

**Title of the Module:**  
**Queer Cinema**

The word 'Queer' in normal parlance denotes 'different' or 'unconventional' or 'shifty' or 'offbeat' etc. Though the term 'queer' was initially used as an offensive label, the terminology now has acquired a positive political semantic layer. Queer still is a conceptual category of sexuality which is in the process of evolution and extension. Queer is an umbrella term which includes categories like LGBTQIA+; referring to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and + denoting a number of additional possibilities. Politically, the term 'Queer' contests the conventional ideas on gender, sex, sexuality, desire, dressing etc. Queer Cinema addresses the issues faced by the queer community in addition to bringing in a new kind of sexuality and gender aesthetics in the context of cinema.

**Learning Objectives:**

To enable the students to:

- i) Comprehend the discursive category called the Queer
- ii) Understand the distinctive features of Queer Cinema
- iii) Familiarize with a few important queer filmmakers and their films
- iv) Critically analyse queer films specifically and visa vis heteronormative cinema

Queer position is an act of political resistance against the pressures of heteronormative society. Heteronormativity refers to the situation where heterosexuality is considered as the default, 'natural' sexual orientation, which further refers to the hegemony of male/female gender binary. On the contrary, Queer stands for fluidity of sexuality. It is a discourse on sexuality, gender and gender norms beyond the social and cultural binaries. Major queer theorists include Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Eve Sedgwick, Jack (Judith) Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose etc.

Queer Studies is a comparatively new academic discipline which evolved from Gay/Lesbian Studies, which was more rooted on identity politics rather than gender fluidity. Again, Gay/Lesbian studies is an offspring of Feminist Theory which contests the normative discourses underlining male superiority and gender inequality. The term 'Queer' is a break and counter to the previous discourses surrounding gender and sexuality, as it focusses on the idea of gender fluidity and fluid identities, rather than assimilating to the mainstream society. Queer is also a rupture in the sense that it is more a poststructuralist intervention to manifest identity. The manifesto of Queer Theory is rooted in Judith Butler's concept of gender which, according to her, is "a verb rather than a noun".

Gender, according to Butler, is a cultural construct which comprises repetitive performances of a person in everyday life. Gender, unlike sex, is not fixed, and is not a causal result of sex. Judith Butler's famous works include *Gender Trouble* (1990), *Bodies That Matter* (1993), *Undoing Gender* (2004) etc. Adrienne Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" is also a key work in the area of Queer Studies. Indian theoretical contributions to the Queer epistemology include: Ruth Vanita's book *Queering India: Same Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (2002) and Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan's edited book *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (2006).

In order to comprehend the idea of Queer Cinema, first of all, one has to acknowledge the fact that mainstream cinema across the world represents heterosexual culture and concerns. Within the heterosexual cinematic paradigm itself, there is an obvious patriarchal dominance, which

pushes the concerns of women to the secondary or peripheral position. Interrogating the racial, gender, casteist, and sexuality practices followed by the mainstream cinematic conventions, many a cinematic sub-cultures developed around the world. Some of them are: black cinema, feminist cinema, dalit cinema and queer cinema.

Queer Cinema resists the stereotypical, comic and demonic representations of people with queer sexuality. Along with the resistance, Queer Cinema celebrates the queer way of life and upholds the Queer sub-cultural practices. Queer Cinema is just an umbrella term and it cannot be confined to any specific cinematic genre alone. Cutting across cinematic genres, queer cinema practices can be seen. That means we can have a queer feature film, queer documentary film, queer melodrama, queer noir film, and queer historical films etc. What makes a movie queer is not the format or genre of movie, but the attempt to achieve an authentic cinematic representation of the queer subjectivity.

Films that strive to provide a positive representation of any of the many types of queer identities can be called queer films. Lesbian Queer Cinema, Gay Queer Cinema, Bisexual Queer Cinema, Transsexual Queer Cinema, Asexual Queer Cinema are some of the sub-categories of the larger cultural construct of Queer Cinema. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin comment that, “Queer film study, [...] understand cinematic sexualities as complex, multiple, overlapping and historically nuanced, rather than immutably fixed. While often giving emphasis to traditionally ignored or censored non-straight sexualities, queer film studies explores how and why the fluidity of all sexualities relates to the production and reception of cinema” (2). Queer cinematic approaches could subvert almost all departments of mainstream heterosexual filmmaking apparatuses and approaches. Filmic narrative, filmic idiom, filmic mise-en-scene, cinema aesthetics, cinematography, etc. can be queered in the process of providing a positive and affirmative depiction of queer identities. Queer cinema becomes a cite of artistic and cultural declaration of freedom from heteronormative, homophobic sociocultural surroundings by overcoming the stereotypical, clinically-sick, victimhood representation of queer life. Politically, queer cinema provides an agency role to queer subjectivities by providing them their due spaces in everyday public sphere and theoretical discourses.

Queer cinema could be considered as a discursive alternative to the heterosexual cinematic canon. As queer life becomes the predominant content of queer cinema, it is supposed to express the unique content in a different cinematic idiom; because a different content normally demands a different form or a different style of expression. A queer structure in cinematic narrative and cinematic idiom is expected in queer cinema. The emergence of queer cinema also prompted the mainstream heterosexual cinema to be politically correct while representing queer characters. Also, queer cinema is supposed to resist the universal straight-gaze often pampered to in mainstream heterosexual cinema. This is one of the cultural consequences of the emergence of queer cinema. In the following words, Alex Jung points out one of the failures of quasi-queer cinema, “Beyond discourse, the question of what makes a film queer has become subsumed by aesthetics and narratives that display a straight gaze.” Queer cinema has to transgress the very visual and thematic logic of the heteronormative films produced for an imagined heteronormative audience.

Occasional queer films made up to the 1980s can be referred to as Old Queer Cinema, because Ruby Rich, an American film critic, called the more authentic queer films emerged in the 1990s as the ‘New Queer Cinema.’ The Sci-Fi film *Poison*, directed by Todd Haynes and released in 1991; *The Watermelon Woman*, directed by Cheryl Dunye and released in 1996; *Edward II*,

directed by Derek Jerman and released in 1991; and *The Living End*, directed by Gregg Araki and released in 1992 are some of the most representative instances for New Queer Cinema.

The Bengali film *Chitrangada* (The Crowning Wish), directed by Rituparno Ghosh and released in 2012; the Kannada film *Nan Avanalla...Avalu* (I'm not He, She...), directed by B. S. Lingadevaru and released in 2015; Marathi film, *Daaravtha* (The Threshold) directed by Nishant Roy Bombarde and released in 2015; the Malayalam film *Njan Marykutty* (I'm Marykutty), directed by Ranjith Sankar and released in 2018 are some of the examples of Indian Queer Films.

Now, Let's look at some of the essential features of Queer Cinema.

### **Presence of a Queer Auteur**

The word 'auteur' in the context of film refers to a film director who leaves a signature style in his film by applying his artistic, intellectual, and technical control on the entire elements of his film. An auteur is normally equated with a literary author who has an autonomous absolute grip on his writing. Woody Allen, Franc Capra, Francois Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Girish Kasaravalli, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Madhur Bhandarkar etc. can be called as auteurs. With the emergence of queer cinema, the idea of auteurship got extended to a few queer filmmakers. Queer Auteurs follow a few consistent aesthetic codes and thematic concerns in their films. Cheryl Dunye, a Black American Lesbian filmmaker is considered to be a Queer Auteur. Similarly, in the Indian context, Rituparno Ghosh also fits into the label of queer auteur.

### **Positive Representation of Queer Characters**

Queer films are defined primarily for the positive portrayal of queer subjectivity. This does not mean that all queer characters are to be glorified in queer films. The implication is that the present disproportionality in the representation of queer characters in mainstream cinema has to be challenged by the queer cinema. Agency of the queer subjectivity has to be promoted in queer cinema, as well as the multidimensionality of queer life has to be revealed through such queer characters. In the early mainstream films, queer characters were often depicted as both psychologically and physiologically abnormal. In queer cinema, queerness is depicted as quite normal.

### **Establishment of Queer Film Stardom**

As in the mainstream film, queer cinema will also be an exploration for establishing a counter-queer stardom because many of the queer actors enjoy a huge fanbase which ensures some form of fixed spectatorship. Matthew Bomer, who was known for his action in the American movie, *Magic Mike* (2012), Jodie Foster, the American actress who acted in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991); and the Indian actor Rituparno Ghosh who is famous for his film *Chitrangada* (The Crowning Wish, 2012) are a few examples of queer film stardom.

### **Queering of the Film Narrative**

The style of film narrative is largely decided by the various political, philosophical, social and gender orientations of the filmmaker. Besides, film narrative might take different directions according to the change in the content of the film. A particular style of film narrative designed for a heterosexual cinema, would not be equally fitting for a queer cinema. Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* is generally appreciated for its subjective, and fragmentary narrative stylistics.

### **Queering of Cinematic Mise-en-Scene**

The entire gamut of set design, acting, costume, lighting, properties constitute the mise-en-scene of a film. As most of the queer cinema are made with small budgets, in all departments of mise-en-scene, queer cinema has to be very selective. A queer cinema has to be sensitive to the following things: designing a queer compatible set or location, openness to queer specific acting behavior, selection of appropriate lighting methods suitable to express the queer body and queer mood. A queer cinema also highlights the celebration of the queer way of dressing oneself up.

### **Queering of Cinematography**

The normative heterosexual cinematic gaze schemata followed in mainstream cinema cannot be adopted and replicated in queer cinematographic choices. The queer cinematographic practices will have to resist the heteronormative gaze; at the same time provide an alternative cinematographic gaze which could be achieved thorough a different positioning and movement of the camera. Portrayal queer characters in a unique visual idiom becomes one of the challenges of cinematography in queer cinema.

### **Queering of Film Production Practices**

Queer cinematic practices, need not follow the model provided by the mainstream cinema, which employs experts in each and every areas of filmmaking practice. Highest type of professionalism is always rented out in such cinema. In the case of queer cinema, it is noted that often the queer filmmaker takes up the multiple role of director, scriptwriter, editor etc. In the making of *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye does many a role: that of the scriptwriter, director, editor, and that of the lead role.

### **Queering of Film viewership**

With regard to film viewership, queer cinema has to work in at least two directions simultaneously. First it has to strive to bring in a viewing habit among the cinema spectators along with the interrogation of present cinema viewing behavior. The mainstream audience are hitherto schooled to expect a convincing conclusion at the end of the film. A queer film need not be ended in such a normal way. As Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin say, “New Queer Cinema simultaneously draws on minimalism and excess, appropriation and pastiche, the mixing of Hollywood and avant-garde styles, and even the mix of fictional and documentary style (11)”. Similarly, the audience habits are to be refashioned to tolerate and appreciate the fragmentary, digressive, and repetitive narrative style.

### **Queering of Film Exhibition Practices**

Ideally queer films are made to cater to the cultural needs of the queer people and their support groups. Mainstreams film exhibition sites may not be equally accessible for the queer community. In such a context, queer cinema often seeks and finds alternative exhibition spaces which include queer clubs, queer parade sites, apart from available mainstream film exhibition theatres.

Now let’s consider *The Watermelon Woman* by Cheryl Dunye as an example of queer cinema. In this film, the filmmaker who is an American Black Lesbian is trying to explore and depict her lesbian sexual subjectivity along with her enquiry into the life of an uncredited and now un-known black lesbian actress in the early Hollywood cinema. This film problematizes the racial and homophobic practices prevailing in the mainstream Hollywood cinema. While looking at the peculiar narrative strategy followed by Cheryl in the film, we can see that she follows a unique style: a mixture of fictional story telling and a documentary way of storytelling

with the filmmaker's own voice over. The director's decision to cast herself in the lead role also makes the film more organic, because it is a film on a black-lesbian actress of the past, made by another black-lesbian actress of the present time. The cinematography of *The Watermelon Woman* is also unique because, it uses different types of filmstock, to bring in different textures to the film to suggest different historical time and different image capturing gadgets used to take the visuals. The casual style, the self-correcting comments, autobiographical approach, resistance to male gaze through the cultivations of an alternative queer gaze in the film are some of the other major features of the film.

Rituparno Ghosh's film *Chitrangata: The Crowning Wish*, foregrounds the life of Rudra Chatterjee's (played by Rituparno), who is choreographer by profession. The film portrays his attempts to negotiate this queer sexuality in personal and professional life. During one of the rehearsals for a stage drama, he meets the percussionist Partho (played by Jisshu Sengupta), who is addicted to drugs. Rudra and Partho fall in love leaving many heteronormative people in shock. Rudra goes for sex reassignment surgery in order to be legally eligible for adopting a child because same-sex partners are not permitted to adopt a child. However, after the clinical reassignment of Rudra's sex, love between Partho and Rudra goes for an unexpected transformation.

**Content Writer: Dr. Vellikkeel Raghavan and Ms. Neethu Das, Dept. of English and Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala**

#### **References:**

Jung, E. Alex. "What is Happening to 'Queer' Cinema in the LGBT Film Boom."

< <https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/queer-cinema-whats-happening-to-it.html> >

Benshoff, Harry M and Sean Griffin. *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*. New York and London: Routledge, 2004.

Rich, B. Ruby. *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013.

Griffiths, Robin. *Queer Cinema in Europe*. Chicago: Intellect, 2008.

#### **Web Links:**

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/new-queer-cinema-b-ruby-rich>

<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/new-queer-cinema-era/>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01439680902890837>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0RR4Q09tDoI>