Theory

Judith Butler argues that gender is not natural or fixed but produced through repeated acts such as dress, speech, and behaviour, which create the illusion of a stable identity. What appears biological is actually socially constructed, and everyday performances actively produce gender rather than express an inner essence, thereby challenging the male/female binary. Similarly, Jack Halberstam proposes the concept of “queer time,” describing lives that unfold outside conventional timelines of marriage, reproduction, and career success, and redefines “failure” as a creative and political refusal of normative achievement. Complementing these perspectives, Sara Ahmed introduces queer phenomenology, emphasizing how sexuality and identity are shaped by how bodies orient themselves in space; turning away from heteronormative paths opens alternative ways of belonging, inhabiting, and resisting the world.

### Feminist Film Theory

Laura Mulvey argues that mainstream cinema is shaped by the “male gaze,” which positions women as objects of visual pleasure and reinforces patriarchal power. In contrast, Bell Hooks proposes the “oppositional gaze,” highlighting how marginalized viewers critically resist and challenge dominant visual representations. Similarly, Legacy Russell describes the “glitch” as a political disruption that refuses fixed, acceptable identities and embraces illegibility as resistance. In the Indian postcolonial context, shaped by colonial laws such as Section 377 and its repeal in *Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India*, these ideas show that challenging rigid identities is both an aesthetic and political act against colonial and heteronormative systems.

### Literary Interventions in Indian English Literature

#### Subversion of the Marriage Plot

A nuanced reading of *Funny Boy* by Shyam Selvadurai, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* by Mahesh Dattani demonstrates how heteronormativity is interrogated through narrative structure, character development, and the politics of space. In *Funny Boy*, Arjie’s emerging queer desire unfolds alongside escalating Sinhala-Tamil ethnic conflict, linking personal sexuality with national anxieties about purity and belonging. The novel’s episodic structure disrupts the traditional bildungsroman, preventing Arjie’s growth from culminating in stable heterosexual

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masculinity; instead, exile becomes his only possible future, marking queer identity through displacement and fractured belonging.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Anjum's life as a hijra fundamentally unsettles binary gender categories, while her transformation of a graveyard into a home reimagines domestic space itself. This alternative community rejects biological lineage and reproductive futurism, forming bonds through care, adoption, and chosen kinship rather than blood ties. Roy's sprawling, non-linear narrative mirrors this resistance to coherence, challenging the idea that legitimacy depends on stability, order, and heteronormative continuity.

In *Seven Steps Around the Fire*, the tragic fate of Kamla, a hijra who marries into an elite family, exposes marriage as a regulatory institution that safeguards caste, class, and patriarchal authority. The play reveals how silence, secrecy, and state complicity protect heteronormative respectability, turning marriage into a disciplinary mechanism rather than a romantic ideal.

Across these texts, characters such as Arjie, Anjum, and Kamla inhabit in-between identities ethnic, gendered, and sexual that resist assimilation into dominant social narratives. By refusing neat closure, disrupting linear progress, and reimagining kinship and domesticity, these works transform storytelling into a form of political critique, exposing how family, nation, and gender norms are constructed and maintained through both social institutions and narrative expectations.

### **Queer Time and Non-linear Narratives**

The disruption of life milestones such as birth, marriage, and reproduction challenges the dominant belief that a meaningful life must follow a fixed, linear path culminating in heterosexual marriage and biological family. Queer and feminist texts question this sequence by presenting characters whose lives do not move toward marriage or parenthood as ultimate goals, thereby unsettling the idea that adulthood and success are measured through reproductive continuity. Instead of organizing identity around these socially sanctioned markers, such works foreground alternative kinship models based on friendship, chosen family, community care, and affective bonds rather than bloodline or legal recognition. These reimagined forms of belonging resist the state's investment in lineage, inheritance, and normative domesticity, proposing intimacy as a flexible and negotiated structure.

### **Feminist and Queer Interventions in Bollywood & Documentary Cinema Oppositional Gaze in Mainstream and Parallel Cinema/Films to Analyse**

Feminist and queer interventions in Bollywood and parallel cinema can be productively examined through the lens of the oppositional gaze, particularly in films such as *Aligarh*, *Badhaai Do*, and *Bombay Talkies*.

These films move beyond token representation by reframing female and queer desire as interior, complex, and self-articulated rather than sensationalized or comic. In *Aligarh*, desire is not displayed through spectacle but conveyed through silence, poetry, and emotional vulnerability, allowing the camera to linger on solitude and introspection rather than erotic display, this shift unsettles the voyeuristic logic of mainstream cinema. *Badhaai Do* addresses

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lavender marriage and social conformity, but instead of centering heterosexual romance, it foregrounds negotiation, companionship, and the emotional labour required to survive heteronormative pressure, thereby complicating the institution of marriage itself.

In Bombay Talkies, particularly in the segment exploring queer aspiration and cinematic fantasy, the gaze is redirected toward marginalized longing, granting visibility without reducing it to caricature. Across these films, camera positioning becomes crucial: close-ups privilege affect over spectacle, domestic interiors become sites of quiet resistance, and the narrative focus moves away from the dominant, heroic male figure typical of Bollywood. By decentralizing masculine authority and allowing queer and female subjectivities to occupy narrative and visual space, these films enact an oppositional gaze that challenges patriarchal spectatorship and reorients cinematic language toward intimacy, vulnerability, and dissent.

In both cinema and literature, the “real” body marked by vulnerability, scars, breath, voice, and gesture often exists in tension with cinematic spectacle, which tends to stylize, aestheticize, or abstract lived experience into consumable images. When bodies are reduced to iconic shots, stereotypes, or narrative tropes, they become objects of visual consumption, creating emotional distance and flattening historical specificity.

By contrast, when texts and films dwell on corporeal detail through close-ups, pauses, fragmented interior monologue, and sensory description, they restore material presence and ethical gravity to the body. This distinction profoundly shapes how audiences perceive suffering, desire, and identity spectacle can universalize and anesthetize experience, while attention to embodied particularity rehumanizes subjects and demands recognition, empathy, and accountability.

Similarly, testimony in documentary cinema, memoir, and testimonial fiction operates as a form of political resistance by transforming private pain into public record. When marginalized individuals narrate their lived realities, personal memory becomes counter-history, challenging official narratives and resisting erasure. In this process, the boundary between public and private collapses: domestic spaces, intimate experiences, and personal confessions acquire civic and political significance. While such visibility can empower speakers and foster collective solidarity, it also risks exposing vulnerable bodies to new forms of surveillance and commodification. The ethical force of testimony therefore depends on whether representation amplifies agency and critical awareness, or merely turns lived trauma into spectacle for passive consumption.

### **Glitch Feminism and Digital Disruption**

The #MeTooIndia movement (2018) became a powerful example of digital testimony as interruption. Women across journalism, academia, cinema, and media used Twitter and Instagram to publicly name perpetrators, bypassing institutional gatekeeping. The digital post functioned as a “glitch” in patriarchal systems suddenly exposing hidden structures of abuse. Figures from Bollywood, including directors and actors, were publicly challenged, disrupting the carefully curated image of the industry.

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Meme culture has also become a feminist and queer tool of satire. Instagram pages such as Diet Sabya (fashion criticism) or feminist meme collectives frequently parody misogynistic advertisements, moral policing, and heteronormative tropes. Memes remix Bollywood dialogues once reinforcing patriarchy into ironic critiques. For instance, exaggerated wedding scenes or “log kya kahenge” (what will people say) tropes are reframed to mock social conformity, turning popular culture against itself.

Digital fragmentation of identity is visible in queer Instagram creators and drag performers who use filters, editing, and performance to construct fluid online selves. Artists like Sushant Divgikr (Rani Ko-HE-Nur) embody multiple gender expressions across digital platforms, destabilizing fixed binaries. Here, the body becomes mediated, stylized, and multiplied an intentional disruption of coherent, state-readable identity.

OTT platforms have significantly expanded space for disruptive narratives. On Netflix, series like *Made in Heaven* foreground queer desire, same-sex relationships, and the hypocrisy of elite marriage markets. The show dismantles the fantasy of the “perfect Indian wedding” by exposing casteism, homophobia, and gender violence beneath spectacle.

Another strong example is *Badhaai Do*, which critiques lavender marriage and heteronormative pressure while circulating widely through digital streaming after theatrical release. OTT circulation ensures that such narratives reach audiences beyond metropolitan elite spaces, subtly reshaping mainstream discourse. Together, these examples show how digital media does not merely represent feminist and queer identities but actively disrupts systems of visibility, authority, and narrative control turning the internet and streaming culture into sites of aesthetic and political intervention.

The methodology is grounded in **qualitative textual and visual analysis**, focusing on interpretation rather than statistical measurement. Instead of collecting numerical data, the research examines literary texts and films as cultural artifacts that produce meaning through language, structure, imagery, and performance. Through close reading of literary works, the study carefully analyses narrative voice, symbolism, characterization, temporality, and form in order to uncover how heteronormativity is constructed, questioned, or disrupted within the text. Attention is given not only to what is said but to how it is said such as fragmented narration, refusal of closure, or reworking of the marriage plot.

In parallel, **visual semiotic analysis is applied to films**, examining how meaning is created through cinematic techniques such as camera angles, framing, lighting, costume, editing, and sound. This approach interprets visual signs and symbols to understand how bodies, desire, and domestic spaces are represented, and how the gaze operates within the filmic structure.

**An intersectional feminist approach** informs the analysis by recognizing that gender and sexuality are shaped by intersecting factors such as caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and nation this ensures that queer and feminist representation is not examined in isolation but within broader power structures. Finally, a **queer phenomenological lens** drawing on thinkers like Sara Ahmed guides the study’s attention to lived experience, spatial orientation,

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and embodiment, exploring how characters inhabit, move through, and experience social spaces that may exclude or regulate them.

Together, these methodological tools enable a nuanced understanding of how literary and visual culture function as sites of feminist and queer intervention.

### Conclusion

Contemporary Indian literature and cinema have shifted from a politics of representation to a politics of disruption. Where earlier feminist and queer interventions sought visibility within dominant frameworks, recent texts and films destabilize those very structures. By subverting the marriage plot, rejecting linear milestones, and reimagining domestic space through non-linear temporality what Jack Halberstam calls “queer time” works such as *Funny Boy*, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and *Seven Steps Around the Fire* expose heteronormativity as embedded not only in law and custom but also in narrative form itself. Their refusal of closure transforms storytelling into a mode of political resistance.

In cinema, disruption operates visually. Drawing on Laura Mulvey’s critique of the male gaze and Bell hook’s oppositional gaze, films like *Aligarh*, *Badhaai Do*, and *Bombay Talkies* shift focus from spectacle to embodied vulnerability, reframing queer and female desire as complex and self-articulated. Legacy Russell’s “glitch feminism” further illuminates how fragmentation and illegibility resist demands for coherent identity. Situated against India’s postcolonial backdrop and the legacy of Section 377, these cultural productions collapse the public/private divide, reclaiming testimony, domestic space, and digital platforms as sites of dissent. Ultimately, feminist and queer interventions in Indian cultural production are not about inclusion but transformation embracing hybridity, illegibility, and formal experimentation to ensure that disruption remains central to cultural resistance and creative reimagination.

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