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Portrayal of Kinship and Matrimony in Super Deluxe (2019): A Thematic Exploration of Gender Identity

Miss. Rashmi Mishra¹, Dr. Saranya Thaloor²

¹Research Scholar, Somaiya School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Somaiya Vidyavihar University

²Associate Professor, Somaiya School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Somaiya Vidyavihar University

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Abstract

This study looks at how marriage and family are portrayed in the Thiagarajan Kumararaja-directed Tamil movie *Super Deluxe* (2019) when a trans lady lives with the family. The movie chronicles the experience of Shilpa, a trans woman who returns to her husband and young son following gender confirmation, as they navigate love, conflict, and acceptance. This movie was selected because of its widespread availability on major OTT platforms with subtitles, several national and international accolades, and critical and financial success (earning ₹34 crore globally on a ₹14 crore budget). The movie is a great example for examining how marginalized identities are portrayed in Indian cinema since it successfully combines the sensibility of parallel cinema with popular appeal. Two phases of analysis are used in the study. Every scene involving Shilpa, her husband Manickam, and son Rasukutty is first subjected to a content analysis, which includes recording how they address one another, instances of acceptance or rejection, affectional displays, disagreements, stigma, interactions with institutions, and the general tone of the dialogue. A thematic analysis is then conducted to find more general trends, including respectability in the community, the legitimacy of parental responsibilities, household acceptance, and the way the camera presents Shilpa's identity. According to early impressions, the film shifts Shilpa's portrayal from one of curiosity to one of typical family life, with the child's unwavering devotion acting as the pivotal moment. Nonetheless, discrimination still manifests itself in public places and among extended family members. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the conversation of how queer and transgender family life might be portrayed in Indian cinema with social significance, empathy, and subtlety.

Keywords: #Transgenderparenthood #QueerKinship #Indianparallelcinema #representation #familydynamics

1. Introduction

In Indian cinema, where stories of kinship, domesticity, and gender identity mold and reflect the cultural imagination of society, the institution of marriage and family has long been a major theme (Uberoi, 2006; Dwyer, 2014). Cinematic depictions of family life have grown more varied with the onset of globalization and the growth of digital platforms, challenging heteronormative structures and tackling marginalized

identities. Thiagarajan Kumararaja's 2019 film *Super Deluxe* is a groundbreaking work that examines queer kinship and transgender parenthood in the context of a Tamil home.

Shilpa, a trans woman, is the main character of this film, which is organized as an anthology of related stories and centres on her return to her family following gender confirmation surgery. There are many complicated issues involving stigma, shame, love, and acceptance in her relationship with her husband Manickam and young son Rasukutty. This portrayal contradicts traditional Kollywood and Bollywood portrayals, which frequently marginalize or mock queer characters (Gopinath, 2005; Ghosh, 2016). The film becomes a crucial location for researching changing ideas of kinship and gender in post-globalization Indian society by placing Shilpa's story within familial and matrimonial contexts.

This essay examines how *Super Deluxe* depicts marriage and kinship in ways that both question and reinforce social norms. The study examines the ways in which gender identity interacts with intimate relationships, community legitimacy, and parental responsibilities through a thematic exploration. The study adds to discussions about the politics of representation, queer visibility, and how marginalized Indian family lives are portrayed in movies.

2. Literature Review

Stereotyping and marginalization have long plagued the portrayal of queer and transgender identities in Indian cinema. Deeply ingrained cultural concerns about gender variance are reflected in the frequent portrayals of hijras and transgender people as comic relief, villains, or targets of mockery (Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). But over the past 20 years, there has been a slow movement toward more complex and sympathetic representations, especially in independent and regional film.

2.1 Queer Kinship and Indian Family Structures

In India, the family is frequently theorized as a site of social regulation and cultural continuity (Uberoi, 2006). Kinship is linked to respectability, inheritance, and reproduction in patriarchal norms, which underpin the heteronormative nuclear and joint family structures. Scholars like Gopinath (2005), however, contend that queer diasporic and non-normative intimacy practices call for a rethinking of kinship. Queer kinship suggests affective connections that go beyond biological reproduction, upending traditional ideas of ancestry, legitimacy, and belonging.

2.2 Transgender Representation in Cinema

Trans identities have been underrepresented or inaccurately portrayed in international film (Halberstam, 2005). Although they haven't had much of an impact, Indian films like *Tamanna* (1997), *Daayra* (1996), and *Naanu Avanalla...Avalu* (2015) have tried to highlight trans lives. Films like *Super Deluxe* have been able to combine critical analysis with popular appeal, increasing the visibility of transgender narratives as OTT platforms have grown in popularity. Shilpa's character is frequently cited by critics as one of the most compassionate depictions of a transgender person in Indian cinema (Anand, 2019).

2.3 Matrimony and Gender Identity

In India, marriage is a social contract with community approval rather than merely a private agreement (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2008). Questions of legitimacy, respectability, and inheritance come up when queer or transgender identities collide with traditional marriage structures. Research indicates that transgender individuals encounter obstacles in spousal relationships and family acceptance (Hines, 2007; Boyce,

2007). As a result, cinematic depictions function as a cultural platform for the disclosure and negotiation of such conflicts.

2.4 Cinema as Social Text

Regional and Bollywood films serve as cultural texts that both create and reflect social realities (Appadurai, 1996; Dwyer, 2014). Movies like *Super Deluxe* show how cinema can question traditional gender roles while maintaining its appeal to a broad audience. The film is a crucial case study for comprehending how cinema mediates discussions about family, kinship, and marriage because of its hybrid aesthetics, which combine melodrama, dark humour, and realism. *Super Deluxe* challenges the idealized depiction of the Indian family that is frequently promoted in popular cinema by emphasizing broken domesticities, non-traditional marriages, and non-normative gender identities. Rather, it offers a disjointed but profoundly human story that enables viewers to interact with difficult issues of identity, fidelity, and morality.

In this way, movies serve as a discursive platform for negotiating social anxieties and aspirations in addition to being a source of entertainment. *Super Deluxe*'s depiction of eroding familial ties and disputed marriage standards is a prime example of how regional film, like Bollywood, goes beyond cultural representation to actively influence discussions of gender, modernity, and family in an increasingly globalized India.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach to investigate Shilpa's plot in *Super Deluxe* by fusing thematic and content analysis.

3.1 Content Analysis

Scenes involving Shilpa, Manickam, and Rasukutty were closely analysed for verbal and non-verbal cues related to kinship and matrimony. Categories included:

- Terms of address (e.g., how Rasukutty calls Shilpa “Amma”)
- Instances of acceptance and rejection
- Affectional displays (hugs, physical proximity, gestures of care)
- Conflicts (domestic disagreements, stigma, societal shame)
- Institutional interactions (hospital, school, neighbours)
- Dialogue tone (respectful, dismissive, mocking)

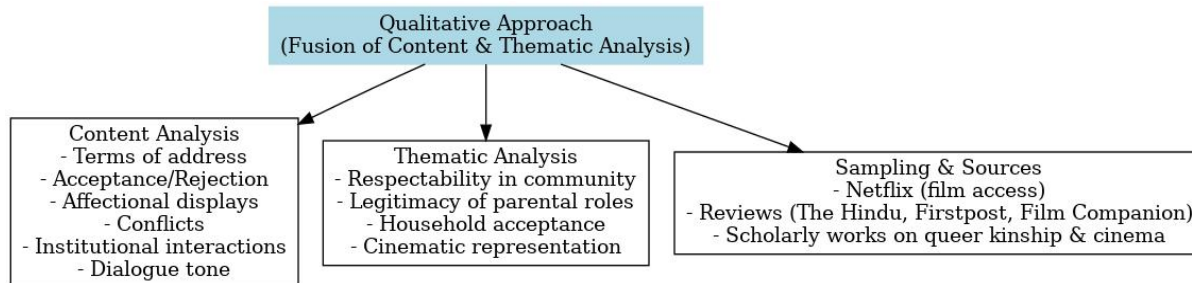
3.2 Thematic Analysis

The second phase involved grouping observations into broader themes, such as:

- **Respectability in the community:** How neighbours and extended family perceive Shilpa's identity.
- **Legitimacy of parental roles:** Negotiations around Shilpa's position as a mother.
- **Household acceptance:** The dynamics of intimacy and reconciliation within the family.
- **Cinematic representation:** How the camera frames Shilpa, whether sympathetically or voyeuristically.

3.3 Sampling and Sources

The film *Super Deluxe* was accessed on Netflix India (with English subtitles), ensuring broad accessibility for both Indian and international viewers. Reviews from *The Hindu*, *Firstpost*, and *Film Companion* were also consulted to triangulate interpretations. Scholarly works on queer kinship, family, and Indian cinema were used to contextualize findings.



(Fig 1 – Methodology)

4. Hypothesis

The study implies that *Super Deluxe* dispels stereotypes by normalizing transgender parenthood through its story and cinematography, empathetically depicting transgender kinship, and demonstrating Rasukutty's unconditional acceptance in the face of social discrimination.

5. Findings and Analysis

An examination of *Super Deluxe* (2019) shows how the movie challenges traditional ideas of marriage and kinship while emphasizing transgender subjectivity via Shilpa's journey. This section shows how individual scenes contribute to a larger reconfiguration of gender, family, and social respectability by combining narrative analysis, thematic framing, and visual analysis.

5.1 Narrative Resistance to Patriarchal Norms

Shilpa's return challenges traditional patriarchal authority, especially in her marriage to Manickam. His uneasiness reflects the fear a heteronormative husband feels when he confronts a partner whose gender identity deviates from conventional marriage norms. In public settings, where Shilpa is the focus of everyone's attention, this resistance is heightened (see Fig. 1)



(Fig. 2. Shilpa is confronted by public gaze. Source: Behindwoods, 2019.)

Shilpa is subjected to scrutiny due to the close framing and harsh yet warm lighting, which highlights how community surveillance serves to uphold patriarchal authority. Neighbourhood areas are transformed into moral arenas where deviation from the heteronormative is policed by *mise-en-scène*.

5.2 Rasukutty's Acceptance as Counter-Narrative

Rasukutty's unwavering devotion to Shilpa serves as a dramatic cinematic device. By insisting on referring to her as "Amma," he defies social ridicule and portrays innocence as a place of acceptance. This is consistent with the idea of queer temporality put forth by Halberstam (2005), according to which affective bonds rather than reproduction give rise to non-normative futures. This bond is graphically conveyed in the private domestic scene where Rasukutty watches Shilpa drape a saree (see Fig. 3)



(Fig. 3. Shilpa draping saree—threshold of kinship. Source: Onlookers Media, 2019.)

The *mise-en-scène*'s mirror, which places kinship as an evolving, affective bond rather than a fixed biological structure, invites introspection and reconciliation.

5.3 Stigma and Public Spaces

Images of Shilpa being made fun of by strangers, neighbours, and police highlight how transphobia endures even in environments where acceptance is extended within the family. Public institutions become stigmatized places, demonstrating how kinship is brittle in the face of outside aggression. Close-ups that humanize Shilpa instead of objectifying her serve as a cinematic counterpoint to this (see Fig. 4).



(Fig. 4. Shilpa's quiet resolve—close-up. Source: Deccan Chronicle, 2019.)

By transforming her into a sympathetic subject, this cinematography challenges Tamil film traditions that have traditionally portrayed trans bodies as tragic or humorous spectacles.

5.4 Cinematic Techniques as Queer Aesthetics

Shilpa is constantly made more relatable by the movie's visual techniques. Warm lighting is used to depict intimacy in domestic spaces, while chaotic framing is used to portray hostility in public interactions. In contrast to previous representations of transgender characters in Indian cinema, *Super Deluxe* prioritizes lived reality over spectacle.

5.5 Matrimony and Respectability Politics

The marriage between Shilpa and Manickam is depicted as tense but not broken. Binary interpretations of acceptance versus rejection are made more difficult by this. In matrimony, respectability, kinship responsibilities, and personal identity are all negotiated. This theme is mirrored in the subplot of Vaembu being confined inside a car (see Fig. 4), as Shilpa's fight against social containment is echoed by her physical confinement.



(Fig. 5. Vaembu’s entrapment in the car. Source: IMDb, 2019.)

The image turns into a metaphor for the limited agency of women (and transgender women), implying how respectability politics function spatially to restrict and dominate.

Table 1. Scene-by-Scene Analysis of Super Deluxe (2019)

Scene / Moment	Key Characters	Narrative Function	Cinematic Strategy	Social Commentary
Shilpa’s return to family (Fig. 2)	Shilpa, Manickam, neighbours	Challenges patriarchal control	Close framing, harsh lighting	Community gaze enforces conformity
Rasukutty calls Shilpa “Amma” (Fig. 3)	Shilpa, Rasukutty	Counter-narrative of acceptance	Mirror shot, soft lighting	Redefines kinship beyond biology
Street ridicule (Fig. 4)	Shilpa, public	Shows persistence of stigma	Close-up humanization	Institutions perpetuate discrimination
Domestic confrontation	Shilpa, Manickam	Marital negotiations of identity	Alternating close-ups	Matrimony as contested legitimacy
Vaembu in car (Fig. 5)	Vaembu	Parallel metaphor for containment	Enclosed framing	Constrains female/trans agency spatially

5.6 Integrated Thematic Insights

By weaving narrative observations with visual readings, several themes emerge:

- Resistance to Patriarchy: Shilpa’s presence unsettles social order (Fig. 2).
- Childhood Acceptance: Rasukutty reimagines kinship through affective ties (Fig. 3).
- Persistent Stigma: Institutions and public spaces curtail familial acceptance (Fig. 4).
- Queer Cinematic Techniques: The lens privileges empathy over spectacle.

- Matrimony as Negotiated Space: Shilpa and Manickam's bond embodies respectability politics (Fig.5).

Table 2. Thematic Insights and Cinematic Representation

Theme	Illustrative Scene(s)	Cinematic Technique	Impact on Representation
Resistance to Patriarchy	Shilpa's return (Fig. 2)	Close framing, neighbourhood gaze	Disrupts patriarchal authority
Childhood Acceptance	Rasukutty with Shilpa (Fig. 3)	Intimate domestic mise-en-scène	Models' alternative kinship futures
Stigma in Public Spaces	Street ridicule, police harassment (Fig. 4)	Close-ups, contrast in lighting	Humanizes vs. stigmatizes trans subject
Queer Aesthetics	Throughout domestic/public contrasts	Warm vs. chaotic framing	Prioritizes empathy over spectacle
Matrimony & Respectability	Shilpa-Manickam marriage, Vaembu subplot (Fig. 5)	Symbolic containment & negotiation	Matrimony as fluid, contested space

Collectively, these results show that *Super Deluxe* does not romanticize away the realities of stigma while framing transgender kinship and marriage in an empathetic manner. Its cinematic language challenges long-standing stereotypes in Indian cinema and normalizes trans parenthood.

5.7 Critical Reception and Cultural Discourse

While the close textual analysis emphasizes Shilpa's familial negotiations, reviews from *The Hindu* and *Film Companion* situate the character within a larger **socio-cultural reception framework**.

- **The Hindu (Srinivasan, 2019)** praised the film for “refusing to caricature its transgender character,” highlighting how Shilpa's narrative is treated with seriousness and dignity.
- **Firstpost (Menon, 2019)** noted that Rasukutty's acceptance served as the “emotional anchor” of the film, drawing critical attention to how innocence destabilizes rigid kinship norms.
- **Film Companion (Rangan, 2019)** emphasized Thiagarajan Kumararaja's “non-judgmental lens,” situating the film as a landmark in Tamil cinema's engagement with marginalized identities.

Table 3 - Critical Reception and Cultural Discourse

Source	Observation	Alignment with Findings	Reference Link
<i>The Hindu</i> (Srinivasan, 2019)	Shilpa portrayed with dignity, not caricature	Supports 5.4 Cinematic Techniques as Queer Aesthetics	https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/super-deluxe-review-believe-the-hype/article26671414.ece?utm_source=chatgpt.com

<i>Firstpost</i> (Menon, 2019)	Rasukutty is the emotional anchor	Reinforces 5.2 Rasukutty's Acceptance	https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/super-deluxe-movie-review-vijay-sethupathi-shines-in-film-powered-by-honest-writing-technical-finesse-6350931.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com
<i>Film Companion</i> (Rangan, 2019)	Lens is non- judgmental, empathetic	Resonates with 5.6 Integrated Thematic Insights	https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/super-deluxe-movie-review-a-unique-ambitious-insanely-detailed-blessedly-amoral-drama-thats-as-epic-as-it-is-intimate?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Integration into Findings:

These reviews validate the **thematic insights** identified earlier, while also revealing how mainstream criticism frames Shilpa's subjectivity as a **turning point in Indian cinematic culture**.

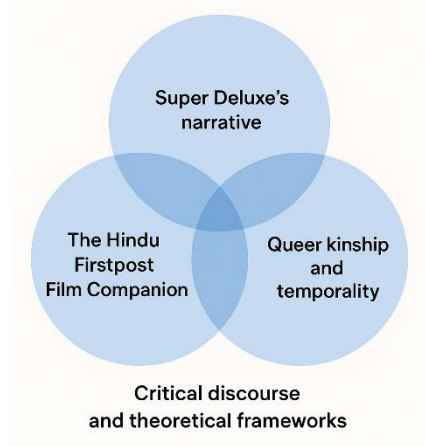
5.8 Scholarly Contextualization: Queer Kinship and Cinema

The academic literature provides a conceptual grounding for interpreting Shilpa's narrative:

- **Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005)** → Explains Rasukutty's non-normative kinship as "queer temporality" (see 5.2).
- **Gopinath's *Impossible Desires* (2005)** → Frames diasporic and non-normative desires as creating alternate forms of family, applicable to Shilpa's re-entry into her household.
- **Rao (2020) on Indian queer cinema** → Positions *Super Deluxe* as a significant intervention that shifts away from ridicule towards empathy-driven representation.

Scholar / Work	Concept	Application in <i>Super Deluxe</i>	Reference Link
Halberstam, J. (2005). <i>In a Queer Time and Place:</i>	Queer temporality —non-normative family structures through affective bonds	Rasukutty’s acceptance as non-reproductive kinship (see 5.2)	NYU Press description
Gopinath, G. (2005). <i>Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures.</i>	Queer diasporic kinship —imagining kinship beyond lineage and nation	Shilpa’s reintegration as emotional, non-biological kinship (see 5.2 & 5.5)	Duke University Press description
Rao, R. (2020). <i>Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality.</i>	Queer postcolonial temporality —how queer existence is shaped by structures of power and legibility in postcolonial contexts	Situates Shilpa’s trans kinship negotiation within the pressures of social visibility, respectability, and postcolonial genealogies (see 5.3, 5.6)	DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780190865511.01.0001

5.9 Triangulating Film Texts and Criticism



(Fig. 6 Triangulation Model.)

This section synthesizes insights from *Super Deluxe*’s narrative with critical reception and academic theory. Reviews from *The Hindu*, *Firstpost*, and *Film Companion* contextualize the cinematic choices, while scholarly works on queer kinship and temporality frame the film within broader cultural debates.

Together, these triangulations ensure that the findings are grounded not only in textual analysis but also in critical discourse and theoretical frameworks.

6. Results

The results of this study highlight the following key insights:

- *Super Deluxe* positions Shilpa not as a marginal character but as a central familial figure, challenging stereotypical portrayals of transgender persons in Indian cinema.
- Kinship roles are redefined beyond biological reproduction, with Rasukutty's insistence on addressing Shilpa as "Amma" serving as a pivotal marker of legitimacy.
- While Shilpa gains partial acceptance within her household, her interactions with institutions (police, medical staff, neighbours) reveal enduring societal biases.
- The cinematography frames Shilpa empathetically, resisting earlier voyeuristic tendencies in cinematic portrayals of transgender bodies.

7. Discussion

These findings are discussed in relation to theoretical frameworks of gender performativity and queer kinship. The movie shows how kinship can be based on care and affect rather than heteronormative reproduction, drawing on Gopinath (2005) and Butler (1990). Halberstam (2005) refers to Rasukutty's acceptance as "queer temporality," which opens alternate futures in which non-normative family structures are accepted.

The movie also shows how easily this acceptance can be questioned by outside social pressures. According to Fuller and Narasimhan (2008), Shilpa's experiences in public demonstrate how respectability politics limit inclusion within larger social frameworks. The conflict between public stigma and private legitimacy draws attention to the twofold challenges transgender people face in balancing social and familial expectations.

Super Deluxe is significant because it shows how Indian parallel cinema can broaden cultural dialogue while still being viewed by general audiences. Its popularity on OTT platforms points to a changing cultural landscape that may allow for the acceptance of alternative kinship narratives.

8. Limitations

There are various limitations to this study:

- It restricts broader generalizations because it is restricted to a single film.
- Although *Super Deluxe* has several overlapping storylines, the main focus is on Shilpa's storyline.
- Secondary reviews, not fieldwork or surveys, provide the data on audience response.
- Transgender audiences lived experiences, which would offer a more thorough empirical foundation, have not been included.

9. Conclusion

According to the study's findings, *Super Deluxe* makes a substantial contribution to the conversation about marriage, kinship, and transgender representation in Indian cinema. The film challenges prevailing heteronormative portrayals and offers an empathetic lens for comprehending queer kinship by presenting Shilpa as a mother figure within a complex family system. The story presents an alternate vision of acceptance based on affective ties, even though systemic discrimination is still visible in society. *Super*

Deluxe represents a significant turn towards more inclusive and multi-layered depictions of marginalized family lives as Indian cinema develops in the wake of globalization and digital expansion.

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