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From Marginalization to Mythologization: Navigating Androgyny in *Navarasa*

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how Indian cinema has depicted androgyny with a particular focus on *Navarasa* (2005) directed by Santosh Sivan. It places the movie within the broader framework of gender and sexuality, questioning the role of cinematic texts in working as cultural apparatuses in the stabilisation and destabilisation of normative identity constructions. It is in this context that *Navarasa* is important in terms of foreshadowing androgyny as a spectacle or as an aberration, but as a lived-in reality. This research explores the ways in which the movie disrupts categories of gender in their normativity and the politics of recognisability through critical discourse and thematic analysis. It attracts attention to the interdependence of mythological practices and modern experiences, highlighting the fact that cultural discourse may legitimize and marginalize non-normative identities at the same time. The reading also takes into account how silence, erasure, and acts of recognition within the movie reflect wider social processes involved in the acceptance or denial of gender variance within Indian society. The results show that *Navarasa* presents a unique form of cinematic ethics in refusing to domesticate androgyny into binary categories and tokenistic acts of inclusion instead of providing more inclusive and empathetic portraits. The research confirms that *Navarasa* represents androgyny as lived experience, not spectacle, and not

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exception, but subversion of binary thinking that dominates Indian cinema. The study proposes the relevance of the cinema in the display of shared imaginings of gender and sexualities and the necessity to take on more encompassing methods of representation that are not tokenistic but transformative.

Keywords: Androgyny; Indian Cinema; Cultural Narratives; Cinematic Stereotype; Mythological Representation

1. Introduction

Androgyny's history is not a mere footnote of gender theory; rather, it is ingrained in its foundation. Far prior to contemporary identity politics, prior to pronouns as a matter for policies and medical determinations, androgyny existed as an ontological enigma inscribed in cultural remembrance and speculative thought. From antiquity to the postmodern turn, androgyny has provoked fascination and anxiety in equal measure because it gestures to what social systems work hardest to obscure: that gender is never fully natural, only naturalised. It presents a body that resists readability, a presence that calls into question the categories upon which social and institutional life rest. Michel Foucault states that "Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check... It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another" (Foucault^[1]). To understand androgyny is not to investigate an identity but to trace a crisis in the epistemology of gender itself.

Although the philosophical origins of androgyny can be traced to the depths of Western and Eastern cultures, its definitions have never been culturally monolithic. In Western culture, as in the Symposium of Plato or even the idea of the androgynous mind of Virginia Woolf, it can be a representation of the intellectual and creative unity beyond the sexual difference. Androgyny in the Taoist cosmology is the balance of yin and yang, and an interdependence of energies and not their opposition. Indigenous American traditions recognise Two-Spirit identities as sacred embodiments of completeness that transcend binary gender roles, while several African cosmologies imagine creator deities as dual-gendered beings representing totality and generative force. This cross-cultural contextualises Indian expressions of androgyny, philosophi-

cal, ritual, and cinematic, in a more general human discourse, which relates metaphysical symbolism to embodied experience.

In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes describes an early human race constituted by spherical beings, combinations of male-male, female-female, and male-female dyads, who were split by the gods to control their power. This primordial unity, once severed, creates desire, longing, and the basis for erotic and affective relations. (Plato and Pelliccia^[2]). This cosmological narrative is not a quaint fiction but a foundational ontological claim. Androgyny predates binarism and, as such, subverts the hierarchy of sexual difference. Rather than being deviant, the androgynous body is original, unmarked by the cultural imposition of sex-gender binaries. Throughout religious traditions, androgynous divinities emerge as metaphysical symbols of totality. Hermaphroditus in Greek mythology, Baphomet in alchemical iconography, and the early Christian theologians often described angels as transcending sexual difference, "neither marrying nor given in marriage," thus existing beyond the human categories of male and female (Pagels^[3]). In alchemy, the Rebis, a composite of masculine and feminine forces, was the final product of magnum opus, signifying enlightenment through reconciliation. However, these sacred embodiments were also marked by a dangerous liminality. Their social reproduction outside of ritualized, symbolic frameworks was deeply policed.

As 19th-century scientific rationality and biopolitics gathered pace, androgyny was increasingly brought under the cold stare of empirical categorization. Michel Foucault states, Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age, there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorisation of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself. Not only were the boundaries of what one could say about sex enlarged, and men com-

pelled to hear it said, but more importantly, discourse was connected to sex by a complex organization with varying effects, by a deployment that cannot be adequately explained merely by referring it to a law of prohibition. A censorship of sex? There was installed rather an apparatus for producing an ever-greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy. (Foucault^[1]). The sexual subject was not liberated by modern societies but rather engraved in the disciplinary institutions. The androgynous subject was no longer sacred but deviant and became legible to sexual, anthropological, and psychiatric discourses. The medical terms of hermaphrodite, pseudo-hermaphrodite, and later intersex were not descriptive terms, but tools of control to indicate which body was appropriate to be surgically normalised and which body was legally understandable (Dreger^[4]).

One of the turning points of philosophical thought is *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler (2011). Butler understands gender as a performance, not an ontological substrate. The unity of the “male” and of the “female” is achieved through the repetition, through the repetition of social scripts, of institutional scaffolding and bodily disciplines. As Butler states, “gender proves to be performative; that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (Butler^[5]). Androgyny is no longer an assemblage of sexes but an extreme enactment of the performativity of all gendered existence. Androgyny reveals that the binary is not natural but constructed and that identity is created through exclusion. The androgynous body is not the location of production, but a discursive rupture of the regime of gendered intelligibility.

Androgyny can be embraced in art, popular music, and fashion, but the life experience of androgyny still has its darker and unbalanced aspects. bell hooks has shown how race and class shape the boundaries of permissible gender expression, revealing that those outside dominant power structures face harsher scrutiny and sanction (hooks^[6]). Angela Davis extends this critique by demonstrating how historical and structural inequalities determine who can safely transgress gender norms. When embodied by a socially privileged, economically secure figure, androgyny is read as innovation; in the body of a racialised or economically marginalised person, the same gesture can invite erasure,

social violence, or incarceration (Davis^[7]). Any serious account of androgyny must therefore situate it within the intersecting systems of power that decide when it is legible, when it is desirable, and when it is disposable.

Unlike in Euro-American contexts, where androgyny was reframed through modern medicine as an anomaly or pathology, Indian philosophical systems historically treated gender variance not as aberrant but as cosmically integral. The figure of Ardhanarishvara, a half-male, half-female composite of Shiva and Parvati, is not symbolic in the abstract sense but ritualised into everyday devotional practice. As Mohapatra, Panigrahi, and Behura said, “Shiva and Shakti are one. Shiva symbolizes Purusha, while Parvati symbolizes Prakriti. Were it not for the balanced union of the two, the universe could not exist. Ardhanarishwara symbolizes the collective psyche of human beings” (Mohapatra, Panigrahi, & Behura^[8]). Ardhanarishvara represents not confusion but equilibrium. In Indian metaphysics, masculine and feminine principles, Purusha and Prakriti, are ontologically co-dependent. As Wendy Doniger states, the presence of Ardhanarishvara in major Shaiva temples reflects a cultural theology in which the blurring of gender is divine, not deviant (Doniger^[9]).

The representation of androgyny in this research is approached in terms of an interpretive framework that integrates the theory of gender performativity introduced by Judith Butler, postcolonial cultural criticism, and mytho-symbolic analysis. The performativity offers an approach to understanding gender as a set of embodied and repeated actions that make identity by being repeated, not essential. Postcolonial views place these performances in long-standing systems of innocence, order, and decency, which have historically defined Indian conceptions of gender. The mytho-symbolic aspect relies on the archetype of Ardhanarishvara and Aravan to examine the continuities between the sacred representations and modern movies. Combined, these tenets inform the analysis of *Navarasa* as a site where gesture, ritual, and silence break binary legibility and express an ontology of lived androgyny.

Other figures reinforce this ontology. Mohini, Vishnu’s female avatar, performs hyper-femininity for strategic, cosmic ends, suggesting that gender is flexible even for the gods. Shikhandi occupies a more complex position in the Mahabharata. Born as a female but raised as a male, Shikhandi’s

presence is both a narrative device and an ontological provocation. Ila, who cyclically shifts between male and female forms, is an ancestor of the Chandravanshis, implying that androgyny is not merely personal but dynastic, mythic, and politically generative (Pattanaik^[10]). However, the cultural visibility of these figures has not translated into social legitimacy for real gender-nonconforming people. Mythic androgyny is treated as sacred precisely because it is metaphysical, exceptional, and contained within the narrative logic of cosmic balance. The divine or semi-divine can transgress norms because their purpose is not to challenge order but to reinforce it in a higher form. The effect is an illusory logic that venerates gender variation exclusively when variation is symbolic, not when variation is embodied. This is reflected in Amrita Middey's statement as she says, "Reference to 'ardhanarishwar' does not always ensure acceptance, and that there are often mythological erasures. They also contend that these sexualities are allowed to thrive in certain spaces... such as jatra performances... or at the Aravan festival in Koovagam." (Middey^[11]). The disconnect has persisted to modern-day India, where Hijra communities continue to be excluded under the legal code, relegated economically, and excluded along gender axes. As Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai argue, androgynous bodies in Indian culture are often venerated in symbolic form but marginalized in material life. One such instance is when Hijras are ritually invited to bless weddings and childbirth, yet structurally excluded from education, employment, and legal protection (Vanita & Kidwai^[12]). Gayatri Reddy calls this a "simultaneous sacralisation and abjection" that defines their social location (Reddy^[13]). This longstanding tension between symbolic reverence and social exclusion forms the backdrop against which colonial authority would intervene, codifying and policing gender variance in new and enduring ways. Colonialism intensified this contradiction.

The British Raj criminalised Hijras under the Criminal Tribes Act (1871) and pathologized any deviation from the male/female binary. The Indian Penal Code, imposed in 1861, section 377, was a depiction of moral codes of Victorian sexuality rather than local unease with same-sex or gender-nonconforming practices. These legal, bureaucratic, and medical interventions did not merely criminalise non-normative genders. They reorganised the conceptual grammar by which Indian society had started to understand

gender and sexuality. Androgyny could only be made legible by the colonial archive through deviance. Formal independence did not eliminate most of these structures. Indian law did not officially recognise a third gender until the NALSA judgement in 2014. Following this historic decision, medical or psychological validation made the lived experience of androgyny the subject of institutional validation. Long after the legal modifications had been effected, the old notions which the laws brought into effect continued in our daily which of difference what we see, judge, and tell. These colonial categories of what is legible, which viewed gender variance as a difference to be boxed, contained, or eliminated, were taken up by art forms, storytelling traditions, and later cinema. The silver screen became one of the main arenas where these hereditary anxieties were played out, turning the bureaucratic and medical control of bodies into long-standing narrative tropes and aesthetic conventions which determined how gender variance might be perceived, discussed, and eventually bound. Boundaries of gender variance have been defined by legal and political structures, thus reducing its acknowledgment and social acceptance.

Beyond these constraints, cultural production and literature in particular, allows transcendentalizing androgyny, far beyond the parameters of legal and permissible interest in its reality, mythical sources, and its manifestation in the story life and form. Writers have not only talked about androgyny as a topic of discussion but also as a constitutive and structuring concept that has disciplined the form, content, and meaning of the piece. An example of this includes *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik that revisits an episode in the Mahabharata where King Yuvanashva unintentionally consumes a potion that was intended to be consumed by his wives and thereafter gets pregnant. This is not handled as a deviation that has to be fixed, but as an ultimate investigation into the rules of dharma. The pregnancy of Yuvanashva is a liminal place in which there is neither masculinity nor femininity, but a place of coexistence of the two as mutually sustaining realities. Devdutt Pattanaik introduces this embodied androgyny not only as a political challenge but also as a metaphysical reality, challenging the rules of succession to the throne, complicating the symbolic power of kingship, and thereby forcing a redefinition of the concept of parenthood itself. The piece is not tempted to rehabilitate binary order, but acknowledges the condition of

Yuvanashva as a legitimate and even divine form. By mythic retelling, the author sets androgyny as a conceptual point of departure to reconsider power, identity, and legitimacy in the Indic tradition.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Arundhati Roy transfers the issue of androgyny to the thick and frequently conflicting Indian reality of the present day. Its core is Anjum, a Hijra whose life moves in between the “Khwabgah,” a gender-nonconforming community space, and the changing topography of Old Delhi. As Aftab and Anjum grow up as boys, Anjum enters the Hijra world, developing along with the changes in the urban space, intimate relations, and political life. Roy places the identity of Anjum in the stratified symbolic status of the Hijra, that is, ritualistically recognised but formally excluded in structural and economic terms. Focusing on the textures of the everyday life of Anjum instead of objectifying her as a single icon of marginality, Roy creates androgyny as a lived experience inherent in the histories, struggles, and solidarities of those who carry it.

She of the Mountains (2014) by Vivek Shraya is a combination of Hindu mythology and queer story. Modern romance is interwoven with the retelling of romance between Parvati and Shiva, and it invokes Ardhanarishvara as the sign of inseparable duality. This blend is a challenge to strict gender binaries, and the narrator is free to live as male, female, and nonbinary, without resolving to one. In this case, myth is not a decorative framework, but a major weave, which enables passage between the cosmological and the individual. The idea of androgyny here is not considered as a glitch in the radar of gender norms, but rather the main prism of life in the world that is abundant with the knowledge that multiplicity is the way to be.

Me Hijra, Me Laxmi (2015) by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi is a self-identified androgynous narrative in the context of the socio-cultural history of the Hijra genocide. She connects her life with a scale of ritual, performance, and kinship that calls the invoking spiritual imagery of Ardhanarishvara. She protects androgyny in opposition to the colonial-medicalizing of gender variation as pathology, and owns it as a dignity source, ceremonial power, and political agentic state. Her autobiography swings between the social existence and individual associations, and activism, revealing the interdependence of the aspects of existence and gender variability. She protects androgyny as an individual identity and a cultural identity

that is fostered by ritual and group solidarity through interlacing autobiography and collective history. These literary texts show that androgyny continues to be a destabilising influence against unbending divisions of identity, despite postcolonial and colonial repression. Yet, the transition from page to screen brings its own constraints and possibilities, shaped by the visual medium, audience expectations, and the moral codes of the cinema industry.

Cinema, like religion and law, has been one of the most powerful tools for both representing and regulating gender. From its inception, Indian cinema has played a central role in visualizing national identity. Ashis Nandy argues that postcolonial Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, became a site for reimagining the Indian self in the wake of colonial fragmentation (Nandy^[14]). However, this reimagination was structured through rigid heteronormativity, with heroes who saved, mothers who sacrificed, and villains who disrupted the patriarchal familial order.

Within this narrative economy, androgyny became a dangerous supplement. It appeared only to be disavowed. One of the most infamous examples is *Sadak* (1991), in which the androgynous antagonist Maharani, played by Sadashiv Amrapurkar, is depicted as predatory, grotesque, and unambiguously evil. Her gender nonconformity is not a detail; it is the basis of her villainy. Her ultimate defeat at the hands of the hypermasculine hero restores not just moral balance but gender order. In *Tamanna* (1997), Mahesh Bhatt attempts a more sympathetic portrayal through Tikku, an androgynous character played by Paresh Rawal, who raises a child with compassion but is ultimately rendered tragic, abject, and disposable. His death is not an injustice but a resolution, a narrative closure that removes ambiguity. *Darmiyan* (1997), directed by Kalpana Lajmi, offers a more textured exploration through the character of Immi, played by Arif Zakaria. Raised in the movie industry by a glamorous actress mother, Immi embodies a mix of longing, marginality, and excess. The movie makes Immi visible, but only within the aesthetics of pathos and failure. His androgyny becomes a site of narrative tension, and eventually, catharsis, but not sustainability. He too dies, alone and misunderstood.

Even movies that attempt empathy, such as *Daayraa* (1996), remain on the margins of public consciousness. Even though they portray androgynous characters and subtly hint towards gender being a mere performance and negotiation

in society. They offer suggestions of lived androgyny, of gender as performance and negotiation, but do not disrupt the overall program of Indian cinematic legibility. That structure demands resolution. It cannot accommodate ambiguity. Shohini Ghosh argues that, “Deploying the conventions of the masquerade and misrecognition, which have had a long history of signifying transgressive desires, Bollywood plays on the idea of false appearances and mistaken identities” (Ghosh^[15]).

Unlike its predecessors, *Navarasa* (2005) refuses the tropes. The movie centers on Gautam, a transgender person who lives with quiet dignity, without exposition or tragedy. Her gender is not a conflict, not a metaphor, not a problem to be solved. She is simply present. Her presence in the household is both casual and destabilised. Casual, because she performs everyday tasks and is destabilised due to her transgression of implicit socio-religious codes governing ritual purity, hierarchical order, and normative gender construct. Played by Kushboo Sundar, Gautam is neither villain nor victim. She navigates social life like anyone else. Her difference is not fetishized in the movie. It does not close up on her body, or impose a flashback, or provide an explanation. The movie does not put her identity into language that the audience can comfortably understand. But still, it never escapes the fact that she is different, either. Gautam is depicted in a ritual area among other transgender women. In this case, the movie intends to allude both to continuity in myths and to social inclusion, without reducing the two. She is not at par with Ardhanarishvara, but is not profane either. It is ordinary, and that is what is so revolutionary about it.

By opposing spectacle and moralization, *Navarasa* expresses a cinematic ethics that few Indian movies have been able to achieve. It does not project the androgynous body as secondary. It does not want a resolution; it wants recognition. According to the movie, allowing an androgynous character to exist, not as a disruption, but as a self, could be the most radical act. This research argues that *Navarasa* questions the scaffolding of gender in Indian cinema. Where older movies use androgyny to reconcile or dramatize normativity, *Navarasa* realises androgyny in the story without passing judgment. By so doing, it opens up new vistas of cinematic expression, of narrative ethics, of thinking gender beyond the binary, beyond even the category of identity itself. The reception of *Navarasa* is a demonstration of the tensions

that the movie attempts to challenge. The Indian audience often attribute to the character of Gautam a two-fold attitude of sympathy and discomfort. A reaction of this kind is contextualised within the already existing cultural ideals of family honour and social normative standards, which underpin the view of the audience on the androgynous identity of the protagonist. On the other hand, foreign audiences largely perceive the movie as a symbol of bravery and self-acceptance. This diversity of interpretations highlights the significant power of ingrained cultural constructs and communal belief systems on the understanding of the audience. By placing *Navarasa* in different interpretive settings, the study connects the lived experiences of recognition and denial with the movie’s visual style of gesture and stillness.

Androgyny has long held a prominent place within mythological, religious, literary, and socio-cultural traditions; however, its cinematic representation in India has been predominantly shaped by regimes of symbolic containment and heteronormative narrative structures. While the cultural histories of gender variance and the systemic marginalisation of queer identities on screen have been well documented, there remains limited critical engagement with works that portray androgyny as an ontological and narrative presence rather than as spectacle, pathology, or allegorical construct. This research examines *Navarasa* (2005), directed by Santosh Sivan, as a significant departure from prevailing representational paradigms. In contrast to mainstream movies that instrumentalise androgyny to reaffirm normative resolutions, *Navarasa* integrates it seamlessly into the fabric of quotidian life, rejecting entrenched tropes of villainy, tragedy, and divine exceptionalism. This research argues that *Navarasa* challenges old visual and narrative grammar in Indian cinema to make gender legible. Set in a long-standing conflict between symbolic reverence and material exclusion of the androgynous, the movie develops a unique cinematic ethic where androgyny is seen and heard not as deviation or spectacle, but as everyday presence.

1.1. Research Objective

The research uses both thematic and character analysis to examine how androgyny is presented in *Navarasa* (2005), placing it within a culturally-centred and narrative-reinforced construct. It prefigures the persistence of androgyny in modern society by tracing the historical and symbolic roots of

androgyny in Hindu mythology, specifically in the figure of Aravan, the ritual commemoration of whom at the Koovagam festival reflects a premodern recognition of gender variance. The research evaluates the echo of this mythological legacy in the character of Gautam, whose figure in *Navarasa* is not bound to prevailing cinema traditions that construct androgyny as spectacle, pathology, or allegory. Examining this interrelation between mythic precedent and cinematic representation, the research attempts to show how *Navarasa* re-orders inherited symbolic codes to produce androgyny as an embodied, everyday reality, and thus transfigures the heteronormative narrative formations that have historically predominated gender legibility in Indian cinema.

1.2. Analytical Process and Methodology

The analytical framework for this study is based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, presented in *Gender Trouble*. She states, "There is no reason to assume that gender also ought to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it" (Butler^[5]). Butler questions the belief that gender is a fixed and inherent identity. She asserts that gender is created by repetitive acts, gestures, and discourses which are supported by a society. In this view, gender is not a reflection of a pre-existing essence or a permanent characteristic of the body; instead, it results from repetition and is maintained by citing cultural norms. The categories of man and woman seem to be fixed due to the constant reassertion of the naturalization of these categories through performances.

One of the most relevant aspects of the theory is the suggestion that the stability of the gender binary is based on the exclusion of identities and expressions that challenge its definitions. In this sense, androgyny is not a simple combination of masculine and female character but rather the disturbance in the logic of how those categories come to be constructed as distinct and mutually exclusive. What makes it relevant is that it allows one to see the artificially created character of subordinated identity and ethnonormative culture; it undermines the binary framework that heteronormative culture relies on.

The qualitative and interpretive approach utilised in this research is based on thematic analysis, which situates

Navarasa (2005) in an aesthetic, cultural, and mythological context. It was an inductive process where the interpretive insights were discovered naturally through the continued exposure to the visual, narrative, and symbolic aspects of the movie instead of being limited by pre-existing categories. The movie was watched several times in order to determine the repetitive motifs, which are gesture, silence, ritual, recognition, and exclusion, which describe the experience of androgyny. These repetitions were narrowed down to emergent themes formed by comparing and contrasting, leading to the creation of gendered meaning in the movie as it is constructed by form and affect.

Although the analysis is fundamentally inductive, the research subsequently uses the theory of performativity as a deductive conceptual framework to place the emergent themes in the broader context of gender, embodiment, and representation. Such a hybrid method, between inductive identification of themes and subsequent deductive placement of these themes into theoretical discourse, was what guaranteed openness to the text, as well as critical discipline. It enabled theoretical interpretation without an external structure imposed on the narrative complexity of the movie.

Given that qualitative research is interpretive, a number of strategies were used to reduce bias and guarantee reflexive validity. To begin with, cross-verification of interpretations was made with the available literature on gender variance, cross-ethnic studies of the Koovagam festival, and cross-cultural studies of the Indian cinema. This triangulation placed the readings within the familiar theoretical and sociocultural frameworks. Secondly, reflexive journaling was carried out on a phase-by-phase basis in line with thematic development, which ensured constant awareness of possible subjective influence. Interpretive notes were also reviewed following the viewing to detect potential overreadings or affective reactions so that they could be self-corrected and transparent. The analysis does not attribute the intent to the filmmaker or psychologize the protagonist, but considers the discursive, performative, and visual codes of the movie as meaning-making evidence.

2. Discussion

As a theoretical and analytic category, androgyny has been a central concern in psychology, cultural theory and

gender studies. Within psychology, its contemporary formulation began in the work of Sandra Bem, whose challenges to conventional sex-role theory positioned androgyny as a form of psychological adaptability, rather than deviance. Bem described androgyny as the facilitation of “a relatively high degree of both masculine and feminine characteristics” (Bem^[16]) and suggested that in such a combination, people could be more adapted to certain altered social and individually-specific situations. Her findings contradicted the idea that well-being depended on strict adherence to gender-typical roles, and instead positioned androgyny as a source of adaptability and creativity. Virginia Woolf broadened the notion of androgyny from its psychologically oriented version and placed it in an epistemologically important sphere. She notes that “it is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman–manly or man–womanly” (Woolf^[17]) and so advanced the notion of the “androgynous mind” as fundamental to creativity and broad thinking. While Woolf’s formulation had a basis in literature, its general implications have resonance with wider gender identity debates in suggesting that androgyny facilitates overcoming constraining binaries.

Androgyny has the individual potential for evading gender constraint as well as a strategy for subverting entrenched dichotomies at the level of culture. In recent contexts, this dual plane facilitates androgyny as a location in which adaptability at the level of psychology intersects with subversion at the level of culture, accordingly making androgyny a necessary figure for considering in what ways gender is both embodied, performed, and represented.

Although frequently conflated both in the popular discourse and in some forms of activism, androgyny and queerness exist in different but sometimes overlapping perches within gender and sexuality studies. More specifically, androgyny is the co-existence, within a single representation or manifestation, of aspects of behaviour that are considered manly and womanly. It is thus primarily concerned with gender expression and the aesthetics of legibility rather than with sexual orientation or erotic practice. As Judith Halberstam notes, androgyny “works on the surface of the body, in the field of signification, by confounding the visual codes through which gender is read” (Halberstam^[18]). Queer, on the other hand, is a critical and coalitional category that includes very diverse identities, practices, and positions

that challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity. Neither can it be found in a specific embodiment style, but it is rather characterized by a structural affiliation with prevailing regimes of sexuality and gender.

Androgyny disrupts the iterative processes that consolidate binary gender by introducing a sustained aesthetic ambiguity. This disruption may or may not be aligned with queer politics. Susan Stryker observes, “Not all gender variance is queer, just as not all queerness entails gender variance” (Stryker^[19]). Conversely, queerness often includes but is not confined to such disruptions of gender; its analytic scope extends to desire, kinship, temporality, and political resistance. In the context of *Navarasa*, the character of Gautam embodies androgyny without being inscribed into a queer romantic or sexual subplot, thereby detaching the visual and narrative politics of gender ambiguity from the representational conventions that have historically framed queer characters in Indian cinema. This distinction allows the movie to stage what Butler calls “the radical persistence of the unreal, and its ability to produce sites of resistance, critique, and to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility” (Butler^[20]), where gender ambiguity is neither resolved into recognisable categories nor instrumentalised as symbolic excess.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity offers a precise vocabulary for understanding why androgyny is so persistently destabilising to social norms. For Butler, gender is “instituted through the stylization of the body” and “must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler^[5]). Gender is not an inner truth waiting to be expressed; it is the accumulated effect of repeated acts that produce the sense of a stable identity. Androgyny disrupts this repetition. It interrupts the smooth citation of masculine or feminine norms, creating an embodied ambiguity that exposes the binary construct. The act of naming someone “androgynous” is not a neutral description but a formative act, as Butler observes, “The call is formative, if not performative, precisely because it initiates the individual into the subjected status of the subject” (Butler^[21]). Naming constitutes the category and situates the body within a field of recognisability that governs how it will be seen, treated, and regulated. As soon as one uses the term androgyny, it is subject to disciplinary action, medical

scrutiny, social ranking, or cultural labelling. The corresponding unease is because androgyny prevents the sealing of the binary gender performance, revealing that performance as performance, socially imposed, through and through.

In Indian cinema, this has historically led to the containment of androgyny within narrow representational codes. Characters who display gender ambiguity are often made narratively safe by turning them into comic relief, villains whose defeat restores normative order, or tragic figures whose erasure closes the story. These representations attempt to domesticate by rendering the disruptive possibilities of androgyny within the world of the dominant binary hierarchy by fixing it as an anomaly rather than allowing it to remain an ongoing presence. There is a structural mechanism that grounds this logic, and ambiguity is only accepted when it reinforces the same principles that it supposedly undermines.

Devdutt Pattanaik's narratives offer a sharp contrast to this containment. In *The Pregnant King*, Yuvanashva's pregnancy disrupts conventional gender roles entirely, yet the text resists resolving him back into a normative category. Pattanaik writes, "Was he father or mother? King or queen? Male or female? Yuvanashva realised he was all of these and none of these" (Pattanaik^[22]). This refusal to force a resolution preserves the ambiguity as a legitimate state in itself. "The gods had made him so, and in their eyes, there was no shame". *The Pregnant King* explores androgyny, gender liminality, and the instability of rigid identity categories through the characters of Ila, Ardhanareshvara, and Shikhandi, which are deeply interwoven with Hindu mythological traditions. These characters dismantle the binary constructs of femininity and masculinity and thus validate the argument that gender is not a biological construct but is constructed by socio-cultural norms and institutional arrangements. But while mythology reinforces and even sacralises gender fluidity, actual transgressors of normative gender expectations are erased, marginalised, and resisted. This contradiction is appropriately reflected by Mohapatra et al. as they state, "Though gender is freed from the binary restrictions when it comes to myths and religion, but reality seems to paint a different spectacle" (Mohapatra, Panigrahi, and Behura^[8]). Ila's story is one of the most explicit examples of gender fluidity in Hindu mythology, illustrating that masculinity and femininity are not fixed but exist on a continuum, influenced by social roles and cosmic cycles. Ila's transformation is not

portrayed as a deviation but as a divine order, reinforcing the precolonial acceptance of gender fluidity within the Hindu tradition, affirming a premodern Indian epistemology that embraced multiplicity and transition.

Similarly, in *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (Pattanaik 2014), gender transitions are presented not as defects to be corrected but as purposeful, strategic moves within divine narratives. Butler describes the social imperative to resolve such ambiguity as the "normative injunction to be a recognizable subject". To be recognised, one must conform to the categories through which recognition is granted. Pattanaik's work, like Butler's theory, rejects this compulsion. His characters inhabit multiplicity without the need for final categorisation, and their narratives validate this as a form of truth rather than as an interlude before restoration of order. This refusal has implications for cinema. It shifts the focus from making androgyny legible according to familiar binaries to making space for its illegibility without erasure. Butler calls this the "radical persistence of the unreal", lives that "do not yet count as lives" but persist nonetheless (Butler^[20]). A movie that represents this morality need not proclaim its politics; its politics is in the fact that a character is left undetected, unamended, the same as they were. In this respect, the treatment of Gautam by *Navarasa* can be regarded as a cinematic implementation of the theoretical stance of Butler and the narrative approach of Pattanaik. The movie does not transform her into the binary grammar that Indian cinema has always been seeking. It does not reduce her to a symbolic icon whose otherness has to be monumentalised in order to be accepted. Neither does it introduce her as an aberration to be neutralised. Rather, it leaves her as it is, as an unassimilated centre of presence. This style compels the audience to grapple with a gender that is not going to fall into familiar forms.

Leaving the androgyny of Gautam unresolved and ordinary, *Navarasa* denies the mythic uplift and the narrative redress that such characters are supposed to have. Instead, the movie develops the theme of androgyny as something concrete, as something in daily existence, and thus fits well within the injunction that Butler brings by accommodating those who have not been able to conform to their normative identities. In doing so, *Navarasa* is the introduction of a cinematic ethic that is very rare in Indian cinema, which, rather than letting androgyny stay as an enthralling performance,

puts it in the context of life in general.

3. Analysis

3.1. Representation of Androgynous Identities in Indian Cinema

The portrayal of androgyny in the Indian movies must be located within the gender and sexuality discourse within the context of the South Asian region. Traditionally, Indian cinema and especially the mainstream Hindi cinema have been mechanizing the heteronormative grammars of their visual and narrative language. The characters outside the binary gender norms are almost never shown as independent subjects; they are merely filtered through existing cultural binaries that can easily be recognised by the audiences and accepted by them. This leads to the fact that cinematic representations of androgyny are encoded into more recognizable markers of masculinity or femininity, thus making it easier to fit into the paradigm of traditional narratives. This process frequently neutralises the disruptive potential of androgyny by offering narrative “resolutions” that restore binary stability, or alternatively, by relegating it to the margins as eccentricity or aberration. The roots of this dynamic can be traced back to the moralistic codes that were deployed during colonial rule and further developments to the post-colonial state and the nation-building process, where movies acted as an apparatus of culture in which the post-colonial elite expressed, naturalized, and circulated a body of directive norms of social values. Only in recent decades have mainstream productions begun to cautiously expand the spectrum of gender identities on screen. Even so, sustained, centralised, and nuanced depictions of androgyny remain sporadic, tentative, and largely peripheral.

Aligarh (2015), directed by Hansal Mehta and written by Apurva Asrani, serves as a noteworthy case study in resisting caricatured portrayals of non-normative gender and sexuality. It is based on the real-life account of Dr. S. R. Siras, a professor at Aligarh Muslim University. The movie records the institutional and societal injustices that he suffers following a sting operation to expose his affair with another man. While the narrative foregrounds issues of privacy, dignity, and legal protection, it also indirectly interrogates the politics of gender performance. Siras’s refusal to adopt an overtly “out” or activist identity, as well as his rejection of

the label “gay,” subverts audience expectations informed by more stylised or exaggerated depictions of queer characters in Indian cinema. His mannerisms, language usage, and aesthetic appearance do not indulge in hyperbolic codes of gender variance that are usually put upon the screen. As a result, the movie is able to create a visual and emotional voice based on the quiet ordinariness, avoiding the use of spectacle and instead highlighting the dignity of a person viewed as an object of perceived difference. In doing so, the movie opposes the frequent tendency in movies to render gender and sexual nonconformity as something new, dangerous, or funny.

In contrast, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* (2020), directed by Hitesh Kewalya, adopts a comic framework to depict queer love within the context of a small-town family drama. The movie is considered an important milestone in mainstream Hindi cinema as it brings into the forefront a same-sex couple, two male characters whose relationship is the centre of the narrative. However, gender variance is also limited as both protagonists subscribe to traditionally masculine dress, speech, and mannerisms, which makes their relationship easier to consume by the majority of viewers. Though the all-pervading humour used in the movie is aimed at normalising queer unions and at questioning homophobia, it fails to address to a greater extent the radical threat of androgyny to established gender roles. The fact that there is no androgynous and gender unspecified body on display further guarantees that the resultant disruption is firmly in the realm of sexuality and does not spread to gender expression.

Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (2019), a movie by Shelly Chopra Dhar, expresses its storyline in the context of emotional repression and family relations between generations. The movie revolves around Sweety, a woman in her twenties who has to express her romantic feelings to another woman in the backdrop of a traditional Punjabi family. Its importance lies in placing a lesbian love story in the centre of a mainstream Hindi movie, but it is still bound to traditional femininity in the way the protagonist is presented. These conventional ideas of womanhood are perpetuated via costuming, kinetic habits, and cinematography on a regular basis, thus making androgyny just a distant memory to the cinematic representation of gender in the movie. Such conventions uphold an industrial trend wherein queer appearance should appeal to the norms of gender-based appearance, an industry

trend that highlights the importance of visual adherence to hegemonic ideals in order to be socially recognized.

Badhai Do (2022), a movie directed by Harshavardhan Kulkarni, engages more explicitly with the societal pressures faced by queers. It is spun around a marriage of convenience between a gay man and a lesbian woman. The movie discusses compulsory heterosexuality, expectations of family, and the strategies that queer people devise to overcome these pressures and expectations. The movie positions itself in the framework of progressiveness due to the presence of two queer protagonists and an overt acknowledgment of the support systems of the queer community. However, the visual representation of those protagonists returns to binary gender codes, which makes their non-binary gender manifestations episodic and situational. Here, androgyny is not so much a long-term tactic of self-representation as it is a temporary occurrence that, though only temporary, unsettles, even temporarily, the hegemonic gender norms.

These movies illustrate an incremental but cautious broadening of representational possibilities. Sexual diversity is increasingly visible, yet the consistent disruption of binary gender norms through fully realised androgynous characters remains rare. When androgyny does appear, it is frequently peripheral, symbolic, or overshadowed by other narrative concerns. The mainstream movie industry, therefore, tends to domesticate ambiguity and maintain a binary framework as the prevailing mode of interpretation. In this context, *Navarasa* (2005) represents a significant departure. The androgynous protagonist takes a central place and is not confined to the binary classification. The continued maintenance of this role allows *Navarasa* to show how an androgynous character can be a central, instead of secondary, element of the story. The movie questions the containment modes by the comic elements or the anticipation of an expected protagonistic redemption arc, and presents androgyny as an enduring reality instead of a temporary disruption.

3.2. Gautam's Androgyny in *Navarasa*: From Domestic Marginalisation to Mythic Resonance

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers a penetrating conceptual lens for the reading of Gautam's appearance in *Navarasa*. According to Butler, gender is "instituted through the stylization of the body" and can only

be understood as "the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler^[5]). In this framework, Gautam's identity is not the manifestation of a fixed inner truth but rather the accumulated effect of lived acts of speech, dress, posture, and interaction that position her outside normative masculine or feminine codes. Her refusal to take up a single, interpretable gender unsettles the "loop" of gender performance in the binary, signifying it as constructed. Butler later extends this argument, observing that lives which "do not yet count as lives" persist nonetheless through what she calls "the radical persistence of the unreal" (Butler^[21]). Gautam's unresolved presence within the family, deprived of recognition and assimilation, reflects this persistence.

Instead of using didactic exposition, the movie uses gesture economy to portray Gautam's androgyny. One notable instance is when she adorns her family's ancestral jewellery. This silent action is the enactment of what Butler terms the constitutive or formative "call" of naming. Here, jewellery is not an ornament, but a signifier tied to femininity. In wearing it, Gautam performs a citational performance that both appropriates and queers the gendered symbols of lineage. "As dress and appearance have traditionally been important cues to communicate gender identity" (Adomaitis et al.^[23]). Her exclusion is emphasised by the secrecy of the act, as it cannot become public without being labelled an aberration. This tension is further discussed by Ruby Grant and Meredith Nash as they state, "disidentification may be an important survival strategy for rural bisexual and queer young women. Disidentification is often strategic for participants because avoiding labels in favour of ordinariness or ambiguity allows them to redraw the lines of normality to avoid discrimination and stigma." (Grant and Nash^[24]).

Gautam's bond with Swetha becomes the only space where she expresses herself without filters and reservations. While talking with Gautam, she expresses aspects of her personhood inexpressible in the larger domestic sphere. This exchange resonates with Butler's argument that recognition operates not as a static condition but as a fluid process of social negotiation, in which the validity of the subject depends upon relational acknowledgment. Swetha's youth and unmediated interest work to momentarily forestall the disciplinary structures ordinarily monopolizing adult response

to gender nonconformity. Gautam's representation of his niece dodges formal political language in favour of daily vernacular, redefining androgyny as a daily mode of being. This revelation resonates with A. Revathi, as she states in her work, *The Truth About Me*, that "The only times I could speak in my own voice, not in the voice that others assigned to me" (Revathi^[25]).

The narrative's thematic arc then moves toward Gautam's journey to the Koovagam festival, a pilgrimage that crystallises both her marginality and her sense of belonging to a broader trans-feminine community. Koovagam, held annually in Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu, reenacts the marriage of the deity Aravan to the hijra community. The festival draws on a Mahabharata episode in which Aravan, the son of Arjuna, volunteers to be sacrificed to secure the Pandavas' victory. Before his death, Aravan requests marriage. No woman from the mortal realm will marry a man destined to die the next day, prompting Krishna to assume the form of Mohini, who then married Aravan and became his widow after his sacrifice. In the Koovagam ritual, hijras marry Aravan in symbolic ceremonies, don bridal attire, and, following his ritual death, mourn as widows by breaking their bangles, smearing ash, and donning white saris. This collective undertaking is explained by Nick McGlynn et al. as they state, "Shared struggles may make some lives more liveable. Challenges – particularly those that are perceived to be shared with other LGBTQ people– can actually be important in creating the feeling that one's life is a life" (McGlynn et al.^[26]).

For many hijras, Koovagam functions as both a religious observance and a socio-cultural affirmation. As the figure of Aravan offers a "mythic charter" for the community's existence and legitimises their femininity. A. Revathi describes the festival as a time when "we are not mocked but welcomed, not hidden but celebrated" (Revathi^[25]). For Gautam, whose life within her family is marked by erasure, Koovagam represents an alternate locus of recognition, an inversion of her domestic isolation. The movie follows her as she participates fully in the festival. Gautam dresses as a bride, marries Aravan in the symbolic ritual, and partakes in the collective mourning that follows his ceremonial death. It is the only scene in the movie where she is not merely tolerated but positively endorsed. Here, in the ritual of the sacred, her androgynous nature is not contested but becomes part of

the ritual, allowing for the experience of completeness she so rarely has. But in being endorsed, she is trapped in the temporality of the event, and the endorsement only exists for the duration of the festival's life.

Back from Koovagam, the tenuous balance falls apart. Swetha reveals Gautam's gender identity to her father, who responds with violent immediacy, reaching for his belt in order to "correct" her apparent deviance. His reaction is proof that "dominant sexual cultures rest on the exercise of power over subordinated, gendered bodies. This power is implicated in violence" (Judge^[27]). Out of self-preservation, Gautam returns dressed as she had previously, in attire suitable for a man in the eyes of her family. But this is not to be misunderstood as her submission. She takes the moment to speak openly and explain her feelings and identity without evading. It results in the family's ugly confrontation with reality, which they have been overlooking and avoiding till now; instead of finally accepting Gautam's true identity, it brought the fear of social humiliation to the forefront. This fear leads to the abandonment of Gautam as she gets outcasted by her family. This expulsion reflects what Butler calls the "limits of recognisability" (2011), where individuals deviating from the socially accepted norms are marginalised. Violence here is both symbolic and real at the same time, as it is exercised by expulsion from society.

The restraint projected during the conclusion of the movie is almost devastating. After a one-year flashback, Gautam is shown lying alone on the floor of a dimly lit room. The soundscape of daily noise is eliminated and replaced with a deadening silence. Her concluding statement, "Who am I?", captures the essential existential and political nature of her odyssey. This query embodies the unresolved dynamic of the recognition of the self and recognition by society. It is not a statement of bewilderment but a cry for legitimacy in a life where she has not been recognized as such. In Butler's terms, hers is an "unlivable life" not due to a lack of self-understanding, but because the surrounding structures refuse to sustain that understanding (Butler^[20]).

The journey from Koovagam to Gautam's ultimate abandonment encapsulates the paradox central to this research. Despite the mythological discourse, even in rituals that assume gender multiplicity, like the marriage with Aravan, the structural obstacles to social integration have not been overcome in the sphere of day-to-day life. The fact that

Gautam was exiled by her family shows that just because androgyny is acknowledged in the religious sphere, it does not mean that there will be a physical acceptance in the domestic and social arena.

4. Conclusion

This research explores the representation of androgyny in *Navarasa* (2005) through the character of Gautam, situating her life within the intersections of domestic marginalisation, personal agency, and the enduring cultural significance of the Koovagam festival and the myth of Aravan. Unlike the dominant patterns in Indian cinema that either erase non-normative gender identities, frame them through comic detachment, or resolve them within the confines of binary norms, *Navarasa* resists these narrative impulses. Gautam's androgyny is never explained in the movie or paraded as a spectacle; she exists as a quiet embodiment of reality, which disrupts the visual and narrative conventions of mainstream cinema.

This portrayal centers on the interplay of personal acts and symbolic rituals that affirm her identity, overlooked by her family but embedded within broader cultural frameworks. Her hidden use of ancestral jewellery is more than a private moment of self-expression; it reclaims symbols linked to her heritage and reframes them as tools for personal affirmation. Her conversation with Swetha opens a rare space of mutual recognition, showing how affirmation takes root in bonds of trust and intimacy when it is withheld by both family and society. Her trip to Koovagam, marriage to Aravan, and mourning his death mark a significant blend of myth and lived experience. It is a ritual that not only endows her with a symbolic legitimacy; it also locates her in a history of gender heterogeneity that is legitimized by the sacred tradition, although her everyday life is constrained by the exclusion of society.

The movie's closing sequence, in which Gautam is abandoned by her family after openly asserting her identity, underscores the persistence of systemic marginalisation despite the existence of legitimising cultural narratives. Her return from Koovagam is not greeted well but is rather met with rejection based on fear of being socially stigmatized. The closing scene shows the hurt of being recognized by the divine and rejected by the very society she lives in. It illustrates the agonizing gap between rituals and reality. This compels the audience to face the distinctions between rit-

ualised recognition and ordinary acceptance, a chasm that remains despite the cultural memory of gender plurality that is held in mythology.

Navarasa manages to accomplish what few Indian movies have tried to accomplish by foregrounding the life of Gautam and making it expressly connected to the myth of Aravan. It does not reduce sacred tradition to contemporary lived realities, nor does it reduce contemporary lived realities to simplification. The research reveals that Gautam serves as not only a critique of the social processes that make androgynous lives non-existent, but it also demonstrates that they are historically and culturally legitimate. It is shown in her story that myth has the potential to make non-binary identities sacred, but the social structures that shape their lived lives are not without exclusion.

The narrative of Gautam resists closure because it is the story of the constant struggle for recognition of many Androgynous and gender-nonconforming people in contemporary India. She is characterized by experiences of personal confirmation, ritual belonging, and social rejection that describe the multi-layered, even contradictory, interplay of myth, identity, and acceptance in society. By not providing a resolution to her story, *Navarasa* makes her audience face the reality that the recognition of androgyny cannot be achieved by cultural memory or some kind of ritual; it requires a restructuring of the daily social order that persists in policing the borders of gender. "This shift requires professionals to move beyond a focus on multiple identities and instead consider how multiple identities are situated within structures of domination" (Duran^[28]).

Author Contributions

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