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## The Politics of Representation

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### **Abstract:**

Entertainment media is a platform where people find characters with similar social identities as themselves, thus feeling a sense of belonging and solidarity with the society around. However, to represent a group doesn't mean just to offer visibility. Behind the labels of 'good' and 'accurate' representation lie inherent power structures. These hierarchies make it essentially difficult for any such instance to be truly 'accurate' to the actual social group's lived experiences. It is a very subjective and authoritative field, where a part represents the whole. This authority and the labels must be challenged as they make the realm of representation complex and deceptive. Thus, the present research paper will analyse selected instances of representation in various popular entertainment media and discuss how each is incomplete or problematic in its own way, to reveal how shallow the portrayal of caste and class, culture, race, sexuality, and gender can really be.

**Keywords:** *Entertainment Media; Inherent Power Structures; Politics of Representation; Subjective.*

### **Introduction:**

Books, movies, and television shows have always been multi-dimensional in the purpose they serve society: they relax, educate, and encourage discussions on a variety of topics. Being a casual yet integral part of the average layman's daily life, entertainment media feeds and affects an individual's perception of themselves and the world around. It either mirrors the diversity of the environment, providing a safe space to identify with, else constructs a sense of hierarchy to compartmentalise oneself and others in. Using conventionally valid and appealing images earns such media the label of 'good' or 'accurate' and it is celebrated for its

representation of a certain social group. However, what is ignored amongst these celebrations is that society is a ladder where the diversity lies not only in the creeds it is made up of, but also the power structures inherent in and between those creeds. Thus, to handpick a few instances as the face of a whole social group is flawed. This synecdochic view of representation hides away the many layers that make a portrayal relatable to some and alien to others within the same social group. It is necessary to stop glorifying such instances by stripping away the labels and peering at how representation and its celebration both are subjective and not necessarily fully 'accurate' or 'true' to a social group. To undertake this, the present research paper will look at various popular entertainment media known for their portrayals of caste and class, culture, race, sexuality, and gender.

### **Caste and Class:**

The caste and class systems are those of socio-economic hierarchies, with the former being unique to India. While upward and downward mobility is possible in the class system, the caste system is comparatively water-tight. This steady hierarchy and compartmentalising has led to caste-based discrimination, violence, and a dominant narrative that renders the lower castes virtually invisible in the national history. Whatever little representation is offered to the lower castes is often cited to be inaccurate and unfair. In cases where the plight of a lower caste or class is portrayed, it often plays on sentiments or serves to enhance the character's appeal as a pitiable one. When projecting the idea of a more glamorous lifestyle, mainstream media settles for the upper castes and classes, yet such content has an audience of the middle class and various castes. What isn't well understood is that one's caste or class plays a big role in even the most minute of daily decisions. As such, their featuring in entertainment media must be evaluated to see how the representation of caste and class is a fine process that affects the audience's understanding of themselves and the world around.

When one talks of caste representation in literature, the most popular text that comes to mind is Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, published in 1935. It is a powerful read that illustrates the conditions of the Dalit caste in India through a single day in the life of the protagonist Bakha, a sanitation worker. It was written in an attempt to appeal to sentiments and argue against the caste system. The novel strongly portrays how the Dalits' socio-economic status determines even simple aspects like how they interact in shops, how they move in public, and where they get their food from. The knee-jerk racism with which the upper caste characters abuse the Dalits in the novel is a part of a harsh reality that exists till the present day: it is an inhuman condition that Dalits have been forced to suffer over centuries due to an age-old and

deeply-rooted system. However, although a moving read, the celebrated novel seems to also trivialise the conditions of the Dalits. At the novel's end, there is a suggestion that the advanced technology of the flushing toilets would release Dalits from their 'impure' and untouchable' status that came from the job of cleaning latrines. What the novel ignores with this prospect is that casteism isn't just about the dignity of labour for one's means of livelihood. Despite the good intentions of attempting to advocate abolishing casteism and empowering Dalits, the apparent solution envisioned is naïve and trivialises the problems Dalits face. This renders the blind celebration of the novel as a representation of the cause, questionable.

A novel that shook the world with its depiction of class struggles in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939. Being a realist novel, it has been celebrated for its vivid illustrations of the hellish conditions that the Oklahoma farmers had to suffer due to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, forcing them to uproot their lives and start anew in an economically-shattered California. Written in simple language, the novel sympathises with the harsh conditions the characters face: displacement from their homes, being reduced to migrant refugees, malnutrition, poor living conditions, mistreatment in camps, ruthless exploitation, and a sense of uncertainty through it all. Touted to be one of the Great American Novels for its strong and impactful depiction, it is not without glaring faults. As said by Cordyack about the Associated Farmers of California, there was displeasure "with the book's depiction of California farmers' attitudes and conduct toward the migrants. They denounced the book as a 'pack of lies'" (qtd. in Baldassarro). Also, the book portrays the farmers as almost-illiterate people from rural areas, while the reality was that most were industrial workers from towns (Allen). It is also critiqued for being melodramatic regarding the camp scenes to politicise the farmers' plight, and for its heavy focus on the church as a source of comfort (Allen). While it is undeniably a powerful read, the sympathy is evoked through false and blown-out narratives, thus doing less to represent and more to force the farmer class into a pitiable light. This perpetuates the inherent power structure that persistently views farmers as a downtrodden, mistreated class.

Caste and Class are very important parts of one's daily life, and their visibility or invisibility is indeed a matter of privilege or lack thereof, affecting how relatable a character's struggles may be to the audience. Thus, entertainment media needs to be sensitive in the portrayal of caste and class that the characters operate within and around, as the audience tends to place themselves in those situations and identify or react, depending on their own understanding. It must not trivialise reality or alienate the viewer by propagating a certain pattern of experiences as the universal truth.

### **Culture:**

Culture is the ideas, traditions, practices, and expressions that bind social groups together. Based on these shared beliefs, people form norms and parameters that decide their cultural identity. A cultural identity may be something one develops in the society they're born into, or even a society they migrate into later on in life. Thus, one can have multiple cultural identities, the representation of which in entertainment media becomes tricky as it must appeal to people experiencing it at the first-hand or second-hand levels. In the post-colonial world we live in, the representation of culture has largely been through the Western lens, which greatly shapes the parameters and sense of identity for non-Western societies. However, lately, non-Western cultural groups have slowly started to recognise this and shift the narrative through their own voice. With this reclaiming, it is necessary to remember that culture integrates both psychological and physical realms, and is connected to social structures like caste, class, race etc. Understanding these various dimensions would help ensure that the complexities of cultural experiences are preserved for successful translation onto the big screen. Avoiding shallow generalisation and stereotypes, and better attention to details will lend the stamp of reliability and genuineness to cultural representation, more so in the culturally fluid world that we inhabit nowadays.

The 2006 rom-com *Outsourced* was written and directed by John Jeffcoat, based on his experiences in Nepal and India. It is a well-received movie that highlights the global issue of cross-cultural experiences and interactions, through a comic and heart-warming lens. It focuses on Todd Anderson, an American who is made to manage a call centre in the village of Gharapuri near Mumbai. By being unapologetic about certain ideas Americans have of Indians like crowds in trains, nosy landladies, specific dining and sanitation habits etc., the movie humanises and owns these misconceived ideas. However, in doing so, the movie also arguably propagates them. The movie features some endearing images of India, like the friendly 'gola' vendor and the regional manager Puro, the community's cheer during Holi, in which Todd learns to immerse himself in the diversity of India. With such different moods in representation, right from the start, the movie establishes the two ways it intends to show India: firstly through the Western gaze via Todd, and secondly, the way India really is via the Indian characters. Todd's Western prejudices and apprehensions are made apparent in sights of public urination, women doing hard labour at construction sites, Todd viewing the public as simply, with traditional sitar and tabla music accompanying it all. India is thus projected in the colonial light — 'traditional' and 'savage' — read 'dirty' and 'backward' unlike America. But as the movie progresses, India is shown in various shades that attract Todd eventually: one such manner is

through the character Asha, who knows the need to bridge the gap between the Indian and American cultures, and how this may come about only through first-hand contact with either culture. Her culture essentially symbolises the ability to retain Indianness in an increasingly globalised and West-dominated world. The interactions between such Indian characters and Todd emphasise the globalisation-related struggles of culture that were very real and relatable to the 2000s' Indian audience, and comical and empathetic to the Western audience. Thus, a sort of dialogue is created between the two by representing how they view each other, and it urges for a break in prejudices. However well-intended, the movie also perpetuates misconceptions and misrepresentations about India. For example, the call centre that would in reality be placed in a metropolitan city, is instead pushed to the outskirts of a barren village. The centre is a half-constructed flood-prone building with cows freely roaming outside. This suggests India as an underdeveloped nation. Caricatures like the intrusive landlady and the sleazy womaniser Manmeet carry forth the tropes of Indians being unrefined and naturally indecent by Western standards. India's portrayal only eases up when, after celebrating Holi, Todd learns to embrace the culture and see it less as savage and more as a space for change. Thus, India becomes a place for the white protagonist to grow and have a personal life-changing epiphany (Ramani). Once again, India becomes a medium of spiritual discovery for the Western soul - this is a unique burden enforced by the Western gaze. An amalgamation of many such instances, *Outsourced* becomes a movie of contradictions - the physical setting may be India, but the mental setting is the Western envisioning of it. This inherent power structure that affects the narrative makes one wonder just how genuine and real the representation of India in this cross-culture movie actually is.

Culture is a very deep-rooted aspect, the superficial handling of which in entertainment media is erroneous, affecting the relatability and credibility of such portrayals. Entertainment media has to be authentic in attempting to mirror life via the integration of culture, because it influences the viewers to reflect upon it as individuals and as a collective society.

### **Race:**

Racism is a very real and consistent problem in the world we live in. It is a sense of antagonism between races, stemming from a superiority complex based on factors like economic and industrial progress, power dynamics, conformity to convention etc. Being a mirror of society, entertainment media plays a prominent role in either making or breaking racist tropes and ultimately shaping the consumer's opinion. While much needed, to what extent each instance of representation breaks the misconceptions is subjective and needs to be

closely examined to understand that solving this issue isn't as simple as what is applauded by the masses. It doesn't end at pushing a racial group to the forefront, but encompasses much more.

Based on the 2009 book of the same name by Kathryn Stockett, the 2011 movie *The Help* was a very impactful illustration that garnered much positive reception. It focuses on the white aspiring writer Eugenia 'Skeeter' Phelan as she strives to give a platform to her friends' black maids to voice their grievances in the racist domestic sphere created by the white families they work for. Set in the Civil Rights era of 1963 in Mississippi, the movie shows the many issues that the black maids face which the average person would take for granted - using the bathroom in someone's house, riding the bus and reaching home safely, going to a voting booth etc. As Skeeter points out, "These coloured women raise white children, and in 20 years, those children become the boss. We love them and they love us, but they can't even use the toilets in our houses. Don't you find that ironic?" which powerfully brings out the conflict between racism and universal humanity (00:26:16 - 00:26:29). As the movie progresses, various maids' frustrated recounting of events forces the viewers to confront the horrors of the very recent past. The movie ends with one of the black maids being fired for speaking out through Skeeter. Her overhead narration in the Black dialect rings out as she proudly walks out: "God says we need to love our enemies. It hard to do. But it can start by telling the truth. No one had ever asked what it feel like to be me. Once I told the truth about that, I felt free. And I got to thinking about all the people I knew and the things I seen and done. My boy, Treelore, always said we going to have a writer in the family one day. I guess it's gonna be me" (02:17:06 - 02:18:15). This brings out the importance of one's own voice, which is something Skeeter attempted to achieve by using her own privilege as a white woman instead of letting their narrative be twisted by white supremacists like her friend Hillary. However, although noble, the movie's credibility of intention has often been questioned. Firstly, the movie is "disengaged with the public legal framework" that allows the rich white women to abuse their black maids, as seen in how the scenes focus more on domestic racism than the laws supporting it (Rosenberg). Secondly, with mere and rough suggestions of police brutality, the issue of racial violence is heavily downplayed - for a movie discussing a painful subject, the scenes aren't painful enough themselves. As Rosenberg quotes, "One way to deal with the "shitty things" in our past that Louis C.K. refers to is to downplay their existence and persistence". Thirdly, the racial violence is seen through the eyes and voice of the white protagonist. As Roger Ebert puts it, "We don't always go to the movies for searing truth, but more often for reassurance: Yes, racism is vile and cruel, but hey, not all white people are bad" - the movie seems to use the narrative of racism

to suggest a ‘not all whites’ chant via the glorified white-saviour protagonist, and this downplays the systematic racial abuse. This itself exposes an inherent power structure that affects the movie’s intentions of black representation.

Considering the inadvertent effect of entertainment media on one’s perception of ‘self’ and ‘other’, it is vital that any racial representation be executed with thought, caution and sensitivity.

### **LGBT+:**

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and other queer identities’ community i.e. the LGBT+ community has, across time, been under- or mis-represented in entertainment media based on trends and stereotypes. Over the years, there has been more self-awareness amongst the community and a demand for much-needed visibility and realistic non-comic representations in entertainment media. These demands have been made time and time again to normalise the community’s existence, and to break the heteronormative assumptions that diminish their realities. While the experience of having to hide, suppress, or suffer being ‘abnormal’ in a heteronormative set-up may be roughly universal, what is undeniable is that the degree of that set-up itself is subjective. For example, it is common for two men to link arms or little fingers in public in Asian countries. Thus, such very specific social circumstances and underlying implications of those subjects of representation must be considered carefully before lauding an instance for simply featuring a queer character.

Created by Max Mutchnick and David Cohan, NBC’s *Will & Grace* was a phenomenal sitcom that firmly established itself and paved the way for gay representation in daytime television. Based on Mutchnick’s own life as a gay man with a straight female best friend, the sitcom was the first in prime-time USA TV series to star openly gay characters. As stated by the current USA President Joe Biden, the sitcom “probably did more to educate the American public” on LGBT issues “than almost anything anybody has ever done so far” (Johnson). Airing right after the banning of the lesbian-featuring *Ellen* and the passing of the heteronormative Defence of Marriage Act in 1996, *Will & Grace* pioneered the presence of queer characters and demystified homophobic tropes. Employing the relatable sensibility of *Friends*, this show featured many homosexual tropes in a realistic and non-caricature manner, thus owning the tropes sans the heteronormative gaze. Amongst the gay characters, there is the smart, sensible, economically well-off lawyer Will Truman, the flamboyant, dramatic, air-headed, jobless Jack McFarland, and their many love interests. All these men not only embody certain tropes but also go beyond them to come to life as real people with feelings and an existence beyond their

queerness. They are also coupled with their straight female friends - affectionally called 'fag hags' - Grace Adler and Karen Walker. The show is also built very specifically on the friendship between a gay man and straight woman - one that isn't free of their sexualities. Yet the show focuses both on and beyond the characters' sexualities, illuminating how it isn't the sole determinant of one's identity yet shouldn't be ignored. This is seen in how the show focuses on the four characters' humorous experiences with friends, family, work, dating etc. While doing so, the show also normalises queer pop culture, seen in the framed Equality flag in Will's living room, references to Cher as a queer icon etc. There is neither hyper sexuality nor forceful agenda, making the show loved and received all the way till its airing in 2020. This formula made it ground-breaking in its representation of gay men. The absurdity of the stereotypical view of gay men is pointed out in the episode "He Shoots, They Snore" when some morbidly-curious straight men following Will around quote, "I always imagined that since you're all guys and everything and... and there's no one to say 'no', that, uh, you must be, like, doing it constantly, right?" to which Will clarifies, "I probably have sex no more than you guys" (00:08:01 - 00:08:20). In such casual conversations, the sitcom demystifies certain misconceptions about the queer community via dialogues, sarcasm, or depictions, thus normalising queerness for its viewers. While all these achievements cannot be denied, what cannot be overlooked is the issue of diversity within the show. The show primarily features only gay men, and its "go-to way of acknowledging anyone outside the white gay male experience on the LGBTQ spectrum - most especially lesbians and trans people - was to refer to them in passing, often as the butt of a careless joke" (Framke). Thus, the show's scope of queer relatability and representation is reduced. The two main gay men of the show - Will and Jack - are caucasian cis-men of the upper economic and social class. There are few to no gay characters of colour or lower economic or social class. Thus, the experiences shown, while credible, are highly exclusive and not wholly applicable to American and non-American viewers. As observed regarding this exclusivity by Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, the show becomes "more acceptable to a mainstream heterosexual audience at the expense of alienating a large portion of the gay community" (90). While the contribution of *Will & Grace* to queer culture and normalisation must be celebrated, it is vital to remember that the visibility it offers is restricted. This inherent power structure of race and class affecting the queer experience in the show is especially apparent in the 2017 revival that went on till 2020, all the while largely maintaining the brand of gay representation, inherent power structures included.

To be given a more prominent platform as characters in daytime television is a huge step for the queer community, yet there is a long way to go. Some viewers may heavily identify with and thoroughly enjoy such representations, while others sitting right beside them may find it alien and idealistic as their queer experience is taken for granted on screen.

### **Gender:**

The realm of gender has forever been plagued by the oppression of patriarchy that dictates water-tight compartments of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, the rigidity of which isn’t necessarily the tendencies and experience of the average person. Lately, people have questioned whether the conformity to or deviance from these binaries is normal or not, and so they sub-consciously turn to the way it is reflected in entertainment media. Seeing the reinforcement or shattering of gender tropes influences the way people understand behaviour within and outside the patriarchal rules of gender binaries. For this, various waves of feminism have demanded better and more accurate gender representation that normalise showing gender as a fluid experience and expression. Thus, any instance of representation that deviates from the established norm is lauded for doing so. However, what is ignored is that the demands of feminism against patriarchy differ across nations and social groups. This makes it tricky to label any gender representation as ‘accurate’ on a larger scale due to this cultural subjectivity, especially since the meeting of these demands in entertainment media is highly influenced by the dominant white feminism.

Amazon Video’s Indian original web series titled *Four More Shots, Please!* is the first of its kind, featuring an all-female protagonist line-up. Often called the “desi version of *Sex and the City*”, the show focuses on four millennial women in South Bombay as they navigate through their turbulent professional and personal lives together (Keshri). The four women are sexually open, inciting a dialogue within the Indian audience to normalise female sexuality. One of them is also openly bisexual, further rendering the web series bold and refreshing. The show also propagates sisterhood and womanhood in various shades, thus being a progressive watch that represents women not as side characters to men but as individuals with all-rounded and complex lives. Another point of celebration is that in subtle scenes, gender norms are challenged: there is a male ballet instructor, a stay-at-home father, and the women are sexually active. The very real issues of women facing rape threats for being vocal about controversies, facing victim-blaming when sexually harassed, working in a hostile male-dominated workplace, breast-feeding in public being seen as ‘scandalous’ etc. are also discussed. Through hard-hitting dialogues and powerfully illustrated scenes, the show illuminates the problems

women face in the Indian patriarchal society. However, the show is also questionable for many reasons. Firstly, the four female protagonists are in South Bombay, making them an economically elite class. As Shweta Keshri says, *Four More Shots, Please!* is “a woman-centric show that features urbane women. Small-town girls have other concerns, which might not be an issue at all for these city girls. The show caters to the metropolitan crowd and certainly appeals to those dreaming of the big-city life. However, it’s still far from reality for girls who can’t even make their own decisions”. Thus, the show’s representation of women is exclusive and alien to the average Indian viewers that make up a majority of the audience. The next point of critique is the protagonist Anjana, a divorced lawyer and single mother. She is arguably a failed representation of single working mothers in India - one of her conflicts is her ‘mommy’s guilt’, yet her interactions with her daughter to support this claim is rarely shown. In fact, a majority of the series focuses on her drinking at a bar and pursuing her love life rather than her struggle as an ‘overworked single mother’, which is what she labels herself as. This representation fails to evoke empathy and relatability in the viewers. Thirdly, the openly bisexual Umang is both a bold and biphobic move on the show’s part: her bisexuality is established in the pilot episode via sexual promiscuity and encouraging infidelity, which propagate the misconception of bisexuals being sexually careless and hyper-active. Also, the four women’s open sexuality is fully accepted with barely any resistance, making the India of the web series a feminist ideal when the reality is different. Also, the show thus suggests sexual openness and hyper-sexuality as the main, if not only, manner of women being seen as ‘liberal’ in a patriarchal set-up. This is a flawed and misconstrued feminism not only for its erroneous message but also for how inauthentic it is. The brand of feminism and gender-based issues that women in India face are very different from what is shown in the web series, where the four women’s concerns are relatively shallow at certain points. Also, in scenes of old women talking freely about their sex lives, the web series suggests an ideal sense of gender-equality and openness, but comes off more as a fabricated fantasy as the reality is that the older generation comes from an era where talking about sex was taboo. Thus in such depictions, the web series is naïve and grossly mistaken, making its women alien to its target audience. While *Four More Shots, Please!* is a very bold and progressive Indian show that challenges the long-held idea of the demure virginal Indian female, it also paints a very surreal fantasy for liberal and sexually liberated women to exist in, making it a realm of the ‘other’ to Indian viewers. As Ektaa Malik puts it, “the show reeks of desperation and being too wannabe... despite having a female director, female showrunners, writers and even a female DOP, fails to elicit even a sympathetic nod”. All in all, the show is a small and much needed step in the right direction, yet its portrayal

of Indian women is confusing and unrelatable, making its label as ‘good representation’ questionable.

Especially in the past few years, gender representation in entertainment media has been a very important agenda, considering how the public now has a better understanding about gender expressions and experiences outside the water-tight parameters set by patriarchy. However, to normalise this non-conformity and bending of parameters can sometimes border on too idealistic and unrealistic for the instance to resonate with the audience. As such, these instances may fall flat. To be more nuanced and careful in gender depictions is a matter of constant re-evaluation, even keeping the social milieu and culture-specific requirements in mind. Thus, the politics of gender representation becomes a never-ending cycle of its own.

### **Conclusion:**

While celebrating change in portrayals of social groups in entertainment media is natural, to label such instances as ‘good’ or ‘accurate’ is dicey. In fact, the politics of representation is one of a very complex and turbulent nature due to the many layers of inherent power structures that hide behind each instance seen on entertainment media. This exposes the subjective and authoritative reality of the super-imposed labels mentioned before. What is essential to remember is that these singular instances of representation are valid yet minute in the overall rich and individually-stitched tapestry of the identity of a social group. In a way, no matter how much entertainment media may attempt to better represent a social group, it is a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ situation. It is only when we do away with those super-imposed and highly assumptive labels that we will truly understand the fluid and ever-changing nature of the politics of representation, and enjoy entertainment media less with rose-tinted glasses and more with a grounding to reality.

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