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## Queer Politics in Cinema: The Evolving Paradigms of Representation of Queer in Malayalam Movies.

### Abstract

The question of silence regarding sexuality becomes highly problematic in India, a nation well renowned for its rich culture and tradition. Although the ancient *Kama Suthra* overtly depicts sexual acts including homosexuality, prostitution and sadomasochism, Indian culture typically treats sexual subjects as taboo. Often neglected by the heteronormative-phallogocentric society, the queer community in India remains 'underprivileged' even in the 21st century. The LGBT categories are more visible in the socio-political scenario of Kerala today, than in the earlier times. One of the best medium that reflects this transformation is cinema. The misrepresentation of the queer, especially the transgender, serves as a prime factor that leads to the abjection of the queer from the mainstream society which is highly patriarchal. Though Malayalam cinema has always been heteronormative, over the years, there is a considerable evolution in the treatment of the concept of sexuality. This change has resulted in a greater awareness and acceptance of alternative sexualities among the audiences.

Key Words: Cinema, Gender, Patriarchy, Representation, Sexuality, Queer

## Introduction:

According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, queer as an adjective means “deviating from the expected or normal”, “odd or unconventional”, “of a questionable nature or character; suspicious”, “fake”(slang), “feeling slightly ill”, “homosexual”(offensive slang) and “of or relating to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, or transgendered people.” Queer was routinely applied to lesbians and gay men as a term of abuse, now intimates possibilities so complex and ratified that entire volumes are devoted to spelling them out. The term ‘queer theory’ was coined in 1990 by the literary scholar Teresa de Laurentis at a conference in California and brought to academic literature in 1991 in her introduction to *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, titled *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities*” (Hark 286) Queer theory borrows a number of ideas from the established poststructuralist theory. It includes Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic models of decentred, unstable identity, deconstruction of binary conceptual and linguistic structures, of Jacques Derrida and, Foucault’s model of discourse, knowledge and power. Contemporary queer theory is also largely reliant on “resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” as Ann Marie Jagose states.

“Homosexuality in a word becomes the excluded; it stands in for, paradoxically, that which stands without” (Fuss, *Theorizing* 391) “They are being threatened with erasure and obliteration from homophobic quarters.” (Butler 170) According to Promod K.Nayar, “categories such as gay/lesbians are evaluated as pathologically evil, deranged, ‘abnormal’, strictly within a system of meaning-generation.” In Foucault’s words, “homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul.” An emphasis on heterosexuality expands traditional sociological approaches to sexuality. Mary McIntosh views homosexuality as a “social role”. She contends that the shift from conceptualizing

homosexuality as a medical condition to viewing it as a social role is crucial, and that it will enable investigation of “the specific content of the homosexual role...the organisation and function of the homosexual groups.

Family and nation has close linkages in the critique of gender and sexuality. The major contemporary nationalist discourses position India as “Hindu, patriarchal, middle class, and free of homosexuals” (Gopinath, 265) Non-heteronormative discourses are thus viewed as illegal and unrepresentable. Homosexuals in our cultural context are often seen as impure. As Gayathri Gopinath views it, it can be seen both as a “threat to national integrity and as perpetually outside the boundaries of nation, home and family”(Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora 263) Transgender community has existed in Kerala for a long time, but they have not been considered as part of mainstream national identity, as they are the ‘other’. Over the last few years, the visibility of transgenders is more visible unlike other periods and their presence and working interests have widened in the social setting of Kerala recently. Cinema is a very powerful medium which reflects this change.

The mainstream Malayalam cinema, owing to its highly patriarchal discourse, has not experimented much on the central aspect of human emotion, regarding sexuality. Entertained by the passion and longing between opposite sexes, the concept of heteronormativity reigns over the average Malayali audience who fail to view the movies that talk about homosexual flicks as if they are all hard porn. Hence the representation of non-normative sexualities seem limited in Malayalam popular cinema. There were some attempts from the part of the film makers to show alternative sexual experiences on screen, but the phallogocentric society has never approached it from a serious point of view. Over the years, movies have released with various themes, having LGBT undercurrents but filmmakers more concerned about catering to these public rigid notions and delusions than to make the society aware of the life experiences of the transgender community in Kerala.

Several research works have been steered nationally and internationally in the broad area of queer studies. In the present decade, quite a few studies were conducted regarding the representation of the queer in the Kerala society. T. Muraleedharan's essay, "*Crisis in Desire: A Queer Reading of Cinema and Desire in Kerala.*" (2005), provides a fascinating analysis of the shifting representations of homoeroticism in Malayalam cinema. T. Muraleedharan's another noticeable essay *Women's Friendships in Malayalam Cinema*, published in the edited volume titled *Women in Malayalam cinema: Naturalising gender Hierarchies* (2010), deliberates on the concept of women desiring women by discussing the romantic friendships and lesbian bonds projected in Malayalam Movies. *Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema*, published in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (2002) is yet another essay on the queer bonds in Malayalam cinema by T. Muraleedharan. Gayatri Gopinath, in her book *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (2018), she writes about the queer politics by imagining Kerala from the diaspora. The book explores the contours of a queer regional imaginary that mobilizes the concept of the region in its substantial sense.

Over the years, there has been a paradigm shift or rather an evolution in the depiction of the alternative sexualities, especially the transgenders, in the mainstream Malayalam popular cinema. There has been a scintillating transformation in the projection of the said image on the silver screen, as far as the Malayalam film industry is concerned. Earlier a taboo, an object of satire and ridicule, the sexual minorities are treated with more dignity. This is evident in the comparatively greater screen space they share, that too, to the extent of being the protagonist or one of the protagonists of the movie. This paper intends to analyse the said representation in select Malayalam movies.

## Discussion:

Stuart Hall's representation theory states that the media, in its multifaceted forms, appropriates certain specific stereotypes thereby reducing people or characters down to oversimplified clichés. These stereotypes often result from the inequality of power as the dominant hegemonic groups in the society takes control of the less powerful. Heterosexual men seen to have more power and hence the sexual minorities are often stereotyped in a very negative way by the media. The case with Malayalam cinema, in particular, has not much digression.

M. Mohan's *Randu Pen kuttikal* (1978), inspired from V.T. Nanadakumar's novel *Randu Pen kuttikal*, was Malayalam cinema's first noticeable encounter with lesbian relationships. The movie rendered the profound and fervent affection between two young women, in a normalised way. Padmarajan's *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (1986) was instrumental in exploring the subject of sismance that chronicles the homosocial female bonding of two girls who elope from their boarding school. Sally (Shari) exhibits immense care, affection and possessiveness towards her friend Nirmala (Karthika). Her cropped hair, her disgust with Harisankar's (Mohanlal) bonding with her close friend, all subject the audience to interpret the movie from a queer perspective. Like most queer people they also face neglect from their family at a young age and they keep moving to another place once their identity is revealed. Yet another film that showed traces of lesbian relationship is Ligy J. Pullappally's *Sanchaaram* (2004) that deals with the rapport between childhood friends, Kiran, a Hindu and Delilah, a Catholic, which blossoms into a delicate love affair, despite social taboos against homosexuality.

Kannan Thamarakulam's comedy thriller movie *Achayans*(2017) is yet another movie that portrays sismance as a subplot. Reetha (Amala Paul) is so insanely in love with her childhood best friend Prayaga (Anu Sithara) to the extent of risking her own life. The

complicated relationship of the two friends, Reetha's possessiveness over Prayaga that climaxes in latter accidentally killing the former, can be subjected to queer examination as well. Written and directed by Kamal Aami (2018) based on the life of the renowned writer Madhavikutty who has always been a gay icon but the makers fails to portray the homosexual sentiments quite effectively on screen. It is often criticized as a pretentious biopic as the makers try "to validate the quest of a woman who gave hoots to moral codes, celebrated body and wore the wounds of love like a jewel".(Times of India)

The Lal Jose movie *Chanthupottu* (2005) received popular attention with the melodramatically feminine Radhakrishnan (Dileep) who was collectively ridiculed by society. The audience failed to realize that Radha was neither gay nor a trans person, but just a heterosexual man with feminine mannerisms. The movie was so misunderstood Chanthupottu became a farcical title for gay men. In most of the mainstream Malayalam cinema "the treatment of homosexuality is made in a hilarious way and the real gay character in the movie becomes the object of mockery"(Georgy). Gay characters are often used for comic relief, as sidekicks or in rare cases, as villains, They have been shown as debauched characters, saying salacious dialogues and the portrayal often takes the form of 'soft porn'. In Shafi's *Two Countries* (2015), this typecast gets repeated with Riyaz Khan's character eagerly waiting for men to touch and wink. His encounter with Ullas (Dileep) is treated in a ludicrous manner. It was in Rosshan Andrews's *Mumbai Police* (2013) that for the first time, in a mainstream cinema, a leading actor had opted to do such a role that is socially challenging. Prithviraj broke the set stereotypes through his effective portrayal of ACP Anthony Mosses, a homosexual who is very much masculine. There too the aspect of sexuality loses its importance post-accident. M.B.Padmakumar's *My Life Partner* (2014) that narrated the story about two gay men ,Kiran (Sudev Nair) and Richard(Ameer Niyas), who decide to live together was indeed a bold and explicit movie portraying homosexuality in Kerala.

The misinterpretation of transgenders in media is one of the major problems that the community face today, and it actually force the mainstream society to maintain gap with the transgender community. Sheethal Shyam, a popular LGBTQ activist and transgender in Kerala, says in her blog article titled *The many holes in the depiction of Transgender persons in Malayalam Cinema* that “a trans person is always a promiscuous, obnoxiously dressed, loud character with exaggerated feminine body language and gestures. They are either made to beg or solicit sex for a living.” In Lohitadas’s *Sootradharan* (2001) a group of hijra community is presented and their ways of earning money being begging and sex work. Transgenders are often projected as minor characters by many filmmakers. In Nithin Renji Panicker’s Mamooty starrer *Kasaba* (2016) besides all the sexy comments and dialogues, appears a transgender character only for one scene in order to be the sole intension of getting teased by the police officer character. In Abrid Shine’s *Action Hero Biju* (2016) a transgender character has been projected with vulgarity. There is a scene which shows a gay man who is questioned by (Biju) Nivin Pauly and he immediately gropes him.

There released a few movies, post 2010, that presented the transgender characters almost in alliance with the reality but were less popular among the audiences. Santhosh Souparnika’s *Ardhanaari* (2012), first Mollywood movie to deal with the issues of transgender, deals with the life of Vinayan, a transgender which actor Jayan’s finest performance The movie depicts the hijra community in an archaic manner hence the movie is far removed from reality. Trans is a gender identity whereas hijras are a cultural identity. All transgenders are thus not hijras. Though the movie didn’t work well at the box office, it did certainly impart information regarding the life of the transgenders in the Kerala society. Viju Varma’s *Odum Raja Adum Rani* depicts the story of a transgender named Thampuru (Manikantan) and his affection towards a man named Venkidi (Tini Tom). Even though the movie does not go beyond the usual discussions, it depicts the problems that a transgender face in the Kerala society.

A significant shift in the treatment of alternative sexualities on screen has been possible through Renjith Sankar's movie, *Njan Marykutty* (2018) that showcased, for the first time in a mainstream Indian cinema, a transperson in a much positive light. Moreover, it was indeed the first time for a mainstream actor like Jayasoorya to experiment with such a challenging character which later fetched him the Kerala State Film Award for the best actor in a lead role. The first Malayalam movie to treat a transperson as protagonist with dignity and respect, *Njan Marykutty* is a slice of a life film that chronicles the life experiences of a woman, trapped in man's body, who constantly faces insults and humiliation. Mathukutty, a man with feminine sensibilities undergoes gender reassignment surgery to begin the physical transformation to Merikutty, a woman. The inner trauma of a transperson is showcased through multifaceted trials and tribulations including the issue of washroom, the violation of rights, physical violence and abuse. Despite being torn by internal conflicts she is determined enough to rise above the gender stereotyping, harassment and humiliations. She asserts herself as a "humanist" and not "feminist". She refuses to give up. She not only chases her dream to be a police officer but also faces the very many obstacles with confidence and fortitude. She constantly fights back against the social injustices with the strong belief that "we can always fight till we actually loose". This thought provoking, emotional movie, that transcends gender divide and the patriarchal stereotypical mentality, has the potential to change the attitude of the people and inspire those who are victim to the system and society that holds as unfair opinion about transsexuals.

#### Conclusion:

The Kerala society has not yet been facilitated to have a good understanding and awareness of alternative sexualities. One of the most poignant reason that prevents any such progressive attitude being the misrepresentation of non-heteronormative sexualities in the

mainstream Malayalam movies. Generally the flicks follow a set pattern in the depiction of transgender characters who are mostly presented as errors thus generating an adverse effect on the community. The present day filmmakers, who are mostly homophobic, try to present transgender lives without proper research in the field and are often clueless about what transgender person is. This attitude automatically makes the presentation skewed and insensitive. The only way forward for a free society and also to reduce the orders of magnitude of hate and fear towards the homosexual community is via social positive representations of the same through the mass media, especially cinema. Over the years there is a considerable progress in the representation of the sexual minorities in Malayalam cinema. Mainstream Malayalam movies like *Njan Marykutty*, that has fetched much recognition, is a poignant example for the same. Moreover Malayalam cinema has also welcomed Anjili Ameer, the very first transperson woman to act in Indian cinema, without much prejudice.

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