

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

*A Thesis submitted*

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*by*

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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