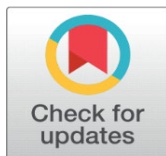


RE-PRESENTATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY ON SCREEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MALAYALAM FILMS *MOOTHON* AND *KAATHAL- THE CORE* AS REPRESENTATIVES OF CULTURAL TRANSITION

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ABSTRACT

Films are a significant part of popular culture that form the frame for exhibiting the culture of the times. Cinema shares a symbiotic relationship with culture by providing a platform for cultural representations and drawing inspiration from the cultural artefacts simultaneously. Two of the phenomenal off-centred Malayalam films, *Moothon* directed by Geetu Mohandas and *Kaathal-The Core* directed by Jeo Baby, become the recent trailblazers by unleashing the cultural transitions in exploring Homosexuality, its impact on the Malayalee audience and the necessity of comprehending the notion of queer space in the present Kerala society. Drawing theoretical insights from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential work *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity", Gayle Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" and Michael Foucault's concept of Heterotopia, this study explores the existential struggles and the trauma behind expressing one's unusual sexuality. Moreover, both the utopian and the dystopian perspectives in understanding the lives of the gay communities are analysed in this study with reference to the selected films. This paper is an attempt to focus on concepts such as free life, gender fluidity and queer spaces that are evolving around us.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Cultural Transition, Malayalam Cinema, Homophobia, Gender Fluidity

1. INTRODUCTION

The American filmmaker Spike Lee has said that, film is a cultural weapon that can change the world, highlighting the ability of this popular media platform to serve as a catalyst in cultural shifts, thereby bringing in cultural transitions all around the globe. Films portray the changing cultural nuances, lifestyle, social, political and cultural norms and occupy a substantial role in the formation of an individual's identity, behaviour, communication skills, belief systems and social expectations.

This transformative capacity of cinema is deeply analysed in this paper with respect to the re-presentation of the gay protagonists selected for the study. The traditional hero-type usually celebrated in Malayalam cinema is a representative of the Alpha male with the characteristics of being charismatic, machoistic, emotionally resilient and egoistic. Such stereotype heroes are an epitome of anger, courage, confidence, assertiveness and physical strength and they employ these traits to thrash down the other characters, from the wicked villain to the submissive heroine. This conventional image of the Alpha male has occupied the celluloid space over the years as representative of acceptable male figures around us.

It is in this context, the gay protagonists of the films *Moothon/The Elder One* and *Kaathal-The Core*, Akbar and Mathew Devassy, demand the rise of gender fluidity in the modern world. Assimilating insights from Queer theory enables us to understand the queer nature of these sexual minorities who live life like a dead carcass as it is necessary to redefine their identity in the mainstream public space. A proper and elaborate definition of the term queer is mandatory to comprehend the concept of queer space around which the plots of the selected films revolve.

Benshoff and Griffin, (2004, as cited in [Pallivathukkal \(2021\)](#)) stated “Queer Theory posits that sexuality is a vast and complex terrain that encompasses not just personal orientation and/or behavior, but also the social, cultural, and historical factors that define and create the conditions for orientations and behaviors. As such, queer theory rejects essentialist or biological notions of gender and sexuality and sees them instead as fluid and socially constructed positionalities. The term queer, once a pejorative epithet used to humiliate gay men and women, is now used by academics to describe the broad, fluid, and ever-changing expanse of human sexualities. Queer can be used to describe any sexuality not defined as heterosexual procreative monogamy (usually the presumed goal of most classical Hollywood couplings); queers are people (including heterosexuals) who do not organize their sexuality according to that rubric.” (p. 29)

Coming out of the closet is a traumatic experience in the life of gay individuals as the fear of ostracization may at times force them to try to behave “normal”. In this pursuit, most of them face extreme identity crisis as they find themselves enmeshed in the quagmire of meaningless marriage associations, emotional havoc, mental instability, suicidal thoughts and ultimately the unrepresentable pain of negotiating one’s self beyond every other suffering

Analysing the gay heroes of the selected films with reference to Tacium’s review of Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity, it is observed that the continuous and forced acts of behaving like a straight, pressurises even the survival of these so called ‘inferior’ sexual minorities. According to Butler, the notion of gender is a construct of the society, where people (especially the queer communities) struggle to meet the set standards of gender roles, fearing getting pushed out from the mainstream. They are in a way, strained to become or perform as another person to overcome the title of being an outcast, other type, inferior, etc. [Tacium \(1993\)](#)

Kaathal-The Core (2023), *Moothon* (2020), *Mumbai Police* (2013), *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004, *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (Migratory Bird Never Cries,1986), *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1978) etc are quintessential depictions of homosexual narratives in Malayalam cinema.

In *Moothon*, when Akbar meets his partner Ameer, a mute, with whom he develops a philiat connection, the former fears being exposed as a gay and flees to Mumbai to escape the burden of being noticed as the other type. In the opening

scenes of the film, Akbar is addressed as 'Bhai', a brawny male villain dealing with child trafficking and drugs, thereby camouflaging his original self. In *Kaathal-The Core*, the plot revolves around Mathew's struggle to hide his homosexuality and his wife's fight to reveal the same to the public, by filing a divorce petition to regain the lost sense of freedom from their lives. Both the heroes are representatives of the homosexual community and the reciprocation which they have received from the people around. The trauma of revealing his original self, pushed Akbar, the elder one of his family, to escape to Mumbai after learning about the suicide of his lover Amir, as an outcome of a forced marriage with another girl. On the other hand, Mathew from *Kaathal-The Core*, feared how his daughter Femy and the society would react to his love relationship with Thankan, a local driving teacher, and tried really hard to perform his straight fullness even in front of the legal system. This paper discusses the trauma experienced by the homosexuals in revealing their original sexuality and the society's take on these relevant incidents by bringing into focus, the other characters who voice distinguishing comments, thereby reflecting the varying shades of the traditional Malayalee community. [Sedgwick \(1990\)](#)

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A detailed qualitative analysis of the gay heroes as portrayed in the films *Moothon* and *Kaathal-The Core*, gives us a clear picture about the endless spiral of mental conflicts thrust upon them by our society, while expressing their inner selves. A comprehensive comparative analysis of these films, exposes two divergent perspectives in comprehending Homosexuality and enables us to move beyond the set constraints of the gendered society. Also, this study explores concepts such as sexual minority, gender fluidity, inclusivity and homosocial society, thereby promoting an iconoclastic perspective on gay communities. This paper brings into the limelight the tragic outcomes of the homophobic society and how these gendered structures perforate through the queer communities, making them vulnerable, sidelined, and non-worthy of existing according to their desires.

3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper employs an in-depth comparative study of the gay protagonists as represented in the Malayalam films *Moothon* and *Kaathal-The Core*, by using the concept of 'Homosociality' popularized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick as it is necessary to incorporate their inclusivity in the mainstream society. [Hammarén & Johansson \(2014\)](#), p.1

This study attempts to accentuate the need to establish a homosocial society, where love is not measured and accepted on the basis of gender structures, where everyone can live life in their own terms and choose their partners irrespective of their sexual orientations. Sedgwick's *The Epistemology of the Closet* is used as a pivotal base to learn about the hidden nature of their sexuality, the trauma behind revealing their sexual orientation to the public and the burden of performing gender as required by the traditional societal structures. Michel Foucault's concept of Heterotopia mentioned in *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias* is also incorporated in the study of these films.

4. ANALYSIS

Gayle S. Rubin, a prominent American cultural activist renowned for her pioneering contributions to queer studies, delves into the complexities of sexual

diversity in her seminal essay *Thinking Sex*. She elucidates the challenges individuals face in embracing diverse sexual expressions, noting the pervasive stigma surrounding sexual behaviours. Rubin contends that sexuality has historically been a source of conflict, and unless a more inclusive perspective is adopted, this discord will persist. Her essay lays the groundwork for engaging discussions on the intricacies of sexual behaviour, inviting exploration into areas that society may have hesitated to broach. Gayle Rubin's discourse challenges the notion of a standardised norm governing sexual preferences, advocating for the recognition of sexual diversity. She underscores the difficulty in comprehending the wide spectrum of sexual preferences, acknowledging the subjective nature of attraction where what one person finds appealing may be unappealing to another. Rubin contests the idea of imposing a universal standard of sexual preferences, emphasizing the individuality and variability of sexual desires. She emphasizes the significance of embracing and embracing this diversity while refuting the notion that differing preferences reflect intelligence, mental well-being, or refinement. In essence, Rubin's perspective underscores the multifaceted and intricate nature of human sexuality, promoting an inclusive and nonjudgmental stance towards understanding and valuing diverse sexual expressions. [Rubin \(n.d.\)](#)

Tracking back, Queer theory originates from the examination of sexuality in both private and public spheres, tracing back to the nineteenth century when it was initially used to describe homosexuals. It encompasses a non-conforming stance towards gender and sexuality, imbuing the term "queer" with nuanced connotations. Emerging from post-structuralist and feminist ideologies, queer theory challenges conventional definitions of gender and sexuality, questioning established binaries and advocating for diversity and fluidity in these domains. Its critical framework extends to scrutinising power dynamics, cultural norms, and discourses that marginalise non-conforming identities, aiming to foster social justice and tolerance. As a vital component of contemporary discourse, queer theory engages with issues of intersectionality, identity politics, and the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ rights and recognition. It delves into how societal norms construct and enforce notions of heterosexuality, homosexuality, gender, and sexual identities while interrogating normativity rooted in these constructs. [Thiel \(2018\)](#)

The traditional narrative cinema usually employs queer roles as sidekick characters or laughing stocks, ridiculing their existence in a homophobic society. The Malayalam film industry, with its ever-revolutionary directors coming to the forefront with appealing and progressive thoughts regarding Homosexuality, is an achievement unexplainable through words. Representatives of the changing Malayalam cinema, Geetu Mohandas's *Moothon* and Jeo Baby's *Kaathal- The Core* have broken the traditional heterosexual hero image and brought in a realistic picturisation of a homosexual man falling in love with another man of his choice. The otherness experienced by the protagonists of these films can be deeply analysed on the basis of the concept 'Heterotopia' propounded by Michel Foucault. Foucault says Heterotopias are specific discursive, institutional, and cultural settings that are in some way 'other': intense, upsetting, incompatible, transformative, or contradictory. Heterotopias are universes inside universes that both reflect and disturb the outside world.

First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—

places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. [Foucault \(1984\)](#), p. 3-4

This paper attempts to delineate the similarities and differences in both the films with respect to the representation of Homosexuality on screen.

5. SIMILARITIES

Both the films, *Moothon* and *Kaathal – The Core* bring into focus homosexual heroes, Akbar, and Mathew, respectively, who are fully aware of their sexual orientation and desires. Both of them often fall prey to the traditionally repeated image of a heterosexual man, engaging in a binary relationship with someone from the opposite sex, echoing the society's take on heterosexuality as the most assenting and acceptable form of a relationship. Both the directors have pictured the intense companionship between both the gay partners without any scene of vulgarity and erotic gestures. Both the homosexuals undergo existential trauma, and in a way try to escape them by performing the prescribed gender acts of the society. Akbar is unable to move to Mumbai according to his love, Ameer's wish, and finally had to flee from the island, surrendering his own identity, after learning about the latter's suicide. In Mumbai, Akbar compromises his gay self and takes up a new identity of a goon named Bhai and performs extremely stereotyped masculine actions by being aggressive, impudent and indulges in drug dealing and trafficking. Akbar's romantic side is kept silent, as the plot develops in Mumbai. [Mohandas \(2019\)](#).

Mathew from *Kaathal- The Core*, also succumbs to the societal encumbrances, marries a woman named Omana and even has a daughter in this wedlock. Mathew himself claims to be a heterosexual and silently neglects his inner desires when surrounded by the public. Both the homosexuals lead a discontented life as an outcome of their suppressed desires and try to perform certain prescribed gender roles as instructed by the societal structures.

Moreover, these heroes avoid their gay companions in the public, fearing the judgements and harassments that may cascade on them. The intense struggle of coming out from the closet is deeply felt by both Akbar and Mathew and the people around them take the privilege of making their life decisions by neglecting their personal desires. The trauma of crushing down their desires keeps mounting over both their bodies and these protagonists live in a world of memories. The memories of their partners, of the lovely moments spent together, their urge to unite, their dreams of living together, fanciful thoughts about a homosocial society, etc. all appear to be a traumatic experience when reality hits hard on their faces.

6. DISSIMILARITIES

The primary difference between the films *Moothon* and *Kaathal-The Core* is that, the former highlights a dystopian perspective in addressing the life of homosexuals, whereas the latter unleashes a utopian perspective regarding the subject matter. Akbar, from *Moothon*, had the privilege of escaping to Mumbai, without marrying a woman out of societal pressures. But, to lead a life in Mumbai, he had to repress his original gay self and perform the prescribed gender role of a male macho to gain acceptance from the outside world. [Mohandas \(2019\)](#)

On the other hand, Mathew from *Kaathal-The Core*, was forced to get married to Omana, by his father Devassy. Devassy is a representative of the homophobic society and he claims that everything will be sorted if Mathew is engaged in a conjugal bond with a woman. In the climax scene, an intense emotional outburst between Mathew and his father is exposed through the former's dialogue,

“You were also there when the doctor talked about my homosexuality right? What did you say then? Everything will be alright if I get married. Is everything alright now?” [Baby \(2023\)](#), 1:36:16

Akbar had the advantage of making decisions in his life, whereas Mathew's life decisions were taken by his father, neglecting Mathew's consent. After the death of his partner Ameer, Akbar lives an emotionally isolated life, with no one around to understand his mental state and reciprocate his feelings. Moreover, he fails to get someone who could help him come out of the closet and expose his gay self. In this context, Mathew happens to be fortunate enough to have Omana as his wife, who completely realised the gay nature of her husband and filed a mutual divorce petition, as a means of acquiring freedom, for both their emotional and physical well-being. Omana epitomizes the modern rational woman, ready to accept people, irrespective of their sexual orientations. She even educates their daughter Femy, regarding the concept of homosexuality as a completely normal and acceptable form of a relationship. Moreover, without injecting any kind of vengeance towards her father, for failing to bring happiness in their wedlock and for indulging in an unusual relationship with Thankan, Omana has strikingly brought into the limelight, the necessity of accepting and including these sexual minorities in the mainstream society. In one of the court scenes, she exclaims ‘I demanded for a child and brought her into existence’, reflecting her unfulfilled marital desires. [Baby \(2023\)](#), 1:07:39

Omana is portrayed as a representative of the changing progressive world, and works for gathering votes for Mathew, who was contesting in the Local Village Body Elections. Mathew finally wins the election, which marks the acceptance of a Gay individual as a political leader in a normal society. [Praveen \(2023\)](#)

In Akbar's case, his partner Ameer compromised their relationship by killing himself, fearing the life he would have to spend with a woman and the forthcoming societal judgements. In Mathew's life, Omana took the firm decision to revolt after twenty years of wedlock and was not ready to surrender to the preferred societal framework of heralding heteronormativity as the most superior form of human relationships. Also, Omana wanted both of them to lead a life of dignity and enjoy individual freedom. There is an intensely heart-warming scene in the film, where Omana and Mathew hug each other and scream their hearts out before the day of their divorce, when Omana finally asks Mathew to sleep beside her for one last time. Mathew's innate guilt for not satisfying Omana's physical desires and the burden of his hidden sexuality gets poured out when he cries out loud exclaiming 'Oh, My God!!!' [Baby \(2023\)](#), 1:41:00

Another major difference between the films is that Akbar gets shot to death in the climax, where he ends up in a spiral, searching for his sister Mulla. In *Kaathal*, Mathew finally gets reunited with Thankan, and the film ends where both of them go for a journey together, symbolising their journey of life together. The point is that Akbar failed to live his life as a gay, whereas Mathew came out as a gay in his life with the support of Omana, and decided to live life in his own terms.

7. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of homosexuality encompasses profound themes of acceptance, self-discovery, and societal progress. The act of coming out represents a courageous and sincere personal journey that confronts societal norms, fostering increased acceptance and comprehension. Despite ongoing efforts needed to achieve full inclusion and respect, substantial strides have been made in advancing equality for LGBTQ+ individuals through advocacy and representation. The ongoing dialogue regarding homosexuality reflects an evolving process of change, emphasizing the importance of advocacy, education, and empathy in cultivating a more equitable and inclusive society for everyone.

This research endeavour seeks to investigate the evolving inclusive environments known as queer spaces, which serve as safe havens for queer individuals, particularly within gay communities, to express themselves authentically without fear of discrimination or bias. Through a comparative examination of the films *Moothon* and *Kaathal- The Core*, these works offer a realistic depiction of the challenges faced by the homosexual community, while also serving as catalysts for providing support, visibility, and empowerment to these marginalized groups. The emergence of homosocial societies, wherein social interactions among individuals of the same gender are normalized, contributes to a heightened visibility of protagonists like Akbar and Mathew, who serve as representatives of a larger, marginalized community. Furthermore, the establishment of queer spaces as centres for activism and cultural expression promotes open-mindedness, empathy, and a broader perspective that values love, authenticity, and individual liberty.

This paper also delves into the depiction of gay protagonists Mathew and Akbar, highlighting a narrative that values inclusivity and acceptance. These characters, departing from the conventional heterosexual hero archetype, offer empathetic portrayals that resonate widely. Through their challenges and victories, these heroes not only reflect the changing cultural attitudes toward homosexuality but also contribute to reshaping popular culture perceptions. A comparative analysis of these two films—one presenting an optimistic portrayal and the other a pessimistic view of homosexuality—illuminates the evolving societal outlook and underscores

the significance of film studies in fostering global conversations. By spotlighting the experiences of these compassionate heroes, films serve as platforms for questioning norms, nurturing empathy, and cultivating a more inclusive and empathetic society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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