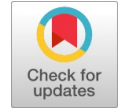


# Exposing and Creating Nuance in Cinema: A Study on the Representation of Marginalized Identities in Neeraj Ghaywan Films

Aswin V



**Abstract:** *Being a perception-inducing and reinforcing medium, films can make remarkable efforts to humanize the lives of marginalized identities. Indian cinema has been largely criticized for its upper-caste gaze, sexual objectification of women, gagged or stereotypical representation of minorities, and other cultural identities. Neeraj Ghaywan is necessarily one of the young contemporary filmmakers from Bollywood who, regardless of the status quo, attempts nuance in terms of representation and portrayal. Diversity in the organizational structure of our society should reflect in mainstream cinema narratives to impact the process of democratization. The presence of more filmmakers from diverse identities would energize this process in its due course. This study is designed to analyze the representation of marginalized identities and explore the auteurship of Neeraj Ghaywan. As choosing not to talk about is itself a political act of subversion, under-representation would impact only social exclusion, while misrepresentations might perpetuate and bring about toxic stereotypes. The films of Neeraj Ghaywan are keen on both aspects of faulty representations.*

**Keywords:** *Marginalized Identities, Representation, Neeraj Ghaywan*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Better representation fosters the development of diversity in ideas and perspectives, where every individual might feel valued and homely for self-expression. In the past few years, there seem to have been notable changes and discourses regarding the representation of marginalized identities such as women, trans communities, homosexuals, oppressed castes, and classes within Indian cinema. Critical analyses are pivotal in understanding, responding to, and scrutinizing the perpetuation of toxic relegation and stereotyping within society. The pervasive role of media is well known for its active construction of meaning and extensive discourse regarding persuasion. Films, being enormously popular as a medium, are capable of inducing and reinforcing perceptions among people. If the diversity within social structure isn't reflected in terms of media representation, there happens to be the perpetuation of toxic relegation and stereotyping within society. Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' was important in understanding how relegating forces like patriarchy and caste sustain and perpetuate within society.

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Hegemony, to Gramsci, 'is the cultural, moral, and ideological leadership of a group over allied and subaltern groups' [1][13][14]. He put forward the concept of 'Manufacture of Consent', saying dominant ideas are not simply enforced; they maintain dominance through consent. Consent is therefore developed through education, culture, and the media. John Fiske argues in 'Reading the Popular' that 'the resources—television, records, clothes, video games, language—carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and that work in favor of the status quo' [2]. The construction of dominant ideology and popular culture seems influenced by mass media. Wood J.T., in her study 'Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender', attempts a comprehensive analysis of gender representation and its influence on people's perceptions. She supposes that three themes describe how media represent gender. First, under representation, which falsely implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or invisible. Second, men and women are portrayed in stereotypical ways that reflect and sustain socially endorsed views of gender. Third, depictions of relationships between men and women emphasize traditional roles and normalize violence against women [3][15]. Julia Cabrera Campoy analyzes gender representation in Iciar Bollain's filmography. Though Bollain seems to reject the term 'feminism', the study titled 'Is it necessary to be a feminist to make feminist cinema?' Iciar Bollain and her cinematographic representation of gender' discusses whether her films can be considered feminist [4]. Francisco José García Lozano, in his study, 'India: radiografía en femenino' (India: radiography in feminine), attempts to look at Indian society focused on women and its harsh reality through three films, one of which happens to be *Masaan*. 'Due to the roots of the religion and traditions of the place, its characters, who have concerns and whose cultural richness is quite high, cannot move to nowhere' [5]. Indian cinema often fails to capture the overlapping of social identities, be it caste, class, gender, or sexuality, giving characters a single-dimensional treatment. The Hindi film industry, commonly known as Bollywood, seems to be undergoing a noticeable change in terms of the diversity of mainstream narratives. While the commercialization of content gagged the representation of actuality without addressing reality, contemporary social scenarios seem sensitive to bigotries. Bollywood seems to be flourishing in terms of content and international appeal through contemporary young directors like Chaitanya Tamhane (*Court*, *The Disciple*),

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Ivan Ayr (Soni, Milestone), Amit V Masurkar (Newton, Sherni), Neeraj Ghaywan (Masaan, Geeli Pucchi), Anand Gandhi (Ship of Theseus), Ritsh Batra (The Lunchbox, The Photograph), and a few more.

Indian cinema had been largely criticized for its upper caste gaze, sexual objectification of women, gagged or stereotypic representation of gender, sexual minorities, and other cultural identities. The counter-hegemonic narratives of Indian cinema at present are evolving as a major movement. Through filmmakers like Vetrimaran, Pa Ranjith, Mari Selvaraj (in Tamil cinema), and Nagraj Manjule (in Marathi cinema), there is an oppressed perspective in terms of caste within mainstream cinema.

In 2018, Neeraj Ghaywan revealed on Twitter that he is a Dalit, making him the only well-known Dalit filmmaker in mainstream Bollywood cinema. He responded to the casteist remark of one of his fellow filmmakers, "I am a Dalit. I won the Cannes film award for our country. Also the Cannes advertising award. I won the national award and the film fare award. All without using my Dalit identity". Neeraj Ghaywan made a splash on social media with a tweet that sought assistant directors and assistant writers for his upcoming projects. The job call was looking for applicants from the Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi (DBA) sections of society. When this ignited a controversy and extensive criticism was laid over him, Neeraj Ghaywan responded by saying how 'unprepared and uncomfortable' the Hindi film industry is to address and discuss the caste realities of the country. It is remarkable that, as a matter of policy, he ensured that women comprised at least 50% of his crew, right from the debut film *Masaan* [6].

The following films that are directed by Neeraj Ghaywan are analyzed for the study: *Shor* (short film, 2013), *Masaan* (feature film, 2015), *Juice* (short film, 2017), *Vicks: 'Generations of Care'* (advertisement, 2018), *Geeli Pucchi* (short film appearing in the anthology, *Ajeeb Daastaans*, 2021).

## II. GENDER, PATRIARCHY AND MISOGYNY

The story world of Neeraj Ghaywan has always been rooted in real-life surroundings. Thus, it enables him to frame reflections of reality, and apart from that, the notion of empowerment and spirit manifests his actual political statement. The central core of *Juice* is a subtle portrayal and response to explicit misogyny, which intertwined and became normalized in Indian society. The story is set in a middle-class household where a get-together is held. The narrative is characterized by presenting three worlds, each representing different phases of deep-rooted patriarchy. At first, we are introduced to the circle of men occupying the living room, where they make fun of their lady superior at work, discuss the perils of having a female boss, and discuss regional as well as international politics. They open up and laugh aloud for misogynist statements to constitute the subset of a typical 'world of men'. Moving along with the protagonist, Manju, we are introduced to the 'circle of women'—naturally occupying the kitchen, busy making dishes. The space of women is not only characterized by cooking but also the cultivation of consent for the sustainment of patriarchal order. Advising a pregnant wife

to quit the job to look after the kid and reassuring the 'excitement' of men in marriage becomes one classic stroke. The women's circle is designed to constitute a subset of the 'women's world', serving as oppressed as well as 'vectors' for patriarchal order. The third 'world' comprises kids, restricted to stay within a room playing video games and having chat chats. The perpetuation of patriarchy is evident here. When a boy thinks video games are meant solely for him and when a mother assigns and authorizes only girl child to serve dishes, the reassurance of social construct as the way it is, is being fulfilled.

In the opening shot of *Juice*, the placement of characters seems to be relevant. We see four men laughing aloud and cherishing moments while the protagonist, Manju, is cleaning up the table and serving dishes further. She never makes eye contact with anyone, revealing her acceptance of the 'vulnerability' that she just 'doesn't belong to be in here'. The way Neeraj Ghaywan chooses to contrast between the men and women circles is also peculiar in terms of visual cues. We see Manju refilling water into a cooler in the living room and, at the same time, women suffocating under heat in the kitchen.

*Shor* opens to the workplace of Meena, a tailoring shop. She is seen wandering somewhere in her inner thoughts, though surrounded by the groaned noise of machinery. Residing in the slum under a single-room tin roof, she happens to be the only earning member of the family as her husband currently runs out of work. She is cursed by her mother-in-law, as their community restricts women from being outside and getting employed. Meena doesn't even belong to the same community as her partner but to one that is considered inferior under the hierarchical system of caste. The power structure within her family is revealed through one single establishing shot, where the husband is lying over the bed, the mother-in-law is on the floor over a mat with the child, and Meena is on the bare floor. Patriarchy isn't confined to being necessarily practiced by men. As it evolved over a long period of time to intertwine and inherit with the social structure, even women ended up being practitioners of its norms. Among the two major female characters appearing in *Shor*, Meena happens to be exploited, and the mother-in-law is the one who perpetuates.

In its hyperlinked narrative, *Masaan* portrays and switches between the lives of two unrelated central characters, Devi and Deepak. The life segment of Devi can be contemplated to be aware of the ingrained patriarchy and embedded morality of the social surroundings they belong to. The story is set in a land that is considered holy, spiritual, and sacred—Varanasi.

Devi is put into extreme agony by the death of her lover, Piyush, who committed suicide when both were caught by police on a morality raid at a hotel. A police inspector has taken a video of Devi in which she is barely dressed and he is threatening her father, Vidhyadhar Pathak, for ransom money. Questions from an extreme moralistic social order, the mental agony of loss, and her attempts for salvation make Devi a compelling character.

In a society where premarital sex is considered a sin, Devi is never ashamed of expressing her sexuality. Her vulnerability to moral cursing appears to be a social construct. In the very first scene, we get to see Devi watching pornography before leaving home. When she is 'caught' by police and asked which brothel she belongs to, she feebly responds and corrects, 'You have got it wrong'. Later, during interrogation, her act of getting involved in a sexual relationship was explained by herself as 'curbing curiosity'. While being asked by her father for an explanation, she remarked, 'I felt nice talking to him', and they became friends. When insulted by her employer at the computer center, asking weren't she ashamed to do it, she retorts, 'Whatever it was, we both were equally involved'. At any point, she never falls into the vulnerability of self-guilt for expressing her sexuality. The salvation she curbs is never from the guilt over her sexual intervention but from the loss of Piyush and the stigma put over her by societal morality. She even remarks, 'The smaller the city, the narrower the world view', justifying her choice to get employed somewhere outside of her hometown.

Apart from inner conflicts, Devi shall cope with or get away from two layers of sickening patriarchal order that exist around her. At a societal level, she has been subjected to slut-shaming and despotism. The social practice preventing women from entering the burial grounds, a corrupt police officer asking for ransom money by threatening to expose 'scandal video', random people from whom Devi encounters questions like 'Will you sleep with me?' - all constitute the misogynistic psyche. When Devi is restricted from entering the burial grounds in the ghat even to give last respects to Piyush, in Masaan's parallel story, we see Deepak get to see the corpse of Shalu (his lover) from the burial grounds itself. Even if Devi might have belonged to the same community as Deepak, she won't have that 'privilege' since gender really matters. The Vicks's Generations of Care (Advertisement, 2018) made as part of its corporate communication strategy is emotionally appealing and appreciable for its social inclusiveness. Gauri Sawant, a Mumbai-based transgender woman activist as herself [7]. To be inclusive about the diversity in gender and develop a humane treatment to identify and normalize their existence is what Neeraj Ghaywan attempts. He aims to empathize and empower with the basic human emotion of all—a mother's care. For the first time, a mainstream brand has created a campaign with a transgender woman who is also a mother. As of now, the advertisement has managed to have more than one crore viewers on YouTube. It raises the issue of discrimination that society keeps over trans communities and normalizes the lives of trans people and trans mothers.

Better representation of women in media doesn't mean portraying women as characters that are 'ideal', characterized by their boldness in nature and uttering feminist verses aloud all the time. The female characters of Neeraj Ghaywan are pivotal to its storytelling and, most importantly, humane. He never confines patriarchy to individuals but develops a wholesome perspective to reveal how individuals become its subjects or practitioners.

### III. SEXUAL IDENTITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

Geeli Pucchi tends to humanize and normalize lesbian relationships by capturing the nuances of tender romance, and it does address the social reality of intersectionality as well. The portrayal of typical boy-girl relationships in films is characterized by their happily togetherness, fun, celebrations, travel, cherishing, and intimate moments. When gay or lesbian love is represented in films, the portrayal seems to be obsessed with depicting their intercourse or physical attachment. Thus, their relationship might be misconceived as individuals being hyperactive to physical pleasure. It is important to portray their physically intimate moments to disregard misconceptions. But mental or emotional attachment, which serves as the most integral part of any relationship, should not be overlooked while portraying gay or lesbian relationships as well. Neeraj Ghaywan happens to be keen on this and captures the nuances and cherishing moments to reveal how happily they are together. Whether it be Priya and Bharti or Deepak and Shaalu (in Masaan), Ghaywan seems to consider and conceive both relationships heartfully. Being a perception-inducing medium, films can make remarkable efforts to humanize the lives of sexual minorities. In the Indian context, it is notable that the narratives regarding sexual minorities have changed drastically over the past few years. How Neeraj Ghaywan inclines to these narratives is by normalizing their lives and making them recognizable with self-respect. He chooses to portray a lesbian couple with the same tenderness in a relationship involving opposite sexes; he explores and reveals the same emotion of love and care in motherhood, irrespective of gender or sexual identity.

### IV. CASTE- THE OBVIOUS AND UNDERLYING

The regional backdrop of Masaan is set in Varanasi, the sacred holy land of Hinduism. The 'Dom' community of Varanasi is the caretakers of the cremation grounds and the main keepers of the fire that lights the pyres [8]. They belong to the lowest ranks of 'untouchable Dalits' in the hierarchical caste spectrum of Hinduism. From an industry like Bollywood, which has been largely criticized for its upper caste gaze, Masaan would probably be the first film to represent the lives of the Dom community, constituting the minimal marginalized narratives present. Through its appreciable realistic portrayal and actual representation characterized by internal viewpoints, Masaan exposes the 'sacredness' of Varanasi and the lives of the Dom community as they are. Beyond the celebrated 'sacredness', Neeraj Ghaywan reveals how the lives of humans are getting 'trapped' there under the inhumane caste bigotry. As Deepak is about to complete his graduation from polytechnic, his father suggests he escape from where they belong. He says, "Get out of this place. The sooner, the better. Otherwise, even your life will end up torching bodies"). In an episodic short documentary series presented by 101 India, featuring 'unique stories from India' we see the real Dom Raja of Banaras talking by mentioning his son, 'I don't want him to do the job of a Dom Raja. I want him to get a respectable job in the government, like an officer or a doctor [9].





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This reveals how close Masaan sticks to its reality. The narrative of Geeli Pucchi is characterized by the intersectionality of caste, class, patriarchy, and sexuality. Bharti (played by Konkona Sen Sharma) is the only woman laborer seen at the factory. Though qualified for an office job, she is discredited on the grounds of her (lower) caste identity. On the other hand, Priya (played by Aditi Rao) belongs to the Brahmin community, and her caste privilege made her qualify for the position that Bharti had been seeking for a long time.

The way Neeraj Ghaywan contrasts Bharti with Priya when they first meet involves subtle usage of mise-en-scene. The factory is composed of both blue and brown-coloured drum cylinders. Bharti is dressed in a blue outfit and seen near blue-coloured cylinders, while Priya is alongside the brown cylinders with her outfit resembling it. The color blue is marked by certain political significance in the Indian context, as it represents Ambedkarism, the epitome of existence for the oppressed class. During the lunch break, we see Priya come down to dine with Bharti. What seems peculiar about the blocking is that Priya is positioned at the top of the staircase, and she gets off to reach Bharti, symbolizing the class as well as the caste divide.

The intersectionality in 'Juice' is made possible through a servant character (Parabatiya). We notice her first when she is pouring water into the cooler while Manju is serving men. As defined by patriarchal norms, Manju ought to feel vulnerability, to be there in the men's circle even for serving. Along with it, caste as well as class consciousness prevent Parabatiya from even 'serving' them. The hierarchy is clearly defined, though complex and inter-sectional, in terms of caste, gender, and class. While women are having tea and snacks in the kitchen, Manju asks the pregnant lady to pass on another cup for Parabatiya. Though there are numerous cups available for her as well, she searches for and finds a steel cup unlike the ones given to other women. Though Manju hesitated a little, he never discarded that choice. Watching all these happenings, Parabatiya stubbornly refuses to have tea and leaves for home. She understands the disrespect and refuses to be subjected to another form of ill treatment. For a long time, even the representation of oppressed caste identities in Indian films posed a hegemonic caste perspective. Similar to the 'white savior' narrative in American films [10], we happened to witness 'upper caste saviors' who sympathize and attempt to 'liberate' the oppressed. Cheriss May, a photojournalist, shared that the media needs to represent the society that it serves because 'if people don't see themselves, then it's almost like a lack of care that's communicated to people' [11]. She observes that there has to be some diverse voices that represent everyone in society that can speak from the voice of those people because there are different issues and different things that are of importance to us. There needs to be diversity in the narrative, and there should be perspectives from the oppressed.

### V. RECURRING ELEMENTS INSIDE THE FRAMES

Being a reflection of a director's artistic vision, auteur theory supposes that the films of any given filmmaker will have identifiable recurring elements [12]. Neeraj Ghaywan

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makes use of food or dining scenes as a major cue or metaphor to represent the nature of the relationship between characters. A dining scene can depict the nature, love, association, and mutual respect prevailing between individuals. If food serves as a metaphor to depict the evolution of respect between Devi and his father (in Masaan), the very same element represents the loneliness of Meena (in Shor). If it is used as a 'token' to express gratitude in Epiphany, nourishment of love is represented in Geeli Pucchi (between Priya and Bharati) and in Masaan (between Deepak and Shalu). While it depicts the tenderness of motherhood in Vick's advertisement, expression of protest against patriarchy's relegation is made possible in 'Juice'. The hegemonic power structures in 'Juice', Shor, Geeli Pucchi, and Masaan aren't caste, class, or patriarchy alone. These all appear to be ingrained and intertwined with the social structure. Individuals are subjected to relegation and social conditioning on the basis of multiple discrimination parameters. Exploring this intersectionality, Neeraj Ghaywan reveals the graded inequality in our social organization structure. However bad reality may seem, Neeraj Ghaywan never leaves us with an impression of hopeless reality. He attempts to expose his actual social surroundings but relies heavily on spirited endings. Whether it be Masaan, Shor, or Geeli Pucchi, in which characters are put into extreme mental suffering, they yet manage to move on and get rid of the past. He never makes use of a deus ex machina factor to bring about a sudden change in the plot. He seems determined to elevate the audience with spirited endings by necessarily making the salvation ignited from the characters' inner selves and brought upon their own realizations. Contrary to the sympathizing narratives regarding the representation of marginalized identities, there happens to be an element of empathy in the portrayals of Neeraj Ghaywan. The lives of the oppressed class would be most convenient when the story is told from their own perspectives rather than making use of a privileged 'alien' character. The representation and portrayal of Neeraj Ghaywan are characterized by offering such 'internal viewpoints' Most commercial films tend to establish Varanasi through a stereotypical montage comprising the visuals of monks, religious ceremonies, holy attire, etc. Though the story of Masaan is set in Varanasi, we never happen to see such grand establishing shots. In contrast to the sacredness and embedded morality of Varanasi, the opening shot of Masaan features Devi watching pornography at home.

The humans of Neeraj Ghaywan are driven by love, desire, and conflicting social realities. The character arcs are subtly designed so that these factors happen to be seminal and recurring. While love and desire lead them, social reality seems to be confronting. When a social reality is addressed, he never confines the criticism to individual characters but necessarily contextualizes individuals for their doings, as people are accustomed to acting the way they are being brought up. Whether it be patriarchy, caste consciousness, or hatred towards sexual minorities, the social structure as a whole is held accountable. Humans or characters are never put into the black-and-white binary.

VI. CONCLUSION

Humans appear fundamentally insane to discriminate, dominate, and relegate themselves within themselves. Gender, caste, class, and sexual bigotry assert discrepancies that prevent individuals from being treated with equally recognizable respect. Neeraj Ghaywan is a contemporary filmmaker in Indian cinema who tends to address and reflect social reality through his films. Exploring intersectionality, Neeraj Ghaywan reveals the graded inequality within our social organizational structure. Being a perception-inducing and reinforcing medium, films can make remarkable efforts to humanize the lives of marginalized people. The study reveals that the films of Neeraj Ghaywan are ample and keen on the representation and portrayal of marginalized identities. The prominent characters, including the protagonists, are characterized by their marginalized identities, as they belong to sexual minorities, women, oppressed castes, classes, or other subjugated communities. He never attempts to idolize or sympathize with the characters but must necessarily humanize and empathize with them. His films tend to address the intersectionality of social structure, and the perspective of storytelling is characterized by offering ‘internal viewpoints’ of characters (the marginalized). Neeraj Ghaywan is necessarily one of the young contemporary filmmakers from Bollywood who, regardless of the status quo, attempts nuance in terms of representation and portrayal. The study found various recognizable recurring elements regarding theme, representation, portrayal, and narrative techniques employed by Neeraj Ghaywan in his films, which thereby affirm his auteurship. Metaphorical implications of ‘food’ or ‘dining scenes’ in depicting the nature of relationships between characters appear remarkably alluring. While the representation of homosexual relationships in Indian cinema appears stereotypical as it emphasizes more on portraying their physical pleasure and intimacy, Neeraj Ghaywan tends to capture the tenderness in their love and attempts to normalize homosexuality.

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