

Invisible in Plain Sight: Bi-negativity, Bi-phobia, and the Erasure of Bisexuality in Indian Popular Media

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Abstract: “Queer” is an umbrella term used to represent the LGBTQIA+ community, which includes individuals who do not conform to conventional gender norms. In the early twenty-first century, often associated with the initial stages of posthumanism, queer concerns have become increasingly visible, especially through the spread of sex education via social media platforms. While significant research exists on broad queer issues, bisexuality remains comparatively underexplored. Bisexual individuals—those who are attracted to more than one gender—face unique challenges rooted in widespread societal stigma and misconceptions. These challenges manifest as bi-negativity and bi-phobia, which in turn lead to bi-erasure and severe mental health issues, including depression and suicidal tendencies. Bisexuals are often doubly marginalized—both within mainstream society and within the queer community itself.

Popular media, particularly films and short films, play a key role in perpetuating stereotypes that reinforce these stigmas. This paper investigates how bi-centric media representations contribute to the ongoing marginalization of bisexuals, specifically analyzing how they reproduce bi-negativity and bi-phobia. The selected works for analysis are the Hindi-language feature film *Cobalt Blue* (2022), the Malayalam short film *Maheshetta* (2023), and the Tamil short film *Bisexual* (2023). These three texts are read as cultural narratives that constrain bisexual identity by portraying bisexual characters through lenses of deceit, indecisiveness, or hypersexuality. This paper aims to trace the social repercussions of such representations, clarify the concepts of bi-negativity and bi-phobia, and suggest practical strategies to address the ongoing invisibility and marginalization of bisexuals.

Keywords: Bisexuality, Bi-phobia, Bi-negativity, Media Representation, Bisexual Invisibility

LGBTQIA+ is an inclusive acronym encompassing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning individuals, and others who identify outside normative constructs of gender

and sexuality (HarperCollins Publishers, n.d.). As a term, "queer" acts as an umbrella that encompasses identities and orientations that challenge heteronormative and cisnormative paradigms. Discourse surrounding queer identities has long been contested, largely due to prevailing social stigmas that cast these identities as "unnatural" or "immoral." Historically, the medical and psychiatric establishment played a role in pathologizing queer identities. The first edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-I, 1952) classified homosexuality as a mental disorder, contributing to widespread discrimination and invasive treatments ranging from psychoactive medications to electroshock therapy. It was only in 1973 that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the DSM, a crucial moment in the process of depathologizing queer identities and affirming the need for respectful engagement with non-normative sexualities.

Contemporary medicine and psychology have become more inclusive, with transgender individuals receiving gender-affirming care and mental health professionals offering support to LGBTQIA+ individuals facing societal stigma. However, despite this progress, bisexuality remains one of the most misunderstood and underrepresented identities within and beyond the LGBTQIA+ community. Historically, queer identities have been acknowledged in Indian cultural contexts as well. The erotic carvings of same-sex intimacy at Khajuraho (c. 950–1050 CE) and Konark (c. 13th century), along with references in Vātsyāyana's *Kamasutra*, demonstrate that pre-modern India acknowledged diverse sexual expressions. Ironically, modern India, despite growing awareness, often struggles to accommodate non-heteronormative identities. While queer representation has increased—thanks in part to online education and social media—stigma persists, and bisexuality in particular remains marginalized.

Despite being grouped within the LGBTQIA+ acronym, bisexual individuals face discrimination both from heteronormative society and within queer spaces. Brewster defines bisexuality as the capacity for emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to more than one gender (2013, p. 12). Yet bisexual people are often accused of being confused or indecisive about their sexuality (Brewster, 2013, p. 15). The term "bi-curious" has been used to describe such uncertainty, but it is frequently misapplied to invalidate bisexual identity altogether. Misconceptions include labeling bisexuals as promiscuous, unfaithful, vectors of sexually transmitted diseases, or inherently incapable of monogamy. These assumptions constitute what scholars refer to as bi-phobia or bi-negativity.

Bi-negativity is defined as the systemic marginalization and negative stereotyping of individuals attracted to more than one gender (The Bisexuality Report, 2012, p. 4). Dating platforms, including those catering to queer users such as Grindr and Scruff, frequently reveal underlying biases against bisexuals. Research further shows that female bisexuality is more socially accepted than male bisexuality, reinforcing gendered double standards (Alarie & Gaudet, 2013). The compounded effect of external stigma and internalized bi-negativity significantly impacts mental health. Bisexual individuals often suffer from identity insecurity, depression, and suicidal ideation. For instance, parental rejection due to bisexuality is closely associated with depressive symptoms, particularly among adolescent girls (Oldehinkel et al., 2016).

Viet Vu, a Vietnamese economist and openly bisexual man, highlighted such challenges in his 2015 TEDx Talk. Recounting how friends questioned his orientation after seeing him kiss both a man and a woman at separate events, Vu's experience underscores the lack of understanding and acceptance bisexuals face. The internal conflict and societal invalidation contribute to bisexual invisibility—the erasure of bisexuality in both mainstream and queer

discourses. Recognizing this, activist Michael Page introduced the bisexual pride flag to affirm bisexual identity and increase visibility. Subsequent waves of bisexual activism, led by figures like Robyn Ochs, Brenda Howard, and in India, Sonal Giani and Harish Iyer, have worked to legitimize bisexual voices within the broader LGBTQIA+ movement. Nevertheless, Indian media has yet to adequately represent bisexual experiences. Films, with their wide reach and cultural influence, are critical in shaping public perception. While Indian cinema has increasingly embraced queer themes—evident in films such as *Fire* (1996), *Aligarh* (2015), *Moothon* (2019), and *Kaathal – The Core* (2023)—few works center bisexual narratives. Even when bisexual characters appear, they are often depicted through stigmatizing tropes.

This paper closely examines three such portrayals: *Cobalt Blue* (2022), *Maheshetta* (2023), and *Bisexual* (2023). In *Cobalt Blue*, directed by Sachin Kundalkar, a mysterious paying guest enters a conservative household and becomes romantically involved with both a brother (Tanay) and sister (Anuja). The character, portrayed as elusive and emotionally unavailable, vanishes after exploiting both siblings. The film implicitly conflates bisexuality with manipulation and polygamy. Such representations reinforce the damaging stereotype that bisexual individuals are untrustworthy and incapable of emotional fidelity.

Similarly, the Malayalam short film *Maheshetta* (2023) follows Karthik, a bisexual man entangled in simultaneous relationships with a woman and a gay man, Mahesh. Karthik's dishonesty and inner turmoil perpetuate the image of the bisexual as deceitful and emotionally unstable. Although the film hints at the confusion bisexuals may feel, it fails to differentiate between emotional ambiguity and deliberate betrayal, reinforcing negative perceptions.

The Tamil short film *Bisexual* (2023), directed by A. Aravinth Raj, introduces a bisexual female protagonist navigating relationships with both a male and a female partner. Her emotional

confession—"I love Ajith just like you, in the same amount. Because I am a bisexual"—collapses the distinction between bisexuality and polygamy. The narrative culminates in the male partner's sudden acceptance of her "dual love," which, instead of offering a progressive resolution, trivializes bisexual experience as inherently conflicted and excessive. Across all three texts, bisexual characters are consistently depicted as sources of emotional instability, dishonesty, or moral ambiguity. These portrayals contribute to what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes as "the danger of a single story": when a community is represented through a narrow, stereotyped narrative, those images become internalized as truth.

Media representations shape public consciousness. As mirrors of society, films and short stories carry the responsibility of ethical representation, especially when dealing with marginalized groups. Bisexual invisibility, defined as the erasure of bisexual identities across social, political, and cultural domains (San Francisco Human Rights Commission, 2011), is exacerbated by reductive media portrayals. The persistent conflation of bisexuality with infidelity or promiscuity reinforces public mistrust and impedes bisexual people's access to community and affirmation. To redress this misrepresentation, it is essential to promote accurate and diverse portrayals of bisexual lives. This includes increasing bisexual representation in media, integrating LGBTQIA+ studies into educational curricula, providing accessible mental health support tailored to bisexual individuals, and creating inclusive spaces within both queer and non-queer contexts. Furthermore, challenging stereotypes—such as the association of bisexuality with deception or hypersexuality—is critical. Awareness campaigns, inclusive storytelling, and participatory advocacy can serve to reshape public attitudes and validate bisexual identities.

In conclusion, while bisexuality remains one of the least visible and most misunderstood identities within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, its marginalization is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Media can play a transformative role - either as a site of erasure or empowerment. By resisting reductive narratives and championing more nuanced depictions, we can move toward a culture where bisexual individuals are seen, heard, and respected as full participants in the human experience.

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