

On the Margins of Heterosexuality!

Representation of Queerness in Malayalam Cinema

Dr Sony Jalarajan Raj, MacEwan University, Canada

Dr. Rohini Sreekumar, Monash University, Australia

Dr Swapna Gopinath, SN College, Chempazhanthi, University of Kerala

Abstract

The conservative social milieu and the official censorship rules prevents any open or transparent form of creative discourses on the realities of queer population in Kerala, a State having the highest literacy rate in India. This article is an attempt to chronologically map the repressed demography of queer within the history of Malayalam cinema. Right from the early days, there were only meagre attempts in the Malayalam cinema to represent, portray and communicate the LGBTQ population that silently exist within the literate Kerala society. This article argues that the Malayalam cinema has a long traditional and discursive practice of normalising heterosexual practices through cinematic imageries. The article illustrates that Malayalam cinema carefully places the queer subtext in the margins of heterosexuality in line with the conservative social order and norms in the State.

Key words

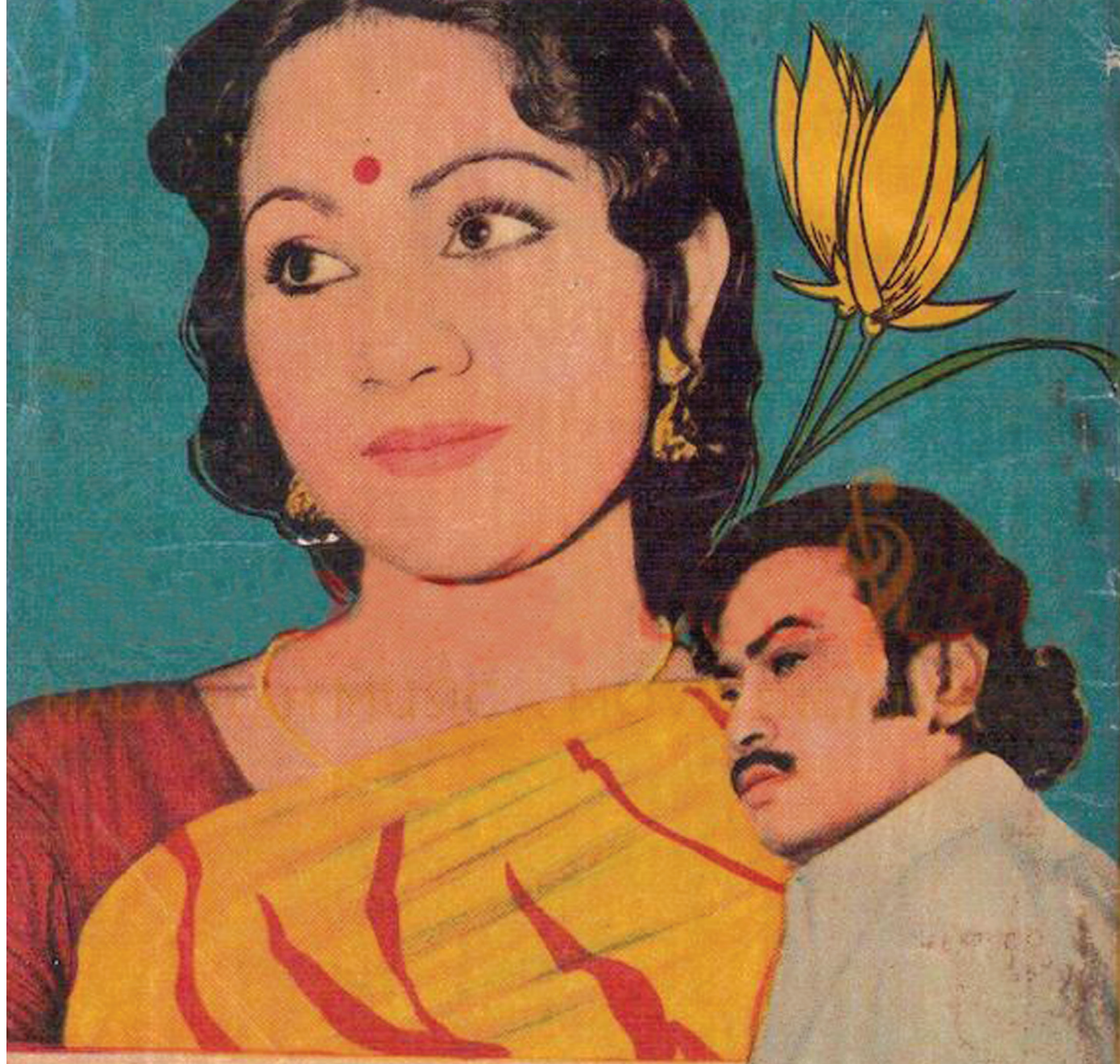
Queer, Malayalam cinema, representation, Keralite, reception, heterosexuality, Othering, subtexts,

Introduction

In pre-vedic times, India was one of the civilizations that addressed the questions

regarding morality in a liberal and accommodative ways. As society solidified its social structures within a distinctly patriarchal ideology, sexuality was also taken into its scrutiny. Strict rules of moral and social propriety were designated and texts like Manusmriti codified them. By according sanctity to these social norms, a strict enforcement of the same was assured. It was colonial India that reiterated and consolidated these restrictive and oppressive norms with the aid of Indian social reformers enchanted by the Victorian sense of morality and European modernity. Sexual behavior other than heterosexuality got stamped as deviant and perverse that demanded ostracism.

Ancient India like other pre-modern civilizations had a considerably tolerant approach to homosexuality and transgender communities. Their normative discourses provided spaces, often accommodating them through religious practices and myths, in the social structures. In India, this happened in various forms, through several myths and stories. As Dasgupta mentions “one of the dominant tropes of same sex love in ancient India is through friendship, often leading to a life of celibacy or the forming of some very intimate relationships” (652). Mahabharata holds aloft the loyal and



ഗണേഷ് കലാമന്ദിർ അവതരിപ്പിക്കുന്ന
വി.ടി.നാടകമാനിന്റെ

രണ്ടു പെൺകുട്ടികൾ

ഗാനങ്ങൾ: ബിജുതിരുമല • സംഗീതം: M.S. വിശ്വനാഥൻ (കുളർ)
നិർമ്മാണം: N.C. മേനോൻ, Y.V. ഗോപാലകൃഷ്ണൻ • സംവിധാനം: മോഹൻ.

സെൻട്രൽ പിക്ചേഴ്സ് റിലീസ്



Sari and Karthika with Director Padmarajan on the sets of *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla*

deeply intense friendship between Krishna and Arjuna. Dasgupta also considers rebirth as another trope which is used to justify same sex love in ancient India. According to Hindu scriptures, in order to cleanse the karmas that the past life has done, one has to take rebirth in a favourable and good family, which is not possible in the case of same-sex marriage. Vedas considers and validates marriage only between opposite sex (Jayaraj n.d-web). Another interesting concept was the depiction of queerness within the trope of divinity. Divine beings were depicted as fluid in gender identities and rise above such categorizations which permits heterosexual as well as homosexual liaisons. 'Ardhanareeshwara' as the halves of Siva and Shakti, Mahavishnu as Mohini and the birth of Lord Ayyappa as the son of Lord Siva and Mahavishnu (as Mohini) can be mentioned in this context.

Kerala, having the highest literacy rate and Education Development Index, is one of those States in India that has atleast recently embarked on an active inclusion of LGBTQ community into mainstream social life. However, right from the early days, there were only meagre attempts in the Malayalam cinema to represent, portray and communicate the LGBTQ population that silently exist within the literate Kerala society. Kerala with its magnificent performance in socio-economic indices and its high literacy rates, has a complex dichotomy when it comes to social behaviour. The radically progressive stance of the average middle class community is carefully swept away by puritanical pseudo-morality when it comes to sexuality. This article is an attempt to chronologically map the 'repressed' demography of queer within the history of Malayalam cinema. This

article argues that the Malayalam cinema has a discursive practice of favouring heterosexual practises by taking an unapologetic stance towards anything deviant. The films analysed here clearly illustrates that Malayalam cinema carefully places the queer subtext as an undertone to normalise and validate heterosexual order and norms.

Contextualizing Queer Presence in India

As we trace the history of the nation, we see social structures beginning to solidify and heteronormative traditions rising to its hegemonic position with lesser tolerance towards deviation. One such instance was the Bhakti movement in which “by making the deity a lover, new forms of intimacy beyond the confines of marriage and family were discovered”. (Dasgupta: 654)). Queer identities underwent the process of marginalization under the imperialist rule with the puritanical moral ideals imposed upon the natives by the colonizers. Interestingly, nationalist agenda preferred to emulate the moralistic patterns of the rulers as part of embracing modernity. As Bose and Bhattacharya point out, “questions of identity are complex to begin with, and they become even more so when one has to relate questions of sexual identities or preferences with questions of national specificity” (2007 x).

The history of the hijra in India is intertwined with religion, general cultural recognition and acceptance of the hijra's existence within society (Patel 836). Hijras are one among the many transgender communities in India. Though Indian mythology bestows them with special powers to bring luck and fertility which supposedly opens up provisions for superior space in Indian culture, hijras face severe harassment and discrimination from every

direction. (Harvey, 2008). Hijras trace their origin to several myths and Puranas including the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Narrain provides an example from Ramayana to elucidate the role of hijras in society:

Rama, while leaving for the forest upon being banished from the kingdom for 14 years, turns around to his followers and asks all the ‘men and women’ to return to the city. Among his followers the hijras alone do not feel bound by this direction and decide to stay with him. Impressed with their devotion, Rama sanctions them the power to confer blessings on people on auspicious occasions like childbirth and marriage, and also at inaugural functions. This set the stage for the custom of badhai in which



hijras sing, dance and confer blessings (n.d, web)

However, alternate sexualities struggle to maintain their identity in India even in this age of globalized communities. This intolerance remains due to constitutional laws that came into effect during the British regime. In India, legal powers are used to threaten hijra community using Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalises carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal even if it is voluntary. This hints that the existence of hijras is always perceived through the lens of carnal pleasure, and hence here sexuality is least about sexual orientation and more on sexual pleasure, thus making this entire lot of marginalised communities vulnerable to various sorts of harassments. Moreover, this not only made their daily existence difficult but resorted them to find alternative ways of living as opposed to a mainstream life. This often leave them as a butt of ridicule and sarcasm.

This dilemmatic, undefined and baffled identity rarely gets mentioned in the visual arts, and when they do get space, this bewilderment is often seen in the characterisation or in the significance of such characters when considering the overall plot of the film.

Lesbians on screen - Early queer attempt in Malayalam cinema

The earliest depiction of homosexuality occurred in a 1978 movie directed by Mohan. The film *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1978) deals with two high school girls Kokila and Girija, a dancer with the former emerging as a possessive partner. Kokila bestows Girija with gifts in an attempt to express her desire for her. However, Girija is fond of a young photographer with whom she had a brief physical relationship. An overtly jealous Kokila tries to spread rumours about Girija to make men stay away from her. However at the end, the two girls compromise and decide to conform to





Sancharam

the dominant heterosexual preferential pattern of social life. Girija assures Kokila that what they felt was just a teenage fantasy and that Kokila need to live like any other women. This film was the first attempt in Malayalam film industry to portray the concept of homosexuality even if it was a frivolous way of identifying the same. As far as the Indian film industry is concerned, this attempt was a milestone in the Indian film history, as the first ever queer-themed film in Bollywood, the flagship industry of India, hit the screen only on 1996 through *Fire*, by Deepa Mehta.

The next noteworthy attempt was by the filmmaker Padmarajan in the film *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (Migratory birds never cries, 1986) that negotiates the complex question of women and gender identity. Sally and Nimmy run away rebelliously from school. They are portrayed as deviant outcasts with homosexual

leanings. Sally the dominant one is possessive while Nimmy is the submissive one. Padmarajan fails to surrender the archaic tropes of gender identity and creates Sally as the short haired, jeans clad, dominant girl with distinct male behaviour pattern. Nimmy is more feminine wearing feminine attires, retains her long hair, is submissive and weak-willed and later develops an emotional attachment to a male. While gender roles are constructed by the society with male as provider and female as nurturer, film makers like Padmarajan use these stereotypical roles even in their portrayal of homosexual relationships. He also dropped the theme of homosexuality at a tragic and bitter denouement where the two succeed at destroying themselves.

Thadani opines on the question of 'lesbian invisibility' (6) thus:

...this technique of 'othering' functions as a form of exiling, rendering invisible and



excommunicating anything which may be seen as representative of homosexual and homoerotic traditions...The ideology of heterosexuality is not merely limited to a sexual relationship between opposite genders, but is a very complex signifying system...The unquestioning of this ideological gaze renders invisible any articulations based on a plural gender self wherein both differences and sameness may coexist, providing myriad forms of same sex/gender identifications (6-7).

This pervasiveness of the heteronormative practices and the consequent othering of other identities prevents a sympathetic response to homosexuality from the world of cultural narratives. Very few films address this injustice and an offbeat film released in 2004, *Sancharam* (Journey) directed by Lijy J Pullappally is probably the only film that attempts to approach the theme of lesbian relationships with compassion. The film uses the trope of “closeting and outing” as its core theme (Vanitha 184). The film though not a mass entertainer takes a progressive stance and daringly depicts the relationship between two girls Delilah and Kiran in all its aspects. They are physically

and emotionally attracted to one another and the treatment is not exaggerated to dramatic excesses. When their gender orination was revealed, Delilah’s parents arranged to get her married off to a guy as a solution to this ‘disease’. This takes Kiran to the brink of suicide. The concluding scene shows an apprehensive Delilah, in her wedding gown, running out of the Church screaming for Kiran, while Kiran holding herself back from the plan of jumping off from a cliff. Such an open-end leaves the audience to decide the future of the characters. Shakunthala Devi, the Mathematical wizard from India wrote the work *The World of Homosexuals* as early as in 1976. She interviewed several homosexuals and same-sex couples around the world, including India. She advocated a progressive approach when she wrote: “On this level nothing less than full and complete acceptance will serve – not tolerance and not sympathy” (114). This film adopts a stance similar to the one advocated by Shakuntala Devi. It passes no judgments or compromises, rather permits the journey of the two women into terrains, probably hostile and difficult and leaves them there. Social apathy to this situation is revealed in



My Life Partner

Kiran's mother's statement when she says they should be given medical treatment. Homosexuality thus becomes a pathological ailment that demands a medical intervention. A more casual treatment is accorded to the theme of homosexuality in *Papilio Buddha* (2013), a film that explored the subject of dalit's subalternity in India and created much furor. Lesbian and gay relations are handled courageously without concerning much about its public reception of the subject and its treatment. Sexual identities and experiences are welcomed and treated realistically and the diasporic identity of the film maker ought to be mentioned in this context.

But apart from these lone attempts, the

scenario seems uniform, with a desperate desire to standardize sexual preferences of every community. Though a realization of the complexity of gender identities and the wide array of sexualities have translated themselves into films that tentatively address these issues, only a few films have been brazen enough to embrace the people who occupy the third space regarding gender. A notable film released in 2015, *Rani Padmini*, has a striking subtext of queerness. It belongs to the genre of road movies and this genre permits critiquing and subversing of dominant social conventions. Quest as a motif functions well within this genre, and offers the perfect medium to depict the journey of self discovery for the two

Unlike other Malayalam films with gay themes or characters, *Mumbai Police* (2013) subverts the portrayal of gayness as less than masculine. But the constant fear of discovery and the resulting emotions of insecurity results in aggression. The reflection of social prejudices prevalent in Indian society weakens the gay theme in the narrative since the film seems to bind one's sexual preferences to their moral and psychological well being.



protagonists in the film. The film maker places one female couple and three male couples on their route to the Himalayas. While the one is on a quest for identity, the other is a refugee, fleeing from her anger and financial crisis. The queer subtext emerges as the buddies embark upon their journey and move towards greater intimacy through shared moments of adventure. Slices of their past life pull them together. Film maker ensures their physical distance from one another while they share a tent but also allows the audience to experience their physical intimacy through a casual embrace. Later in scenes where Padmini meets her husband Giri, camera captures in a single frame all three of them, heightening the tension through the presence of Rani. Though a bold attempt, the stereotypical dénouement, with Padmini back with her husband and a child, draws the film back into the heteronormative tradition. Rani's initiation into the world of modeling safely places her back in a traditionally feminine world and the picture of her alluring eyes in a magazine reinforces the return to the patriotically defined role. The queer subtext in the film is carefully placed in the margins and is quelled at the end where heterosexuality in the guise of marital bliss

survives and triumphs. Any venturing into the world of homosexual desires is considered as deviant social behavior and the journey of the two women permits a brief detour only to return to the socially permissible familial structures.

Daring to portray, fearing to explore - Gay characters in Malayalam cinema

As Doty (1993) says “cultural texts offer the potential for queer readings that focus on connotative rather than denotative meaning, that is, to find credible readings hidden in text that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism bars us from seeing” (17). Explorations into popular Malayalam cinema offers such possibilities although homosexuality and other alternate sexual patterns are shunned by the Malayalee psyche and cinema adopts the path that is least challenging. The dread of such ‘deviance’ is visible in the phobia such creative artistic expressions reveal in their works. The homophobia that percolates the Malayalee sensibility is perceivable in the film maker's craft as well. This dread of homosexuality prompts the society to question homosocial behaviour and thus films about male bonding reveal the subtext

of fear and suspicion the society exhibits when confronted by such relationships. Male bonding with strong undercurrents suggestive of homosexual behaviour can be found in films like *Harikrishnans* (1998) and *Salt 'N Pepper* (2011). *Harikrishnans* depict a strange case of male bonding treated in a ridiculous fashion with Hari completing dialogues begun by Krishnan and vice versa. Their heterosexual romantic inclination towards the gorgeous Meera takes the scene and move as an undercurrent towards the middle of the plot and towards the end. *Salt 'N Pepper* is another film that interrogates male bonding through the characters of Kalidasan and Babu. The master and the cook share a warm, intimate relationship which reminds the viewer of the bliss of conjugality. They meet for the first time during a traditional bride-viewing ceremony where Kalidasan goes to 'see' a prospective bride and returns triumphantly with their cook. Throughout the film, they speak in suggestive tones with dialogues and action suggestive of a marital relationship. But utmost care has been taken to avoid physical proximity between the characters, in both these films.

Apart from these films of a suggestive nature, there are two other films that

demand closer examination and they are *Rithu* (2009) and *Mumbai Police* (2013). Both of these films have queer characters that are positioned against heterosexual characters and binaries are built upon this framework of homosexual and heterosexual positions. "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. ... 'Queer' then, demarcated not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative" (Halperin 62). Alienation of the Other and misrepresentation of the queer community is strikingly visible in these films. Moreover in the conceptualization of both the stories, gayness emerge as a pointer towards the weak-willed, morally susceptible characters. *Rithu* directed by Shyamaprasad narrates the story of three friends, named Sunny, Varsha and Sarat and the theme is that of betrayal. Of the three, Sunny is gay and Sarat is a heterosexual who cherishes his romance with Varsha. On a cursive reading of the film, Sunny's identity as a homosexual seems to be of little importance but a closer understanding of the undercurrents of human behavior as revealed in the film unveil another story. Sunny is introduced in the film with boyfriends partying in Bangalore while Sarat is the subdued, home





Mayamohini

as gay in the same conversation where he is identified as the betrayer as well. The polarities built upon this theme distinctly reveal the ideological position adopted by this film. The botched attempt at betrayal happens with the help of Jamaal who is clearly a gay stereotype in mannerisms, makeup and gestures and the viewer witnesses the building up of a sexual energy between the two.

Homosexuality is placed strategically in the narrative in a more recent film titled *Mumbai Police* (2013). This film by Rosshan Andrews triggered several debates on the theme of homosexuality and the film deserves merit for foregrounding a much tabooed topic. Homosexuality in this film is as Seidman opined “Constructing the homosexual as

loving, straight guy from the US. The film builds upon this binary of a straight and a gay character. The straight guy is the innocent, morally upright person while the gay character is weak-willed, struggles with his insecurities, is jealous and emerges as the betrayer in the film. Gayness gets criminalized by association. The revelation made by Jithu to Sarat provides the clue to the viewer as to the significance of his sexual preference in the film. Jithu exposes Sunny

defiled justifies his/her exclusion from public life. Symbolically degrading the homosexual contributes to creating dominated gay selves – that is, individuals for whom shame and guilt are at the core of their sense of self; public invisibility becomes in part self-enforced”. (353) The film unravels the story of male bonding in a disciplined male centered world where three police men, Farhan, Anthony Moses and Aaryan share a steady and strong friendship. Antony is

designated to investigate the murder of Aaryan and ends up losing memory following an accident moments before revealing the name of the murderer. Farhan assigns the new Antony, alienated from the old self, to complete the investigation. Mystery is unravelled when the new Antony discovers his gay self, and he is shattered and torn between his two selves. Antony finds that it was his old self that had killed his friend in order to maintain his façade as a macho police man. Here, the new Antony is unaware about his sexual inclination; after losing memory, Antony meets his gay partner (unaware of him being his sexual partner), only to feel awkward with his advancements and gestures.

The film fails to transcend the heteronormative tradition even though it bravely created a gay character and used a masculine prototype like Prithviraj (actor) for



Ardhanari

the role. Unlike other Malayalam films with gay themes or characters, this film subverts the portrayal of gayness as less than masculine. But the constant fear of discovery and the resulting emotions of insecurity results in aggression. Antony is an authoritative bullying police man, ruthless and violent to the core. The stereotypical self is the well acted out role that he plays to hide his homosexual exploits. The film maker decides to tread

safely when Rascal Moses becomes the weak and unfaithful one, while Farhan and Aaryan remain trustworthy and sane. The reflection of social prejudices prevalent in Indian society weakens the gay theme in the narrative since the film seems to bind one's sexual preferences to their moral and psychological well being. Since alternative sexual behavior patterns are deemed deviant, other forms of deviance are conveniently clubbed together in popular



Rani Padmini

art forms like cinema. Mumbai Police stands testimony to this concept. Sanjay – Bobby, script writers of *Mumbai Police* says thus in an interview given to The Deccan Chronicle: “Here the initial Antony Moses knows he is lacking something and tries to cover up by his over aggressiveness. The second Antony Moses who loses his memory is more of a normal man”. (“M’Town Goes Offbeat”)

As Mathew says “cinema constructs a normative structural perspective, which involves the concretised versions of sexual behaviour that are showcased and catered to the mass psyche of society ... and to meet the spectatorial anticipations”(28). This holds true of films like *Mumbai Police* as well. The binary of the heterosexual and homosexual Antony reveals the ideological stance adopted by the film maker. Antony is a complex, fragmented person, torn by guilt and shame and is compelled to enact the macho male stereotype thereby alienating himself from his true self. His identity is to be established through performance rather than suggestions about his sexual inclination. The film suggests a self analysis of a gay self from the perspective of his own heterosexual identity, as imagined by the director of the film. The violent reaction to

the revelation of his gay self and the accompanying music used for the scene highlights the tragedy. Antony cries out loud defying his alpha male image and the agony of this knowledge crushes his spirit. Aaryan’s moment of realization about Antony is a similar one where he reacts violently by breaking their friendship. He accuses him of lacking in manliness and blames it as the reason for his violence and criminal tendencies. The subtext of homosexuality as deviance and as the cause of the hero’s miserable failure is subtly conveyed to the audience. His heart wrenching cry over his realization of his sexual preference reflects the society’s paranoia about homosexuality. Though the film maker shocks the sensibility of the viewer with a homosexual act visible in a shadowy opaque visual, the film maker plays on a diplomatic terrain. The tentative adventure into the domain of homosexuality may lead others to venture into this theme at a later stage. The movie falls short of any attempt towards breaking stereotypes and the narrative remains loyal to the hegemonic ideological construct.

My Life Partner released in 2014 employs a similar strategy in its appropriation of

queer sexuality. Though the portrayal is sensitive and with empathy, the film maker fails to consider homosexuality as a normal human sexual preference. Richard and Kiran are two friends who are confronted with their deep passionate relationship. They live together and problems crop up with their decision to adopt a child. Richard who is a bisexual, marries an orphan, Pavithra and the situation is further complex when a pregnant Pavitra realizes the nature of the friendship between Kiran and her husband. Leela Iyer, a psychiatrist and social activist in the film, opines about the relationship: "This can't be called real love. Only an emotional bonding". The film maker emphasizes that circumstances have played a major role in this relationship. In an interview given to The Deccan Chronicle, Padmakumar, the film maker said: "Homosexuality is a human behavior like drinking or prostitution and has to be addressed ...". ("M'Town Goes Offbeat").

Since cinematic narrative upholds and normalizes heterosexuality, it plays a significant role in identity construction and, by the process of Othering the homosexuals, film makers accelerate this process. *Chandupottu* (2005) and *Odum Raja Adum Rani* (2014) are films that delineate and deliberate upon the polymorphous structures of sexualities and sexual identities. *Chandupottu* by Lal Jose has an

actor Dileep, of the mainstream cinema donning the role of a man confused about his sexual identity. His preference for a feminine self invites ridicule and his alienation from the community compels him to abandon his home land and his subsequent journey to another place transforms him completely. The film reasserts the heteronormative tradition proscribed by the society and the hero returns home after having completed his period of exile when he makes a painful exploration and discovery of his masculine self. His identity is defined by the societal reactions in the film and compartmentalization of gender identities using classic stereotypes reveals the film maker's desperate attempt to adhere to the popular notions of conventional sexual behaviour patterns. In a critical reading of the film by Prabhakaran, R and Thomas, N titled "Masculinizing Radha: The Politics of Representation in *Chandupottu*", the writers concluded their essay thus: "The director of the movie *Chandupottu* who set out to be 'revolutionary' did not affect any radical change in the system. He assumed that the audience would treat the text as natural, obvious and simply there to be enjoyed. The unconscious patriarchy has structured the film form. Had the movie challenged this autonomy of the viewers, it would have been politically progressive". Unlike *Chandupottu*,

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Odum Raja Adum Rani directed by Biju Varma dealt with the same crisis but approached it with a little more subtlety and compassion. The film is sympathetic to the travails of the hero who is fragmented between his real and fake identities and the agony of occupying a hostile and insensitive social space. The film maker used humour to take the viewer through the angst and dilemma of the hero caught between his homosexual identity and the demands thrust upon him by a heterosexually patterned society.

Ardhanaari (Half-woman, 2012) by Dr Santhosh Souparnika is perhaps the only Malayalam film that daringly portrayed the travails of the transgender community. Though the film failed to address the core conflicts and suffered from a weak cinematic framework, the attempt was a bold and sympathetic one towards this marginalized community. The film added to the shock value by casting actors known for their stereotypical masculine identities, accepted by the Malayalee sensibility. The film regresses from its progressive intentions when it employs stereotypical mannerisms and behaviour patterns to portray the transgender community. Typical feminine gestures ascribed to hijras are employed throughout the film. Female identity shrinks to motherhood and a deeply held sexual desire which is repeatedly through several visual images. The film maker assumes an

ambiguous position when he calls the journey of the hijra as a futile one that is a quest for an identity lost between a male and female self. The journey of the protagonist Vinayan to Vinutha and later to Manjula is punctuated by emotional and physical upheavals and betrayals along with the deeply rooted pangs of identity crisis faced due to these socially ascribed sexual statuses.

Unlike other sexual deviancies, Hijras are portrayed quite frequently in Indian films, whether it is mainstream or parallel. This trend is not different in Malayalam also. The reason for such an inclusion in the film industry is intertwined with religion, general cultural recognition and acceptance of the hijra's existence within society. Their presence is obvious in the Indian society and they are bestowed with special powers to bring luck and fertility, and hence they are given supremacy during marriage and child birth. However with urbanisation, their superior role was gradually fading off and this community has been pushed into poverty and ridicule. This has driven many of them into prostitution and begging. While there are a few films like *Ardhanaari* that has portrayed the tyranny of this community, in most cases they have been conceived as a comic figure. This comes easy for the filmmaker as the complex layers and codes of sexual and gender politics is almost negated by the slapstick gestures and

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physical appearance of hijras. Rather than as a homosexual, they are portrayed as homo-social, which is a safer way of painting them in mainstream films. Hence, as Gopinath (290) asserts, in Indian films, hijras remain as the general representation of any kind of gender and sexual deviancy.

Osella and F. Osello concluded that gendering process is closely linked to sexual identity in South India, i.e. “the production of a normalized and naturalized compulsory heterosexuality is what we find to be crucial to successful gendering processes” (2). This results in stiff resistance that cuts across religious boundaries and queer community finds itself ridiculed, shunned and marginalized. They are often presented as psychological or physical deviations from the normal and desired heterosexual patterns. Hence earliest representations of the world of alternate sexuality by Malayalam cinema was extremely restricted and can be detected in a few scenes of cross dressing. As with hijras, drags became a popular comic device used by filmmakers where, typical male stereotype hero dress as

woman in single scene or more, sometimes having no relevance with the plot. Adoor Bhasi, a celebrated comedian of commercial cinema of the 1960s and 70s, has done innumerable drag acts in films like *Cochin Express* (1967), *Taxi Car* (1972), *Rest House* (1969) and *Kalli Chellamma* (1969). Many of the leading comedians in the later decades appeared in the guise of women, most often in a crude and sexually provocative manner. Sometimes characters adopt a feminine stereotype that was emulated in gestures, body language and tone often as an offender or comedian. Leading stars of the industry appeared as drags in several films – Mohanlal in *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu* (1998), Jayaram in *Naranathu Thampuran* (2001) and Dileep in *Mayamohini* (2012). Heroes established in their masculine identity is opted here for these adventures. Most of these acts were tagged on to the script with no particular contribution to the theme or the narrative in these films. While cross dressing by men was casually incorporated into the script as superficial additions to provide laughter, cross dressing



by women was less frequent. *Ammayane Satyam* (1993) by Balachandra Menon had a female hero dressed as a young boy adopting the mannerisms attributed to a man by Indian society. But the film maker reversed the stance later in the film with scenes that reiterated the femininity of the female hero, thus abandoning the challenges offered by such a portrayal.

Conclusion

Gender identity as a cultural construct normalizes and naturalizes the process of marginalizing of everything other than heterosexuality, condemning them as perverse and stigmatizing them by ridicule or violence. As Mathew asserts for queer theorists, sexuality is a “complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interacts to shape the ideas of what is deviant in any particular moment and which then operate under the rubric of what is ‘natural’

‘essentialist’, ‘biological’ or ‘God-given’” (Mathew 26). This leads to closeting and self-confinement, resulting in trauma and fragmentation of the individual self. Though gender identities are performed to conform to socially accepted normative patterns, it is perceived as the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ sexual behaviour by the masses. As Butler posits “compulsory heterosexual identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (723).

Malayalam cinema responded to the discursive practices on gender and sexuality by portraying faithfully the unapologetic stance favouring heterosexual practices. An unflinching loyalty towards the dominant position regarding sexuality became visible in the depiction of gender relations and sexual preferences in films for several decades. Queer voices are silenced, due to

lack of representation or misrepresentation. Queerness remains marginalized as a narrative theme for mainstream cultural discourses. As De Lauretis observed in her essay “The Technology of Gender”, though gender construction by hegemonic discourses is oppressive and is based on a policy of exclusion and condemnation of the other, there are also other possibilities of constructing gender from the margins. “Posed from outside the heterosexual contract, and inscribed in micropolitical practices, these terms can also have a part in the construction of gender, and their effects are rather at the ‘local’ level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation” (719). Though Malayalam cinema presents the perfect platform for such counter-hegemonic practices, such articulations are nearly absent in this visual media. As with other collectives of a subaltern status, lack of film makers from among the queer community remains a challenge. Sympathetic positions towards queerness are scarce when it comes to film making. Muraleedharan opined thus: “The sporadic sojourn to the domain of queer intimacies is immediately reiterated in most of the Malayalam films by quick re-establishment of a normative order. This is generally accomplished through a reinscription of the main character into the heterosexual matrix that, in most films, constitutes the final marriage of the hero and heroine” (79).

As Mulvey (837-838) asserts, in classical cinematic trajectories, the pleasure in looking is always gendered where there is always male and female points of identification. Cinema activate as well as attract certain desiring relationship and concepts, one of the most prominent of which is the binary of masculine and feminine. Halberstam (84) has taken this into more detail and claimed that gendered characters in a film play their part within an

extremely limited and bounded variation in line with the gendered spectators who have already consented to the limited gender roles. “Entertainment in many ways is the name we give to fantasies of differences ... as much as viewers want to believe in alternatives, the mainstream film assumes that they also want to believe that the choices that they made... offer the best possible options” (Halberstam, 84). This could be applied to the tropes adopted by the Malayalam films mentioned earlier. Though films like *Mumbai Police*, *Rithu* etc has queer presence, thereby presenting alternatives, the queer characters remain only to conform the appropriateness of heterosexual choice. Hence by providing a queer inclusive cultural texts masquerading as a portrayal of alternative sexuality, these films question the homosexual tropes, by making way for the normalisation of heterosexual relationships.

What we require is as Foucault writes in “The Gay Science”: “... is a radical break, a change in orientation, objectives, and vocabulary”. (as quoted by Diana Fuss 351) While the cinematic representations of queer have increased in volume, the concern lies with the sexual politics implicitly played within these texts. They speak voluminously of the cultural environment and often fail to apprehend the complex issues of identity and acceptance faced by the queer community. The homophobia exhibited by the community and the normalizing of heterosexuality is aptly mirrored in these films as well, notwithstanding a couple or more films that tread a path of resistance against the accepted sexual norms.

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ഓർമ്മച്ചിത്രം

ഫോട്ടോ പി. ഡേവിഡ്



‘പൂച്ചുസന്യാസി’യുടെ ചിത്രീകരണവേളയിൽ ഹരിഹരൻ, രാജ്കുമാർ, മായവി

ചലച്ചിത്ര സമീക്ഷ

MARCH 2018

CHALACHITRA SAMEEKSHA - a bilingual magazine from kerala state chalachitra academy

പുസ്തകം 1 ലക്കം 8 മാർച്ച് 2018 ₹ 50



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കോ-ഓർഡിനേറ്റിങ് എഡിറ്റർ
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ഓൺലൈൻ പ്രമോഷൻ
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മാർക്കറ്റിങ്
അഖിൽ, മനു. എം

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എം.ടി വാസുദേവൻ നായർ
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കവർ ഡിസൈൻ & പേജ് ലേ-ഔട്ട്
ശിവപ്രസാദ് ബി

എഡിറ്റർ, ചലച്ചിത്ര സമീക്ഷ,
കേരള സംസ്ഥാന ചലച്ചിത്ര അക്കാദമി,
ശാസ്തമംഗലം, തിരുവനന്തപുരം 695010
chalachitrasameeksha@gmail.com,
www.keralafilm.com
Phone: 0471-2310323, 2312214,
Fax: +91-471-2310322



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അക്കാദമിയുടേതോ ആയിരിക്കണമെന്നില്ല. അവയുടെ
പൂർണ്ണ ഉത്തരവാദിത്തം ലേഖകർക്ക് മാത്രമായിരിക്കും.

We are grateful to various film websites from which we have borrowed materials to enrich this magazine. The opinions expressed herein are not necessarily of the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy or the editors