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## **QUEER CONTENT; REPRESENTATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN SRI LANKAN FILMS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study sets out to find how Sri Lankan films directors represent the homosexuality and whether there are gender differences in representing homosexuality in the films. To carry out the objectives, the content analysis was performed. The study concluded that both films, 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna' (Flying with one wing) and 'Sayapethi kusuma' (Frangipani) films have revealed and represented homosexual relationships realistically which are hidden in the shadows. Homosexual relationships have been humanized in these two films. In the film, 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna', the homosexual characters are often shown in a miserable state; sad, isolated, powerless, and depressed. They hide their sexuality and are afraid to come out regardless of their social status. In the 'Sayapethi kusuma', the homosexual characters have been humanized. They find the ways to reveal it to the society and tells the society cinematically that will continue. Further, it is found that those two films have allocated considerable time to speak subject matter. The queer theory was the theoretical foundation of the study.

**Key words:** Cinema, Homosexuality, LGBT, Thani thatuwen piyabanna film (Flying with one wing), Sayapethi kusuma film (Frangipani), Queer Theory

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Cinema is the art of moving images, a visual medium that tells stories and reality. It is also most complex, collaborative, costly artistic expression and powerful medium. Film is the art of communication to spread ideas, perceptions, and feelings. The films represent various issues, concepts, ideologies, major problems, various types of relationships in real society which can not speak in publicity. At present, filmmakers have made films on homosexual relationships in the world cinema and in Sri Lanka as well. Therefore, new queer cinema also emerged in the world attempting to make salient the dominant messages with respect to gay and lesbian.

Homosexual are becoming more visible in the society. Homosexuals are considered as criminals, abnormal, disgusting, filthy, and unacceptable in the society. Homosexuality encompasses a variety of phenomena related encompasses a variety of phenomena related to a same-sex sexual orientation. Although definitions of the term often focus mainly on sexual acts and attractions between persons of the same biological sex, homosexuality also refers to patterns of same sex romantic and emotional bonding, identities and communities based on same-sex desires and relationships, and the shared culture created by those communities (Sabharwal & Sen, 2012). According to Queer Theory, Homosexual people are called as queer people and it is alignment with ideas about homosexuality.

Homosexual people are considered as marginalized and have been portrayed negatively and positively in world cinema. And New Queer Cinema has faded as a movement when queerness became more acceptable within the mainstream. In the book *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo analyzes the representation of gays and lesbians in Hollywood films from the 1890s to the 1980s and argues that Hollywood's portrayal of lesbians and gay men has often been cruel and

homophobic. During that period, gay and lesbian characters were defined by their sexual orientation and lacked any complex character development.

**The film “Thani thatuwen piyabanna” (Flying with one wing, 2003)**

The film “Thani thatuwen piyabanna” directed and written by Ashoka Handagama based on a true story. Its stars are Anoma jinadari, Gayani Gishanthika, Mahendra perera. A girl who grew up in a rural area of Sri Lanka who had to hide her sexual identity in order to impersonate herself as a male after coming of age. The main characters fell in love with another girl and starts a new life. A young man who is working in same garage tries to win Manju’s heart.

The film mainly represents homosexual relationships which exist in the society. This is the first time in Sri Lanka that the issue of gender politics is addressed in cinema. The film had the World Premiere at the “San Sebastian Film Festival (2002) and it was declared as the Best Asian Film at the Tokyo International Film Festival (2002), Audience Award for Best Film at Torino International Film Festival and many more.

**The film ‘Sayapethi kusuma’ (Frangipani, 2013)**

Sayapethi kusuma film is a Sri Lankan Sinhala romantic drama film directed and produced and directed by Visakesa Chandrasekaram. It stars Dasun Pathirana, Jehan Sri Kanth and Yasodha Rasanduni in lead roles. This is a feature film, which presents a story of two young men and a woman entangled in a lustful love triangle tabooed in their remote but rapidly changing village. Sri Lanka governed by old colonial laws that permit imprisonment of gay and lesbian people. But homosexual people exist in villages and towns.

Frangipani was the first Sri Lankan film to successfully present gay protagonists seeking public support to overcome persecution of LGBT community in Sri Lanka. The film won several awards including the Award for the Best Foreign Film at 2015 Rio LGBT Film Festival and Dr Lester James Peris Award for the debut film maker at 2016 Sarasaviya Film Festival.

**Concept of LGBT**

LGBTI (or LGBT) stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, transvestite, and/or intersex people. LGBTI emphasizes a diversity of sexuality and gender identities.

Lesbian refers a woman who has emotional, social, psychological, and physical commitments and responses to other women.

The word ‘Gay’ is used to describe people whose enduring physical, romantic, emotional, and/ or spiritual attractions are to people of the same sex. In contemporary contexts;

Bisexual is a person who is sexually attracted to both men and women or to a set of qualities that do not necessarily line up with biological sex.

Transgender refers to persons whose self-perception as male or female is different than their biological sex and who live full-time as the other sex (Gary, 2011).

**2. LITRATURE REVIEW**

Frida carried out on research on ‘Representation of Homosexuality in two contemporary Nigerian Film’ to find out how two Nollywood films namely, ‘Men in Love’ and ‘Rag Tag’ represent homosexuality. The researcher used the concepts of transnationality and stereotype as analytical frameworks and revealed the differences in how the two films represent homosexuality. The film ‘Men in Love’ reproduces predominant negative stereotypes on homosexuality by portraying homosexuality as a demonic or satanic influence that is tied to having a licentious lifestyle. The findings are ‘Rag Tag’, which is more transnational in orientation, radically challenges negative same-sex stereotyping, as it represents homosexuality on equal level with heterosexuality.

They study of Xuan Zhang (2014) 'Portrayals of gay characters in Chinese movies: A longitudinal look' found that filmmakers tried to humanize them in an apparent effort to evoke sympathy toward and understanding of their plight. Most of the gay characters in the Chinese films suffered oppression from the society and their family. However, the government censorship severely limited the number and funding opportunities of homosexual-themed movies, making it difficult for such films to earn a profit. The researcher further revealed that even though some filmmakers and younger filmgoers are willing to bring the gay lifestyle into the light, government restrictions on content and distribution of the pictures has limited their exposure. Therefore, the portrayal of gays in films has remained essentially the same during the years covered in the study. But a slight thaw in government regulation has allowed some gay characters to appear in mainstream movies, providing some indication that times are changing.

Dutt (2014) doing a visual analysis of the semiotics of women within Hollywood movies, found that while some film genres portray women as independent, powerful and agentive individuals, many still succumb to patriarchal constructions. Positive images of women outside the action-adventure genre are relatively scarce. Though we have come far in our depictions, we still have a long way to go before women are represented in a more realistic manner. Evalyn (2015) says that gay and lesbian television depictions are completely accurate and have varying effects on audiences.

Ponmalar & Karamjeet (2001) doing a The representation of homosexuality: a content analysis in a Malaysian Newspaper found that there was a less favourable representation towards homosexuality; 74% of the news articles have framed in a negative way. Furthermore, the media by highlighting the seriousness of the issue informs its readers that homosexuality is not acceptable within Malaysian culture.

Most of the literature shows that many films have used negative and marginalized depictions of queer people being cruel and homophobic. They have been defined by their sexual orientation and lacked any complex character development in the films.

The existing literature on the representation of homosexuality is rare in Sri Lankan context. Thus, the study attempts to fill the information gap while analyzing how Sri Lankan film directors represent the homosexuality in films, 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna' and 'Sayapethi kusuma'.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In order to carry out the objectives of the research, qualitative methodology was employed. Primary data will be collected through content analysis and coding sheets. Content analysis is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring variables. The purposive sampling method was used to select the sample. 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna' (Flying with one wing) and 'Sayapethi kusuma' (Frangipani) which represented the homosexuality were used for the study.

### **4. RESULTS**

Both films 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna' (Flying with one wing) and 'Sayapethi kusuma' (Frangipani) represent the homosexual relationships which existing in the society. While 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna' (Flying with one wing) represents both gay and lesbian relationships, 'Sayapethi kusuma' film represents gay relationships. The lead characters are also homosexual characters in both films.

There are 46 scenes in 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna' (Flying with one wing). Out of 46 scenes 11 scenes portrayed gay scenes and 14 scenes portrayed lesbian scenes. In 'Sayapethi kusuma' (Frangipani), total number of scenes were 77. Out of that, 49 scenes represented gay scenes. The

heterosexual relationships also portrayed in the film. Both films have allocated more time for those scenes considerably.

The film 'Thani thatuwen piyabanna' represented both gay and lesbian relationships. In the film, the main character is a female person but she behaves as a male person; behaviours, clothes, attitudes, languages and everything. She got attracted to one girl and married her and living in an apartment. There is a smoking scene representing real male behaviour. There are scenes which represent about the sexual relationship. The woman (Manju) behaves as a male character in a sexual relationship but both persons are the female person so that they have built a lesbian relationship. The woman, Manju does not reveal her body to her partner and hides 'his' true sexuality from his wife. She works as a car mechanic in a garage, where she keeps up the pretence of being a man.

'Thani thatuwen piyapanna' film includes some of gay scenes. The woman, Manju is attracted by manju's friend (Mahendra Perera) and he touches her hand. Inviting Manju to bath with him, also used to represent gay relationships. Finally, Manju's friend builds a relationship with another male person.

'Sayapethi kusma' (Frangipani) film was the first Sri Lankan film which is represented gay relationships realistically. Most of gay relationships have been used throughout the film. The main character, Nalin is attracted sexually by Chamath. Their eye contact, behaviours, facial expressions have shown the gay relationship. The director has used kissing scene, naked bodies, bathing scene, etc to represent gay sexual relationship.

The film, 'Thani thatuwen piyabana' (Flying with one wing) has shown only back of naked male bodies and the time duration of the scenes also are less. But the film has used the female front of naked bodies. It is found out that women are used as visual accessories in the films; used as sexual objects. In 'Sayapethi kusuma' film, there are more scenes representing gay relationships with their naked bodies, but not full bodies.

In the film, 'Thani thatuwen piyabana', the homosexual characters are often shown in a miserable state; sad, isolated, powerless, and depressed. They hide their sexuality and are afraid to come out regardless of their social status. In the 'Sayapethi kusuma', the homosexual characters make their own choices, powerless. They find the ways to reveal it to the society and tells the society cinematically that will continue further.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Homosexuals are considered as criminals and abnormal in the society. 'Thani thatuwen piyabana' and 'Sayapethi kusuma' films have revealed and represented homosexual relationships realistically which are hidden in the shadows. And those relationships have been humanized. But still there are gender differences in representing the subject. In the film, 'Thani thatuwen piyabana', the homosexual characters are often shown in a miserable state; sad, isolated, powerless, and depressed. They hide their sexuality and are afraid to come out regardless of their social status. In the 'Sayapethi kusuma', the homosexual characters have been humanized. They find the ways to reveal it to the society and tells the society cinematically that will continue further. Those two films have allocated considerable time to speak subject matter.

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