

# **(Trans)forming Space: Construction and Contestation of Transgender Identities in Selected Malayalam Films**

*A Thesis submitted*

*in partial fulfilment for the Degree of*

**Doctor of Philosophy**

*by*

**Anu Kuriakose**



**DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES**

**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF SPACE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY  
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MAY 2020**



## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **(Trans)forming Space: Construction and Contestation of Transgender Identities in Selected Malayalam Films** submitted by **Anu Kuriakose** to the Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology, Thiruvananthapuram, in partial fulfilment for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is a *bona fide* record of research work carried out by her under my supervision. The contents of this thesis, in full or in parts, have not been submitted to any other Institution or University for the award of any degree or diploma.

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May 2020

Signature of HoD with Seal



## DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis entitled **(Trans)forming Space: Construction and Contestation of Transgender Identities in Selected Malayalam Films** submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** is a record of original work carried out by me under the supervision of **Dr. Gigy J. Alex**, and has not formed the basis for the award of any other degree or diploma, in this or any other Institution or University. In keeping with the ethical practice in reporting scientific information, due acknowledgements have been made wherever the findings of others have been cited.

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27.05.2020

Anu Kuriakose

SC15D012



*Dedicated To*

*Niyathi's Ramakrishnan...*





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## Abstract

The representation of transgender identities in contemporary Malayalam cinema intersects with the shifting trends of gender and sexuality discourses in the public sphere of Kerala. There has been a forced silence on non-heteronormative sexual practices and trans identities in the state. Malayalam cinema also maintained a meaningful silence regarding the problematization of transgender identities and queer desires. However, one could observe the underpinnings of non-heteronormative sexuality and gender performances through the depiction of subversive masculinities and femininities on screen. The drag performances in Malayalam theatre and cinema foreground the early attempts to subvert hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity.

This thesis examines the changing discourses of gender and sexuality and the formation of a queer public sphere in Kerala in contemporary times. By making use of visual and thematic analysis of the films, field documentation, and literature review through queer framework, the study maps the democratic politics of recognition of trans people in the state. The state has been undergoing a transformation with the emergent political activism and claims for citizenship rights of the LGBTQIA community. The government and non-government interventions, activist and academic support have provided with space for trans people, who, now, have come out from the shade of the LGB groups. The queer movement in the state stems from a collective reaction against the criminalization of IPC 377 by queer and trans people, and after the decriminalization of same-sex desire, the queer movement has entered into the celebratory phase.

The role of the media, especially visual cultural texts are significant to critically analyze the transformation in the public sphere. The thesis examines a set of films in which trans identities and their identity constructions and contestations are discussed as focus themes. These films could be perused for their representation of trans identities, their gender performances and sexualities through the lens of various post-colonial, gender, psychoanalytic, and film theories. The clothing of trans people in these films is demonstrative of their gender dysphoria, affirmation, as well as regional and cultural identity as 'Malayali.' To foreground the gender nonconformity and identity conflicts of the trans characters, cinema makes use of mirrors as recurring metaphors. The selected films also discuss how the patriarchal concept of heteronormativity is established while depicting transgender marriages.

The thesis critically examines the social position of trans people in the selected films as deeply influenced by their gender identity, education, class and caste status, employment and economic stability. Trans people from marginalized

communities are portrayed as affected and experience social alienation the most. Violence against trans people in the public spaces and the visualization of violence against transpeople in the selected films also form the crux of inquiry. Trans people experience verbal, physical, and sexual violence from society due to their gender nonconformity. In cinema, transfeminine people are depicted as quiet helpless in resisting the violence, as they are lynched and disrobed in public places by mob. Whereas, the trans man in the only film is able to resist sexual violence and cinema typecasts the courage for it arises from the underpinned masculinity of the character.

This thesis also analyses the politics behind the production of a greater number of trans themed films in contemporary times. Apart from the sites of circulation, the thesis also examines the reception of the selected films by cis and queer spectators. Broadly, these films could be categorized as ‘commercial’/‘popular’ and ‘offbeat’ films while looking at the aspects of production, circulation, and reception. The ‘invisibility of trans people’ in Kerala in the past and the commercial interests of contemporary Malayalam film industry appear crucial to place the issues of trans people and queer minorities, as they remained unaddressed and side-lined in the earlier popular films. The thesis is divided into five chapters each looking at various aspects of trans representations.

**Keywords:** transgender identity, Malayalam cinema, gender performance, sexuality



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## Introduction

*... a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.*

- **Maya Angelou, *Caged Bird***

The image of a caged bird singing for freedom in Maya Angelou's poem is the metaphor that strikes my imagination when I recall my fieldwork among the queer community in Kerala, a state in the South- West of the Indian subcontinent, during the initial days of this study. 3<sup>rd</sup> *State Transgender Habba, Kerala's Big Push for Transgender Welfare* in 2015 was the first cultural and political event I attended after venturing into the research on transgender people in Kerala. It brings to mind the political activity of speaking up by a group of people from different states in India. They gathered at Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala to discuss expanding access to health, education, employment, and livelihood for transgender people in the state. The queering of Kerala's public sphere with painted faces shouting slogans and marching with rainbow-colored flags, posters, and placards, has been a conspicuous event. When I speak about the '(Trans)forming Space' in this thesis, the image which recurs is that of Shyama's... It was on the sidelines of the 6th Queer pride at *Manaveeyam Veedhi*, Thiruvananthapuram, I met my friend Shyama again after our college days. Shyama was forced to conceal her<sup>1</sup> gender identity fearing social ostracism. The transformation happening in the public sphere of Kerala could be understood from the courage she gained to articulate her gender identity. Trans people have been the caged birds, struggling for their space in society to voice their identities. There is a sense of freedom the queer people in Kerala experience

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<sup>1</sup>In this thesis, 'they'/'their'/'them' are used to refer to non-binary/gender queer identities. For those transgender people who expressed their wish to be addressed as either masculine or feminine, I have used the pronouns 'he' or 'she.'



when they compare the present with the past. When their struggles have turned out to be the political act of ‘coming out,’ a tremendous shift has happened in Kerala. It is evident in the trans visibility movement in the state, academic discourses, various social movements, and in the political-legal-cultural interventions.

### **A Note on Terminology**

This thesis investigates about the trans community in Kerala, and their emergent visibility in Malayalam cinema. I prefer to use the term ‘transgender’ in this thesis to position my critical observations about gender variance in the films. These gender performances vary from the traditional understanding of masculinity and femininity in the social politics and in the selected films. ‘Transgender identity’ denotes to a person’s gender identity that does not match with the sex or associated gender role assigned to them at birth. It is also important to note that it is an identity category as well as a medical category. Which means that, the term must be used for people primarily based on whether they identify themselves as such, and based on how they look, or what medical procedures they undergo. The term ‘trans’ used in this thesis underscores the debates on ‘transgender’ and ‘transsexuality’ in the West. It highlights the deficiency of the English language to express gender diversity (Straube 2014, 23). ‘Trans’ is efficacious as both verb and adjective (Chiang et. al 2018, 309). The terms ‘trans women’ (plural) and ‘trans men’ (plural) are also used in this thesis depending upon whether the trans persons/ trans characters wish to associate with this trans feminine or trans masculine identity. ‘Gender nonconforming’ is another significant term that is used throughout in the thesis to denote people who do not conform to conventional expectations on gender or gender roles. Transgender persons may or may not refer to this. Depending upon identity, terms such as ‘gender variance,’ ‘non-binary,’ etc. are also used. For a less binary gender specific place of the person, the phrase ‘gender variant person with feminine presentation’ or ‘amab’ (assigned male at birth), or ‘afab’ (female assigned at birth) are used. To denote to specific gender variant people in Indian contexts, I have

adhered to the traditional terms popularized in India (a discussion of that in detail is provided in Chapter 1), and at other instances while referring to the gender variant people in general, I have used ‘transgender community’/‘transgender people’ in India. The term ‘queer’ is also used at many places as a political umbrella term reclaimed by the LGBTQIA community specific to sexuality, gender, discourses, activism, social, and cultural areas from a non-heteronormative perspective.

Sex reassignment Surgery (SRS or Gender confirming /affirming surgery) is a standard medical term used in the thesis. The different surgical procedures help trans people to affirm their gender identity by modifying their body as per their wish. It is to be noted that whether to undergo SRS or not and identify as ‘transgender’ are individual choices of the person. Another notable term in the thesis is ‘gender dysphoria,’ defined as “discomfort or distress caused by a discrepancy between a person’s gender identity, and that person’s sex assigned at birth (and the associated gender role, and or primary and secondary sex characteristics)” (*WPATH’s Standards of Care Report* 2011, 5). Rather than pathologizing gender dysphoria as a gender identity disorder (GID), the modern medical discourses prescribe SRS (Sex Reassignment Surgery) for transgender people (Fraser et. al 2010, Coleman 2011). People who experience gender dysphoria can choose to undergo different procedures in gender-affirmative healthcare and affirm their identity.

It is also pertinent to have an introduction to some terms that acquired popularity in Kerala. ‘Transgender’ is the accepted and most preferred term by transgender individuals in the state as a dignified term to identify with. It refers specifically to “those who identify within the binary, i.e., as feeling a dissonance with their gender assigned at birth (man/woman), and desiring to live and be recognized as the other gender (man/woman).” However, there is also a tendency to conflate ‘transgender’ with ‘trans women’ in popular understandings (Menon 2019, 2). While analyzing the terminologies specific to the context of contemporary Kerala, one may find ‘TG’ as an abbreviation used widely by trans community in the state. It is used

as a noun, for example ‘I am a ‘TG’/’TRANSGENDER’ is used rather than ‘I am a transgender person.’ However, in the Western context ‘transgender’ is an adjective and using it as a noun is discouraged and considered as dehumanizing. Trans people who underwent SRS popularly use the term ‘transsexual’ here for self reference. This is being out phrased in West as it may reinforce discrimination against those people who do not wish to undergo SRS. But in many instances trans people prefer to identify as either men or women and they use the term ‘transsexual’, as ‘transgender’ denotes their experience of transitioning rather than an identity itself. The popular reference to the term ‘community’ in Kerala context used by transgender individuals is different from the ritualized communities of *hijra/aravani/jogappa* in other states of India. Rather, the term signifies the networks of social and support groups among transgender people. A detailed discussion about these networks is done in Chapter 1. In general, it could be stated that, the discussion on terminologies are an ongoing one.

### **Why Malayalam Cinema?**

Trans communities have been less addressed subjects of cinema, particularly in regional cinemas of India. In Kerala, the role of cinema is noteworthy as a popular mode of entertainment and social interaction. ‘As a cisgender<sup>2</sup> scholar’ from Kerala and an ‘enthusiastic ally of the trans community’<sup>3</sup> I am interested in looking at the transgender and cisgender actors as well as filmmakers, specifically, how they depict the lives of trans community in Malayalam cinema (the cinema industry of Kerala). Cinema could be viewed as an ideological apparatus that voice the opinions of film makers. However, contemporary discourses engage with opinions of the spectators as well and the political position they adopt while viewing it. Malayalam cinema has avid spectatorship, who contributes to the artistic growth of the industry apart from its

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<sup>2</sup>A person who prefers to perform the gender according one’s the biological sex, and is not a transgender.

<sup>3</sup>I borrow these self identifications from Rebecca Bell-Metereau (2019).

market propaganda. Referred as ‘Mollywood,’ the Malayalam film industry is synonymous with ‘Hollywood’ or ‘Bollywood,’ the film industries of the West and the Hindi film industry based in Mumbai, respectively. Malayalam cinema is eponymous with the cultural identity of the ‘Malayali.’ Other regional film industries also have captured trans experience. However, Malayalam trans films are significant in the sense that they attempt to depict the experience of Malayali trans people and social politics specific to the region. The social life of Kerala and the ideologies of Keralites mirror the subjects of Malayalam cinema, hence, it is a suitable tool to look at the transformation in its public sphere. I use the words ‘Trans Cinema’ and or ‘Trans films’ to refer to the films that deal with trans life. This is primarily a corollary to the Western scholarship on films with cis and trans actors or characters with ‘gender dissidence,’ films with trans viewers (Williams 2011; Straube 2014), trans produced films (Steinbock 2011). However, it is to be noted that calling the selected films Trans Cinema may not be as apt in the sense the West addresses it. Malayalam trans films address the cis straight viewers, but possibly trans people, though a minority, as viewers of these films cannot be ruled out.

This thesis centers around seven Malayalam films for detailed analysis, but a number of films that portray the gender variance and same sex desire also fall under the scope of the analysis. The primary texts are *Chanthupottu (Bindi-Paint*, Dir. Lal Jose, 2005), *Ardhanaari (Half-Woman*, Dir. Santhosh Souparnika, 2012), *Odum Raja Aadum Rani (The Running King and the Dancing Queen*, Dir. Viju Varma, 2014), *Irattajeevitham: (S)he the Dual (The Double Life*, Dir. Suresh Narayanan, 2017), *Aalorukkam (The Makeup*, Dir. V.C. Abhilash, 2018), *Njan Marykutty (I Am Marykutty*, Dir. Ranjith Sankar, 2018), and *Udalaazham (Body Deep*, Dir. Unnikrishnan Avala, 2018). It is important to note that the majority of films include trans feminine or feminine presenting gender variant people (e.g. hirja) in the lead roles and only one film among these includes a trans man. A brief outline of these films is as follows.

*Chanthupottu* narrates the story of a feminine-presenting youngman Radhakrishnan, who is endearingly addressed as ‘Radha,’ from Omanappuzha coastal village. Society regards their gender performance as a curse and force to ‘love’ a girl to prove their ‘masculinity.’ Unable to bear social ostracism, Radhakrishnan leaves the village, but brutally attacked by ‘Komban’ Kumaran, and his gang. In another coastal area, they undergo ‘masculine disciplining’ and return to the native space to seek their family. The narrative concludes by Radhakrishnan as the ‘father’ of a child and someone who is forced to prove their masculinity by avenging the villain, and taking up the traditional employment as a fisherman.

Set in a futuristic time, *Ardhanaari* is about a feminine-presenting young male assigned at birth Vinayan addressed as Vinutha, who joins the hijra community, when banished from family and society. While living as a hijra (Manjula) outside Kerala, they recall their past, and desire for love and family. The film depicts the apathy hijra community receives from the society. Manjula was deceived by their husband Balu, and was victimized by police for the death of another hijra, Kokila. The film closes with Manjula’s suicide by drowning in sea.

*Odum Raja Aadum Rani* narrates about the glob-trotter macho Venkiti and a feminine-presenting *Karagattam* dancer Thamburu. Thamburu’s gender performance places them at the receiving end of ridicule and violence from Venkiti, Venkiti’s friends, and society. They seek the help of Maala, a female friend of Venkiti, to ‘masculinize’ and ‘cure’ Thamburu. Unable to bear the violence and harassments, the dejected Thamburu leaves Kerala. Venkiti comes to know about Thamburu’s grim past (their employment as an *Aattu* dancer, and about their family). Venkiti feels pity at Thamburu, and reaches Koovagam to take them back. But Maala intervenes and advises him to leave Thamburu at Koovagam itself where they seem to be happy in flaunting the trans identity.

The friendship of two girls and the one sided same-sex desire forms the narrative of *Irattajeevitham*. The plot depicts Sainu, who is now married to another cis man, finds it difficult to come in terms with the trans man identity of her friend Aamina (now Addruman). Addruman's identity is acknowledged by the marginalized Muslim community of the coastal region where he lives. However, he is faced with social alienation. In the end of the film, failing to fulfil his love, Addruman walks through the sea shore to an indefinite future.

In the film *Aalorukkam*, a father (who is an *ottanthullal* artist) searches for his missing son Sajeevan in a city, whom he finds now as a trans woman Priyanka, leading a quiet family life, with her partner and an adopted daughter. The traditional views of the father forces him to treat the transgender person as an aberration, despite of the warm and affectionate treatment she gives to the ailing father. Unable to live with Priyanka and her family, he decides to move out. The narrative closes when the father asks the driver to stop the moving vehicle on his return journey to his native, suggests his afterthoughts and a possible acceptance of the son as the 'daughter.'

*Njan Marykutty* depicts a post-operative trans woman Marykutty and her struggles to establish herself as the first transgender Sub Inspector in Kerala police. She experiences verbal, physical, and sexual violence from the police and cisheteronormative society. Marykutty is ostracized by the family for her gender identity, but with her self-will, strong determination, and with the help of a few supporters, she achieves her dream and sets a model for the entire transgender community.

*Udalaazham* focuses on the life of a feminine-presenting male assigned at birth Gulikan who belongs to *Paniya* scheduled tribe. Gulikan feels themselves as a woman 'trapped in a man's body.'<sup>4</sup> The film captures the social backwardness, and

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<sup>4</sup>The use of 'trapped in a wrong body' is a heavily critiqued term as it has reference to the medical practice in early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US. It is a problematic framing of trans, however in this thesis the

their struggles against all odds. The protagonist is forced to be married at the age of 14, and is sexually exploited by the cisheteronormative society outside their tribal hamlet for their gender non-conformity. At the end of the narrative, Gulikan who has lost the roots, and family, is on a constant run. They accidentally fall on a trap for tigers in the forest and meet the catastrophe.

## **Research Questions**

The questions this thesis seeks to address are the following: how the emergence of trans community in India and Kerala can be observed through historical texts, how the trans space in India emerged with close affiliation to religion, and later as a product of activism and democratic politics of recognition, how the trans space in Kerala is constructed, what are the ways in which gender variance depicted in early films, how can one analyse the frameworks in films with trans characters, the ways in which selected films attempt construction and contestation of transgender identities, the politics and various tropes of contemporary trans representation on Malayalam screen, and what are the influencing factors of production, circulation and reception of these films in Kerala, and especially how does trans people receive these films.

## **Research Hypothesis**

Kerala's public sphere and Malayalam cinema have reformulated itself to accommodate queer sexuality and transgender people amidst its deep-rooted convictions based on patriarchal moral codes on gender and sexual identities. The emergence of a transgender and queer inclusive space in contemporary times in Kerala is a reaction towards the transnational and national gender and sexuality

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term is used at only those instances where the films/trans characters themselves refer to this. This author does not wish to call trans people as 'trapped in a wrong body.' It is the individual opinion of certain informants as well as representational politics of the films.

discourses. Malayalam cinema addressed same-sex intimacies and gender dissidence in earlier films often compromising with cisheteronormativespectatorial pleasures and values, and the visible presence of trans people as central characters in contemporary Malayalam cinema is a product of democratic politics of recognition. Such characters unsettle the heteronormative public sphere and trigger (trans)forming space in the state.

## **Materials and Methods**

The thesis is framed as a visual analysis of selected number of films as well as their cultural contextualisations. It includes field work, interviews, and political observations. Chapter one primarily uses analysis of literature, interviews, and findings of the field documentation (participant observation of various queer events in Kerala). The temple festivals in Kottankulangara and Koovagam are supported with expert interviews. Chapter 2, 3, and 4 (chapter 3 and 4 particularly examines 7 selected films) are visual and thematic analysis of films supported by theories on gender identity, performativity, film theories of gaze (male, female, and transgender), psychoanalytic theories of identity formation, etc. Chapter 5 deploys ethnographic field work as well as views how these films have emerged in different times, with different foci on different gender identities, and with specific distribution and reception dynamics connected to them that have changed over time.

## **Previous Works**

Before I propose the outline of this thesis, a brief overview of the fundamental studies certain film scholars have already attempted will help to comprehend how the specific questions are debated further in this thesis.

The study has taken its key observations from the critical understandings of queer subjectivities in Malayalam cinema and social transformation in Kerala



discussed by the queer scholar Muraleedharan Tharayil. His articles (1998, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2014) form an exhaustive mapping of romantic friendships, queer sexualities, desire, affect, pleasure, queer movements in Kerala, and queer spectatorship in Malayalam cinema. The studies that span over two decades have provided a firm understanding on the shifting paradigms of gender and sexuality discourses in Kerala. Muraleedharan argues that, the transformation in the space could be observed as a result of the social movements, LGBT politics and activism, and cultural interventions. I have used his studies as a solid structure from where the thesis focuses on the contemporary visibility of transgender subjects and their sexualities in Malayalam cinema. It could be argued that, the present-day transgender visibility in the state has close connections with the sexuality movements in Kerala and Malayalam cinema in the past two decades has been demonstrating transgender subjects by reshaping the gender positioning of queer people in the state.

Navaneetha Mokkil (2009, 2010) has critically examined the ‘prostitute’ and the ‘lesbian’ figures as the contested subjects of sexuality in the state since the 90s. She argues that these figures rupture the ‘normative codes’ of sexualities and form counter discourses to heteropatriarchal imagination of ideal femininity of the ‘domestic woman.’ I would be examining the identification of same-sex underpinnings in the transgender texts by linking it with her analysis of the 1990s Malayalam cinema. Instead of the lesbian suicides she has brought up in her study, my focus in the thesis is to push the lesbian subject further to explore trans man identity in the contemporary public sphere and in the selected Malayalam film. Deepa V. N.’s (2005) ethnographic accounts of lesbians in Kerala and Gayatri Gopinath’s (2007) readings on the lesbian subject positioning in Malayalam cinema, the demarcation of a queer region in Kerala have also influenced my understandings of the ‘lesbian’ sexual identity and the ‘trans man’ gender identity in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Mokkil’s (2018) readings on queer film festivals are also considered while examining the circulation of queer and trans themed Malayalam films.

Jenny Rowena (2002) has analyzed the cultural and economic aspects of Malayalam cinema in the 1990s in her thesis on 'laughter films.' According to her, comedy films reinvented new narrative patterns, with the centrality of heterosexual romances and families. Her examination of the anxieties of masculinities, the visibility of subaltern masculinities, and the image of 'domineering women' in laughter films are significant. Her thesis sets the ground for the articulation of hitherto less-discussed topics of homosocial bondings, and the deconstruction of ideological gender positioning in Malayalam cinema. I make use of her findings in my study to view how the bonding between hegemonic masculinity and subaltern masculinity has redefined the structure of gender positioning in Malayalam cinema. Rowena's influential analysis of the characterization of certain elderly women as domineering in comedy films draws our attention to the reconfiguration of femininities in Malayalam cinema. Yacob Thomas's (2010) article on the gender constructs through female cross dressing in Malayalam cinema offers multiple perspectives on cross dressing as a trope of gender role inversion, and sexual subject positioning. This thesis differentiates the female cross dressing and male cross dressing while analyzing the non-normative gender identities represented in Malayalam cinema.

Prominent scholars, J. Devika (2007) C.S. Venkiteswaran (2010), Janaki Sreedharan (2010), and Rajeev Kumaramkandathu (2013) have studied on modernity, development, marriage, family, sexual practices, and gender performances in Kerala and its representations in literary and cultural texts. These studies help to have a picture of the public sphere of Kerala since its formation to contemporary times. It also marks the consolidation of normative families represented in Malayalam cinema in order to contrast the constitution of transgender families at present. Sony Jalarajan Raj et. al's article (2018) is a comprehensive survey of the queerness placed on the margins of heterosexuality in Malayalam cinema and it helps to understand that the gender and sexuality constructs in films stem from the homosexual unconsciousness

of Malayali. Since the scope of the thesis encompasses the production, circulation, and reception of the selected texts, it takes into account the discussions of scholars, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2006, 2009, 2010, and 2012), Jenson Joseph (2012), C.S. Venkiteswaran (2006, 2008, and 2011), S. Sanjeev (2002), and Meena T. Pillai (2017) on the industry aesthetics and spectatorial subjectivities in Malayalam cinema. Their analysis of the hierarchical division between ‘art’ and ‘commercial,’ the emergence of offbeat films, and the shifts in Malayalam industry over many decades also contribute to better understand the contemporary Malayalam film industry and its emergent gender discourses.

The thesis analyzes anthropological ethnographic studies (Serena Nanda 1999, Gayatri Reddy 2006) of the Indian hijra identity. They offer insightful analysis of the concepts of ‘*tritiya prakriti*’ in the earlier Indian texts. The same-sex desire described in the ancient religious and medical literature give evidence to the ‘submissive’ participants of such relationships, who are regarded as ‘*napumsaka*.’ It denotes their ‘neither man nor woman’ existence and the ‘third gender’<sup>5</sup> positioning in society. The stigmatization and sexual objectification persist till contemporary times and it reflects in cinema as well. It could be argued that, the contemporary Malayalam cinema has taken up queer sexualities and transgender identities as a subject matter of discussion. However, in the recent films the effort is to understand transgender identity as distinct from the traditional ritualistic community of the hijras in the other states of India. Many Bollywood films carve transgender identities (hijras) as abjects, subject of ridicule, and erasure. Moreover, they are subjects of

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<sup>5</sup>The term is a traditional one that refers to its roots in Sanskrit and Pali texts. However, in the Western context, it is a problematic term to address gender variance. The problematic usage could be viewed as a product of the implicit continuation of colonial oppression. Anthropologists Towle and Morgan (2006) offers critique of the problematic usage of this term because it has inherent ambiguities, it falsely places other cultures in an ‘ideal primordial location’ and tends to ignore gender diversity in a given culture. They tend to treat non-Western societies as static. ‘The West versus rest’ mentality misrecognise others and complicates potential political alliance across other cultures (p. 666-684). They argue that the term erases local specificities, glorifies gender diversity in a non-Western context or merges it with colonial narratives on the ‘non-civilised’ colonial other.

comic relief, along with the others who deviate from the hetero-patriarchal norms; gay men, feminine-presenting men, and cross dressers. A number of films have depicted trans people as the 'other' if we trace back to history. Such representations have the leaning towards cisheteronormalcy and to conceive transgender identity as transgressive.

Apart from these, the thesis has consulted the works of a number of scholars from the West, and many non-Malayali scholars in India and also those who are affiliated to foreign institutions, who work on transgender and LGBTQIA scholarship. They are Susan Stryker, Stephan Whittle, Jack Halberstam, Judith Butler, Wendy Doniger, Ruth Vanita, Saleem Kidwai, Wibke Straube, among many others. A comparative reading of the West vs. East is not the ultimate aim of this thesis; however, this has helped to take the transgender identity issues in society, culture, and politics from West to my familiar regional space and critically examine the new meanings of identity politics in Kerala. I have tried to move away from Western framework of inquiry to an extent, however, it is proved as not possible always.

I shall now provide a brief outline of how the thesis progresses.

### **Outline of the Thesis**

The thesis is subdivided into five chapters. Chapter 1 tries to understand transgender identity and its contemporaneity in Kerala. It gives a historical perspective of the '*tritiya prakriti*,' the gender variance mentioned in the religious texts of ancient India and further views references of 'third gender' through the literary, religious, and medical discourses, in ancient, medieval, and colonial period. The criminalization of same-sex desire and the invisibility of transgender people in the colonial period are critically examined in the chapter. It also explores various transgender communities in India who live as ritualistic performers- the *hijra*,

*jogappa, sivasathi, and aravanis*. The chapter identifies that after independence, the gender and sexuality debates focus more on HIV/AIDS eradication among the sexual minorities by the intervention of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs), and their citizenship rights claims. Moving ahead, the chapter observes the queer activism sprouting at the national level, the call to repeal IPC 377, and the gender and sexual minorities' issue becoming the subject of academic and activist discourses. Apart from campaigning for the political rights of the LGBT, academic discourses focus more on theorising gender in terms of the fluidity in its performance, and certain recent studies critique the stress given to sex reassignment surgeries (SRS). The emergent discourses in Indian texts show the transgender identities in ritualistic communities and the religious dimensions of it. The chapter further examines the historical invisibility of transgender people in Kerala's public sphere and the silencing of same sex desires in the region. The contemporary visibility of transgender people is as a result of the social movements, queer political activism, and the active engagement of queer groups, the government, NGOs, CBOs, and academics. The chapter critically observes the cultural interventions, especially a variety of media that focus on queer sexuality and transgender identities. The undercurrents of queer activism in the region have influenced Malayalam film industry and contemporary films deal with transgender identity contestation as central theme.

Chapter 2 analyses gender variance and same sex desire represented in early Malayalam cinema. Gender variance analysed here include male and female cross dressings, feminine-presenting men, female masculinity, and the gender performance of gay men and lesbian women. The chapter critically observes how cross dressing was used as a trope to arouse visual pleasure in spectators by the representation of gender parodying. Rather than investigating the gender dilemmas of the character, cinema focused on the comic relief. Cross dressed performances of cis male actors in Malayalam cinema since the 2000s portrayed slapstick comedy by the eroticization of their bodies. However, female cross dressings were presented as a temporary disguise

of identity and such cross dressings are ‘found out’ rather than they disclose themselves and the female characters compromise to cisheteronormativity in their union with the masculine hero in the narrative closure. The gender positioning of queer men and women in the cisheterosexual narratives are critically examined and it could be observed that Malayalam cinema typecasts such depictions forcing self destruction or heterosexual bondings. The conspicuous absence of trans themed films can be noted in Malayalam film history until the first decade of twenty first century. In the early 2000s, the reference to hijra in certain films map such identity in close connection with the ritualistic communities mostly in other parts of India. Identities claimed as ‘transgender’ appears in Malayalam cinema only after the second decade of twenty first century. Apart from the films that are discussed in detail, a few films during the period employ actual transgender people to enact transgender identities on screen. Such attempts are seen in the light of the transformation happening in the public sphere of Kerala.

Chapter 3 critically examines the seven selected films to understand the discussion of the gender identity, gender performance and sexuality of the transgender characters in them. It is to be noted that, these films have certain similar structure while they represent the transgender characters. They distance from the hijra narratives of Bollywood, yet one film is about the hijra community who follow their own traditional beliefs and practice alternate domesticity. Trans characters feel the gender variance of being ‘trapped in a wrong body’ and their gender performance deviate from the cisheteronormative assumptions. While visualizing the trans body, Malayalam cinema conveniently uses clothing as a signifier to their deviation. The amab (assigned male at birth) transgender people are in feminine clothing and the afab (assigned female at birth) transgender person uses masculine clothing, and certain characters use gender-fluid clothing in the phase of their gender transition. The Malayali identity of the characters is asserted through clothing. Selected films make use of mirrors as tropes of identity contestation through which trans people explore their inner self and associate themselves with an essential gender identity. It

could be observed that films politicize pleasure through the gaze of trans person to one's own body and the gaze of the spectators at their bodies. When it comes to the discussion of sexuality, the selected films have tried to represent transgender sexuality from a cisheteronormative angle. The chapter critically observes how trans bodies are eroticised as sexual objects for the visual pleasure of spectators, and at this instance, trans bodies are compared with the eroticised female figures in soft-porn films. *Kuli* scenes (bathing scenes) in the selected films are packed with erotic underpinnings. The chapter also examines the construction of trans families in the selected films, and argues that the heteropatriarchal codes of family practiced in Kerala work out in the subtext when familial spaces are captured.

Chapter 4 is a critical reading of the social positioning of the trans characters in the society they are fitted in. The social positioning of a person is determined by the gender identity, class, caste, education, employment, economic adaptability and social participation. Transgender people in Kerala have been marginalized in their families and society due to their gender identity and the chapter traces how Malayalam cinema addresses the plight of Malayali trans people. There are trans characters from marginalised communities, who lack social privileges and certain trans characters are benefited by their higher education which affect their thoughts and self esteem. I argue that, the selected films follow the pattern in which trans people who lack education, and those who hail from lower class and caste suffer the worst when compared with the trans people who are privileged with education, and have a positive world view. The chapter explores the representation of violence on trans bodies when the gender identities of the central characters do not fit with the social construction of heteronormative gender performance. Society disciplines and punishes trans people and the selected texts visualize the verbal, physical, and sexual violence against them. While the verbal and physical violence are justified to 'normalise' the trans people, it is symptomatic of the transphobia of the society. The chapter studies the sexual violence against the trans bodies by examining the molestation, rape, and public disrobing of them as recurrent images in the selected

films. Such scenes in the films are critiqued for endorsing violence on trans bodies and they reflect the society's curiosity regarding transgender persons' body. Moreover, in the film texts, the trans feminine characters are depicted as unable to resist the sexual violence on their bodies, but the trans man resists it successfully. I critique this model which give the impression that the claiming of an 'essential gender' (femininity at this instance) silences the trans person; being feminine is typecasted as a sign of submissiveness in the particular film.

Chapter 5 of the thesis analyzes the production, circulation, and reception of the selected films. The chapter attempts to have an understanding of their production history, their marketing strategies as 'commercial', 'art', and the 'middle stream' genres, and the background of their release. Certain films are widely discussed in Kerala's public sphere; they get theatre release, and are promoted by the industry, whereas a few other films are screened in film festivals only in front of selected spectators. The chapter close reads the politics of entertainment that downplays the significance of these films just because of it falling under the art category. The chapter argues that the increasing number of transgender subjects in contemporary times is a reflection of the queer activism. The transformation in public sphere is resulted through the sensible interventions of the government, academics, and activists, but, transgender people are not yet mainstreamed as lead actors in Malayalam cinema. This is evident from the selected films' use of cisgender actors to play transgender characters which incidentally 'others' the trans identity and that makes the characterization as an 'outsider's gaze' at trans life.



# CHAPTER 1

## Emerging Trans Spaces in Kerala: Histories and Politics

‘Transgender’ is a significant term that critiques the cisheteronormative models of sex, gender, and sexuality. Interdisciplinary and transnational understanding of transgender identities stemming from cultural, medical, sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic perspectives examine the construction of gender identity, gender performance, and sexual practices. These discourses suggest that trans people’s gender identity deviates from the binary assumptions of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity.’ They are ‘lived,’ ‘embodied,’ ‘experienced,’ ‘performed,’ ‘encountered,’ and are complex and varied by the binary sex or gender ideologies (Susan Stryker and Stephan Whittle 2006). ‘Transgender’ is a “practice that takes place within as well as across, between gendered spaces” (Stryker et. al 2008, 13). It is a “movement across socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place” (*ibid*).

The focus of this chapter is to provide a brief historical overview on trans community, and their socio-political and cultural mobilization in India, and more significantly in Kerala. The study makes use of details from literature review, participant observation of various events, and selected visual ethnography. A broad survey of the South Asian literature on trans identities is ventured, and an analysis of the ancient, medieval, and contemporary scholarly inquiries on the subject in India so far is attempted. The public cultural practices and the democratic politics of Kerala are now appearing as inclusive to transgender people. This could be understood from their increasing visibility in the state in contemporary times. The past decades draw the picture of transgender people and sexual minorities (Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual) in Kerala struggle to survive in a cisheteronormative society. These efforts have contributed significantly to the contemporary shifts in academic and activist

approaches to transgender identities in the state. Hence how the mobilization happens in recognizing the transgender identities in the public sphere of Kerala, in its cultural, political, visual, and social spaces set the ground for this thesis.

## **1.1 Trans-in-India<sup>6</sup>: An Introduction to the Queer and Trans Politics in India**

For the past decades, academics and activists have been trying to record the lived experience as well as identity politics of transgender people of South Asia. The transgender identifications in the global south, especially in India, are largely influenced by the cultural and religious context. Sexuality and gender identity are blended in India than in a Western context. Gender diversity spectrum overlap between sexual orientation and gender expression in traditional Indian texts, which is uncommon in West even before the medical founding of transsexual.

Many scholars are engaged in identifying trans cultures across Asia (Gayatri Reddy 2005, Howard Chiang 2012), yet the regional voices are often muted. ‘Transgender’ has entered in India recently as a popular term to refer to gender variance. Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy (2014) critiques this, as it marginalizes the South Asian discourses and practices of sexual variance as merely “local expressions of transgender identity” (320). Shraddha Chatterjee (2018) addresses the issue of the resignification of gender and sexuality discourses in India in her article. This reminds that “the all-encompassing appeal of ‘transgender’ also forgets and erases by collapsing the unique norms and prescriptions of gender performance associated with diverse communities of queer subjects caught between colonialism and globalization” (Chiang 301). In India, the word ‘queer’ denotes sexual and gender non-conforming experiences, that include “gender identities, sexual practices, sexual identities, culturally sanctioned form of erotic behaviour- which contest the embedded nature of

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase coined from the article “Trans-in-Asia” by Chiang et. al, (2018).

heterosexism” in society (Narain and Bhan 4-5). Ancient mythical texts in the South Asian Region provide sources for same-sex desire in India in religion and culture. Narain and Bhan enlist people with gender variance- *hijras*, *kothis*, *jogappas*, *jogatas*, *shivshaktis*, and *gangacharis*- as transgender people, and the term ‘queer’ narrows down the link between their gender identities and sexual orientation.

Transgender identity movement in the post-independent India is associated with the ushering of the queer political activism. It has gained visibility on the sidelines of debates of the decriminalization of IPC 377 that curtailed the free expression of same sex desire. The gender and sexuality discourses in the South Asian region have complicated ‘third’ gender and sexual identities, who are often victimized. Before progressing to that, an idea of the discursive territory of ‘third gender’ is required to be done to contextualize the transgender people in Kerala as culturally unique.

### **1.1.1 Tracing the Past: Same Sex Desire and Gender Nonconformity in Ancient, Medieval, and Colonial Literature**

Leonard Zwilling and Michael J. Sweet (1996), Wendy Doniger (2000), Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000), Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (2002) have critically examined ancient literary texts that include the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jainist texts. These texts elucidate third gender identities and same sex desire in India. They are written in *Sanskrit* and *Pali* languages and refer to *kliba*<sup>7</sup>, *pandaka*<sup>8</sup>, *tritiya prakriti*<sup>9</sup> and *napumsaka*<sup>10</sup> as people performing the non-conforming sexual and

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<sup>7</sup> In *Sanskrit* and *Pali* texts the term varies its meaning from “eunuch” to someone who is “sterile, impotent, castrated, a transvestite, a man who had oral sex with other men, who had anal sex, a man with mutilated or defective sexual organs, a hermaphrodite, or finally a man who produced female children” (Doniger 2003).

<sup>8</sup> The term is used in the context of bisexuality in Jain literature after 5<sup>th</sup> BC to refer to men who invariably desired either men or women to a desire for both sexes. See, Gayatri Reddy 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Literally means ‘the people of third sex’ in Sanskrit literature. See, Amara Das Wilhelm 2004.

<sup>10</sup> The persons classified as not having procreative ability in ancient Indian medical literature. See, Filliozat 1964, Zysk 1991, Sweet and Zwilling 1993.

gender roles. *Kamasutra*, an ancient Indian text on eroticism, sexuality, and emotional fulfilment in life, mentions *tritiya prakriti* in its initial chapters which literally means ‘third nature.’ The ‘third nature’ is explained as a reference to *napumsaka*, “neither man nor woman” by Yashodhara, in 12th century A.D., that “constitutes a medieval reading of the text” (Vanita and Kidwai 56). The Jain literature during the period which gives reference to third-natured individuals is the “the single richest source for knowledge of the third sex, as well as speculations on sex and gender, to be found in India from ancient and medieval periods” (Zwilling and Sweet 363). The classification of people and objects as natural and grammatical genders- *linga*(*purusa*, *stri*, and *napumsaka*)- by the presence or absence of certain features is pertinent in Buddhist texts. Indian medical literature signifies *napumsaka* by the presence or absence of procreative ability (Filliozat 1964, Zysk 1991). However, Jains reject the masculine and feminine markers of Buddhist and Brahmanical texts and contend that instead of the biological gender or *dravyalinga*, psychological gender or *bhavalinga* should be the basis of gender identities. A more compassionate treatment to gender identity confusion can be traced back to Jain literature, where the hyper libidinal nature of *napumsaka* was explored in the fourth to fifth century BC. Jains emphasize the sexual behavior- the sex role (receptive or penetrative)- to categorize gender identities as masculine *napumsaka* or *purusanapusaka* (active) and feminine *napumsaka* or *strinapumsaka*. According to Gayatri Reddy’s (2005),

Whatever the differences between the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain texts, there was certainly an extensive debate and literature on the concept of sexuality, differentiations between biological and grammatical gender, elaborations on sexual object choice, and the notion of third nature in India dating back to at least the third century, if not before” (21).

There are limited records on third sex from eighth to eighteenth centuries on medieval period according to Gayatri Reddy, rather than commentaries on earlier texts. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000) analyze commentaries and translations

of *Puranas* (epic and *Puranic* stories; *Katha* literature or story cycles; historical chronicles produced in courts; and devotional poetry), and Perso-Urdu materials to locate same-sex desire and third gender identities. These medieval materials “produce a range of cultural practices that have been highly influential in the subsequent periods” (65).

Medieval materials in the Sanskritic tradition cite a number of gender changes of gods and goddesses. Certain tales in the Indian epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranic* tales on Lord Vishnu’s incarnation as Mohini and Lord Shiva’s *ardhanaariswara*,<sup>11</sup> *Shikhandin* in *Mahabharata*, present multiple gender variants of gods which are unique (Hiltebeitel 1980, Nanda 1990). Gopi Shanker, a queer scholar has discussed the regional resources on the cultural and social representations of the ‘queer’ in India in his paper presented at the *National Queer Conference*, Kolkata in 2013. He stresses the need for finding counter-narratives of Western trans identities in the regional spaces. He has analyzed the traditional Indian culture that replete with myths where heroes and heroines have invariably chosen various genders without guilt. Shankar observes, “In the southern states, the ancient ‘Sangam literature’ uses the word *Pedi* to refer to people born with an intersex condition which also refers to *antharlinga* hijras and various hijra” (“No More under Siege”). He examines the Koovagam festival in Tamil Nadu, where a folk tradition called the ‘aravan cult’ of feminine-presenting trans people or *thirunangai* (who are known as ‘aravanis’ due to their association with the aravan cult) is celebrated.<sup>12</sup> In the ‘Sakibeki cult’ in West Bengal, the trans community do

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<sup>11</sup> Lord Shiva’s male and female form, i.e. half man and half woman. The form of Shiva is united with his female/Shakti form. Hijras have great affinity for Lord Shiva and the *Ardhanareeswara* is respected in Shiva temples.

<sup>12</sup>The transgender community enact the aravan cult during an annual three-day festival. According to their belief, Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Ulupi, Naga princess agrees to sacrifice himself in the Mahabharata battle with the condition that he should make love to a woman first. As no woman is ready to marry him, Lord Krishna takes the form of a woman and marries Aravan and fulfils his desire. Krishna assumes his male form after becoming a widow and the subsequent mourning. The ritualized enactment of this myth is held annually at the KoothandavurKovil in Koovagam.

not undergo castration and shave off their facial hair. They dress as women retaining their masculine features and sing in the praise of Lord Krishna (*ibid*). Similarly, the *jogappas* in Karnataka, who are the worshipers of Goddess Yellamma,<sup>13</sup> do not undergo *nirvan* like the *hijras*. They are perceived with a halo of divinity and in possession of supernatural powers of healing and fortune telling. The privileged divinity of *jogappas* is derived from the folklore of Renuka. As per the myth, she becomes Yellamma and her sons, *jogappas* (Sitlhou 2016). The possession of the Goddess by a devotee requires a gender change, that gets religious sanctity and here the transgender identity is framed as a divine division rather than an individual's wish (Bradford 1983). Religious spaces like the aravan cult in the Koovagom festival and the Yellamma *jatre* in the Saudatti temple<sup>14</sup> (where *jogappas* celebrate their myth) in northern Karnataka, etc., attract a number of transgender people. Thus, it could be argued that gender identity and sexual practices in India have been largely inclined to culture and religion of different regions.

During the Muslim kings' rule in India there had been references to eunuchs<sup>15</sup>-castrated men or men who lacked procreative ability- living as slaves or religious figures (Vanita and Kidwai 2000). Such feminine-presenting men were considered as belonging to hijra community in India. Many European travelers have recorded "eunuchs' increasing presence in various empires as political advisors, chamberlains as well as trusted generals and guardians" and the "condition of the eunuch as a castrated man" (Shaun Tougher 143). Europeans were upset by the

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<sup>13</sup> Goddess Yellamma is the Ādiśakti popular Hindu deity in South India especially in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and in parts of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. She is the Hindu Goddess of the poor and downtrodden and is popularly associated with the Devadasi concept. The story of origin of Yellamma is unique and is associated with Goddess Renuka the mother of Parashurama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. See, <<https://sites.google.com/site/goddessyellamma/Home>>

<sup>14</sup> At the Yellamma temple, *jogappas* celebrate the festival in which they behave as if they are possessed by the Goddess.

<sup>15</sup>In Indian sub continent, hijra was equated with eunuch and transgender people. The term hijra was translated in English as 'eunuch' or 'hermaphrodite' (Nanda 1999). However, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, of India in consultation with hijra and other trans activists decided to discontinue the usage of this term in government documents. The thesis uses the term 'eunuch' to point at the medieval references to sexual and gender variance only.

veneration accorded to eunuchs in holy cities of India; the sight of “whole men” kissing the hands of these “repulsively ugly (...) startlingly emaciated,” “sexless creatures” (Rutter 1928, quoted in Marmon 1995, 95).<sup>16</sup> The Perso-Urdu poetry of medieval India depicts slavery of gay men as normative (Indrani Chatterjee 1999). The slave status has in a sense given them protection during the Mughal rule. During the medieval period, “eunuchs certainly existed in large numbers in most Islamic (and many non-Islamic) empires and rose to positions of significance and affluence in the royal courts” (Reddy 23). European colonial encounter shifted the same sex desire to ‘unnatural’ acts. The hijra community were penalised under the *Criminal Tribes Act* promulgated in 1871. It called for the “registration, surveillance and control of certain tribes and eunuchs” (Srivastava 2001, quoted in Reddy 26) and the individuals in this category were punished under section 377 of the IPC, for appearing or ornamented like women in public streets or places. Thus, cross-dressing seems to be highly discouraged and criminalized during British India. This ruling laid the foundation for socio-economic discrimination against people with gender variance in India.

The European colonial rule constructed hypermasculinity over Indian masculinity and femininity. The hypermasculinity or ‘manliness’ of the British colonialists was seemingly contingent on the ‘effeminacy’ and contemptible weakness of the colonized Indian men (Nandy 1983, Sinha 1995, Indira Chowdhury 2001). The Britishers ostracized transgender people for their deviation from the norm: “transgenders being branded unclean and freakish – their marginalization was more severe than that of the Indian male who was termed effeminate and devious” (Sonya J. Nair 92). These references in the medieval and colonial literature construct the image of transgender people as who belong to a ‘third category’ and those who inherently enter into same sex orientation. The forced cisheteronormalisation could be observed as aimed at maintaining strict discipline in the adoption of laws that criminalize gender non-conforming people.

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<sup>16</sup> Rutter, Eldon. *The Holy Cities of Arabia Vol. 1*, 1928. Arabian Publishing, 2015.

Post independent India, there have been engaging debate on the sexual and gender ambiguities, cross-cultural understandings of gender fluidity, and the construction of sexual categories (Reddy 2005). In India, gender variance is examined through the most visible non-binary community of hijra. Hijra's role is observed as that of a sexual performer, apart from their religious and ritualistic role. Scholars (Serena Nanda 1990, 1994, Zia Jaffrey 1996) have tried to critically observe hijra as corollary to transgender identity. Other non-binary parallels like *Kathoey* of Thailand, *Xanith* of Oman, *berdache*/ two-spirit of Native North America, all play an "institutionalized third gender role" (Nanda 35). Trans-feminine communities are highly visible in the urban centres and small towns of South Asian region. In Nepal amab transgender people are referred to as *meti*, and in Pakistan they are called *khwajasira*, the other regional identifications include *waria* (Indonesia), *maknyah* (Malaysia), *transpinay* (the Philippines), *bin-sing-jan*, and *kwaa-sing-bit* (Hong Kong) (Khubchandani 2016, Boyce et. al 2018). Certain ethnographic studies (Dutta and Roy 2014) spread light to transgender people who wear feminine clothes and form a loose sisterhood in the North-Eastern regions of India. They address themselves as *kothi*, based on their role as recipients in a same-sex relationship. The hijras or hijadas in North Indian states have their cultural parallels in South Indian regions, *kojja*, *chchakka* (Andhra region and Hyderabad), *aaravani*, or *aruvani*, *ali*, *thirunangai* (Tamil Nadu), *jogappa* or *jogata* (Karnataka, Maharashtra), etc. In Odia language, "a hijra is referred to as *hinjida*, *hinjda* or *napumsaka*, in Telugu, as *napunsakudu*, *kojja* or *maada*, (...) in Punjabi, *khusra* and *jankha*, in Sindhi *khadra*, in Gujarati, *pavaiyaa*" ("Hijra Cultural Anthropology" 3). Kerala did not have any ritualistic communities like hijra and derogatory slangs like *Menaka*, and *Penpoosu* to refer to feminine-presenting men and people who had been suspected as gay men were in use. It points at the absence of a dignified term in Malayalam language to denote transgender people.

It could be noted that the feminine-presenting males who form a social clan in the Northern states of India legitimize their cultural identity from various myths as



discussed already, and hijras are prominent among them. The notion of the community life is key in the understanding of hijra existence. It helps them to belong to a hierarchical frame and survive as a 'parallel society.' The English word eunuch was used to refer to hijra and hermaphrodites for some time, "emasculated biological males and intersexed 'males' whose sexual organs are ambiguous at birth or who suffer from a genetical malformation" (Sandeep Bakshi 215). Serena Nanda (1990) refers to them as 'neither men nor women' in the title of her study. She describes hijra as a religious group of men who dress and act like women and whose culture center on the worship of *Bahuchara Mata*, who is one of the many versions of the Mother Goddess worshiped in India. The hijra undergo ritualistic castration<sup>17</sup> in which their genitals are removed. The hijra emasculation operation consists of surgical removal of the penis and testicles, but no construction of a vagina. It is through their identification with the Mother Goddess, and the female creative power that she embodies, the hijras are given a special place in Indian culture and society. Nanda (*ibid*) observes that hijras, as neither men nor women, perform 'institutionalized third gender role' and traditionally perform at the birth of a child, at weddings, and at temple festivals. The divinity assumed by the hijra community during such occasions stems from the religious sanctity.

Hindu texts also mention female gender variants who are less visible and prominent, as the *hijras*. In the context of Hindu values and culture, marriage and reproduction are considered as essential components of social life and the role of *sadhin* or female ascetic is significant. This has to be read in the context of the position of women in society and the concept of asceticism (Humes 1996). The ethnographic study among Gaddis, a pastoral community in the Himalayan-foothills region shows the female gender variant role, known as *sadhin*, who renounce marriages emerged in the late nineteenth century. However, they do not "wear

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<sup>17</sup>A ritualistic castration or removal of the genitals, in the hijra community it is performed by a *thayamma* known as *nirvan*. See, Serena Nanda, 1999.

women's clothing, but rather the everyday clothing of men, and they wear their hair close cropped" (Phillimore 1991, quoted in Nanda 40). The initiation to *sadhin* role is not marked by any ritual like the hijra initiation ceremony, but it is publicly announced when the female adopts male clothing and cuts her hair like a boy, who does it for his initiation rite to adulthood. The significance and the uniqueness of the *sadhin*'s role in the Gaddy community is described by Serena Nanda (2000),

The *sadhin* role, defined as an asexual female gender variant acts as a constraint on the potential, unacceptable, sexuality of unmarried women. The definition of *sadhin* as asexual transforms 'the negative associations of spinsterhood' into 'the positive associations of *sadhin*-hood' (Phillimore 1991, quoted in Nanda 41).

By a thorough reading of Serena Nanda's (1990) critical observations on trans communities in India, it could be argued that these gender variant identities in the Indian subcontinent have no exact match in the Western taxonomy of sex and gender. The hijra identity cannot be subsumed into the transnational umbrella of trans identity, as scholars suggest that this would fail to address the "conceptual baggage" associated with the category. Also, this would bolster the "long standing and continuing (post) colonial construction of scale of hierarchies"(Dutta and Roy 2014, 320).It limits the complexities of identities if one tries to view 'transgender' solely within the framework of sex/gender binaries as the quintessential 'third sex' or 'neither men nor women.' Because, they dismantle the categories of sex/gender constructed by society and create a new category of binary division.

### **1.1.2 Trans People in Post-Colonial India: Sexuality and Gender Identity**

The modern understanding of transgender people as citizens of India has political underpinnings as defined by the State in which transgender people and sexual minorities are the target groups of developmental aid or HIV intervention programs. The "gendering of sexual behaviour" and "(homo) sexualisation of gender variance" forms patterns of discrimination, and resistant strategies of community

identity (Reddy 2005, Hall 2005, Dutta and Roy 2014, 324). The establishment of various Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have given visibility to transgender people in the contemporary times and the term ‘transgender’ has been prominently used after 2000s especially, the amab trans people, as a high-risk group of HIV infection. Kareem Khubchandani (2016) has examined the activities of the NGOs and CBOs among the homosexual and trans communities, and he observes that, NGOs run by the English-speaking gay and bisexual men have created work opportunities for trans people and encouraged them to run CBOs in their neighbourhoods. Often, *hijras* are tasked with the distribution of protective measures against HIV/AIDS, and relevant literature in male cruising areas. Increasing developmental and legal policies, and state funding for transgender beneficiary programs through the Social Justice Department of the government have also gained momentum after independence, as a result of the demand for justice and rights by community members, activists, and academics.

During the second phase of India’s National AIDS Control Programme (NACP II- 1997-2007), activists such as TistaDas, West Bengal who underwent the modern SRS, that is distinct from the hijra castration-penectomy, has chosen the term ‘transgender’ for self expression (Das 2009). In consultation with community representatives, UNDP in 2009 put trans people in India under an umbrella category, which include both hijra and *kothi*, “Transgender is a gender identity. (...) It is an umbrella term which includes trans-sexuals, cross dressers, intersexed persons, gender variant persons and many more” (“Report of the Regional TG/ Hijra Consultation in Eastern India” 17). This construct of trans identity is oblivious about the trans men who are comparatively less visible in India. Transgender identity must be understood as a cross-cultural identification of the transnational movement in this categorization and it fails to address how the regional transgender identities are distinct from global identity. The biological essentialist classification excludes the intersex community who does not fit into the binary. It is significant to observe that

the state-sponsored beneficiary programs have classified transgender groups as different from the same sex category of “men who have sex with men” (Dutta and Roy 328). Care has been taken by the state to avoid the confusion between sexual and gender variants as the target groups of benefits, which is indicative of the double standard of the government adhering with the colonial codes of sexual morality in the independent state. The judgment by the Supreme Court of India has defined ‘transgender’ as an umbrella category extending its use beyond HIV-AIDS prevention, and it has firmly established the transgender rights as fundamental rights by prohibiting discrimination on the ground of gender identity (SC 2014).<sup>18</sup> But trans people disapprove the tag of ‘third gender’ used in the court verdict. They allege that the verdict fails to comprehend the different categories in it. The non-recognition of the trans people in civil and criminal statutes such as those relating to marriage, adoption, inheritance, public health, etc., continues to be discriminatory.

The increasing popularity in the use of the term ‘transgender’ in media reports despite the social stigma associated with gender nonconformity is the result of trans people’s struggles for recognition in society. Many trans people undergo SRS and self- fashion their bodies as per their wish. Some scholars critique SRS as well. Ashwini Sukthankar (2005) critiques the transsexual rights campaign that reifies the rigid categories of gender definition, “We would experience and express panic that a stated right to medical intervention, to surgery, to the refashioning of self and the body, can only lead relentlessly down a slippery slope to the validation claims in favour of voluntary amputation” (173). She argues for the government to frame gender rights as universal rights exercised by every human being rather than ‘special rights applicable’ to a particular group.’ Many of the trans and intersex people are disappointed by the *Transgender Persons (Protection and Rights) Bill 2016*,<sup>19</sup> as the

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<sup>18</sup>National Legal Services Authority v. Union of India, (2014).

<sup>19</sup> A proposed Act of the Parliament of India.

<http://www.prsindia.org/uploads/media/Transgender/Transgender%20Persons%20Bill,%202016.pdf>  
Accessed on 17 July 2018

bill in the draft does not acclaim for transgender persons the right to choose the gender identity of their choice and it also says that

Physical screenings by district screening committees be used to certify trans, gender variant, and intersex people as transgender, offers token measures in the name of anti-discrimination and refuses to recognize the distinct, even though sometimes overlapping, concerns of trans and gender variant individuals from intersex persons (*Transgender Persons Bill 2016*).

However, the Bill which has now become an Act, other government interventions, and welfare measures by governments across different states, the activities of different CBOs, and the emerging queer political activism have been mobilizing trans people in different states in India to re-affirm their identity.

It could be argued that the trans identities in India are distinct from the global counterparts, and are nurtured by the cultural practices in the region. And also in Indian context, the discussion on gender and sexuality is much more blended than in the West. The tendency to view gender variance overlapping with sexual orientation in India is distinctive from the West. While India has a cultural legacy, the West does not have a traditional understanding of gender variance outside feminine men (gay men) and masculine women and the distinction between gender variance and sexual orientation is product of medicine (pathologization). In contemporary times, trans people have started to assimilate with the global identity politics and social recognition movements, and try to form a monolithic category called 'transgender.' At this instance, the current visibility of trans people in Kerala becomes relevant. Trans people of Kerala once migrated to and lived with other trans communities in neighbouring states. Thus, the discourse of trans identity, sexual orientation, trans experiences, identity politics, social life, the legal and social measures taken by the government in contemporary scenario for their benefit, the cultural interventions that foregrounded trans identity movement in Kerala, etc. form topics of critical attention.

## **1.2 Trans-in-Kerala: Regional Identifications and Subcultural Spaces**

‘Transgender’ appears as a novel term in the gender identity debates in Kerala that gained official recognition and public attention lately by the state government’s adoption of the *Transgender Policy* in 2015. Kerala observed diplomatic silence on the same-sex intimacies in the region until the early 1990s and the regional imaginations of gender and sexuality remained as heterosexual at the surface, influenced by the colonial period and the missionary education. Muraleedharan Tharayil (1998) observes Kerala’s significant locale in India, that is far from northern states in forming its own regional identity as “it is the farthest, geographically as well as culturally from a Hindi speaking metropolitan mainstream contemporary India” (47). In Kerala, the gender identity movement has close connections with the same sex sexuality discourses. The focus in this section is to critically look at the same-sex desire in the region, and the slow ‘coming out of’ the gender non-conforming identities in the new millennium on the sidelines of the sexuality movements in Kerala. It is pertinent to find that the national queer pride parades, the survival movement of queer groups in the state, their collective action challenging the criminalization of homosexuality, and the call for the repeal of IPC 377, etc., have helped the trans visibility movement to gain momentum in the state in contemporary times. Before proceeding to analyze the trans identity politics and academic discourses, it is important to have a historical perspective of what it means to be ‘queer’ in Kerala, and how it is linked to the sexual practices, the constitution of family, the encoding of normative desire, and the cultural spaces in the locale.

### **1.2.1 The Formation of Queer Discourses in Kerala**

During the colonial period, the British educators and missionaries denounced the Indian tradition of marriage, family, and sexual practices that demean women, as primitive. Due to the influence of Victorian values, “Monogamous heterosexual

marriage came to be idealized as the only acceptable form of sexual coupling, within which the woman was to be the educated companion of the male head of the household” (Vanita and Kidwai 223). The matrilineal inheritance system of Nair communities in Kerala was looked upon by the Britishers with contempt, due to the polygamous sexual practices, and was outlawed later. The sexuality debates in Kerala since the initial days of its formation have been linked to rigorous disciplining and the establishment of a heterosexual society that practice sexuality within marriage. Rajeev Kumaramkandathu (2013) in his compelling analysis, critically examines the sexual subjects and morality in early modern Kerala. He argues that the “middle class sexual morality had attained considerable amount of acceptance and popularity in society by the 1950s” which “opened ample space to negotiate the fundamental logic of Family Planning Programme. (...) Modern heterosexual monogamous principle was already a given frame which allowed sufficient room to accommodate discussions about the different controls on sexual desire within the space of domestic family” (54). Patriarchal heterosexual families had been the prevailing norms in the 1960s and 1970s, and there was considerable silence on sexualities till the family planning programs introduced by the government. J. Devika (2005) observes that the acceptance of these family planning programs in Kerala is due to the emergence of English educated Malayali middle-class society. The feminist discourses in the 1970s tried to understand sexuality from a heterosexual point of view when they talked about sexual violence. But same sex desire could be identified in Kerala in the 1960s and 70s in the northern regions of the state, especially in Calicut, and the reasons for them are,

The rich Sufi traditions of Malabar, which continued through the 1960s and 1970s as merry, all male evening get-togethers of music and camaraderie, along with the lesser menace of the ‘straightening’ (referring to the heterosexist nature of the western educational system) effects of western education, could have sustained an environment that facilitated freer sensual interactions among men (Muraleedharan 72).

The Gulf remittance-based economy of Kerala has a prominent feature since the 1960s and it contributed to the breaking of silence on sexual practices. Certain male homosocial clubs like *mugalilsanghams* (“upstair associations” or “male meeting clubs” on the top of some shops) in Northern Malabar is a noticeable factor during the time (Osella 2012, 539). It could be observed as quite common during the 1970s and 1980s in the Malabar regions. While the male homosociality and homosexuality have had sites for articulation, female homosocial spaces remain less discussed. In his examination of the female homosocial spaces in early modern Kerala, Muraleedharan Tharayil (1998) observes that there had the possibilities of same-sex intimacies among wealthy women from Nair communities with their personal maids until the spread of English education in the second half of the nineteenth century. The colonial rule instilled heterosexual moral codes in the society and the likelihood of articulating intimate desire, especially of the same sexes were diminished.

Another important factor of social reform and sexuality movement in Kerala was the land reform movements that began in the 1880s, and continued after the independence. The Left Governments in the state have played influential role in the ‘Kerala Model of Development’ while materializing the land reforms. But this model is criticised for its exclusion of the *adivasis* (tribal groups), fishermen, women, and sexual minorities in the state. The narrow sexual morality that controlled the movement of bodies based on strict conjugality is inherent in this Kerala model (Agaja 2016). The feminist discourses that challenge heteropatriarchy have resulted in the changing politics of sexuality in the 1990s in Kerala. Navaneetha Mokkil (2010) in her study on the sexual figures of Kerala remarks, how the figure of the prostitutes, the lesbian women, etc., threatened the dominant discourses concerned with the chaste ‘domestic woman,’ the image of the patriarchal heterosexuality. She cites examples from the diasporic lesbian activist Deepa Vasudevan’s project of *Sahayatrika*, which helped the lesbian women to ‘come out.’ Deepa V. N. (2005) recalls in “Queering Kerala: Reflections on Sahayatrika” how she was forced to take the pseudonym Devaki Menon, to articulate herself during the early phase of her



fieldwork and academic writings on Kerala. Same sex desire in Kerala were largely under the closet in the 20th century. Yet one cannot dismiss the claim of homoerotic exchanges in the region despite the colonial upbringing that ‘sanitized’ the Malayali.

The visibility of the global and national queer movement (LGBTQIA) and philosophical positions have caught the attention of people in Kerala, and certain queer men and women in the state in the early 1990s itself started to break their silence. Survey reports of CBOs and NGOs, spread knowledge regarding the AIDS prevention among prostitutes and gay men and lesbian women in the state. These discourses are the noticeable transformation regarding the articulation of sexuality in the public sphere, but the approach by these agencies initially put the ‘sexual subjects’ on the fringes of social positioning. It is quite evident from the critical examination of the government activities during the period that Sharmila Sreekumar (2009) has attempted. She has analyzed the state-sponsored discourses that circulated a fear regarding the sexual subject, ie., how the body of the sex worker represented in such campaigns as, “not just the carrier of an irreversible destruction but the destruction itself” (169). The picture of the sexual figures drawn by the sensitization programs made the queer subject a topic of discussion in the public sphere, but largely dystopic. Media reports, autobiographical narratives of sex workers, etc., have received wide readership during the time and mobilized public debate on sexual practices and offered a critique of the licentious sexuality. The act of disclosing one’s queer identity through suicide is also a thriving issue that invited public discussion in the news features during the period. The suspected same sex relationship between young women is debated in the public sphere when their suicides are covered in media reports (Deepa V. N. 2005). Navaneetha Mokkil (2009) has taken up this in her analysis of the suicide of two girls in the Malayalam film *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (1986, Dir. Padmarajan). She maintains that “Lesbian suicide can be seen as an act of claiming recognition for a non-normative sexual relationship through an ultimate stepping out of the social. The ending of life, here, becomes a desperate act of visibility, a slashing of the social sphere by staging a public death” (13). Besides

the issue of queer visibility through the intervention of an outside agency and articulation through lesbian suicides, another remarkable feature of the 90s is the formation of queer groups in Kerala, a political movement initiated by the queer people themselves.

The foundation of the same-sex group, *Men in India Movement* by a group of gay-identified, educated young men in Kochi in 1996 was a culminating moment in the queer visibility in Kerala. A cultural society called *Malabar Cultural Forum* was formed in Calicut in the late 90s to promote the creative expression of sexual minorities through art and culture.<sup>20</sup> Their cultural activities have been the cruising spaces for gay men as well as for the gender non-conforming people to articulate their identity through cross-dressing. A group of seven girls from a government school in Trivandrum were expelled in 1992 for forming a lesbian group, the 'Martina Navratilova Club' (Mokkil 2010). This could be remarked as an event of disciplining the queer groups by the heteropatriarchy disregarding their struggles to come out. National level academic conferences 'Histories of Sexuality'<sup>21</sup> in 1993 and the 'Same-sex Sexualities'<sup>22</sup> in 1995 offered the platform for the educated Malayalis to speak out on their identity (Muraleedharan 2014).

The hegemonic heteropatriarchy in Kerala have forced queer men and women to be a part of the institution of heterosexual marriage. Transgender identity is

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<sup>20</sup>“Orukkam” is an annual festival of the MSM (men who have sex with men) community members organized on 30th May every year. “Orukkam” is essentially about freedom of creative expression of art and self. “Orukkam” not only provided a common platform for MSMs but also helped in developing a sense of oneness among them. The trendsetter to “Orukkam” was a “Saturday night fever” way back in 1999, where the MSMs used to gather in a small lodge in Calicut to express their sexual and emotional identity as women. MCF (Malabar Cultural Forum) conceived and implemented this programme over the past ten years. This festival brings together the community members from different parts of the state and the country. The ever-growing number of participants in each year is a testimony of the acceptance of this festival among the community members. See <https://mcfcalicut.wordpress.com/> Accessed on 15 August 2018.

<sup>21</sup>Organized by *Sakhiyani* and *Naz project* in Delhi

<sup>22</sup> Organized by *Humsafar trust* in Mumbai.

imprinted in the public imagination through the image of feminine-presenting men, who are assumed as gay by the public. Literary and visual cultural texts give evidence of male prostitutes and male dancers, who are stereotypically portrayed as gay men by the homophobic public in Kerala. The difficulty of gender nonconforming people to hide their gender performance from public visibility has resulted in them being stigmatized as gay men. Shaan P. A. (2014), in his research on queer sexualities in Malayalam literature, critically examines how transgender people were considered as visible practitioners of same sex desire in Kerala. He critiques the prevailing notion held by the society, that gay men are trans people. The visibility of gay men and male sex workers on the premise of *Thrissur Pooram*<sup>23</sup> has also formed the subject of his ethnographic study (*ibid*). The absence of people who identify as ‘transgender’ in the state can be noted in the 20th and in the first decade of the 21st centuries also. From these studies it could be argued that the social life in the state was visibly cisheteronormative with dissenting voices arising from different regions. It is thus pertinent to examine other emerging sites of identity contestations; literature, religious and cultural spaces, community activities, political participation, government interventions, and the role of the media in carving the contemporary visibility of transgender identities in Kerala.

### **1.2.2 Desire and Gender: Queer Depictions in Malayalam Literary Productions**

The public sphere in the nineteenth century Kerala is understood as heterosexual at the surface. The discourse of desire can be observed as a major preoccupation in Malayalam literature during the time itself, and the desire is expressed through various agencies. In his “Two figures of Desire: Discourses of the body in Malayalam Literature,” Udaya Kumar (2002) analyses literary texts and

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<sup>23</sup> A temple festival celebrated in the Malayalam month of Medom (April-May) is a grand assembly of gods and goddesses in and around Thrissur, Kerala. It is believed that the gods and goddesses make their visit to the Vadakumnathan Temple premises during the festival.  
[http://www.thrissurpooramfestival.com/thrissur\\_pooram.php](http://www.thrissurpooramfestival.com/thrissur_pooram.php) Accessed on 20 April 2019.

observes their role in the production of desiring subjects. He identifies two moments as crucial in the articulation of the discourse of desire,

One is an examination of the nature of desire in general and human desire in particular, in terms of which the subject seeks to identify, understand and manage its desire, the other is a movement towards the inner, whereby the interiority is seen as the true locus of desire. This is accompanied by a difficult repositioning of bodily experience (132).

When the literary discourses represented sexuality, heterosexual conjugality was the prominent aspect around which the dictions of desire were constructed. The underpinned homoeroticism in the Malayalam literature in early modern Kerala has been the subject of inquiry of many scholars in the twenty-first century. Such studies spread lights to certain early literary works like Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's *Shabdangal* (*The Voices*, 1947) (Rajeev Kumaramkandath 2013), and C. V. Raman Pillai's novels (Shaan 2014). *Shabdangal* was condemned as immoral because of its representation of same sex desire of men. The novel depicts a man who joins the hijra community after being "homosexually assaulted" in childhood (Vanita and Kidwai 230). It is the earliest depiction of queer sexuality and the hijra identity in Malayalam literature. The harassment and trauma arose from the sexual assault are captured along with the gender identity confusion the hijra character experiences in the novel. It is pertinent to observe that even in the early Malayalam novels, queer and trans people are discussed as the figures of sexual objectification by the heterosexual majority.

The consolidation of Kerala as a linguistic territory of India after the formation of the nation is significant regarding the discussion of sexuality in the region. While the gender non-conforming identities and sexual desires were denied space in the public sphere, the regional literature discussed it apart from the media reports and visual cultural texts. Madhavikkutty's fictional memoir *Ente Katha* (*My Story* 1973) mentions about same-sex desire and the word *kundan* gets a reference in

it. The word denotes to a feminine-presenting or ‘soft-looking’ young male who would play a potential ‘passive’ role in a same-sex act. Her 1988 novel *Chandanamarangal* (*Sandal Trees*) portrays the same sex intimacy of two women who suffer from the orthodox heterosexual joint family framework in Kerala during the time. The articulation of same-sex desire in these literary texts disrupts the heterosexual construction of normative gender performance by necessitating “a pleasurable alternative to socially sanctioned heterosexuality” (George 118). Transgender identities are depicted in Malayalam literary texts as ‘deviant’ and who live as ‘alternative gender identities’ in heteronormative societies. Their existence ruptures the heterosexual normalcy in society. *Napumsakangal* (*Gender Neutrals*, Madhavikkutty), *Hijadayude Kutti* (*The Child of Hijada*, Indu Menon), *Chedamsajeevitham* (*Half Life*, Pramod Raman), *Rathi Mathavinte Puthran* (*The Son of Mother Rathi*, Pramod Raman), and *Edwin Paul* (C. V. Balakrishnan), etc., are among the short stories in the recent literary history that discussed non-confirming gender identity and sexuality. The fictional works about transgender people include *Hijada* (M.M. Menon), and the translated work from Tamil language to Malayalam, *Avan-Athu= Aval* (He-It=She, S. Balabharathi). Such trans narratives written by cis writers assume an outsider’s gaze at the life of ‘third genders’ and ‘alternative sexualities.’ In these works, trans people are depicted as following the custom of the *hijra* community who form cultural spaces outside Kerala.

When certain Malayali trans people started breaking their silence by narrating their life with the *hijra* communities outside Kerala, it has become more authentic account than the fictional narratives in Malayalam. The autobiographies published at the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century, form monographs of transgender people which provide an insider’s narrative of trans life; about the social ostracism they face, and their struggles for existence. Two autobiographies Jareena’s *Oru Malayali Hijadayude Athmakatha* (*The Autobiography of a Malayali Hijada*, 2006), written in Malayalam, and *Oru Hijadayude Athmakatha* (*The Autobiography of a Hijada*, Revathi, 2011) translated from Tamil to Malayalam narrate the pathetic life

of trans people in the home state and their search of identity, gender visibility, and solace. *In Search of Space: A Transgender Tells His Story* (2008) is the biography of the Malayali trans man SreeNandu, written by J. Rajasekharan Nair. In contemporary times Malayali trans people articulate about their body, gender identity, and sexuality through literature. The contribution of the trans woman poet Vijayaraja Mallika is significant in this respect, as her writing looks at trans identity through her own experiences. Mallika has published around 21 poems and the anthology of poems *Daivathinte Makal (The Daughter of God)*, illustrates the trans body politics, the way a trans person looks at society and society's perceptions of trans identities. Her poetry speaks about the shattered dreams of gender non-conforming people in leading a family life, giving birth to a child, and enjoying motherhood. Her poetry critiques the patriarchal social system that makes trans lives difficult.

A limited number of academic texts have explored the issues and political debates on queer sexuality and trans identities in Malayalam, besides a number of media reports featuring lesbian suicides. A few studies on trans identities in Kerala have been published since the last two decades. The scope of a thesis that exclusively analyzes the cultural texts that deal with the trans people of Kerala could be located here. The national level debates on IPC 377 and the queer activism surrounding it has shaken the public sphere in Kerala, which has captured the attention of scholars. *Transgender: Charithram Samskaram Prathinidhanam (Transgender: History, Culture, and Representation, 2016)* by Resmi G. and Anil Kumar K.S. is the first book that records the trans spaces in Kerala. The work engages a critical understanding of the 'Malayali transgender identity' in Kerala but fails to distinguish their cultural significance as Keralites when the work read their identity in the context of the hijra community. The book edited by Shaji Joseph, *Moonnam Lingam: Limganeethikkayulla Nilavilikal (Third Gender: The Cry for Gender Justice, 2015)*, and P. Surendran's *Hijadakalude Porul (The Truth about Hijadas, 2008)*, *Devadaasikallum Hijadakalum (Devadasis and Hijadas)* are the other works in Malayalam in the recent decades besides a number of articles published in periodicals

and newspapers. As Shaan P. A. rightly points out in his study (2014), the early literature presented the trans identity by associating them with the ritualistic gender non-conforming communities outside Kerala. Often the trans peoples' comparative visibility in the public sphere has forced the society to view them as representatives of same sex desire in such texts. The proliferation of blogs, and social media in the past years have actively contributed to trans literature in Kerala. These writings are easily accessible and they often appear as personal narratives and independent researches. The momentum of its growth since 2015 has been extreme and radical, as a result of the queer activism in Kerala. Media reports which cover the trans discourse in the state also spread light to the formation of the religious space in Kerala that sanctions a temporary avenue for trans people to perform their gender. The visibility of trans people in the temple festival at Kottankulangara in Kollam district of Kerala are unique in this sense. The recent increase in the number of trans devotees in the festival is suggestive of their visibility in the public sphere; they try to capture the attention of the media and claim the space for the articulation of their identity.

### 1.2.3 Trans Visibility in the Sacred Spaces of Kerala

The *chamayavilakku* festival of Kottankulangara temple as proclaimed by the devotees is not a trans festival like the aravan cult in Koothandavar temple of Koovagam village in Tamil Nadu. In the Koovagam festival, trans people re-enact the myth of Lord Krishna's reincarnation as Mohini, an enchantress and her marriage with the son of the Naga Princess Ulupi, who is known as Aravan. On the very next day, trans people mourn the death of Aravan in the battle of Mahabharata by breaking their bangles and *talis*.<sup>24</sup> A large number of trans people arrive at the temple to participate in the festival and the space gives religious sanctity and dignity for their gender performance. Similarly, in the border regions of Karnataka and Maharashtra, the jogappa community celebrate *jatre* in the temple at a place called Saundatti. In

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<sup>24</sup> < <http://www.koothandavartemple.tnhrce.in/> > Accessed on 25 May 2018

Hyderabad, the Hindu festival- *bonalupanduga* (literally means the ‘pot festival’ in Telugu) is celebrated at the Goddess Yellamma temple. According to Gayatri Reddy (2005), “Near the temple premises, one invariably sees a number of sari-clad men (and women), their foreheads smeared with turmeric, dancing as if possessed. These individuals are jogins and siva-satis, still other self- (and hijra-) identified members of the koti family” (68). There are rich resources of religious divinity to trans people outside Kerala, however, a trans inclusive space in a cisheteronormative religious festival qualifies the Kottankulangara festival as unique when compared with the other trans temple festivals.

The annual *Chamayavilakku* festival is an offering to the Goddess Bhagavati. The gender performance of the cross dressed cis male devotees is normalized even by those who eschew the visibility of feminine presenting trans people in the public sphere. Oral narratives on the origin of the temple point at ritualized cross-dressing, which become the chief offering of the male devotees. During my field visits to the temple in 2016 and 2017, I interacted with the temple authorities who maintained that trans people are not part of the festival, for their fear of the possible tagging of it as a trans festival.



Figure 1.1 Trans people Renju Renjimar (left) and Sheetal Shyam (right) at the Kottankulangara festival (Image Source: Facebook).



However, trans people participate in the ritualistic cross-dressing as per news reports. They see it as an opportunity to flaunt their femininity. It is reported in the media that the event gives “the freedom to dress up as a woman and travel in buses without much stigma” (“This Year’s Chamayavilakku”). A celebrity Malayali trans makeup artist, Renju Renjimar puts it, “I have been attending the festival for last 23 years. Earlier, it was our only chance to stroll openly as women and even now we are very happy and excited to be part of it” (“Discovering the Sacred Feminine”). In this respect, the festival celebrates gender fluidity and it may be read as a temporary space of queering and the celebration of trans identity. The embarrassment in acknowledging the trans presence in the festival even though it is about the mythical<sup>25</sup> gender change, demonstrates the stigma meted by the trans community in Kerala. Renjimar’s comments indicate that trans people in Kerala who are closeted, view the cross dressing festival as a space to flaunt their identity publicly. Though not a trans festival, the media endorsement could be observed as a social sanction for trans people in the religious space.

*Attukal Pongala* is another festival that constitutes the annual female homosocial space on the premises of the Thiruvananthapuram city as part of one of the many rituals in Attukal Devi Temple in the capital of Kerala. Darshana Sreedhar (2014) remarks that, “it has been appropriated as a hyper-feminine space and as a ritual performed exclusively by women devotees” (53). The all-women space at *Attukalpongala* could be seen as parallel to the male homosocial space in the Sabarimala temple in the state. The trans community also started attending the *pongala* festival as reported in media<sup>26</sup>. The amab trans people who recently

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<sup>25</sup> According to the oral narratives, the temple has a mythical past; it was a deserted place and a group of cow-herd boys got a coconut (*kottan* in local language), and to break the coconut, they found a stone from this place. When they hit the stone with the coconut, it began to bleed, and an astrologer suggested building a temple in the place where the stone was found. As per the belief, since there were no girls to hold the lamps as offering to the Goddess, young boys cross-dressed as girls carried the lamps. The same is celebrated as a religious ritual in the temple. See. The pamphlet issued by the temple trust, Chavara Sri. Major Kottankulangara Temple, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> “Transgenders in AttukalPongala 2018.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Asianetnews, 2 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWvkNaTtseU>

participated in the festival attribute the chance of flaunting the hyper-feminine space and seek the blessing of the deity to their femininity. The lack of an exclusive trans festival in Kerala is undermined when trans people assimilate into the mainstream society's gendered spaces by making their presence felt. This political move is significant to examine the feminine-presenting trans people's entry at the Sabarimala temple as well in connection with the proclamation of women's entry by the Supreme Court of India in 2018. The Supreme Court of India's verdict<sup>27</sup> that sanctioned the entry of women of reproductive age at the homosocial space marked a rupture of the hegemonic patriarchy. Malayali transgender people have (feminine-presenting/ trans women) politicized the event by claiming their right to enter the religious space. This act may be seen as politically motivated at the instance; for the first time, trans people demanded their right to worship Lord Ayyappa along with other devotees. Transgender people receiving permission to enter Sabarimala temple<sup>28</sup> could be observed as historic for their success in the struggles for existence. However, the massive struggles at the temple premise by the devotees against women's entry underline the strong-knit patriarchy in the society. The absence of an exclusive trans festival and transgender space in the state demonstrates the gaps in our progress, yet one cannot ignore the slow changes happening in the sacred spaces when transgender people also actively participate in the rituals and worship.

#### **1.2.4 Trans in the Public Sphere of Kerala: Inclusive Spaces**

The contemporary visibility of trans people in the public sphere is due to the historic struggles by the LGBTQIA communities at the global, national, and regional level against the discriminations set by heteronormative society. This section

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<sup>27</sup>[https://www.supremecourtindia.nic.in/supremecourt/2006/18956/18956\\_2006\\_Judgement\\_28-Sep-2018.pdf](https://www.supremecourtindia.nic.in/supremecourt/2006/18956/18956_2006_Judgement_28-Sep-2018.pdf). Accessed on 25 July 2018,

<sup>28</sup>“Four Transgenders, who were Denied Entry, Pray at Sabarimala Temple.” *NDTV*, 18 December, 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/kerala-news/sabarimala-temple-4-transgenders-who-were-first-denied-entry-offer-prayers-at-lord-ayyappa-temple-1964417>

critically views the contemporary shift in terms of the specificity of space, and time by examining the CBO and NGO interventions, academic discourses, government policies, and visual cultural productions that accelerate the queer activism and trans visibility in Kerala. Jack Halberstam (2005) recalls Michael Foucault's comment in "Friendship as a Way of Life" as, "homosexuality threatens people as a way of life rather than as a way of having sex" (Foucault 310, quoted in Halberstam 1) when they talk about living in the contemporary queer and trans inclusive space. Queer cultural discourse has affected the thought process of different institutions across cultures, regional societies, the legal system of different nations, marriage and family, religious faith and the visual cultural texts. The queering in Kerala could be traced to the 1990s, but the discourses have become active in the last decade and especially during the national debate for the decriminalization of homosexuality. LGBTQIA community, who were looked upon as threats to heteronormalcy united against the criminalization of homosexuality. Feminine-presenting males and masculine females have been the metaphor for homosexuality in heteronormative society and hence their 'coming out' in the public sphere of Kerala and the articulation of their rights, the repealing of IPC 377 by the Supreme Court in 2018,<sup>29</sup> etc. form an inclusive space in the region.

The 'invisibility' of transgender and homosexual people in the public sphere of Kerala before the 1990s is due to the following reasons: the society's reluctance to accept gender con-conformity and same sex desire, and the belief of the society that trans community is living in metro cities outside Kerala. The proliferation of NGOs in the 90s could be attributed to the neoliberal policies of the government along with the interventions against the spread of HIV/AIDS. The target groups of such programs were mainly sex workers and sexual minorities. During the same period a group of young feminists conducted fact-finding investigations in Kerala regarding the suicides of young women. The possible reasons behind such suicides are same sex

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<sup>29</sup> Accessed on 16 August 2018, [https://www.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2016/14961/14961\\_2016\\_Judgement\\_06-Sep-2018.pdf](https://www.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2016/14961/14961_2016_Judgement_06-Sep-2018.pdf)

desire, the threat of violence, forced heterosexual marriage, and forced sex. The report of the fact-finding team dispelled the myth of the non-existence of lesbian women in Kerala, and the reality that a lot of trans men suppressed their identities due to fear. The pathologization of same sex desire and gender non-conformity is evident in the case of many women who were brought to psychiatric professionals by their relatives (Agaja 2016). *Sangama*, an NGO that works for transgender and sexual minorities' welfare in the Kerala and Karnataka states made history on 23rd April 2013, when it brought 35 transgender people who identify as hijra, in front of a District Judge who served as the member secretary of the Kerala State Legal Services Authority (KSLAS). The authority was working to provide legal aid to the poor and the marginalized sections of the society to protect their constitutional and legal rights. The NGO observed the status of trans people in Kerala until then in its blog,

Though Kerala has witnessed a number of social movements advocating for rights, the state remains visibly transphobic and homophobic. MSM, transgenders and hijras (MTH) are considered criminals, frequently harassed and even murdered. Already disproportionately vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, community members have limited access to quality health services, and healthcare workers too often treat them with little dignity or respect. Such discrimination undermines health and wellbeing, forcing the community to remain hidden with limited economic prospects. Many turn to sex work or leave Kerala for better opportunities elsewhere. The state has the highest migration rate for transgenders in India ("Transgenders Speak Out in Kerala").

Trans people of Kerala were silenced through disciplining and violence by the public and police. The face-censored images of the trans women circulated in an online repository of the NGO, that organized the consultation and planning meeting is demonstrative of the transphobic and homophobic public sphere of Kerala even a few years back. The image (Figure 1.2) traces back to the haunting past. The space has now transformed tremendously, and trans people are now celebrating their identity.



Figure 1.2 The face-censored image of transgender people who attended the Consultation and planning meeting in Kerala on 23 April 2013 (Source: [www.allianceindia.org](http://www.allianceindia.org)).

The first transgender survey<sup>30</sup> in the state was conducted by the Social Justice Department of Government of Kerala in 2014. It covered the social and personal aspect of trans people in Kerala. The term ‘transgender’ was adopted for the first time in an official document instead of the derogatory terms that Malayalis used to make fun of queers.<sup>31</sup> Based on the findings in the survey, the state has adopted a Transgender Policy<sup>32</sup> in 2015 which is unveiled at the International Conference on Gender Equality (ICGE).<sup>33</sup> The transgender survey covered the basic details of trans persons, their awareness about their own bodies, self-esteem, civil rights, access to health service, and the ability to live with dignity and freedom. Moreover, there is a section to understand the priorities, needs, and aspirations of trans people. The transgender survey and transgender policy can be discerned as the first effort by the government to understand a transgender person as a citizen of India. The effort to

<sup>30</sup> <<http://swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Survey%20Report/12157.pdf>> Accessed on 15 July 2018

<sup>31</sup> Terms like *penpoosu*, *menaka*, *onpathu*, *kashmalan*, *tharikida*, *chathupottu*, *flute*, *shikhandi*, *sadhanam*, *vandu*, *kundan*, etc. are used as slangs to refer to homosexual and transgender people in Malayalam. Even now, there lacks a Malayalam term that address transgender people with dignity, and they prefer the English term ‘transgender.’

<sup>32</sup> See the policy document of State Policy for Transgenders in Kerala 2015, <<https://kerala.gov.in/documents/10180/46696/State%20Policy%20for%20Transgenders%20in%20Kerala%202015>> Accessed on 15 July 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Accessed on 15 July 2018, <<https://genderpark.gov.in/icge.html>>

locate trans identities in Kerala who experience gender dysphoria comes to fruition with the government intervention in the state. The policy document is the first official document and initiation to a recorded history of transgender people in Kerala, both the amab (assigned male at birth) as well as afab (assigned female at birth) trans people, and it reinforces their ‘regionality.’ An important shift in the queer discourse in the 21st century is trans people becoming recipients of assistance from developmental programs at the national and state levels.

### **1.2.5 The Emergent Roads: Trans Visibility in Kerala and Governmental Initiatives**

Several other measures adopted by government mark the transformation in the public sphere that offered the opportunity to many Malayalis to ‘come out’ without any fear of being harassed or ridiculed. Educational difficulties faced by trans people are the thrust in the policy and hence the government has started to conduct continuing education programs for trans students. Kerala has been branded as the model state with the highest literacy rate, however, the trans people in the state in the past failed to finish their schooling due to different factors. With the help of *Saksharatha Mission*, Kerala government has started the continuing education for them (“Kerala Scores Again”). The Kerala government has directed universities to reserve seats for trans students in undergraduate and postgraduate courses subject to fulfilment of their qualification (“Kerala Announces Reservation for Transgender Students in Colleges”). The University of Kerala has adopted a *Transgender Policy*<sup>34</sup> for its trans students modeling on the state policy to address equal opportunity, respect, and educational needs. The main concern of the policy document is to bring the trans students to the mainstream by education and to remove the social stigma. As a consequence, the university has ensured anti-ragging and counseling services,

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<sup>34</sup>See the University of Kerala Policy for Transgender Students.  
<[https://www.keralauniversity.ac.in/pdfs/news/kerala\\_university\\_transgender\\_policy1463741162.pdf](https://www.keralauniversity.ac.in/pdfs/news/kerala_university_transgender_policy1463741162.pdf)>  
Accessed on 16 July 2018.

syllabus revision, scholarships, and other benefits apart from the other trans friendly infrastructures. Maharaja's College, Ernakulam has reserved seats for trans students in response to the government direction.<sup>35</sup> Besides these, there are other education programs for transgender people in Kerala, as an initiative by the government.<sup>36</sup> *Mission Trans 5* is the social internship proposal for the young generation to hoist awareness about sexual, gender and bodily diversity, and to promote and ensure equal rights and fair treatment for trans people in society hosted by the district collector's student community service of Kollam district with Social Justice Department of Kerala. The first transgender school 'Sahaj International' started by transgender people themselves at Thrikkakara in the Ernakulam district of Kerala to educate school drop out trans people through open schooling. It shut down later due to the limited number of trans students turning up for admission. The reason for it opens up discussions about other issues like poor livelihood opportunities faced by the trans community in Kerala. The discussion on the visibility of transgender people in contemporary Kerala emphasizes their social upliftment through education.

### 1.2.6 Academic and Activist Interventions

Academic discourses along with activist interventions have helped in marking space for trans people in Kerala. The first International Conference on Gender Equality (ICGE) 2015 held in Thiruvananthapuram, organized by the Social Justice Department of Kerala and in which the transgender policy of Kerala was released. A.C. Sreehari (2016), the scholar who writes extensively on the cultural aspects of the

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<sup>35</sup> <<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/kerala-govt-allots-2-additional-seats-course-transgender-persons-colleges-84130>> Accessed on 18 July 2018.

<sup>36</sup> <<https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/220317/kerala-govt-initiates-special-education-programme-for-transgenders.html>> Accessed on 18 July 2018.

region called Payyannur, a small town in Northern Malabar notes how ‘transgender’ is a category worth reckoning in academic space, through organizing a national seminar on transgender issues at C.A.S. College Madayi, near Payyannur in 2015. The documentary *Aan Poov (Male Flower)*, 1996 directed by P. Balan, the earliest trans biopic which discusses the transformation from a female to a male, was screened during the seminar session. The trans activist Kalki Subramaniam<sup>37</sup> was invited by Payyannur Mid Town Rotary Club, and Sreehari remarks that “Through such endeavors, such organizations attempt to conform to neo liberal, agendas of making the ‘untouchable’ third gender visible, offering them a cultural space to celebrate their selves as ‘others’ rather than as part of the ‘high culture’ of Payyanur” (7). In the next year, the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Thiruvananthapuram has conducted a national seminar,<sup>38</sup> in association with *Queerala*, a queer group based in Kochi which offered exclusive academic space for trans people and other sexual minorities. Modeling on these, many other academic institutions like the University of Kerala, Kaladi Sanskrit University Thiruvananthapuram sub-center, the University College Thiruvananthapuram, and a number of other colleges in the state have begun to address trans issues and their space in Kerala as a thrust area of discussion. The national Young Scholars Congress 2019 organized by the A. K. G. Study centre in Thiruvananthapuram has approached diverse issues trans community faces in contemporary times in the presence of the transgender panelist Sheetal Shyam. The series of educational programs and the academic discourses that have politicized the struggle for recognition by trans people in the state and the role of government institutions in forming a queer temporality in the state are significant.

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<sup>37</sup> Kalki Subramaniam has addressed the public as the key speaker of ‘Voices’ at the Kazhcha film festival at Trivandrum in 2018. She recalled her experience at an academic event in which she was invited as a guest at Farook college, Calicut in 2007. Students looked at her with embarrassment, as if she was an alien. She pointed at the transformation happened in Kerala over a span of last ten years and acknowledged it as very positive. See. <https://www.facebook.com/kfftvm/videos/306613319954119/> Accessed on 8 December 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Quest 2016, a two-day National Seminar on Queer Discourses and Social Dialogues, <<http://queerala.org/quest/>> Accessed on 17 July 2018



Due to activist interventions for the trans rights in the state, a transgender cell, a round-the-clock crisis management centre, were also launched to “act as a central point to provide support to the Transgender Justice Board so that they get the financial aid to implement the transgender policy. The cell will review projects, arrange new projects with the support of NGOs” through the state government’s project called “Mazhavillu” (“C.M. Pinarayi Vijayan to Launch Project for Transgender People Today”). Government through the Social Justice Department has started giving funds to medical assistance after the SRS, and funds to be self-employed.<sup>39</sup> Necessarily, these measures recognize the existence of trans identities in Kerala and critiques the society’s unwillingness to accept them.

The modern understanding of trans identities in Kerala can thus be read in line with the citizenship rights and as a product of the developmental initiatives by the state as well as the CBOs. As a result of it, they get political, social and cultural recognition which is evident from the transformation in the political sphere. The right to cast vote in 2016 Kerala assembly election and the distribution of identity cards are important acts for political recognition. The documentary *Avalilekkulla Dooram* (2016) that narrates the struggles of the trans woman Surya’s life depict her casting of vote in the 2016 Kerala Assembly elections and the joy to claim citizenship rights. The Social Justice Department of the Government of Kerala has issued special identity cards to trans people to access welfare programs.<sup>40</sup> In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, trans people have engaged in open discussions about their rights, sensitization campaigns among the mainstream society as voters, and several trans and intersex people have contested to become elected representatives. The intersex candidate AswathiRajappan who contested from Ernakulam campaigned by inviting peoples’ attention to the gaps in the government policies, and the denial of justice.

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<sup>39</sup> <K[http://swd.kerala.gov.in/scheme-info.php?scheme\\_id=MTQ3](http://swd.kerala.gov.in/scheme-info.php?scheme_id=MTQ3)> Accessed on 15 August 2018.

<sup>40</sup> <[http://sjd.kerala.gov.in/scheme-info.php?scheme\\_id=IDE1Mw==](http://sjd.kerala.gov.in/scheme-info.php?scheme_id=IDE1Mw==)> Accessed on 25 March 2019.

From the struggle for space, these political initiatives for trans people in contemporary times lead us the understanding of their economic independence, self assertion, and pride. Mechanisms by the government to provide employment opportunities to gain economic independence are another striking feature to observe.

### **1.2.7 Employment Opportunities for Trans People in Kerala**

While looking at trans people in Kerala, their present employment opportunities and livelihood should also be discussed. While the hijra community follow their traditional livelihood methods in other states by perform at weddings and the birth of children in Northern states, they also use sex work for livelihood (Hossain 2017). They receive alms through begging and sex work. But sex work earn them stigma and violence on their bodies. The police brutality is the worst among all, due to which most of the trans people are afraid to report violence committed against them. When the government interventions gave legal recognition and citizenship rights to the trans identities, many have begun to come out openly by admitting their gender nonconformity.

For trans people in Kerala when compared with other trans communities in India, the absence of a traditional community life can be noted. The desire to get dignified jobs and the aim to mainstream their identity through employment is the characteristic of trans people in the state at present. Earlier, trans people in Kerala have migrated to cities in other states and joined the hijra community for a home and livelihood. The trans survey pointed at the opportunities of employment for trans people in the state who wish to come back. Trans people in the state have offered to be placed in the *Kochi Metro project*. But those who received a job at the Metro have abandoned it by complaining about the meager salary which was not sufficient for the cost of living in Kochi, and the discriminatory attitude of the employers. A study about the working condition of trans employees in Kochi metro by Chaithanya K. (2019) recommends for increased salary, equal working conditions with other staffs,

transportation, and other infrastructure facilities, apart from an attitudinal change in the authority. Lately, some trans have announced self employment by setting up a restaurant and a beauty parlor in Kochi. Such ventures indicate the path of progress the trans people in Kerala have attained.



Figure. 1.3 Deepthi Nair as the cover girl of *Vanitha* (July 15-31, 2016)

Individual success stories of Malayali trans people celebrated by media have been endorsement to those who are closeted. Certain Malayali trans people work as professional makeup artists, and among them Renju Renjimar is popular for her works “from magazine cover to feature films” (“Renju Renjimar”). The first trans woman who is placed in IT field in Kerala is Sara Sheik (“Meet Kerala’s First Transgender IT Professional”). Tripthi Shetty, another Malayali trans woman has received the artisan card from the central governments’ the Ministry of Textiles and she has been a trans model by profession (“Tripthi Shetty, A Transgender Person Gets Artisan ID”). The trans woman actress Anjali Ameer has acted in a lead role in a successful film (“Meet Anjali Ameer: India’s First Transwoman Star”). Deepthi Nair has created history by becoming the cover girl of *Vanitha*, a leading women's magazine in Malayalam besides being a famous trans woman model (“Vanitha Cover Girl Trans woman Deepthi”). Many other trans persons like Shyama S. Prabha, Sheetal Shyam, Vihaan Pithamber, etc. are figures celebrated by media for their achievements as trans persons and trans activists.

### 1.2.8 The NGOs, CBOs, and the Queer Politics in Kerala

The visibility of trans in contemporary times is also due to the functioning of CBOs for their advantage. The government has conducted transgender survey through CBOs and they are quite stronger in the northern districts of Kerala (Nair 2015). *Sahayatrika*, *Vaathilakam*, *Snehatheeram*, *Jwalamukhi*, *Queer Kerala* are certain groups that have worked for the welfare of queer people in Kerala (Mokkil 2010, Shaan 2014). *Queerala*,<sup>41</sup> a CBO based in Kochi has been conducting academic sessions by mobilizing the support through online resources that include *YouTube*, blogs and social networking sites like *Facebook*.



Figure 1.4 The Facebook page of *Queerala* on July 11, 2018

They are able to create a ripple in the social space in Kerala. As a CBO, *Queerala* is not limited to trans community but they are working for the entire LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual) community living in Kerala and outside the state. The *Facebook* page of *Queerala* describes it as the registered organization for Malayali LGBTQIA persons started functioning from 2012 onwards as a *Facebook* support group for individuals interested in queer topics. They aim for a society free of discrimination against gender non-conforming individuals and sexual minorities. Constantly working to empower the LGBTQIA community in Kerala, they support individuals to ‘come out’ as well as being

<sup>41</sup> <<https://www.facebook.com/Queerala/>> Accessed on 11 July 2018.

comfortable with their gender identities. *Queerala* disseminates national and international news in English and Malayalam, and organizes support, and shares the news about LGBTQIA related events in Kerala. They provide necessary counseling service to Malayali youngsters, and act as a repository on LGBTQIA topics and sensitize the society and media on LGBT human rights. They conduct seminars, art exhibitions, and awareness programs. *Queerythm*<sup>42</sup> has started functioning in Thiruvananthapuram in 2017, and the organizers of the CBO include activists, academics, and queer people living near to Thiruvananthapuram. Like *Queerala*, they have been coordinating monthly meetings, and empower trans people through education. The Facebook page of *Queerythm* says it is “a registered community-based organization for the LGBTQIA people. Started as a support group (with regular monthly meetings on first Saturdays) for queer individuals, we aim for a society free of discrimination against gender and sexual minorities.” The celebrity make-up artist and actor Renju Renjimar has founded the *Dhwayah Arts and Charitable Society* in 2017 to promote cultural activities among trans people, and the organization has become the key to begin the annual beauty pageant for trans people in Kerala. Similarly, *Oasis Cultural Society*, based in Thiruvananthapuram is another CBO and cultural society, which gives support and encouragement for trans people. A few other trans organizations in Kerala that have emerged since the transgender survey and transgender policy, and who actively help and support transgender people in different districts include *Loveland Arts Society* (Kollam), *Santhwanam* (Pathanamthitta), *Lasya Kairali* (Kottayam), *Samrudhi* (Kottayam), *Karma Cultural Society* (Malappuram), *Malabar Cultural Forum* (Kozhikode), *Snehatheeram* (Kannur), and *Kshema* (Kasaragod). All these CBOs promote cultural activities, mobilization, education, counseling, and support for transgender people in Kerala. It is observed that, through their intervention, tremendous change has happened within a span of a few years in Kerala. These groups use the platforms like media, especially the cyberspace-social networking sites like *Facebook*- to spread news about queer events happening in Kerala and across the globe. This collective mobilization in a

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<sup>42</sup><<https://www.facebook.com/queerythm/>> Accessed on 11 July 2018

sense is an eye opener for the general public in sensitizing themselves and brings transgender people in Kerala to the mainstream.

### **1.2.9 Cultural Interventions: Film Festivals, Pride Parades, Beauty Pageants**

The surge of trans cultural programs in the state for the past few years include the participation of the trans community in the *Onam* celebration in 2016, the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK 2016), and the Female Film Festival of Kerala (FFFK 2016). The IFFK and the FFFK included films on LGBTQIA- titled “Gender Bender”- and seats were reserved for them in the screenings. The introduction of trans friendly toilets at the festival venue<sup>43</sup> was unprecedented and these efforts by the organizers mark changing sensibilities of the society.

Kerala has an informed public sphere with the proliferation of print and visual media that produce cultural materials (Jeffrey 1992, Radhakrishnan 2005, Mokkil 2010). The contribution of the contemporary media in transforming to a queer inclusive space in Kerala is a significant factor. The print media’s popularization of trans initiatives and programs are to be analyzed in line with the television channels in the state which have also been airing programs based on trans life in Kerala. Social media, blogs, *YouTube*, etc., have been actively engaging in mainstreaming the LGBTQIA in the state. The objectives of trans-themed programs include an analysis of the factors that are detrimental for the migration of Malayali trans people to other states, the contemporary transformation in Kerala’s public sphere, and the shifting trends of gender and sexuality discourse in the state. Initially, most of these programs were aired as lampoons by which the LGBTQIA community were projected as clowns. *Comedy Stars* has been a popular comedy program serialized in *Asianet* entertainment channel that made use of transvestite men apart from female actors. Such female impersonation often exaggerated femininity. The nature of those programs has started to shift lately. The talk shows and news snippets discussed how

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<sup>43</sup> < <https://www.thebetterindia.com/82412/transgender-india-lgbtq/> > Accessed on 10 May 2019.

the trans people in Kerala have been ostracized and denied the basic rights as human beings, and as citizens. These programs sought to end the violence and phobia on trans as well as ensured the need for gender sensitization. The positive media coverage of the contemporary queer political activism and visibility of the trans people in the cultural and social space in Kerala reflect the transforming space.

The queer prides parades in the state have a history of less than a single decade as it roughly began in 2010 by offering the platform for trans visibility, and queer political activism in the public sphere. The heterosexual values are questioned and parodied during the protest and pride. These events have gathered the attention of academicians as well as media who perceive the parade as a political move by the queer community to persuade the public to recognize their identity, gender visibility and rights. The Sixth Transgender *Queer Pride Keralam's* (2015) public invitation signifies this argument,

Isn't this the violation of human rights? The act of labeling those who do not conform to the norms of the patriarchal society and its normative ideals of masculinity and femininity with their minds, bodies, gender, and sexuality, and stigmatizing them as unnatural and profane, and locking them in sanatorium and prisons? (...) Let diverse gender identities may come out of their shell and fly high with colored wings. Let new equations of sexuality may sprout across humankind. ("With Pride, We Can Celebrate")

The observation by Begonya Enguix (2009) on European pride parades is significant to note while examining the pride parades in the public spaces in Kerala as they are a form of resistance and celebration of queer identities that "generate power through social mobilization" (16). The pride parades in the state demonstrate the normalization of queer bodies in the public sphere. It captures the attention of media which legitimizes the existence of trans people in Kerala. It is pertinent to note that the pride parades in Kerala are held at the cities' cultural corridors: *Manaveeyam Veedhi* to VJT Hall in Thiruvananthapuram, *Mananchira Square* to Tagore Hall in Kozhikode and High Court junction to *Rajendra Maidan* in Kochi. The observation

of Dereka Rushbrook (2002) that the Western pride parades in the urban spaces are “temporary space of queer festivals,” suitable to the pride parades in Kerala, ie., the the social spaces in the state are also transformed to become queer friendly.



Figure 1.5 A news clip on the queer pride parade in Kerala (Source: *The Hindu*)

During the pride marches, the trans people are mainstreamed as they assert their identity and seek gender justice and equality in the public sphere. In the Durkheim’s notion<sup>44</sup> of the “ritual,” whereby participants both create bonds of solidarity, and produce “meaning” or “purpose” for collective action, in the pride parades, the participants experience the feeling of being in a community that aims for a common cause. The event offers cultural and political articulation of trans people in contemporary Kerala. It shakes the naturalized construction of heteronormativity by the celebration of trans identities. The support groups, CBOs, and gender rights activists play a significant role to mobilize the support for the activities in the cultural and political sphere.

A notable event sensationalized by the media in 2017 was the first trans beauty pageant *Queen of Dhwayah 2017*, held in Kochi organized by the Dhwaya Arts and Charitable Society (“In Pictures: Queen of Dwayah”). Feminine-presenting trans people from different parts of Kerala participated in the event, which was

<sup>44</sup>In Emile Durkheim’s sociological concept of Collective Effervescence (EC), a community come together and simultaneously communicate the same thought and participate in the same action. Such an event then causes collective effervescence which excites individuals and serves to unify the group. See Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Routledge, 1976.



attended by the Minister of Social Justice Department, Government of Kerala along with many other prominent people from different walks of life. The trans organizers described the *Queen of Dhwayah 2017* as a remarkable event, because both the participants and organizers were trans people. The second edition of the transgender beauty pageant that held in 2018, also gathered public attention on trans visibility and the exhibition of trans bodies in the public sphere in Kerala.



Figure 1.6 The three winners and other contestants of *Queen of Dhwayah 2017*

The trans-beauty pageants are to be seen as occasions that celebrate the trans identity. However, a closer look at this proves that it embodies the values of cisheteronormative society. It evokes not only the normalizing of trans identities, but also the mainstreaming of the hegemonic value system. The *Queen of Dwayah* events present the celebration of the accomplishments of trans women and promote their self-esteem. This can be analyzed in comparison with the fashion show associated to Koovagom temple festival. While boldness and beauty are asserted in the beauty pageants and fashion shows, they reproduce the cisheteronormative notions of gender. While analyzing the fashion show conducted as part of the Queer cultural fest in 2017 at *Manaveeyam Veedhi*, Thiruvananthapuram J. Devika (2017), points at the commercialization of entertainment in trans/ queer fashion shows,

I do not wonder that these fashion shows give importance to the exhibition and beauty as they are indented to exhibit one's body, its beauty, identity, and the pride they take from the same in front of the public. In this sense, the show gives importance to Hindu *Purana* and commercial films. These are the

discourses which give space to transgender people at present (“New Celebrations on the Old Road”).

She further states how she was irked by the conversation between certain spectators of the fashion show. They were not at all interested in queer politics and were ignorant about the ideology behind the show. They attended the show to find an actress for the commercial film industry. J. Devika’s observations are significant while analyzing the commercialization of beauty pageants and fashion shows. Like the trans beauty pageants in the West as noted by Rushbrook (2002), the trans beauty pageants in Kerala also present visual spectacles in which queer people become commodities when ‘straight’ spectators attend the pride events and drag shows. They tend to “forsake their true transgender self for a socially acceptable female identity. (...) The disavowal of the true body and the attempts to approximate to female appearance suggests conformity to the heteronormative gender conventions” (Arya Mohan 22-23). The beauty pageant endorses the patriarchal notions of ‘feminine body’ and gender stereotypes. However, the media attention to these events legitimize trans visibility in contemporary Kerala public sphere.

Two trans art-photo exhibitions also grabbed public attention in Kerala. The photo exhibition conducted in Thiruvananthapuram is notable due to its exclusive focus on trans men. It gave a platform for their ‘coming out’ in Kerala, as the photos of trans men - Eby, Sonu Niranjana, Vihaan Peethambar, Ishaan K Shaan (all from Thiruvananthapuram), Christy Raj (Bengaluru), and Selvan (Tamil Nadu), were featured in the exhibition. Another art-photo exhibition held in Kochi, “Trans, a Transition for Life” by G. Harikrishnan depicted the paintings and photos that captured the bodies of both amab as well as afab transgender people in nude.

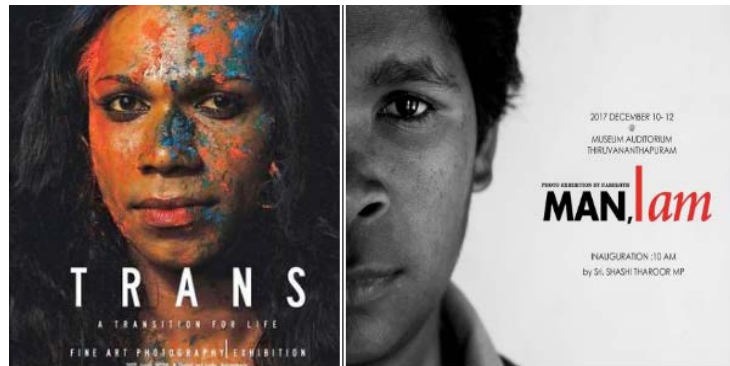


Figure 1. 7 The posters of trans photo exhibitions in Kerala

The press photographer P. Abhijith, who photographed the trans men expressed his vision behind the exhibition as, “I am trying to introduce the trans men into the society. After SRS trans men find it hard to get a job and also find it difficult to get acceptance in the society. I hope that the visibility received through the exhibition will help them get jobs” (“Lives of Trans men in Varied Hues”). The exhibitions, “Trans” and “Man, I am” serve two purposes; by posing as nude, the trans bodies express their protest and self affirmation, and it satiate the public’s curiosity regarding the ‘body’ of a transgender. Moreover, the artistic expressions become a visual spectacle for the public.

#### 1.2.10 Tying the Knot Legally: Trans Marriages in Kerala

The notion of family is the nodal point of the constitution of society. The trans marriages in Kerala invite public attention as it ruptures the social construction of a cisheteronormative family. Navaneetha Mokkil (2010) examines the instance of sensationalized lesbian relationships in Kerala and their struggles to ‘live together.’ She discusses about ‘romantic friendships,’ female same sex desire and the concept of ‘family’ in her study. Citing the case of two lesbian women Sheela and SreeNandu, which became infamous in Kerala, Mokkil observes that,

Sheela and SreeNandu’s decision to live together in 2003 was the first incident of a highly visible lesbian relationship in the public sphere of Kerala.

This was a controversial event in which the intrusive and sensational media coverage raised questions about the ‘advantages and pitfalls of visibility’ (Deepa 2005:175). Nandu’s assertion of his transgender identity showed up the slippages in the public naming of this relationship as lesbian (193).

Besides capturing the fundamental question about one’s confusion on gender identity and sexual orientation, the case of Sheela and SreeNandu shows the attempts of two lesbian women to move away from the traditional concepts of heterosexual ‘marriage’ and ‘family.’ Almost a decade and a half after the Sheela-SreeNandu incident, trans marriages are now widely discussed in Kerala. The trans actress Surya has married Ishaan, a trans man. Both of them had undergone the SRS before they legally tied the knot. It is to be noted that they had to conform themselves to binary by surgically re-appropriating their bodies to get legal sanctity for their marriage. Media have reported the trans marriage as a huge step by the trans community in Kerala, who has been denied happiness or opportunities (“Surya and Ishaan Create History”). Trans marriages parody the social institution called ‘marriage,’ which is also a mechanism for reproduction. But in the marriage of Surya and Ishaan, it turned out to a trope that bring them under the binary. Trans people face difficulty in living family life as per the existing legal system. They have to gain the ‘male’ or ‘female’ identity cards rather than the newly introduced ‘transgender’ identity cards by the state government, to marry legally. This is suggestive of the flaws in the existing social system and it turns out to be an endorsement of the social construction of heteronormativity. However, the system is undergoing a transformation and hopefully in the future trans marriages will be materialized as per individual choices.

The chapter has discussed about trans communities in India in the light of various historical and literary records, religious, cultural, social, and political discourses. It has examined the earlier trans invisibility in Kerala and the shifting trends of gender and sexual practices that resulted in the formation of a trans space recently. Trans people are more visible in contemporary Kerala due to the liberal and democratic politics of recognition. It seems difficult to separate the trans experiences

from trans politics in the state, as it is in a phase of recognition only. A major factor that resulted in the mobilization of trans experiences and queer activism in the past few decades is the involvement of the media. Earlier, the media in Kerala adopted a casual attitude to transgender and homosexual people, as evident from the news reports of lesbian suicides, and the violence on trans people. The contemporary news features cover issues related to how transgender people in Kerala are mainstreamed. The contribution of visual cultural texts like television and cinema are also noteworthy in this regard. As opined by Muraleedharan Tharayil (2005), cinema is an important “tool in the study of identities and sexualities” in contemporary times due to its “ubiquitous presence as a popular medium” and as a “powerful ideological apparatus negotiating with subjectivities and pleasures” (72). Since films mediate between society and contemporary realities, they record the shift by influencing the masses. Meena T. Pillai (2013) puts it in her analysis of modernity and gender in Malayalam cinema, “The regional cinemas have been instrumental in the crystallization of social formations with clearly demarcated structures meticulously codified social relations” (102). Different cinematic forms record the changes in the gender and sexuality discourses of Kerala. Besides feature films, the documentary, and short films are the emergent narrative genres in the present-day involving varied politics in the production, and circulation of social realities. Any discussions on trans people and queer sexuality was ‘absent’ in the earlier film texts. The present visibility of trans people in the region influences, politicizes, and records the narratives in Malayalam cinematic practices. Though cross-dressing and drag performances are used in many of the early Malayalam films, they are hardly given any serious attention and such tropes in the films could be comprehended for the queer understatements. An insightful analysis is required to understand such gender dynamics and the trans underpinnings in earlier visual texts. The next chapter of this thesis hopefully serves the purpose of a detailed survey of the non-conforming gender performances in Malayalam cinema. None of these texts embody trans identities, rather they exhibit the fluidity of gender performance and subvert heteropatriarchy to

an extent. The chapter also attempts to identify the beginnings of ‘trans cinema’ in Bollywood.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Restrained Figures: The Non-Heteronormative Gender Performances in Malayalam Cinema**

The unprecedented popularity of trans people in contemporary print and visual media invites our attention to their historical invisibilization as well. Televised talk shows,<sup>45</sup> advertisements,<sup>46</sup> fashion shows,<sup>47</sup> etc., discuss about various non-heteronormative gender performances. Live stage shows, star nights, and television programs present comedy skits with cross dressed characters. They offer possibilities to watch popular enactment of gender stereotypes, as a counter discourse to the patriarchal imaginations of heteronormativity. The popularity of such performances has persuaded many entertainment channels in Kerala to air programmes on gender crossing which become a 'commodity' for Malayali's visual pleasure. But a television serial *Marimayam*, that satirizes contemporary issues, has captured the attention of Malayalis by portraying the plight of trans people in one episode.<sup>48</sup> The ritualized cross dressing at Kottankulangara temple festival,<sup>49</sup> its report in the media also undermine the very foundation of heteronormativity in performing gender.

A historical analysis of the cultural texts evinces that gender variance has been a significant motif in Malayalam cinema. It is depicted through the clothing,

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<sup>45</sup>"Selfie." *YouTube*, uploaded by *Kairalionline*, 10 May 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEIIysQe9c5k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEIIysQe9c5k)

<sup>46</sup>"Mayday." *YouTube*, uploaded by *KaaliKuppy Media*, 2 May 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Def9I\\_KIVI4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Def9I_KIVI4)

<sup>47</sup>"Queen of Dhwayah 2017- Transgender Beauty Pageant." *YouTube*, uploaded by *Kairalionline*, 27 June 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbQZjeFcFjo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbQZjeFcFjo)

<sup>48</sup>"Marimayam Ep 273- Story of a Transgender's Life." *YouTube*, uploaded by *Mazhavil Manorama*, 25 September 2016 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPPu6Sb\\_GKw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPPu6Sb_GKw)

<sup>49</sup>"Men Dressed Like Women." *YouTube*, uploaded by *Asianetnews*, 23 March 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU-dRfHpqRI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hU-dRfHpqRI)

social roles, and sexuality of the characters. Earlier films captured non-heteronormative gender performances and sexuality in ‘heterosexual narratives.’ The chapter explores such gender expressions in which queer subjects are problematized. The use of the phrase ‘non-heteronormative gender performance’ in the chapter is remarkable due to the fact that the official documentation of the term ‘transgender’ happened in Kerala only by 2014<sup>50</sup> and they offer wider analytic perspectives. Such performances discussed in this chapter include the male and female cross dressings, feminine-presenting men, female masculinity, gay men and lesbian women, and the body switching in Malayalam films. Through this, the chapter outlines a historical back-drop to variance from binary gender performance in Malayalam films. The chapter argues that the explicit representation of trans identity in Malayalam cinema is a 21st century phenomenon as a response to the queer activism in Kerala. However, there have been depictions for other purposes like inciting parody, and invoking humour. Such non-heteronormative gender and sexuality performances are also emblematic of the lack of visibility and erasure of queer people in the public sphere of Kerala. I shall now look at cross dressing and its significations in the traditional theatrical performances as a precursor to gender dissidence in the cultural productions of the state, before proceeding to films.

## 2.1 Performing Gender through Cross Dressing

The constructive critiques of gender identities and performances state that gender is culturally determined and constituted through physical manifestation. The performance of the hegemonic codes of binary gender brings forth the significance of clothing and bodily manifestations in gender performance. Susan Gubar (1981)

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<sup>50</sup> The state sponsored survey in 2014- 15 and the policy document released thereafter in 2015, officially documented the term ‘transgender’ See, Sangama, *Transgender Survey Kerala 2014-15*. <http://swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Survey%20Report/12157.pdf>. Accessed on 15 July 2018. See. Government of Kerala Social Justice Department, Order. <https://kerala.gov.in/documents/10180/46696/State%20Policy%20for%20Transgenders%20in%20Kerala%202015>. Accessed on 15 July 2018,



argues that “Cross- dressing becomes a way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequalities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity” (479). Drag performances by men and women formed the crux of gender parodying, not only in terms of clothing but also in the appropriation of their mannerisms. G. G. Bolich (2006) observes the significance of clothing and its relation to gender performance in the Euro-American culture while discussing the role of cloths in depicting gender identities, “Dress is a chief way of presenting perhaps enacting - gender” (17). Cross dressing is used to subvert the stereotyped gender identity of a sexed body performing a specific gender role; it deconstructs the fixity of gender performance. In their “Introduction” to *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (1993), Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough observes that it was Magnus Hirschfeld, who, coined the term *transvestism* in 1910 and in Latin it was used to denote ‘cross dressing.’ Havelock Ellis, his contemporary, felt that the term was too much literal, and “over emphasized the importance of clothing while failing to include the ‘feminine’ identity factors present in male cross dressers” (vii). To refer to the female cross dressers, Ellis coined the term *eoinism* based on a historical personage, the Chevalier d’Eon de Beaumont (1728- 1810), who lived as a woman. Later, a few other terms were also evolved to designate cross dressing: “*gynemimesis* (literally “women mime”) and its counterpart *andromimesis*, *gender dysphoria*, *female* or *male impersonation*, *transgenderist*, *femmiphile*, *androphile*, *femme mimic*, *fetishist*, *crossing*, *transsexual* (both preoperative and post operative), and many others” (vii).

It is pertinent to analyze theatre performances to understand the practice of cross dressing to perform gender identity of other sex. The female roles played by men in theatres in Western societies in the past were the result of a patriarchal imagination that, “the stage was not a suitable place for a ‘proper’ woman since no proper woman would make such display of herself” and men in drag performed the feminine gender (Bullough and Bullough 76). During the Elizabethan times, William Shakespeare made use of cross dressing in his plays when female actors were not allowed to perform on screen. Chad Allen Thomas (2009) studies on drag and queer

performances in Shakespearean theatres and traces the emergence of ‘radical drag as theatre aesthetics.’ According to him, drag was acceptable in the British theatre through the late 1960s, and after the New York Stonewall Riots, certain gay groups adopted drag as a radical strategy to mark their political protest. This ‘radical drag’ is different from the earlier female impersonations which include the gay community, and it did not attempt to mask the practitioner’s gender. “Radical drag insisted on the incorporation of both male and female attributes” (Thomas 73). He argues, “instead of trying to pass as female, male practitioners of radical drag wanted to retain and even highlight their masculine characteristics” (*ibid*). But, the performance of male actors as females on stage set up an ideal of normative femininity by mimicking femininity itself. This demarcation of homosocial spaces with male cross dressers is not only a Western tradition. In India, various regional theatres also adopted the stand of the Westerners. The coming section attempts a critical understanding of cross dressing and gender performances in Indian theatre.

### **2.1.1 Acting up: Indian Theatre and the Performance of Gender**

In Indian cultures, theatre traditions in the early period prohibited women to perform on stage and men played the female roles. *Arthashastra* records that those women who watched plays were also fined (Varadapande qtd in Mangai 35-41). About this female impersonation in theatre, the theatre scholar and performer A. Mangai (2015) opines, the female impersonation impressed a large male audience; the aesthetic skill and power, and it remains as iconic in the viewing and imagination. In literary texts, the image of women has been represented as a product of patriarchy. The visual cultural texts like theatre also construct femininity in the material body of a man on stage. A number of male actors contributed to female impersonation in Indian theatre.<sup>51</sup> In Bengali *jatra*- a three centuries old travelling theatre tradition-

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<sup>51</sup>Bal Gandharva (Marathi theatre), Jayashankar Sundhari (Gujrati theatre) Nasharvanji Framji Madan (Parsi theatre), Bhaurau Kolhatkar, etc. include the famous female impersonators in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in India

Chapal Bhaduri<sup>52</sup> performed the lead role and whose performances inspired filmmakers like Rituparno Ghosh<sup>53</sup> later. The male bodies performing drag aroused visual pleasure in spectators and became a “palatable surrogate” for the real women whose entry had been restricted in theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, because, “the kinds of pleasure produced by these spectatorial positions - the pleasure or witnessing a gender ‘stunt,’ or of weeping while feeling a, homo-erotic ‘buzz’ - may well have surpassed the pleasure of seeing a real woman on the stage” (Hansen 2296).

In Kerala, in the earliest theatre form *Kathakali* also made use of female impersonation.<sup>54</sup> Muraleedharan Tharayil (2005) observes that, “A ‘feminised’ male body had been functioning as an object of desiring gaze.... The *streeveshamsin* Kathakali had been highly fetishised objects of desire in the early years of the twentieth century, evoking *moham* (allure/ desire) among the male spectators” (74). In Malayalam musical dramas women were restrained from performing female roles, and mostly men performed ‘femininity.’ At this juncture, it is relevant to examine the theatrical prowess of an eminent actor, OchiraVelukutty who has made significant contribution as a female impersonator.<sup>55</sup> His performances mesmerized the spectators

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<sup>52</sup> “India’s Last Female Impersonator”, *BBC News*, 11 January 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-35197086>

<sup>53</sup> Rituparno Ghosh (1963– 2013) was a director, actor, writer and lyricist in the Bengali cinema. *Unishe April* (1994) won him the National Film Award for Best Feature Film. He was a self-proclaimed gay figure in Indian cinema and was considered an icon of the LGBT community of India. He also acted in two Bengali films— *Arekti Premer Golpo* (Dir. Kaushik Ganguly, 2011) which dealt with gay relationships, and *Memories in March* (Dir. Sanjoy Nag, 2011). *Chitrangada* (Dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2012), based on Rabindranath Tagore's work 'Chitrangada,' received the special jury award at the 60th National Film Awards.

<sup>54</sup> *Kathakali* has been observed as a musical theatre in Kerala which encompasses aesthetics of the contemporary visual arts and dance forms (Madathil 199).

<sup>55</sup> The biopic play, *Pen Nadan* (The Female Actor), dramatises Papputty Asan, a well-known actor who specialized in transvestite roles in Malayalam Drama during a period when females were absent on stage. The play puts light on the agony of a similar artist named OchiraVelukuttyAsan who was also well versed for his transvestite roles. There were many who took such characters. But these two actors not only rose to the horizon of acting, but inspired both men and women with their elegance and charm. The role of the central character is performed by Santhosh Keezhattoor, who is also the director

of the time by blurring the boundaries of gender; a male body performing feminine gender (“Documenting the Life of a Great Stage Artist”). Spectators rushed to the green room after being allured by the cross dressed performance of Velukkuty on stage. He was forced to undress and prove himself as a man on many occasions (Sreekumar 99-100). Sajitha Madathil (2010) notes how OchiraVelukkuty’s female impersonation reproduced the patriarchal heteronormative construction of ‘femininity’ in her analysis of “Tamil-Malayalam Musical Dramas, Female Roles and Female Impersonation.” The femininity performed by Velukkuty set a model for the later female actors, who imitated his ‘femininity’- gait, gestures, and costumes- in a sense all these constructed the epitome of femininity in the theatre practices in Kerala.

When men did female impersonation, women also performed cross dressed roles even before that. Thottakkatt Ikkavamma’s performance of ‘masculinity’ on stage through cross dressing poses questions at the gender positioning of women in society.<sup>56</sup> She might have used the cross dressing to cover her own femininity on stage at a time when women were neglected entirely in theatre. When theatre was replaced by cinema, the tradition of male and female cross dressing continued to arouse visual pleasure in spectators. Cinema has drawn much from these theatrical cross dressings of ‘femininity.’ The upcoming sections of the chapter offers a meta perspective onto the politics of male and female cross dressing in Malayalam cinema.

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of the play. Keezhattoor, Santhosh. *Pen Nadan* (The Female Actor ). Jagrithi Theatre, Bangalore, 2016,  
<http://www.jagrititheatre.com/pen-nadan-the-female-actor>

<sup>56</sup>ThottakkattIkkavamma cross dressed as Nalan, while her nephew Govinda Menon played the role of Damayanti in the Sanskrit play *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, in 1892, in Thrissur (Madathil 31).

## 2.2 Male Cross Dressing in Malayalam Cinema

Cross dressing in cinema has been a popular trope for laughter since the initial days of the medium. Clothes in different regions connote manifestations of gender identities and its performance in specific cultural contexts. Cross dressing in cinema stereotypically re-imagine and foreground gender performances. In the “Introduction” to *Undressing Cinema* (1997), Stella Bruzzi notes that, “gender has been constituted in theory and a re-evaluation of the eroticisation and problematization of the cinematic image” is attempted through its “relationship to clothing” (19). Malayalam cinema has used the cross dressing of male and female actors mostly to evoke laughter.

A brief survey of Malayalam films reveals the gender politics of laughter and amusement generated by watching cross dressing on screen. In cinema, cross dressing has been “one of the reliable tools of generating guffaws in an onscreen narrative (...) more so owing to the testosterone- dripping ‘maleness’ that have come to be associated with the onscreen leading personas” and with the “‘bi-polar successions’ of Sathyan<sup>57</sup>–Prem Nazir,<sup>58</sup> Mohanlal<sup>59</sup>–Mammootty<sup>60</sup>” (“Adoor Bhasi: Malayalam

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<sup>57</sup>Sathyan was one of the major stars of Malayalam cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, won two Kerala State Film Awards for Best Actor. He made his acting debut in the 1952 film *Athmasakhi*. He rose to stardom with the critical and commercial success of *Neelakkuyil* (Dir. P. Bhaskaran and RamuKariat, 1954). He's remembered for his performances in *Nairu Pidicha Pulivalu* (Dir. P. Bhasakaran, 1958), *Odayil Ninnu* (Dir. K.S. Sethumadhavan, 1965), *Chemmeen* (Dir. Ramu Kariat, 1965), *Yakshi* (Dir. K.S. Sethumadhavan, 1968), etc.

<sup>58</sup>Prem Nazir was a major star of Malayalam cinema along with Sathyan. Nazir is often referred to as *Nithyahariatha Nayakan* ("Evergreen Hero"). Nazir began his career as a stage actor and made his film debut with the 1952 film *Marumakal*. He is noted for films such as *Murappennu* (Dir. A. Vincent, 1965), *Iruttinte Athmavu* (Dir. P. Bhasakaran, 1967), *Kallichellamma* (Dir. P. Bhasakaran, 1969), *Anubhavangal Paalichakal* (Dir. K.S. Sethumadhavan, 1971), *Vida Parayum Munpe* (Dir. Mohan, 1981), etc.

<sup>59</sup>Mohanlal is a popular star and the president of (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists). He has been active since 1978 with the film *Thiranottam* (Dir. Ashok Kumar). He won the National Film Award for best actor twice for films *Bharatham* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1991) and the highly acclaimed *Vaanaprastham* (Dir. Shaji N. Karun, 1999). <http://www.thecompleteactor.com/>

Cinema's Favourite Cross Dresser"). While tracing the cross dressings in Malayalam cinema, it is interesting to observe that Adoor Bhasi,<sup>61</sup> did a number of comedy roles and became an icon in performing feminine gender. Bhasi's "excursions in drag on screen" commanded him as a brand, as the spectators of the time derived pleasure by looking at the cross dressed male body (*ibid*). It was used to disguise the identity of the character and his performance made the drag an erotic visual spectacle.

The Prem Nazir-Adoor Bhasi duo performed cross dressing in a number of films and as in theatre, those cross dressings gave emphasis to the aspect of 'performance.' These performances reflect the theatricality of Malayalam cinema in which drama had great influence as a popular mode of entertainment. *Cochin Express* (Dir. M. Krishnan Nair, 1967) was a crime caper of the time, and Bhasi performing a dance number in a brothel in feminine costume that stereotypes femininity as a trope for seduction. *Kalli Chellamma* (Dir. P. Bhaskaran, 1969) depicted Bhasi's dance for a folk song in which his body becomes an alluring object, a subject of gaze. These representations of seduction in Malayalam cinema parody the courtesan tradition which provided visual and sensual pleasure to the 'male spectator.' It could be read as a melding of the social notion of a woman as *vesya* (the courtesan) or *kulina* (the wife as a biological and ideological reproducer). In Malayalam cinema, heroines were depicted as "sensuous without being seductive and who could skilfully use the embellishments of culture to entertain their men within the regulated spaces of the private domain" (Devika 2007, quoted in Pillai 2013, 106). In this respect, a cross dressed feminine male and a sensuous and chaste heroine offer the subversive possibilities of gender parodying in films.

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<sup>60</sup> Mammooty is one of the major stars of Malayalam cinema. He has won three National Film Awards for Best Actor, seven Kerala State Film Awards and thirteen Filmfare Awards South. Mammooty began in the 1971 film *Anubhavgal Paalichakal*, directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan. His prominent films include *Thaniyavarthanam* (Dir. Sibi Malayil), *Oru CBI Diarykurippu* (Dir. K. Madhu, 1988), *Oru Vadakkan Veeragadha* (Dir. Hariharan 1989), *Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar* (Dir. Jabbar Patel, 2000), *Kerala Varma Pazhassi Raja* (Dir. Hariharan, 2009), etc.

<sup>61</sup> Adoor Bhasi (K. Bhaskaran Nair, 1927-1990) a star of earlier Malayalam cinema invariably done character roles and comedy roles since the 1950s to 1980s. He directed three Malayalam films in the 80s also.



Figure 2.1 Prem Nazir and Adoor Bhasi in *Kannappanunni*

Male cross dressing was a recurring trope in many earlier Malayalam films; *Padunna Puzha* (Dir. M. Krishnan Nair, 1968), *Rest House* (Dir. J. Sasikumar, 1969), *Taxi Car* (Dir. P. Venu, 1972), *Anjathavasam* (Dir. A. B. Raj, 1973), *Arakkallan Mukkalkkallan* (Dir. P. Bhaskaran, 1974), *Kannappanunni* (Dir. Kunchacko, 1977), *Ithikkara Pakki* (J. Sasikumar, 1980), etc. At the same time, other comedy actors like Kuthiravattom Pappu<sup>62</sup> and Bahadoor<sup>63</sup> also performed cross dressing on screen mostly for comedy. In the film *Karutha Kai* (Dir. M. Krishnan Nair, 1964) both, Pappu and Bahadoor cross dress, and their ‘performance’ of the drag evokes laughter like Charlie Chaplin pantomimes of the West. It could be argued that the feminine presenting cross dressings manifest female body, as a product to be consumed. However, these cross dressings appear distinct from the early theatre performances in which women were absent on stage. Bhasi performed feminine roles during the time in which female actors had been performing on screen. Thus, Malayali spectators

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<sup>62</sup> Kuthiravattam Pappu (1937-2000) was a popular theatre and film artist. He won the best comedian award for the drama *Samasya*. His remarkable comedy roles in the 80s and 90s include *Vellanakalude Nadu* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1988), *Manichithrathazhu* (Dir. Fazil, 1993), *Thenmavin Kombathu* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1994), etc.

<sup>63</sup> P.K. Kunjalu (Bahadoor 1930-2000) was a comedian in early Malayalam cinema who performed character roles as well. He won Kerala State Film Awards for Second Best Actor twice, and Best Comedy Artist Award. He also acted in Akashavani plays. His major films include *Paadatha Painkil* (Dir. P. Subramanyam, 1957), *Nairu Pidicha Pulivalu* (Dir. P. Bhaskaran, 1958), etc.

derived pleasure by looking at these ‘constructed femininities’ when they were re-deployed against women actors in Malayalam cinema.

It must be speculated that the female impersonation by male actors, had been a deviation from the norm at a time in which the discussion of sexuality and gender identities confined itself to heteronormativity. While studying the formation of sexual subjects, and sexual morality in Kerala, Rajeev Kumaramkandathu (2013) notes that, the second half of 19th century was a period that driven to the formation of an elite public sphere in Kerala which engaged in open discussions about raising/transforming moral standards of the people. Such discussions were made easier by the colonial English education and the expansion of print technology. According to him, both print and the English education were “crucial in organizing a new public sphere that was both spatially connected and rich in its resources” (50). The progressive reform narratives tried to engender the social spaces to mark masculinity and femininity as completely disassociable, and it was conceived as a project of modernity (Praveena Kodoth 2001, J. Devika 2005). For the monogamous Victorian models, the local practices of gender and sexuality appeared as ‘sexual anarchy.’ The restraining of desire appears to be a phenomenon emerged as a result of colonial modernity. The colonial education would have probably rehabilitated the hetero-patriarchal morality in the discourse of gender identities and sexualities in early modern Kerala.

Visual cultural texts were largely influenced by the moral codes imposed by heteronormative society. However, drag performances had been successfully used for comic purpose in a number of films in the 1960s and 1970s. It could be said that, those performances voiced a collective dissent against the social construction of gender, and sexual subjectivity during the time, even if films of the time would not have intentionally used the trope with the purpose of parodying the monolithic categorization of gender performance. The strong heterosexual familial fabric in 1960s and 1970s had been a threatening force for men to marry the opposite sex even



if they had homosexual leanings, and the invisibility of homosexuality in the region constituted the eroticisation of male bodies through drag performances. According to Muraleedharan Tharayil (2014), “Cross dressing has been re-signified as a political act in the context of queer politics” (75). Subversion of gender performances in cultural practices may be discerned as a result of the marked restraint of same-sex desires and gender nonconformity in public sphere. Queers have been depicted as objects of humour.

In the 1970s and 80s, male cross dressings were less successful to evoke laughter as it was used in comparatively small number of films. The focus of cinema shifted to the depiction of social realism during the time. The emergence of a ‘new wave’ in Malayalam cinema began in the 1970s and its culmination in 1980s forced a radical change from comedy films to realistic films. The aesthetic aspects of films made by Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan slowly paved way for directors like Bharathan, Padmarajan, and K. G. George. C. S. Venkiteswaran (2006) observes that, films of the 80s combined commercial and art elements and formed a ‘middlebrow’ cinema. Sexuality, desire, violence, and the incongruities of human mind appeared as staple themes during the period. The subversive gender performance as comedy could be seen as another industry aesthetics like stunt, and sex. The parallel and middle films of the 80s excluded the dramatic dialogues, and melodramas, and the gap between commercial and art films became narrowed (Mathew 2013). Cross dressing began to reappear in the 90s, with the emergence of a series of laughter films in Malayalam. Jenny Rowena (2002) observes, “Laughter films<sup>64</sup> created a paradigmatic shift in the representation of masculinities in Kerala, in response to the cultural situation of the post 1980s (...) The laughter films overhauled the existing modes of masculine identities” (125). The next generation of directors

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<sup>64</sup>Jenny Rowena in her “The ‘Laughter Films’ and the Reconfiguration of Masculinities” used the Malayalam term *chirippadangalorthamashappadangal* to those films that emphasized the production and generation of laughter. These films addressed different issues, such as non hegemonic men/locations, male bonds, fraudulence and marginalised heroines, etc. (149).

started reinventing opportunities in cross dressing for comedy by the exaggerated imitation of opposite sex. In a number of low-budget films produced during the time, cross dressing is used for humour. The chapter further tries a brief overview of the cross dressed performance of the male actors in Malayalam cinema post the 1980s.

Malayalam films of the 90s faced the aftermath of globalization and media revolution. Due to the influence of television that grabbed themes like man-woman relationships through serials, Malayalam films saw female spectators confining to domestic spaces. The infiltration of soft-porn and comedy films is also to be noted as prominent features of the decade. Cross dressing reappears as a staple motif in comedy films.



Figures 2.2, 2.3, 2.4 & 2.5 Scenes from *Cheriya Lokavum Valiya Manushyarum* depict cross dressed Innocent (bottom left) and Mukesh (bottom right)

*Cheriya Lokavum Valiya Manushyarum* (Dir. Chandrashekharan, 1990) is a film released during the economic shift and it problematizes joblessness and fraudulence as means of making money. The plot is narrated as a comedy, as it depicts actors Mukesh<sup>65</sup> and Innocent<sup>66</sup> appear cross dressed. The cross dressed men and the

<sup>65</sup>Mukesh is a Malayalam actor, producer, and politician. He has been popular through his comic-lead roles in the late 80s and 90s. His major hit films include *Mutharamkunnu P.O.* (Dir. Sibi Malayil,

women in the scene, invariably represent clichéd femininity and its counter discourse. The sequence, thus underscores in the subtext that gender could be performed through cross dressing. Mukesh imitates the heroine in a song sequence in another film *Ammayane Sathyam* (Dir. Balachandra Menon, 1993), through cross dressing, while the heroine herself is cross dressed as a male. In his analysis of the female impersonators, Muraleedharan Tharayil (2014) argues that cross dressing in comedy shows and cinema points out that transvestism, or the scrupulous appropriation of the behaviour of the “opposite” gender is,

Supposed to undermine the very foundation of a binary imagination of gender, while drag, that is, an almost sardonic appropriation of cross-gender appearance and behaviour (for example, a bearded male in a nun’s garb), is capable of laying bare the performativity of gender, and thereby initiating a powerful critique of the received notions of gendered behaviour and appearance (75).

In the popular film *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Noottandu* (Dir. Viji Thampi, 1994), Jagathy Sreekumar<sup>67</sup> cross dresses to disguise his identity. However, his enactment of femininity evokes laughter, even though he is in the disguise of a mentally disabled person. The excess makeup and his costumes exhibit a hyper-femininity in the scene. Whereas, in *Hitler Brothers* (Dir. Sandhya Mohan, 1997), he imitates the cross dressing of Kamal Hassan in *Avvai Shanmukhi*<sup>68</sup> and makes the spectators laugh. Two

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1985), *Ramji Rao Speaking* (Drs. Siddiq-Lal, 1989), *In Harihar Nagar* (Drs. Siddiq-Lal, 1990), *Godfather* (Drs. Siddiq-Lal, 1991), *Hitler* (Dir. Siddiq, 1996), etc.

<sup>66</sup> Innocent is a Malayalam actor and politician, acclaimed for his comedy roles. His major comedy roles in the 80s and 90s include *Ramji Rao Speaking* (Drs. Siddiq-Lal, 1989), *Kilukkam* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1991), *Godfather* (Drs. Siddiq-Lal, 1991), *Vietnam Colony* (Drs. Siddiq-Lal, 1992), *Mannar Mathai Speaking* (Drs. Siddiq-Lal, 1995), etc.

<sup>67</sup> Jagathy Sreekumar has been a popular comedian of Malayalam cinema and is highly acclaimed for his character roles as well. His popular comedy roles include *Kilukkam* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1991), *Yodha* (Dir. Sangeeth Sivan, 1992), *AvittamThirunalAarogyasreeman* (Dir. Viji Thampy, 1995), *Meesha Madhavan* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2002), etc.

<sup>68</sup> In *AvvaiShanmukhi* (1996, Dir. K.S. Ravikumar), the Tamil actor Kamal Haasan has cross dressed as an old lady AvvaiShanmukhi which became so popular.

other films, *Mangalam Veetil Manasweswari Gupta* (Dir. Suresh Vinu, 1995), and *Three Men Army* (Dir. Nissar, 1995) portray the cross dressing of Indrans.<sup>69</sup> The non-normative gender performances in these films deploy laughter by projecting cross dressed anti-macho bodies. Jenny Rowena (2010) observes that such scenes,

In the game of masculinity, (...) define the non masculinity of powerless men and circulates heterosexuality as a needed masculine virtue. Such a representation (which posits homosexual desires in the degraded persona of the comic 'other'), even as it awakens homoerotic desires, arouses homophobic anxieties in the watching men, pushing them to seek more masculine/ heterosexual postures (144).

Cross dressing of comedy actors, is used as an effective tool in the 90s in buddy films. One may note the undercurrents of homoeroticism in such films where subversive masculinities cross dress as women.

The male heroes also performed drag in certain films and it could be seen as forming a counter discourse to their hegemonic machismo. Apart from the humour and the visual pleasure, these sequences represent their body as viable tools that bear gender confusion accentuated through clothing. The popular hero Mohanlal has performed subversive masculinity to evoke comedy in *Vandanam* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1989), *Manichitrathazhu* (Dir. Fazil, 1993) and *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu* (Dir. Kamal, 1998). These films conveniently use the drag performances as mischievous acts of the non-hegemonic men and the spectacles provide visual pleasure. The gender performance of the actor results in a 'radical drag,' where he uses the feminine clothes and retains masculine embodiment like his moustache on his body. By the enrobing of feminine clothes, Mohanlal's body undo the cinematic

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<sup>69</sup> Indrans, is an Indian film actor and former costume designer. His breakthrough with *CID Unnikrishnan B.A., B.Ed.* (Dir. Rajasenan, 1994) led to him being cast in various comedic roles in the films of the 1990s. He won the Kerala State Film Award for Best Actor for his performance in the 2017 film *Aalorukkam*.

construction of a normative macho hero. Hence, the accidental cross dressings and the confusion arise from it become tropes for humour.



Figure 2.6 Mohanlal in drag, a scene from *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu*

Apart from comic pleasure, gender parodying through cross dressing is used for a temporary disguise of identity. These non-humorous depictions also arouse visual pleasure in spectators. *The Truth* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 1998) and *Independence* (Dir. Vinayan, 1999) are two films that present revenge motif and depict ‘fake femininities.’ These tropes also foreground the playful displays of gender by men.

While critically examining the comedy films of the 90s, O. P. Rajmohan (1997) remarks that, comedy films were the strategy of commercial film industry that aimed to set a model for an idle life. He critiques comedy films for their nonsensical humour that was reflective of degeneration of the industry during the time. However, narratives underpinned with humour were quite popular in 2000s. *Thenkasipattanam* (Dir. Rafi-Mecartin, 2000), *Ee Parakkum Thalika* (Dir. Thaha, 2001), *Kunhikkoonan* (Dir. Sasi Shankar, 2002), *Meesa Madhavan* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2002), *C.I.D. Moosa* (Dir. Johny Antony, 2003), *Rajamanikyam* (Dir. Anwar Rasheed, 2005), etc., celebrate non-hegemonic masculinities. Preeti Kumar (2015) in her study of masculinities represented in *Meesa Madhavan* and *Rajamanikyam* argues that,

The heroes in the comic films of the 2000s are representative of large sections of the populace unable to take advantage of the benefits of globalization, and witnessing the dominant role of men in public and private places being eroded. The reaction against the loss of potency and fear of failure in the lived experience of the 21st century male resulted in the reaffirmation of the normative 'generic man' (42).

A number of low-budget films of the decade used cross dressing as a popular trope of laughter. The influence of digital technology resulted in the proliferation of television in Malayali households in the 2000s. Comedy through mimicry, skits, stage shows, comedy cassettes and VCD/DVDs,<sup>70</sup> and laughter films of the 80s and 90s were the most consumed entertainment programs by Malayalis. Vipin Kumar (2008) observes that comic film as an independent genre has close connections with mimicry. The large number of mimicry troupes in Kerala has cultivated a laughter industry in Kerala. The rise of a number of mimicry artists to stardom also resulted in the spread of comedy films during the period. *Meranam Joker* (Dir. Nissar, 2000), *Naranathu Thampuran* (Dir. Viji Thampi, 2001), *Soothradharan* (Dir. A. K. Lohithadas, 2001), *Balettan* (Dir. V.M. Vinu, 2003), *Thillana Thillana* (Dir. T. S. Saji, 2003), *Boy Friend* (Dir. Vinayan 2005), *Kilukkam Kilukilukkam* (Dir. Sandhya Mohan, 2006), *Hallo* (Dir. Rafi-Mecartin, 2007), *Chocolate* (Dir. Shafi, 2007) etc., used male cross dressing for comedy in various scenes. In the first decade of the twentieth century, male cross dressing continued to be a popular trope of humour. Salim Kumar<sup>71</sup> (*Meranam Joker*), and Harisree Asokan<sup>72</sup> (*Balettan*) appeared as radical drag in song scenes to entertain spectators. As mentioned, the cross dressing of the hero and the

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<sup>70</sup> The release of the audio and video CDs of the satirical program *De Maveli Kombathu* by mimicry and film artists, including Nadirsha and Dileep have been the trendsetter since the 90s and 2000s. Released during the Onam season the satirical program, it was a major hit in the 90s.

<sup>71</sup> Salim Kumar is a noted Malayalam actor for his comedy as well as serious roles. He became prominent in the late 90s and 2000s through his roles in *MeesaMadhavan* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2002), *Kalyanaraman* (Dir. Shafi, 2002), *Pulival Kalyanam* (Dir. Shafi, 2003), etc. He has won National Award for Best Actor in *Adaminte Makan Abu* (Dir. Salim Ahmed, 2010).

<sup>72</sup> Harisree Ashokan started his film career as a mimicry artist in various troupes like Harisree and Kalabhavan. He has been active since the late 90s and his hit comedy performances include *Punjabi House* (Dir. Rafi-Mecartin, 1998), *EeParakkumThalika* (Dir. Thaha, 2001), *MeesaMadhavan* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2002), *Chronic Bachelor* (Dir. Siddique, 2003), etc.

cross dressing other subversive male characters serve different purposes. The cross dressing of the hero turns out to be an extension of his eccentricity, a method of endearing the characterization.



Figure 2.7 Jayaram's cross dressing in *Naranathu Thampuran*

In *Naranathu Thampuran*, the hero Jayaram<sup>73</sup> performs the character of a mentally disabled. As part of his pranks he cross dresses in sari and uses a wig of long hair to stereotype femininity, but retains moustache, which is a symbol of the essential masculinity and it depicts a 'radical drag.' His playful and exaggerated imitation of femininity emphasizes that gender is a performance. Incidentally, the film portrays the cross dressed man receiving insensitive comments from public who watch his pranks that would ridicule the queer minority in Kerala.

Two campus films in the early 2000s portray cross dressing of young actors, Krishna<sup>74</sup> and Manikuttan,<sup>75</sup> in *Thillana Thillana* and *Boy Friend*. The gender

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<sup>73</sup>Jayaram is an actor, percussionist, and mimicry artist, rose to popularity in the 1990s for his roles in family dramas and comedies. Notable films include *Sandhesam* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikadu, 1991), *Meleparambil Aanveedu* (Dir. Rajasenana, 1993), *Thooval Kottaram* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikad, 1996), *Summer in Bethlehem* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1998), *Veendum Chila Veettukaryangal* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikad, 1999), *Manassinakkare* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikad, 2003), etc.

<sup>74</sup> Krishna has been a television artist and Malayalam actor since the late 90s. His films include *Daya* (Dir. Venu, 1998), *Snehithan* (Dir. Jose Thomas, 2002), *Margam* (Rajiv Vijay Raghavan, 2003), *Traffic* (Dir. Rajesh Pillai, 2011), etc.

confusion and sexual tension depicted in those films from cross dressing and the tension depicted in certain scenes by the eroticization of their bodies are effective tropes for visual pleasure. *Thillana Thillana* is marketed for the hero's cross dressing as a woman in the plot. Krishna's body is reappropriated as that of a college girl. The feminized body of the hero is juxtaposed with the body of the heroine in the film and forms an antithesis to the normative femininity which re-deploys the popular assumptions of femininity and its performance. There are sequences in *Thillana Thillana* which depict the physical re-appropriation of the actor while he changes to female costumes. The erotic pleasure is evoked in spectators through his 'artificial bosom.' It foregrounds patriarchal notions of feminine body as a subject of sensual pleasure for the male gaze. Moreover, the dialogues are aimed at accentuating erotic pleasure in spectators by using slapstick humour.



Figures 2.8 & 2.9 Krishna (left) and Manikuttan (right) as college girls in *Thillana Thillana* and *Boy Friend*

The campus film *Chocolate* depicts two cross dressed young men performing femininity. In a scene, one of them imitates the way a female model should walk on the ramp. A young male fashion designer (Jayasurya<sup>76</sup>) instructs 'feminised walking,

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<sup>75</sup>Manikuttan is a serial and film artist since the 2000s, and his major films are *Boy Friend* (Dir. Vinayan, 2005), *Mayavi* (Dir. Rafi-Mecartin, 2007), *Chotta Mumbai* (Dir. Anwar Rasheed, 2007), *Passenger* (Dir. Ranjith Sankar, 2009), etc.

<sup>76</sup>Jayasurya is a Malayalam actor, impressionist, and producer, rose to popularity in the 2000s for his comic-oriented roles in *Swapnakkoodu* (Dir. Kamal, 2003), *PulivalKalyanam* (Dir. Shafi, 2003), *Chathikkatha Chanthu* (Dir. Rafi-Mecartin, 2004), and *Gulumaal* (Dir. V. K. Prakash, 2009), and at the same time villain roles in *Classmates* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2006), *Arabikkatha* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2007), and *Kangaroo* (Dir. Raj Babu, 2007), etc.



using his own sari clad male body in front of a group of female models, which itself ironically becomes an image of the femininity nurtured by patriarchal society. The visual pleasure and irony in the scene arise from the gendered gaze of spectators for erotic pleasure at the back of his half-naked hip swaying as a physical manifestation of ‘femininity’ in close up shots (as in figure 2.13). In another sequence, the hero (Prithviraj<sup>77</sup>) wears a ‘petticoat’<sup>78</sup> - in front of a group of young women and displays a non-hegemonic representation through cross dressing. His macho body functions as a spectacle of subversive gender performance aimed at generating humour. Such depictions underline the irony in the breaking of gendered notions associated with clothing; as the wearing of the opposite sex’s dress is observed as a taboo in the cultural setting of Kerala. The scenes also underscore the embarrassment of the male character (Jayasurya) who is opposite to the machismo of the hero (Prithviraj) in his gender performance.



Figures 2.10 & 2.11 The poster of *Chocolate* depicts male actors in female clothes and Jayasurya’s hip swaying walk in close up shot (right)

He is shy when he sees the woman watch him in drag. This scene is contrasted with the other scene in which the macho hero (Prithviraj) uses his cross dressing to exert

<sup>77</sup>Prithviraj is an actor, producer, and play-back singer, and director. He debuted in *Nandanam* (Dir. Ranjith, 2002), which was a successful film. His other hits include *Swapnakoodu* (Dir. Kamal, 2003), *Classmates* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2006), *Vaasathavam* (Dir. M. Padmakumar, 2006), *Puthiya Mukham* (Dir. Diphan, 2009), *Ayaalum Njanum Thammil* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2012), etc.

<sup>78</sup>A light, loose undergarment worn by women. In the film a group young women rag a young man, by asking him to wear a petticoat as per their college circular that reads, “All students of this institution are mandatorily required to wear a petticoat while inside the campus” (00:34:42-00:34:48).

his masculinity; the women who force him to wear it are embarrassed when he sarcastically puts a display of femininity in the drag. The hero's body endorse masculinity even in cross dressing, whereas the non-hegemonic masculinity in cross dressing is a comic spectacle in the film.

In the film *Kilukkam Kilukilukkam*, the drag performances of Salim Kumar, Kochin Haneefa<sup>79</sup>, Innocent and Jagathy Sreekumar redeploy cross dressing as a popular and recurring trope of laughter. The visual pleasure reiterated in the female impersonation suggests the patriarchal construction of female body as sexual object of the heterosexual male desire.



Figures 2.12, 2.13, 2.14 & 2.15 Salim Kumar (top left), Kochin Haneefa (top right), Jagathy Sreekumar (bottom left) & Innocent (bottom right) in *Kilukkam Kilukilukkam*

The close-up shots that capture the half-naked 'feminized' body of Jagathy Sreekumar through the gaze of Kochin Haneefa (who is also in drag in the scene), forces spectators to stare at it more and the look objectifies the cross dressed body. In *Hallo*, Jagathy Sreekumar cross dresses and fakes as a bride to divert the attention of

<sup>79</sup>Kochin Haneefa (1951-2010) was a Malayalam actor, producer and director. Haneefa is noted for his comedy roles in *Mannar Mathai Speaking* (Dir. Siddique-Lal, 1995), *Punjabi House* (Dir. Rafi-Mecartin, 1998), *Sreekrishnapurathe Nakshathrathilakkam* (Dir. Rajasenan, 1998), *Ee ParakkumThalika* (Dir. Thaha, 2001), *MeesaMadhavan* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2002), etc. The films directed by him, *Aankiliyude Tharattu* (1987) and *Valsalyam* (1993) were also remarkable.

the villains, and thus commands as a brand closely following the record of Adoor Bhasi who has many cross dressed performances in his credit.

The masculinity anxieties continue in the post 2010 films as well. A major feature of the films of this period is the presence of unconventional heroes. Mirium Xavier's observation about the new generation masculinities hints at the 'threat' that these heroes face and how their "performance (on screen) is subdued in contrast to the patriarchs" (101). Films like *Salt n' Pepper* (Dir. Aashiq Abu, 2011), *101 Weddings* (Dir. Shafi 2012), *Tamaar Padaar* (Dir. Dileesh Nair, 2014), *Mathai Kuzhappakkaranalla* (Dir. Akku Akbar, 2014), etc., portray feminine-presenting males. These men carry over the anxieties of the decade. When we look at non-hegemonic masculinities presented through cross dressing and slapstick humour and (one liners); they all aim at the objectification of the female body. Dileep; whose effeminacy is celebrated in the film *Chanthupottu*; through his gait and gestures again donnes the role of a seductress female in his next film *Mayamohini* (Dir. Jose Thomas, 2012). This time it is not only gait and gestures; the costumes, makeup, silky hair, which is again accentuated by his reappropriated body as that of a voluptuous figure- and the seductive look- make her an object of desire and possession. The macho heroes and male characters even fight among themselves to get her attention. *Mayamohini*, a family entertainer conveys a very stereotyped, negative and unhealthy representation regarding feminine gender and uses cross dressing in the agency that served the purpose. This 'image creation and circulation' of femininity appear in *Ulsaha Committee* (Dir. Akku Akbar, 2014) and *Chanakyathanthram* (Dir. Kannan Thamarakkulam, 2018) also. In *Chanakyathanthram*, Unni Mukundan's cross dressing has minor significance only. But the image of hyperfeminine sari clad actor is widely circulated through posters, teasers, and trailers. This is the space where visuality or visibility of a cross dressed body gets fetishized. The cross dressing and mannerisms of male actors in these films female body as a motif of seduction for men and these cross dressings aim at satisfying the spectatorial gaze.



Figures 2.16, 2.17 & 2. 18 The cross dressed Dileep in *Mayamohini* (left), Baburaj in *Ulsaaha Committee* (centre), and Unni Mukundan in *Chanakyathanthram* (right)

The undercurrents of camp performance in the West are quite evident here, as Susan Sontag (1961) opines, “The whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (277). The cross dressings intended to generate misogynic comic pleasure in the mass. While examining the camp performances in Dileep films, Meena T. Pillai (2017) comments that,

Camp as a sub cultural reception strategy by which non-hegemonic masculinities can also be represented in mainstream culture in a humourous and non-threatening manner... In patriarchal, misogynist societies, humour or camp becomes an effective ploy for representing masculinities in a less offensive, in-nocuous manner, making misogyny appealing to the masses through its bad taste and tongue-in-cheek suggestions (56).

The cross dressed actors in these films, with their re-appropriated bodies and constructed femininity, appear as seductresses. The feminized male bodies objectify women for the erotic visual pleasure of heterosexual male spectators and the misogynist way of performing femininity at times crosses the level of obscenity.

Sudheer Karamana's<sup>80</sup> female impersonation in a play in the film *Ennu Ninte Moideen* (Dir. R.S. Vimal, 2015), conveys the conditions of the heroine, who is victimized by the men in her family. Though the actor mimics the heroine, his female impersonation could be linked to the earlier theatre performances in which women were absent on stage. In two other films *Tamaar Padaar*, and *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* (Dir. Viju Varma, 2014) the ritualistic cross dressing at Kottankulangara *Chamayavilakku* is depicted. While the cross dressing of men in other films accentuate laughter, the possibility of comedy is lessened here; the focus shifts to the divinity underpinned in subversion of gender identities.

The male cross dressings discussed in films could be critically perused with Judith Butler's (1990) postulation of performativity of gender. For Butler, drag appears as instability between an essential sex and gender. Butler raises the question whether the man appearing in feminine clothing is essentially a man, and whether he has only the 'appearance of a woman.' Gender parodying of men in Malayalam cinema necessitates an answer to similar questions and these films could be linked to Butler's reading of the "cultural practices of drag" and "cross dressing" (137). Further, R. W. Connel (2005), proposes hegemonic masculinity as any practice that legitimizes man's dominant position in society. If a drag is critically understood in terms of this, it appears as a threat to the established patriarchal power claimed by men. The male cross dressings are used for humour, and the visual pleasure aroused thereby. It could be opined that, "If identity is made up of performances, then drag performance is an ideal site for exploring identity; drag functions by taking practices that are culturally encoded as feminine or masculine or as heterosexual and homosexual, and combining these in ways to create new gender and sexual meanings" (Ha 23). In the films analyzed here, drag performances of male actors

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<sup>80</sup>Sudheer Karamana is an actor, and the son of veteran actor Karamana Janardhanan Nair. His films include *Ozhimuri* (Dir. Madhupal, 2012), *Varsham* (Dir. Ranjith Shankar, 2014), *Anuragakarikkin Vellam*(Dir. Khalid Rehman, 2016), etc.

challenge the social construction of masculinity. Moreover, these enactments underscore the masculine imagination of femininity in our society. Male cross dressings are used for the purpose of humour, more specifically, for sexist humour in recent films. It is significant to explore the counter politics of women performing masculine gender through cross dressing, how it is distinct from the male cross dressing. The politics of female cross dressing in Malayalam cinema is reflective of the gender dynamics in Kerala's public sphere. The next section of the chapter critically examines the female cross dressing in Malayalam cinema as a counter discourse to the male cross dressings discussed so far.

## 2.3 Female Cross Dressing in Malayalam Cinema

It is appropriate to examine the female cross dressing in films to understand the visual and pleasure politics underpinned in the depiction. The social roles of women as wives and mothers have placed them in a less privileged position compared with men. Moreover, female sexuality and its articulation in society is restricted. The fictional and historical accounts give female cross dressing to attain liberation.<sup>81</sup> The cultural theories of female masculinities by Jack Halberstam (1998) propose that there have been many models of women performing masculine gender identity and it is a process of conceiving masculinity in essence, which is not merely an imitation and hence masculinity is not just claimed by men. In female homosocial spaces, female masculinity is performed through sexual positioning. An analysis of lesbian sexuality would spread lights to diverse models of female masculinities. They are varied from cross dressing as men (drag king), dykes, female husbands, butch femme, tomboys, etc. Drag kings underscore the normative gender performance of masculinity with its use of artificial wig, beard, and moustache. Such 'constructed

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<sup>81</sup> In the west, there were instances of female cross dressings who prefer to live in male identity. Lucy Ann Slater alias Reverend Joseph Lobdell was arrested and institutionalized. Another woman Cora Anderson lived for thirteen years as a man with two women without revealing her true sex (Bullough and Bullough 165). Theophile Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle du Maupin* (1835) presents a woman Theodore de Serranes dressed in male attire in order to become acquainted with another young woman.

masculinities' parody the normative male models by subverting the female bodies through cross dressing. As mentioned earlier, there have been male impersonation on stage which suggests a "sustained, realistic attempt on the part of the extravaganza actress to recreate or mimic adult male behavior" (Bullough and Bullough 227). The theatrical cross dressing in the earlier times provided with women an opportunity to have adventures of desired roles which was denied by the gender conventions of the society during the time.<sup>82</sup> It could be observed that women seize opportunities to live the male role and gain confidence through cross dressing from the analysis of the historical and fictional accounts.

The male cross dressings represent subversive gender performance of men. Feminized male bodies have been used to derive laughter, and in contemporary times it appears to be misogynic humour. Malayalam cinema has represented cross dressed female characters as pleasure spectacles. Rather than pure humour, it points at the advantageous position men hold in patriarchal society. In his study on female cross dressing in Malayalam cinema, Yacob Thomas (2010) observes, "The deconstruction of body politics (in films) problematizes the hegemonic position of masculine gender, rewrites sexuality, and annuls the division of gender identity as masculine and feminine" (1125). In the Malayalam films selected for analysis, one could observe how the cross dressing of women fail ultimately. Malayalam films that used cross dressing of female actors are less in number and are not as diverse as male cross dressings. It includes *Ponnapuram Kotta* (Dir. Kunchacko, 1973), *Ammayane Sathyam* (Dir. Balachandra Menon, 1993), *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Noottandu* (Dir. Viji Thampi, 1994), *Hitler Brothers* (Dir. Sandhya Mohan, 1997), *Daya* (Dir. Venu, 1998), *Akashaganga* (Dir. Vinayan, 1999), *Meranam Joker* (Dir. Nissar, 2000), *Chirikkudukka* (T.S. Saji, 2002), *Rasathanthram* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 2006), *Chocolate* (Dir. Rosshan Andrews, 2007), *Nawal Enna Jewel* (Dir. Renjith Lal, 2017), etc.

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<sup>82</sup>Certain male impersonators (Vesta Tilley 1864-1952, Anne Hindle b. 1847, Ella Wesner 1841-1917) played 'masculine roles' offstage as well. They portrayed swaggering, cigar-smoking, swearing young men, etc (*ibid*).

In *Ponnapuram Kotta* the heroine is one who is unconventional from patriarchal imagination of ideal femininity. She is a brave, self-determined, and independent woman. By taking 'advantage of the masculine appearance' through cross dressing, she attacks the fort of those who killed her father. It is ironic that while cinema constructs masculinity in the heroine, her gender identity as a woman is revealed in front of the hero (Prem Nazir) who watches her bathing in a river. The bathing scene in the film eroticizes the female body in a clandestine space, and it is gazed by the hero. The camera captures her nudity that arouses erotic visual pleasure in spectators. The film underlines the patriarchal notion that a woman cannot hide her femininity for long, as it will be ultimately unwrapped by a man and end in a heterosexual romance for 'social acceptance.'

The reason for the sporadic representation of female cross dressing in Malayalam cinema may be the subject's failure to attract Malayali spectators. While male cross dressing results in a comic visual pleasure in most of the films, female cross dressing appear to satiate the scopophilic and voyeuristic pleasure of spectators. But in the 90s and in the 2000s, female cross dressing is represented in minor sequences of certain laughter films. In *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Noottandu*, *Hitler Brothers*, *Chirikudukka*, and *Akashaganga* female cross dressings are used for the purpose of comedy. Most of these films emphasize the exhibition of masculine signifiers on female bodies: moustache and beard, and masculine clothes are used for subverting the gender performance. Even though they reinforce masculinity in women, it seems less appealing to spectators as comedy. In *Chocolate*, the depiction of the cross dressed female in a song (*Kalkandamalaye...*) becomes a derogatory visual spectacle through the representation of a feminine-presenting male<sup>83</sup> and is emblematic of the cinematic construction of deficient masculinity. These selected comic portrayals offer possibilities of female cross dressing as a counter discourse to the male cross dressings in Malayalam cinema.

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<sup>83</sup>The popularisation of the image of a feminine-presenting male in the film *Chanthupottu* as a deficient masculinity and comic spectacle influenced the depiction in *Chocolate*.



Four Malayalam films are significant to be analyzed as the male impersonation in them problematizes the gender identity and the social positioning of the cross dressed women. It is to be noted that these disguises of identities are represented as temporary solace for the cross dressers. In *Ammayane Sathyam* (1993), the heroine cross dresses to escape from patriarchal society. The film depicts her as employed as a domestic help in an all male space. The film critiques the male dominated society's treatment of women as sexual objects, which is underpinned in the subtext. The cross dressed woman succeeds in making others (men) believe that she is a young man. As a domestic help, she does the household chores solely. However, the film reinforces that a woman cannot live long in male clothing, as the gender identity of Thomas (the cross dressed heroine), is brought out by the inmate Omanakkuttan, who marries her later. It is significant to observe that Thomas' body is depicted as an erotic object as the camera captures her in bath, and also in the scene where her clothes are wet at the seashore when she falls into the water.



Figures 2.19, 2.20 & 2.21 The cross dressed heroine as a domestic help in *Ammayane Sathyam* (1993), she attempts to cover her bosom out of coyness when her femininity is revealed, the ensuing heterosexual romance between the hero and heroine

In the scene (Fig. 2.20), the bosom of the woman is a signifier of her sexed body as well as underscores the failure in binding<sup>84</sup> it. Incidentally, when her cross dressing fails in the film, it becomes a compromise to the heteronormative expectations of society. The film points at Omanakkuttan's visual pleasure and sexual frustration in making her to wear female costumes in clandestine spaces at night and he brings sophistication in his manners to impress her which indirectly makes the other men appear as rude (in front of her). An aura of eroticization of their desire is accented in their togetherness in the bed room with the background music. In a later scene, Omanakkuttan teases the heroine by pointing at her cropped hair. He comments that a woman should be coy, and should have long hair, which reinforce the patriarchal imagination of normative femininity. The 'unfeminine' appearance of the woman in the film ruptures this view. However, the ending of the film with a heterosexual union of the heroine and hero, stresses that a woman can never acquire independence, a patriarchal construction of masculine privilege, and the cross dressing is dismissed as a failure.

*Rasathanthram* (2006) captures a woman who cross dresses to hide her identity, when her femininity victimizes her. The popular heroine Meera Jasmine<sup>85</sup> played the role (for which the film was marketed) of the destitute woman named Kanmani, who is forced to cross dress. Kanmani tries to perform masculinity, but her psychological gender remains 'feminine.' She is engaged as a 'male domestic help,' yet, the gender performance points out as if 'a woman has come to the house.' Thus, the male cross dressing fails while it is performed. Kanmani longs to return to her feminine identity that is evident in certain scenes, in a shop she touches bangles, bindi, etc., the semiotic devices of femininity that catches her attention. The film

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<sup>84</sup>The term refers to the process of flattening one's breasts to have a more masculine or flat appearing chest.

<sup>85</sup>Meera Jasmine is a popular actress in the 2000s. She won the National Award for Best Actress in 2004 for her role as a victim of child marriage in *PaadamOnnu: Oru Vilapam* (Dir. T.V. Chandran, 2003). Her major hits are *Swapnakoodu* (Dir. Kamal, 2003), *Kasthuriman* (Dir. A. K. Lohithadas, 2003), *Achuvinte Amma* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 2005), etc.

depicts the heterosexual union of the hero and the heroine in the narrative closure. It could be argued that, *Rasathanthram* presents the female cross dressing playfully, it arouses visual pleasure in spectators. Moreover, it points at the precarious gender positioning of an adult woman and her sexuality in a patriarchal heteronormative society.

In its representation of female cross dressing, the film *Daya* is distinct from *Ammayane Sathyam* and *Rasathanthram*. Popular actress of the time Manju Warri<sup>86</sup> played the role of Daya. The heroine serves as a domestic help, and cross dresses as a man later to escape from the villain. She exhibits her skill in horse riding and passes intelligence tests for the post of a male minister. Daya establishes herself as a noble and efficient minister however, the cross dressing ultimately fails by chance. Daya's body is not exhibited half naked in bathing scenes like in the other films.



Figures 2.22& 2.23 Manju Warri in *Daya* (1998)[left] and Swetha Menon in *Nawal Enna Jewel* (2017)[right]

It is ironic to note that, though the people accept the woman as their minister irrespective of her gender, the king announces her marriage the next day, as if once the gender becomes 'feminine' it needs a 'masculine' support through marriage. An analysis of the male impersonation in *Daya* foregrounds the privileged social role of a

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<sup>86</sup> Manju Warri made her acting debut in *Sakshyam* (Dir. Mohan, 1995). Her most well-known films are: *Thooval Kottaram* (Dir. A.K. Lohithadas, 1996), *Sallapam* (Dir. Sundar Das, 1996), *Ee Puzhayum Kadannu* (Dir. Kamal, 1996), *Kanmadam* (Dir. A.K. Lohithadas, 1998), *Summer in Bethlehem* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1998), *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (Dir. T.K. Rajeev Kumar, 1999), *How Old Are You?* (Dir. Rosshan Andrews, 2014). She also won the Kerala State Film Award for Best Actress in 1996.

man in the society. She receives social approval, only when she cross dresses and performs masculinity. It is suggestive of the social attitude regarding the gender roles of women by emphasizing 'biology as destiny.' The heterosexual marriage at the end of the narrative could be also observed in the light of the patriarchal control of a woman's sexuality.

*Nawal Enna Jewel* (2017) depicts a woman who is victimized by the male dominated society that treats women as sexual objects. The heroine uses her cross dressed identity to save herself and her girl child. She disguises as an old man using prosthetics. The film critiques the patriarchal social view of sexual objectification of female bodies. By cross dressing, the woman is able to attain liberation in a misogynic society as she plays the role of a 'protective' figure of a father. The film has sensationalized the cross dressing of Swetha Menon<sup>87</sup> as a marketing strategy by releasing the video of her makeup in YouTube.

All the films mentioned above follow certain archetypal patterns in the representation of cross dressed females and their gender performance. When the positioning of women in patriarchal male dominated society is problematic due to their feminine gender identity, the cross dressings are used as a resolve, which itself is depicted as a temporary solace. Through cross dressing, a temporary disguise of identity and the concealment of femininity is attempted which help in saving them from the clutches of masculine powers. These films emphasize the male dominated society as oppressive and females as victims. The masculinity of the cross dressed women are visualized in the narrative with homoerotic undertones (ironically constructed in a heterosexual manner); women in men's attire are gazed by other women, and such romances are also temporary for the spectatorial pleasures as the narratives in all respect end with heterosexual romances. Observing in comparison with male cross dressing in Malayalam cinema, female cross dressings are less

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<sup>87</sup> Shweta Menon is a television anchor, actress and model. Her noted film include *Salt N' Pepper* (Dir. Aashiq Abu, 2011), *Kalimannu* (Dir. Blessy, 2013), etc. She has won Kerala State Best Actress award for *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (Dir. Ranjith, 2009).

popular as for the purpose of humour. The cross dressing of male actors has been a comic device, and such scenes are followed by moments of revelation of the actual gender identity of the characters. However, the cross dressing of female characters are 'found out' rather than they themselves disclose it. In a few films, cross dressing of a woman is represented through an objectification of her body for the voyeuristic male gaze in bathing scenes. It is pertinent to observe that Malayalam cinema does not discuss these gender performances in terms of the gender nonconformity the cross dressed characters experience in their mind, rather the focus was on the pleasure evoked by the gender performance of the cross dressed. Though the male and female cross dressings subvert gender performance of the cross dresser, in the films they reinforce the masculine and feminine cultural signifiers through clothing and makeup. The next two sections of the chapter aims to critically examine feminine presenting men, female masculinity and the gender positioning of queer men and women in Malayalam cinema. The slow emergence of dissenting voices concerned with homosexuality and transgender identities in society could be observed in these performances.

## **2.4 Non-hegemonic Masculinities: Feminine-presenting Men and Queer Men in Malayalam Cinema**

In laughter films men were presented as non-hegemonic, powerless, and mostly dominated by women. The homosocial bonding of men stereotyped queer men as 'feminine.' This section discusses certain films in which homosocial bonding are ruptured for the sake of bringing heteronormalcy into the narrative. The gender identity of queer characters is conceived in films as deviating from the social expectations of heteronormalcy. This could be examined further with the critical theories on performativity, gender and sexuality by Judith Butler. In her "Critically Queer" (1993), Butler critiqued the hegemonic heteronormalcy using psychoanalytic theories. Butler proposed that, "the heterosexual logic requires, identification and

desire as mutually exclusive (...) if one identifies a given gender, one must desire a different gender” (28). Films tend to construct the queer characters as people whose gender performance strongly adhering to the binary gender positions. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2005) takes up this further in his analysis of queer Malayalam films, and he argues that scholars in the 1970s and 80s focused on “the ideological function of the cinematic text” (72). By drawing from Butler, he focuses on the ideological position of the viewer when they watch the films. The hegemonic codes of gender and sexuality have been critically examined by Muraleedharan Tharayil’s readings (2002, 2005) on male bonding in popular films in Malayalam. He notes how a male body becomes the “object of visual pleasure and desire” by a critical analysis of Kamal Haasan’s popularity in the 1970s. In the film *Kanyakumari* (Dir. K.S. Sethumadhavan, 1974), Kamal Haasan’s bare body is offered as a commodity in the film posters (with the absence of female figures in them). In *Vishnu Vijayam* (Dir. N. Sankaran Nair, 1974) the male character is homosexual and the body of the actor is presented as a subject of gaze and erotic desire (specifically, for a homosexual spectator). The 1980s continue this eroticization of male body with the emergence of the hero Jayan. If Kamal Haasan’s “boyish,” “androgynous identity” in his early career is the subject of erotic pleasure for a queer spectator, Jayan has projected a “hirsute,” “muscled-torso.” However, all these male bodies were quite popular and interestingly, women were absent on the film posters. (Muraleedharan 74-75). The male bodies in the posters invited desiring glances and offered visual pleasure to spectators. Moreover, these images offered possibilities for subversive gender performance in the so-called ‘heteronormative plots.’

The depiction of non-hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam cinema is analyzed further by Jenny Rowena. In her study of ‘laughter films’ (2002), Rowena argues that the representation of non-hegemonic masculinity has emphasized heterosexuality as a needed virtue among the upper caste men and women. In hostels and lodges, male homosocial spaces were constructed post the 80s when men lived together for the purpose of higher studies and occupation. The increased male

bonding was a major feature in films during the time. Rowena argues that this social situation deeply affected the male bonding in laughter films. She critically examines the remasculinization of upper caste men with a lower caste friend as his subordinate, who is mostly represented like a ‘fool’ and the proliferation of such depictions in laughter films. Actors Innocent, Jagathi, Jagadish,<sup>88</sup> Sreenivasan,<sup>89</sup> Mamukkoya,<sup>90</sup> etc., played such comic roles with super heroes Mohanlal and Mammooty. The homosocial bonding of Mohanlal-Sreenivasan (*Nadodikattu*, Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1987), and Mukesh-Jagadeesh (*In Harihar Nagar*, Dir. Siddique- Lal, 1990, and *Godfather*, Dir. Siddique- Lal, 1991), represent the homoerotic space in Malayalam cinema; the remasculinization, and the heterosexual union of the hero with the heroine. The ‘hetero-construct’ of these films, in the temporary absence of the heroine makes the male partner a ‘feminine other’ and thus effects a non-normative masculinity on screen. In the films, the “‘normal’ ‘male’ subject is constructed only when he [the hero] sees homoerotic desire as ‘feminine desire,’ and ‘suppress [es] that desire, to purify all relationships with other men” (Rowena 150). While the hero emerges as an epitome of masculinity, the homosocial partner is represented as ‘feminine’ and ‘emasculated.’ These ‘comic others’ are also symptomatic of the homophobia of the heterosexual spectators of the time.

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<sup>88</sup>Jagadish is a Malayalam actor, television anchor and politician. His notable films include *Godfather* (Dir. Siddique-Lal, 1991), *Mr. & Mrs.* (Dir. Sajan, 1992), *KunukkittaKozhi* (Dir. Viji Thampi, 1992), *Injakkadan Mathai & Sons* (Dir. Anil Babu, 1993), *Hitler* (Dir. Siddique, 1996), etc.

<sup>89</sup>Sreenivasan is a Malayalam actor, screenwriter, and director. He has won two Kerala State Film Awards for Best Screenplay, for *Sandesam* (Dir.Sathyan Anthikkad, 1991) and *MazhayethumMunpe* (Dir. Kamal, 1995). His major comedies include *Aram + Aram = Kinnaram* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1985), *PonmuttayidunnaTharavu* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1988), *Chithram*( Dir.Priyadarshan, 1988), *AzhakiyaRavanan*(Dir. Kamal, 1996), etc.

<sup>90</sup>Mamukkoya has mostly appeared in comic roles in Malayalam cinema. His prominent comedies include *Gandhinagar 2nd Street* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1986), *SanmanassullavarkkuSamadhanam* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1986), *Nadodikkattu*(Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1987), *Pattanapravesham* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1988), *Thalayanamanthram* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1990), etc. He got the Kerala State Award for Second Best Actor in 2004 for the movie *Perumazhakkalam* (Dir. Kamal, 2004).

Malayalam cinema in the 90s represented normative masculinities in films like *Devasuram* (Dir. I.V. Sasi, 1993), *AaramThamburan* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 1997), etc. The “elusive and normative ideal of the male, fair-complexioned hefty body gratifying the egotistical masculine desires of its implicit audience” (James 384). Muraleedharan’s articles (2002, 2005) form the crux of the study about the male to male desire in Mohanlal’s revivalist films. Dr.Sunny’s queer desires to Nakulan and Chanthu in *Manichithrathazhu* (1993), Varghese and Shyam in *Thacholi Varghese Chekavar*(Dir. T. K. Rajeev Kumar, 1995), Hari and Krishnan in *Harikrishnans* (Dir. Fazil, 1998), Vidyasagar’s misogyny and desire for the friend Ramakrishnan, (*Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu*), etc., are described as “‘hetero-social,’ since the eventual constitution of the heteroexual bond is tragically devoid of desire and prompted by gendered responsibilities, preceded by long narrative celebration of same sex desire” (Muraleedharan 81). This male-male bonding could be observed as persisting, as in *Thenkasipattanam* (Dir. Rafi Mecartin, 2000), *One Man Show* (Dir.Shafi, 2001), *Chakram* (Dir. A. K. Lohithadas, 2003), etc. These films deal with queerness in the subtext, with male homosocial spaces. Such representations often create spectacles of visual pleasure by endorsing the ‘normalcy’ of macho figures.

The feminine-presenting male in films forms comic spectacle and invokes visual pleasure in the spectators. The body of the male dancer, who practice the *lasyanrita*, is stereo-typically represented with ‘femininity’ in films. It is a popular misconception and pleasure spectacle in Kerala’s public sphere through the exaggerated mannerisms and performative aspects of gender identity. Pothuval Mash (Oduvil Unnikrishnan<sup>91</sup>) in *Thalayanamanthram* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikad, 1990) is one such misrepresentation, who fails to prove his masculinity in front of a woman

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<sup>91</sup>Oduvil Unnikrishnan (1943–2006) was a Malayalam film actor. His memorable roles include those in *Nizhalkuthu*(Dir. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 2002), *Kathapurushan*(Dir. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1995), *Sargam*(Dir. Hariharan, 1992), *Yodha*(Dir. Sangeeth Sivan, 1992), *OruCheruPunchiri*(Dir. M. T. Vasudevan Nair, 2000), *AaramThamburan*(Dir. Shaji Kailas, 1997), etc.



(Urvashi<sup>92</sup>) (as a chaste married woman, she throws him out of her house as he approaches her with sexual advances), which forms a comic spectacle. In these films, “those bodies that fail to achieve or even aspire to the assumed masculine ‘normalcy’ are designated as abnormal and incomplete” (James 384). Feminine-presenting male characters has been a recurring feature in the post 2010 Malayalam films, probably due to queer visibility in the public sphere. However, the homophobic society in Kerala derives pleasure by disciplining and making fun of them. Chenichery Kurup in *Urumi* (Dir. Santhosh Sivan, 2011), Babu, the cook with macho body in *Salt n’ Pepper* (Dir. Aashiq Abu, 2011), Jyothish Kumar, a dance master in *101 Weddings* (Dir. Shafi, 2012), Tubelight Mani in *Tamaar Padaar* (Dir. Dileesh Nair, 2014), Suthan, the male dancer in *Mathai Kuzhappakkaranalla* (Dir. Akku Akbar, 2014), Sreeni, the feminine-presenting teacher in *Kamuki* (Dir. Umesh Unnikrishnan, 2018), etc. deviate from the normative imagination of masculinity. The masculine femininity makes them erotic and derogatory visual subjects in cinema, demonstrative of the phobia of the society. One could relate this to Judith Butler’s (1993) observations on ‘homophobia.’ According to Butler,

Homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abjected gender to homosexuals, that is calling gay men ‘feminine’ or calling lesbians ‘masculine’ and because of the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender (27).

The reference to queerness as a derogatory trait is noted in mainstream Malayalam cinema in the early 1980s. Director I.V. Sasi has explicitly depicted the “man-boy love culture in Calicut” in his film *InnallenkilNale* (1982) (Muraleedharan 74). The films of the 90s and early 2000s seem to maintain a silence regarding homosexuality. The queer men depicted in films after 2010, are forced to engage in heterosexual

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<sup>92</sup> Urvashi is an actress, TV host and producer in South Indian Industry. She was the lead actress in the 80s and 90s, and won the National Film Award for Best Supporting Actress for her performance in *Achuvinte Amma* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 2005). Her noted performances include *Mazhavil Kavadi* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1989), *Thalayanamanthram* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1990), *Bharatham* (Dir. A. K. Lohithadas, 1991), *Kazhakam* (Dir. M. P. Sukumaran Nair, 1995), etc.

marriages, and are portrayed as abject figures even at a time the public sphere in Kerala has been undergoing a rigorous shift from silence to celebration. The women in those films are depicted as shocked and disturbed for their husband's infidelity and the homosexuality is conceived as a failure of masculinity in the marital relation, from a woman's point of view. The queerness of films is displayed in such a manner that the audience is blind about the male homosexual's inner conflicts for being in a heterosexual relation by behaving as a 'happy husband' (even if they are bisexuals). *Sufi Paranja Katha* (Dir. Priyanandan, 2010), *English; An Autumn in London* (Dir. Shyamaprasad, 2013), *My Life Partner* (Dir. M.B. Padmakumar, 2014), *Aami* (Dir. Kamal, 2018), etc., are symptomatic of the homophobia of society by the representation of queer male husbands. Certain films explicitly state homosexuality as phobic, immoral and non-normative. *Rithu* (Dir. Shyamaprasad, 2009), and *Apoorvaragam* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 2010) portray queer men as social deviants and criminals. *Mumbai Police* (Dir. Rosshan Andrews, 2013) narrates the homosexual orientation of the central character and his violence as a cover to his 'deficient masculinity.' Antony Moses' hyper-masculinity in the film is questioned because of his queer identity, as a gay police officer. The film illustrates how Moses kills his friend who is a representative of heteronormative society. The crime could be read as a result of the fear on gender bashing in a homophobic society that criminalized homosexuality. The gender performance of a queer male and his partner stereotypically form the pattern of 'dominant male' and 'submissive male' in the film as per the heterosexual imagination. The films *Nee-Na* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2015), and *Two Countries* (Dir. Shafi, 2015) represent queer men, who are made fun at by heterosexual men. However, the offbeat films *Papilio Budha* (Dir. Jayan K. Cheriyan, 2013), and *Ka Bodyscapes* (Dir. Jayan K. Cheriyan, 2016) have politicized non-normative sexuality. *Ente Mezhuthiri Athazhangal* (Dir. Sooraj Thomas, 2018) has a queer male character, who gets an opportunity to speak out, yet the film does not break the conventional codes of a heterosexual family, and the hero's diplomatic stand on non-normative desires is to be noted. In all the said films, the eroticization of

male bodies is attempted for the consumption of heteronormative public through their performance of non-normative sexuality and gender.

## **2.5 Female Masculinities, Queer Women, and Non-Heteronormative Gender Performances**

The female masculinities in Malayalam cinema prove that gender performance is a construction and there have been a number of female characters placed against the conventional norms of femininity. Yet most such depictions end in heterosexual bonding as a relief for women to escape from the victimization of patriarchal society. Malayalam cinema has subverted the hegemonic notions of women as submissive by depicting certain female characters struggling against the norms. They assume masculine roles at home and society.

Even in the formative years of the 50s, and 60s, Malayalam cinema has placed women characters within the confines of patriarchal families, as ‘good wives’ dominated by their husbands. However, certain women characters cross the social restrictions and are treated as bad women. For instance, in *Jeevitha Nauka* (Dir. K. Vembu, 1951), there is a woman who ill-treats her husband’s brother and his wife. Women are shown as silent sufferers in the 60s films, as in *Chemmeen* (Dir. Ramu Kariat, 1965), *Thulabharam* (Dir. A. Vincent, 1968), and *Adhyapika* (Dir. P. Subramanyam, 1968); a number of female characters are victimized by social forces. Meena T. Pillai (2010) observes that,

The heroines of the 1960s too are steeped in the sentiment of exaltation with a clear demarcation between the heroine and the vamp; former being portrayed in a romantic and gentle light in contrast to the latter who offers visual pleasure by enabling fetishistic scopophilia. The vamp is the stereotyped representation of the sexualized female body whose identity is contained and crippled by the very act of such representation (17).

Malayalam films of the 1970s act as social critiques, yet, the domestication of women continues to an extent. Women try to erase the normative gender roles of silent suffering; however, films undermine such codes, and end up by not breaking the ideological structures. *Oru Penninte Katha* (Dir. K.S. Sethumadhavan, 1971), *Swayamvaram* (Dir. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, 1972), *Idavazhiyile Poocha Mindapoocha* (Dir. Hariharan, 1979), etc. depict struggling women, but those who conform to normative femininities ultimately. Two types of femininities are to be noted. One category of women is feeble, domesticated, and chaste, and the second category is marginalized more, as merely puppets or sexualized figures. Their bodies become sexualized figures that evoke spectatorial pleasures. When women have started to be more active in the public sphere due to education, employment, and economic independence, they are interpreted as 'less feminine.' The middlebrow films are influenced by the shift in their formal and aesthetic aspects, and economic and social shifts in public sphere. Masculinity of women when they deviate from their assigned roles has been a thriving issue since then.

The laughter films of the 1980s and 1990s represent subversive gender performance of women. Elderly women assume dominant roles in comedy films, that makes them 'unfeminine.' "The only non-hegemonic women who attain some prominence in the comedy-scene are a handful of comediennes, who are seldom given any relevance in the main plot and are treated to a huge amount of ridicule" (Rowena 153). Sukumari<sup>93</sup> has performed non-normative femininity in a number of films as she is represented as "bossy, unfeminine, dominating and 'bad'" (Rowena 153). In *Boeing Boeing* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1985), and *Vandanam* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1989), she plays 'unfeminine' characters, elderly women who drink and dance in the

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<sup>93</sup>Sukumari (1940-2013) was an actress who worked in multilingual films. She was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India for her contributions toward the arts. Her remarkable performances include *Padayottam* (Dir. Jijo Punnoose, 1982), *Innalenkil Nale* (Dir. I.V. Sasi, 1982), *Koodevide* (Dir. P. Padmarajan, 1983), *T.P. Balagopalan M.A.* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikad, 1986), *Arappatta Kettiya Gramathil* (Dir. P. Padmarajan, 1986), *Thenmavin Kombathu* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1994), etc.

company of men. Whereas, in *Gandhi Nagar 2nd Street* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikaad, 1986) and *Thalayanamanthram* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikaad, 1990) Sukumari's characters are ridiculed for being domineering. These characters are deviating from the cinematic images of women as caring mothers. Philomena's<sup>94</sup> performance during the time is also noted for its stress on humor. Her characters are sometimes "ugly, for smoking, drinking and talking loudly" (Rowena 154). Interestingly in the film *Godfather* (Drs. Siddique-Lal, 1991), Philomena plays the role of Aanappara Achamma, a stubborn elder woman opposite to the patriarchal figure Anjooran. Though Anjooran is a tough man, Achamma's depiction arouses comedy among spectators. Both of them cultivate rivalry and the film ultimately stands with the hegemonic position of the male supremacy, as Achamma ends up as a failed femininity, as a mother.

Post the 90s, Kalpana<sup>95</sup> is phenomenal in portraying the non-normative femininity in Malayalam cinema. In *CID Unnikrishnan B.A., B.Ed* (Dir. Rajasenan, 1994), Kalpana performs as a CID candidate who fakes the identity of a housemaid, and competes with other CID candidates. *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Noottandu* (Dir. Viji Thampi, 1994) depicts her as a woman struggling against social norms by joining the women homosocial space and interestingly the actress cross dresses for the role of her own twin brother. In *Kaliveedu* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1996) and *Arjunan Pillayum Anju Makkalum* (Dir. Chandrasekharan, 1997) Kalpana assays the roles of non-hegemonic women who are represented as dominating their husbands (such husband roles have been performed by the comediennes Kochin Haneefa and

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<sup>94</sup> Philomena (1926-2006), mostly played comedy roles and roles as mother and grandmother in Malayalam cinema. Philomena won her first State award, for the best supporting actress, in 1970 for her roles in films *Thurakkatha Vaathil* (Dir. P. Bhaskaran, 1970) and *Olavum Theeravum* (Dir. P.N. Menon, 1970). In 1987, she received the award for the second time for *Thaniyavarthanam* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1987).

<sup>95</sup> Kalpana Priyadarshini (1965-2016), was a Malayalam actress who invariably done comic and character roles. She won National Award for *Thanichalla Njan* (Dir. Babu Thiruvalla, 2012). Her remarkable performances include *Dr. Pasupathy* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 1990), *Uppukandam Brothers* (Dir. Suresh Babu, 1993), *CID Unnikrishnan B.A., B.Ed* (Dir. Rajasenan, 1994), *American Ammayi* (Dir. K.G. Gouthaman, 1999), etc.

Harisree Asokan as subversive masculinities, a counter discourses) at the nuptial day itself, which is an unconventional depiction of the popular cinematic construction of the shy Malayali bride entering the bed room with a glass of milk.

While examining the representation of female characters who subvert the normative femininity with boldness apart from the genre of laughter films, Vani Viswanath's <sup>96</sup> police roles are worth mentioning. She is represented as an enthusiastic and ambitious police officer in films *The Truth* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 1998), *Rapid Action Force* (Dir. Salim Bava, 2000), *Ee Nadu Innale Vare* (Dir. I.V. Sasi, 2001), *Black Dalia* (Dir. Baburaj, 2009), etc. These police characters model on the hegemonic masculinities performed by popular actors like Mohanlal, Mammooty, and Suresh Gopi. Though these characters dominate and exert power over other characters, most of them end with female masculinity downplayed by male characters. The film *Kaliveedu* (1996, Dir. Sibi Malayil) portrays Vani Viswanath as a “Malayali girl with cosmopolitan exposure” who lands in India to search for her groom (Sreedharan 83). The film constructs her as an unideal type of family woman, as per the imagination of an educated Malayali man, due to her independent thoughts and action. P. K. Nair (2010) observes that the film *Susanna* (Dir. T.V. Chandran, 2000), captures the “literate and cultured prostitute- takes stock of the four men in her life and in the process exposes the hypocritical society which denigrates and humiliates her and her ilk” and the “subdued and intelligent performance of Vani Viswanath” (33). One could argue that the actress herself has grown up to the figure of a desiring yet unconventional femininity on screen through her characters.

Unconventional femininities are also represented in the 90s through Manju Warrier. In *Kanmadam* (Dir. A.K. Lohithadas, 1998), the central female character Bhanu is a self-willed resilient woman. She is the sole breadwinner of the family who does jobs that require hard physical labour. She is portrayed as one who is tough, and

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<sup>96</sup>Vani Viswanath is a Malayalam actress and politician, who won the Kerala State Film Award in 2000. Her major films include *Sipayi Lahala* (Dir. Vinayan, 1995), *Mannar Mathai Speaking* (Dir. Siddique-Lal, 1995), *The King* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 1995), *Hitler* (Dir. Siddique, 1996), etc.

brave, which makes her an epitome of female masculinity. However, the film underscores the patriarchal notion that a woman cannot live alone as she is peered by the male dominated society, she falls in a romance with the macho hero, who stands as the consoling and protective figure in her traumatic experiences. In fact, a number of films in which Manju Warriar acted in the second half of 90s - *Summer in Bethlehem* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1998), *Pathram* (Dir. Renji Panicker, 1998), and *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (Dir. T. K. Rajeev Kumar, 1999), etc., follow the pattern of a woman, who is domineering, outspoken, and smart, struggling against the social norms. However, in order to conform itself to the hegemonic codes, cinema appropriates the female masculinities to fall in a heterosexual romance and become 'feminine' enough. A patriarchal macho hero marries the 'feminized' heroine ultimately. It is pertinent to observe that in another film, Manju Warriar performs a sensuous femininity. *Pranayavarnangal* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1998) depicts two female characters with contrasting femininities; one is active, dominant, naughty, and the other girl is her opposite. Maya (Divya Unni<sup>97</sup>) and Arathi (Manju Warriar) share a homosocial space in the hostel as roommates, but their characterisation is juxtaposed with each other. Maya is tom boyish, as the film opens with her arm wrestling with male students in the college, whereas Arathi is timid, docile, and an introvert who lives in her own world. Arathi is sari clad in most of the scenes, with her long hair spread. The patriarchal cultural construct of femininity is connected with women possessing long hair, as the hair of a woman symbolises her feminine beauty and sexuality. Socio-cultural studies on hair and its power in Asian cultures (Olivelle 1998) show the significance of hair in female sexuality and erotic potencies, the loose hair of a woman, is regarded as a sign of her domesticity and "sexual intimacy" (16). In the film, Maya's physical and emotional characteristics undergo a thorough transformation when she realizes that the man, whom she playfully connected with her friend Arathi (whose shyness she intends to alter), actually loves her. Maya conforms to the normative imagination of femininity, while the hero dismisses her

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<sup>97</sup> Divya Unni has been a leading actress in the late 90s and early 2000s. Her major hits include *Karunyam* (Dir. A.K. Lohithadas, 1997), *Kathanayakan* (Dir. Rajasenan, 1997), *Varnapakittu* (Dir. I.V. Sasi, 1997), *Friends* (Dir. Siddique, 1999), *Ustaad* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1999), etc.

characteristics as mere ‘pranks’ of her age. The heterosexual bonding in the end of the narrative brings back normalcy by undoing the female masculinity.

The non-normative gender performance of the heroine in the film *Vinodayathra* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 2007) is remarkable for her portrayal as the breadwinner of her family, who even becomes a model for the hero, a recurring pattern in many of Anthikkad films. Another film *Elsamma Enna Aankutty* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2010), in its title itself puns at the masculine gender performance of the heroine Elsamma. Due to social circumstances, she is forced to assume the patriarchal role of masculine gender positioning in her family. The local people call her a ‘boy’ for being strong and not vulnerable. Aparna Prem (2013) in her critical analysis on powerful male figures and desirable female body in Indian cinema argues that this framework re-emphasizes the social behaviour bestowed upon men and women by society. Though the film shows her taking unconventional job, she continues to be ‘feminine’ in her clothing, except at home she wears her father’s shirt, because she feels the presence of her father and experiences a comfort. As discussed already, the hegemonic male dominated society’s tension over an adult woman’s gender positioning and sexuality leads her to conform to the notion of heterosexual family as ultimate solution for her problems. The film has sensationalized the gender performance of the heroine during its release; however, it fails to break the gender stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

With the emergence of new generation films<sup>98</sup> in Malayalam since 2010, the representation of femininity has become unconventional. Most of the depictions that deviate from the hegemonic construction of femininity are noted as following: a woman taking revenge on her abusers (*22 Female Kottayam*; Dir. Aashiq Abu, 2012), the carefree woman staying in a men’s lodge (*Trivandrum Lodge*; Dir. V. K. Prakash, 2012), a bar dancer becoming a mother (*Kalimannu*; Dir. Blessy, 2014), the pregnant

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<sup>98</sup>Swapna Gopinath and Sony Jalarajan Raj (2015) define ‘new generation films’ as a discursive term that refers to a new set of films that departure from the regions conventional style, yet cannot be considered as a genre (1).



yet, bold teenager (*Zachariyayude Garbhinikal*; Aneesh Anwar, 2013), the lone traveller (*Charlie*; Dir. Martin Prakkat, 2015), the tomboyish woman (*Ne-Na*; Dir. Lal Jose, 2015), the tomboy fighter (*Rani Padmini*; Dir. Aashiq Abu, 2015), the woman wrestler in *Godha* (Dir. Basil Joseph, 2017), the adventurous woman in *Carbon* (Dir. Venu, 2018), etc. are the epitome of unconventional femininities performing non-normative gender roles.

The gender performance of women within female homosocial spaces and the female bonding are also required to be critically understood while examining the history of non-normative gender performances in Malayalam cinema. The cinematic narratives emphasize on the dominant ideals of heterosexual bonding through marriage and the patriarchal model of 'family.' Navaneetha Mokkil (2018) critiques this model, "The shaping of a singular model of procreative heterosexuality as the legitimate social practice of desiring, intimacy and cohabitation is tied to the choreography of masculinity and femininity in oppositional grid" (231). It may be observed that the gender politics in normalizing queer femininities focus on uniting them in death or in 'curing' them. Certain films, however attempt explicit representations of lesbian love and it could be seen as "non normative erotic and gender configurations, which erupt within sites of extreme heteronormalcy" (Muraleedharan 168). If lesbian love has started to shake the naturalized gender hierarchies in Indian cinema only with Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998), the Malayalam film *Randu Penkuttikal* (Dir. Mohan, 1978), based on the novel with the same title by V. T. Nandakumar depicted the bonding between two females much before the issue became identity politics. The preface to the second edition of the novel concludes with a note about the "development and spread of lesbianism in Kerala" (Muraleedharan 75). Though the film is silent on the lesbian undercurrents, the novel explicitly captures their romantic friendship. The women in this film are represented as taking the binary role of dominant and submissive in their homosocial intimacy. The film depicts the bonding of two high school girls, Girija and Kokila, that gets fragmented by their compromising to hetero-normalcy. The film is released during a

time homosexual practices were closeted in Kerala. One among them, who is depicted as a 'butch lesbian' assumes a non-normative gender role. But the cinema recasts it and she is brought back to hetero-normalcy, with the aid of a psychiatrist. She is cured from the 'mental illness' of same-sex desire (Scaria 2012). The depiction of homoeroticism among adolescent women becomes a recurrent pattern in two other films, which further problematizes the gender positioning of those females.

*Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (Dir. Padmarajan, 1986) depicts two school girls who are aggressive and assertive, and their bonding shakes the naturalized construction of heterosexuality. The film ends with their mysterious suicide after a short period of exile from school. The two girls, Sally and Nimmy, are pitted against the back drop of the absence of lesbian suicides as an issue in Kerala's public sphere, and also prior to its usage as a political tool for coming out and protest. The disruption of the naturalized construction of gender performance is evident in depicting Sally as the dominant one among the two in resisting the disciplinary acts of the school. Nimmy, nick named as 'Sally's tail' is submissive always. The portrayal of Sally in school uniform and her transformation in clothing and appearance, with cropped hair in the later scenes also signify the undercurrents of female masculinity. The film, thus establishes a binary model within the two girls, one 'dominant' and the other 'submissive' in the homosocial space. The diverse taxonomies for lesbian masculinities introduced by Jack Halberstam (2005) are pertinent while analyzing the character of Sally.



Figure 2.24 'Masculine' Sally and 'feminine' Nimmy in Harishankar's gaze

It is evident that, in a restaurant sequence in the film, Sally is captured by the camera as a tom boy with cropped hair, which is stressed as the masculine signifier that cinema constructs. The popular actor Mohanlal plays the role of the hero, whose intrusion into their space is also depicted as an establishment of normative masculinity as a counter to the masculinity of Sally. The gaze of Harishankar (Mohanlal) is captured in a wide angle shot and the mid-shot which depicts the hair and the seating posture of Sally and Nimmy portray them as ‘male’ and ‘female’ in front of the viewers; as if a heterosexual couple is enjoying their bonding. Harishankar later reveals them that he did not invade their space at first by mistaking them as a heterosexual couple and when he realized that they are two girls, he feels he can intrude their space and talk to them. Harishankar’s intrusion can also be read as a patriarchal disciplining of queer spaces. The hegemonic imagination of heterosexuality is thus represented as disrupted in the film with the homosocial coupling of the two girls. However, the erotic undertones in the subtext are evident from their exchanges, though the film is released when the discourse of homosexuality was absent in the public sphere. With the homosexual undertones- their deviation from the normative gender roles and sexuality- the film could be watched as a queer spectacle. Navaneetha Mokkil (2009) reads the circulation of the film in the mainstream public sphere in Kerala with the label of “good art,” which has the purpose of “undoing normative codes of desiring” (17).

The queer temporality in the region of Kerala marks the lack of platforms for sexual minorities to voice their non-normative desires and gender identities. An inquiry into the discourse of gender and sexuality shed light to Kerala modernity and the status of the state as progressive. The local kingdoms, the coming of Christian missionaries, the radical social movements, and developmental narratives must have contributed to this Kerala modernity (Sreekumar 2009, Bose and Varughese 2015). Yet, this model is criticized for ignoring the sexual minorities in Kerala by demarcating them as “abjects” and “outcasts” (Devika 2005). In the 90s, feminist discourse has started focussing on the sexual minorities and their gender positioning.

FIRM (Foundation for Integrated Research in Mental Health) founded in 1995 by Maithreyan and Dr.Jayasree, is regarded as “an important starting point for sexuality related debates in Kerala” (Agaja 89). Into this shifted space, *Sancharram* (2004, Dir. Ligy J. Pullapally) is fitted as a film that explicitly depicts the queer love of two women. In her reading of *Sancharram* and *Desatanakkili Karayarilla*, Navaneetha Mokkil (2009) argues, “The location of *Sancharram* in the LGBT discourse in India and abroad makes it so enmeshed in setting up an established meaning for the term ‘queer’ that the process of queering becomes one of a stabilising a chosen form of desire as the ideal one”, she adds further, the latter “sets out to trouble the naturalised construction of the heterosexual couple and injects a sense of instability into the social sphere itself” (12).

*Sancharram* (2004) depicts the homosexual bonding of two school girls Kiran and Delilah. Following the pattern of *Randu Penkuttikal* and *Desatanakkili Karayarilla*, the film portrays the disruption of the non-normative desire by the forced heterosexual marriage as part of the patriarchal family system in Kerala. The semiotics in the final sequence of the film, Kiran as standing on the top of a cliff with a possible suicide in her mind, and her revoking of it by turning back to embrace life over suicide forms a counter discourse to the lesbian suicides in Kerala. This depiction is contrasted with the suicide in the closing shot of *Desatanakkili Karayarilla*, in which the two girls in bed are portrayed as if “entangled bodies in a final sleep” (Mokkil 13). Kiran’s coming back to life, and the cropping of her hair in *Sancharram*, may be seen as her ‘masculinization processes’ in the film. Delilah and Kiran are juxtaposed to each other with the former’s ‘sensuous femininity’ and the latter’s increasing ‘masculinity.’ However, Gayatri Gopinath (2007) argues that the gender positioning of Kiran as ‘masculine’ is diminished in the film as the final sequences place her as a “modern, metropolitan lesbian/ feminist subject rather than a queer/ butch one... She emerges as the ‘authentic’ lesbian/feminist subject of the film while Delilah remains mired in the deadening strictures of normative femininity and heterosexuality” (Gopinath 347). Gopinath reads against the grain and argues that

Kiran transforms to a feminist and a lesbian. Whereas, Delilah embraces conventional femininity. It could be argued that Kiran undoes the stereotyped 'feminine gender performance' by being a lesbian, however her transformation in the end of the narrative underlines her gender non-normativity.

The issue of the 'authentic lesbianism' is problematized in the film *Silent Valley* (Dir. Syed Usman, 2012). The lesbian woman is represented as mad, one who attempts multiple murders of both men and women, to satisfy her non-normative desires. The central character Shabana attributes her love for women and her hatred for men, as a result of the traumatic experiences in her childhood and the gangrape by her lover and his friends. The film places Shabana as domineering, active in her sexual acts, as well as she resists and traps men, and by murdering them, she enjoys a sadistic pleasure. Shabana's gender positioning in the film ruptures the heteropatriarchal notions about a woman, as she is represented as a seductress, who enjoys pleasure in her act of revenge. *Silent Valley*, by representing lesbianism as a product of madness, conforms to the normative imagination of heterosexuality. It also ends up as a film that portrays homosexuality as a phobic element, without acknowledging the shift that has been happening in the public sphere of Kerala, which accommodate the non-normative sexualities and gender performances.

Thus, it could be noted that, Malayalam cinema attempts to present gender non conformity of women by emphasising their deviation from heteronormativity, and sexual and social role. When a woman assumes dominance in family and social relations, she is portrayed as unconventional. Queer women are also portrayed as gender non conforming when films discuss their sexuality. The next section discusses the endorsement of the binary gender roles in cinema as well as the outcome of gender confusions. One may find that, these films suggest one's gender identity as closely related to ones body and the way it is performed.

## 2.6 Representation of Body-Switch in Films

The discussion of non-normative gender performance will be incomplete without an analysis of the body-switch films. Male and female characters exchange their gender positions in certain Malayalam films, which arouse visual pleasure by the confusion and irony the gendered bodies evoke. These films reaffirm role reversals that conform to the patriarchal notions of biological sex and its gender role expectations.

The film *Ithihasa* (Dir. Binu S., 2014), by using fantasy and comedy, explores the possibilities of an exchange of gender roles of the male and female central characters. The plot revolves around an accidental transformation of body of the hero and heroine with an extra terrestrial power. However, the film interestingly presents non-normative gender performance of the actors. They start performing the gender that go beyond their assigned sex. The confusion created by the role reversal forms spectatorial pleasure in the film. By conforming to a binary normativity of masculinity and femininity, the film popularizes that gender is a performance by clothing and bodily manifestations. It is to be noted that, the film could not break the fixed norms of the way masculinity and femininity are performed in Kerala, the transformation happens just to their body; not in the mind.

*Garbhasreeman* (Dir. Anil Gopinath, 2014), explores the futuristic case of ‘male pregnancy’ as the next step of medical and scientific advancement. Reading in line with the post-humanist myth that blurs the boundaries of biological sex, the film is anticipated as a scientific development which fails in breaking the conventional myths regarding the fixed biological roles. Male pregnancy is attempted as a gender role switching in another film *Daivame Kaithozham K. Kumar Aakanam* (Dir. Salim Kumar, 2018) as well. The debate between the social positioning of the masculine and feminine gender forms the crux of the plot, as the husband and wife in the film fantasize the intervention of God in their life. The gender role inversion in the film is

stressed as unshattered when it is depicted as conforming to the patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity.

A close reading of the said films proves that body switchings are attempted as a trope for humour only, as they never intend to break the conventional social constructs of gender identity and gender performance. Also, they leave the impression that gender roles are fixed and negate trans identities. None of these characters are discussed from the perspective that they feel gender nonconformity in their mind. Spectators derive pleasure by the gender confusions evoked by their bodily manifestations. The portrayal heterosexual marriage, family and monogamy persist even in such futuristic gender role exchange narratives. These films present gender performance as strongly connected with one's body, and hence endorse biology as destiny. At this instance, it is noteworthy to have a cursory glance at portrayal of characters who feel the gender non conformity in their mind. The concluding section of the chapter tries to locate the transgender subject in Malayalam cinema. It examines the depiction of hijra identity in a few films in the early 2000s. The transgender characters are treated as social outcasts in these films.

## **2.7 Absent Spaces: Hijra Community in Malayalam Films**

'Transgender' people started getting wide attention in Kerala by the second decade of 21st century due to the politics of recognition. Hence, the gender nonconforming identities prior to that are looked upon with aversion. Two such films, *Chanthupottu* (Dir. Lal Jose, 2005) and *Ardhanaari* (Dir. Santhosh Souparnika, 2012) require a detailed analysis in the upcoming chapters. So, this section restricts its focus to films of the first decade of the twenty first century in which hijra characters play insignificant roles; *Nalacharitham Nalam Divasam* (2001, Dir. K. Mohanakrishnan, 2001), *Soothradharan* (Dir. A. K. Lohithadas, 2001), *Parthan Kanda Paralokam*

(Dir. Anil Kumar, 2008), and *Drona 2010* (Dir. Shaji Kailas, 2010). Such hijra depictions typecast ‘gender subaltern’<sup>99</sup> who lacked a space in Kerala.

In *Nalacharitham Naalam Divasam*, a gender variant person with feminine presentation is depicted as living in Mumbai. The film conforms to the construction of Kerala as a state without transgender people. In literary and cultural texts, Kerala is popularly imagined as far from the Hindi speaking/metropolitan mainstream of contemporary India, both geographically as well as culturally, and as a developed and progressive state (Muraleedharan 1998). The film constructs a marginalized and distorted image of trans people. The plot downplays the identity contestation and inner conflicts of the hijra character. In the narrative, the hijra is portrayed as a victim of social apathy. She guards the hero, who is a captive in an asylum in Mumbai. The hero exhibits an inhuman treatment on the hijra at first, however, later understands the quality of her mind, and endearingly addresses them as ‘Maina.’ Their exchanges in the narrative capture Maina as an affable character and the subtext becomes a pointer at the stark reality of the plight of being trapped in a wrong body, and the social harassments. The depiction of a Malayali as a trans person in a space outside Kerala is significant because, the hijra identity is depicted as a cultural construct in urban spaces like Mumbai and at times it is a stereotyped portrayal in line with the Bollywood films of that period. These films looked at hijras, prostitutes, etc., as social deviants who are employed with underworld dons and goons. Hijras as the ‘other’ in cinema are visualized as villainous, “involved in prostitution or pimping and also abducting children to emasculate them and recruit them to hijra clans” (Kalra & Bhugra 166).

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<sup>99</sup>The term ‘gender subaltern’ in the chapter is coined from ‘sexual subaltern,’ a term popularized by Ratna Kapur (2000) in “Law and the Sexual Subaltern: A Comparative Perspective.” The term ‘sexual subaltern’ denotes that those people whose sexual identities as gays, lesbians, and sex workers challenge the dominant cultural norms. ‘Gender subaltern’ locates the gender non conforming identities of those people who fall under the spectrum of transgender identities at a disadvantageous and marginalized social position.





Figures 2.25 & 2.26 Kalabhavan Mani as 'Maina' (left) and Salim Kumar as 'Leela Mani' (Right)

When it comes to *Soothradharan*, the representation of the hijra reinforces the absent spaces for trans people in Kerala. The traditional ways of earning livelihood for them are mainly begging and prostitution (Nanda 39). The hijra subjectivity as a beggar and prostitute in the film is a reflection of the social construct of them who “navigates the public space with a brazenness that belongs to the masculine domain and yet conducts her/himself with a simultaneous grace and coy femininity which may erupt into a threat of exposure if denied alms or repudiated (Pattnaik 2). In the film, Leela Krishnan (Salim Kumar) is a married Malayali man and the father of two kids, who fakes the identity of a hijra (Leela Mani) and joins their community. The cinema places the transgender community outside Kerala, probably in the border regions of Karnataka. The film constructs transgender characters as abjects living in communities that follow certain rules. They are depicted as terrifying figures. *Soothradharan* is reminiscent of the financial insecurities of a lower middle-class Malayali who migrate to other spaces to make a living, and performing the role of the hijra for economic adaptation. Financial insecurity of the Malayali male forms the crux of discussion in many films in the post-Gulf era. A number of films released in the 90s and 2000s record the anxieties of Malayali masculinities, who are jobless due to the economic transitions after liberalization, and who satisfy their consumerist desires through deceit. The hijra impersonation in *Soothradharan* is also used as a trope for laughter. Rather than a compassionate treatment to a transgender person, the film represents him as a spectacle for laughter. It points out how the transgender identity is fraudulently used for making money. The hijra community’s ‘socially

accepted' role of begging becomes a method adopted by a financially unstable Malayali male as the chief mode of income. Thus, the depiction of the hijra in *Soothradharan* establishes gender nonconforming identities as fakes in front of Malayali spectators. By observing the two films closely, it could be discerned that, these films follow certain recurrent patterns of misrepresentations; the absence of transgender people in Kerala, and the representation of them as cultural construct in other states. Interestingly, in both films the cross dressed hijra characters are performed by actors who are typecast as comedy actors. This is to ascertain the humour in the depictions. The transgender people are marginalized in society and these films depict the hijra identities through abjection, ridicule and erasure, and are emblematic of the transphobia of the people in Kerala.

*Parthan Kanda Paralokam* presents a feminine-presenting man Veerabhadran who is looked after by the hijra community outside Kerala. They return to their native to revenge against the society that victimized them and the hijra community. The film stereotypes hijras as social miscreants and the queer as a villain and deviant. The gender performance of the queer evokes ridicule and they are harassed with derogatory terms like *onpathu* (nine), and *aanum pennum ketta* (neither man nor woman) for their feminine-presenting gender performance. The heroine's rejects them due to their feminine expressions which reflects heteronormative society's phobia and disapproval to non-heteronormative gender performance. Veerabhadran legitimizes their gender identity through the divine concept of *ardhanaareeswara*, the union of femininity and masculinity in one body. As stated, the film typecasts them as an aberration and as a villain who is banished from the society. The film endorses the hegemonic machismo by portraying trans people as villains. *Drona 2010* is another Malayalam film that follows *Parthan Kanda Paralokam*. This film pathologizes trans identity as a gender identity disorder (GID), which is cured through the divine intervention of the hegemonic masculine hero. These representations not only establish heteronormalcy in the narratives, but also summarily reject the possibilities of trans identities in Malayalam cinema.

Though the first decade of the 21st century located the transgender subject in side roles in Malayalam cinema, the phobia of the society becomes an agency that cultivates the belief of a hostile space for the transgender community in Kerala. The activist and academic engagements continue its momentum, yet Malayalam cinema fills the space with slapstick humour and insensitivity towards the issue of transgender subjects. *Action Hero Biju* (Dir. Abrid Shine, 2016), and *Kasaba* (Dir. Nithin Renji Panicker, 2016) are two recent Malayalam films that portray transgender characters as derogatory visual spectacles, who are harassed in public spaces. Apart from the misogyny and racist comments for which these films are criticized, the transgender characters appear in one or two sequences, only to be made fun at and harassed by the macho male heroes. The slapstick humour is aired at the queer characters in such a way that, it is an unavoidable ingredient for the industry's interests for exercising hegemonic masculinity.

## 2.8 Possibilities of Parading the Self: Trans Actors on Screen

The film industry of Kerala has been restraining the gender minorities who are engaged as actors, to come to the mainstream. Though many transgender people earn their livelihood from cinema as makeup artists,<sup>100</sup> the medium has been turning a blind eye towards them performing as actors. Apart from transgender people becoming a part of comedy skits<sup>101</sup> that ridicule them with insensitive humour, trans visibility as performers is limited in Malayalam cinema. However, post 2010, there has been a visible (trans)formation as certain trans actors started appearing in side roles in cinema. The domain of non-normative gender performance in Malayalam

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<sup>100</sup>Sathyendran, Nita. "In a Class of their Own." *The Hindu*, 24 February 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/trensetting-transgender-makeup-artistes-in-kerala/article8275811.ece>, accessed on 15 December 2018.

<sup>101</sup> Pillai, Radhika C. "The Men We Love for their Women Roles." *Entertainment Times*, 18 January 2014, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/tv/news/malayalam/The-men-we-love-for-their-women-roles/articleshow/28994362.cms>, accessed on 15 December 2018.

cinema will leave a vacuum if such representations go unmentioned, though a detailed analysis of the politics and aesthetics of them are not the aim of the study. Irrespective of the overlapping of genres- off beat films and popular films- their number, which is quite less, provides a glance at the shift; *Ardhanaari* (Dir. Santhosh Souparnika, 2012), *Thira* (Dir. Vineeth Sreenivasan, 2013), *Ka Bodyscapes* (Dir. Jayan K. Cherian, 2016), *Mayaanadhi* (Dir. Aashiq Abu, 2017), *Aabhasam* (Dir. Jubith Namradath, 2018), *Poomaram* (Dir. Abrid Shine, 2018), etc., portray trans actors.

*Ardhanaari* portrays a number of trans actors including Surya, the Malayali trans activist, and in the film *Thira*, a trans person Savitha appears as an aid to the heroine (Shobhana) (Neela P. U. 2017). *Mayaanadhi* and *Poomaram* depict trans persons Abeel Robin and Renju Renjimar as makeup artists. These films position them in society with dignity, and are symptomatic of the transformation in the public sphere in Kerala. However, the films *Ka Bodyscapes* and *Aabhasam* move a step further and politicize the issue of trans identity and sexuality. Sheethal Shyam, a trans person and activist, depicts the sexual and gender minorities in these films. Both *Ka Bodyscapes* and *Aabhasam* parody social prejudices and social differences by depicting the life of transgender people in the political text.

The non-heteronormative gender performances discussed above give a glimpse at the gender constructions in Malayalam cinema. The gender dissident characters mentioned in this chapter may not be exhaustive, as cinema continues to experiment with cross dressing, feminine-presenting, female masculinity, and body switch roles. The chapter has attempted to touch up on the history of non-heteronormative sexual and gender performances in Malayalam cinema. It demonstrates that, the visual imagination of the Malayali has always been gendered though there could be observed certain fissures. Gender parodying has been a popular trope to arouse comedy and visual pleasure in the spectators. The conspicuous absence of trans subjects in the public sphere of Kerala epitomizes their invisibility in

mainstream films. The survey of non-heteronormative gender performance in Malayalam cinema brings out the (trans)forming space and the upcoming chapter in the study will examine the selected texts in detail to critically analyze the shift in perspectives, and the politicization of transgender people's gender identity and sexuality.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Representation of Gender Variance and Sexuality in the Selected Films**

The representation of transgender people in contemporary Malayalam cinema intersects with the shifting ideas of socio-politics and cultural aesthetics in Kerala as a result of the identity politics and activist interventions in the region. The meaningful silence on trans visibility in Kerala's public sphere and the whispered identifications of non-normative sexual practices in the region are reflected in the diplomatic stand Malayalam cinema has adopted. Early representations of gender and sexuality in cultural productions revolve around the dichotomous model of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality. Such cinematic practices skillfully hide the trans performances and same-sex desire in the region. The presence of cross dressed characters, gender blending, same sex desire among characters in cinema, are suggestive of the forced silencing of homosexuality and transgender people in society.

This chapter critically analyzes the depiction of transgender characters in the seven selected Malayalam films by looking at the representation of their gender identity, performance, and sexuality. Queer scholars (for instance, Muraleedharan 2005) have pointed out how gender non conforming characters are done mostly through a heteronormative angle and the queer readings by looking at how they interact with the queer spectators. Homosocial spaces, the structuring of male bonding, and the definition of 'masculinity' have been the concern of popular films which celebrated 'asexual friendships.' For instance, certain popular films in the 90s and early 2000s presented male bonds, as in *Aaram Thamburan* (1997), *Harikrishnans* (1998), etc., where the possibilities of sensual intimacy between the hegemonic hero and his friend could not be dismissed. The female bondings with erotic underpinnings emphasized the politics of spectatorial pleasures and 'sisterhood

femininities.’ A revolt against the binary gendering can be observed in cross dressed gender performances which stressed gender blending. The emergence of ‘middlebrow’ cinema that blurred the boundaries of ‘art’ and ‘commercial’ in the 70s and 80s offered radical shifts in representing sexualities and gender positioning. Films like *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978) and *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (1986) problematized sexual identity within hetero-normal narratives. They discussed political sensibilities that contest patriarchal norms. The central characters never articulate any gender dysphoria, yet, for the society, their gender appear to be deviant.

The chapter critically examines seven Malayalam films released in the first and second decade of the twenty first century in which the narrative problematizes the gender identity of the central character. Medical literature uses the term ‘gender dysphoria’ to refer to such discomfort or distress caused by one’s assigned sex at birth and gender identity. *Chanthupottu* (2005), *Ardhanaari* (2012), *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* (2014), *Irattajeevitham* (2017), *Aalorukkam* (2018), *Njan Marykutty* (2018), and *Udalaazham* (2018) attempt to look at trans people’s space in Kerala, their gender identity constructions and contestations, the political significations of trans identity, and sexuality of transgender people. The release of these trans themed films in contemporary times, especially in 2017 and 2018 could be attributed to the culmination of queer political activism and government’s initiatives with trans beneficiary programs in Kerala. Trans visibility in Kerala has been a much discussed political subject for the past few years. These narratives record the shift happens in the public sphere; from resistance to the celebration of the gender performance and the non-normative sexual identities on screen. From *Chanthupottu* to *Udalaazham*, though the numbers of films that problematize the transgender identities are limited, they carve a regional identity to the trans people in Kerala. Using visual ethnography, the chapter critically examines the construction of trans identity, their gender performance, the politicisation of their body and sexuality, and the constructs of ‘family’ illustrated in the selected films.

### **3.1 Trans Bodies on Screen: Identity and Expressions**

GLAAD (formerly the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) describes gender expression as following, “External manifestations of gender, expressed through one’s name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behaviour, or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture.” In India’s socio-cultural contexts, the religious and ritualistic community of hijras are viewed as trans people. Using the cisheteronormative logic, Indian cinema had visualized trans people’s gender identity as a crisis to perform binary gender, and depicted a ‘curing’ from the ‘non-normalcy.’ However, many contemporary films try to move away from these constructs. In Malayalam cinema, there are certain visual codes that emphasize trans people’s identity and their gender expressions, through clothing, haircut, behaviour, etc., and the coming sections critically examine these aspects in detail.

#### **3.1.1 Tailoring Gender: Clothing as Markers of Trans Identity in Cinema**

Trans representations in Malayalam cinema demarcate their ‘Malayali identity’ by manifesting regionality. This geographic territorialisation is significant to analyze how their bodies are imagined and contested on screen through devices like clothing, and makeup. In certain earlier films that questioned the dominant gender codes; cross dressing has been used for gender crossing. One’s clothing could be regarded as a signifier to gender identity, it sexualize the body by its association to either masculinity or femininity. Male cross dressing has been used as a trope of laughter, and popular actors like Dileep used cross dressing to evoke sexist humor in the film *Mayamohini* (2012), for instance. But, in *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (1986), a film that presented lesbian underpinnings in a heteronormative narrative, it suggested



the rupture of gender performance of the two female characters through their ‘masculine’ (Sally) and ‘feminine’ (Nimmy) clothing. It could be argued that the clothing of trans characters in cinema represents their gender identity confusion.

*Chanthupottu* deals with a feminine-presenting central character, whose masculinity is perceived by other characters as ‘in crisis.’ The queer character uses gender fluid clothing, they wear *mundu* and *jubba* in feminine way the first half of the narrative. Radhakrishnan, male assigned at birth is addressed by a feminine noun Radha in their native. They use lipstick, nail polish, bindi, and bangles, which establish a difference in their body from the ‘masculine male bodies’ in the public imagination. Thus, cinema typecasts Radhakrishnan’s body as emblematic of deficient masculinity. Clothing is a reference to a fixed gender identity, and cross dressing goes one step further by highlighting the centrality of gender constructs. It subverts the visualization of gender and ironically results in the ‘wilful alienation’ from fixed gender identities. Annette Kuhn’s (1985) observations on gender crossing are pertinent here, “In its specificity, the cross dressing with its play on the distance between a gendered body and gendered clothing also opens up a space of self referentiality” (54).



Figures 3.1 & 3.2 Radhakrishnan in Kerala Christian outfits, (left), Radhakrishnan on his shore as a dance teacher (right)

Radhakrishnan’s clothing does not conform to the social expectations on masculinity. When they reach another space, their gendering is again in crisis when they wear

*chatta*<sup>102</sup> and *mundu*. However, the narrative uses these tropes to evoke laughter. They are forced to wear ‘masculine clothing,’ pants and shirt as part of the patriarchal disciplining. The film *Chanthupottu* never acknowledges Radha as a trans person.

*Ardhanaari* depicts a Malayali assigned male at birth, who feels gender dysphoria and joins the hijra community outside Kerala. In its title card itself, the film claims that, it is a realistic depiction of feminine presenting trans people, by showing one’s clothing and makeup as the sartorial markers of gender performance. It is significant to observe the clothing of the central character in the film, whose gender performance is in a flux. The film depicts the gender performance from a heteronormative angle. Vinayan who is also known as Vinutha, wears both feminine and masculine outfits in their childhood, and is disciplined by the school teacher. The teacher tells Vinayan to remove the kajal, nail paint, and anklets and advises to crop their hair like other boys. The teacher maintains that, ‘the one with a male body should be a man, and the other with a female body, a woman.’ In the particular scene, Vinayan wears gender-queer costumes and the teacher tries to bring them to heteronormalcy. After joining the hijra community, Manjula (Vinayan) wears feminine clothes. It could be delineated that *Ardhanaari* attempts to use clothes to showcase Vinayan’s femininity. The Malayali trans woman in the film is forced to go out and identify with the cultural signifiers of hijra identity, due to the invisibility of trans people inside Kerala. The hijra characters in the film are represented in sari and other female clothing with exaggerated makeup. Further, the ‘neither man nor woman’ picture of the hijra community is used to depict Vinayan as a gender-queer and the title ‘Ardhanaari’- half man half woman<sup>103</sup> signifies the gender-queer identity.

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<sup>102</sup> A traditional garment worn on the upper body by Kerala women in Christian community

<sup>103</sup> *Ardhanaari* in the Hindu scriptures represents a constructive and generative power. It is believed that the God is Lord Shiva and the woman part is his consort Goddess Parvati or Shakti. It conveys the unity of opposites in the universe. The male half stands for *Purusha* and female half is *Prakriti*. According to this belief, each human organism bears the potentiality of both male and female sex (Raveesh 2013).

The film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* narrates the identity crisis and the articulation of sexuality by a feminine-presenting man called Thamburu. Their clothing in the film progresses from a feminine-presenting male to their self identification as a trans woman. Thamburu's wearing of *mundu* defines their gender-queer identity. While the other men in the narrative wear folded *mundu* leaving their bare thighs visible; a casual way of Malayali men's wearing *mundu*, Thamburu is very shy and conscious about their body. The contextual cross dressing in the film, the spectacle of the Kottankulangara temple festival where cis men cross dress as an offering to the temple deity, is used as metaphor to stress Thamburu's gender nonconformity. Later in Koovagam festival, Thamburu dress in feminine as a celebration of their transfemininity. Thus, the cinematic cross dressings produce the substance of a fluid gender (Bruzzi 20). The masculine clothes, but depicts them as an embodiment of deficient masculinity like Radhakrishnan in *Chanthupottu*. The trans identity of Thamburu is politicised in the sequences of Koovagam festival. Cinema offers the feminized body to spectators by showcasing a liberated space where trans people could perform their gender according to their choice.



Figure 3.3 Trans woman Thamburu at the Koovagam Festival in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*

Two other selected texts depict trans women characters in lead roles. The clothing of Priyanka (Sajeevan) in *Aalorukkam* and Marykutty (Mathukkutty) in *Njan Marykutty*, contest for the expression of their inherent femininity. *Njan Marykutty* constructs trans identity through the recurring pattern of the feminine clothes used by Marykutty. Her body transitions from its biological male sex identity to the feminine

gender identity, and the film uses bindi, kajal, nail paint, etc., to suggest femininity in her. Ultimately, cinema attempts to forge gender identity within the limits of a dichotomous understanding. Marykutty undergoes a phase of transition, from a sexed body to another. Her cropped hair is contrasted from the identity of a hijra, which is asserted in the film as a result of the medication. It could be observed as the effort to free from a stereotyped imagination of a feminine body. In *Aalorukkam* also trans identity is foregrounded through cross dressing. If Marykutty switches to certain sports apparels in a few shots, Priyanka's gendering is fulfilled through her feminine clothing in entire sequences of the film. Transgender identities in these two films are manifestations of the feeling that one is trapped in an alien body. The sex reassignment surgery (SRS) discussed in *Njan Marykutty* is a method of re-shaping one's body where one can feel the fulfilment in materializing a desire to perform one's psychological gender. Transsexual identity is thus celebrated as an achievement in the film. Marykutty's clothing becomes a physical attribute to this transition from one body to another, and in that respect, the body is actually sexualised through cross dressing. Whereas, there is hardly any vivid mention in the film regarding Priyanka's seeking of medical assistance to alter her body, rather, it conveniently brings forth the images of the 'woman' through feminized clothes and accessories. It is interesting to observe certain aural signifiers when the trans woman is introduced in the film. Those who wait for Sajeevan in an office, are moved by the sound of the anklets that denotes the approach of a woman instead of the man they are searching for. Moreover, in all the sequences, Priyanka wears feminine clothes only. It could be argued that, trans identity is manifested in *Aalorukkam* and *Njan Marykutty* through feminised trans bodies. This binary imagination of trans identity is a product of cisheterosexual normativity.

The clothing of transsexual people in Malayalam cinema conforms to the regional imagination of binary clothing. In *Irattajeevitham*, the central trans character is a female assigned birth who feels the gender dysphoria. Addhuman (cinema presents Amina as an ephemeral reference, and problematizes the life of Addhuman),

‘masculine; *mundu* and shirt. The opening shots of the film depict a crowded market, where Addruman walks away unnoticed by anyone, it could be observed as a test for his masculinity. In the flash back scenes, the central character is shown in feminine clothes- wearing churidar, and covering the head like a traditional Muslim woman. Certain shots from Amina’s childhood juxtapose her cross dressed photograph for a theatrical performance with her school uniform. These images are conveniently used in the film to point out her gender dysphoria. Moreover, the way Addruman wears *mundu* is distinct from the feminine-presenting male characters’ clothing in other films already discussed. The folded *mundu* and the bare thighs normalize and merge Addruman to masculinity.

The film *Udalaazham* narrates the life of a feminine-presenting person belonging to a scheduled tribe, who feels that ‘I am a woman who is trapped in a man’s body.’ Interestingly, this film presents a gender-queer person who wears masculine clothes in a feminine way. One could see the way *mundu* is worn by Gulikan in the film that demarcates queerness in their body. *Mundu* brings forth the geographic demarcation of the Malayali transgender identity as well. The film depicts Gulikan wearing *mundu* and shirt throughout. However, the film uses it to foreground the gender-queerness of the person, one who is denied the privileges to become a trans woman. Whereas, the other characters in the film are placed in the realm of heteronormalcy if their clothing would be considered. Gulikan’s clothing in *Udalaazham* denotes the gender non-conformity even though they articulate the desire to become a woman.

Since clothing is a strong signifier that genders one’s body, films also experiment with it while representing trans characters. But in the selected films, transgender people wear clothes that fulfill their desired gender identity. Yet there are certain transgender people who wear gender-queer clothing. The clothing and makeup of trans characters in the selected films are suggestive of their ‘Malayali’ identity as well. The coming section of the thesis critically understands how cinema

contests the gender performance of trans characters through certain other visual aspects.

### **3.1.2 Performing Gender: Visualizing Trans' Gender Performance on Screen**

In cinema, gender performance is represented through bodily manifestation apart from clothing and makeup. Even certain gestures are perceived in visual cultural texts as 'gendered.' An examination of the selected texts brings out these mediated realities of gender performance. Trans identities are visualized in terms of masculine or feminine appearance. The post-structuralist theories in the West offer gender as a cultural construct and dismiss a completely naturalized gender performance. In "Critically Queer," Judith Butler comments on the performativity of gender, "heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality(...) operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of 'man' and 'woman'" (26). She emphasizes the heterosexual stabilization of gender norms and critiques the attribution of the "abjected gender" to homosexual people. While representing trans women, who also live as ritualistic performers in India, Malayalam cinema manifests femininity in their gender performance. The trans man identity still remains as a less discussed topic in films. While discussing the gender performance of trans people in the selected texts, it is crucial to observe the trans body and the gender it embodies and performs.

Cinema elaborates on the non-conforming body by pointing at its failure to perform within the binary gender. *Chanthupottu* contests the ideas of the gender binary- masculinity and femininity- by presenting a body that problematizes a 'lack.' The protagonist dons femininity in the male body through exaggerated dialogues, and exhibits certain mannerisms that are aimed at evoking laughter. The profession as a dancer who teaches folk *lasyanritha* to the fisher girls in the native is an effort to

point at the femininity of the character. The cinema portrays Radha's body as demonstrative of deficient masculinity and hence it qualifies to be a queer. This is constructed as a result of "faulty upbringing" (Muraleedharan 76). Incidentally this stance underscores the social construct of normative gender performances. Besides perceiving normative genders, it is further complicated by dictating certain codes regarding how the binary gender should be performed. When Radha is unsuccessful to perform their gender as per the social norms they are referred with disgust as *aanum pennum ketta* (neither man nor woman). The text ultimately depicts a series of attempts by the society to 'cure' their gender performance. Freddy and Rosy in the 'modern shore' take the role of the heteropatriarchal regulators who discipline Radha. They transform them from 'Radha' to 'Krishnan,' femininity to masculinity. A popular song in the film visualizes this transformation of Radhakrishnan: they crop their hair, change their cloths from *mundu* and *jubba* to pants and shirt. The strenuous effort by Freddy and his friends in 'normalizing' the gender-queer is stressed in the film when Freddy says, 'a male should live like a man.'

Radha's efforts to be 'manly' are visualized in their performance of masculinity two combat sequences in the film.



Figures 3.4, 3.5, 3.6 & 3.7 Radhakrishnan uses dance steps in their fight with Cleetus, a juxtaposition of their femininity (the dance) with masculinity(the stunt)

In the first sequence, Radha resists Cleetus, the duel starts with Radha's dance steps portrayed in a comic way. Later it proceeds to be 'masculine' through physical violence, when Radha smashes a bottle on Cleetus' head, who falls on the ground with blood oozing of a deadly wound. In the scene, "Radha indeed, performs gender through his play- an expression of masculinity through violence and femininity through dance" (Thomas 98). In the final combat, their transformation is visualized when Radha resists Komban Kumaran.<sup>104</sup> Radha fights on their own accord for the right to protect their lover Maalu in front of the villagers, when Kumaran, challenges and tells, Radha can have Maalu only if they kill him. This fight is the culmination of Radha's transformation from 'Radha' (femininity) to 'Krishnan' (masculinity). The violence nears death, the threats of death Radha makes against Kumaran, by almost drowning him and then almost stabbing him is fully with purpose. When Kumaran's friends try and enter the fray, they are stopped by the men who see the fight necessary for Radha's masculine honor. It is delineated that the film *Chanthupottu* depicts a trans' gender performance arising from one's failure to perform an essential gender according to hegemonic social codes. As Janaki Sreedharan (2010) rightly points out,

The film, though structured within the formula of popular heterosexual romance, problematizes the processes of gendering and the initiation into hegemonic masculinities through rituals of violence and aggression. Sexual ambivalence surrounding the cross-dressed male figure unsettles the notions of the fixed gender identities (90).

Radhika Chopra et. al. (2004) observes that, the film suggests that Radha's gender performance is nothing but a "masquerade." According to them, it is not an essential gender identity but a performance. They perform an acquired gender identity and can unlearn all those. The film then "appears to represent a non-essentialist approach to gender, which promises to free it from determinism and naturalism even as it insists

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<sup>104</sup> In Malayalam language, *Komban* denotes a male elephant. *Komban* is used as a qualifier to Kumaran, signifying his masculinity. *Pidi* refers to a female elephant. In the film, Kumaran makes fun of Radha's father by saying that he is proud of being known with the nickname Komban Kumaran, as he is a *Komban* (masculine), not a *pidi* (feminine). He was referring to Radha's 'femininity.'



upon a normative performance” (Chopra et. al 209-210). *Chanthupottu* ruptures an essential masculinity, and at the same time, through the display of the feminine-presenting as a figure of social rejection, it points at the possibilities of a trans person’s gender performance being ‘cured’ by social intimidation.

*Ardhanaari* depicts the hijra community, and it refers to the traditions of hijra clans’ customs and rituals. Femininity in Vinayan as a child is mediated through cross dressing and jewellery. The film hints at their homosexual orientation when they become a young adult. Their gender non-conformity and homosexual orientation make them an outcast from family and society and they join hijra community. After the initiation to hijra community, they become a hijra named Manjula. The erasure of masculinity from Vinayan’s body through the ritualistic hijra initiation ceremony called *jelsa*<sup>105</sup> is portrayed in the film.

Trans people legitimize their existence and gender performance through their attribution to religion. Vinayan’s gender performance is reasoned in the film using Lord Shiva’s *Ardhanaareeswara* (half man-half woman form). Vinayan’s father in his deathbed imagines his ‘son’ as the incarnation of the deity and the film visualizes the metamorphosis. The gender and sexual fluidity in Vinayan are attributed to divinity. Unlike the Western understanding of transsexual identity, the religious implications attributed to *Ardhanaareeswara* and the philosophical implications of *tritiya prakriti* could be the two possible identifications used by transgender people in

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<sup>105</sup>As per the belief among transgender people, a person transforms into a different gender only after ‘Jalsa,’ the traditional pooja, which they consider as a ritual for a new birth. It is a ritual performed on the lines of girls coming-of-age rites. The ritual is held on the 40th day after the removal of male genitals. During the entire period, the person remains indoors and is not allowed to venture outside. They are provided special food and taken good care of. On the 40th day, they are clad in a silk saree, applied mehendi and decked with ornaments. The pooja is performed before the deity of Bahuchraj Mata. All the functions start at 8 pm. The main initiation pooja is held at 4 am the following morning. After the pooja, a pot of milk is placed on the head of the person and taken to the beach. At the beach, the milk pot is dropped into the ocean, which completes the ritual. All these have to be performed before day-break and following this initiation into womanhood becomes complete.  
<http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2017/oct/30/sreekutty-to-become-keralas-first-transgender-to-attain-womanhood-through-sex-reassignment-surgery-1686643.html>.  
Accessed on 18 July 2018,

Indian scenario. The psychedelic vision of Vinayan's father in his deathbed juxtaposes the divine masculinity and femininity in Vinayan, as justification of their gender- queerness. The gender performance Vinayan dons is further established through their riding of a bike. In one sequence, they take a side posture (potentially feminine) while sitting on a two-wheeler with their brother, who shouts at Vinayan and disciplines them to 'sit like a man.'



Figure 3.8 The juxtaposition of divine masculinity and femininity in Vinayan's gender performance

A second sequence in the film depicts Vinayan as riding a bike and the image endorses masculinity in their body. The aggressiveness Vinayan exhibits at those who attack them undoes their femininity. Thus, cinema presents Vinayan's identity as non-binary or gender-queer. Stella Bruzzi's (1997) analysis of androgynous representations states that, "The blurred ambiguity of the image itself makes androgyny a far more erotic form of transvestism, to watch than cross dressing, because it is not defined by any acceptance of the fixity of gender binaries, but rather by the effect of ambiguity (172). Cinema justifies the culmination of masculinity and femininity in the androgynous form by the metaphor *Ardhanaareeswara*. Apart from the cross dressing in the film, the trans image is legitimized through the religious myth. The bodily mediation of femininity and masculinity in Vinayan's gender performance is further emphasized in the narrative through Manjula's (Vinayan) sensuous femininity as Balu's wife and the frustrated masculinity in the presence of another trans woman Kokila. *Ardhanaari* thus views trans identity in terms of hijra

identity, the model is a reproduction of the social construction of binary gender performance.

*Odum Raja Aadum Rani* “employs the spectacle of deficient queer bodies to satiate the hetero-masculinist cultural assumptions of a typical ‘normal’ Keralan or Malayalai” (James 384). The nickname Thamburu is a social attribute for the queer character’s inability to perform ‘masculinity.’ Thamburu’s feminine gender performance is complicated in the narrative with its juxtaposition to Venkiti’s macho masculinity. Patriarchal notions attribute femininity to domesticity, and Thamburu’s gender performance makes them an ‘object’ figure who is harassed by other characters. The film progresses by comparing Thamburu with the machismo of Venkiti and also with the femininity of Maala. The construction of master-steward relationship between Venkiti and Thamburu makes the latter submissive, bearing emotional torture for the non-normative gender performance. Whereas, there is also a growing enmity between Thamburu and Maala and later it transforms to a compassionate sisterhood. The introduction of Maala in the narrative is to discipline Thamburu, to make them ‘masculine,’ as Venkiti advises her to ‘correct’ them. Thamburu admires Venkiti’s macho masculinity and the body, and the film underscores Venkiti as an epitome of hegemonic masculinity. However, after bearing much harassment, Thamburu, fights back once and Venkiti perceives it as a ‘curing’ for the latter and says, “There you are; now you are becoming a man. Come on...beat me” (01:46:22 - 01:46:25). Gender performance of the transgender person is perceived by the cisheteronormative society as an abnormal due to his failure to perform binary gender, and cinema has used ‘masculinization’ as a curing for this. However, there is a compassionate treatment of trans identity in the film as the narrative closes at an exclusive ‘trans space’ where Thamburu can perform their gender according to their wish. It could be discerned that in the film, the trans person exhibits gender-fluid performance, as it is imagined and materialised from a heteronormative framework.

Malayalam cinema also marks transsexual identities in some selected texts. *Irattajeevitham* focuses on trans man Addruman's gender performance. Addruman was female sex assigned at birth and the film juxtaposes these two identities in front of the spectators. Jack Halberstam (2005) has critically observed paradoxical models of transsexuality. The cartographies of sexual orientation and gender performance are complicated by the use of the terms, 'butch lesbian' and 'FtM transsexual.' While the latter is a term that refers to people who experience prolonged male identification and think of themselves as male, the other category think of them masculine but not necessarily male and certainly not female (*ibid*). The gender performance of lesbian characters in *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978), *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (1986), and *Sancharram* (2004) are to be noted for the binary model. Amina is shown as a woman who fails to perform her feminine gender as per the social norms, she is represented as fearless contrasted with Sainu's characterization. She is even braver than Faizal, another friend in their childhood, who cries for help when he mistakes a rope as a snake. While Amina plays football with boys, Sainu passively watches it, when Amina learns riding the bicycle, Sainu decorates her hands with *mehandi* in the company of other girls. It is Amina who takes Sainu to watch a ritualistic performance of the Muslim community, where only men are allowed to attend it at night. In the fisherman community only men go to sea traditionally, but together the girls explore sea. The pairing of Amina and Sainu as dominant and submissive femininities are used in the cinema as a trope to showcase Amina's gender nonconformity.

*Irattajeevitham* follows a non-linear narrative and Amina is presented as Addruman in the beginning of the film itself, as one who has undergone a sex change. But the film is silent on Amina's life in the world outside when she eloped from the coastal village. For the villagers, Amina does not exist at present, yet they disapprove Addruman as a 'curious visual spectacle.' Addruman's gender appropriation and his trans body is presented to the spectators in comparison with the other men's bodies in the film. The cinema visualizes the performance of the

masculine gender in the way he walks with folded *mundu*, in his cropped hair, sprouting moustache, and the newly acquired ‘masculine’ labour in the boat. Addruman’s trans body is represented as conforming to the cispatriarchal notions of the binary gender. When he lights a cigar in front of Sainu, it could be perceived as a masculine phallic symbol of virility.



Figures 3.9 & 3.10 Addruman lights a cigar, the ‘masculine’ clothes and posture

In figures (3.9 & 3.10), the camera identifies with Sainu’s gaze on Addruman, to which the spectators also identify with, as it captures ‘masculinity’ in Addruman. These sequences underline that cinema has conveniently manufactured a trans masculinity. In *Irattajeevitham*, it is significant to critically observe how the people who are Addruman’s near and dear ones come into terms with his ‘trans’ gender performance.

In *Njan Marykutty*, the central character is a post operative trans woman, and hence the film endorses femininity on her body. Mathukutty was ‘a woman trapped in the body of a man.’ This affirmative gender identity disclosure claimed at the beginning of the narrative attempts to produce rationales for Marykutty’s femininity through her monologues in the initial shots, and presents the sex reassignment surgery (SRS). Ashwini Sukthankar (2005) in her article on the rights of transsexual people in India, attempts to critique transsexuality. She compares the modern medicalized transsexuality (a constructed gender performance) and the traditional hijra identity (a natural sort of being). Transsexual people do the expensive surgery and pass as men or women, hijras remain as hijras only. Hijras enact their gender

through bodily manifestations, but transsexual people surgically alter their body and try to perform a socially constructed gender. The difference between the narrative of a hijra (femininity of Manjula) in *Ardhanaari* and the narrative of a transsexual (femininity of Marykutty) in *Njan Marykutty* could be expressed in terms of the greater access to information and social privileges for the latter. It could be argued that the process of normalizing 'transsexual gender performance' in the film influences Marykutty's gender performance when it is placed at hegemonic heteronormativity.

*Njan Marykutty* constructs femininity in the body of a transsexual person through the erasure of masculinity. The bleached face, make up, jewelry, and the medication 'feminise' the trans body. Marykutty performs femininity through her clothing and jewelry, and the hormone tablets. Further, Marykutty's non-binary voice is mentioned in the film as a result of her ongoing hormone treatments, and what she undergoes is a temporary phase. Apparently, Marykutty emotionally responds to a lady gazetted officer who harasses her. The ways in which this femininity is established in detail could be perceived through the representations of Marykutty as a feminine teacher and singer, who is endearingly addressed as 'Mary aunty' by the children. The augmentation of femininity is not only limited here, even the posters of the film are circulated in a way, as it depicts 'the femininity of the cisgender actor Jayasurya'. In a particular poster, Marykutty is captured as painting her nails, and her seating posture is visualized as 'feminine.' One cannot dismiss the erotic underpinnings in the exhibition of a transsexual body. The tagline in another poster reads *innumuthal ivalaanu pennu* (She is the woman from today onwards) is also aimed at attracting public attention. The society which holds a hegemonic patriarchal view about the gender performance in the film disapproves Marykutty's identity.

While depicting transsexuality, *Aalorukkam* constructs an image of a 'domestic woman' in trans woman Priyanka. Navaneetha Mokkil (2010) in her analysis of the cultural processes, through which dominant and marginalized sexual figures are produced, observes that homosexual people in Kerala are positioned as a

threat to heterosexuality. The image of the “domestic woman” stems from the understanding of an ideal “reproductive family” (12). Priyanka’s gender performance conforms to the normative imagination of a domestic woman; however her transsexual identity as an infertile ‘female’ ruptures the construct of a patriarchal heterosexual family. Priyanka performs her femininity through her household chores; cooking, cleaning the house, taking care of her elderly father, and adopted child. Apart from a brief mention to Priyanka’s job in a company, the film visualizes her as an ideal woman- a dutiful wife and caring mother- as per the patriarchal imagination. The sight of transgender community gathering and intrusions of the transphobic public in the flat are the only sequences that rupture this ‘normative familial’ space. Feminine essence is ensured in Priyanka through her costumes and the narrative allows social sanction for it unlike the case of Marykutty, who faces lots of criticism and harassments. It does not mean that Priyanka’s passage as a trans woman is smooth; she faces hostility from her father, who finds it difficult to accept the ‘missing son’ as a transwoman.



Figures 3.11, 3.12, 3.13 Priyanka (Sajeevan) is represented as ‘ideal domestic woman’ in *Aalorukkam*

Gulikan’s performs non-binary gender identity in *Udalaazham*. The film problematizes the traumatising attempts for femininity by the protagonist. The irony of ‘being trapped in a wrong body’ or owning a body that does not bear one’s self forms crux of the narrative. While observing closely the gender Gulikan performs, it is to be noted that it deviates from the cisheteronormative imagination of masculinity and femininity. Gulikan longs for femininity, yet fails to attain it due to their underprivileged circumstances (they are not able to undergo medically assisted body

alteration). The tribal trans' gender performance is distinctive from the gender performance of all the other characters discussed. Married during childhood, Gulikan is unable to be in a heterosexual conjugality and impregnate their wife. Different sequences in the film juxtaposes their femininity with their wife Maathi's female masculinity, where she appears to be 'masculine' than them when she performs gender as per the patriarchal imagination. She can climb tree, which Gulikan cannot; the scene that depicts both of them collecting firewood in which Maathi standing on the branch of a tree and Gulikan on the ground requesting her to come down, positions her as 'dominant' and 'brave' in the narrative. Even in other scenes as well, Gulikan is 'submissive' in their gender performance compared to other women; the dancer, the vagabond, and other working women. When the dancer woman approves their femininity, and proposes to teach their dance, it is significant to listen Gulikan's reply. According to Gulikan, their queer body body is a barrier to dance.



Figure 3.14 The performance of femininity through dance

The motif of dance as a performing art is used to emphasize feminine gender performance in the film. Gulikan's lack of confidence on their body demarcates their non-heteronormative gender performance.' *Chanthupottu* has explored the way in which *lasyanritha* as a feminine embodiment positions the male bodied as 'abject.' Being a practitioner of classical art, Vinayan's feminine gender performance in *Ardhanaari* is also attributed to their skill as a performer. *Udalaazham* stresses the trope of dance by linking it with body politics. Gulikan attempts to dance, but they



are shy about their body. According to them, it is ‘neither masculine nor feminine.’ Thus, cinema frames Gulikan’s gender performance as non-binary.

While visualizing the gender performance on screen, the film uses other devices like mirrors, which politicizes the body of trans characters and the gender they perform, apart from the dance. The coming section critically examines the ways in which mirrors are used in the selected texts as a metaphor of self realization. The gaze of the transgender people of one’s own image and the gaze of the viewers of the film manifests transgender identifications and spectatorial pleasure.

### **3.1.3 Exploring Self: Mirrors as Cinematic Tropes of Gender Identifications**

The selected films use mirror motifs which form recurring signifiers to gender dysphoria. Mirror appears as a trope of self identification in the Greek myth of Narcissus. Psychoanalytic framework has centered on the object and its relation to the sense of self (Kohut 1971, Lichtenstein 1964). Leonard Shengold (1974) has examined the metaphor of the mirror and the plurality of its significations as, “The mirror’s magic, good and bad, stems from its linkage with the narcissistic period... The stress on the visual associated with the mirror is another link to narcissism (and therefore self and identity), but also specifically underlines voyeurism and exhibitionism, the primal scene, and castration” (114). Thus, images in the mirrors act as strong signifiers of self assertion and the selected films use this device when they problematize the gender identity of trans characters.

In *Chanthupottu*, Radhakrishnan is forced to conform to cisheteronorms of the society and their realization of gender identity strikes for the first time when they see their face in a broken mirror. While sitting lonely on the sea shore, they find a broken mirror and casually look their image in it. They identify a developed moustache on their face, which embodies ‘masculinity’ on their body. Delighted, they correct their

moustache and look at Maalu who has been flying kites at a distance on the shore with other girls. In figure (3.15), the camera captures their gaze and the image in the mirror is highlighted in the shot.



Figure 3.15 Radha realises their 'masculinity' (the moustache) in the mirror

The hands and the back of the person holding the mirror signifies 'femininity' by depicting the grown hair and the fingers with painted nails. However, the image in the broken mirror highlights only the portion of the face with moustache, as it is symptomatic of the Malayali construction of 'masculine' face. Thus, the images of femininity and masculinity are juxtaposed in the shot which stress 'masculinity' within the feminine-presenting male's body. Radha then reflects light at Maalu's face using the same mirror. The close up shot highlights her feminine beauty while her face glows in the sunlight. The strong undercurrents of patriarchal notion of binary gender are endorsed in the sequences. Lacan's critical interpretation of Freud is pertinent in the trope of mirrors. His psychoanalytic theories argue that human infants who pass through a phase in which an external image of the body (reflected in a mirror, or represented to the infant through the mother or primary caregiver) produces a psychic response that gives rise to the mental representation of an 'I.' The mirror image serves as an infant's emerging sense of selfhood, and strives to develop towards the 'ideal I.'<sup>106</sup> Radhakrishnan in the later half of the narrative, attempts to achieve the ideal masculinity they identify in the mirror, though it is imposed through patriarchal disciplining.

<sup>106</sup> <http://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/lacan/> Accessed on 12 February 2019.

Thamburu derives pleasure while looking at their image in a mirror in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, and the sequences politicize their trans body. A scene in the film captures their gaze in the mirror twice, in the first, they are seen as enjoying their feminine image in the mirror. The narcissistic pleasure Thamburu obtains from re-appropriating the body according to their psychological gender is visualized here. In the next sequence, Thamburu is disrobed by a group of men and is harassed. After the traumatic incident, they gather the dishevelled clothes and gazes at their body in agony. The image in the mirror then contradicts their earlier fantasy of attaining femininity and the horrible reality that has happened. The same mirror binds the gendered notions of one's self to a dream and reality.



Figures 3.16 & 3.17 Thamburu's gazes at the mirror capture their narcissistic pleasure and trauma

Thamburu gazes their image in the mirror, and it forms a transgender gaze<sup>107</sup> in the subtext of the film. The trans character's body is used in the film to reveal their 'real sex' that satiates the voyeuristic pleasure of the hetero-normative hegemonic men who harass them, and for the voyeuristic pleasure of the spectators. In the incident of shaming, they undress them and they are captured in a closeup shot. As Jack Halberstam (2001) has stated after examining the trans character's gaze of one's own body in *Boys Don't Cry*, it "serves both to destabilize the spectator's sense of gender stability" and confirms the trans subject's gender despite the camera captures his genital in the previous close up shot (in *Boys Don't Cry*) (294). In *Odum Raja Aadum*

<sup>107</sup> The term introduced by Jack Halberstam, "The Transgender Gaze in *Boys Don't Cry*." *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 3, Autumn 2001, pp. 294–298.

*Rani*, Thamburu's gaze is divided within itself in the shots of their pleasure and pain captured in the mirror. It could be argued that, these mirror shots offer the trans body as the object of spectatorial eroticism.

When *Irattajeevitham* captures different sets of images of the trans character in the mirror, it underscores the gender dysphoria. It also suggests the internal conflicts of Sainu, who comes to terms with her friend's trans identity. Figure (3.18) depicts Sainu's fantasy, when she sees Amina's 'masculine' image on the broken mirror. When she picks up the mirror, then she finds her own image in the mirror. This could be critically analyzed using the concept of 'suture' proposed by Jean Pierrie Oudart (1977).<sup>108</sup>



Figures 3.18, 3.19, Sainu's fantasy and the reality, 3.20, 3.21& 3.22 Amina feels the 'artificial' moustache and searches for a 'real' moustache, the symbol of masculinity on her face, depicted since childhood to adolescence in the film as a recurring image

According to this, as in a mirror stage in Lacanian notion, the film presents the curiosity and excitement of Sainu through the misrecognition first, and then the realization later. The spectator continues to be a voyeur in the sequences. In the

<sup>108</sup>Odart, Jean Pierrie. "Cinema and Suture." *Screen*, vol. 18, no. 4, Winter 1977, pp. 35–47, <https://academic.csuohio.edu/kneuendorf/frames/editing/Oudart7778.pdf>. Accessed 14 February 2018

particular shot, the mirror projects her 'fantasy' and the 'reality' though the image itself is a distortion of reality. The mirror becomes a motif that takes her back to their past, where she realizes. Amina's 'masculinity' is foregrounded in her cross dressing for the school festival. Sainu looks at a series of reflections in other objects (the image of Amina in water filled in a vessel) as well, and the images disrupt her from reality to fantasy regarding Amina's gender identity. Whereas, there are a few other close up shots of Amina's images in the mirror. In (Figure 3.20) Amina enjoys her cross dressing and the manifestation of masculinity, in (Figure 3.21) and (Figure 3.22) she searches for elements of masculinity (moustache) on her face. These images are the cinematic endorsement of the masculinity in Amina. Reading in comparison with the mirror shot in *Chanthupottu*, this is quite different, if Radhakrishnan feels the real moustache on 'his' face Amina feels an 'invisible' moustache on 'her' face. Radhakrishnan is forced to identify his masculinity, and conform his gender performance to patriarchal notions of masculinity that 'suits' his male body. However, Amina does the reverse, the mirror shots signify her gender dysphoria of 'being trapped in the wrong body' and in the film she alters her body according to her psychological gender.

The mirror sequences in *Njan Marykutty* capture the narcissistic pleasure Marykutty derives by looking at her own reflection in the mirror. Mathukutty as a young boy in the song sequence enjoys cross dressing and feminizing his body in front of the mirror. The film visualizes the recurring trope of mirror that projects the trans person's narcissistic pleasure through her gaze of her own image. In a mirror sequence after Marykutty's SRS, she examines her transformation in front of a mirror. The camera focuses on the trans woman's image in the mirror, and it is framed in such a way that it gives her narcissistic pleasure. The trans woman enjoys her transitioned body, at first, she touches her cheek and senses its 'smoothness' (Figure 3.23), her hand gently travels from the bosom to the belly (Figures 3.24 & 3.25), she then gently raises the sari and touches her belly (Figure 3.26). It is also significant to

note the hands, where her polished nails and the bare belly fetishizes the transsexual body in the mirror.



Figures 3.23, 3.24, 3.25 & 3.26 Marykutti's narcissistic visual pleasure mediated through her gaze at her reflection in the mirror

This scene could be read in two levels: at the first instance, the narcissistic pleasure that the individual derives from seeing her own transformation in the mirror, the surgically transitioned body gives self esteem of the struggle for a dream and the materialized reality. In the second, for the camera, the feminized body of the transsexual person becomes an erotic object that fulfils the fantasies of the spectator. The transsexual's gaze of one's own body in the film reproduces the heteronormative imaginations of a feminine body and it uses the trans body as an icon of the 'otherness.'

The pleasure in the gaze can be observed as gendered as Laura Mulvey (1990) has argued. Marykutti's gaze on her image in the mirror mediates her pleasure for identifying her as feminine, while the hetero-normative majority of the viewers derive pleasure and identify her conformation to heteronormativity. Jack Halberstam (2005) states that, "To the extent that cinema depends on the power to activate and attract desiring relations (between characters, between on-screen and offscreen subjects, between images and subjects, between spectators), it also depends on a sexual and gendered economy of looking, watching and identifying" (83). These mirror images

can be analyzed further with another mirror image in the film in which, Marykutty expresses the cry of helplessness. After harassed by a government official, Marykutty is depicted as looking at herself through the mirror at a public toilet (in the film, it is a toilet for people with disability, that representation takes us to another level of analysis where trans identity would be interpreted by society as a disability for its failure to conform to hegemonic normalcy). This image offers an alternative vision of ‘otherness’ the trans person experiences, for her ‘transgression’ from normative gender identities. Ultimately, this image takes us back to *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* in which the queer Thamburu looks at their face after the harassment they experience and unifies the function of mirrors in the understanding of the treatment of trans subjectivity.



Figure 3.27 Marykutty’s cry of helplessness is contrasted with the visual pleasure she derived from looking at her body in the mirror with self esteem

Cinema has used mirror trope to argue that trans body is also a construct, heteronormalized image for popular consumption. *Aalorukkam* presents the enactment of femininity as well as the sartorial process of ‘making up’ a trans body. Priyanka, erases the markers of masculinity in her body by shaving her face in front of the mirror. Her father Pappu Pisharody watches it from behind, and moves away from the scene to the next room in his wheelchair, where the camera captures his image reflected in another mirror in that room. It is demonstrative of his uneasiness with the gender identity of Priyanka. The figures (3.28, 3.29 & 3. 30) bear the look of the camera, to which spectators identify with. The physical appearance of Priyanka and the degree to which she appears ‘feminine’ is the subject in figure (3.28) in which the

camera captures the image of the trans woman slightly away from her real body. It stresses the fact that the view through the camera is not real and the subject bears testimony to the authenticity of the image. In the next figure (3.29), the image of the trans woman is blurred and the camera takes the position of the patriarch who is the bearer of the look and the spectators identifies with this look.



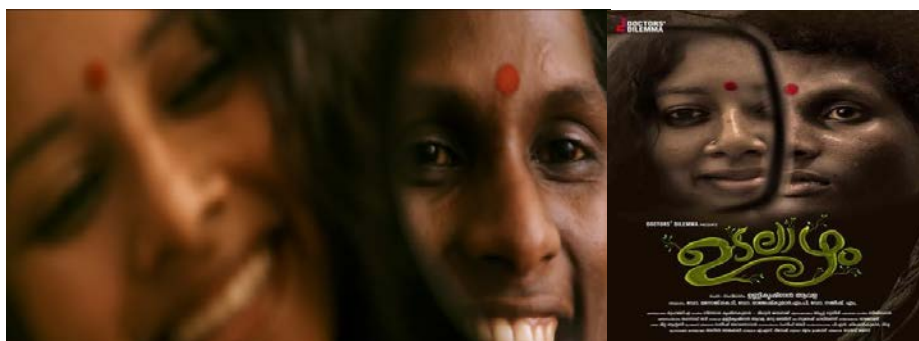
Figures 3.28, 3.29 & 3.30 Priyanka's physical appropriation and subjection of the patriarchal gaze

The vivid image of the father's face reflects his aversion and it 'others' the trans woman. When he moves to the other room, the image captured in the second mirror (3.30) is gazed by the spectators who identifies with the father by seeing him as one who holds the traditional view that fails to accommodate the transformation. The mirrors in the film efficiently capture the othering of trans identity, and foreground the trans body as a construct.

In *Udalaazham*, the mirror image of trans person asserts the 'trapped in the wrong body' narrative and the caste politics. Gulikan's face is captured in a close up shot, when they wear kajal and derives narcissistic pleasure in their mirror image. In Lacanian terms, what they identify in the mirror is their dream figure. The mirror is a metaphor to their underpinned femininity. A closeup shot captures the superimposed



mirror image of Gulikan and the face of the dancer, placed outside the mirror (Figure 3.31). The trans person's position outside the camera and the dancer's position in front of it, evoke many paradoxes. The privilege of the upper caste white woman and the femininity she embodies are contrasted with the dark subaltern who is doubly marginalized. The woman who stands opposite to Gulikan is the idealization of the feminine beauty they identify with.



Figures 3.31 & 3.32 The femininity of the upper caste white woman is contrasted with the dark skinned trans subaltern's 'femininity'

In (Figure 3.32), a poster of the film circulates the idea of femininity 'trapped in the wrong body,' using the mirror motif. Gulikan sees the dancer's face in the mirror, which is suggestive of their intense desire to be 'feminine,' however, the dark color-code used in the poster, where the dancer is also dark skinned like the subaltern trans person indicates an impossible desire. It could be argued that, the poster being a tool to grab the attention of spectators to the film takes an ironical stand, as the darkening of the image of the elite woman in the mirror to which the trans person identifies with, offers the sight of an impossible desire for the subaltern. Their underprivileged social condition prevents them from attaining their desired gender. The dancer supports Gulikan's feminine gender performance, and though she suggests surgical reappropriation of their body, they are reluctant to do that due to their underprivileged circumstances. Judith Butler (2013) argues, psychoanalysis brings forth the relation between gender and sexuality, it could be negotiated through the "relationship between identification and desire" (28). The image of a transsexual is central to trans'

gender performance. The heteronormative logic denaturalizes sexuality of trans people. Malayalam cinema problematized the sexual practices as an attribute to the non-normalcy of trans identity in the narrative. The next section of this chapter ventures for a critical understanding of the sexuality of trans people represented in the selected Malayalam films.

### **3.2 Subversive Desires: Cinematic Constructs of Trans' Sexuality**

Gender identity, gender performance, sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation constitute the shifting trends of discourses on trans people. Some working definitions are used in this section for the purpose of categorizing trans people's sexual orientation discussed in the selected films. While 'sex' is a biological categorization as male and female based on the genitalia of the individual possess and based on the genetic differences; 'gender' is a construct based on social expectations, how a male or female may behave. The society structures gender by designating two categories, masculine and feminine. Thus, trans identity becomes distinguished from these normative models of expressions. One's sexual orientation/sexuality denotes the sexual attraction a person has or does not have to another person. Interestingly, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Asexual classification in sexuality comes from the choice of one's partner and 'his' or 'her' biological sex.

Social structures in various cultures define the acceptable form of desire as heterosexual conjugality. The rigid notions of heteronormative ideals dictate what it means to be a man and a woman and what kind of relationship should unite the two. Hegemonic moral codes of the society penalize all those who fall outside the spectrum of heteronormativity. The term 'queer' was used in the past in a derogatory sense to describe homosexual people. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (2005) observe that "in the English language 'queer' might seem a perplexing choice of name for a community or movement" and homosexual people have reappropriated this term of oppression to reject the oppressor (3). The rules of sexual conduct

decided by societies construct ‘normal’ sexual behaviour. Nivedita Menon (2005) also opines, “if we recognise that this ‘normal’ heterosexuality is painfully constructed and kept in place by a range of cultural, bio-medical and economic controls, precisely in order to sustain existing hierarchies of class and caste and gender, then we would have to accept that all of us are- or have the potential to be- ‘queer’”(39).

Queer readings in cinema in its early days addressed the so called ‘normal’ heterosexual spectators, and the depictions of desires that disrupt hetero-normalcy were adjudged as marginal. The gender positioning of people with same sex became problematic when their desire towards each other deviated from a ‘normal’ track. Malayalam films like *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978), and *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (1986) negotiated the evolving schemes of gender politics with homosexual underpinnings aimed at ‘straight viewers.’ *Sancharram* (2004), however projected “lesbianism as a natural choice born of free will rather than out of hatred or bitterness towards men or any other social constraint or emotional deprivation” (Sreedharan 91). In *Mumbai Police* (2013), the hero’s sexual orientation is depicted as a disintegration of his gender non-normalcy. Thus, cinema offers possibilities of fluid desires and their manifestations, which simultaneously remould the gendered subjectivities. The focus of this section is to address the selected films which discuss trans people’s sexual orientation. It also analyzes trans bodies exhibited as eroticized figures for popular consumption in films.

Sexuality is used as a trope to ‘cure’ the ‘deficient masculinity’ in *Chanthupottu*. The queer hero undergoes a forced heterosexual disciplining that cures their gender expression. Radhakrishnan shares space with their female students, which could be negotiated as ‘homosocial’ due to the gender they perform. The protagonist behaves ‘feminine’ in the scene in which they interact with another man Laurence. Radhakrishnan playfully says to Laurence that if somebody sees them together, they might think that both of them were in love. The said scene is

underpinned with homosexual tensions. In *Ardhanaari*, the feminine-presenting Vinayan also loves a man. The dominant-submissive gender positioning works out when Vinayan responds to Balu's sexual desires. The same sex pairs, among which the one who is submissive posed anxieties on gender in these narratives. The pattern becomes recurrent in the other trans films as well; the desire is deployed towards a masculine male. Thamburu's fascination towards Venkiti and Gulikan's sexual act with their macho colleague are also imagined in this cinematic model.

Forced heterosexualisation on Radhakrishnan happens when their mother advises them to desire a girl, and marry the most beautiful girl in the shore who would return their desire at him also. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2014) opines, "The social and political responses evoked by this film are indicative of a network of new discursive formations that facilitated the diverse significations of Radha: as 'gender queer', a male homosexual, and a transgender person" (76). Radhakrishnan finds Maalu as the most beautiful woman on the shore and desires her. Once she responds to their desire, the film begins to depict the curing process of the feminine-presenting male hero.



Figure 3.33 The hetero-sexual bonding as a cure; Radhakrishnan and Maalu in embrace in a popular song in *Chanthupottu*

The song that became so popular (*Chanthukudanjoru sooryan maanathu*) in Kerala soon after the release of the film depicts the culmination of a romance between the couple Radhakrishnan and Maalu (3.33). When the union between a queer and a

cisgender woman is materialized on screen, it normalizes their desire first, and then their body. By falling in love with Maalu, Radhakrishnan's sexuality is normalized in the hetero-patriarchal manner. They are forced to think that there is something wrong with their self and in order to cure from that they remember the advice of their mother on falling in a 'normal desire' to 'normalize' themselves. Using the entertainment elements like song sequence and dance, cinema brings an aura of romance between the couple and as a result of the ensuing physical union, Maalu is impregnated by Radhakrishnan. However, this fact is deferred from their knowledge till they return after a short period of exile, with a 'trans'formed body. Thus, *Chanthupottu* conveniently uses the trope of sexuality to 'cure' the queer. "The use of Maalu to prove Radhakrishnan's sexual prowess is another part of his transformation to 'masculinity'" (Prabhakaran 322). But, Radhika Chopra et.al (2004) observes that there "exist prevalent possibilities of homoeroticism and male femininities" in Radhakrishnan, for them, "It does not insist upon the total erasure of Radha's former persona or his femininity. It permits a degree of manoeuvre within gendering and the flows of sexual desire and affection" (211). Radha is forced by the heterosexual society to desire a female. The cinema acts as an apparatus which disciplines the desires of the queer to mature them as per the society's norms.

The feminine-presenting trans characters are imagined as receptive spectacles of dominant male desire. Cinema uses this trope not only to define trans person's sexuality, but also to typecast them as sexual objects. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2005) reads the queer desires in Malayalam cinema, by pointing out the configuration of dominant male desiring the 'feminine' (rather than female) "as a palpable object of desire and visual pleasure" (75). In *Ardhanaari*, the protagonist's desire is channelled towards homosexuality and the film portrays Vinayan and Balu forming a homosexual coupling since their school days. Vinayan's transgender identity is emphasized in the narrative with an erotic underpinning of his bonding with Balu. Femininity becomes central in Vinayan's depiction as the object of sexual desire of other male characters. These homosexual leanings are cited as the source for his

‘abnormality’ by his elder brother, who reports it with utmost disgust to their father: “Your son’s love is not to a female; but to a male” (00:13:42- 00:13:48) The feeling of being ‘trapped in a wrong body,’ and the lack of spaces to articulate his desire force Vinayan to leave the home in search of his identity.

The sexuality of trans characters undergoes heterosexual conditioning in the films. In *Ardhanaari*, Vinayan leaves home confused over his sexuality. When Vinayan meets the trans woman Kokila, they feel certain ambiguities in their gender expression, as they feel sexual desire for them. They stop their initiation ceremony to the hijra community as a result of the tension going in their mind, “When I meet certain women, the ‘masculinity’ in me wakes up... I feel that I am not a woman” (00:51:51- 00:52:06). The working out of heteronormative frame of sexuality is easily visible at this instance. The desire to alter one’s body springs from the patriarchal notions of heteronormativity. Vinayan decides to be a woman to legitimize their homosexual orientation by heterosexual conditioning, but when they feel the sexual desire for a trans woman, they are again confused. The issue of sexuality defines gender identity in *Ardhanaari*, when Vinayan is declared as a bisexual, it is legitimized as divinity. The bisexuality of Vinayan is highlighted in the film and transgender people’s gender performance is observed from the guise of homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality in the film. It is relevant to observe Kokila’s desire towards a cisgender man and their castration to achieve femininity. Sexuality of the transgender people in the film appears varied and fluid, yet it is inextricably linked to heterosexuality.

The forced attempts by heteronormative society to cure a person’s same-sex desires end up in their ‘queering’ in the film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*. The film employs male bonding to foreground the gender nonconformity of the queer, Thamburu. One gets the sense of complexity in the sexual desires working out in the narrative. Venkiti’s hegemonic masculinity and his sexual frustration are conceived from a heterosexual framework and are envisioned as ‘normal’ even though he is a

philanderer. Whereas Thamburu's desire for Venkiti remains unrequited, it falls out of the heterosexual lens. Malayalam cinema manifests the sexuality of transgender people as transgressive, adhering to the Western puritanism. Addressing the issue of identity and the politics of sexual practices in the West, Marjorie Garber (2009) critiques the attitude that fails to abide by non-normative sexuality, "Eroticism and desire are always to some degree transgressive, politically incorrect" (31). Thamburu's fascination for Venkiti is quite evident when they glance the latter taking bath. The erotic sensibility is visualized through manipulating the gaze of the camera as Thamburu's, who derives pleasure in watching Venkiti's semi-nude torso in close-up shots.



Figures 3.34, 3.35 & 3.36 Thamburu's homosexual desire and admiration for Venkiti, Venkiti's semi-nude torso

Unlike Vinayan who is declared as a bisexual, Thamburu's love is instigated to a dominant, hefty, and fair complexioned 'masculine' male. Moreover the queer is depicted as misogynist in their sexual desire. The film narrates Thamburu's relationship with five women: Urmila, their wife; Maala, Venkiti's domestic help; Ambaal, the prostitute; the female dancer who expresses her love to Thamburu; and Kanaka, the village beauty. Thamburu exhibits hostility towards Maala and Kanaka due to their intimacy with Venkiti and the film develops a combat between them and

the queer to possess Venkiti. The inability to requite the love of the dancer, and any affection to their wife is portrayed as a crisis in Thamburu's gender performance. A sisterhood femininity develops between Thamburu and Ambaal as both of them share the space of the 'other,' the stigmatized group in the hierarchical society. The form of disciplining and compulsory heterosexualization results in the entry of Maala as a domestic help to Venkiti, who asks her after elaborating on Thamburu's sexuality with sarcasm, "Your job is to correct this creature" (1:12:23- 1:12:26). The policing and controlling of sexuality becomes the key to develop a split between Maala's femininity and Thamburu's feminine-presenting among which, the hegemony is claimed by the former. Thamburu's gender positioning in the village house is contrasted with Maala's, who is set as an example of 'normative femininity' by patriarchal society. From the household chores to sexual partnership, she competes with Thamburu and claims legitimacy. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* fails to articulate the sexuality of Thamburu in a compassionate manner, when the director himself admits, "I prefer to address a serious issue in a humorous vein and it is about a community that is slowly getting eliminated from the society! ('M' town Goes Offbeat") However, the transgender character is presented as a victim of the patriarchal heterosexual society, through the forced marriage, hegemonic oppression, and stigmatization in the society.

In *Alorukkam*, the trans woman Priyanka and her cisgender husband live as 'heterosexual couples.' The protagonist's father recalls his son's same sex sexual orientation, and his attempts to discipline the queer son. However, the film progresses to present the queer character as a trans woman (cinema does not clearly state whether Sajeevan has undergone SRS, but presents a trans woman), who marries a cis man and then performs sexuality in hetero-normative familial space. The film also depicts the trans woman as a victim of sexual objectification by the public.

Gulikan in *Udalaazham* desires men who treat them as a human being. The film attempts to free from the stereotyped notions of gay men as misogynists, as



employed in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, and problematizes the sisterhood affection the transgender person develops towards their wife. Gulikan is not distancing from her sexual desires, but tries to convince her about their psychological gender and sexual orientation. However, dismissing the claims of any homosexual readings in the film, the director clarifies, that he has imagined Gulikan as an amab who experiences gender nonconformity. Their sexual orientation is towards cismen as Gulikan feels as if a woman (trapped in the wrong body).<sup>109</sup> Gender dysphoria and the inability to perform SRS in the case of Gulikan should be observed from their subaltern status. Homosexual cis men (mentioned as *kundanmar* in the film) commit physical violence on Gulikan through forced sex. However, Gulikan expresses their desire willingly towards a cis man while working as in a tile factory. The heterosexual conjugality constructed in the patriarchal forced marriage also fails its purpose. It could be argued that, *Udalaazham* makes the trans person to love a cis man as their choice.

The lesbian relationships and the sensationalized suicides reported in media analyzed by Deepa V. N. (2005) point at the thriving issue of the “emotional and institutional marginalization” faced by gender nonconforming women in Kerala. Socially and economically, certain women are confined in heterosexual marriage, a few “desire to change themselves, to change their sexual orientations through means such as self-restraint or psychiatry, or to cope with the nonconfirmation to gender norms by sex reassignment surgery” (182-183). *Irattajeevitham* focuses on the physical intimacy of two young women and the sex-change of one among them. The film portrays the failure to cope with the social conditioning of biological determinism of sex. *Irattajeevitham* works on the binary assumptions of gender positioning and sexual practices when it depicts Amina as a girl who does not conform to gender stereotypes and Sainu as a timid, docile, a passive receptor of Amina’s care and affection. A female assigned at birth and hailing from a society that practices compulsory heterosexuality, Amina’s predicament is to be seen as ‘a lesbian

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<sup>109</sup>Personal interview with Unnikrishnan Avala (Director, *Udaalazham* 2018), March 2019.

in denial' and she reveals it through the hints before leaving her native. Addruman opens up about it later to Sainu. Jack Halberstam's (1998) observations are pertinent at this juncture, "The recent visibility of female to male transsexuals has immensely complicated the discussions around transsexuality because gender transition from female to male allows biological women to access male privileges within their re-assigned genders" (143).



Figures 3.37, 3.38 & 3.39, Amina and Sainu exchanges a homo erotic space, the symbolic phallic union

Amina's unrequited love for Sainu and the fear of losing her due to the patriarchal heterosexual-family codes become the rationale for her to move away from the native and come back with the transitioned body. The film is packed with stark visual codes that endorse Amina's erotic desires to Sainu. The film depicts Amina's homosexual tensions, and they are expressed through her physical gestures (the movements of the hands and fingers suggesting a symbolic phallic union), visualized in close up shots in the film (figures 3.36-3.37). In another sequence, Sainu recalls the plucking of berries. The deep seated eroticism of a symbolic sexual act is represented through Amina's (replaced by Addruman in the second shot) plucking and throwing of berries from the tree towards Sainu who stands under the tree, and enjoys the juice of broken berries on her face. This could be considered as a transition state of gender reassignment to conform to sexual orientation. "Many FtMs come out as lesbians

before they come out as transsexuals” (Halberstam 150). It could be argued that, the gender change and the resultant trans man identity discussed in *Irattajeevitham* arises from Amina’s strong desire to possess Sainu, which is a patriarchal heterosexualized articulation of her homosexual desire.

The film *Njan Marykutty* does not discuss the sexuality of its trans woman protagonist. The film presents Marykutty as inarticulate about her sexual preferences, but portrays her as a victim of the sexual violences committed by power structures of hegemonic masculinities. The film captures the tensions of the society regarding transgender community as sexual perverts, at the police station she is sexually harassed and accused of pedophilia. Cinematic construction of homosexuality places Marykutty as the other, as an object of gaze. Marykutty’s advocate expresses his sexual advances on her, subjects her body for his erotic fantasies. He is also ridiculed by the homophobic society as *kundan vakkeel* (homo advocate), a derogatory pun on his homosexuality. The film thus foregrounds the heterosexual assumptions on transgender and homosexual people as social deviants. Markutty becomes a visible subject of the queer man’s desire, as represented in the film. It is also significant to note the casual treatment adopted by the filmmakers to homosexuality, as it is presented as a comedy, and subject of mockery. Moreover, the film constructs ‘sisterhood femininity’ between Marykutty and her friend, thus closing the possibilities of any erotic intimacy. This diplomatic silence on trans sexuality and its expression in the popular cinema is to present the trans person as an affable character.

It could be observed that, in these selected films, trans people express their sexual orientation to cis men and cis women which is in a sense their choice. However, some trans people are disciplined through heterosexual norms when society feels their desire as ‘abnormal.’ It is significant to read how films have visualized trans bodies on screen. They are mostly represented as erotic figures whose exhibition communicates the gratification of the sexual fantasies of the patriarchal ‘heterosexual’ viewer.

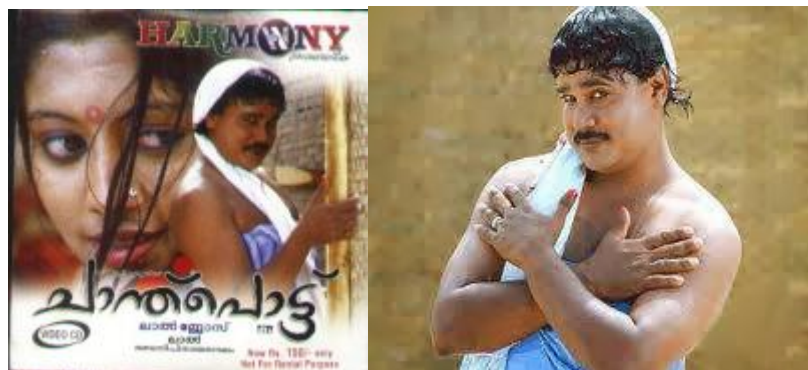
### 3.2.1 Desirable Trans Bodies on Screen: Analysis of Spectatorial Pleasures

While visualizing the trans bodies on screen, the cinematic celebration of their sexual objectification persists as trans bodies are offered as sites of visual pleasure. When cinema started representing trans body as the centre of focus, the gaze of the camera identifies with the heterosexual spectators, who watch their fetishised bodies and derive pleasure. This section close reads certain visual codes in the selected texts that present similar images. *Kuli*<sup>110</sup> scenes (bathing scenes) of trans people are depicted as the metaphors for spectatorial pleasures. In such sequences, the half-nude body of trans characters are presented as fetishised objects, and mostly the male bodies with feminine leanings are used for erotic exhibition. The *kuli* scenes often reflect the soft-porn genre of Malayalam films in which the “female lead as a cultural outsider—a transient figure who is both a threat and a source of exoticized desire,” as observed by Darshana Sreedhar (2019, 49). The female lead in a soft-porn film and the prostitute figure in society are always ‘the other’ due to their sexual precarity. Trans bodies unsettle the notions of normative sexuality in a different way. A prostitute figures in the heteronormative imagination as an outsider, the textual aspects of soft porn in Malayalam cinema “mobilize sexual potentials” (*ibid*). Transgender people’s gender performance and sexuality fracture the binary codes of gender and sexuality. In a few of the selected films, the trans body is eroticized for spectatorial pleasure in a way the female body is eroticised in soft porn films.

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<sup>110</sup>The Malayalam term refers to bathing. An installation by Priyaranjan Lal at Biennale, *Kuliyum Mattu Scenukalum* “reflects the form of soft-porn as remnants of the past that haunt the present.” The term is borrowed from an analysis of the art in Sreedhar Mini, Darshana. “The Spectral Duration of Malayalam Soft-porn: Disappearance, Desire, and Haunting.” *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 12 January 2017, pp. 127-150. doi.org/10.1177/0974927616667971

In *Chanthupottu*, Radhakrishnan's body is eroticized in a song sequence, they come out of the bathroom wearing a bath towel. The film typecasts queer identity in this attire and their physical gestures embody femininity. The gender expression is 'cured' as Freddy's tries to beat them. In the film, apart from the disruption of normalcy, the shot is presented as a trope of laughter.



Figures 3.40 & 3.41 The poster of *Chanthupottu* depicts the queer hero's clothing in feminine, and the topography of the upper body in figure (3.41)

The camera lingers on their body, the crossed hands that covers the bosom (Figure 3.41) eroticizes their torso. The image of a non-normative hero, in the posters of the film (Figure 3.40) is widely circulated for popular consumption. It creates the impression that a male feminine body poses a threat to the rupture of heteronormalcy. Apart from deriving scopophilic pleasure, the spectators are convinced to believe it as an aberration.

The *kuli* scene depicted in *Ardhanaari* presents the bathing pond as a meeting point of two lovers in addition to the establishment of the gender conforming identity of Vinayan. The scene cuts from Vinayan's childhood to their emergence as an adolescent who feels gender dysphoria, and the scene is set with homoerotic underpinnings. Balu and Vinayan share their intimacy in the clandestine space. The sequence emphasises Vinayan's femininity through expressions of coyness, accentuated by Balu's comments. Vinayan bathes by covering their bosom; the

sequence forms the recurring image of female bodies in soft-porn genre, by underscoring ‘femininity’ in the gender performance.



Figures 3.42 Balu (& the spectators) watches Vinayan’s bathing in the pond and the erotic exhibition of their body; 3.43 Thamburu comes out wearing the bath towel covering the bosom

The close-up shots that capture Vinayan’s semi-nude torso form an erotic spectacle for the spectators, who identify with Balu’s desiring gaze on Vinayan’s body. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2002) argues that male bathing in public spaces that recur in British fiction and paintings in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are distinct from the bathing enclosures of rural ponds in Kerala which are well covered public spaces that ensure privacy for heterosexual romantic encounters. In the cinematic construction, the picture of bathing ponds in Kerala is “traditionally associated with clandestine romantic encounters mostly heterosexual” (187). Hence the bathing scene in the film depicts their romantic desire, and eroticizes the trans body for spectatorial pleasure.

In *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, the bathing pond persists as a metaphor to sexual encounters and voyeurism. The queer Thamburu is beaten up by a group of women for trespassing their bathing pond and voyeurizing them (in the narrative, Thamburu is accidentally caught when they stalked Venkiti who ogled those women at bath). Venkiti attributes Thamburu’s act of voyeurizing the bathing women to their heterosexual orientation. In another sequence, Thamburu returns from the pond, and the shot records their body, following the *kuli* scene. The feminine-presenting male

body mediates between masculinity and femininity through the way he wears the bath towel. As shown in the figure (3.42), they cover their bosom like a woman, which instigates the spectators to focus on the body more. Further, as elaborated in another scene, this rouses the curiosity of Venkiti (with whose hegemonic masculinity the spectators identify with) who teases Thamburu, and peeps the changing room to see Thamburu's body. The erotic exhibition of Thamburu's body near the pond offers site of visual pleasure for spectators.

The recurring trope of presenting the nude body of the transgender people in Malayalam cinema could be seen as their sexual objectification. Moreover, when trans women cover their bosom, the act endorses the femininity in them. *Irattajeevitham* depicts a trans man who wears *mundu*, and tries to express masculine gender. While the trans women wear *mundu* by spreading it down, the exhibition of the bare thighs denotes a masculine authenticity to Adduman's body. However, one cannot dismiss the possibilities of the sensual visual pleasure the bare thighs offer to the spectators. The half-nude torso of trans women as well as the bare thighs of trans man in the films, present them as desirable erotic subjects on screen. The physical violence perpetrated against transgender people also comes from a curiosity concerned with their bodies. The eroticization and exhibition of trans bodies according to the prevailing gendered sense of self result from the effort to invoke spectatorial pleasures, which is visual as well as sexual.

### **3.2.2 Sexuality, Marriage, and the Construction of Trans Family in Cinema**

While discussing the expression of sexuality and homoeroticism, the familial structures constructed in the selected texts seem fitting to analyze. Malayalam cinema envisaged family as a unit that functions under the strict patriarchal framework. Specific meanings settle around the institutions of marriage and family in Kerala. During 1950s and 1960s, the monogamous marriage and patriarchal heterosexual

family had been precarious in Kerala (Muraleedharan 2014). Sex and female companionship were part of the conservative society in the 1960s, and the generation tried “to cut off from the community/ joint family contexts” (Venkiteswaran 43). The backward economy suffered from redundant agriculture and industry and sought for gulf remittance-based economy in Kerala after the 1970s, and the resultant nuclear families accentuated individuals to be free and “pursue their pleasures” (ibid). The nuclear familial model as a result of modernity has been emerging since the 1960s, and films portrayed modernity “invariably symbolised by sexuality in its disrupted and less sanctioned forms” (Vaidyanathan 236). The rehabilitation of hetero-patriarchal morality with the emergence of modernity during the time has been observed by scholars (Arunima 2003, Chatterjee 1993, Menon 2008). Feminist movements in the 1970s broke the silence on sexualities in the public sphere of Kerala. The allusion of disruptive sexuality in the 1970s Malayalam films is purely heterosexual. During the time in which, there could be observed the “disillusionment with the new family and modern conjugality” as a result of which the transgressing of gendered individuals, and the crisis aroused by it (Devika 300). Most of the transgender and queer people in Kerala were denied options to enter into ‘legal marriage’ and adopt children; they have been leading ‘live in relationship.’<sup>111</sup> The activism and struggle for survival have made trans marriages in Kerala possible by 2018 with the marriage of Surya and Ishaan, both have surgically reassigned their sex. A couple of trans marriages in Kerala after that followed the heterosexual model of an ideal family.

The construction of normative families in early Malayalam cinema is associated with the consolidation of heterosexual conjugality. But the homosexual underpinnings surrounding it cannot simply be dismissed in the narrative. Heterosexual marriage and sexuality have upper hand by placing the homosexual

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<sup>111</sup> An arrangement in which an unmarried couple live together in a long-term relationship that resembles a marriage. The status of same sex couple who live together and the denial of their right to adopt children has been a debated topic. P. Abhijith. “Moonnam Vargathinte Nerkazhcahakal” (The View of Third Tribe). *Pachakuthira*. January 2014.



desires as non-normative that needs to be disciplined. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2010) argues that, “The narrative traditions established by our mainstream cinema, as well as the patterns of reception they engender have fabricated a discursive logic that remains entrapped within the paradigms of hetero-patriarchy” (172). In *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978), this affirmation of heterosexual bonding is well established in the narrative by the two girls Girija and Kokila entering into heterosexual marriages and the disintegration of lesbian theme. *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (1986) depicts Hari Sankar choosing Devika and their heterosexual conjugality, while the homoeroticism of Nimmy and Sally disintegrates into self destruction. The two films dismiss non-legalised same sex intimacy outside marriage as “romantic friendships” only (*ibid*). However, the film *Sancharram* (2004) that treat homosexuality with compassion, ultimately shows Kiran’s emergence as a carefree lesbian woman outside any heterosexual bonding and the forced heterosexualisation of Delielah, an indirect reference to prevailing heterosexual hegemonic social codes (Gopinath 2007, Mokkil 2010). In certain Malayalam films in the 1990s and early 2000s, male bondings are represented within the heterosexual narratives. The institution of heterosexual family in *Aaraam Thamburan* (1997), *Harikrishnans* (1998), *Thenkasippattanam* (2000), *One Man Show* (2001), etc., is through the invocation of male intimacy. These films present “an alternative domestic system” and the homosocial space borders on the “replication of patriarchal heterosexual domesticity” (Muraleedharan 78-79). Films like *Sufi Paranja Katha* (2010), *English* (2013), *My Life Partner* (2014), and *Aami* (2018) depict queer desires as a crisis to heterosexual bonding within marriage with a legally wedded female wife and a male homosexual partner. Thus it could be concluded that the figures whose gender identity do not conform to the patriarchal norms of binary have been invisible in earlier films, and those discussed in contemporary Malayalam cinema would not offer a paradigm shift, because they hold on to the patriarchal hegemony.

The conception of family and sexuality in the selected films demonstrate the heterosexual conjugality in Kerala. Malayalam films approach the subject in a

different manner but end up with similar results. Familial space and the performance of sexuality are treated as devices that bring normalcy to the gender performance in *Chanthupottu*. Radhakrishnan's expression of heterosexuality is not just by chance. They are forced to prove their masculinity through the performance of a normative sexuality. Radhakrishnan's homosexual leanings are clearly established in their coyness and resistance when Laurence touches their body. They playfully warns Laurence that people will think that they are lovers, if they see them meeting in a deserted place. The narrative concludes with a full picture of the inauguration of a heterosexual family of Radhakrishnan and Maalu, could be discerned as a device of patriarchy to stress what is normal.

Forced heterosexual marriages are presented as the institutions of sanity in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* and *Udalaazham*. Thamburu's marriage is fragmented when they fails to offer 'masculine protection' to their wife who was raped by their own sibling. In the village house, they shares space with the macho Venkiti and the narrative progresses in terms of the master-steward kind of male bonding in a homosocial space. The admiration Thamburu exhibits while looking at Venkiti's body also points at their 'deficient masculinity,' as they imagine that their body lacks what Venkiti possesses. The cinema constructs a one sided homo erotic coupling with Thamburu and Venkiti, which is visualized in their togetherness by sharing bed in the 'first night' at the village house like that of the nuptial day. Their 'family' however, is under the constant threat of disintegration with the coming of female figures, Maalu and Kanaka whose femininities are endorsed in the film as normative. This is the result of the patriarchal heterosexual families working under the core of social norms. Venkiti's sharing bed with Maalu, which is not under a marital bond is discerned as a fracture of moral codes for the society. However, even that is represented as heteronormalcy over the desires of Thamburu. In a comparative reading of the familial spaces and the exercise of sexuality in the film, it projects heterosexual household as the nodal point of normative family. In *Udalaazham*, the heterosexual child marriage is forced upon by the tribal community on Gulikan and

Maathi. The marriage is not consummated as Gulikan is unable to perform heterosexuality and impregnate the wife. Thus, though the couple stay together under the same roof, the familial space constructed in *Udalaazham* does not come up to the codes of normative patriarchal sexuality. Gulikan's favourable response to another male and their physical intimacy institute alternative family in the narrative, yet it is dismembered by hegemonic masculinity in their effort to bring heteronormativity.

Homosexuality is normalized under the cisheteronormative framework in the marriage between a hijra and a cis man. Vinayan marries their childhood friend Balu in *Ardhanaari* and performs femininity. The film depicts the celebration of the hijra marriage and their family like 'the marriage between a man and woman'. Thus, the trans woman Manjula performs the patriarchal concept of femininity and domesticity in the marriage. However, the masculine and feminine gender performances are colligated in Vinayan when the film shifts its focus from their intimacy to the trans woman Kokila, who later undergoes ritualised castration to marry a cisgender man. When Manjula lives as the 'wife' of Balu, their gender performance is questioned by the latter's 'legal wife' who asks, "I don't understand what pleasure you are giving to my husband, which being a woman, I couldn't"give (01:29:21- 01:29:27). When the biological woman is juxtaposed with the 'trans woman' the film ironically non-normalize the trans woman identity of Manjula, and questions the authenticity of the institution called marriage in the narrative. The ideal family is designated as the heterosexual household envisaged by patriarchy.

There is a striking similarity between *Ardhanaari* and *Aalorukkam* in depicting the trans person married to the cis man and the construction of familial space. *Aalorukkam* portrays a trans household in which the bonding works in the heterosexual spectrum of conjugality. The domestic space offers avenues for the trans woman to perform her gender identity and sexuality. Yet it is distinct from *Chanthupottu* that points out, the culmination of domesticity as man and woman and their capacity to bear the child. The adopted child "who is invariably a girl" in

*Aalorukkam* is a deviation from the biological determinism of normative family, and it sets up alternative domesticity as discussed earlier (Muraleedharan 78). A more compassionate treatment is in *Aalorukkam*, in which the trans person becomes the ‘mother’ of the child, rather than forced to ‘father’ a child as in *Chanthupottu*. The autonomy to choose one’s gender performance within the familial framework is determined by the individual rather than as a social imposition if the two narratives are compared and contrasted.

There is a silence regarding the sexual preferences of the trans woman Marykutty in the film *Njan Marykutty* and she is presented as a person who lacks the familial space through marriage and a partner. Her advocate only seeks sexual pleasure from her. Marykutty sarcastically comments at the heteronormative morality of the advocate by asking him, “Will you marry me?” He lowers his head and she further adds, “I can sexually satisfy you, but I cannot give birth to a child.” Unashamed, he replies, “I want only that” and then she dismisses him by saying “I don’t have time for it” (00:11:59- 00:12:12). These exchanges in the film present a trans person’s existence in society as a threat to the very established notions of heterosexual conjugality and a critique to the pseudo morality of compulsory and forced sexuality inside the familial space.

These seven selected narratives manufacture similar thread as the trans characters are denied space in their own families. Deserted by parents and siblings, transgender people migrate from the familial spaces and form alternative families. The hijra *hammad* in *Ardhanaari* gives glimpse to the familial space offered as a counter discourse to the heteronormative patriarchal families in Kerala. The hijra culture is more prominent in Northern states and certain regional spaces mostly outside Kerala. The absence of trans households and the images of it in films come from Malayali’s cultural imagination of hijra household as transgressive from social norms. Serena Nanda (1990) and Gayatri Reddy (2006) have done detailed studies on the trans families and their community life in Mumbai and Hyderabad. In the

suburban spaces outside Kerala, transgender people construct the familial space in which the migrated Malayali becomes a part of; construct their social living and family. This hijra community follows the system of the *guru* (an elder hijra) adopting a *chela* (younger hijra as daughter). Such trans families have their constructed bondings in the institution which have similarity with heterosexual families in the mainstream society. The trans people in Kerala live outside such frameworks, but show leanings to the hijra family model; in Kerala, those transgender people came back to the homestate and have built alternative families in Thiruvananthapuram. (Resmi& Anil Kumar 2016). The creation of solacing spaces outside home state is a recurring trope in Malayalam cinema, *Njan Marykutty* pushes it further, as the trans person undergoes SRS in Chennai, but comes back and proves one's capacity in the native. Such cinematic models offer sites of identity contestations and critique the warping of the heterosexual families in Kerala.

The chapter has analyzed the cinematic representation of trans identity and their sexuality by critically examining the gender performances, and sexuality of transgender characters. The spectatorial pleasures in the erotic exhibition of trans bodies are also noted, as it forms a discursive territory of sexual objectification. Malayalam cinema has problematized gender performance by focussing more on the sexual orientation of queer characters. Trans people are forced to be in heterosexual conjugality as a process of curing their gender performance. Certain trans characters medically alter their bodies that fit to their psychological gender. It is argued that, the heterosexual normativity cultivated in the patriarchal mind of Malayali spectators have affected the character formation of transgender people in Malayalam cinema. Their sexualities are problematized in the patriarchal heterosexual angle; feminine presenting transgender people are moulded as those who take the 'submissive' role, and the masculine presenting transgender person as its counter discourse. This construction has affinity to the cishetero-normative society and hence the social positioning of trans characters need to be studied in detail. As briefly hinted, the sexual objectification of trans bodies in cinema is aimed at arousing visual pleasure

and satisfying the social curiosity. The forced disciplining of trans people through violence and genderbashing has to be explored. The upcoming chapter pushes the representation of transgender identities in Malayalam cinema further by critically analyzing the social positioning of transgender people, the genderscapes constructed, and violence perpetrated on them.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Social Positioning and the Visualization of Violence on Trans in the Selected Films**

Trans identity construction in contemporary Malayalam cinema is emblematic of their emergent visibility in Kerala. The cultural history of transgender people is connected to their existence in Indian society by drawing legitimization from mythical pasts. The image of gender non-conforming individuals popularized by Indian cinema is linked to the lives of the ritualistic community of hijras. Malayalam cinema tried to depict hijra characters in certain films released in the 2000s. However, recent depictions of trans in Malayalam cinema deviate from these images and construct region-specific transgender identities and gender nonconformity. This chapter maps the Malayali trans identity and critically analyzes how Malayalam cinema discusses their social positioning where they live. The gender identity of an individual is discussed in cinema in a way, how the cisheteronormative society views the trans body and its gender performance. Transgender people often face social exclusion and harassments in society which include physical and emotional abuse, and sexual violence. This chapter further analyzes the violence inflicted on trans and its representation in the selected seven films with reference to its visualization on screen and the spectatorial pleasures aroused by the eroticization of the 'abject body' in the selected texts.

#### **4.1 Identity and Construction: The Positioning of Trans in Society and Cinema**

The positioning of a person in a society is demarcated by a number of factors like his/her gender, caste, class, education, employment, economic adaptability, social participation, etc. Majority of transgender people in India have been less educated,

unemployed and have been pulled down from attaining the fruits of development for a long time. Trans in India are known by different names and they face exclusion for socio-cultural participation, political participation and exclusion from economic activities (K. Delliswararao & C. Hangsing 2018). Due to their disadvantageous position in society social scientists regard them as ‘subalterns.’ Trans have started to voice themselves through various social movements for their survival in Kerala especially since 2010. The demographics of the state in the 2011 census and the state transgender survey 2014 construct the social profile of trans people in Kerala. According to the census data, they spread across all castes and religions in Kerala and the percentage of school dropouts among trans students are comparatively high, and very less have higher education. It could be attributed to their poverty, harassments from the heteronormative society, and gender based negative experiences in schools. Most of them remain unemployed. Those people who face gender based violence migrate to other spaces to live in their transgender identity.<sup>112</sup> The picture of transgender people drawn in the survey report sheds light to their marginality in Kerala.

Malayalam cinema in the 2000s has portrayed hijra characters as migrant figures in other states of India. They are represented as searching spaces for their gender expression and spaces to live according to their wish (*Nalacharitham Nalam Divasam* 2001, *Soothradharan* 2001, *Parthan Kanda Paralokam* 2008). Recent Malayalam films try to capture Malayali trans within the regional spaces of Kerala. The positioning of the identity is contested in terms of the marginality caused by a number of factors apart from the marginality of the society where they belong to. Transgender people and their traditional community life are represented in Bollywood films in the 1990s (*Sadak*, Dir. Mahesh Bhatt, 1991; *Daayra*, Dir. Amol Palekar, 1996; *Tamanna*, Dir. Mahesh Bhatt, 1997; *Sangharsh*, Dir. Tanuja Chandra, 1999), but these films discuss the lives of hijra in a negative shade, as ‘sexual predators,’ and

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<sup>112</sup> Transgender Survey Kerala 2014-15,  
<http://swd.kerala.gov.in/DOCUMENTS/Report/Survey%20Report/12157.pdf> Accessed on 27  
 November 2017



as ‘child abductors.’ But *Shabnum Mausi* (Dir. Yogesh Bharadwaj, 2005) treats the trans subject with compassion. Certain recent regional language films, *Chitrangada*, *The Crowning Wish* (Dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2012), *Naanu Avanalla Avalu*, (Dir. B.S. Lingadevaru, 2015), *Narthagi* (Dir. Vijayapadma, 2011), *Paal*, Dir. D. Sivakumar, 2016), etc. try to have a more compassionate treatment of the trans people as marginalized and victimized by society.

Malayalam cinema captures trans people within the cisheteronormative society. It could be observed that trans from marginalized societies are marginalized more than those trans who are ‘privileged’ in terms of their life in urban spaces as educated and employed. The social privilege and emancipation of certain transgender people as depicted in recent films also denote their upper caste and class status. However, both the ‘marginalized trans’ and ‘privileged trans’ unanimously face social exclusion and harassments because of their gender identity. The coming sections will critically examine transgender identities in the selected texts in terms of the society where they belong to, the rural-urban divide in the setting of the narrative, the hierarchies of class and caste, and other important factors that determine trans independence: their education, employment and economic stability. The selected films have been categorized to have a critical understanding of the class and caste, and the society where the trans people live. *Chanthupottu* and *Irattajeevitham* share similar setting (the life in close connection with sea) but different religious and social milieu. Hence it could be compared and contrasted when the trans characters’ social profile in those films are studied. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* and *Udalaazham* portray the trans people who belong to socially marginalized caste and tribal identities. Their social positioning is the result of their subaltern status, educational and economic conditions, and hence a critical analysis of their social position could be made through a comparative reading. *Ardhanaari* is the only film in Malayalam that has tried to capture the life of hijra community and their social marginalization. However, *Aalorukkam* and *Njan Marykutty* present the social transformation in Kerala while

portraying the transgender central characters. These two films are compared in terms of the positive shift in social attitude and the progressive treatment of the theme.

#### **4.1.1 Trans Lives in Coastal Kerala: *Chanthupottu* and *Irattajeevitham***

The cultural anthropological studies of Serena Nanda (1990) and Gayatri Reddy (2006) identify the Indian transgender people as living a community life with specific rituals who claim their lineage from the Hindu myths and epics. Hijras and Jogappas are such trans communities located in urban spaces. They function as ritual performers, who worship the religious cult of Goddess Bahuchara Mata, and earn livelihood as sex workers. Malayalam cinema has captured transgender identities on screen, deviating from this community identity of the hijras and jogappas. Most of the selected texts locate them as individuals living within their native space struggling against patriarchal social norms. Trans persons in *Chanthupottu* and *Irattajeevitham* live the coastal villages in the south-central and northern part of Kerala. The location and the cultural identity of these spaces are significant in forming a ‘regional’ and Malayali identity for the transgender people.

Two of the selected films place the central characters in fishing villages of coastal regions. The marginality of these coastal villages complicates the possibilities of articulation of the transgender subjectivities of Radhakrishnan as ‘Radha’ and Amina as ‘Addruman.’ A critical understanding of the space would bring certain common threads that would bind the identity of Radha and Addruman and their social positioning as trans people. In Kerala, the traditional fishermen form an important community however they remain as a marginalized community in spite of the socio-economic progress of the state. They are “socially marginalised and geographically isolated” (Mathew 2000, 34). The fisher folk in Kerala belong to different religious communities- Hindu, Christians and Muslims and the social organization of each communities in the different locales of the state share some commonalities of

marginalization. In *Chanthupottu*, Radhakrishnan lives in a coastal village as the title card shows acknowledgement to the inhabitants of Arthunkal, Andhakaranazhi and Omanapuzha fisher villages in Kerala. Similarly, *Irattajeevitham* is located in the coastal area of Malappuram district, a space that suffers from the economic depression resulted from the industrialization of fishing. The lives of Radha and Addhruman are deeply rooted to the daily routine in the shore, the social and cultural specifications of the region. These films problematize the transgender identities as different from the ritualistic performers as envisaged in the cultural anthropological texts (*ibid*).

The backwardness of the society and their social stratification based on their caste identity, labour, and economy are interlinked with the cultural formation of the region and the two films discuss this differently when the gender identity of the central character becomes a crucial point of discussion. The social division based on caste shapes the identity and culture of the fishing community. The influence of religion is quite evident in the configuration of different caste groups like *arayan*, *velan*, *mukkuva* and the *marakkan* who practice the rituals and beliefs of Hinduism. The fishermen look upon the sea as sacred always as they refer it as *Kadamma*; the sea as ‘mother,’ and it also points at the fertility and chastity of a fisherwoman. *Chanthupottu*, uses the beliefs and customs of the Hindu fishermen community as a trope in charging the feminine-presenting male as a social outcast and as a curse to the village. The village headman attributes the lack of a *chakara*,<sup>113</sup> and the unemployment of the villagers as a curse of *Kadamma* and the villagers easily fall prey for his apprehension. Radha is ‘thrown’ into sea by the custom of the community in putting the victim under the wrath of the sea as a solution to famine. Deaths in the sea are regarded as the wrath of the mother, which is attributed to violations of any tradition (Khambete 2012). The song sequence in the film *Azhakkadalinte* portrays the lores and legends of the fishermen community, their traditional employment and life as fishermen, the sea shore with close affinities to the artisan fishing in non-

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<sup>113</sup>The expression of the marine phenomena in which a large number of fish and shrimp throngs during a particular season as a result of mud bank formations. It becomes a time of propensity for the fisher folk, locally expressed as ‘season.’

mechanised boats. Whereas the other shore in the film, which is referred to as ‘civilized’ (*oru parishkruthamaya theeram*) is dominated by Christians. The scene opens with the humming of an English song that is juxtaposed with the atmosphere in Omanapuzha shore. It is suggestive of a landscape with a post-colonial modernity and enlightenment. However, the trans person is a misfit in the region even though those who adopt the person see them as a ‘blessing.’ Thus, the two shores in *Chanthupottu*, one with puritan sentiments and the other as civilized and modern in outlook do not appreciate the trans identity of the person and attempts heterosexual disciplining.

The coastal region depicted in *Irattajeevitham* is distinct from *Chanthupottu*, and is dominated by Muslims who are also placed at the fag end of the social ladder in comparison with other elite Muslim communities in Kerala like *Thangals*, *Koyas*, etc. Scholarly studies on the society of the Muslim fisher folk show they have strong organizational setup with social cohesion and class differentiation. P. R. G. Mathur (1978) has studied about the Muslim fisherfolk called Mappilas who are mostly converts from the *Mukkuvacastes*, their lifestyles, economic activities. According to him, their rituals connected with illnesses have been very much similar to that of the Hindu fisherfolk. P. C. Saidalavi (2017) and notes that, the idea of caste, which is understood as the organizing principle of Hindu societies on the Indian subcontinent, have determined social hierarchical practices among Muslims too. But there is a lack of consensus for the term ‘caste’ to denote social hierarchy, due to the lack of a religious ideology sustaining these practices among Muslims. However, scholars like Imtiaz Ahmad (1978), and Zarina Bhatti (1996) use the term ‘caste’ by arguing that, most of the features of the Hindu caste system like occupational specialization, endogamy, commensal restrictions are also observable among Muslims. In the decennial Census of 1891, it was observed that the majority of Muslims in Malabar retained ‘Mappila’ as a subdivision and a few remained in *putiya Islam*, but were converts from the Mukkuvan caste among Hindus (Stuart 1893). Thus, the film *Irattajeevitham* draws the picture of a socially marginalized community of the Muslim fisherfolk while narrating the life of a female to male transgender.

The coastal village in *Irattajeevitham* suffers from the aftermath of industrialization in the traditional fishing and the allied economic instabilities of the society. The capitalist modernization of fishing has changed the worlds of artisan fishing and unlike traditional fishermen in *Chanthupottu*, the motorised fish boats have taken over the shore in *Irattajeevitham*. The marginality of the society results from their lack of labour and social mobilization through a proper income. The film depicts how the migrant labourers from other states take over the native artisan fishermen and the Malayali fishermen are represented as engaged in loose talk, and time-pass through games, and are also exploited by money lenders. The film demonstrates the competition in vending business and the economic burden in the shore after the demonetisation of currency. The depression in economy is also stressed through banks' waiver loans for non performing assets and the resultant financial crunch constantly discussed in media. The trans man Addruman's life is placed against this economically unstable and marginalized social background. But he never fits in the company of other men in the cisheteronormative society, who place him outside their spectrum. The film discusses the marginality of the society as a whole, and Addruman lives at the periphery of the marginalized society, struggling against all odds.

Transgender people are deprived of opportunities of higher education due to their gender identity and social background. And in the selected films, they are depicted as school dropouts. There are references in the film *Chanthupottu* about the educational status of the trans, as a school dropout. *Irattajeevitham* also has descriptions about Addruman's school education, in certain shots of school going and in the cross dressing for a school festival. The poor educational status of the whole village itself becomes detrimental for Radhakrishnan. The villagers' belief in myths concerned with sea and the social ostracism make the trans person a curse to the land as dictated by the village headman. However, when Radha migrates to another shore, the family that accommodates him is not traditional. Their upper class educated

outlook and status as businessmen, in the film presents them more progressive than the fishermen in Radha's native. But they also find it difficult to accept Radhakrishnan's identity due to the influence of patriarchal social construction of gender norms. Thus, when they find fault with Radhakrishnan's gender performance, they teach them to behave like a 'real man.' Freddy, who has rescued Radhakrishnan from the sea, advises 'him' to live like a 'man' by exerting powerful masculinity. Freddy's sister also finds fault with Radhakrishnan's mannerisms; clothing and she scolds them often. It could be argued that the transformation that has happened in Kerala's public sphere a decade after the release of *Chanthupottu*, might be the reason for social approval for Adduman in *Irattajeevitham*. The film depicts the people in the coastal area as less educated but the film makes use of the circulation of print and visual media as a signifier to modernity. The trans man is easily 'passed off' as a cis male; a motif used for the cinematic cishetero-normalization of the trans body in public spaces. Several shots in the opening of *Irattajeevitham* captures the trans man in public spaces as unnoticed. The villagers accept Adduman as a trans man. A fisherman, who is the father of Sainu, corrects his wife that it is Adduman, not Amina, while she mentions the previous name of the trans man. The film points out that the less educated people in a marginalized society in Kerala are able to acknowledge the transgender identity of a person as a result of the visibility of transgender people in Kerala's public sphere, which is progressive social change. Yet, the educational status of the trans and the society itself become pivotal in positioning the trans man in a marginal space within a marginalized community.

Economic conditions and independence of trans are discussed in the selected films through their employment opportunities. The marginalized identity of trans makes them vulnerable to social exploitation. The lack of education leaves Radha without a salaried job that would have let them gain much respect and dignity in society. Yet Radha is self-employed as a dancer, and makes a living by teaching folk dance to village girls. The society acknowledges Radha as a dancer, and as an artist, even though the feminine-presenting gender performance is a 'deviation' from the

normative gender codes. The undercurrents of the social codes of gendering could be read here, as going to sea to catch fish is adjudged as a masculine job. Radha's failure to do so makes them a 'deviant' who cannot do the traditional occupation, and a marginalized in the society. The fisherman community determines a fisherman's masculinity in terms of his ability to explore sea, and return with a good catch. A friend, and a neighbour of Radha's father tries to console them by saying that Radha is an artist, who earns their income through teaching dance. In the same shot, Radha's response brings humour when they says, "I'm not afraid of sea; my nail polish will be spoiled in sea water" (00:29:15- 00:29: 20). There is another gender politics involved in the said statement. Irrespective of the differences of religion, caste and class, gender ideologies in the fishing community prevent women from entering the sea and fishing and limit them to activities that include net-making, salting, drying and (predominantly) selling fish (Dietrich & Nayak, 2006). Hence when Radha is afraid to engage as an artisan fisherman, their position is put to question in the society. Radha's reluctance to explore sea is attributed to their feminine gender performance. However, people's reaction to his choice as a dance teacher is different. But the village headman reacts differently towards Radhakrishnan's profession. He utters with disgust, "the true fisherman should go to sea and must earn his living." The education, employment and economic adaptability of a person are strongly bound and the problematization of the gender nonconformity becomes crucial when the profession is read in terms of gender identity. Thus, there is a clear demarcation in the social positioning of Radhakrishnan in his society.

The fear of going to sea is type casted as emasculation in *Chanthupottu*, however, in *Irattajeevitham*, Amina dreams of exploring the sea. She takes her friend Sainu along with her and their crossing of the forbidden spaces of gender becomes problematic for the society. The young men in their village valorize Amina's courage, but the older generation scolds and punishes them for crossing the confinements of gender. When Amina becomes Adduman, gender identity forbids him from getting a traditional labour in sea. The Muslim dominated society where Adduman lives have

moved away from artisan fishing and the industrialization brings economic depression to artisan fishermen. While reading the modernization in fish industries in relation with gender and religion, Aswathy and Kalpana (2018) argue that in Kerala, Latin Catholic and Hindu fishermen have been traditionally associated with fishing, while Muslim fishermen have mostly been involved in fish marketing and trade. The commercialization of fish markets has drawn Muslim men to the fish business in large numbers. Since the mid-2000s, the iced fish market has boomed with Gulf-sourced capital pouring in and increasing numbers of Muslim men entering all the hierarchies of iced fish marketing including wholesale, retail and petty vending. As discussed already, the religion and caste based gender puritanism restrict women's entry into the sea. When Amina becomes Adduman, the gender identity continues to limit his entry as he is denied employment in the traditional industry and the lack of education restricts the scope of other opportunities too. Yet, he engages in odd jobs in the fishing boats unlike the other women in the shore. He earns a job in the motorized boat of Hajjar as an unskilled labourer but loses it as a result of the trans man identity. A person's employment in society is determined by his gender and education, and in the selected films the trans people are placed at the margins because of their transgender identity primarily. Thus, cinema conveniently uses the employment of a trans person to stress his gender identity as well as social positioning.

Trans people's position in society could be understood in terms of the spaces they find comfortable with. When trans people find it difficult to be with people of their same sex assigned at birth for employment, they become deviants in society. Radhakrishnan is comfortable with the company of women in *Chanthupottu*, typecasted as a result of his faulty upbringing. Men in the shore treat them as a 'woman,' even though they use the male pronouns to refer to them. When they reach the modern shore, they prefer female bonding rather than being in the company of other men who makes them an object of mockery. *Iratajeevitham* discusses the past of Amina as a girl who found comfort in the company of her friend Sainu, once Amina becomes Adduman, the transgender identity obstacles their sharing of the same space.



The grown up and married Sainu is restricted from meeting Addruman by her parents, since they now belong to different gender identities, and they see it as against social norms. Addruman is placed outside the homosocial space in the village due to other men's reluctance to welcome him in. He faces social alienation as neither in the company of his friend Sainu and nor in the company of other men in the village.

While comparing the social stratification of transgender people in *Chanthupottu* and *Irattajeevitham* it could be observed that they share similar marginalized social space in coastal villages. Since these villages suffer from unstable economic conditions, transgender people who live in the space are also at a disadvantageous position. Apart from their poor education, the puritan social norms and the adherence to heteronormativity adversely affect transgender people in the marginalized communities. The social positioning makes them doubly marginalized. *Chanthupottu* released in 2005 is symptomatic of the erasure of transgender people in Kerala's public sphere, because society viewed them as 'aberration' during the time. *Irattajeevitham* released in 2017, has certain differences in approaching the theme. Yet, it is also demonstrative of the structural paralysis in comprehending the 'deviation' from assigned sex at birth and related gender expressions, and continue to hold the view of *Chanthupottu* to an extent. Transgender people are depicted as continuing to live in a hostile and transphobic Kerala. Radhakrishnan is welcomed in their native space only when they 'asserts' proves 'masculinity' by adhering to the social codes, while Addruman walks towards an indefinite future and social alienation even though a decade has been over.

#### **4.1.2 Marginalized Caste and Tribe: *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* and *Udalaazham***

The articulation of gender identity that does not conform with the biological construction of binary gender makes transgender people 'subaltern' (Kapur 2011). Trans, who belong to lower castes are pulled down in the social ladder and are at a

disadvantageous social positioning. Dalit body in cinema has always been portrayed as a contrast to the body of the upper caste and often endorses the latter. Ayntika Pal (2019) critiques the Dalit representation in cinema, “A Dalit male has always got depicted with a shabby thin body, physically untidy, emotionally weak and intellectually hollow appearance while, a female attained some sexually attractive and desirable physique so as to be objectified and subjugated by the Brahmin-patriarchs” (“Why are Dalits Missing from Indian Media and Cinema”). Even if Dalits and lower castes are represented in cinema, such images carry the perspectives of the dominant, the values of the heteronormative upper caste people in society. The lower caste identity itself marginalizes and makes a person untouchable in our society and when such people feel gender nonconformity, that turns out to be double marginalization.

The tribal trans person in *Udalaazham* and the trans person from a lower caste in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*<sup>114</sup> face the denial of social privileges due to their subaltern status. Both of them are placed in a geographical terrain different from the two films discussed already. Their life is closely linked with the rural setting, and the hierarchies of class and caste play dominant roles to position them at the margins of the society. If the life of Radha and Addruman are closely affiliated with their cultural setting of proximity to sea, Gulikan and Thamburu are placed against the backdrop of the forest, and the plain, that shape their livelihood opportunities. Both of them are not part of any transgender communities, and the selected texts problematize their positioning in heteronormative society as ‘gender subaltern’ and the focus is shifted to the mutual interaction between the transgender people and the society, where they live.

Gulikan’s identity non-binary identity is complicated further as due to their tribal identity and they fails to attain education, and faces exploitation from the upper caste people living near to their native forest. Gulikan’s social positioning could be observed from two angles: at first, it points at their spacing within the tribal

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<sup>114</sup> The film does not explicitly name the caste of the trans person Thamburu. However it says that Thamburu hails from a community that performs the ritualistic dance called *aattu*, that is offered to the local deity, for the dead people.

community, and next, it observes their positioning in the casteist world where they migrates to. Within one's community, Gulikan is looked upon as a gender non-conforming, one who fails to produce an offspring in a heterosexual conjugality. The tribal community in view Gulikan as different from other tribal men, and the society perceives their body as ill. The tribal rituals are portrayed as seeking the blessing of the Goddess *Poomathe* to cure their gender nonconformity. Even Gulikan is forced to ask the existential question, why is they made like this, as 'neither a man, nor a woman?' In the world outside the forest, Gulikan is victimized due to the tribal identity which is coupled with lack of education, financial insecurity, and the constant sexual exploitation.

It is significant to observe how a trans person is placed in a heteronormative society in the film. Gulikan finds comfort while in the company of women, as see themselves as a 'woman trapped in the man's body.' Apart from their wife, the tribal woman Maathi, a female dancer and a vagabond woman they meets outside the forest understand and behave compassionately with them. Thus the film portrays Gulikan as sharing a warm space among women. The title of the film, *Udalaazham* is indicative of the depth of meanings of a person's 'body.' The body of Gulikan is juxtaposed with the bodies of other people, who do not feel gender nonconformity within them. It is curious to watch the film's representation of the trans body of Gulikan with a developed bosom like that of females. Their body is exploited by society; it is marginalized due to the color of the body as well. The cisheteronormative society ostracizes Gulikan's gender nonconformity and the tribal identity. Yet, the film shows that Gulikan is accepted in their tribal community, as their wife says that she will look after them, as she can. The director of the film mentioned about an inter sex person Raju,<sup>115</sup> whose life had been traumatic when they migrated to the world outside leaving the natural habitat behind. Whereas, another tribal transgender person

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<sup>115</sup> The book *Vipareetham* is a biography of intersex Raju, who is born with male genitals and a womb inside the body. Raju and Unnikrishnan Avala. *Vipareetham*, DC Books. 2012.

is offered comforts at their home as they never comes out of the forest.<sup>116</sup> Thus, the film underlines that, within the tribal community, and inside the forest, the gender nonconforming people are safe and secure to an extent and the invasion of the outside world and the migration to *naadu* (land outside the forest) construct hostile spaces to tribal trans people. Cinema typecasts Gulikan as comfortable with an elder macho male who cares them and both of them enjoy the physical intimacy, which does not last for long, as the heterosexual society intrudes and victimizes them. This is different from all other trans texts, as the home and native space exclude the trans people, however, here the tribal community does not harass hir for the transgender identity. The tribal community within which Gulikan is placed itself is exploited by others who invade their native spaces and overpower them. The film is critical of the upper caste heteropatriarchal society's invasion on the marginalized community.

Educational advancement is the major indicator of social development and tribal people lag much behind in educational opportunities compared to other socially backward communities in India. The poor education among tribes would be due to the insufficient educational institutions in tribal areas. Poverty, lack of nutritional and healthcare programmes, poor enrollment and high dropout from schools are also the major problems faced by Scheduled Tribes in India (Suresh 2015). The backwardness of the caste places Gulikan at a disadvantageous position, as most of the people in tribal communities in the film are denied opportunities for formal education except a few. The marginality arising from poor education is further complicated by the lack of a fixed income and the film discusses why Gulikan migrates to the world outside their forest in search of livelihood. While the 'civilized' upper caste people take over the forest, the natural space and livelihood opportunities of the tribals, they are left with the lack of a stable income. The educated and qualified members of tribal community are ensured with opportunities as an effort by the state government to mainstream the community. But, researches by social scientists among certain tribal communities in

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<sup>116</sup>Personal Interviews with the director.

Kerala show that, tribal communities like Kattunayakan<sup>117</sup> depends forest for their livelihood. While some other communities, having lost their land to settlers, are working as agricultural labourers (*ibid*). *Udalaazham* problematizes the life of Gulikan as one who is unable to participate in traditional occupation of the tribal community in their native, as they switch from one space to another in search of an occupation. Opportunities for wage labour are the most important factor that would determine the economic condition of a person. Unlike the educated upper class trans who could undergo SRS, Gulikan is poverty-stricken and cannot afford such a surgery. Dark skinned, fragile, introvert, and vulnerable, Gulikan struggles to balance their life working as a coolie in the city, and for a short period, they work at a tile factory and then at a public crematorium.<sup>118</sup> They had been earning as a leech gatherer before they were forced to go outside their native and find a job in a hotel. The abjection that tribal people face in the castist society is evident in their labour at the hotel. Gulikan is restricted from serving food, their tribal identity demarcates them as untouchable and them is warned by the hotel owner for entering into the public dining space. According to the mainstream society, Gulikan fits only to outside manual labour. Economic exploitation of the weak is depicted in the film by restraining them from a deserving wage. The film portrays Gulikan as unpropitious who belong to marginal social class, and being exploited by the society.

Thamburu is depicted as embracing the self they wished to become, unlike Gulikan who meets with a tragedy at the end of the narrative. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, delineates Thamburu as a feminine-presenting male and their marginality in the society arises from their gender identity, lack of education, and poor income as a dancer. The social ostracism is demonstrative in the naming of the person as Thamburu whose real name is Ayyappan. Thus, gender nonconformity and the backwardness in terms of education, employment, etc., form the indicators of social

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<sup>117</sup> Kattunayakans work as forest labourers. They are also the collectors of non-timber forest produces for livelihood

<sup>118</sup> Accessed on 18 February 2019,  
<https://www.mumbaiilmfestival.com/images/festival%20ecatalogue2018.pdf>

positioning in the film. It is to be noted that both *Udalaazham* and *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* capture transgender people and their own cultural space only outside the regional locale. The transgender festival in Koovagam, a temple in the neighboring state of Kerala is represented as the only solacing space for transgender people in both films. Gulikan and Thamburu migrate from one space to another in search of acceptance for their gender identity as well as a safe space to work in order to make a living.

Thamburu inherits the profession of the ritualistic *aattu* dance from their family's tradition. The protection of their family that include the mentally ill brother, an aged mother, and wife from the poverty-stricken household had been the challenge in front of Ayyappan. Though Thamburu raises their gender identity and sexual orientation as a barrier to their heterosexual conjugality, they had to agree to the marriage finally, due to social compulsion. Their gender nonconformity and the employment as a ritualistic *aattu* dancer are placed at the backdrop of a rural setting. Though less educated, Thamburu is the sole breadwinner of the household. Thamburu migrates to another village, as the narrative progresses. Thamburu's femininity is constructed in the film through the metaphor of his profession as a dancer. They try to make a living as a *karagattam*<sup>119</sup> dancer in the new village, and dreams to establish a dance troupe called 'Urmila Aaattasangam.' While the elite performances like *kathakali* are rewarded in society, the *karagattam* dancers are left without any acknowledgment. *Karagattam* performance is yet to be accepted as an artform. The mistreatment of *karagattam* performers in society underlines the politics of caste and hierarchical structures of art created in the social order that subjugate the value of the art form ("Karakattam: A Folk-Art Languishing in the Web of Morality"). Thus, as a practitioner of *karagattam* dance, Thamburu experiences social marginalization.

The lack of education reinforces the social ostracism faced by Ayyappan (Thamburu) and places them at the lowest in the society with unstable financial

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<sup>119</sup> An ancient folk dance of Tamil Nadu. Basu Soma "A Care for Karagattam?" *The Hindu* 11 June 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/society/A-care-for-Karagattam/article11642228.ece>

status, as the chief source of income is the occasional *aattu* performance. When they join the troupe of *karagattam* dancers, the exploitation of the members of the troupe by its owner is discussed in the film in detail. The middleman who acts as an agent divides the earnings from the performances and takes the major part of the money as commission. Thamburu's inability to resist such exploitations of the employer becomes crucial in constituting the crisis in his income as well as in his masculinity. The performance of masculinity in the patriarchal social imagination is conceived as the ability to control by exerting power and Thamburu's failure in demanding the deserving wage is emblematic of the crisis in their masculinity. Gulikan also fails in getting the deserving remuneration for their employment due to their inability to exhibit power. Both of them fail as husbands in satisfying the emotional needs and 'protecting' their women. Thamburu is not able to reciprocate the sexual desires of another female dancer, which is depicted as a result of their failed masculinity in the film. Similarly, in the sexual relationship with their wife, Gulikan is unsuccessful to bring an offspring and also not able to save her when the hut that is set to fire by the patriarchal men who came to understand the transgression of Gulikan's wife.

*Odum Raja Aadum Rani* shows Thamburu's transformation, as they join the transgender community at Koovagam. Thamburu has faced harassment and social alienation due to their gender nonconformity, yet they struggle hard to become what they wished to be. In the film, the rural locales in Kerala where Thamburu lives are represented as ill treating them for gender nonconformity. Those places become uninhabitable to transgender people. The temple premise at Koovagam is depicted as a liberating space. However, the ritualistic space is a temporary space to flaunt their identity and the film presents an uncertain future. Thamburu's migration from the native rural region is because of their peripheral existence in the society. It is suggestive of the social condition of an underprivileged trans in Kerala. The lower caste people with nonconforming gender identity are doubly marginalized when compared with transgender people who are advantageous of their caste identity, education, economic participation. Such trans people emerge as successful figures in

the end of the narrative. Radha, Adduman, Thamburu, and Gulikan are Malayali trans people whose lives are placed at the backdrop of marginalized social communities in Kerala. The level of the marginalization varies in the selected texts; however the common thread that binds them together is their social positioning as abject figures, devoid of any dignity. Their bodies are sexually objectified and are represented as rupture to heteronormal perspective of society. The other selected texts, *Ardhanaari*, *Aalorukkam*, and *Njan Marykutty* discuss the issue of transgender people; however, the central characters are privileged with upper caste identity, education, and employment that enable them to climb up in the social ladder.

#### **4.1.3 *Ardhanaari*: The Social Positioning of Hijra Community**

*Ardhanaari* is the only film in Malayalam till date that documents the hijra community, their social role as ritualistic performers, and the cultural spaces they construct as their own as the focus. The victimization of hijra community and their profession as male sex workers are also dealt in detail in the text. The life of the central trans character and their social positioning could be observed from the angle of the space in their native as well as the society where they migrate to. The film introduces Vinayan/Vinutha as belonging to an upper class household and their family name is emphasised in the film unlike that of the trans characters in the other selected texts.<sup>120</sup> Being the ‘son’ of a retired soldier Medayil Parameswaran, the status of the family in the society is juxtaposed against the dishonour that Vinayan’s gender identity brings to the bourgeois family that cultivate heterosexual values. Vinayan’s brother, who exhibits a patriarchal domination over his younger brother, alleges that the gender nonconformity of the younger one has spoiled the reputation of the family. The concern regarding the protagonist’s trans identity as it pulls down the family from the hierarchical class, is symptomatic of the transphobic heterosexist society.

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<sup>120</sup> The film does not name the caste identity of the transgender though it places him at an elite familial background.



The trans person's education in the film, as discussed in the other texts is an important indicator of their social positioning. *Ardhanaari* depicts Vinayan's school education, yet no further reference regarding the higher education. The lack of proper education results in unemployment, along with that the gender nonconformity prevent Vinayan from an independent source of income. They migrate to another state when their gender identity becomes problematic in the native. The hijra community where they join is represented as ritualistic performers. They have an alternative family with their own internal structures and rules. The film discusses in detail the hijra community, their life, the lack of education, employment, and economic adaptability. The members of the hijra community are depicted as living a life of social exclusion and faces social injustice. When cinema focuses on the life of Vinayan as the trans woman Manjula, the social ostracism of the community itself is highlighted in the text. The individual class and caste identity gets erased and the hijra household's social positioning forms the topic of the narrative.

The hijra community in Indian society mostly earns their livelihood through blessing the newly born, newly wed couples, and these performances are called *badhai*.<sup>121</sup> The profession of sex work decreases their respect in society and leaves them vulnerable to public mockery (Nanda 1990). The cultural significance of hijras in India is strongly endorsed in Indian mythology through the mythical androgynic form of *ardhanaareeswara*. These myths are significant in the institutionalized role of a 'third gender'. Apart from Hinduism, Islamic texts also make reference to Muslim rulers' patronage of hijras in the pre-independent Indian past (Lynton & Rajan 1974). The transgender community in *Ardhanaari* follows the traditional roles of the hijra community: they are depicted as engaging in prostitution to make a living, perform emasculation rituals, perform at marriages and childbirth, and observe their own religious, ritualistic and cultural life in their space. The transgender community as a whole experience a Victorian righteousness in their social

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<sup>121</sup>The term denotes to the traditional gifts of cash and goods that hijras receive as payment on such occasions.

positioning, even though they enjoy certain amount of freedom in the society they live. The moral policing and the harassments, sexual exploitation, etc. faced by the trans people are also depicted in the film.

Vinayan is introduced to the hijra community by a trans woman Kokila when they migrate to a deserted and less inhabited space in a region outside Kerala,<sup>122</sup> where they get warm reception. Vinayan's social positioning within the hijra community as 'ardhanaari' is legitimized by their bisexuality, and is regarded as a blessing, as a status of true hijra; "neither man nor woman" (Nanda 1990). The ritualistic roles, and the alternative family constructed in the hijra space place Vinayan in a respectable position among the community members. But outside the hijra community, the mainstream society exhibits hostility towards them. Transgender people are tortured, exploited, and murdered. Vinayan is victimized as the murderer of Kokila. The cinematic construction of the ethnographic gaze<sup>123</sup> demarcates the transgender people with marginal social positioning in the native space due to their gender nonconformity. The British period in India had criminalized transgender people as child abductors and punished them for cross dressing as women. The criminal Tribes Act 1871 considered people whose gender identity fail to conform to the binary gender as criminals (Michelraj 2015). The constitution of 'tribe' erases the individual caste identity of trans people and places them in a single group, which is criminalized under the prevailing rule of law. The transgender people in *Ardhanaari* establish an alternative family space called *hamaam*, and the members of it are represented as forming a single group, rather than their individual caste or class identity. The hijra space itself is not a comfortable zone always as there are recurring threats of sexual exploitation by the heteronormative society. Though

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<sup>122</sup> Certain geographical and linguistic signifiers point that the space is in the rural area of Tamil Nadu.

<sup>123</sup> The term is used in photography to refer to historical photographic images. According to this, the people in front of the camera are considered as the repository of some social ideal now lost to creators and consumers of the images. The term fits to the context in which the cinema holds an outsiders view of the transgender community. See. Faith, Moosang. "The Ethnographic Gaze." *Cultural Diversity and Museum Publications*,

[https://www.museums.ca/uploaded/web/docs/FMoosang\\_The\\_Ethnographic\\_Gaze.pdf](https://www.museums.ca/uploaded/web/docs/FMoosang_The_Ethnographic_Gaze.pdf) Accessed on 19 April 2019.

futuristic, the dystopian ending of the narrative is demonstrative of the anxieties and the social alienation of transgender individuals and their community in mainstream society. The trans woman Manjula (Vinayan) is victimized by the mainstream society, and the police exploit them and the entire community. The social injustice and inhumane treatment demarcate hijra as deprived from the basic human rights to live with dignity. The next section looks at Priyanka and Marykutty two trans women characters, whose caste and economic conditions place them at a privileged position compared with all the other trans characters.

#### **4.1.4 Trans Lives in Cityscapes: *Aalorukkam* and *Njan Marykutty***

The rural-urban divide is quite evident in the selected films. Several media reports prove that gender nonconforming people migrate to other states in order to live the life they want to. The hostile native and a transphobic public sphere in Kerala have forced trans people to choose urban spaces outside Kerala. Trans characters in *Aalorukkam* and *Njan Marykutty* flee their homes when they feel gender dysphoria. Some common features are there in the social positioning of Priyanka and Marykutty due to their caste and educational privileges, social status, economic adaptability, and the space where they live. Both the narratives end with the trans people receiving social recognition even though the path they undertake are different.

The narrative of *Aalorukkam* creates an aura of suspense while presenting the transgender character. Priyanka was a male assigned at birth, born to a classical artist. When the character feels gender dysphoria, they go in exile during college days. The *Ottanthullal* maestro Pappu Pisharody and the other characters (who represent the society) hold contrasting views about transgender identity when the narrative shifts to trans woman Priyanka. When Pappu Pisharody is adamant in his traditional patriarchal view of the biological determinism of binary gender, others try to convince him about the shift in the society regarding the visibility of transgender people, and Priyanka's longing for the approval from her father. The confrontation between tradition and

modernity underplays in the narrative until modernity wins. However, the social positioning of Priyanka is a result of a number of factors like her education, her employment, the support from a 'husband,' the space they live and their class identity.

The trans woman in *Njan Marykutty* also experiences social ostracism and exclusion within the familial and native space. The cinematic construction of the ending of the narrative in which Marykutty emerges as a successful transgender police officer is the result of the privileges she shares with Priyanka: the upper class status, the higher education, software job, and the advantages of living in the metro city, Chennai. Marykutty receives support from the parish priest who is portrayed as the most progressive man even though the church is puritan in its outlook. Cinema establishes Marykutty and Priyanka as transsexual women. Marykutty undergoes SRS, but there is no mention regarding Priyanka's SRS, Priyanka lives in her trans woman identity with her husband and an adopted child. The social positioning of Marykutty in her native is problematic due to the society's transphobia: trans people as sexual objects, child abductors, and social nuisance. It is ironic that education and the transformation concerned with queer political activism in Kerala has not changed the attitude of the society, while observing the social rejection Marykutty experiences. The society is not able to approve her trans identity. The police who are supposed to establish justice for the trans woman treat her as an anomaly. Whereas, Priyanka has a comfortable social position when it is compared with Marykutty; but it does not mean that she gets approval from the whole society. The trans woman and her husband live in a rented flat with an 'illegally adopted' daughter and they constantly face moral policing from a neighbour and threat of eviction from the transphobic flat owner. Cinema presents Marykutty and Priyanka in a space different from the uneducated and less progressive background, both of them voice their identity and live their life as per their wish, and is able to resist the transphobic society.

Education has enabled the trans women to be independent in realising their gender identity and has given the courage to seek medical assistance. Education entitles Marykutty to adopt a positive attitude towards life which is reflective of the acceptance she receives from the society. Priyanka's husband remains as the unyielding figure who cares and supports her and recommends the society to change their attitude, apart from a group of progressive people who advise her father to accept her as a daughter. The higher education let the transgender people to get employment and economic stability in society. Sex work, as mentioned in the case of the hijra community has had the stigma; trans women in *Aalorukkam* and *Njan Marykutty* do dignified jobs. Priyanka has been working in a company for three years, and Marykutty has worked in a software firm, and she is portrayed as an affable figure in the film through her present job as a radio jockey. Moreover, the profession as an RJ sanctions Marykutty to gather and alter the society's prejudice on transgender people, and connect with high profile government servants to raise voice for her cause. There is the sudden shift in social positioning when Marykutty succeeds and emerges as the first transgender police officer. Both films illustrate that the transgender characters face social rejection due to their gender nonconformity, however they are able to withstand it through their education and employment, and are represented as successful figures in the end of the narratives. It is to be noted that only those people who have upper class or caste identity are able to make any difference in their life through education and employment. These two films have used the identity of transgender people who hail from an upper caste and middle-class status, to which a Malayali could easily identify with.

The selected Malayalam films analyzed here have drawn the picture transgender people who live within their native space. Even though they migrate to another space, it is be a short exile. Their roots are strongly entangled to their own locale. Moreover, the regional spaces are represented in the films as unsympathetic to transgender people, and hence migration becomes a motif of self-search for them. Radhakrishnan reaches another shore and returns to their native as 'masculinized,'

Amina goes in exile and returns as a trans man, Vinayan escapes from native to a neighbouring state and joins the hijra community, Thamburu shifts from native to another space and then to Koovagam, Gulikan is on a constant run from one place to another, Sajeevan vanishes from their home in a village and lives as trans woman Priyanka in an urban space, Mathukutty flees from home for SRS, and returns to native as trans woman Marykutty and establishes her identity. The selected texts point out that all the transgender people are uncomfortable with their homeland, and gender identity affects their social positioning. Migration from the native helps in achieving the desired gender identity as most of them become what they wish to be, except the transgender people in *Ardhanaari* and *Udalaazham*. The transformation happens in the public sphere of Kerala is evident in the formation of cityscapes as comparatively better spaces for transgender emancipation. It could be observed that the modernity of a society reflects in its reaction towards gender nonconforming people and their social positioning. The caste and class identity of transgender people have significant roles in their mainstreaming as well. Lower caste and lower-class transgender people suffer the worst while establishing their gender identity. Education, employment and economic stability obtained from it determine transgender emancipation in the films. The harassments and physical violence faced by transgender people in society are the result of the deep-rooted stigma attached to non-normative gender identities, and society's leaning on the gender dichotomy. The cinematic representation of violence on transgender people shows the degree of disgrace they face from the cisheteronormative society. The visualization of violence on the trans body in films aims at producing pleasure by disciplining the non-normative. The next section of the chapter views the selected texts in terms of the visualization of violence on transgender people in it.

## **4.2 Transphobic Public Sphere: The Visual Politics of Violence on Trans People**

The term ‘violence’ refers to a number of acts, mannerisms, and attitudes. It varies from verbal insults, to an invasion of personal space for intimidation, the act of public humiliation, and the threat of physical assault. Violence also includes the act of attacking someone's body— and sexual assault including rape. Trans people and sexual minorities are subjected to various forms of violence due to their marginality in society. Heterosexism is the “belief that heterosexuality is or should be the only acceptable sexual orientation and the fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of same sex” (Blumenfeld 15) While homophobia is a term that can be used interchangeably with heterosexism, it denotes a “fear usually irrational, of homosexual people based on their sexual orientation including ‘a prejudice often leading to acts of discrimination, sometimes abusive and violent’” (Blumenfeld 1992, quoted in Steven J. Onken 10). The prejudist believes reinforced by heterosexual norms of the society pathologize queer people. They are discriminated, harassed, and oppressed. “The question of violence is obviously linked to that of discrimination: in the case of attacks against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, (...) for example, privileges heterosexual relationships over homosexual ones, and thus fosters an atmosphere of intolerance of sexual minorities” (Namaste 139). In this respect, transphobia could be discerned as the negative attitudes, feelings or actions toward transgender/transsexual people. Transphobia results from emotional disgust, fear, violence, anger, or discomfort felt or expressed towards people who do not conform to society's gender expectations. The violence perpetrated on transgender people by the heterosexual society is often aimed at disciplining them in terms of the binary codes of gendered behaviour with the perception that anything falls out of it is an aberration. The violence on trans bodies visualized in the selected texts are to be examined in the context of the social apathy that trans people have been facing.

In his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault seeks to analyze disciplining and punishment of bodies. He uses the term 'discipline' in a way which acts as a controlling mechanism and it is also a type of power that controls the free movement of the body. In the Foucauldian way, the society exerts a controlling power which often results in violence on the trans body and the disciplining even happens at their home as well. Queer people have been the subject of ridicule and films have used it as a motif of fun. For instance, *Parthan Kanda Paralokam* (2008) depicts a queer character who is rejected by a woman for their feminine-presenting gestures. The girl's parents pass comments that denote sexist humour when they mention them as 'eight plus one.'<sup>124</sup> It denotes the sarcasm aimed at the person for being different from the hegemonic heterosexual norms while they perform their gender. The spectatorial pleasure is largely drawn by presenting a person as unfit according to heteronormativity. In the popular film *Action Hero Biju* (2016), a queer is presented as one who expresses their sexual advances to the macho police officer at a public place. The officer harasses them as if an abject figure which point at society's homophobia. However, spectators laugh while watching the queer being harassed on screen. The film presents the scene as an endorsement to the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity of the hero. The two films represent verbal violence however; the fact that it is a violence is hardly critiqued.

Malayalam cinema problematizes violence perpetrated on transgender people by society as the centre of focus. In the selected films, it is portrayed as a befitting punishment for their 'non-normalcy.' The gender-based violence represented in films could be broadly categorized as two types, the social violence is aimed at ridiculing, and harassing transgender people by beating them up and verbally assaulting with the notion that it would ultimately 'cure their deviation' from heteronormalcy. Even trans people's family members attempt this as they find it difficult to come in terms with the 'incongruities' of their physical body and gender performance. The second kind of

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<sup>124</sup> *Onpathu* (nine= eight + one) is a Malayalam slang used derogatorily to refer to a feminine-presenting gay or transgender person. The hijra community have been shamed by this term.



violence on the transgender people is sexual violence. They are sexually assaulted and sometimes, they are gangraped. The mob violence includes public lynching, forced disrobing in public places, and sexual crimes like rape. The sexual violence are visualized in cinema and have been reported by media. The unnatural death and trans dead bodies dumped in isolated spaces have filled the national and regional newspapers.<sup>125</sup> Media reports concerned with justice seeking protest marches in recent histories also point at the lacune in the legal system for the benefit of trans people.

The visualization of extreme violence on trans people in cinema requires to be critiqued, as they are often depicted as unsympathetic figures receiving violence as a punishment for their trans identity. By observing closely, the visibility of transgender people in the public sphere of Kerala, the cinematic representations of violence could be drawn in a linear way. The violence on transgender bodies as depicted in earlier Malayalam cinema is a reflection of the societal attitude and phobia of the society regarding gender nonconformity. Transgender people have been treated as abnormals in social spaces and in cinema. The spectators derive pleasure by looking at the violence against transgender people on screen and are forced to believe that the disciplining mechanism in the form of physical violence would act as a curing process. The queer activism in the public sphere have resulted in social mobilization and the later films attempt the visualization of violence to raise concern on the human rights of transgender people. The politics behind visualizing violence on transgender people in cinema invites society's attention towards it, and further it shows the gravity of the act. The thesis works on the premise that the cinematic construction of violence on transgender people is symptomatic of the shifting trends of social attitudes in public sphere.

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<sup>125</sup> "Transgender Person Found Dead in Kerala under Suspicious Circumstances." *The News Minute*, 16 August, 2017, <<https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/transgender-person-found-dead-kerala-under-suspicious-circumstances-66866>>

When cinema visualizes physical violence in the form of beatings and verbal violence through derogatory terms, it results from patriarchal heterosexual disciplining. The exertion of power on trans bodies is a device used by cisheteronormative society. Cinemas instill the image of an essential gendered body by juxtaposing it with a 'lack.' *Chanthupottu*, being the first full-length mainstream Malayalam film with a queer as the central figure, visualizes the violence a person faces for being different from the social norms of gender performance. The fisher folk in the village address the feminine-presenting Radhakrishnan as 'Radha,' as the narrative show that they have internalized their difference from hegemonic masculinity.



Figures 4.1 & 4.2 violence on the queer: Radha's ear is pierced by Kumaran in the childhood scenes

As a child, Radha experiences patriarchal disciplining for their feminine gender expression while playing with other girl children in the locality. The underpinning of social lynching is to be noted in this act. The narrative also depicts how the feminine-presenting faces disciplining at home from the father for cross dressing and for sharing social space with girls, rather than with boys. In their childhood pranks as visualized in the film, Radhakrishnan is victimized by Kumaran as the latter pearses Radhakrishnan's ear and says, "You have kajoled your eyes like girls, and has worn bindi too... Don't you want earrings?" (00:09:10-00:09:14). This violence on Radha's body points at how the social construction of gender norms are instilled since childhood itself, and how a child who does not follow the hegemonic norm is physically harassed. It is pertinent to observe how Radhakrishnan's father reacts to

this violence, rather than expressing any pity, he behaves as if it is a deserving social harassment for being queer.

Films portray the physical violence as a solution for curing the anomaly in performing gender. It is done through beating from childhood for exhibiting gender nonconformity. In *Ardhanaari*, Vinayan is insulted by his sibling for wearing girly embellishments in childhood. The brother takes the position of a patriarchal figure who tries to discipline Vinayan through verbal and physical violence. The queer is verbally harassed by their school-teacher as well, for wearing kajal, bindi, nail polish and anklets. While listening to this, the classmates laugh louder and Vinayan lowers their head as if they have been scolded for some mistake. *Njan Marykutty* visualizes the patriarchal disciplining as a method of correcting the gender identity in a song sequence in which the child Mathukutty is beaten up by the father for cross dressing. The mother who is silenced by the patriarch, removes the bangles from the sleeping child later, as the social imagination prevents a male assigned at birth from wearing bangles. Thus, the patriarchal disciplining is represented in films as exerting physical and verbal violence at a younger age itself.



Figures 4.3 & 4.4 The patriarchal disciplining on the amab in childhood

In *Udalaazham*, tribal people are overpowered by upper caste people and they talk ill about the tribal transgender Gulikan and their sexuality. Gulikan faces disciplining from other tribal people; however, it is not as intense as the transgender people in other films. The probable reason could be the structure of the tribal society

itself that would accept the transgender identity as divine.<sup>126</sup> However in the film, an elder tribal woman scolds Gulikan for being in the company of women always and their inability to impregnate their wife. While such gender abashing is minimal in the tribal community it is at worst when the trans person reaches a world outside.

The disciplining of a trans person becomes a mode of punishment and correction through verbal harassment in the selected texts. The ridiculing and making fun of a queer for their traits are recurrent tropes of gender-based violence prevailing in society. Cinema visualizes the verbal harassment on trans identities in cisheteronormative society. In *Chanthupottu* Radhakrishnan is referred as *aanum pennum ketta* (neither man nor woman), *onpathu, shikhandi*,<sup>127</sup> etc. Radhakrishnan complains to Kumaran that, the latter's aids make fun of him for being feminine-presenting man. The title of the film *Chanthupottu* later became a slang used in a derogatory sense in the vocabulary of Malayalam language to shame non-binary. It has turned out to be a slapstick humour to contempt the non-binary, feminine-presenting men in later Malayalam films as well. In the film *Chocolate* (2007), a group of young women poke fun at a young man who got admission at a women's college by referring him as 'chanthupottu' though he is a masculine male. Many queer people have openly stated their strong reaction against *Chanthupottu*, for traumatizing their identity in the public sphere, through the wrong representation.<sup>128</sup> They mention the verbal harassments they met with in school, colleges and in public places due to *Chanthupottu*'s making of the title infamous. It also points at the lack of

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<sup>126</sup> In my interview with the director Unnikrishnan Aavala, he narrated his experience about meeting a tribal trans woman, who has been compassionately treated by her family members. According to the director, the tribal transgender person seemed more comfortable than any other transgender person living in the mainstream society. This could be understood as tribal people's acceptance of non-conforming gender performance of a person by attributing an unquestionable religious divinity to it. He conceived Gulikan's disciplining in the film as a result of his migration to the mainstream society.

<sup>127</sup> Reference to the mythical character Amba, who reborn as a male to kill Bhishma in *Mahabharata*.

<sup>128</sup> "In a Touching Post, Kerala Gay Man Recounts How a Blockbuster Film Wronged Him." *The News Minute*, 22 December 2017, <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/touching-post-kerala-gay-man-recounts-how-blockbuster-film-wronged-him-73568>

a Malayalam word to address the regional transgender people with respect. Even the dialogues and gestures of the queer is typecast as something which evoke fun and the spectators are satisfied when a crude joke at the queer and the queer's own perception about their gender expression is voiced in films.

The verbal harassment on a trans person as *aanum pennum ketta* (neither man nor woman) is recurrent in many other films. *Ardhanaari*, *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, and *Njan Marykutty* depict trans people being harassed through derogatory terms by the heterosexual majority. The dejected father in *Chanthupottu* asks his child to commit suicide for their 'transgression' from the 'normative gender.' The verbal violence on the queer Radhakrishnan is the maximum as at a critical point, even their mother laments when the entire family is ostracized by the society, "Oh Goddess! Such a 'neither man nor woman' (*aanum pennum ketta*) creature has born to this family" (00:58:58-00:59:01). Their mother's comments form a harassing gesture as Radhakrishnan decides to go to sea to prove their masculinity. When they reaches the 'civilized shore' (*parishkruthamaaya mattoru theeram*, as mentioned in the sub title), Rosy, another woman who is the sister of their caretaker, reminds them that, 'a male, he should live like a male,' and should not live like 'neither man nor woman.' A woman officer verbally harasses the trans woman Marykutty for her gender crossing. She exhibits abhorrence at Marykutty, and the trans woman emotionally responds when she is verbally harassed. The film has different sequences of verbal harassment in public spaces as society showers abusive comments at the trans woman. The discipling of the queer often ends up in ridicule and verbal harassments in the film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*. The friends of Venkiti ridicules the feminine-presenting Thamburu and they force them to drink which ends up in Thamburu getting emotional and barks as if they are a guard dog of the house. Other men in the scene only laugh at Thamburu's helplessness and they are victimized for the crude joke. Venkiti showers his anger at another instance using the derogatory phrase *aanum pennum ketta* at Thamburu. Thamburu's employer, who is the manager of a dance troupe, also verbally abuses them. In such instances, the trans person's gender performance becomes the

rationale for the hegemonic heterosexual masculinities to verbally harass them, and the films are also demonstrative of the trauma and agony of the trans characters when they are harassed by family and society. Most of them are unable to withstand such verbal harassments.

Due to society's transphobia, trans people experience moral policing at public places. The horrific instance of disciplining, and social curiosity are symptomatic of the representation of disrobing as an archetypal trope in all the selected Malayalam films. *Aalorukkam* depicts certain scenes in which a neighbour peeps through the flat where the trans woman Priyanka and her family lives. This gaze is a form of violence and could be seen psychoanalytically. In psychoanalysis, the philosophic term 'gaze' denotes the methods of seeing an object. Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) explored the concept of the gaze to illustrate the dynamics of socio-political power relations and society's mechanisms of disciplining citizens. The gaze of the neighbour in the film is not a mere look, but it implies the voyeuristic and erotic pleasure he experiences and his curiosity involved in watching a non-normative body secretly. Foucault's gaze theory argues that the gaze is sourced from a powerful apparatus and it appears as a disciplinary surveillance called panopticism. By intruding to a transgender person's private space without any permission, the neighbor violates the code of conduct and it happens to be the violence of intimidation. Marykutty and her friend experience moral policing in public places and the trans woman is verbally assaulted. It cannot simply be dismissed that the assault and disrobing in cinema is an effort to raise concern on the physical violence on trans bodies. By visualizing the disrobing of transgender people in public spaces, cinema satiates the social curiosity and the spectatorial pleasures on screen. Mob violence often end up in physically assaulting the transgender people and disrobing them in public places. The perpetrators and the onlookers derive a voyeuristic visual pleasure from the act. One could argue that the films make use of such scenes to derive pity from the spectators towards transgender people. But, the visualization of such hate

crimes against transgender people in the selected texts are to be criticized, because the possibility of the spectatorial sanction for such crimes cannot be dismissed.

Radhakrishnan is forcefully disrobed by a group of people for the feminine-presenting gender performance in *Chanthupottu*. The perpetrators say that they have been thinking about it for quite a long time, whether Radha a man or a woman? The curiosity and transphobia result in the public humiliation of the queer person. Though, they cry out loud, they run behind and beat them up, and snatches their *mundu*. The violence on Radhakrishnan by the public to find out what their sex is emblematic of the social imagination of a gender non-conforming person as to be ‘corrected.’ Their deficient masculinity arouses their curiosity and they try to see their genitals. “The narrative transforms such images of lack into a gratifying spectacle whose very continuation appears to generate and perpetuate pleasure” (James 385). Thus, Radhakrishnan’s queer body becomes a visual spectacle for the transphobic public and spectators. By depicting such a scene, the film justifies that those who do not conform to the social expectations of gender performance will be punished.



Figures 4.5 & 4.6 Radhakrishnan is disrobed by a group of men

Though, their mother saves them from harassment, the father is not ready to revenge, as he doubts the sex of the ‘son’ and justifies the cruelty as a result of the gender performance of the queer. He even asks Radhakrishnan’s mother, “Are you sure that the child born to you is a male?” (00:36:43-00:36:47) The question is poignant to note, as the trans person does not get a relief at the house, instead, the gender identity puts

the family also in dilemma and it reflects the heterosexual disciplining by patriarchal society.



Figure 4.7 Freddy transforms 'Radha' to 'Krishnan' by correcting the wearing of *mundu* from 'feminine' to 'masculine'

The film further explores the disrobing as a trope for shaming the queer and to arouse a comic visual pleasure in spectators. As depicted in a popular song in the film, the patriarchal figure is replaced by Freddy, who snatches the bath towel that Radhakrishnan has worn on their upper body and makes it visible as the social construction of the masculine way of wearing *mundu* in Kerala exhibits the male torso. The body shaming of the queer in the film is diluted by presenting it as a comic spectacle. The violence involved in the shaming of a person could be examined using the theories of Affect. The Affect theory developed by Silvan Tomkins (1962) use the term 'affect' to refer to 'biological portion of emotion,' as he classifies it with positive, negative, and neutral stimuli. The shame a person experiences through violence could thus be perceived as a negative affect. And in the figure (4.7), Radha is depicted as crying and resisting the 'masculinization' process. However, in the film Freddy and his sister seem to neglect the negative response of the victim and their helplessness is portrayed as a source of spectatorial pleasure.

Thamburu's cross dressing in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* triggers the curiosity of Venkiti's friends, who trespass their room and forcefully disrobe them. However, if Radhakrishnan is disrobed in a public space, Thamburu is harassed and stripped naked at their private space. The incident signifies the Malayali psyche that harasses



queer bodies who deviate from the normative assumptions of gender performance. The societal curiosity to disrobe Thamburu in the film is justified as for mere fun. Thamburu cries and resists, as the figure (4.8) depicts the shock they experience while the hegemonic heterosexual perpetrators laugh at them insensitively. Thamburu's semi-nude body is presented as a visual spectacle in the scene to satiate the heterosexual spectator's curiosity. The trans person cry helplessly while being harassed. By placing Thamburu's queer body against the macho masculinities, the cinema endorses the cisheteronormative bodies. "Bodies which fail to achieve or even aspire to the assumed 'masculine' normalcy are designated as abnormal and incomplete. Such representations often create affective spectacles of pleasure which reverse endorse the normalcy of macho figures" (James 384). The film was released at a point when the public sphere in Kerala was not yet ready to accept transgender people.



Figure 4.8 The disrobing of Thamburu, the shot captures their trauma juxtaposed with the pleasure derived by a group of heterosexual men

The shaming of trans person is diluted while visualizing it as a disciplining or as a joke. The post-trauma of the victimized are also shown in the films. Trauma theories in films and media developed since the 1980s explore the spectatorial positions and the mental processes of the victims. The traumatic experiences at the instances of the disrobing of trans people in the films often result in a "learned helplessness," it implies that in such traumatic situation, the victim is unable to resist the attack (Bloom 3). Films portray the immediate reactions of fear, shame, anger, and helplessness of trans

people in traumatic experiences. Thamburu cries out of helplessness after the physical violence of being stripped naked by the hegemonic men. Thamburu gets angry when humiliated at another instance and they bark like a dog in front of Venkiti's house. In *Chanthupottu*, Radhakrishnan also showers their anger at the men who snatches their clothes; they resist and cry for help. Such visualization of the post-trauma of trans people could be perceived as a criticism against the transphobic society.

In *Njan Marykutty*, the trans woman Marykutty is victimized by the mob in a public space at a late evening, they harass and manhandle her, and grab her clothes. Certain other men shoot the incident in mobile camera, which signifies their insensitivity and inhumaneness. None from the public help Marykutty and the child along with her, and both of them are traumatized through the mob violence. The perpetrators ask the trans woman to exhibit her surgically altered body. The scene depicts the heterosexual society's curiosity about the trans body and the voyeuristic visual pleasure the onlookers derive from committing the violence.



Figures 4.9 & 4.10 Marykutty is disrobed by the public and the onlookers shoot it in mobile camera, the nude body Marykutty as the object of the camera, while it captures her trauma

The scene underscores the pleasure in sadistic voyeurism while a few men strip the trans woman naked. The other men are obsessed with capturing the fear of the victims as well as the nudity of the trans woman. In her "Notes on 'The Gaze'" Virginia Bonner (2007) explains Laura Mulvey's concepts of 'sadistic voyeurism' and 'fetishistic scopophilia.' The gaze associated with sadism (or demystification) ascertains control over a person. Fetishistic look in contrast to this, eroticize the object

itself. Mulvey argues that the film spectator oscillates between these two forms of looking: sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. The male gaze in the scene (Fig. 4.9) is focused at the body of the trans woman, and it becomes a potential fetishistic object for them. One could relate the gaze of the men in the scene to the desiring glance of a male towards a female body while analyzing the voyeurism involved here. The spectators identify with the look of the camera that carries the heterosexual tension of watching a trans person's 'feminized' body being stripped naked. It could be argued that the spectators who watch the disrobing identify with the perpetrators and oscillate between sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. The nude body of the trans woman recurs as a potential site of sadistic voyeurism as well as spectatorial pleasure in a later scene as well, at the police station where she is imprisoned (Fig. 4.10). The 'abject body' in such sequences contest transphobia the hegemonic masculinities subjected on the queer, and the objectification of trans body rather than arousing the sentiments of pity. Thus, the disrobing of trans people becomes emblematic of heteronormative society's mode of physical violence against bodies that have gone 'awry', and transgender people become helpless victims, who are unable to protect themselves.

The police brutality on trans people are discussed as the physical violence in the selected films. Rather than acting as protectors of law, the police abuse their power and victimize trans people. In *Njan Marykutty*, the trans woman is repeatedly tortured, physically and emotionally by the police. The police arrests Marykutty at an instance even though she is saved from the mob violence, for child trafficking. At the police station, the police forcefully remove Marykutty's clothes and imprisons her naked as she does not fit to the category of a male or female citizen, according to them. In the film *Ardhanaari*, Vinayan is disrobed and sexually harassed by police. When transgender Kokila is murdered, the police trap the entire transgender community by pointing at the lacune in the legal system to protect them. The police mistreat and harass transgender people and the selected films criticize it.

Trans people are often victims of sexual violence and in most instances, the violence is not reported due to the lack of any effective mechanism to protect trans rights. It can be observed that sexual violence on trans people includes specifically the sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, rape, and attempted rape as consequences of their gender identity or expression. J. Devika (2018) critiques violence against trans people by the society and its prejudistic perception that those trans people who do sex work violate the social codes of morality. The selected film texts visualize the atrocities like sexual violence and the inhuman treatment of society on trans people. In cinematic practices, trans bodies are stereotypically represented as sexual objects and the society observe trans people's deviation from the norm as an attribute of their sexual frivolity. When cinema visualizes the sexual abuse of trans people on screen, it serves different purposes. The sexually assaulted trans bodies in films invite the society to rethink on their attitude and in a few films, it is visualized as a befitting punishment for deviating from the norm. Trans people, who are adivasi, dalit or upper caste are disproportionately affected by sexual crimes.

*Njan Marykutty* also depicts the trans woman facing molestation in public space. Marykutty successfully terminates the sexual advancement by a man while she travels. The act underlines the popular imagination of the society regarding trans people as sexual objects.



Figures 4.11 & 4.12 Marykutty's subjection of sexual violence in public and personal spaces

The undertones of comedy in the scene is foregrounded with the background music and Marykutty's cleverly act accentuates laughter. The sexual frustration of Malayali

is represented through the scene in which Marykutty's advocate grabs her hands with sexual thoughts in his mind. The sexual violence met by trans community in terms of unwanted physical intimidation is stressed in this scene as well. Trans bodies are represented as sexual figures in films; when Marykutty turns away; her back is being gazed by the advocate, as he gets the voyeuristic sexual pleasure. The sub inspector and his colleague gaze her back and pass sexist remarks which is underpinned with the note of sexual objectification of the transexual body. As discussed earlier, such scenes force the spectators to identify with the camera where the trans bodies are subjected to fetishistic voyeurism in the close-up shots (Figures 4.11 & 4. 12), which also act as an ideological apparatus that objectify trans people.

*Ardhanaari* has several sequences that present the sexual objectification of hijra community and the sexual violence perpetrated on them. Vinayan is gazed as a sexual object in their native. It is delineated as stereotyped view in relation with the hijra role as a sex worker in the Indian context. Serena Nanda (1999) opines that, "Although becoming a hijra means making a commitment to a stigmatized identity in some respects, it (prostitution) is a commitment that nonetheless gives social support and some economic security, as well as cultural meaning, to their lives, linking them to the larger world rather than isolating them from it" (54). Prostitution or sex work turns out to be abusive sometimes with violence on trans people including rape as well as torture. Scholarly studies show that trans persons experience forced and unwanted sex (Clements-Nolle et al. 2006, Garofalo et al. 2006). The societal violence on trans body is discussed in yet another sequence in which a trans woman in the community narrates her experience of sexual violation and economic exploitation by a police man to Vinayan's foster mother.<sup>129</sup> Vinayan is also molested in police custody and is unable to resist it. The sexualization of trans bodies as figures that fulfil the male fantasies is the motif underneath in such acts.

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<sup>129</sup> The hijra custom is to adopt a transgender person as daughter. Nanda, Serena. "The Hijra Hierarchy: Gurus and Chelas," *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, 1990, p. 43-47.

The visualization of sexual violence on the subaltern is the most traumatic among the selected texts, as represented in *Udalaazham*. The subalternity and subordination of Gulikan are foregrounded in the scenes that portray sexual violence. Gulikan is raped by gay men who are referred as *kundanmar* in the film. Being fragile and weak, Gulikan is unable to resist such atrocities on their body. It is evident when they define their 'body.' The illiterate tribal trans person perceives their body from the physical abuse they face from other men and concludes that 'body is flesh.' The plight of being trapped in the wrong body and the recurring sexual violence are visualized in the film.



Figure 4.13 The sexual violence on Gulikan and their efforts to resist it

Gulikan's helplessness and physical torture after such atrocities are also stressed. The film depicts Gulikan's post-trauma due to sexual assault. They cry out of pain and ask their wife Maathi, why they are non-binary, as wherever they go, the gay men rip them apart. Maathi, who is also helpless, consoles them that she will look after them as she can, which shed lights to the victimization of the doubly marginalized. The predicament of the subaltern at the receiving end of sexual violence is visualized in the film, through the powerful gaze of the dominant. The perpetrators are those who have the privilege of hegemonic masculinity and who victimize them just as they have invaded the subaltern's native spaces. The society, which is carefree of sexual violence, poses a cold attitude towards it. This is evident from the response of the passerby when they hear Gulikan's cry for help. They are also curious about their sex

when they comment in a derogatory manner, whether they have a dick or a hole by referring to Gulikan's anatomy. What differentiates the scenes of rape in *Udalaazham* from the other texts is the visualization of post-trauma, of the subaltern which affects the viewers and evokes a sense of pity at the victim.

The case of the trans man is not different when sexual violence against trans community in *Irattajeevitham* is observed closely. The sexual frustration of the working-class results in their passing of sexually charged comments at the trans man who is kept outside the circle of hegemonic masculinity. Social ostracism on the trans man develops as a collective plot. A middle man, out of his childhood enmity with afab Amina challenges Hajjar, a womanizer to trap and have a sexual escapade with the trans man.



Figure 4.14 Addruman (right) resists Hajjar's attempts of sexual assault

Addruman resists Hajjar's attempted molestation on him which is depicted as his advantage due to 'masculinity.' Thus, the film constructs the image that the trans masculinity of Addruman enables him to resist the sexual violence. Whereas, in *Aalorukkam*, Priyanka is molested in a public place due to her trans femininity, her husband becomes a saviour figure in the event then. The representation of trans women as hapless victims in films and the success of the trans man in resisting it, typecast the dichotomous method of sex-based violence by the heterosexual society.

Alienation experienced in the family and society due to the gender nonconformity, the escape from the native space, and the return after a temporary migration form the crux of the transgender texts in Malayalam cinema. Trans people are the targets of “harassment, abuse, stigma and discrimination” (Sughra& Imran 100). When certain people are banished from their own spaces, certain others willfully undertake the journey. The harassments outside the regional spaces are also discussed in the selected texts. It is to be observed that gender identity plays a pivotal role in a person’s social acceptance and positioning. The disgrace and indifferent treatment from the society are recurrent in the selected texts and they draw a hostile transgender space in Kerala. However, a shift could be observed in the public sphere of Kerala in mainstreaming transgender people in a few narratives. If Radha is disciplined as Radhakrishnan into masculinity, Marykutty has the choice to become a trans woman. The ‘object body’ of the queer becomes a desiring spectacle through Marykutty, as the film appears as motivational to trans people in Kerala. The stark reality of trans people’s social positioning in the films are determined in terms of privileges of caste, class, education, and economic adaptability apart from the gender nonconformity proves that, trans people are marginalized in the region and there is a hierarchical positioning within their marginalization.

The politics and aesthetics of representation of trans people in Malayalam cinema could be discerned as in a flux from marginalization to mainstreaming. Yet, cinema has to be more careful while portraying the fetishisation and visualization of violence on trans bodies. The production, circulation, and reception of trans films become pertinent at this point to evaluate the spectatorial pleasures, affect, gender sensitization, transformation in the public sphere, etc. The next chapter of the thesis critically looks at the politics behind these in detail.



## CHAPTER 5

### **The Politics of Consumption: Production, Circulation and Reception of Trans Films**

The culture industry<sup>130</sup> of a particular region encompasses music, literature, and films which form discourses that influence the life of the people living there. The formation of culture industries in different regions are determined by the methods of livelihood of people, their traditions, beliefs, familial structures, etc. The interaction between all these components affects and creates a unique and distinctive culture to different regions. Kerala can be understood as a region formed on the basis of linguistic division of states in India, after its independence from colonial rule. The region forms a geographical and political unit, where the linguistic territorialization marks the identity of its people as 'Malayalis.' Malayalam cinema portrays the contemporary socio-cultural life in Kerala, the cultural identity of people living in the region, their tastes, ideologies, and desires. Cinema is a medium that represents the dynamics in the social space where it is produced, and it also contests over the social realities from time to time. The production of films in the industry broadly depends on the space, culture, and the spectators to whom they are addressed. Malayalam film industry has had not less than nine decades' history and has produced films that fall under 'art,' 'commercial,' and certain other films which form 'a combination of both.' As discussed in the previous chapters, films which problematize non-conforming sexual and gender identities have formed subjects of Malayalam cinema

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<sup>130</sup> The term is presented as a critical vocabulary by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" of the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). They compare the popular culture with the standardized goods produced in a factory and the cultural goods include films, music, radio and television programs, etc. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, these cultural products are meant for profit and produce consumers who are adapted to the needs of the capitalist system. The mass consumption of such goods leads people to passivity which is difficult to their economic circumstances. Hence Adorno and Horkheimer warn against the mass-produced culture, which is dangerous to the technically and intellectually difficult high arts.

in contemporary times only. This chapter attempts to critically examine the production, circulation and reception of the seven selected Malayalam trans films by analyzing the overlapping of genres, the background of their production, the chief mode of circulation of these films, and how they are received by spectators, the discussions regarding the trans identity among spectators, academics as well as queer and trans people.

The production, circulation, and reception of Malayalam cinema in different decades have generated serious academic discussions. Jenson Joseph (2012) studies on the industrial aesthetics and spectatorial subjectivities of Malayalam cinema, and observes that major studies on Malayalam cinema post the 1970s have done by S. Sanjeev (2002), Jenny Rowena (2002, 2010), Muraleedharan Tharayil (2002, 2005, 2014), C. S. Venkiteswaran (2002), Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2006, 2009), and Navaneetha Mokkil (2010). C.S. Venkiteswaran (2011), as they point out a major shift in Malayalam film scholarship. Apart from the popularity of ‘art’ films as a subject of academic inquiry, the commercial/popular films also have started gaining attention of academics at universities. They form important sources to examine the production, circulation, reception, and the cultural aesthetics and regionality of the ‘Malayali’ and Malayalam films. This thesis focuses on films that form contemporary discourses on gender and sexuality, and discusses how the contemporary visibility of transgender people in Malayalam cinema are distinct from previous depictions of sexual and gender non-conformity.

Sanjeev (2002) analyzes the writings on cinema of the 1970s, that construct a hierarchy between ‘art’ and ‘commercial’ films. He observes that the latter exhibits excessive investments in ‘the body’ (i.e., the sexualized female body) while the former focuses on ‘the soul.’ Sanjeev argues that the ‘middlebrow’ cinema of the 1980s shows a progressive tendency to collapse the binaries in many ways. The Gulf-remittance economy and its impact in Malayalam cinema between the 1970s and 1990s constitute the cultural identity of Kerala in three decades (Radhakrishnan

2009). The latter half of the 1980s and the early years of the 1990s have witnessed the emergence of comedy films with comparatively small budget becoming box-office hits and a number of production houses emerging during the period (Rowena 2002, 2010). The influx of soft-porn films has saved the industry from financial burden in the 90s and 2000s (Radhakrishnan 2010). As noted by Meena T. Pillai (2017), “The 1990s, in Kerala as in most other parts of India, witnessed the most drastic changes in its social and cultural life with the opening up of the Indian economy and its integration into a global capitalist market” (53). After the 90s, the newly liberalized economy has resulted in the creation of a spectacle of market excess and has become the most significant marker of Malayalam cinema.

Observing cinema as an industry, a large number of films could be labeled as ‘commercial.’ They are produced as sentimental dramas with a mixture of songs, stunts, violence and erotic scenes, that have mass spectatorship. ‘Art films’ lacks mass spectatorship unlike the popularity of commercial films. However, the aesthetics of art films has attracted selected spectators, and in Kerala, it has certain well-defined spaces for circulation. Art films have been circulated through film societies’ special screenings, as ‘noon show’ at mainstream film theatres (Venkiteswaran 2010). K. G. George, Bharathan, and Padmarajan were the acclaimed directors in the 80s, and the genre has been known as ‘middle stream films,’ well appreciated by family spectators for its “seamless integration of the seriousness of parallel cinema and the popularity of the mainstream cinema” (Mathew 12). Malayalam cinema has discussed offbeat themes always, but the problematic categorization of ‘art’ and ‘commercial’ films is strictly under the confines of the values of the industry. S.V. Srinivas (1997) focuses on the centrality of the audience and categorize them as ‘mass audience’ and ‘class audience’ who shape the attitudes in his analysis of Telugu cinema. Malayalam cinema also works under this binary by focusing on a large audience with huge budgets as entertainers and the independent art films are produced with less budget and address spectators who aim beyond pure entertainment. In this thesis, the term ‘offbeat’ is used while discussing certain

selected films, because of their form and content.<sup>131</sup> It could be observed that the ideological position adopted by the filmmakers when they deal with subjects that deviate from the heteronormative society's prevailing notions are often treated as offbeat films. However, the popularity of queer and trans films is less even though they have formed discussions in public sphere. The chapter further examines the background regarding the production of the selected texts, along with a set of other Malayalam films that deal with same sex desire and transgender identities.

## **5.1 The Production of Trans Films in the Heteronormative Public sphere of Kerala**

Since the 1970s itself, queer sexuality has formed the subtext of Malayalam cinema, but those films mainly addressed the family spectators. *Randu Penkuttikal* released in 1978, is based on a well-known Malayalam novel about the 'romantic friendship' between two girls. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2010) observes, "Made on a moderate budget, the film had relative newcomers portraying the lead roles" (170). By quoting the novelist V. T. Nandakumar, he argues that the film adaptation is less received as compared with the novel which has got huge readership, for its compromise with heterosexuality in the narrative (*ibid*). Another film released in 1986, *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* also presented the lesbian undercurrents in the heteropatriarchal narrative. Only by 2004, an explicitly lesbian subject (*Sancharram*) is filmed by Ligy J. Pullapally who has access to cosmopolitan spectators. It may be discerned that, the 'invisibility' of queer and transgender films in Malayalam is due to the heteronormative public sphere in Kerala.

Films that portray homosocial bonds ending in heterosexual unions have been quite common in Malayalam cinema in the 1990s. Jenny Rowena (2002) in her

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<sup>131</sup> *Planet Bollywood* distinguishes commercial films in Bollywood with the category of art and experimental film called 'offbeat films,' which are dark, serious, and sad in content, as well as lacking humour. "Commercial Cinema Versus Off Beat Cinema." *Planet Bollywood*, Accessed on 25 March 2019, <http://www.planetbollywood.com/displayArticle.php?id=s082314033954>

compelling analysis of the ‘subaltern masculinities’ and ‘male homosocial spaces’ in popular laughter films observes how subaltern masculinities and upper-class femininities that deconstruct the dominant discourses are presented as subjects of laughter in those films. Muraleedharan Tharayil (2005) reads a number of heterosexual romances in the 90s and early 2000s that speak about queer desires in the subtext. As mentioned already, these films are aimed at making profits and have adopted diplomatic treatment towards queer underpinnings. In another article, Muraleedharan (2010) analyzes the pleasure aroused by such depictions in the heterosexual narratives, “What mainstream cinema accomplishes is a process of ‘un-naming’ that inscribes same sex desire as ‘invisible’ visual pleasure-where the very act of ‘not seeing’ becomes the source of pleasure” (172). It could be argued that the production of such films and their popularity among the heterosexual spectators map the deep-rooted sentiments of normalcy of the institutions of family and society in Kerala during the time.

Right from the early days of Malayalam cinema, due to the invisibility of trans people in the Kerala, there has been the absence of trans actors as well as trans characters. The abjection and erasure of trans bodies in the social space is evident in Malayalam films in the 2000s. Two films, *Nalacharitham Nalam Divasam* (2001) and *Soothradharan* (2001) in the early years of the new millennium depict transgender characters in minor roles. However, they record trans people as living in metro cities and suburban area, as ‘aberrations’ outside Kerala. The queer and trans people have made fun at and objectified in the commercial films. *Parthan Kanda Paralokam* (2007) portrays the trans character as a social deviant, villain, and as a threat to heteronormalcy. Other cisgender characters ridicule him for his feminine-presenting gender performance. The eroticization of queer bodies is also used as a trope in juxtaposition of the hypermasculinity of the macho hero in popular films. In the second decade of twenty-first century, gay men and cross dressed men, who are feminine-presenting, are portrayed in commercial films like *Mayamohini* (2012), *Ulsaha Committee* (2014), *Tamaar Padaar* (2014), *Chanakyathanthram* (2018),

*Apoorvaragam* (2010), *Drona 2010* (2010), *Elsamma Enna Aankutti* (2010), *Salt N' Pepper* (2011), *Urumi* (2011), *101 Weddings* (2012), *Mathai Kuzhappakkaranalla* (2014), *Nee-Na* (2015), *Kamuki* (2018), *Action Hero Biju* (2016), *Kasaba* (2016), *Masterpiece* (2017), etc. This is to be seen in the light of contemporary trans visibility in the public sphere and the gender bashing is depicted as comedy in these films. In commercial films, the gender bashing forms a trope of erotic visual pleasure and is treated as a metaphor to discipline the non-cisnormalcy of the characters. The thesis critically examines how the visibility of trans people in Kerala has affected the Malayalam film industry from 2000s till date, with two box-office hits *Chanthupottu* (2005) and *Njan Marykutty* (2018) among the other films, and the commercial and political interests behind their production. The production histories of 'offbeat' films that deal with trans lives are also taken into account.

In the 1990s, Malayalam cinema was influenced by the process of globalization and with the emergence of television, and the boundaries between 'art' and 'commercial' films began to be blurred. Television brought cinema to households- family dramas were produced, it resulted in the decline of female spectators in theatre spaces. Cinema became male-dominated and a number of male-centered narratives were produced thereby. Laughter films of the 90s were popular for the display of subversive masculinities (Rowena 2002). The insecurities and distrust in politics, problems of urbanization, unemployment, economic development, the decline of the joint family system, disagreement with bureaucrats, etc., were the major themes explored by them. In his examination of the popular film genre post-1990s in Kerala, Babumon Edampadam (2014) examines the shifting trends in the industry, film makers, and spectators in Kerala that constitute the popularity of certain narratives. The film industry in Kerala were market-oriented in the 90s and 2000s, and according to him, "The growth of film industry with modern technology, the infiltration of other language films to Kerala, the socio-economic and cultural changes in kerala, marketed cultural discourses, foreign remittance, capital formation and, privatizations largely affected the film industry" (91).

The precarious stardom of Mammooty and Mohanlal and the emergence of Dileep as a popular actor are the major features in the 2000s. Dileep's professional background as a mimicry artist has helped him to perform a number of subversive masculine heroes to which any ordinary Malayali male could relate to. Films like *Kunhikoonan* (2002), *Meesa Madhavan* (2002), *CID Moosa* (2003), *Thilakkam* (2003), *Kalyanaraman* (2003), etc., have competed with the hypermasculinity of the superheroes played by Mohanlal and Mammooty, and have made huge returns in the industry inviting mass spectatorship. Humour invoked by mimicry popularizes the 'marginalized hero' in these films. Meena T. Pillai (2017) remarks about Dileep's emergence as a popular actor in Malayalam cinema by playing the subversive masculinities as,

Though straying away from an exclusively masculine pantheon, he has nevertheless embraced the cultural logic of patriarchal systems. Dileep plays characters who are outside normative masculinity... For ordinary men, it is easier to relate to Dileep's non-hegemonic, masculine heroes. Dileep's heroes also alleviate the anxieties evoked by the practices of hegemonic masculinities by making available alternative spaces of identification (56).

In 2005, Dileep has performed the role of a feminine-presenting male as the central character in the popular film *Chanthupottu*. The film is conspicuously different from the other mainstream films as it tries to undermine one of the endorsed conventions of mainstream Malayalam cinema – the machismo of the male hero. However, it is pertinent to observe that the film makes a feminine-presenting male as a derogatory visual spectacle by exaggerating femininity through the 'unconventional' male attire, dialogues, and gestures. This points at the industry equations playing pivotal role in digging out a marginal theme and making it popular through mimicry. *Mayamohini* (2012) has marketed the cross-dressing and the feminized body of the actor. Though the film was an average grosser, the depiction is packed with slapstick humor and the eroticized body of the actor has aroused strong reactions from female spectators as well as from academic circles. Female spectators especially condemned the sexual

objectification of the feminized male body on screen as a product of the male-dominated industry. The production of *Chanthupottu* as a film that portrays a feminine-presenting hero could be critically analyzed on the sidelines of the popularity of comedy programs in Malayalam television channels in the 2000s as well. While surveying on comic films in Malayalam, Vipin Kumar (2010) argues that the public sphere of Kerala is consumers of humour, which is evident from the proliferation of cartoons and comics in print. The “aesthetics of mimesis and mockery” is attributed to a large number of “mimicry troupes in the state – the laughter industry of Kerala, subverting the earlier Brahminical hold on humor. The emergence of the comic film as an independent genre has close and sustained associations with mimicry” (20). The film mimics a trans person and makes him butt of a joke. Masculine femininity is used as a ploy to make profit through humour in the film. This move could also be viewed as aimed at wooing the family spectators, who are mostly the consumers of the comedy programs in television. Kerala had the rich theatre tradition of female impersonators like Ochira Velukkutty,<sup>132</sup> however, the ‘female dupes’ in the comedy programs performed the sardonic enactment of femininity which made its spectators ‘laugh.’ Shilpa Menon (2018) remarks that the transvestism in comedy shows are “vulgar” for it,

Reveals much about how certain performances of femininity that (are made to) reflect dominant ideals and elite values are held up as exemplary, whereas others, emerging from and remaining rooted in working class, Dalit-dominated performance cultures, are dismissed as being disreputable. As the inheritors of a long tradition of female impersonation, the female dupes suffer multiply because their art is marginalized in terms of cross-gender dynamics and because of its association with what is dismissed as “low culture (“To Become a Woman”).

Her comments are significant while examining the production of the feminine-presenting male in *Chanthupottu*. The film has captured Dileep’s exaggerated female

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<sup>132</sup> A detailed discussion of female impersonation and OchiraVelukkutty’s theatre persona is attempted in Chapter 2



impersonation; cross-dressing, gait, dialogues, socialization among girls and women, and the profession as a feminine dancer. An important aspect regarding the production of *Chanthupottu* is Dileep's emergent stardom as a continuation of other major hits of him in the 2000s. The politics in the valorization of stardom has influenced the creation of films like *Chanthupottu* by mainstreaming feminine masculinity. The film is produced by another actor Lal, through his production house called Lal Creations<sup>133</sup>. It demonstrates the associated networks in film industry and the production-consumption model. All the films of the company are popular comedies that have turned out to be commercially viable and have earned huge profits. Lal Creations has been ventured into the distribution of a few other successful comedy films too. *Chanthupottu* could be put under the category of a commercial film that aims to make a profit with mainstream actors playing major roles through slapstick-comedy, songs, sentimental as well as humorous dialogues, etc.

There are other big-budget Malayalam films that have valorized the machismo of the superheroes. They depict queer people as derogatory visual spectacles in minor roles as in *Action Hero Biju* (2016) and *Kasaba* (2016) and are the products of the market economy and represent stardom in commodity form. The spectators laugh when the feminine-presenting or transgender person is ridiculed by the super hero. In this manner, commercial films become trendsetters in defaming the queer people in the public sphere. In the era that followed liberalization, cinema has transformed from art to industry. "Organised production and standardised film types that tapped spectacle and stardom became a sure way of wooing large audiences. This synchronisation of the 'merchandise' of cinema with an emerging consumerist capitalist culture was predicated on big budgets and maximising profits" (Pillai 53). The aesthetics of art has to compromise with market formulas which determine the success of films. Films that fail to conform to the 'entertainment industry's formulaic aesthetics' are not able to create an impact in the public sphere.

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<sup>133</sup>The other major hits of the company include *Thenkasipattanam* (2000), *Kalyanaraman* (2002), *Pulival Kalyanam* (2003), *Chathikkatha Chanthu* (2004), and *Thommanum Makkalum* (2005).

*Ardhanaari* (2012, Dir. Santhosh Souparnika) is different from *Chanthupottu* in its portrayal of the trans characters' identity contestation. The film is produced as the first attempt of the production house owned by the playback singer M.G. Sreekumar. Maniyan Pillai Raju,<sup>134</sup> who is one among the star cast in the film opines in one of his televised interviews that, the film is not aimed as a commercial one. Rather, it treats the 'subject as the hero,' moreover, it hopes to grab awards.<sup>135</sup> *Ardhanaari* is the pioneer in the history of Malayalam cinema that tried to give a glimpse at the hijra community, their cultural significance, the religious and ritualistic spaces from which they claim their lineage and their marginalization in society. Apart from the cis actors Manoj K. Jayan,<sup>136</sup> Thilakan,<sup>137</sup> Maniyan Pillai Raju, Sukumari, etc., female impersonators from the popular TV Show *Vodafone Comedy Stars* in *Asianet* and a number of trans people are also acted in the film. It can be opined that *Ardhanaari*'s failure as a commercial hit largely owes to the time-period of its production as well as treatment, though a big production house is behind the film. Another trans film with a similar title, *Ardhanaareeswaran*, was announced in 2012 with Jayasurya in the lead role (Figure 5.2) along with other major Malayalam actors. However, it did not materialize and the possible reason could be the apprehensions regarding its reception due to Kerala's transphobic public sphere.

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<sup>134</sup> Maniyan Pillai Raju is an actor, and producer in Malayalam film industry. His prominent films include *Kireedam* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1989), *Kilukkam* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1991), *Chenkol* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1993), *Spadikam* (Dir. Bhadran, 1995), etc.

<sup>135</sup> "Interview: Maniyan Pillai Raju." *YouTube*, uploaded by Asianetnews, 27 November 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeRRWWrH28k>

<sup>136</sup> Manoj K. Jayan is an actor, he won three Kerala State Film Awards for his exceptional performances, as KuttanThampuran in *Sargam* (Dir. Hariharan, 1991), as Thalakkal Chandu in *Pazhassi Raja* (Dir. Hariharan, 2009), and *Kaliyachan* (Dir. Farook Abdulrahiman, 2015).

<sup>137</sup> Thilakan (1935-2012) was a theatre and film artist who won National and Kerala State Film Awards for his performance several times. His prominent films include *Namukku Parkkan Munthirithoppukal* (Dir. Padmarajan, 1986), *Nadodikkattu* (Dir. Sathyan Anthikkad, 1987), *Kireedam* (Dir. Sibi Malayil, 1989), *Perumthachan* (Dir. Ajayan, 1990), *Kilukkam* (Dir. Priyadarshan, 1991), *Spadikam* (Dir. Bhadran, 1995), *Ustad Hotel* (Dir. Anwar Rasheed, 2012), etc.



Figure 5.1 & 5.2 The poster of *Ardhanaari* and the first look-poster of Jayasurya's *Ardhanaareeswaran*

*Mayamohini*, a film with Dileep's feminine-presenting character in the lead released in 2012 and the film surpassed *Ardhanaari* in making profit. When *Ardhanaari* miserably failed in the box office, the slapstick and misogynichumor in *Mayamohini* attracted the mass as an entertainer. It is suggestive of the attitude of society on gender minority. But *Ardhanaari* could be viewed as a precursor to the shift happening in Malayalam cinema.

Many small budget films without any superheroes were also the trend in the 90s. Most were comedy films appreciated by family spectators and were produced as a response to the cultural situation during the period. Post-2000s, the production of films has been significantly affected by digital technology and cinema has become accessible to the public who are aspiring filmmakers. Moreover, the decade has been seriously affected by *cinema prathisandhi* (cinema crisis) which has a huge impact on the industry.<sup>138</sup> A number of amateur producers and directors have tried to make films with small budget. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* (2014), is such a film that deals

<sup>138</sup> The term *Cinema prathisandhi* (Cinema Crisis) is drawn from media reports and film journalism that refers to the labour strikes in the industry in the 2000s and early years of the next decade between, theatre owners, distributors, and star actors. The reasons for it are varied, as producers have demanded to reduce the cost of production against the demand for higher remuneration by the actors, and the demand for hiked commission by the distributors and theatre owners. The crisis has affected the release of a number of films and due to which many projects by the established production houses could not materialize. See Nair, Perunthanni Balachandran. *MalayalaChalachitram*. Yavanika Publications, 2017.

with non-conforming gender identity and sexuality. It is ventured by an amateur production house named Wafi Group, a gulf-based company that claims as standing for social causes as mentioned on its Facebook page.<sup>139</sup> The Kerala economy has been largely depended on Gulf-remittance as the working-class population are migrant labourers. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2009) argues that Malayalam cinema has a three-decade long relationship with Gulf as it has been “a significant point of reference for the imagining of a cultural identity in Kerala” (217). He also points out the developmental models that are in place, the economic conditions of the film industry, and how the textual and the aesthetics of Malayalam cinema have been highly influenced by the Gulf. The production of the film by a Gulf-based company with Gulf-sourced capital becomes consequential while analyzing the production history of it. The lead actors in the film are those who usually play comedy roles, and who lack the stardom of Dileep or Manoj K. Jayan (those actors who played the transgender characters in *Chanthupottu* and *Ardhanaari*). Television and comedy stage shows have made remarkable aid in the mainstreaming of such artists. But the *avantgarde* theme and the non-valorization of actors have probably resulted in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* becoming unappealing to the culture industry of Malayalam cinema. Yet, it may be noted that the film has surpassed its predecessors in problematizing the absent spaces for queer people in Kerala, and has deconstructed the stereotypical feminine-presenting male bodies in the other popular films. The reluctance of major production companies in Malayalam industry to venture into topics like non-conforming gender and sexuality as a major concern is emblematic of the attitude that it is not a market-oriented or a commercially viable topic to be consumed by the public in Kerala.

The unfavourable condition of trans people to articulate their gender identity in the public sphere of Kerala until the second decade of the 21st century could be attributed as a major reason for production houses to have an unconcerned attitude to

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<sup>139</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/pg/Wafi-Group-634834143201094/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Wafi-Group-634834143201094/about/?ref=page_internal). Accessed on 23 December 2018

their cause. The shifting trends of trans representations in Malayalam cinema after 2015 could be understood with the change in the history of gender and sexuality discourse in the region where these films are produced and circulated. The *International Conference of Gender Equality* (ICGE 2015) organized by the Social Justice Department of Kerala has offered a platform for trans people in the state and from outside Kerala to gather in the capital city to address the heterosexual majority across the globe. It is recorded as the first of such an event that opened the stage for the queer minority in Kerala's social, political and cultural history. In the same year, the government organized *3rd State Transgender Habba* to discuss expanding access to health, education, employment, and livelihood. A large number of queer and trans groups participated in the event and narrated their experiences. Many Malayali trans people, who had migrated to other states earlier, have started to return to the home state and revealed their identities. The production and release of a number of films, including documentaries, short films, and television programs during the time on trans issues, and films with trans characters in recent times are demonstrative of the culmination of the queer political activism.

A significant aspect is the advancement of digital technology for the past years that has made it easier to access the film industry. The advent of television and the internet have mobilized media; when the number of media increases, the tendency to explore the hitherto less discussed topics becomes a necessity. C. S. Venkiteswaran (2008) argues that the growth of media in great numbers asks for innovative contents. Those topics that were marginalized earlier; the issues of *Adivasis* (tribal people), sexual and gender minorities, other socially backward and weaker communities are now discussed as subjects in cinema. The database of Malayalam cinema after 2015 shows four feature films with transgender identity contestation as the central theme, and also a fewer number of films boldly attempt a deviation from the tradition of representing trans people as mere derogatory visual spectacles. Major production houses still continue to be patriarchal and transphobic, and are unconcerned about the merits of the theme. But certain set of filmmakers reinvent avenues to shed light to

trans subjects by moving away from the formulaic aesthetics of the industry at present.

The resistance against the culture industry and the intense desire to mainstream the marginalized are the reasons for the production of art films. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2012) analyzes the aesthetic structure of Malayalam cinema in the 1970s and observes that realism has been central to the films of the period. According to Radhakrishnan,

It unpacks the movement towards the consolidation of realism as a mode of address that generates certain spectatorial responses, as opposed to understanding this turn in Malayalam cinema as foregrounding a new version of the social. The status of popular cinema and cinephilia are at the center of these contestations, as these film texts actively intervene in debates around aesthetics (91).

His observations are crucial while tracing the ‘art’ film movement in Malayalam cinema as a reaction against the popular cinema and “melodramas” of the period before that.<sup>140</sup> The concern for the cause of art also stems from the flaws of commercial or popular films and its content. The 1970s was a period noted for new institutional structures in film making. The activities of film societies and the increased state funding could be traced back to the formation of parallel cinema in Malayalam (*ibid*). The middlebrow films that have emerged in the 1980s combine aestheticism and the melodrama,<sup>141</sup> and such films have aimed at making profit also. C. S. Venkiteswaran (2009) takes note of the 1970s as a decade in which the film society movement got underway. It opened to world cinemas and Bollywood films through the special screenings by the film societies have influenced the spectators as well. The division between ‘art’ and ‘commercial’ become an active topic of discussion during the time. The impact of state sponsored television network is quite

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<sup>140</sup> Radhakrishnan (2012) uses the term ‘Melodrama’ “to describe the affective economy of popular cinema” (92).

<sup>141</sup> The term ‘middlebrow’ films is used by Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2012).

evident if the analysis of their role in circulating art films; films that go beyond the commercial interests are attempted. However, a shift could be observed in the 90s with the revival of commercial interest with the opening of the liberalized economy and the renewed commercial interests of the production houses. The emergence of modern technology in the 90s and 2000s, new media like mobile phone, the internet and digital technology, etc., have resulted in the mobilization of industry. The transformation is most visible in the industry while attempting a critical understanding of the recurring themes. Comedy and sex remain as staple themes that cannot be replaced. It could be argued that the influence of the art films of the 1970s and 1980s persists even today when certain film makers address the thriving issues of gender and sexuality in contemporary society.

The capital for art films is collected through mostly crowd-funding. In the initial period of the ‘art film history’ of Malayalam cinema, the fund was sourced from the State Government.<sup>142</sup> The production of art films in the 90s and 2000s was affected by the new economic policies and the limited government sponsorship. Hence a different turn in the production of art films could be observed, which caters to the needs of foreign and regional spectators through film festivals. Independent art films become a remarkable and discursive feature since the 90s. Shaji N. Karun’s *Swaham* 1994, and *Vanaprastham* 1999, and Murali Nair’s *Maranasimhasanam* 1999 have grabbed international attention. A number of filmmakers contributed tremendously to the genre that combines the art, parallel and independent film making. Priyanandanan (*Neythukaran* 2002, *Pulijanmam* 2006, *Sufi Paranja Katha* 2010), Rajiv Vijayaraghavan (*Margam* 2003, *Maruvili* 2015), Ligy J. Pullappally

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<sup>142</sup> Ratheesh Radhakrishnan (2009) has extensively written on the State Government’s initiatives to promote Malayalam cinema in the 1960s onwards. The setting up of a committee “under the Chairmanship of novelist and scriptwriter, Malayattoor Ramakrishnan, to look into the industrial aspects of cinema, with emphasis on promoting film production within the state” (224). The recommendations of the committee includes the State Industrial Policy in 1967’s listing of cinema “among small-scale industries that can avail government financial support” and the “setting up of the Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) in 1975 and the establishment of a full-fledged studio under the aegis of the state government, the Chitranjali Studio, in 1983” (*ibid*) In the next years state awards were given to art film category under “Films Produced Within Kerala (225).

(*Sancharram* 2004), Satish Menon (*Bhavum* 2002), Jayaraj (*Makalkku* 2005, *Vellappokkathil* 2008, *Gulmohar* 2008, *Ottaal* 2015), Sanal Kumar Sasidharan (*Ozhivudivasathe Kali* 2015), etc. are certain exceptional figures of the time. The increased presence of diasporic filmmakers who made films on Kerala for the cosmopolitan spectators are significant among them. C.S. Venkiteswaran (2006) distinguishes the themes explored by both the diasporic and regional filmmakers and remarks that, when Malayali directors gazed from inside to out, the diasporic directors gazed from outside to inside. The diasporic filmmakers have looked back to their nostalgic past, and made films in which the cultural setting is Kerala, and they exhibited those films in front of foreign spectators. However, the film makers in Kerala have observed the shifts happen in Kerala as a response to the socio-political movements across the globe. It is pertinent to note that the social-economic shifts in the state have affected the cultural productions, and many, including the diasporic directors attempt to make independent offbeat films that get international recognition. An exploration of Malayali's queer sexuality and gender identity as a response towards the global queer movement, and its forming of the subject of independent art films are the significant issues to be critically examined at this instance. The number of films based on transgender identities and queer sexualities increase after 2015 due to the transformation in Kerala as a result of the queer activism. As mentioned earlier, such films are referred to as 'offbeat' in this thesis, considering their formal as well as aesthetic aspects.

*Irattajeevitham* (2017) is as an independent offbeat film written and directed by Suresh Narayanan, who has been working as a documentary filmmaker. Vijay, the producer of the national award-winning film *Pulijanmam* (2006), has funded for *Irattajeevitham*. The film does not have any of the major stars of Malayalam cinema, and considering the form and theme, it could be categorized as an offbeat film. Media reports state that, Suresh Narayanan has expressed his dislike to be a part of the commercial film industry and the film is symptomatic of his stand as an independent



filmmaker and he wishes to make more such films.<sup>143</sup> Even the entire crew worked with the project are amateur artists. The central character of the trans man is played by a cis woman Athmaja, who is a theatre person herself. *Irattajeevitham* can be adjudged as a political text, a pioneer as well as the single Malayalam film that deals with the trans man identity. As opined by the director, filmmaking itself becomes a political activity for him and the producer, when they explore transgender people in Kerala and voice their sexuality through cinema.

*Aalorukkam*, directed by V. C. Abhilash, released in 2018 is the debut film of the director as well as the producer. In one of his interviews, the director states that he does not want to categorise the film as merely ‘art’ or ‘award film,’ which could be read as an attempt to move away from being typecast. “We had to plead with several exhibitors to get theatres. We even had to take efforts to let the crowd know *Aalorukkam* was not an ‘art film’ but a commercial one! All we wanted to do was to create a good film” says the director (“Awards Galore”). Beyond the artistic and academic value of the film, he strongly believes in the return as profit to the producer, to continue the tradition of ‘good art.’ The performance of amateur actors from ‘Act Lab,’ an acting school based in Kochi in the film demarcates it from the category of films produced with huge budget, embedded with market oriented propaganda. What differentiates it from *Irattajeevitham* is, the film has purposefully kept a secrecy regarding the theme of a transgender person’s identity contestation in the society. The motif presented in the film, a father slowly comes to terms with the gender identity of the ‘son’ shows the society’s slow transformation. Though *Aalorukkam* depicts Indrans as an *ottonthullal* artist for its advertisement, it goes beyond his typecast roles of subversive masculinities. *Irattajeevitham* and *Aalorukkam* are different from the popular aspects of stardom of the actors, though both approach the theme of transgender identities differently. *Udalaazham* (2018) deals with the life of a feminine presenting male from a tribal community. The film is produced by *Doctor’s*

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<sup>143</sup> Augustine, Athira V. “Suresh Narayanan Talks about Irattajeevitham.” *Film Beat Malayalam*, 30 April, 2018, <https://malayalam.filmibeat.com/interviews/suresh-narayanan-about-irattajeevitham-042616.html>

*Dilemma*, a group of medical practitioners who strive to address a social cause. They embark on the issue of transgender identity by keeping aside the industry's production of entertainment-consumption model. The director of *Udalaazham*, Unnikrishnan Avala has been a documentary filmmaker. Media reports say that, the crew of *Udalaazham* is actual tribal people, and the central character is played by Mani, who is the first actor from tribal community.

One could observe that in contemporary times, film making is more accessible to those who desire to shed light to themes which are left out by the commercial industry, with the digital revolution. Broadly, these three films fit under the category of new offbeat films with lesser known actors and small budget, if their production background is analyzed. A critical understanding of the textual aspects of their production suggests that they have a leaning towards the middlebrow films of the 80s that seeks to create public opinion on queer sexuality and trans identities. But the limited exhibitions and the lack of wider spectatorship marginalize gender non-conformity as a topic still in ghettos, and as unappealing to the mass. The cultural and political implications of these films vary, depending on the directors and the producers. However, the increasing number of filmmakers who attempt to narrate the life of transgender people with amateur actors and small budget, take into account the transformation in the public sphere and film industry.

Though *Ardhanareeswaran* did not materialize in 2012, popular actor Jayasurya has been instrumental in politicizing the transgender identity in 2018 with the commercial film *Njan Marykutty*. Ranjith Sankar has directed the film, whose earlier films have been commercially viable and discussed by the cinephilia. His *Passenger* (2009), *Varsham* (2014), *Su...Su...Sudhi Vathmeekam* (2015), *Ramante Edenthottam* (2017), etc., are lauded by critics and well received by the public due to the social concern underpinned in such films. Sankar argues that there are no hard and fast rules to make cinema, and there cannot be any formula for the good cinema. Everyone perceives cinema in a personal manner. New cinema happens only when a

director chooses an existing story idea and gives a new interpretation, based on his life's experiences.<sup>144</sup> Hence, Ranjith Sankar's recognition as a maker of 'good art' has probably helped him in branding his films in the industry. Jayasurya who plays Marykutty has grown from the image of an actor with his background as a mimicry artist to a playback singer, impressionist, and co-producer in Malayalam film industry. His reputation in contemporary times lies in the versatility of the roles he chooses to play. After 2010, though the influence of new generation films has been foremost in the industry, the characters Jayasurya has chosen are noteworthy.<sup>145</sup> He has become an influential figure in the industry in the contemporary times like Dileep, and has risen to stardom. *Njan Marykutty* is a joint production venture by Jayasurya as well as the director under the banner *Dreams N' Beyond*. It is distributed by the actor's own company *Punyalan Cinemas*, a leading distribution firm of commercial films. The film industry in Kerala has grown into a number of star network associations where film production and marketing become joint ventures for profit. While approaching the two popular films, *Chanthupottu* and *NjanMarykkuty*, there is a similarity between both films which depict Dileep and Jayasurya in lead roles. As rightly pointed out by Meena T. Pillai (2017) in her analysis of the stardom of film actors and its association with cinema,

The semiotics of stardom necessitates a network space in which audiences, fan associations, media houses, the fashion and cosmetic industries, and the advertisement industry are all ratified in one way or the other by the fetishist power of stardom. Stars and celebrities are integral to a consumerist culture offering great scope for the legitimisation and endorsement of a vast number

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<sup>144</sup> Excerpts from an interview with Ranjith Sankar published on a blog on cinema. The interviewer praises Ranjith Sankar that his talent lies in translating an abstract idea to an entertaining narrative. "Interview with Ranjith Sankar- Part 2." *Varnachitram a Blog on Cinema*, 12 October 2009, <http://varnachitram.com/2009/10/12/interview-with-ranjith-sankar-part-2/>

<sup>145</sup> Jayasurya's films after 2010 include *Cocktail* (Dir. Arun Kumar Aravind, 2010), *Beautiful* (Dir. V. K. Prakash, 2011), *Trivandrum Lodge* (Dir. V. K. Prakash, 2012), *Apothecary* (Dir. Madhav Ramadasan, 2014), *IyobintePusthakam* (Dir. Amal Neerad, 2014), *LukkaChuppi* (Dir. Bash Mohammed, 2015), *Su..Su... Sudhi Vathmeekam* (Dir. Ranjith Sanker, 2015), and *Captain* (Dir. Prajesh Sen, 2018). His popularity for comedy films is phenomenal, such as *Punyalan Agarbattis* (Dir. Ranjith Sanker, 2013), *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Dir. Nadirshah, 2015), *Aadu* (Dir. Midhun Manuel Thomas, 2015) and *Aadu 2* (Dir. Midhun Manuel Thomas, 2017) and has an impact in the box office.

of commodities. They determine the sites of purchase, the circuits of desires, and patterns of consumption (53).

The power of stardom which is integral to the consumerist culture has played a significant role in popularising and mainstreaming Jayasurya's *Njan Marykutty*. It could be argued that, apart from the wide attention transgender people receive in contemporary times, the association of a versatile and popular actor with a noted director is a principal factor behind the reach of the film to a larger audience. The attention it has grabbed from the industry, spectators and media is suggestive of producing an offbeat theme as commercially viable film. A detailed analysis of the advertisement campaign (regarding the release of *Njan Marykutty*), the popularity, and the networks of fetishisation of entertainment in the industry in line with the consumerist politics will be discussed in the following section that deals with the circulation of the films.

Major production houses and the commercial film industry itself have been afraid to experiment with the subject of gender non-conformity as the focus due to the transphobic heterosexual public sphere in Kerala, being apprehensive about the reach of such themes onto the mass. Transgender people have been part of commercial cinema just as comic spectacles and figures rejected by society. Many popular films celebrate the hegemonic masculinity of the hero and portray transgender people as ridiculed and victimized by the hero. Such depictions are utilized for reinforcing the macho hero as an epitome of gender normativity. Among the seven films chosen for the detailed analysis in this research, only three are produced by professional filmmakers. The other four films have varied production histories; debutant directors who want to record the shift happens in Kerala's public sphere take up the offbeat themes seriously. The unconcerned attitude and indifference to transgender subjects shown by major production houses in the earlier years of the Malayalam cinema demonstrate the profit-oriented outlook of the culture industry. The uncertainties and the socio-economic aspirations of the industry have had an impact in making the

transgender as a commercially viable topic of cinema. When queer themes are widely perceived as not been worthy to make a huge profit in the market, they keep diplomatic silence, yet the possibility of more trans themed films, and transgender film makers in the future cannot be dismissed. It is pertinent to analyze the circulation of the transgender films in Kerala by critically examining the commercialization of Malayalam film industry, the patterns of consumption, the synchronization of queer identity politics gaining momentum with a social movement for visibility and the articulation of political rights. The next section of the chapter thus addresses the circulation of the films that deal with trans identity contestation as its focus.

## **5.2 The Circulation of Trans Films and Gender and Sexuality Debates in Public Sphere**

The print, visual, and cyber media in Kerala foreground cultural productions that necessitate public discussions on gender identity and sexuality in the public sphere. The proliferation of media in mobilizing the public opinion is rampant since the early 1990s due to the economic, political, social, and technological expansion catering to the needs of the society. Malayalam films released from the 90s onwards reflect the changing sensibilities of modern Kerala. Due to the high literacy rate in the state, it has an avid reading culture which includes a larger contribution from print media. Kerala has had the community reading practices in teashops; newspapers were read aloud and its contents were publicly discussed (Jeffery 1992). The noticeable features in Kerala's bus stands and railway stations have been book shops packed with different kinds of magazines dangled in an enticing fashion (Mokkil 2010). The print media affects the mass and form opinions through which power relations are structured in society (Christy 2017). Before the actual viewing of the film, the print and cyber media function as the sites of its circulation with location news, pre-production and post-production coverage. Newspapers, its supplements, and film magazines like *Nana*, *Vellinakshathram*, etc., have contributed to the

circulation of popular films in Malayalam film industry. Before the advent of digital technology, the chief source for advertisement of films during the time has been film posters exhibited in public places, and they have been and circulated through print media as well. Of late, the cyberspace is quite active in film promotions through the announcement of new films, first-look posters, teasers, trailers, interviews of artists, and the circulation of music videos, mostly through YouTube channels. This section of the chapter tries to have a critical understanding of the modes in which the trans subjects in Malayalam films are circulated and how they map the public opinion. It also takes into account the promotion of regional films through government sponsorship in the past, and the activities of film societies to give recognition for art films in Malayalam. While looking at the contemporary circulation of offbeat films, the role of the film festival circuits as potential sites of film circulation among Malayalis requires to be critically understood. There is an increasing number of film festivals in which the proliferation of queer sexuality and gender identities could be noted. Even in mainstream film festivals, trans people and queer sexualities are considered as staple themes that cater to the educated elite spectators, whose opinion on it becomes crucial when the impact of trans themed texts is analyzed.

The popular cinema circulated through the print and visual media since its early days hardly mention about trans people, because of their ‘absence’ in Kerala. One could view the active role of print journalism that discusses about the themes, stars, directors and production houses. Scholarly inquiries look at the history of Malayalam cinema and show theatre spaces or (*cinema kottaka* in Malayalam) as the active space of film circulation, and in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, the influence of drama could be observed as very high. Archival analysis (Jenson Joseph 2012, C.S. Venkiteswaran 2006, 2011, Ratheesh Radhakrishnan 2009), explores the formal and aesthetic aspects of film circulation. They particularly take note of the 60s and 70s as the decades in which a major paradigm shift happened in Malayalam cinema. The formation of film society movement and Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) are prominent events during the period which have an impact in reviving

the spirit of regionalism and aestheticism. Film societies have been instrumental in promoting the circulation of art films by opening avenues to the screenings of art films among Malayali spectators. The art-commercial divide figures mostly since the 80s onwards, C. S. Venkiteswaran (2006) takes note of the contribution of national awards and Indian panorama as potential sites which gave recognition to Malayalam cinema outside the state. According to him, the major advancement in the 90s was the emergence of television through satellite broadcasting. Television has influenced the tastes and sentiments of ‘Malayali,’ especially the female spectators. Apart from these, the shifts in the economic system- the capital formation and industry expansion- have affected the sites of circulation. This situation of “low economies of scale” was not favourable for Malayalam cinema to adopt new narratives and technologies (Venkiteswaran 2006). Comedy and soft-porn films have competed in theatres by making huge profits and when television, VCDs/DVDs, etc., have started circulating films in the public sphere. This section focuses on the circulation of the selected trans films among Malayalis. *Randu Penkuttikal*, and *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* released in the 70s and 80s circulated as heteronormative narratives among the heterosexual public. The discussion surrounding the queer underpinnings in such narratives began to stem only a decade back due to the global and local queer movements. Before the 2000s, there was hardly any film that dealt with trans identity contestations as its theme. In the 2000s, trans characters are represented in minor roles and the celebration and politicization of trans identities appear prominently after 2010 only. Hence the queer and trans films have competed with the ‘star films’ produced with huge capital and those films that make use of the technological advancements, in the last decade.

*Chanthupottu* was released at a time when the film news and details were circulated and popularized through print media mostly, though a trailer for the film released later.<sup>146</sup> The location news and press meetings formed promotionals for the

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<sup>146</sup> “Dileep- Chandu Pottu Trailer.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dileepofficial Online, 2 October 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lOIeu5Qa1h0>

film. Since the popular actor Dileep played the lead character of the feminine-presenting Radhakrishnan, much of the discussion regarding the film was about his ability to make the film a huge grosser in the industry. The star value of Dileep and his major hits previous to this film acted as determinants of expectations and popularity. This is very much evident from the excerpts of a leading English newspaper in South India, that covered the location news and the press release of *Chanthupottu* as a Dileep film:

It is easy to guide newcomers to the location of 'Chanthupottu' in Arthunkal, near Cherthala. With some big names in Malayalam films in attendance, it has become a big event for the people who live in this scenic area close to the sea... In 'Chanthupottu', Dileep sports an entirely new look. He is Radhakrishnan, who is effeminate in his mannerisms and behaviour. His grandmother had wanted a baby girl and when the baby turned out to be a boy, the newborn, Radhakrishnan, was brought up like a girl. She called him 'Radha' and as he grew up, Radhakrishnan became effeminate in his outlook and conduct. Among his friends, most of whom were girls, he was particularly close to Malu. However, the relationship undergoes a change when the duo realise that they are in love. "He is a 'normal person,' but it was just that he got carried away with the way he was brought up," says Lal Jose, about the main character ("New Look- Dileep").

This kind of promotional sketch would rouse the curiosity of spectators who had watched the previous hits of Dileep, like *Meesa Madhavan*, *Kunhikoonan* and *Thilakkam* with lots of expectations. They would have expected a fun-packed family entertainer that conforms to the prevailing hegemonic notions of heteronormative gender and sexuality. Rather than forming a discussion on the central character's depiction as a representative of the marginalized community in the film after its release, the discussion centred on Dileep's expertise in handling the role. Another write-up in the same newspaper after the release of the film reads as:

The film star Dileep says that it had been a great challenge to don the role of an effeminate man in his newly released film, *Chanthupottu*. (... ) At a press conference here on Saturday, Dileep said that before donning the role, he had studied the mannerisms and behaviour of transvestites. He had encountered many such persons in the state in his days as a mimicry artiste, enabling him



to study their mannerisms and body language. The role has been a different one for him after playing a hunchback in *Kunhikoonan*. In *Kunhikoonan*, the make-up helped him a lot to essay the character. However, he had to take a lot of strain to come up with feminine expressions in *Chanthupottu*. The actor says that though he knew the mannerisms and body language of transvestites, he was in tears contemplating ways to give expression to their sentiments. However, he was able to get over such fears after a talk with a transvestite (“Dileep Cracks a Great Challenge”).

These two excerpts bring out certain significant facts; the popularity of the star is used as a marketing strategy. Never in the promotional news of the film has it mentioned about the theme, as about a transgender person’s life, and the significance of such a characterization against the backdrop of the hegemonic masculinities and heteronormativity. But it is conveniently covered as a transvestite’s identity, suggesting the invisibility and marginality of trans people in Kerala during the time. The release of the film is coincidental at a time when the television channels in Kerala have been airing comedy programmes with male performers enacting hyperfemininity. Some of the performers have maintained the feminized body as their personal appearance, “threading their eyebrows, waxing their chests, arms and legs, and growing their hair long to endow greater ‘authenticity’ to the roles they portray,” to suit their profession, “making gender-crossing a staple component of an average Malayali’s daily visual pleasure” (Muraleedharan 76). Dileep has stated in one of his interviews, he was inspired by the female impersonators. The unconventional depiction of the feminized body of Dileep in the posters of the film has posed visual pleasure for onlookers. Moreover, it has enhanced the curiosity of spectators regarding the gender performance and the ‘sex’ of the feminine presenting man. The promotionals of *Chanthupottu* emphasize Dileep’s acting skills and the challenges he faced in enacting a feminine-presenting role in the film, distinct from his previous films. These media reports form an engaging discussion on the power of media in promoting and popularizing the star. *Chanthupottu* has added another feather to Dileep’s career as a mimicry artist attaining stardom in the decade.

The circulation of *Chanthupottu* as a film on ‘masculinity in crisis,’ is followed by almost seven years for the release of another Malayalam film *Ardhanaari* (2012), which problematizes a trans person’s identity contestation. Unlike *Chanthupottu*, the film narrates the cultural significance of the hijra community. It is released at a time when the promotion strategies of mainstream cinema have been slowly switching to the internet era, and the emergence of social networks during the time is also noted. As stated, digital technology plays a tremendous role in the new millennium in mobilizing the ‘consumer’ to decide the form and content of visual cultural texts. Television, reality shows, YouTube, blogs, FM Radio, DVD/VCD, etc., are the media forms that directly interact with the spectators and gather opinions from them. Film posters, media interviews, and the innovative method of the launch of the film trailer could be seen as a mode adopted in *Ardhanaari*’s promotion. It was released as a commercial film through mainstream theatres, but media reports show its average fare. The social cause the film addresses is used as a marketing strategy in its promotionals. The reviews after the release of the film point out the flaws in its narrative in depicting trans theme in Malayalam cinema.<sup>147</sup> An insightful review regarding the film stresses this aspect,

The film has not exactly wasted away a beautiful subject but has certainly not used it well enough to stir thoughts or even prompt empathy with a community that has always been shooed, shunned or brutally shown the door. It does however, show glimpses of the real transgender world, especially their emotional upheavals and the way law treats them. It also has a star cast that is widely acclaimed as the cream of Malayalam cinema (“Ardhanaari: Light Falls on an Obscure World”).

However, the casting of cis actor Manoj K. Jayan as a trans character in the film is discussed for his expertise in enacting femininity, by the reviewers and film critics.

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<sup>147</sup>Palicha, Paresh C. “Review: Ardhanari is an Average Fare.” *Rediff.com*, 26 November 2012, <https://www.rediff.com/movies/review/south-review-ardhanari/20121126.htm>

*Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, has been circulated as a film with a feminine-presenting male depicted in a comic way. The film was released in theaters in 2014, but did not become so popular like *Chanthupottu*.



Figure 5.3 The poster of *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* shows the list of theatres where it was released. Source: Facebook

However, it has made use of the internet and social media platforms like Facebook<sup>148</sup> to circulate the location news, and production in progress photos. In the poster (Figure 5.3) of the film, one could see the emphasis given to the regionality and the criticism at profit minded commercial films, *suddhamaaya oru naadan cinema* (a pure native film). Besides the technological advancements, film magazines, and reviews written by both amateur as well as professional cinephilia are the other major tools for the film's circulation in Kerala, apart from the trailer.<sup>149</sup> The film did not have huge advertisements like other major commercial films of that period. Though the film was released in theatres, it could not grab wide spectatorship. *Ardhanaari* initiated a discussion in the public sphere largely due to the mainstream actors playing unconventional roles, but *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* remained less known to the public until the film started circulating in popular video hosting sites like

<sup>148</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ORAR.Movie/> Accessed on 27 March 2018.

<sup>149</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfVcpKWqgrk> Accessed on 27 March 2018.

YouTube.<sup>150</sup> Technological advancements like DVDs, and the internet offered potential circulation space for this film as its reception and discussion years after the release would suggest.

The present-day circulation of films is dependent on the media convergence resulted through technological advancements and the shifting trends in economic and consumption patterns. The traditional Film festivals organized by the state as well as non profit groups as part of other cultural and aesthetic activities continue to be more active, apart from the print media, television, and the internet to trigger discussions in public platforms on the formal and aesthetic aspects of cinema.<sup>151</sup> The subscription based streaming of media to internet users by media firms like NetFlix, has bypassed the telecommunications, and broadcast television channels. Since 2015, there has been the flooding of queer activities in Kerala with the initiatives of CBOs, NGOs, and government interventions which attract the attention of independent filmmakers. As part of the queer activism and film festivals, a number of queer themed films are circulated. Navaneetha Mokkal (2018) analyzes the space of queer film festivals in India and observes that, “more recent accounts of curating queer film festivals (to) disrupt the conception of cinema as a tool to consolidate sexual identities” (1). Her article explores “the non-cohesive subjectivities engendered through practices of film viewing” and argues that “queer film festivals have a generative power when they disturb, play with and shake the sensorium of the spectator” (*ibid*). The small budget

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<sup>150</sup>“Odum Raja Aadum Rani Full Movie.” *YouTube*, uploaded by MovieworldEnt, 11 June 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmZleFmunAM>

<sup>151</sup> International Film Festival of Kerala organized by the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy since 1996 has been a contentious circuit for the cinephilia. Numerous film festivals organized in the state by independent film societies like ViBGYOR Film Festival (organized by ViBGYOR Film Collective in Thrissur), SYNE International Film Festival (an annual film festival at Muvattupuzha in Ernakulam) are to mention a few. Recently, the Kochi Muziris Biennale has been running ‘Artist’s cinema’ that showcases art films, documentaries, and feature films from across the world in packages curated by filmmakers and film scholars. The Kazhcha-NIV Indie film festival at Lenin Balavedi, Thiruvananthapuram organized by KazhchaChalachitraVedi (a film society) is a niche festival for Indian Indie Films. The society has been actively involved in production, promotion and making of independent cinema.

films that emphasis on the political message and artistic values above popularization strategies of commercial films have explored the theme of transgender identities.

The circulation of the three films, *Irattajeevitham*, *Aalorukkam* and *Udalaazham* relatively in the same period is distinct from the other selected trans films. *Irattajeevitham* released in Girija Theatre near Thrissur has had a few more festival screenings. *Udalaazham*'s premier in Kerala happened during the 2018 International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), and *Aalorukkam* was released in 2018 in mainstream theatres. The best actor award for Indrans made *Aalorukkam* popular in the film circles.<sup>152</sup> The three films could address selected audience only, due to the deep-rooted heteropatriarchal imaginations on gender and sexuality in society. Hence it would appear unappealing to the mass. The circulation and publicity of the independent trans films are different from the commercial films produced by big production houses. Film festivals and special screenings are the major circulation method of independent films in Kerala. The film society movement and its activities are incidental in forming film festivals in Kerala. The establishment of Kerala Chalachitra Academy<sup>153</sup> initiated a full-fledged functioning of state sponsored festival network in the state for the promotion of regional, national and international films for spectators in Kerala. Film festivals have served as exhibition sites primarily, and in recent years they have grown to meeting points for professional filmmakers, with open forums, film workshops and marketing of those films which do not fall under the popular genre. The IFFK 2016 set stage for a 'gender bender' section in

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<sup>152</sup><http://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/malayalam/2018/mar/08/kerala-state-film-awards-2018-announced-indrans-parvathy-ottamuri-velicham-bag-top-honours-1783983.html>. Accessed on 29 July 2018.

<sup>153</sup>Kerala Chalachitra Academy (KCA) was set up in 1998 "to counter the gross commoditization of the film medium and a rightful recognition of the contribution of cinema to the cultural enlightenment of the society." The Academy's core objectives include being a link between the Government and the film industry, the conducting of Film Festivals all over the State, the preservation and propagation of Malayalam Cinema, to intervene in film education, to document the History of Malayalam Cinema, the honoring of persons and films that contribute to the aesthetics of Malayalam cinema. <https://www.keralafilm.com/index.php/about-us> Accessed on 12 January 2019,

which the international transgender and queer themed films were exhibited apart from the similar Malayalam films.<sup>154</sup> There are a few other parallel film festivals organized through crowd funding in Kerala along with the queer film festivals, that have huge impact on film circulation in Kerala. Navaneetha Mokkil (2018) argues that the dominant tendency of the journalistic writings is to view film festivals as part of the LGBT politics and activism. However, she underlines the capacity of cinema to “complicate the field of visibility and thus disturb the seamless links between cultural practices and the consolidation of identities” (2). *Irattajeevitham* has been circulated through journalistic writings, and discussions on the side lines of film festivals. It was exhibited in Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival and Reel Desires: The Chennai International Queer Film Festival in 2018. *Udalaazham* made use of publicity through the internet mostly and it was exhibited for the first time in the film festival outside Kerala, known as the Mumbai International Film Festival organized by MAMI (Mumbai Academy of Moving Images).<sup>155</sup> The circulation space of *Aalorukkam* is mainly film festivals, though it is released in theaters. ‘The National Award for the Best Film on other Social Issues’ and a couple of regional awards necessitate contentious spaces for the circulation of the film.<sup>156</sup> It is pertinent to note the comments of *Aalorukkam*’s director, that his film has been a commercial film

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<sup>154</sup>The ‘Gender Bender’ package of the 21st International Film Festival of Kerala includes a bunch of films on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community around the world. This section features six films which propagate emotional, social, cultural and political situations of the LGBT society. It is for the first time IFFK shows its solidarity with transgender community. <https://iffk.wordpress.com/2016/11/28/iffk-2016-gender-bender-in-solidarity-with-lgbt-community/>, Accessed on 29 December 2018.

In the ethnographic interview with trans woman Sreekkutty, she narrated her experience during the IFFK 2016. It was an initiative by the state government to make the festival inclusive. Transgender people received reservation for seats in theatre, and transgender friendly toilets introduced. Many transgender people including her, were happy to be interviewed by media, regarding how they appreciate the films, and the 21st IFFK’s special initiatives to include transgender people.

<sup>155</sup>In my interview with Unnikrishnan Avala, who directed *Udalaazham*, he expressed the desire to circulate the film through mainstream theatres in Kerala, and film festivals outside the state. However the subject the film deals with has difficulty in getting mass reception, he noted. The film released in theaters in Kerala on 6<sup>th</sup> December 2019.

<sup>156</sup><https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/national-film-awards-jury-praises-standard-malayalam-films-and-quality-acting-79519>, Accessed on 29 July 2018

with a social cause, and it has been disheartening to be pulled out of theatres despite receiving good ratings. He has also requested the Kerala State Film Development Corporation to allow his film to be screened in government theatres.<sup>157</sup> The role of government sponsorship in opening up circuits for the circulation of films with social cause would be a significant move for the promotion of such films. A closer look at the production and circulation of *Irattajeeviitham*, *Aalorukkam*, and *Udalaazham* show that they blur the genre of ‘commercial, or ‘art,’ or ‘independent,’ or ‘offbeat’ through the circulation methods adopted. They have to overcome the entertainment industry dominated by commercial considerations.

*Njan Marykutty* released in 2018 aptly fits to the popular film genre that depicts the life of a trans woman on screen. It is a commercial film, that intelligently made use of resources from print journalism to the internet for pre and post production news, interviews of the crew, and also the testimonies by famous personalities from the industry. The support of trans community is also used as a promotional strategy.



Figure 5.4 Jayasurya walks on ramp during the release of *Njan Marykutty*'s trailer along with five well-known trans women at Kochi

<sup>157</sup> <http://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/malayalam/2018/apr/13/director-of-national-award-winning-film-aalorukkam-wants-theatres-to-continue-screening-it-1801057.html>. Accessed on 29 July 2018

The trailer of the film “was released by five transwomen- the makeup artist Renju Renjimar, IT Professional Zara Sheikh, entrepreneur Thripathy Shetty, social activist Sheethal Shyam and legal advisor Riya, at Lulu Fashion Week held in Lulu Mall, Kochi” (“Jayasurya’s *Njan Marykutty* Trailer Out”). Media reports sensationalized *Njan Marykutty*’s release unlike any other trans themed Malayalam films. ‘Trans people’ became a consumable product with a ‘market value’ when a popular cisgender actor enacted the trans character. The circulation of the film in the public sphere has huge impact of its promotion as a film on trans emancipation. For that purpose, the technological as well as human resource is effectively utilized. This is what distinguishes *Njan Marykutty* from the other independent trans films. Meena T. Pillai (2017) critiques the way stardom of the actor, and the associated networks of media form entertainment in the industry for their profit,

The production of cinema is directly linked to the media hankering after stardom where the satellite rights to the film are bought by TV channels depending on the star value of its hero. This parasitic/ symbiotic relationship of two industries of Kerala, where there are few other industries to boast of, make award nights, star shows, and music nights as well as celebrity gossip, the staple fare of entertainment on television (54).

The stardom of actor Jayasurya and other supporting actors, and the advertisements have influenced the circulation of *Njan Marykutty* to be branded as a popular film that addresses a social issue. The star networks of the actor have campaigned for the film. The cross dressed image of Jayasurya has used in the large hoardings to advertise the ‘Saritha Jayasurya Design Studio’ in Kochi.<sup>158</sup> The director Ranjith Sankar himself has shared the picture of the hoarding with a caption, “The first wife in the world who made her husband wear female costume to promote her shop,” that is popularized by

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<sup>158</sup> Saritha Jayasurya is actor Jayasurya’s wife, who designed the costumes of Marykutty in *NjanMarykutty*. ‘Saritha Jayasurya Design Studio’ is owned by Saritha. <https://www.facebook.com/sarithajayasuryadesignstudio/> Accessed on 12 January 2019,



the media.<sup>159</sup> Stars become integral to the consumerist culture by offering great scope for the legitimization and endorsement of a vast number of commodities. With the release of the film, the satellite rights are owned by a media giant and they advertised the film by circulating the figure of the star as transgender in their leading ‘women’s magazine’ to increase their circulation (Figure 5.5). Thus, the multi-dimensional marketing and promotion of the popular film have enhanced its circulation, which in turn make ‘transgender identity’ a visible presence in the public sphere as well as in cinema.



Figures 5.5, 5.6 & 5.7 Sites of circulation and consumption; Marykutty as *Vanitha*’s cover girl, the ‘feminized Marykutty’ in the Music DVD of the film by *Manorama Music* and ‘Saritha Jayasurya Design Studio’*s* advertisement Kochi

The media reports sensationalized the cisgender actor visiting of legislatures in Kerala. His interaction with trans people aired in news channels as entertainment programs are also demonstrative of how the stardom of the actor is carefully used for popularizing a marginalized theme. The posters of this film should be analyzed to see how the image of the sari clad trans woman is circulated for the popular consumption. The feminized trans body offers visual pleasure for spectators. In one poster, Marykutty is captured as applying nail polish and her seating posture is conceived as ‘feminine.’ Another poster exhibits Marykutty as playing football with a group of boys, in which she has worn sari. This stereotyped depiction of femininity forms a

<sup>159</sup><https://www.facebook.com/ranjithsankar.dnb/posts/10156416091903792>. Accessed on 12 January 2019,

pattern in all other posters. The tagline of a poster, *innumuthalival 'aanu' pennu* (She is the woman from today onwards) ironically endorses femininity by turning a blind eye at the fact that 'transgender identity' is an umbrella term used to denote a number of gender identifications. The normalization of the surgically re-appropriated body of the individual as a 'female' circulated for the popular consumption stereotypes femininity and hence at times, the film acts against its own purpose of celebrating trans identity.



Figures 5.8, 5.9 5.10 & 5.11 Popularizing the trans femininity; the sari clad trans woman in the posters of *Njan Marykutty*

*Aalorukkam* also circulated the feminized image of the trans woman who wears sari and other feminine clothing. Such images erase the innumerable manifestations of trans identities. The release of the film marks the culmination of a queer activism in the region. The media has been celebrating it as a trans emancipation film that has invoked reactions from various trans groups and activists to re-imagine trans people as figures to be revered and celebrated.

The circulation of popular films and low budget independent films are different in its strategies and circulation among spectators. When popular films with

huge budgets get mass circulation through *avant-garde* marketing strategies, they leave a stronger impression in the mind of spectators and influence them. Small budget films which are unable to adopt mass circulation strategies lag behind in reaching to spectators. The festival and awards give recognition to independent offbeat films and grab the attention of cinephilia. Because of the technological advancements in contemporary times, even if the films leave theatre spaces, it would form another form of circulation through archiving. Television channels air them, and they are also circulated through online, and memory devices like DVDs/VCDs. Academic circles also debate on the formal and aesthetic quality of films, offering a possible circulation space for them. It could be argued that, due to the popularity of commercial films, the circulation of transgender identities has wider reach when it is compared with the independent films. Hence, the spectatorship matters a lot while tracing cinema as a political tool in mainstreaming the marginalized gender identities. The next section the chapter analyzes spectatorship of the selected transgender films by critically examining their reception and how they map public opinion on trans people.

### **5.3 The Reception, Spectatorship and Consumption of Malayalam Trans Films**

The examination of cinema as a site of cultural exchange takes into account, the historical and socio-political contexts in which these films are produced, their circulation and spectatorship. While analyzing their spectatorship, the viewer's engagement with cinema as a public and political activity, the formation of spaces within and outside the theatre before and after watching films matter a lot. How the stardom of the actor mediates between cinema and spectators, and how watching films addresses spectators within a family, are also the significant questions to be examined. A spectator is an individual or a group of people. Academic film studies is concerned with how films produce "a larger system of meaning in which the hypothetical viewer-referred to as the spectator-is enveloped." ("Spectatorship and

Audiences”) Film theories suggest that there is a specific relationship built between a film and its spectators. Western spectatorship studies focus on understanding the ways films produce pleasure in their viewers. Reception studies of film texts in the western scholarship have made use of quantitative analysis of box-office revenues (Sedgwick 2011), fan literature, and movie magazines (Biltereyst and Van de Vijver 2018), etc. The use of memory studies methodology proposed by Annette Kuhn (2002) and others on bottom-up experiences and memories of cinema-going not only reconfirm ideas of audience activity, selectivity and power in a historical context, but it also underlines the extent to which cinema-going is remembered as part of the fabric and routine of social life, thereby questioning the relevance of the movies themselves. The oral history method proposed by Kuhn analyzes the social context of the films and cinema-going with ethnographic perspective.

The use of the term ‘consumption’ in the chapter refers to activities associated with cinema going which includes forms of distribution and exhibition including (but not limited to) television (broadcast, satellite and cable), video rental and sales, and internet (Jancovich et. al 2003). The studies with reference to a historical context underline the importance of contextualizing issues of spectatorship in terms of interrelations between text, intertextual zones and contextual forces. The meaning arises from the interplay between a text, its reader and surrounding historical and societal forces are important in the historical materialist reception research. Staiger (2000) addresses the importance of contextual factors in order to examine audience’s film experiences. Staiger’s historical materialist approach underlines the interactivity between text, context and the active viewer. The ‘historical materialist reception research’ analyses and reconstructs the viewing strategies available to the viewer in a specific historical period through a contextual analysis of public discourse about a film.

This section of the chapter analyzes the reception of the selected films based on the viewers’ response to them and the specific context in which they are produced

and released. Film spectatorship of Malayalis is largely confined to the consumption of commercial films. Different regional film festivals conducted in the state offer avenues to films other than the commercial ones. However, the festival spectatorship is limited compared with spectatorship of popular films. There has been a marked silence on the queer spectators in Kerala until around 2015. Early Malayalam films center on the issues of heterosexual spectators and the marginalized queer spectator's reaction to it remain largely neglected. This study makes use of the results of interactions with Malayali trans spectators, interviews with film scholars, survey of newspaper reports, film reviews, and opinions published on social media, blogs, etc. It could be argued that the heteronormative public sphere derive pleasure by poking fun at feminine-presenting men and trans subjects in cinema. The queer spectators responded to the ethnographic study expressed their pain about watching such films, but could not articulate how they received it initially. The queer movement in the state has given them voice and they harshly criticize the representation of homosexual and trans people and in Malayalam cinema as figures rejected by the society. However, the public sphere in contemporary times tries to be sensitive to the presence of queer minority and selected films treat trans characters with compassion. Trans spectators expressed their happiness about this shift when they were interviewed.

On the one hand, the media and the spectators celebrate trans people in popular cinema now a day, but a major part of the cultural practice, that includes independent films are still in closet with limited viewership. Regarding certain representation of trans characters in popular Malayalam cinema, the trans activist, Sheetal Shyam expresses her strong reaction against it,

Malayalam filmmakers are rather clueless about who exactly is a transgender person. That automatically makes their depiction skewed and insensitive. So, a trans person in cinema 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. The depiction becomes more offensive as most of the roles are performed by male actors who dress up as

transgender persons (“The Many Holes in the Depiction of Transgender Persons in Malayalam Cinema”).

The film *Chanthupottu* turned out to be a hit in box office and it popularized the term ‘Chanthupottu’ among the heteronormative spectators to ridicule feminine-presenting men in Kerala. This demonstrates the trans phobia prevailed in society when it was released. The heterosexual public sphere has engaged in discussions on the central character in *Chanthupottu* as a case of ‘masculinity in crisis.’ Later, academic and activist groups also have observed the patriarchal normalization of the queer in the film. Muraleedharan Tharayil notes (2007), “The film could be seen as marking a rupture in the discursive composition of the (patriarchal) scopic regime by queering the cinematic gaze” (33). In their discussion on South Asian masculinities, Radhika Chopra et al. (2006) observes that, “The film undoubtedly raises for discussion a former taboo, it marginalizes and mocks gender dissidence and presumed sexual deviance by framing it within comedy” (210). Muraleedharan Tharayil in his article on gender and sexuality debates in Kerala (2014) records the strong reaction from a Kannur based gay group that filed a case against the film for making fun of feminine-presenting men. A Malayali trans woman Zarina, wrote in a leading literary journal that the film did not address any of the discriminations or violence regularly faced by the real trans people in Kerala. The film-maker, Lal Jose stated in a televised interview that the protagonist of his film was not really a homosexual, but merely “effeminate” due to “faulty upbringing” (76). The social and political responses evoked by this film are indicative of a network of new discursive formations that facilitated the diverse significations of Radha: as “gender queer”, a male homosexual, and a transgender person (*ibid*). Besides the stereotyping, the character of Radha has achieved cult status, and is frequently resurrected in advertisements and other popular media. In his Facebook page, nearly a decade after the release of the film, Muhammed Unais, a queer person recalled how they were made fun as a feminine-presenting boy at school, which could be considered as an aftermath of the film. The film struck a chord with the audience, at a time when society viewed people who are

gay with contempt; they quickly gave them another label- ‘chanthupottu.’ For Unais who, had not yet ‘come out’ with their<sup>160</sup> sexuality, it opened a mortifying chapter in life. Unais was openly called ‘chanthupottu’ for their bearing, first by their tuition teacher and later by their schoolmates (Menon 2018). ‘Chanthupottu’ literally grew up to slang in Malayalam as many other cultural texts like films used the term to mock feminine-presenting men. The exaggerated way of performing femininity in the film influenced many other filmmakers to experiment the mode with different actors performing subversive masculinity in many other films since *Chanthupottu*.<sup>161</sup>

*Ardhanaari* depicted hijra community and their cultural significance on screen, yet the film did not initiate any discussion among the general public. The reason for it could be attributed to the lack of acceptance of the theme in Kerala’s public sphere then, and the superfluous narrative that lacked the spirit of the script. In one of my interviews, a spectator who identified himself as a cis man responded about the reception of the film,

This seems to be a well made film representing the pangs of a transgender person born in Kerala with the theme of acceptance as a focus. Representations sometimes demand cinematic elements for communicating to audience effectively well. So do we find the characters sometimes crossing the limits of descent representation. However, the film seems to have been instrumental enough to build a basic awareness with regard to some common misconceptions that Malayalam film audience had until then for they never used to discuss these if otherwise in ‘respectable’ circles (Excerpts from Interviews).

The queer people’s reaction to *Ardhanaari* brings out how they observe the film from an insider’s perspective. In a personal interview with trans woman Sreekutty, who is

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<sup>160</sup>Unais wanted to be addressed with the pronoun, ‘their.’

<sup>161</sup>*Parthan Kanda Paralokam* (2008), *Drona* 2010 (2010), *Urumi* (2011), *101 Weddings* (2012), *Mumbai Police* (2013), *Mathai Kuzhappakkaranalla* (2014), *Action Hero Biju* (2016), *Kasaba* (2016), *Poomaram* (2018), *Kamuki* (2018), *Ente Mezhuthiri Athazhangal* (2018), etc.

also the president of the organization called Sexual and Gender Minority Federation of Kerala (SGSMFK), expressed her opinion that,

When the film *Chanthupottu* ridiculed us, *Ardhanaari* attempted to look into our lives seriously. The film is emblematic of the treatment we received in Kerala's public sphere. It (*Ardhanaari*) is different from any other Malayalam film, for its depiction of our religious myths, cultural significance and rituals specific to the hijra community.

*Ardhanaari*'s focus to mainstream hijra community is worth mentioning, however, its reach across the heteronormative spectators in Kerala is limited. The casual attitude adopted by Malayalis when the film was released in theatres could be attributed to the technical and aesthetic flaws of the script as stated before. But it is a precursor in the history of Malayalam cinema as the first feature film about the hijra community.

The public sphere in Kerala, tend to have mass spectatorship of films that fall under the commercial-popular genre, when it provides to its spectators, "the imaginary world, solace, romantic overtones, dramatisation, and musical melodramas" (Edampadam 33). Laughter films in the 90s which depicted the rupture of the joint family system, the alternative economic system, the advancement in technology, the consumer culture, etc., have been popular in Kerala. However, gender issues also began to be discussed in certain small budget films underpinned with comedy. In the 2000s, films tend to be more misogynistic with the laughter aroused from making fun of women, sexual and gender minorities. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* has narrated the plot in a humorous track. Media records the director's claim, "I prefer to address a serious issue in a humorous vein and it is about a community that is slowly getting eliminated from the society! I am very confident about my story which is laced with black humour" ("M' town Goes Offbeat"). The film was released at a time when queer political activism had been gaining momentum in the state. It could not attain mass spectatorship, though the film discussed the sexuality and gender identity of a Malayali. The actors in the film have little star value which



adversely affected the film's circulation and reception apart from the media networks completely neglecting it soon after its release. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* has been circulating through the YouTube channel of 'Movie World Entertainments,' and most of the viewers who have watched it appreciated the offbeat theme and the treatment of it. These responses in recent times reflect the shift in gender and sexuality discourses in Malayalam cinema as well as in Kerala's public sphere.

The category of films that fall under the parallel or art cinema genre gets selected spectatorship through their screening in film festivals. The three films *Irattajeevitham*, *Aalorukkam*, and *Udalaazham* deal with transgender person's identity contestations, and they address the heteronormative and queer spectators. The responses for those after the screening of such films underline the rising sensitivity to gender and sexuality discourses in the state. Karthik, a young trans man from Thiruvananthapuram, has responded in the ethnographic interview, how he views *Irattajeevitham*, about the portrayal of the trans man identity in the film, and his experience about living as a trans man in Kerala. He has watched *Irattajeevitham* at a special screening as part of the queer community's cultural celebrations in Thiruvananthapuram, and notes, "The film has opened spaces for men who are trapped in female bodies. It is the first of such film that deals with our identity contestation (trans men's) and I am hopeful for more such films to be released and society will accept us slowly." Karthik has narrated the comfort he experiences in the public sphere, after his SRS, he is easily passed off as a guy. During a screening at Thiruvananthapuram, both the queer and heteronormative spectators praised the director for the progressive approach regarding the depiction of a trans man identity in the film. *Udalaazham* was premiered in IFFK 2018, and its media coverage in festival circles points out the positive responses of the spectators. At IFFK, the film was appreciated very well by the cinephilia. Even though, the actual watching of such films is less, as compared to mainstream films with theatre release, they form certain spaces for debate and discussion. Media reports and the interviews of the festival spectators show that the depiction of the tribal transgender in the film as well

appreciated. *Aalorukkam* was premiered in a theatre, but it has become a topic for discussion in academic circles, when Indrans won the Kerala State Film award for best actor. Still, the film is not received as a transgender film, but a father's realization and his slow acceptance of his child's gender identity. The politics of undermining transgender identity is evident in circulating the film as an *OttanThullal* maestro's search for his son. Sreekutty criticizes the film's marketing strategy by using the popularity of the awards, and keeping the transgender theme on the margins. She says, it is reflexive of the hypocritical stance that cultural productions take, even though they attempt to mainstream the marginalized identities (Excerpts from interview). It could be observed that the offbeat trans films are yet to be massively received because of their form. At the same time, the success of a commercial film like *Njan Marykutty* lies in its ability to entertain the masses. The language of offbeat films often neglects this visual pleasure of the common spectators. Televised and personal interviews with the directors of these offbeat films verify that they are unconcerned about the mass reception and huge profit by making an entertainer. These films are not commercial hits. Yet, the three trans themed offbeat films have grabbed the attention of cinephilia and have been actively discussed in academic circles. The impact of offbeat films and its reception among the selected spectators appear laudable from the media reports, interviews conducted, and participant observation of their screenings.

The release of *Njan Marykutty* in 2018 is a reflection of queer political activism and the emerging spaces of trans discourses with the governmental and non-governmental interventions. A lead cis actor in the industry taking up the role of a trans character is well covered by media as a bold move by the actor as well as the director. The valorization of the stardom of actor Jayasurya, the formal and aesthetic aspects of the script, the director's role in materializing it, etc. have significant contribution in creating an impact in the public sphere and making it a popular Malayalam film and a commercial success. Unlike the representation of trans persons as comic figures, villains, and 'abjects' as in other popular films, *Njan Marykutty*

politicizes the trans woman as a successful figure, a model and motivation for the patriarchal society to alter their 'image of trans people' as beggars, sex workers, and villains in real life. The film tried to realize the sensibilities of the industry as well. Since the film could identify the pulse of contemporary spectators; both the cisheteronormative and the queer, it is well received. As reported by media, in an interview soon after the first screening of the film, a few representatives of the trans community in Kerala appeared to be so moved by the reel depiction of the traumatic incidents they have undergone in society. A trans man states in the video, *Njan Marykutty* has been a touching film, there are trans men in the society, who are unheard and are forced to be silent and films should be made about their identities too.<sup>162</sup> Shyama, a trans woman, and the state Transgender Justice Board Project Officer applauds it, "The film is a message to society. The film offers motivation to the Marykkutties in society, who are still invisible. The film depicted the diverse life experiences of transgender people in society, which we have undergone" ("*Njan Marykutty*: Transgender's Heart Touching Response") It could also be observed that, with the release of *Njan Marykutty*, the inside space of the theatre became trans friendly, because many trans people turned up to watch a popular film about their life. This is suggestive of the acceptance the film received among Malayali trans people and set a model for their mainstreaming. But it also points at the confounded use of the terms 'transgender' and 'transsexual' in the film. The central character asserts, "I am not a transgender, I am a transsexual," which is questioned by trans woman Sreekkutty, as she has clarified it in the ethnographic interview: "The use of the two words in the film confuses the heteronormative spectators, who are rather unaware of the identities and their manifestations, it could have been 'I am a transgender person, and above all a transsexual person.'"

Popular Malayalam films always have a tendency to experiment with the hitherto marginalized topics according to formulaic aesthetics of industry. Post the

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<sup>162</sup>"*Njan Marykutty*: Transgender's Heart Touching Response." *YouTube*, uploaded by Koumudy, 15 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yzCxYJG31k>

90s, sexuality discourses became more active and radical in popular films, besides its political articulation through art films. The sex worker's role in society, homosexual orientation, and transgender life, has formed subjects for cultural discourses and films started representing such identities in the last three decades. Popular films attempted to reconstruct the public sphere in the first two decades of the twenty first century, especially, with the emergence of new generation films. Jurgen Habermas (1974) describes the public sphere as a constituted space in which "public organizes itself as a bearer of public opinion" (50). The commercialization of the culture industry has reformulated the public sphere by affecting their opinion formation process. The popular reception of *Njan Marykutty* could be attributed for its careful use of modern technology and cultural intermediaries for circulation and the treatment of the theme as appealing to the heteronormative as well as queer spectators. As discussed, the advertisements have helped *Njan Marykutty*, the associated networks of stardom is conveniently used for the film. It has formed discussions on trans identity in the public sphere. The media reports also underline that family spectators watched the film due to the popularity of actor Jayasurya. But the other offbeat films lack such family spectators.

While analyzing the the production, circulation, and reception of the selected films, the chapter has critically examined the strategies of production houses, the role of the media, the valorization of the stardom and associated networks, the mediated spaces among the queer and heteronormative spectators. Over a period of time, the identity contestations of the transgender individuals have reshaped the Malayalam cinema and industry aesthetics have played a major role in it. The mass spectatorship is what makes films popular and the consumption strategies are determined by the political, social and cultural changes happening in the public sphere from time to time. In the past, queer people could not voice themselves in Kerala, as scholarly studies show the history of gender and sexuality of the heteronormative majority. The discussion related to transgender visibility in the public sphere has less than a history of one and a half decade. The queer movement in the state has different phases from

the struggle for survival to activist spaces involving the political, cultural and academic interventions. Blurring the boundaries of commercial/popular, middle stream, and art genres, the selected cultural texts emphatically reflect the social changes in Kerala, from representation of transgender people as 'abjects' to politicization and celebration of their identities.

The selected films on trans subjects have not used trans persons for performing the lead role, and this itself is indicative of the politics in the production of cultural texts. Representation of transgender lives had not been a viable topic of popular films for quite a long time in the industry due to its leaning towards commercial interests and profit making. Even many art film makers have also been reluctant to make trans films, which is symptomatic of the heteronormative society's transphobia. The industry's shift of focus is a response to the social changes in acknowledging trans people, and recently, *Njan Marykutty's* marketing techniques and reception assert the mainstreaming of the marginalized by altering the modes of entertainment unlike that of *Chanthupottu*. Compared with commercial films, a small number of spectators watch independent offbeat films. But the selected offbeat films could initiate serious discussions in academic circles, with a hope for more critical explorations on the alternative gender spaces. The cultural significance of *Irattajeevitham*, *Aalorukkam*, and *Udalaazhamlies* in their unyielding spirit to politicize and articulate trans masculinity and trans femininity without compromising to commercial interests. A decade of trans representation in Malayalam cinema also demonstrates the *avantgarde* circulation strategies like the release of trailers and teasers, entertainment programs including chat shows, serious academic discussions, and open forums. The production and circulation of these selected texts have helped in mobilizing the trans identity in the public sphere, as the reception of the films show.

## Conclusion

The thesis aimed at critically re-viewing the construction and contestation of transgender identities represented in selected Malayalam films. Gender normativity has been defined by heteropatriarchy as the attraction towards the opposite sex, the enactment biological sex roles, and the formation of heterosexual families. In India, the articulation of same-sex desires was observed as a crime, and various trans communities were penalized under the British Victorian moral codes. The groundwork for this thesis hence began by tracing the sexual practices that deviate from the patriarchal moral codes, tagged as ‘unnatural’ and their connection to the visibility of non-heteronormative gender performances. There is a vast literature concerned with the same-sex desire in Hindu mythological texts from which many trans communities in India legitimize their identities. The connection between same-sex desire and gender identity construction in Indian texts remain indisputable.

In India, the understanding of trans identity is initially situated around the cultural significance of hijra identity. Historical documents situate them as people who undergo forced castration and the colonial rule stigmatized them as ‘criminal tribe.’ The *Criminal Tribes Act* penalized the homosexual acts, and asexual occupations related to singing, dancing, and begging of the hijra community. The intervention of NAZ Foundation, a sexual health project based in Delhi, helped their community in gaining awareness about HIV/AIDS, to raise upto activist mode and to speak about their rights, and to speak against different forms of oppression post 1950s till date.

The visibility of the queer and trans community in Kerala is inextricably linked with feminist and queer movements, sex workers’ movements, CBO interventions, Governmental reactions to these, and cultural representations. They go side by side with the broad frame of national debates of the rights of transgender and

homosexual people since independence. However, a momentum could be observed after the 1990s only, and it received explicit mention in various discourses in the twenty first century. The activist and academic interventions for decriminalization of IPC 377 are most visible in the second half of the twenty first century. The queer movement especially sought to remove the stigma associated with queer and trans people, their welfare, and to question forced heteronormativity.

Film is a major and active form of cultural practice in Kerala that has been addressing different gender discourses in the public sphere. Early cultural interventions like theatre also have contributed to performance occupying gender, class, caste, but from a binary perspective. The thesis could see gender dissidence through female impersonation (mostly male actors cross dressed as female characters, and rarely females cross dressed as male characters) in Kerala's performance traditions. The political significance of cross dressing to represent gender nonconformity remained as an unexplored area in the early decades in theatre and later in films, because of cross dressing's appeal to evoke laughter. But the fact that the appearance and behaviour of female impersonation exhibited desiring bodies on stage, and screen is undeniably true. Though cross dressing is used extensively to create humour in comedy skits in the early 2000s in television channels, Malayalam cinema in the 1990s used cross dressing of cis men as a trope of humour. One could discern that the non-heteronormative gender is critiqued and made fun at through the cross dressed performances. It is also significant to read the soft diplomatic silence adopted by Malayalam cinema until the early 2000s regarding queer and trans identities. All these could be attributed to the hegemonic heteronormative society that imagined the state as free from any 'sexual and gender dissidence.' The collective reactions against the dominant heteronormal framework by feminist and queer political movements underscore the transformation in the region. The thesis argues that such socio political movements strived to shatter the autonomy of heteronormal sexuality, binary gender identities, and the ideological position cinema has adopted till then.

Contemporary Malayalam cinema has a different approach to gender variance. However, a critical examination of the selected films points out that the cisheteronormative model of gender identity could not be bypassed easily. The films narrate transgender life under struggles and sorrows for 'being trapped in the wrong body.' These seven selected show the phases of gender dysphoria and coming out; the transgender characters feel identity crisis, they are ostracized by family and society, migrate to other spaces in search of a space to perform their gender according to their choice, and return as 'cured'/ 'queered.' It is significant to observe the titles- *Chanthupottu*, *Ardhanaari*, *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, *Irattajeevitham*, *Aalorukkam*, *Njan Marykkutty*, and *Udalaazham* are focusing on body, identity, the aspect of make up for configuring the gender identity, and the reference to dance, an art that manifest 'feminine gender performance.' Incidentally only one film is there in the selected list that deal with the identity of a trans man.

*Chanthupottu* presents gender variance and identity crisis of the central character, but it conforms to the heteronormative values of society. This could be attributed to the period of its release as well. The feminine-presenting Radhakrishnan is forced to 'father a male child' to prove their 'masculinity,' as the film underlines the ideals of hegemonic masculinity in the state. It also depicts the forced masculinization, as in the end of the narrative, 'Radha' becomes 'Radhakrishnan' by venturing into sea as a fisherman rather than earning the livelihood as a feminine-presenting male dancer. Whereas, *Ardhanaari* captures the lives of the hijra community, who do not have any space in their native, due to their gender nonconformity. The film has drawn attention towards the inhuman treatment by family and society on hijras when they express their gender dysphoria. The suicide of the central character after suffering much in life is the result of the prejudistic attitude of the society on a person's gender identity. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, explores this subject further but through non-nonsensical humour through the feminine-presenting central character Thamburu. At the surface level, Thamburu's 'queering' in the



narrative through the participation in the Koovagam transgender festival at the end appears as a progressive stand adopted by the film. Yet, it also creates ambivalence, as it is a temporary space of transgender performance outside Kerala and the perspectives in the regional space has not changed at all to affects their return. After a short gap of three years, an offbeat film released in 2017 has politicized the transgender subject in Kerala. *Irattajeevitham* critiques the heteronormative society by portraying lesbian longings and trans man identity. However, the film blends one's sexual orientation and gender expressions and hence the film's portrayal of trans man identity is misguided to an extent. *Aalorukkam* released in 2018 has been circulated in Kerala, as a father's search for his missing 'son,' whom he later finds out as a trans woman. The film signals the father's approval of the daughter in the end narrative. It is demonstrative of the emotional battle between the hegemonic heteronormative patriarchal mindset and the cosmopolitan liberal attitude of the contemporary young generation. *Njan Marykutty* is the film that has become quite popular with wide media attention, and the positive reactions from the transgender community in Kerala. Though it avoids any discussion about the traditional transgender communities in India, it could shed lights to the problems faced by trans people in contemporary society through the life of the trans woman Marykutty. The release of this film and its reception is at the high point of the queer movement for visibility, that turned out to be a celebration and articulation of transgender identity in the public sphere. It could also be discerned that *Njan Marykutty* projects a trans woman from an upper middle class background whose success, to an extent is benefitted by education and strong aspiration to become what one wishes to be. *Udalaazham*, is another significant trans film released in Kerala as part of the IFFK 2018, that unfolds the struggles of a trans person from a tribal community who lacks social privileges. In stark contrast to *Njan Marykutty*, the color and marginal identity of the cast(e) plays crucial role in the sufferings of the trans character.

While analyzing the selected films, it is observed that the gender performance of trans people is imagined from heteronormative models. Clothing is used as a

metaphor for one's gender identity and in films it is perceived as a cultural symbol as well. They use sari, churidar, *mundu*, shirt etc. and are worn in such a way, that it constructs 'Malayali identity' which is noted for its essential difference in the ritualistic transgender community (hijras) in the other states. The thesis argues that clothing endorses heteronormalization of trans bodies (as in the films *Irattajeevitham*, *Aalorukkam*, and *Njan Marykutty*) and gender fluidity in *Udalaazham*. *Chanthupottu* fits with this trope in Radhakrishnan's forced queering. Cinema's use of a few visual codes, like the mirrors form recurring metaphors that represent trans people's identity confusion, realization of the self, and embodiment of the underpinned psychological gender. The pleasure politics of eroticization also works in the subtext in the representation of 'feminized' trans figures.

Cinema uses sexuality as a metaphor to visualize the gender variance of a trans characters. The sexual desire of a queer is connected to their gender dysphoria in the selected films. However, in *Njan Marykutty*, the trans woman's sexual orientation is diplomatically silenced. This thesis however critiques this, and also the other films for their representation of trans people as sexual objects. In the fourth chapter the pleasure politics and the victimization of transgender people is explored in detail by cinema's narrative construction and visualisation of violence on transgender bodies. The forced heteronormalization, gender bashing, verbal and physical abuse, sexual violence (rape, molestation), and disrobing in public spaces are the major concerns addressed by the selected films. Such depictions capture the post-trauma of these characters, and could be perceived as attempts to bring gender sensitization. However, this thesis critiques the portrayal of extreme violence on screen and objectifying trans characters as sexual figures.

Majority of the trans people in Kerala are placed at the margins of society due to their gender identity as the state Transgender survey report 2014 records. Malayalam cinema represents trans people as those who belong to the marginal communities, unable to access social privileges to establish their identity, and are

stigmatized. However, a few trans people like Marykutty, are benefitted by education, gets salaried job, medical assistance to alter the bodies, and exposure to outside world to conquer their dreams. *Njan Marykutty* makes use of a success myth to motivate trans people as well as asks the society to change its attitude. This cinematic model fails to address the many problems trans people in contemporary Kerala face.

A significant aspect to be noted is contemporary Malayalam cinema's efforts to capture trans lives and their attempts assimilate to society. Kerala stands first in the index of literacy and yet it had to wait from 1956 to 2018 to produce films with trans characters at the centre. It spreads light to the paralysis in our own social policies and the pseudo moral codes of heteronormativity. From the earlier identifications of transgender characters living on the margins of metro cities with the cultural identity of the hijras, cinema now has progressed to give space for transgender people to 'appear' as themselves. However, in the mainstream cinema, commercial success and market-oriented interests continue to play the pivotal role and cinema end up to adopt an outsider's gaze at transgender lives as well.

This thesis also takes into consideration the queer and trans spectatorship who are muted by the dominant heteronormative society. The queer spectators tend to feel the outsider's domination on their lives as only the central character is a trans person and the films depict the struggles of the trans person in the heteronormative society. In the *Kazhcha-Niv Indie Film Festival* (KNIFF 2018), the trans activist Kalki Subramaniam, who spoke about 'the portrayal and impact of trans lives in Indian Cinema' opined that, trans people should be able to speak about themselves in cinema, there is the need for transgender film makers, and the community should be able to express without fear and shame. She also urged young filmmakers to make films from the point of view of trans community. Hence, after analyzing the selected texts, the lacuna of transgender's own voice is constantly felt in many of them. Cis actors play trans roles, which complicates the issue further with the notion that film industry itself is working from the angle of heteronormativity. Moreover, most of

trans actors remain in the closet. The tremendous shift happening in Tamil film industry is relevant to mention, a Malayali trans woman Anjali Ameer has performed the leading trans character in the film who gets a compassionate treatment and voice in the Tamil film *Peranbu* (2019, Dir. Ram). Such brave attempts are absent in Malayalam cinema, except a few trans persons playing non-binary ‘side characters’ in *Thira* (2013), *Mayanadhi* (2017), and *Aabhasam* (2018). Another film *Daivathinte Manavatti* in which trans woman Harini playing the lead role<sup>163</sup> is a welcoming news.

This study argues that there has been transformation in Kerala as trans people ‘come out’ and articulate their identity in public sphere. Their visibility is a result of democratic politics of recognition and efforts by the progressive media. The inclusive agenda, even though motivated by market interests, also identifies the lacune in the social policies and activism. More compassionate treatment is to be meted to transgender people. For instance, the Tamil film *Super Deluxe* (2019, Dir. Thilagarajan Kumararaja) presents the new concept of ‘trans parenting.’ Its high time that Malayalam cinema also allow trans identity to subsume to mainstream society. Certain limitations of the thesis cannot go unmentioned. The non-heteronormative sexual practices and gender identities are enlisted through primary viewing of films since the 1960s, reviewing literature which includes scholarly articles, academic theses, media reports, oral narratives and participant observation. However, the thesis has analyzed only seven Malayalam feature films in detail that narrated trans lives over the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For the purpose of homogenous documentation, the thesis excluded the emerging genre of films that portray trans people for trans roles. The thesis does not examine other forms of cinema like documentaries, short films, ad films, televised and web serials that focus on trans identity. The political significations of such representations require detailed analysis in future inquiries. This thesis marks the groundwork of the dissenting voices sprung in Malayalam cinema regarding the understanding of transgender identity, their

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<sup>163</sup>“Transgender Harini to Play Lead Role.” *On Manorama*, 22 April 2019, <https://english.manoramaonline.com/entertainment/entertainment-news/2019/04/15/transgender-harini-indaivathinte-manavatti.html>

gender performance, transgender sexuality, violence on transgender people, and their social positioning. The narrative strategies and reception of such films also matter among the heteronormative majority and queer minority. To sum up, the examples set through these selected transgender films in Malayalam unwrap the evolution of 'transgender' as subjects in contemporary Kerala. The trans characterization in the selected films serve as a point of reference to trans contemporaneity in the region.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1

#### List of Non-Detailed Films Cited in Chapter 2

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- Abu, Aashiq. director. *Salt n' Pepper*. Lucsam Creations, 2011.
- Abu, Aashiq. director. *22 Female Kottayam*. Film Brewery, 2012.
- Abu, Aashiq. director. *Rani Padmini*. Fort Entertainment, 2015.
- Abu, Aashiq. director. *Mayaanadhi*. Dream Mill Cinemas and Entertainments, 2017.



- Akbar, Akku. director. *Mathai Kuzhappakkaranalla*. Aan Mega Media, 2014.
- Akbar, Akku. director. *Ulsaha Committee*. Chand V. Creations, 2014.
- Andrews, Rosshan. director. *Mumbai Police*. NisaadHaneefa Productions, 2013.
- Antony, Johny. director. *C.I.D. Moosa*. Grand Productions, 2003.
- Anthikkad, Sathyan. director. *Gandhi Nagar 2nd Street*. Casino, 1986.
- Anthikkad, Sathyan. director. *Thalayanamanthram*. Mudra Arts, 1990.
- Anthikkad, Sathyan. director. *Rasathanthram*. Aashirvad Cinemas, 2006.
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- Anwar, Aneesh. director. *Zachariyayude Garbhinikal*. Friday Film House, 2013.
- Baburaj. director. *Black Dalia*. Yemky Films, 2009.
- Balan, P. director. *Aanppove (Male Flower)*. 1996.
- Bava, Salim. director. *Rapid Action Force*. Shirdisai Creations, 2000.
- Bhaskaran, P. director. *Kalli Chellamma*, Roopavani Films, 1969.
- Bhaskaran, P. director. *Arakkallan Mukkalkkallan*, Prathap Arts Pictures, 1974.
- Blessy. director. *Kalimannu*. Cherumuttadathu Films, 2014.
- Binu, S. director. *Ithihasa*. A. R. K. Media, 2014.
- Chandrashekharan. director. *Cheriyala Lokavum Valiya Manushyarum*. ChaitramCini Arts, 1990.
- Chandrasekharan. director. *Arjunan Pillayum Anju Makkalum. Sree Shakti Productions*, 1997.
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- Fazil. director. *Manichitrathazhu*. Swargachitra, 1993.
- Fazil. director. *Harikrishnans*. Pranavam Arts, 1998.
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- Gopinath, Anil. director. *Garbhasreeman*, J. K. Productions, 2014.
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- Jose, Lal. director. *Meesa Madhavan*. Moviekshetra, 2002.
- Jose, Lal. director. *Elsamma Enna Aankutty*. Rajaputhra Visual Media, 2010.
- Jose, Lal. director. *Nee-na*. L. J. Films, 2015.
- Joseph, Basil. director. *Godha*. E4 Entertainment, 2017.
- Kailas, Shaji. director. *Aaram Thamburan*. RevathyKalamandir, 1997.
- Kailas, Shaji. director. *The Truth*. A. B. R. Productions, 1998.
- Kailas, Shaji. director. *Drona 2010*. Aroma International, 2010.
- Kariat, Ramu. director. *Chemmeen*. Kanmani Films, 1965.
- Kamal. director. *Ayal Kadha Ezhuthukayanu*. Kalinga Vision, 1998.
- Kamal. director. *Aami*. Reel & Real Cinema, 2018.
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- Kunchacko. director. *Ponnapuram Kotta. Udaya*, 1973.
- Kunchacko. director. *Kannappanunni*, Excel Productions, 1977.
- Lal, Renjith, *Nawal Enna Jewel*. Indusvalley Film Creations, 2017.

- Lohithadas, A. K. director. *Kanmadam*. Pranavam, 1998.
- Lohithadas, A. K. director. *Soothradharan*. Milan Jaleel, 2001.
- Lohithadas, A. K. director. *Chakram*. KittuAmmini Arts, 2003.
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- Malayil, Sibi. director. *Pranayavarnangal*. Dream Makers, 1998.
- Malayil, Sibi. director. *Summer in Bethlehem*. Kokers Films, 1998.
- Malayil, Sibi. director. *Apoorvaragam*. Koker's Films, 2010.
- Mehta, Deepa. director. *Fire*. Kaleidoscope Entertainment, 1998.
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- Mohan. director. *Randu Penkuttikal*. Sree Ganesh Kalamandir, 1978.
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- Mohan. Sandhya. director. *Hitler Brothers*. Swetha Films, 1997.
- Mohan. Sandhya. director. *Kilukkam Kilukilukkam*. Back Waters Entertainment, 2006.
- Nair, Dileesh. director. *Tamaar Padaar*. Rajaputhra Visual Media, 2014.
- Nair, Krishnan M. director. *Karutha Kai*. Neela, 1964.
- Nair, Krishnan M. director. *Cochin Express*, Jaya Maruthi, 1967.
- Nair, Krishnan M. director. *Paadunna Puzha*, Jaya Maruthi, 1968.
- Nair, Sankaran N. director. *Vishnu Vijayam*. Samarias, 1974.
- Namradath, Jubith. director. *Aabhasam*. Spire Productions, 2018.
- Nissar. director. *Three Men Army*. Baba's Vision, 1995.
- Nissar. director. *Meranam Joker*. Suryakanthi Cinemas, 2000.
- Padmakumar, M.B. director. *My Life Partner*. Kirthana Movies, 2014.
- Padmarajan. director. *Desatanakkili Karayarilla*. Burton Movies, 1986.
- Panicker, Renji. director. *Pathram*. Seven Arts Films, 1998.
- Panicker, Renji Nithin. director. *Kasaba*. Goodwill Entertainments, 2016.
- Prakash, V. K. director. *Trivandrum Lodge*. Time Ads Entertainment, 2012.
- Prakkatt, Martin. director. *Charlie*. Finding Cinema, 2015.
- Priyadarshan. director. *BoeingBoeing*. Evershine Productions, 1985.
- Priyadarshan. director. *Vandanam*. Shirdi Sai Creations, 1989.
- Priyadarshan. director. *Kilukkam*. Goodknight Films, 1991.
- Priyanandan. director. *Sufi Paranja Katha*. Silicon Media, 2010.
- Rafi & Mecartin. directors. *Thenkasipattanam*. Lal Creations, 2000.
- Rafi & Mecartin. directors. *Hallo*. Jithin Arts, 2007.
- Raj, A.B. director. *Anjathavasam*. Ganesh Pictures, 1973.
- Rajasenan. director. *CID Unnikrishnan B. A., B. Ed*. Rajalakshmi Movie, 1994.
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- Sasi, I. V. director. *Devasuram*. Anugraha Cine Arts, 1993.
- Sasi, I. V. director. *Ee Nadu Innale Vare*. Silver Screen Movies, 2001.
- Sasikumar, J. director. *Rest House*. Ganesh Pictures, 1969.
- Sasikumar, J. director. *Ithikkara Pakki*. Sree Murugalaya Films, 1980.
- Saji, T. S. director. *Thillana Thillana*. Kerala Talkies, 2003.
- Saji, T. S. director. *Chirikkudukka*. Vismaya Films, 2002.
- Shankar, Sasi. director. *Kunhikkoonan*. Milan Jaleel, 2002.
- Shafi. director. *One Man Show*. Aswathey Films. 2001.
- Shafi. director. *Chocolate*. Anantha Vision, 2007.
- Shafi. director. *101 Weddings*. Film Folks, 2012.

- Shafi. director. *Two Countries*. Rajaputhra Visual Media, 2015.
- Shine, Abrid. director. *Action Hero Biju*. Pauly Jr. Pictures, 2016.
- Shine, Abrid. director. *Poomaram*. Dr. Paul's Entertainment, 2018.
- Shyamaprasad. director. *Rithu*. Play House, 2009.
- Shyamaprasad. director. *English; An Autumn in London*. Navarang Screens, 2013.
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- Thamarakkulam, Kannan. director. *Chanakyathanthram*. Miracle Productions, 2018.
- Thampi, Viji. director. *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Nootandu*. Prathiksha Pictures, 1994.
- Thampi, Viji. director. *Naranathu Thampuram*. Aroma Movie International, 2001.
- Thomas, Jose. director. *Mayamohini*. Color Factory, 2012.
- Thomas, Sooraj. director. *Ente Mezhuthiri Athazhangal*. 999 Entertainments, 2018.
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- Vembu, K. director. *Jeevitha Nauka*. K & K Combines, 1951.
- Venu. director. *Carbon*. Poetry Film House, 2018.
- Vimal, R. S. director. *Ennu Ninte Moideen*. Newton Movies, 2015.
- Vinayan. director. *Akashaganga*. Vinayan, 1999.
- Vinayan. director. *Independence*. Gurubavan Vision, 1999.
- Vinayan. director. *Boy Friend*. Harikrishna Productions, 2005.
- Vincent, A. director. *Thulabharam*. Supriya, 1968.
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## Appendix 2

### List of Malayalam Queer and Transgender Literary Works Cited in Chapter 1

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## Appendix 3

### Ethnographic Interviews

The interviews were unstructured, as transgender people were asked to voice their own reflections and experiences. The following are two samples from the excerpts of such interviews.

#### a. Interviewee: Sreekkutty Namitha

**Q:** How would you introduce yourself?

**A:** I am sreekkutty, a native of Thiruvananthapuram. I am a trans woman, works for the welfare of transgender people in Kerala. I am the president of the Oasis Cultural Society, an organization works for the welfare of trans people.

**Q:** What is your take on the recent transgender visibility in Kerala, and your life, your experiences?

**A:** I underwent the SRS only a year ago, and my *Jelsa* was celebrated by the community members. My guru came from Delhi, as I was one among many of her chelas. I too have a son and daughters now. I travelled a lot, literally I roamed in cities. Many treated me very badly, even my family, now they have approved my identity. But it's not the case of all transgender people, many are still unable to disclose their identity due to the society's attitude. I should say, there is change, the government has helped us a lot, we travel in public spaces, attend functions. The IFFK 2016 gave us a platform to speak up. Even, I too was a delegate, and media interviewed me and published my comments, I am so happy about it.

**Q:** The interventions of the government are helpful, right? The employment opportunities in Kochi Metro...

**A:** Yes, the government is helping us, but the job at Kochi metro is not implemented in the right way. There is a kind of untouchability, like we are placed at the lowest, and there was meagre salary too. We couldn't afford the high cost of living in the city, moreover, the general attitude of the society is that we are sex workers. So, a decent accommodation was denied. What the authority should do is, to give us opportunities to complete our education, reservations for employment opportunities to an extent. And short-term funds for setting up our own small business will also be helpful to uplift us. Change will happen in future, slowly.

**Q:** How would you see the representation of transgender people in Malayalam films? Is there any change?

**A:** Malayalam cinema treated us very badly, as all of us know, *Chanthupottu* represented feminine-presenting men as figures of social rejection. When it ridiculed us, the film *Ardhanaari* attempted to look into our lives seriously. The film is emblematic of the treatment we received in Kerala's public sphere. It (*Ardhanaari*) is different from any other Malayalam film, for its depiction of religious myths, cultural significance and rituals specific to the hijra community.

**Q:** What about the film *Njan Marykutty*...

**A:** I am happy that, a popular actor has shown the courage to act in a film that tells the story of a trans woman. It wet my eyes, many of us have undergone such harassing life situations. When I was in Mumbai, hot water was poured on my face when I begged due to starvation. *Njan Marykutty* introduces the transgender identity to Malayalis, it is a decent representation and inspirational for us. But I should also wish to point out that the use of the two words, 'transgender' and 'transsexual' in the film confuses the heteronormative spectators, who are rather unaware of the identities and their manifestations, it could have been 'I am a transgender and above all, a transsexual.'

**Q:** Have you watched *Irattajeevitham*, *Aalorukkam*, and *Udalaazham*?

**A:** No, I didn't watch *Irattajeevitham* or *Udalaazham*. But I acted in *Aalorukkam*. We were approached by the director that it will be a big push for us, but we were shown in a small scene only. It was marketed as something else, I guess, with Indrans. Many short films, documentaries are also coming out focusing our lives. P. Abhijith, a press photographer made a documentary on Surya, who is now married to Ishaan. In fact, I am happy about the changing attitudes of film makers and the public.

#### **b. Interviewee: Karthik**

**Q:** Can you please introduce yourself?

**A:** I am Karthik, I am 20 years old, I was born as a girl in Thiruvananthapuram. I did not complete my education due to my gender identity. Students made fun of me. And about my family... I have a brother. My mother passed away, and brother lives with my father now. I

now live as the son of Sreekkutty Amma. My father and brother come to see me. I am quite happy here.

**Q:** How do you see the change in society...

I am undergoing SRS now, it's a lengthy process. Earlier I was ridiculed for being boyish, now I am happy that I am easily passed off as a guy. I have enrolled for continuing education. I have friends like myself; I have a girl friend now (smiles).

**Q:** Do you watch films? Have you watched any Malayalam films with transgender characters?

Yes, I do. *Chanthupottu* is a failure for its indecent portrayal of transgender people. *Ardhanaari* is about transgender community, but it failed due to its style. We all went together to watch *Njan Marykutty*, chechies were crying, and they said, it's their true life. And there's less films on people like me. I watched *Irattajeevitham* in Queerythm's special screening. It's about an FtM transgender identity. A feel-good movie... I hope that people will definitely change and more films will be made by, and on us.

## Appendix 4

### Excerpts from interview with Unnikrishnan Avala (The director of *Udalaazham*)

**Q:** Your reflections and experiences regarding your film *Udalaazham*?

**A:** *Udalaazham* is about the life of a tribal transgender. One could approach the subject in two levels. Firstly, it is about one's personal struggle for existence, and then it's about society's notions on one's appearance, beauty, and how the society marginalizes people who are different from the normative assumptions of sexuality, gender, and beauty. I was inspired by the life of Raju, who was an intersex, and a tribal person from Wayanad. The biggest challenge I faced was how to approach the subject differently, as many others have already filmed tribal people. Hence, I approached Mani, who is the first tribal film actor, he acted in the film *Photographer* when he was a boy. He was reluctant initially; however, we managed to convince him regarding the significance of the role. The film is structured as portraying the forest, plain, and sea, and how the landscape and the society interact with the tribal transgender character. Gulikan's life could be simply put as hir constant run, between hir two legs; they cover as much distance as they can. Gulikan's crisis is different from the transgender people who live as a community, like the hijras. The society participates in hir identity quest. They are also troubled by the loss of hir habitat. But during my visit to the tribal colony, interestingly, I found a tribal transgender person lives with hir family. The family has approved and supports hir transgender identity. They seemed quite comfortable. However, Gulikan is ostracised once they leave hir natural space.

**Q:** Have you faced any difficulty in depicting the gender identity and sexuality of a transgender person in the film?

Gulikan is a transgender, though I was motivated by the life of intersex person Raju. In the film the transgender's body hence appear to be gender-queer, they have feminine gestures, and a developed bosom like a female. Regarding sexuality, Gulikan feels they are trapped in

a wrong body, and ‘they’ are ‘women.’ Then how can we call hir homosexual when they are attracted towards an elder macho man?

**Q:** How would you look back at the days of the shooting of *Udalaazham*?

**A:** Most of the actors of the film are real tribal people who belong to the Paniya tribe in Vettilakkolly colony. They acted in the film without any specific training. The location was near to a river bank, which usually floods in the monsoon season. In order to maintain natural touch, we avoided artificial electricity lights and used lighted torches.

**Q:** The crew behind the film...

**A:** A group of friends who have professional background in the industry motivated a lot. Regarding the producers, the film is a collective effort by a group of doctors. Dr. K. T. Manoj, Dr. Rajesh, and Dr.Sajeesh produced the film under the banner ‘Doctor’s Dilemma.’ I am indebted to many of the actors and technicians who supported the film without claiming any reward.

**Q:** How do you observe the films reception?

I am not aiming a commercial success, like *Njan Marykutty* or any other popular movie; however, I am happy for the good reviews and recognition received by the film in MAMI and IFFK 2018. I hope for feedback from foreign spectators as well.

## **Appendix 5**

### **Personal Interviews with Film Scholars**

A number of interviews (through direct interaction, using google forms, and through telephone) were conducted with film scholars.

### **Excerpts from responses collected**

Sample Respondents:

1. Deepak O. Nair (Film Scholar, Curator)
2. Muraleedharan Tharayil (Academic, Chetana College of Media and Performing Arts, Thrissur)

**Q:** What is your opinion about the transgender representations in Malayalam cinema- Do you think cinema represent real life of transgender people? Do you have any criticism on the representation? How do you think transgender people should be represented in cinema?

**Ans. 1:** Films on transgender people do not represent real life in completion as it is a medium of expression for revenue generation, certain extend of cinematic elements must have to be included. However, in many films with fleeting scenes with transgender people, they are presented to evoke laughter. Such representation demeans the individuality of these gender identities. So, such vulgarization or mockery of trans-identities must be avoided.

**Ans. 2:** The representations are mostly superfluous.

**Q:** Do you think Malayalam cinema has changed in treating the subject of transgender identity?

**Ans. 1:** Yes, these days' film makers are more aware of representations and seem to be cautious about characterisations. However, by and large, their personal thoughts and misconceptions do reflect at times. Anyhow people seem to be more aware and films with Jayasurya starring as a transgender person which was released last year as a mainstream cinema as such experiments that Malayalam cinema can afford in the present situation.

**Ans. 2:** Some mild change, but nothing substantial.

**Q:** Have you watched the Malayalam film *Ardhanaari*? What is your opinion about the character Vinayan? How do you observe Manoj K. Jayan's enactment of the transgender character Vinayan?

**Ans. 1:** This seems to be a well-made film representing the pangs of a transgender person born in Kerala with the theme of acceptance as a focus. Representations sometimes as stated before demands cinematic elements for communicating to audience effectively well. So, do we find the characters sometimes crossing the limits of descent representations. However, the film seems to have been instrumental enough to build a basic awareness with regard to some common misconceptions that Malayalam film audience had until then for they never used to discuss these if otherwise in "respectable" circles.

**Ans. 2:** The character had some complexity, which was interesting. But the film was too dramatic towards the end.

**Q:** Have you seen the film *Chanthupottu*? What is your opinion about the character Radhakrishnan? Comments about Dileep's enactment of Radhakrishnan in the film *Chanthupottu*.

**Ans. 1:** *Chanthupottu*, as could be observed seems to be highly misrepresented in the sense that the character itself does not have a completion which is what is required in narrative mediums like films. Though the film was a break from the mainstream representations of those days, it garnered the misconceptions of Malayali viewers very much. It was like adding oil to fire for it portrayed a character who seems to be gay interested in cross dressing falling in love and emerging as a heroic figure who shirks of all fears and frets to become a man conveying a message that to man someone is the ultimate need and that is possible. Being gay is only a passing stage that one may assume as an identity in being foolish enough to think thus.

**Ans. 2:** I think Dileep did well, but the film's approach was very transphobic.

**Q:** Have you seen the film *Njan Marykutty*? What are your observations about the character of Marykutty as a transgender person? What is your opinion about Jayasurya's representation of Marykutty in the film *Njan Marykutty*?

**Ans. 1:** No.

**Ans. 2:** I think it was a very flat film, and Jayasurya had done a very bad job.

**Q:** How did you come across these transgender films?



**Ans. 1:** Film News from Magazines/other print media/ Film News from Social Media/ other internet sources, etc.

**Ans. 2:** Film News from Magazines/other print media/ Film News from Social Media/ other internet sources, etc.

## List of Publications based on the Thesis

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2. Kuriakose, Anu. "Hetero-sexualizing the Transgender Identity: A Discourse of the Marginalized in *Njan Marykutty*." *Cambridge Scholars Publishing*, 2020 (Forthcoming).
3. Kuriakose, Anu. "Of Transgender Bodies that Matter: *Queering the Media Narratives in Kerala*." *Alteritas: EFL-U Journal of Literary Inquiry*. 1(1) August 2019.
4. Kuriakose, Anu. "Masculinities without Men: Reflections on the Invisibilization of Female to Male Transgender Identities in Kerala." *Gender and Politics: Emerging Trends and Issues*, edited by Dr. Samuel Jacob Kuruvilla, Pravada Books, March 2019, pp. 18-27. ISBN 9788194025139
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