



Exploring the intersectional undertones of popular culture



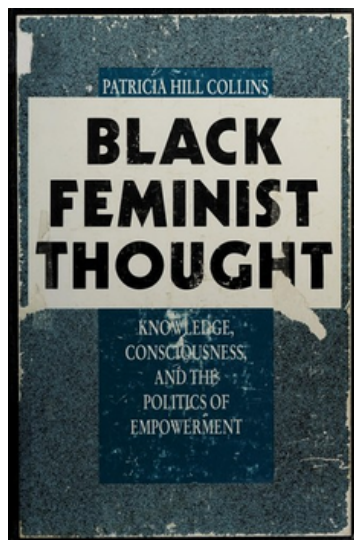
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Have you ever been asked to introduce yourself in an academic, professional, or social situation? If yes, how many times do you start with your name, your age, and what you study or where you work? A majority of us will say every time. This ingrained habit in us to define ourselves through the identities we possess is universal despite where you situate yourself region-wise, ideology-wise, class-wise, or any other parameter or metric to outline identity. While the way we do may differ across communities, the act of utilizing our identity remains consistent.

A consideration of these identities in how we conduct ourselves in society always stands out either as a common coming-together point or as a contentious act that leads to conflicts and segregation of communities. A conscious study or the act of acknowledging the cross-cutting nature of these identities is what we call intersectionality.



While there is intense disagreement amongst academics in the application and study of intersectionality, the timeline of the introduction of the term in popular academia is not disputed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins presented the paper “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” to the University of Chicago Legal Forum.” The publication of the paper popularized the term and constructed an image of it as an analytical framework for mechanisms across academia and even the private sector along with policy making. But my analysis in this article does not concern itself with the political or economic connotation of it directly but with the intertwining of intersectionality within the field of arts, specifically, films in India. While it is simple to search for films on the internet that are self-proclaimed intersectional films, it is imperative to have an eye for the intersectionality present in most mainstream movies we watch.

Let's look into some popular movies that highlight intersectionality in regard to gender, race, and sexuality.

Everything Everywhere All At Once

Released in 2022, everything everywhere all at once is a seeming sci-fi film circling around the concept of multiple realities and conscientiously multiple identities. It revolves around an Asian family of a humble background navigating taxes and the IRS in the US.



It sets its foundation in describing the family as a conventional and close-knit Asian family where the mother is constantly stressed about finances, the daughter feels distant from her mother struggling to introduce her girlfriend to the family in fear of disdain from the grandparent and the father is a soft-spoken equalizer who wishes things were calmer than they are in relation to his marriage. The story unfolds in a way that communicates to the audience that the film is centered around funky colors, trippy editing, and pleasing aesthetics.

However, what stands out is the common and prominent theme of intersectionality and the struggle with finding a self in the chaos created by it. While the multiverse is extensively explored in the movie, it evidently stands as a metaphor for intersectionality. A minority race living in a predominantly white country along with struggling to come to terms with her daughter's sexuality, our protagonist, the mother, is dazed by the double burden of a working Asian woman. This is expressed in the way she and her daughter's multiple selves show up to challenge all that she knows. The impact of the layering of our identities is beautifully expressed through the metaphor of a multiverse. It is not just projected to enjoy aesthetically but to display the conflict that individuals face in realizing and understanding a sense of self when posed with the struggles of navigating their intersectional self.

Geeli Puchi



Released as part of the anthology series “Ajeeb Dastan” on Netflix, Geeli Puchi is a queer love story that centers around the intersection of gender, caste, sexuality, and capitalism. Following two women, both of starkly different economic backgrounds in relation to their castes and gender expressions, consequently resulting in different societal statuses. Bharti is a Dalit woman and butch presenting lesbian while Priya belongs to an upper caste family, destined to marry and hold a higher position in the factory that they both work in.

The story follows the love story of both these women as two people in love who are of different castes and two different ranks in their jobs due to their caste. It displays the experience of being a queer upper-caste woman and how it inadvertently differs from being a sexual, gender, and caste minority. In an attempt to show how caste and queerness intersect, they also display how in certain ways sensitivity towards both is exclusive and not necessarily inclusive. The film shows us that moral ambiguity doesn't discriminate and that the forces of caste and capitalism can overpower more humane emotions. This outright play-by-play of how intersectionality takes center stage in the unfolding of the story makes it the protagonist.

The story, unlike many queer movies that show a soul-soothing ending, portrays to us that queerness is deeply interlinked to other societal norms that cannot function without them affecting your queer experience.

Darlings



Dark comedies aren't usually the first genre that is suggested when an attempt to visually represent intersectionality is considered. Stepping into that realm of using discomfort as an instrument to realize complex ideas, the 2022 film Darlings explores the issue of domestic violence from a feminist lens inculcating the axes of finance, religion, and family.



The story follows a young Muslim woman who gets married to a man she loves and starts living only a few houses away from her mother. While the fairytale constructed in her mind about her young love does not turn out to be as colorful as she'd hoped, she continues to exist in an environment where her physical and emotional safety is exploited. As she confides in her mother, played by Shefali Shah, she is encouraged to leave her husband and end the marriage. However, the story takes an unpredictable turn when the young woman, played by Alia Bhatt, decides to hit her husband back and take him captive in their home. The rest of the movie outlines her literal and emotional journey of deciding her next move and contemplating when and whether she wants to kill him.

In the story's unfolding, we see the autonomy of a woman being taken back by her despite her financial constraints. In a way, the director makes it clear that her decision is heavily based on where she is socially and economically situated in society and how the story could have unfolded differently if it occurred in a different social bubble. The intersectionality displayed in the movie beautifully explains to the audience how the actions we take and the decisions we make to deal with a circumstance in our life, are dependent on our identities and the external factors around us. Our inability to go against the influence of these factors offers a deterministic perspective in understanding human actions, specifically human actions when making a moral decision. Intersectionality displays how all these factors work together in building an individualized perspective on life.

Conclusion:

It is not common practice for commercial high-budget films to concentrate on the nuances of intersectional identities in their plotlines, however, it is possible to utilize our critical and imaginative lens to pick up on hints of intersectionality or draw alternative storylines through an intersectional lens. The attempt of small filmmakers to explore these encompassing ideas is often gone unnoticed or unappreciated, and it is only when we choose to gift them our time and eyes to understand those stories, do we realize the strength of diverse stories left unrecognized. While encouraging audiences to allow themselves the pleasure of different types of cinema is crucial, the impact commercial movies leave on cultural practices and beliefs cannot be denied. Therefore, one can only urge audiences to look further than the surface, to dwell deeper, and to derive individualized meanings from what the director originally planned to deliver. Intersectionality in film is to be kept alive not just by filmmakers who are unafraid to tell unabashed stories but also by consumers of these films who absorb each element of what is displayed and reproduce meaning not just for themselves but also for the environment that surrounds them.

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About the Author



Mannat is a student of Philosophy at Lady Shri Ram College for Women, Delhi University. She enjoys reading and discovering new ideas and ways of approaching her academic interests.

With a knack for being restless, often indecisive but at the same time, passionate, she is always ready to take up new endeavors to challenge herself. Shifting from Jstor articles to movies on her Chrome tabs, she hopes to write more and open new pathways for learning of all sorts.
