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QUEERING THE NARRATIVE: EMILY'S PATH THROUGH FLUIDITY IN ARUVI

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 06/01/2025 Accepted: 20/01/2025	This paper explores the concept of fluid identity through the character of Emily in the Tamil film <i>Aruvi</i> (2016). Fluid identity refers to the idea that identity is not fixed, but rather, continuously evolves and adapts across contexts, resisting rigid categorisations of gender, sexuality, class, or cultural boundaries. Rooted in postmodern and queer theories, fluid identity challenges the essentialist notions of identity and instead embraces flexibility, multiplicity, and hybridity. In the context of neo-colonialism, fluid identity becomes a form of resistance to the dominance of Western-centric, homogenising forces that seek to impose uniform identity constructs onto diverse, non-Western cultures. Neo-colonialism often reinforces binary and rigid categories, marginalising those who live outside these structures. Emily, a key figure in <i>Aruvi</i>, is a striking portrayal of fluid identity in contemporary Indian cinema. Her character disrupts traditional gender roles, embraces androgyny, and navigates various intersections of class and marginalisation. In Emily, we see an embodiment of the struggle between local identities and global, neo-colonial influences, as she defies categorisation and embraces a self that is continually in flux. This paper argues that Emily's portrayal of both a personal journey of self-acceptance and a broader critique of society's rigid structures reflects how fluid identities confront and resist neo-colonial power dynamics. Through an analysis of Emily's narrative and the film's cinematic techniques, this paper seeks to demonstrate how <i>Aruvi</i> offers a powerful commentary on the fluidity of identity in a world still shaped by colonial legacies.
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In the paper *Fluid Identity and Cultural Sensitivity in Youth*, Fluid identity is defined as an identity that is constantly changing or is constantly evolving. Both cultural identity and cultural experiences affect how individuals perceive their world, their beliefs and values.

According to Nilofer Merchant, identity is fluid. Humans are all multifaceted beings, and their identities are uniquely their own. Various factors, including origins, shape them. Their vertical identity, encompasses our parents, race, gender, age, socioeconomic status, and more. Additionally, identity is influenced by the skills and interests one cultivates through dedicated effort, often reflected in our vocations. However, identity isn't solely defined by one's past or work; it also includes our aspirations and dreams for the future, which I refer to as horizontal identity. This aspect pulls us forward and reflects our potential. As they grow and adapt, identities continue to evolve.

The current violence directed at the transgender community can largely be traced back to British colonisation in India. Before this period, the community was highly valued and respected. Evidence of this can be found in various Hindu texts and writings from the Mughal era. However, with colonisation, the British imposed a Westernized view on Indian culture, outlawing practices that contradicted their societal norms. The implementation of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 1858 marked the beginning of systemic discrimination against the transgender community.

In *Transgender Persons in India: Problems, Policies and Interventions*, K. Visweswara Rao and K Nikita have discussed the problems faced by the transgender community in India. The major problem they face is social exclusion. They face discrimination, unemployment, and lack of educational facilities. They also lack medical facilities like HIV care and hygiene. They were also deprived of many rights and privileges which also included denial of fundamental rights. This paper concluded that the problems faced by the transgender community are very peculiar keeping in view the stigma. The origin of the problems of transgender people mostly lies in the stigma and discrimination they face in family and society which in turn results in exclusion from society.

In the paper *History of Transgender Portrayal in Indian Cinema*, the authors have concluded that the portrayal of transgender characters is given minor roles with no substance and technically their characters don't add value to the plot. But, recently there have been changes in the portrayal of transgender for example in movies like *Kanchana* directed by Raghava Lawrence, the movie talks about the plight of the transgender community giving them more importance.

In the research paper titled *Examining the Portrayal of transgender people in Tamil Movies in Comparison to Reality*, the authors have concluded that transgender people have been shown as objects of pleasure like sex workers or they have been portrayed as someone with bad attitudes mostly given negative roles. These portrayals of transgender in these lenses also have played a major

role in creating the mindsets of the people. Though there are exceptions, there are a lot of them who have excelled in various fields. They hold several prominent roles in government and media.

Cinema, is a mode of communication where powerful stories of unheard voices are being voiced. Though not all voices come out in the open, there are a few which have made society to rethink. One such movie is *Aruvi* (Stream) directed by Arun Prabu. This movie is his directorial debut, it had a good reach all over and it won awards such as the South Indian International Movie Awards (SIIMA), 2 Vijay Awards, 2 Edison Awards, and many other awards.

The movie revolves around Aruvi, played by Aditi Balan. It starts off with Aruvi being interrogated by Shakeel Waquab, played by Mohammad Ali Baig, who thinks that she is part of a terrorist group. They also talk about Aruvi's childhood. She was from a middle-class family who had a simple life. Her life starts to take violent turns when her family accuses her of bringing shame to her family. She gets thrown out of the house. She seeks refuge in her college friend Jessy's house for a few days and later she moves to a hostel where she meets Emily, a transgender woman. They grow to become close friends. To earn they work for a man named Arunmani, a tailor in an NGO. One day she hears that her father needs to have emergency surgery, so she goes to Arulmani crying and requesting money. She takes off and never returns. Every once in a while she goes to tough therapy with a Swami who uses hypnosis to heal stress.

As the story moves, Emily approaches the producer of *Sollathellam Sathyam*, a reality show that showcases people's problems. Aruvi presses her problems to the producer of the show and points out three men who raped her. On the show, while the host, Shoba Parthasarathy played by Lakshmi Gopalasamy, asks her to narrate her story, Aruvi says how the three men took sexual advantage of her. Jessy's father sexually abused her when she was staying there. Arulmani took advantage of her when she asked for a financial favour and the Swami who had hypnotised and raped her.

It is only later that Aruvi discloses her diagnosis of AIDS, which she received two years ago. She met Emily at an NGO, and both women share this condition. Aruvi originally intended to go on the show so the men who wronged her could apologise. However, the show's host, Shobana, turns against Aruvi, accusing her of deliberately infecting the three men, all of whom tested negative for HIV during the show's medical evaluations. Aruvi is appalled by this accusation and asserts that society is fundamentally flawed, highlighting the stereotypes that compel individuals to conform to thrive in a consumer-driven world.

To boost the show's TRP rating, director Balaji withholds the HIV test results from the three men, leading to growing tension. Frustrated, Aruvi pulls out a gun and injures Balaji in the arm. As she calms herself and is about to leave, Arulmani tackles her and hits Emily. This maddens Aruvi

and she starts to hit him with a rebar. She then takes control of the situation and holds the others hostage, engaging them in trivial games. Her main objective is to connect with them and encourage the sharing of feelings. The commotion attracts the attention of the public, prompting the police to surround the premises. During this standoff, Aruvi receives a call from Shakeel, during which she assures him that the hostages are safe. As the game unfolds, the hostages begin to exhibit signs of Stockholm syndrome, becoming increasingly friendly toward Aruvi. She even forgives the three men who raped her.

Aruvi suffers a nosebleed by the time she surrenders to the police. Since she and Emily are AIDS patients, they cannot be arrested and instead must be isolated in a camp. Aruvi's condition deteriorates. One night, she disappears from the camp and ventures into a nearby village alone. A few days later, all of Aruvi's friends—the hostages—receive a video from her on Facebook. In the video, she expresses her feelings of loneliness and how much she misses them. Upon seeing the video, Peter gathers everyone together and leads them to find Aruvi. He gifts her a card confessing his love. Touched by his gesture, Aruvi reciprocates his feelings. To lift her spirits, everyone plays a bottle game and enjoys themselves, determined to make Aruvi's remaining days as memorable and joyful as possible. The film concludes with Peter capturing a photo of Aruvi smiling.

The character Emily was expertly portrayed by a Trans woman Anjali Varadhan, showcasing the depth and complexity of trans women's experiences. This film presents the character with remarkable sensitivity and authenticity. The movie shows the beautiful friendship between Emily and Aruvi. Their friendship blooms when Aruvi comes to live with Emily in the NGO camp after learning that she was diagnosed with AIDS. From that day on they relied on each other. Though Emily is transgender, she has to face her own set of hardships and discrimination. In a scene, she says that the men on the road won't stare at girls as they stare at us (Trans women) she asks Aruvi are they that beautiful? Emily is represented as a bubbly character, a person who takes everything in a positive sense. She is not very much bothered by the negative comments thrown at her.

In the movie, a scene where the host of the show *Sollvathellam Sathyam*, insults Emily by saying look at your face...her reply is that her face is way better. It is also shown that even Emily is an Aids patient. This makes her doubly marginalised. In the movie, when the host tried talking about how supportive the transgender community are towards people, the director Balaji, stopped the host from talking about them. This shows how society has a hatred towards the community as a whole.

It was Emily in the first place to go to the production house and talk to the assistant director Peter, about the problem that Aruvi faced. As usual, people tend to make up their minds even before listening to the complete story. Peter and the office boy concluded that it was Emily who was sexually assaulted. And they were constantly pondering on that and the office boy was stuck up on

saying “How could someone do ‘that’. The point to note is the use of the word ‘that’ as if she were a mere object and not a human. Addressing the Trans community with words that are usually used for objects has become common, it is more like society is dehumanising them, and seeing them as mere objects.

In a society where people see transgenders as a threat, movies like this give out another dimension to look at these Trans people with a more humanistic nature. Emily, in the movie *Aruvi*, plays the central role of a caretaker for a woman who was thrown out of her house. Emily, herself has to lead a difficult life, face the everyday insults thrown at her, not being able to get employment anywhere being a transgender and an HIV patient, even amidst her difficult life, she takes in Aruvi and helps her. Emily always tries to find light even in the darkest days for Aruvi. She is very fluid, as throughout the movie, she is always ready to help Aruvi out, whatever it be.

In Tamil cinema, the portrayal of transgender is mostly in a negative role or a funny role, not many directors have given an important role that affects the people. There are a few movies like *Kanchana*, *Super Deluxe* and others that have shown the life and struggles of transgenders in society. Emily's role in the movie has had a further reach with the public as it was played by an actual transgender, whereas in other movies a male actor had to play the role. This also had its controversies of being paid less and not doing justice to the actor but that never stopped the movie from making its way into people's hearts.

More such movies, where they portray transgenders as humans, a person who can help out anyone and everyone giving them positive roles will help in shaping the minds of the public, as they are mostly influenced by movies. This will also help in generalising ideas of LGBTQ. People will start viewing queer people as humans rather than threats or consider them as outcasts of the society. It will also help in making society a better place for the upcoming generations where they will not have to face discrimination based on their sexual identity.

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