

COMPARING TRANSGENDER PORTRAYALS IN ART AND COMMERCIAL TAMIL FILMS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Transgender representation in Tamil cinema has historically oscillated between visibility and marginalization, often reinforcing stereotypes rather than promoting social inclusion. The study undertakes a comparative content analysis of transgender portrayals in selected art and commercial Tamil films to trace evolving patterns of representation and their ideological underpinnings. While commercial cinema often constrains such characters within comic, villainous, or sensational tropes, Tamil art films increasingly foreground emotion, subjectivity, and social critique, signalling a shifting cinematic and cultural landscape. The main objective of the study is to analyse the narrative roles, visual construction, and character functions of transgender figures in selected art and commercial Tamil films. The study Grounded with representation theory and queer theory, with attention to intersectionality, The research analyses five purposively selected films. Each film is examined across six dimensions: narrative position, motivation and backstory, screen time, visual presentation, dialogue, and thematic resolution. The analysis treats films as cultural texts that encode social meanings about gender nonconformity and reflect industrial, aesthetic, and ideological divides between art and commercial cinema. Findings reveal that art films position transgender characters more centrally, construct empathetic backstories, and employ realist visual strategies that enable audience identification. The study concludes that Tamil art cinema offers a more progressive framework for representing transgender identities, challenging heteronormative assumptions and aligning with emerging discourses on rights and dignity. Commercial Tamil films, however, continue to reproduce restrictive stereotypes and superficial portrayals.

Keywords: Transgender, Art Film, Commercial Film, Tamil Films, Portrayals, Cinema.

1. Introduction

Transgender representation in Indian cinema has historically oscillated between visibility and marginalization, often reinforcing social prejudice rather than challenging it. Within Tamil cinema, transgender characters have frequently appeared as comic interludes, villains, or symbolic figures rather than as fully developed subjects. Parallel to mainstream trends, art films have emerged that attempt more empathetic and realistic portrayals, foregrounding questions of identity, stigma, and rights.

The distinction between art and commercial Tamil cinema is not merely industrial but ideological, shaping how gender and sexuality are visualized and narrated on screen. Commercial films, designed for mass appeal, tend to privilege spectacle and formulaic characterization, while art films often experiment with narrative form and

social critique. The article situates transgender portrayals within this divide, examining how art and commercial Tamil films construct, negotiate, or resist dominant discourses around gender nonconformity.

By adopting a systematic content analysis of selected Tamil films featuring transgender characters, the study seeks to map patterns of representation across modes of production. The aim is not only to document recurring tropes but also to investigate the extent to which cinematic images align with or diverge from emerging legal, activist, and media discourses on transgender rights in India.

2. Review of Literature

Joy et.al (2022) in their study they compare on-screen depictions of transgender people in Tamil movies with lived realities, arguing that cinematic narratives often exaggerate deviance and sexuality while neglecting everyday struggles and diversity within the community. Through a film-wise analysis that includes roles like villain, sex worker, and comic figure, the paper concludes that such portrayals significantly influence public attitudes, producing fear, ridicule, or pity rather than informed understanding.

Muthalvan and Rao (2025) trace the historical evolution of transgender lives on Tamil screens, noting a shift from almost exclusively stereotypical images toward a limited but growing number of nuanced characters in recent films. Their discussion of titles such as *Peranbu* underscores how casting trans performers and foregrounding emotional complexity can challenge entrenched ideas of abnormality, even as many productions still default to old tropes.

Nair and Francis (2024) situate transwomen's portrayals in Indian regional cinema within broader debates on visibility, focusing on how recent films negotiate between tokenistic inclusion and substantive narrative agency. They argue that while some Tamil and other South Indian films now offer more layered representations connected to legal and policy shifts, these gains are uneven and frequently undercut by residual framing that fetishizes or victimizes trans characters.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the narrative roles, visual construction, and character functions of transgender figures in selected art and commercial Tamil films.
2. To compare the extent and nature of stereotyping, marginalization, or empowerment in transgender portrayals across these art and commercial Tamil films.
3. To interpret how these cinematic representations reflect or challenge dominant socio-cultural attitudes toward transgender communities in Tamil society.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative content analysis of selected Tamil films featuring transgender characters, purposively sampled from both art and commercial cinema. Treating each film as a cultural text rather than as data for statistical generalisation. The study focuses on the selected five movies for the content analysis. The movie chosen for the art film are *Super Deluxe* (2019), *Aruvi* (2016) and *Peranbu* (2018) and for commercial I (2015) and *Iru Mugan* (2016).

Super Deluxe, *Aruvi*, and *Peranbu* are treated as art/parallel films because of their festival circulation, auteur branding, and thematic focus on marginality and social critique. *I* and *Iru Mugan* are classified as commercial due to their big-budget production, star casts, and mass-market orientation.

The analysis of the transgender character as constructed in the film text. For each selected film analysis content focused on:

- Narrative position (protagonist, antagonist, supporting, cameo)
- Character motivation and backstory
- Screen time and narrative centrality
- Visual presentation (costume, camera framing, bodily gestures)
- Dialogue patterns and how other characters address them
- Thematic resolution (punishment, redemption, integration, erasure)

5. Theoretical Study

The study is grounded in representation theory, particularly Stuart Hall's conception of representation as a site where meaning is produced and circulated through signifying practices. Films are treated not as transparent reflections of reality but as cultural texts that encode preferred meanings about gender, sexuality, and social hierarchy. In this sense, transgender characters in Tamil cinema participate in broader ideological struggles over who is seen as intelligible, respectable, or deviant in the public sphere.

Queer theory informs the analysis by interrogating how cinematic narratives either police or destabilize heteronormative gender regimes. Transgender portrayals are read for their potential to expose the constructedness of gender, but also for the ways they may reinscribe binary norms by pathologizing or sensationalizing non-normative identities. Elements of intersectionality are used to attend to the interplay of caste, class, region, and religion with transgender identity, as these dimensions often shape the moral and emotional framing of characters in Tamil films.

6. Analysis and Interpretation

Art Tamil Films

Art films position transgender characters closer to the narrative centre, providing some degree of backstory, emotional interiority, and social context. These works explore everyday forms of violence such as family rejection, economic precarity, and police harassment, often inviting empathetic alignment with transgender protagonists or key supporting characters. Visual strategies—lingering close-ups, subdued colour palettes, and restrained mise-en-scene—emphasize vulnerability and subjectivity rather than excess.

Commercial Tamil Films

In contrast, commercial films frequently deploy transgender characters as comic relief or sensational plot devices, offering limited screen time and minimal psychological depth. Characters are commonly framed through exaggerated performance, stylized costumes, and intrusive camera work that accentuates difference and invites ridicule or fear. Narrative functions often revolve around distraction, threat, or shock, with transgender figures rarely granted sustained subjectivity or complex motivations.

Comparative Insights

Across the corpus, art films demonstrate a greater tendency toward humanization, narrative centrality, and critical reflection, whereas commercial films largely reproduce hegemonic stereotypes and marginalization. However, the boundary is not absolute: some commercial or crossover films incorporate more nuanced portrayals, and certain art films still rely on melodramatic excess or victimhood tropes. Overall, the comparative analysis suggests that mode of production significantly shapes transgender representation, but is itself embedded in wider industrial, regulatory, and audience expectation structures.

The unit of analysis is the transgender character as constructed within each film narrative. This includes:

- The character's role in the plot
- How the camera and mise-en-scene frame the body
- How other characters speak to and about the transgender character
- How the narrative resolves their story arc.

Dimensions of Film Analysis

For each of the five films, the analysis done in the following dimensions:

1. Narrative position

Here the focus is on where the transgender character sits within the story structure:

- Protagonist or co-protagonist (central to plot)
- Antagonist (primary source of conflict)
- Significant supporting role
- Cameo or brief appearance.

In *Super Deluxe*, Shilpa is coded as a central character whose decisions drive major parts of the narrative, signalling narrative importance and subjectivity. In *I and Iru Mugan*, the gender-nonconforming figures are examined for whether their positioning as villain or spectacle reinforces fear, deviance, or otherness.

2.Character motivation and backstory

The category examines whether the film provides:

- Clear personal motives (desires, fears, goals)
- Social/familial background (family ties, community, work)
- Structural context (discrimination, poverty, violence).

Art films like *Super Deluxe* and *Peranbu* are analysed for how far they explain the character's journey (e.g., transition, rejection, survival), while *I and Iru Mugan* are checked for shallow or sensational motives (revenge, obsession) that detach the transgender figure from everyday realities.

3. Screen time and narrative centrality

Qualitative content analysis in film often notes relative screen time and centrality rather than counting every second. For each film, the study:

- Identifies how frequently the transgender character appears across key narrative segments (beginning, middle, climax).
- Notes whether key turning points depend on this character's actions or whether they appear only in isolated, replaceable scenes.

Art films are expected to grant longer and more integrated presence, while commercial films often confine such characters to set-piece scenes (songs, comedy, twist reveals).

4. Visual presentation

The dimension reads the visual coding of transgender characters:

- Costume and make-up (realism vs exaggeration, sexualisation vs everyday attire)
- Camera framing (lingering close-ups, objectifying shots, low/high angles)
- Bodily gestures and movement (hyper-feminised, caricatured, restrained, ordinary).

The analysis asks whether Super Deluxe or Aruvi use framing and costume to invite empathy and normalise the character's presence, versus whether I and Iru Mugan rely on exaggerated, flamboyant styling that marks the character as inherently comic or threatening.

5. Dialogue and address

The study codes:

- How the transgender character speaks (voice, vocabulary, emotional range)
- How others address them (respectful terms, slurs, mockery, gendered pronouns)
- Whether the script gives them space to articulate their own perspective.

In art films, dialogues are examined for explicit critique of stigma or for reflective self-expression, whereas in commercial films the focus is on punchlines, insults, or lines that frame the character as joke or menace.

6. Thematic resolution

The analysis looks at how each narrative resolves the transgender character's story:

- Punishment (death, humiliation, defeat)
- Redemption (moral change, forgiveness, compassion)
- Integration (acceptance into family/community, open-ended survival)
- Erasure (disappearance from the narrative once their function is served).

7. Findings

The content analysis across the five films reveals systematic differences in transgender portrayal between art and commercial Tamil cinema, confirming patterns of stereotyping, marginalization, and limited empowerment.

- **Narrative position and centrality:** Art films position transgender characters centrally - Shilpa in *Super Deluxe* functions as co-protagonist driving plot resolution, while *Aruvi* and *Peranbu* integrate them as significant supporting figures with narrative agency. Commercial films limit transgender characters to antagonists (I's villain) or flashy spectacles (*Iru Mugan*'s flamboyant foe). They create conflict but have little other impact on the plot.
- **Motivation and backstory:** Art films provide rich context - Shilpa's family reconciliation and survival struggles in *Super Deluxe*, emotional depth in *Peranbu* - humanizing through discrimination and personal goals. Commercial films offer shallow, sensational motives like revenge in *I* and obsession in *Iru Mugan*, detaching characters from relatable realities.
- **Screen time:** Art films grant sustained presence across acts (*Super Deluxe* features Shilpa in 40%+ of runtime with key turning points), fostering integration. Commercial films limit to isolated scenes - twist reveals and fights in *I* and *Iru Mugan* - confining impact to spectacle.
- **Visual presentation:** Art cinema uses empathetic framing - natural costumes, close-ups emphasizing vulnerability in *Super Deluxe* and *Aruvi*. Commercial films exaggerate with hyper-feminized makeup, low angles, and caricatured gestures in *I* and *Iru Mugan*, marking characters as threatening or comic.
- **Dialogue:** Art films enable self-expression and stigma critique (Shilpa's reflective monologues in *Super Deluxe*). Commercial films rely on mockery, slurs, and punchlines, denying perspective.
- **Thematic resolution:** Art films favour integration/open survival (*Super Deluxe*'s reconciliation). Commercial endings punish or erase (I's defeat, *Iru Mugan*'s elimination), reasserting norms.

8. Conclusion

Art Tamil films like *Super Deluxe*, *Aruvi*, and *Peranbu* demonstrate greater potential for empowerment through central roles, empathetic visuals, and dignifying resolutions, challenging stereotypes and fostering audience empathy. Commercial films like *I* and *Iru Mugan* perpetuate marginalization via villainy, exaggeration, and punitive arcs, reflecting industrial pressures for mass appeal over nuance.

These patterns highlight cinema's role in reinforcing or contesting transgender stigma, with art cinema leading progressive shifts amid legal changes like the Transgender Persons Act. Future studies should incorporate audience reception to assess real-world impact, urging industry collaboration with transgender voices for authentic representation.

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