

RHYTHMS OF IDENTITY: LGBTQIA⁺ REPRESENTATION IN ASSAMESE MUSIC VIDEO *AADOR*

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Abstract

This study examines the evolving representation of LGBTQIA⁺ individuals in Assamese society, literature, and music. Focusing on Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta's song Aador, this analysis explores the visual and lyrical portrayal of lesbian relationships, bisexuality, and societal attitudes. The research reveals a shift from tragic narratives to empowering 'coming-out' stories, promoting self-acceptance and challenging heteronormative norms. The findings highlight the importance of education and gender sensitization in overcoming homophobia and promoting inclusivity.

Keywords: LGBTQIA⁺, Aador, Assamese literature, music, representation, identity, inclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

Issues like LGBTQIA⁺ were initially untouched in Assamese society but gradually such an environment is starting to change. Although people's mindsets have not changed completely, they have improved a lot compared to the past. People from within the community have come out to express themselves, and to live with their own characteristics. On 9 February 2014, the first Pride or *Gaurav Yatra* was held in Guwahati, Assam by members of the queer community and queer rights activists. It is currently being held continuously. Such efforts have also been seen in Jorhat and Dibrugarh. These are led mainly by queer rights activists like Milin Dutta, Rituparna Neog, Bidhan Barua, Swamim Nasreen and Ratna Bharali Talukdar. Over the past few years, many support groups like 'Xukia' and organizations like 'Xobdo', 'Xomonnoy', Rainbow Home of Seven Sisters, and All Assam Transgender Association (AATA) have mobilized the queer community and spoken out about their rights.

On September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court of India handed down a historic judgment on homosexuality. According to the judgment, a consensual relationship between two adults of the same sex is a constitutional right. Such rights, however, have not solved the problems of the people within the community. A field study of third-gender and gay men in Guwahati, Assam by Dr. Pratiti Burman, along with several others, revealed that the problems faced by such people are four: family rejection, physical and emotional violence, discrimination on the basis of gender, and childhood sexual and rape. (Khandelwal, 2023) All these together are called HOMOPHOBIA. Such problems can only be overcome through proper education and gender sensitization. The insiders and also conscious writers have made various aspects of queers the subject of Assamese literature. The voices of these two groups of writers have different values. Authors like Pranjal Sharma Bashishta, Govind Prasad Sharma, Arup Kumar Nath, Jayanta Saikia, Aruni Kashyap, Gitali Bora, Mausumi Kandali, Manikuntala Bhattacharya, Dr. Akashitara, Rudrani Sharma, Jonmani Das, Panchanan Hazarika, Jintu Gitartha and Mayuri Dekha etc. examines love, sexuality, fear, anxiety, uncertainty and rejection of the queer community through Assamese short stories, poetry and novels. Recently, the issue of queer has also been presented in modern Assamese songs. There are attempts to present such contexts artistically, especially in the visual text of songs.

This study presents an analysis of how the visual texts and lyrics of the song *Aador* by Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta present lesbian relationships, bisexuality, and the attitude of society towards such issues. The processes adopted to analyze are: identify LGBTQIA⁺ characters and their roles, analyze their portrayal, examine the storyline and themes, consider the context, and evaluate the impact. The song *Aador* was released on July 29, 2022, via YouTube. It was written by Swapnali Mahanta and sung by Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta. The video concept, screenplay, and direction of the song are also her own (Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta). In an interview with *E Live Assam*, Mahanta mentioned that the video concept of the song reflects the bisexual identity that she wants to express.

The story presented in *Aador* has two female characters from within the LGBTQIA⁺ community. In this analysis, one is named 'first female character' (main female character), and the other is 'second female character' (secondary female character). The visual text also adds a glimpse of the complications created by the arrival of a heterosexual/third person into a lesbian relationship. In this analysis, the third person is named as the 'male character'. These three characters show that a man enters into a lesbian relationship and the first female character agrees to marry him. The relationship slowly progresses and eventually, the first female character is hinted at accepting the second female character. These three characters express the attitude of the homosexual society towards female homosexuality, bisexuality, and such relationships.

Despite the first female character agreeing to marry the male character, she ends up accepting the second female character who is already in a relationship. There is no indication that the first female character presented throughout the scene agrees with family or societal pressure. Similarly, in another scene, the first female character has a heartfelt conversation with the male character and accepts the gift he gives her. In fact, the presence of gender-identity conflict is noticeable in this female character. In front of the second female character, indicates a positive response to the man's proposal of marriage.

Through the expressions of the character's lips and eyes, it is clear that she is attracted to the male character. For this reason, it can be assumed that the character expresses bisexuality. Subsequently, after having a dream, the first female character approaches the second female character. Through the dream, the character felt that such a relationship would not be accepted by the individual and society. The second female character is busy preparing for the wedding of the first female character but is also worried about the distance. The first female character is also worried about observing the second female character and is ready to forget about the new relationship and go back to the old relationship. The family does not know anything about the relationship between the two female characters. Like a friend, she has helped in every aspect of the wedding. The unnoticed relationship between family and society only becomes clear after the arrival of third parties. This illustrates the complexity between an individual's sexual identity and social demands.

The first female character set out to adopt a bisexual life but has self-discovered midway. While there was no hint of pressure from family and society, the possibility of danger after marrying the male character was weighing on the subconscious mind of the first female character. This is reflected in the dream (the man leaves her in times of trouble) and the scene of the earrings the man gave her falling off the table and separating. Next to the earrings, she has placed a handkerchief embroidered with a red rose for her girlfriend. This whole scene is actually symbolic. The presence of the embroidered handkerchief and the earrings in the same place represents bisexual life. The detached earrings indicate the complications that such a lifestyle can bring. The first female character was in a relationship with the second female character before meeting the male character. For these reasons, it could be argued that the first female character was originally associated with female homosexuality.

The character has to journey through a gender-identity conflict in the context of some social norms. They are about to go through the 'social norms' and get involved in a heterosexual relationship. The fullness of such a relationship would have brought complications. But before that, the character gets acquainted with his true form. This journey of self-discovery is the main tone of the visual presentation of *Aador*. A person's self-identity always seeks expression. People start their journey of identity search even after overcoming various obstacles. Even if you try to bind them on the pretext of 'social rules', the truth will one day be revealed. The lyrics of the song express the nature of the search for identity:

“Duwarrokhiya botahjakok Efoliya kari somai ahe Bonfuliya subash esati”
[The fragrance from the wildflower Runs ring around the watchful wind At the threshold]



The story is presented in the context of Assamese society and culture. The first female character is apprehensive about the bisexual sexual identity she is about to adopt as the wedding is being prepared. This fear is presented through a dream. In a society that recognizes heterosexuality, everyone will turn away from bisexuality. The main male character expresses such character or hypocrisy of heterosexual society. Even though the Indian Constitution recognizes homosexuality, the mindset of people has not changed. This story reflects the mentality of an Assamese society about alternative sexuality with the help of an Assamese middle-class family.

Evaluating the impact shows that the video sends a positive message to the audience. If the first female character married the male, sexual identity complications would subsequently arise, and maintaining a relationship with the second female character would cause a social reaction. Both of these paths of relationship are thorny, but the first female character takes the second path. It is important to maintain one's existence rather than forcefully accepting a heterosexual relationship and leading a bisexual life. Beyond the scene of intercourse in the bedroom, the two female characters expand into the open-air field and such visual representations announce a strong presence of the existence of the self-identified person. It should be noted that Srijani Bhaswa Mahanta has used the style of *Satriya* dance in the kissing scene and through this he has tried to express the beauty associated with sexuality.

The comments of the audience also prove that this visually appealing presentation of *Aador* has sent a positive message to society. In queer literature, writers try to expose the societal pressures, stigma, violence, exclusion, loneliness, and rejection that queer people experience. The scenes of *Aador* do not reveal all aspects of this, but they depict the possibility of exclusion, loneliness, and politics of rejection. The hypocrisy of a heterosexual society is exposed through the scene in which the male character leaves the first female character in times of trouble. Queer people often face politics of exclusion and cannot claim an equal place in mainstream society. Analysis of the scenes of *Aador* initially reveals a tendency to associate the identity of the person associated with bisexuality with sorrow or tragedy. However, this narrative has evolved into a 'coming-out narrative' at a later stage. The main female character has moved on to the process of revealing her identity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the significance of representation in Assamese literature and music in promoting LGBTQIA⁺ visibility and acceptance. *Aador* serves as a powerful example of how art can challenge societal norms and encourage self-discovery. The analysis underscores the need for continued efforts in education and gender sensitization to overcome homophobia and foster an inclusive environment. As Assamese society gradually acknowledges and accepts LGBTQIA⁺ individuals, this research contributes to the growing conversation, advocating for empathy, understanding, and equal rights.

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