

Mapping the Queer Body: Queer Tropes and Malayalam Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The narrative logic of mainstream Malayalam cinema is often predicated on heteronormative values and homophobic social practices. Though representations of LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and agender) desires (both individual and collective) have been subject to changes particularly after the historical verdict of 2018, mainstream Malayalam cinema is quite reluctant to explore “the love that had for so long been left out in the cold” (Griffiths 2008, 130). Barring a few exceptions, most of the films produced in Kerala (since Malayalam cinema’s inception in 1928) have characterised LGBTQIA+ as aberrant, abnormal, or deviant. Having said that, there have been considerable efforts from progressive filmmakers to critique and subvert the homophobic sentiments of the society and engage with queer desires in Malayalam cinema either denotatively or connotatively. This has been made possible due to their exposure to variegated cultural values as a result of the changing socio-economic and political conditions. By identifying three major tropes (the closeted queer body, the stereotyped queer body, and the visible queer body) in queer filmic representations, the paper attempts to map the many expressions of queer subjectivities in Malayalam cinema. In the process, the article demonstrates how queer cinema in Malayalam disrupts heteronormativity using its queer aesthetics.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+, queer tropes, homophobia, Malayalam cinema, Kerala

INTRODUCTION

The narrative logic of mainstream Malayalam cinema¹ is often predicated on heteronormative values and homophobic social practices. Though representations of LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and agender) desires (both individual and collective) have been subject to changes particularly after the historical verdict of 2018,² mainstream Malayalam cinema is quite reluctant to explore “the love that had for so long been left out in the cold” (Griffiths 2008, 130). Barring a few exceptions, most of the films produced in Kerala (since Malayalam cinema’s inception in 1928) have characterised LGBTQIA+ as aberrant, abnormal, or deviant. Such constructs of sexuality, particularly LGBTQIA+ subjectivities and their desires, expose the regressive nature of Malayalam cinema in spite of its prodigious claim as an industry that represents/renders a fully literate and progressive society in India. Having said that, there have been considerable efforts from progressive filmmakers to critique and subvert the homophobic sentiments of the society and engage with queer desires in Malayalam cinema either denotatively or connotatively. This has been made possible due to their exposure to variegated cultural values as a result of the changing socio-economic and political conditions. By identifying three major tropes (the closeted queer body, the stereotyped queer body, and the visible queer body) in queer filmic representations, the present study attempts to map the many expressions of queer subjectivities in Malayalam cinema. In the process, the article demonstrates how queer cinema in Malayalam disrupts heteronormativity using its queer aesthetics.

THE CLOSETED QUEER BODY

In his *The Celluloid Closet*, a classic survey of homosexuality in Hollywood films, Vito Russo (1981) explores the politics of the (mis)representation of gays and lesbians in popular cinema. According to him, they were presented as an unseen danger and/or as the dark side of the “American dream.” Similarly, the Malayalam film industry privileged heterosexual and homophobic narratives by offering a liminal vision of the entire queer life in Kerala, albeit in unique ways. In this process, the actual life of Keralites with same-sex desires (gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and those some who don’t align themselves with any particular sexual orientation) were either downplayed or outrightly ignored. Public anathema caused by the homophobic sensibility of Keralites also accentuates the filmmakers’ hesitancy to map such issues. Moreover, section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, valid till 2018, made homosexuality a criminal act and a punishable offence. As a result, mainstream films maintained a strange silence about LGBTQIA+ issues as if queerness was either completely absent in Kerala or treated as a western import, despite films like *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1978) and *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (Migratory Bird Never Cries, 1986) which “compromisingly” addressed lesbian desires. There was a paradigmatic shift in perspectives regarding gender and sexuality, particularly after the 1990s with the restructuring of the Indian economy. As part of globalisation policies, there was a proliferation of satellite televisions in India, which initiated a wide variety of Indian and international programmes of atypical content for the Indian audience. While elaborating the impact of television in the conventional Indian households in the 1990s, Shohini Ghosh contends thus, “In the 1990s, television challenged heteronormativity by creating space for queer representations. Queer issues were addressed directly in newscasts, talk shows, and interviews. Queer spaces also appeared in television serials” (Ghosh 2002, 216). This paradigm shift in the portrayal of LGBTQIA+ desires in television also impacted the form and content of films produced during this period. For instance, *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004) directed by Ligy J. Pullappally is arguably the first Malayalam film that explicitly addressed the politics of lesbian desires progressively.

Mainstream Malayalam cinema of the 1990s was predominantly a heterosexual enterprise and reified the figure of a heterosexual upper caste masculine hero. Since it was difficult for a filmmaker to make an LGBTQIA+ film ignoring the existing homophobic determinism, very few filmmakers dared to address LGBTQIA+ issues explicitly. However, despite such dominance of heterosexual narratives, there were (in) visible cases of subversive and/or closeted characters in the 1990s Malayalam cinema which in turn challenged, though indirectly, the heteronormative discourses of popular films. This broader moral ambivalence about homosexuality silently transgressed the overarching enterprises like heterosexuality and its capitalist libidinal desires. As Muraleedharan Tharayil, a pioneering scholar of queer studies in Kerala, argued, in a closeted Malayalam film “the ideal ‘masculine’ identity is defined alternatively as desiring and desired by another male. This desire is sharply contrasted with the male’s near-total indifference to a physically alluring female” (Tharayil 2002, 189). By celebrating the seemingly asexual, homosocial companionship among men, male buddy films of the period negotiated and visualised complex physical intimacies and queer desires. Having said that, mainstream Malayalam films of the 1990s only offered connotative meaning(s) unlike some millennial films that explicitly addressed queer issues (Doty 1993, 17). As a result, there were many closeted Malayalam films in the 1990s that offer credible queer readings, which Shohini Ghosh would call “reading against the grain” (Ghosh 2002, 207). Accordingly, a conscious invocation of homoerotic bonds was explicit in many popular films of the 1990s and after. For instance, films like *Harikrishnans* (1998), *Thenkashipattanam* (2001), *Chakram* (2003), and *Urumi* (2011) among others carry “queerness within the straight” (Tharayil 2002, 181). However, the culture of compulsory heterosexuality determines the narrative dynamics even in these non-straight queer movies by quickly re-establishing the heterosexual order. This is usually accomplished through a reinscription of the main character into the heterosexual matrix culminating in a marriage between a hero and heroine. Thus, while these films offer spectators a momentary vicarious trespassing of society’s accepted boundaries for gender and sexual behaviour, they also systematically reconstitute the heterosexual norms towards the end of the film (Straayer 1996, 44).

Although there are many films such as *Harikrishnans* (1998) and *Salt N’ Pepper* (2011) among others, Santhosh Sivan’s historical fantasy film *Urumi* is a typical millennial example of such a closeted Malayalam film. Set in the backdrop of fierce warrior clans of Northern Kerala in the 16th century, it details the cult of *Chirakkal Kelu Nayanar* (starring Prithviraj) and his mission of killing Vasco da Gama (starring Robin Prat). The film spans the time between the second and third visit of Vasco da Gama to India and chronicles a varied version of how he could have met a bloody death in AD 1524. In his task, Kelu is supported by Vavvali (starring Prabhudeva), his childhood friend. They soon find their destinies inseparably intertwined, even though they eventually fail in their mission of killing Vasco da Gama. While the film is set in colonial Kerala during

the Portuguese invasion, *Urumi* also unfolds an unusual narrative of “homosociality” and focuses on the closely intertwined and inseparable homoerotic bond between Kelu and Vavvali, though not explicitly. Their intimate conversations and particularly, Vavvali calling Kelu “*Changayi*,” among other scenes make it a potential closeted narrative that demands serious queer critique. For instance, when Kelu decides to fight directly against Vasco da Gama, Vavvali opposes it. But when Kelu insists, he agrees and says, “since you said I will.” Moreover, the queer shades of the film are unravelled when Kelu asks Vavvali not to approach any women as he gazes at Bala (starring Nithya Menon). He warns him by saying, “If you go, you will be vanquished.” After his advice, Vavvali shows absolute indifference to her sexual invitations. She even asks him why he is reluctant to love her despite her advances in a song sequence (“Why don’t you look at me even after I sang a song for you and talked to you in silence?”). Such a scene resonates with what Muraleedharan (Tharayil 2002, 189) argues that homoeroticism in mainstream Malayalam cinema is foregrounded through the male protagonist’s “near-total indifference to a physically alluring female.” Failing miserably in her efforts to woo him, Bala asks Vavvali why he is so attached to Kelu at the cost of not loving her. His reply, “I wish I could talk to you about it” conveys the intensity of his relationship with Kelu. By taking recourse to gay stereotypes such as the effeminacy in Vavvali, the text makes visible the apparent invisibility of gayness in his character. Kelu even thinks that Vavvali is his source of strength, and he can defeat anyone if Vavvali is with him. Although the film entangles Kelu in a heterosexual relationship with Aracakkal Ayisha (starring Genelia), it only temporarily suspends his bond with Vavvali (Tharayil 2002, 189). When Kelu discredits his heterosexual relationship by saying that it was only to materialise his racial procreative duties, the film underscores a “slippery continuum” (Vanita 2002, 146)—the possibility of the continuing a homoerotic bond between him and Vavvali beyond their homosocial relationship. But the film advocates explicitly a heterosexual continuum at the end of it, perhaps to satisfy its homophobic viewers, by imagining two heterosexual characters as contemporary reincarnations/reflections of Kelu and Ayisha who repeat their predecessor’s non-conformist legacy in their fight against the land mafia. Although Vavvali as a new character appears at the end of the film, the narrative does not focus on his queer subjectivity. The film thus replaces the earlier forms of male bonding between Kelu and Vavvali with a “modern” reincarnation of ideal romantic (heterosexual) love and coupledness. As Tharayil (2002, 189) argues, this final happy resolution as envisioned in the film is “anchored on a muted promise of the continuation of the male bond.” Such attempts at the “reinscription of heterosexuality and containment of queer sexuality” (Raymond 2003, 100) have been a major trope in the mainstream Malayalam films of the 1990s, and after which the final heterosexual resolution relocates the spectators back in their heteronormative aspirations.

THE STEREOTYPED QUEER BODY

Mulvey (1975) explores how the female body becomes a spectacle of pleasure in Hollywood cinema. According to her, in a patriarchal cinematic world, pleasure in looking has been divided between “active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 1975, 11). Inside such deterministic projects which privilege the male gaze, women are simultaneously looked-at and displayed to the extent of becoming “to-be-looked-at-ness” (17). Such display of women as erotic spectacle in pin-ups and stripteases is played and signified according to male desire (11). Furthering this Mulvian critique of commercial cinema and its representation of women, Neale (1983) argues how a male body is imagined in commercial films: “in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated and in some other way, its erotic component repressed” (Neale 1983, 8). By disqualifying the male body as a homoerotic “thing,” mainstream cinema represents its male protagonists, as a symbolic (non)thing and as the ideal ego with heterosexual masculine features such as power and omnipotence. While male characters become the non-erotic thing devoid of homosexual subjectivity, the female characters in these films become patriarchal/spectatorial significations that make them passive carriers of libidinal desires and their toxic expressions. Since masculinity in these films is represented as an ideal to be achieved and thus performs a symbolic function, those who fail to achieve this ideal are imagined as incomplete and discomfiture sites that deserve the normative gaze (an assumed superior gaze that conceives the “looked-at” as abnormal and incomplete). The queer male body is such a trope in Malayalam cinema that spectacularly represented and constantly re-employed to suggest its abnormality in the dominant discourses of heteronormativity.

While there is an ongoing technological reform in Malayalam cinema in terms of its making, there is little systemic change regarding its hetero-patriarchal values. For instance, Malayalam cinema has always preferred and iconised an assumed brawny macho figure who hails from an upper caste background in its narrative. Such ideological play was quite dominant in the 1990s films such as *Devasuram* (1993), *Aaram*

Thampuran (1997), *Ravanaprabhu* (2001) among others. Among the bodies (re)presented, those who fail to achieve the idealised masculine ‘normalcy’ are designated as abnormal and incomplete. As a result, an effeminate man with squeaky walks, a macho man with a feminine voice, a transgender, a cross-dresser among others become the non-erotic and ‘unethical’ body in Malayalam cine-scapes to be teased and morally done away with. In such cases, the queer characters would be the marginalised other who appear as foils to the hegemonic masculine hero or the normalised femininity of the upper caste heroine. Such representations reassure the normativity of heterosexual toxic fantasies of spectators at the cost of queer bodies becoming the site of ridicule and normative sexual gaze. A typical example of this is Ashique Abu’s *Salt N’ Pepper* (2011). The movie features Baburaj, a South Indian actor, as the chief cook who serves his master Kalidasan (starring Lal). The film eliminates all the hypermasculine features of Baburaj and presents him as an effeminate male. At the beginning of the film, he is spectacularly introduced in the background of a bizarre butcher shop. Contrary to viewers’ expectations, he requests groceries and bathing soaps from a shop. From the initial gruesome tone, the music becomes grotesque creating giggles in viewers. The irony of asking for bathing soaps by a macho figure like Baburaj beside a bizarre butcher shop tellingly situates the effeminacy in the character. Although effeminate characters are not unusual in Malayalam Cinema, *Salt N’ Pepper* uses the choreographed effeminacy of Baburaj as a spectacle to be laughed at. This laughing dismissal of the effeminate male as abnormal and deviant other, regularises the heterosexual hero as the norm and produces a spectatorial position that aestheticise and appreciate unambiguously hetero-patriarchy.

While writing about the politics of effeminacy in Hollywood cinema, Rudy (2016) argues that effeminacy is represented as the general signature of gay people in the cinema. As a result, “sissies,” as they were called, are visualised as “amusing” and are often shown in the comedy genre (Rudy 2016, 62). Not very different from its Hollywood counterparts, Malayalam cinema also propagates this heteronormative ideology of laughter, either by constructing a homogenous heterosexual spectatorial position or by catering to the homophobic drives of its spectators. As a result, all those characters who fall short of the definitive features of heteronormativity and heterosexual masculinity become amusing comic spectacles that release spectators’ stress and burdens. For instance, Baburaj in *Salt N’ Pepper* is introduced to the middle-aged protagonist Kalidasan (starring Lal) during a traditional bride-viewing ceremony³ where Kalidasan goes to “see” a prospective bride. Instead of finding any interest in the woman, Kalidasan returns home happily with their cook Babu suggesting Babu as his new-found love. But the prospective conjugal homoerotic tone in the scene is downplayed as a mere comic situation in which Babu’s presence, his squeaky way of talk, effeminate mannerisms among others become a matter of laughter. The presence of Babu in the film does not adhere to clear definitions of sex and gender. As “a physical body in transition” (Phillips 2014, 3), he defies the borders of systemic heterosexual order. But by casting out Babu’s queer performativity through laughter, the film tries to maintain or reinforce the heterosexual boundaries that are threatened or undermined in the unconventional bride-viewing ceremony in the film.

Lal Jose’s *Chanthupottu* (2005) is another such film that follows an effeminate young man named Radhakrishnan who everybody calls “Radha” (a Malayali feminine name) because of the absence of “assumed masculinity” in him. The first half of the film explores his life as a dance teacher in a fishing village, his love affair with a young woman named Malu, and his eventual excommunication from the village for allegedly bringing a curse to the village. Although characters with effeminate mannerisms are not new in Malayalam cinema, what distinguishes the film *Chanthupottu* from the rest is the way it uses the protagonist’s effeminate mannerisms as a means to expose his liminality and the “unfitting” nature of his identity. The film perceives the effeminacy in Radha as a reflection of an overabundance of female influence (grandmother in his case). As a result, it conceives effeminacy as a defect and tries to restore his manhood (Russo 1981, 6). As a result, Radha is taken to a modern beach resort where he is forced to assimilate masculine mannerisms as the aspirational norm. The following narrative of the film focuses entirely on the aspiring Radha who practices the “ideal” masculine mannerisms such as heroic entry into the village, multiple physical fights, defeating antagonists, reclaiming his wife and child among others.

The film also uses the comic stereotype of effeminacy as a useful tool for “putting homosexuality back in its place” (Russo 1981, 110). As a result, the film uses laughter as a means to cure “his” effeminacy and his exaggerated effeminate caricature as a warning to all aspirational queer desires that flaunt heteronormativity. *Chanthupottu* also frames Radha’s effeminacy as an amusing comic spectacle to release the stress and burden of its viewers. For instance, in a scene where Freddie, a friend of Radha, attempts to train Radha with masculine mannerisms, he becomes a ludicrous caricature and a laughing stock. When he tries to imitate the hyper masculine persona of a macho male star of the 1970s Malayalam cinema (Jayan) it becomes an ultimate moment of (non)laughter. The curious return of the image of a popular masculine star of the 1970s Malayalam

cinema and its comic redeployment in an effeminate body discursively highlight the lack of masculinity in Radha. The film thus envisions a “collective hetero sexist masculine spectatorship” that looks at Radha as a lesser “man.” Moreover, such assumptions situate audiences in a superior position. While most Malayalam films encourage the audience to identify with protagonists who are generally upper caste masculine characters, *Chanthupottu* dissuades its viewers from identifying with the protagonist. It is this spectatorial position that prompts them to gaze at the process of “shaming” Radha (the brutal gang act of undressing Radha in the film to verify his sex). In the process, the indifferent and benign spectators (un)consciously identify with the bullies. Queer groups in Kerala protested against this depiction and questioned the authenticity of such representations. They stated that the film made a laughing stock of them by portraying Radha as a ridiculous caricature. They filed a case against the film, claiming that ever since the film came out, they faced harsher discrimination in society. They alleged that, just like the characters in the film, people started ill-treating and even physically assaulting them. Although Lal Jose, the director of the film, tried to justify his position by saying that the protagonist of the film is not a queer but just an effeminate male, a product of “faulty upbringing” (Tharayil 2014, 76), the film, undoubtedly, has created a certain vitriolic image of the queer community in Kerala. Unfortunately, such stereotypical representation has reiterated the popular imagination of LGBTQIA+ desires as a defect that can be cured either through punishment or proper treatment.

THE VISIBLE QUEER BODY

Devika (2007) argues how the notion of a “modern” man and woman in Kerala is entwined with concepts of domesticity and the conjugal family. Devika observes, “whole set of practices, some restrictive and others positive, were recommended as aids...to produce ‘Womanly women’ and ‘Manly men’. For instance, in the early 20th century, the sexuality of teachers and students in colleges were subjected to strict surveillance and anything that seemed to indicate the presence of same-sex affections were carefully weeded out” (2007, 27). Thus, the production and circulation of a heterosexual conjugal relationship has become the desired ideal that ensures Kerala’s progress and modernity. Since this normative vision of heterosexuality received primacy and acceptance, it has not been easy for filmmakers who make commercial films to destabilise homophobia, even if they aspire to offer an alternative perspective regarding LGBTQIA+. Irrespective of such ideological censures, there were some daring attempts, though marginal, that engage with LGBTQIA+ lives via queer activist aesthetics.

Randu Penkuttikal, directed by an independent filmmaker Mohan, is perhaps the earliest Malayalam film that dared to discuss openly the lesbian bond between two girls Kokila and Girija in a period where homosexuality was seen as a crime and an aberration. In spite of its spirited engagement with the homoeroticism of its protagonists, the film ends with a heteronormative dialogue where Girija advises Kokila that “homoerotic sensation is nothing but a phase in teenagers’ life, and she should be married to a man and lead a happy/productive life.” Although Padmarajan’s *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* depicted a lesbian bonding between two lovers (Nimmy and Sally) in a period when homophobia was so dominant, it was accused of carrying the trope of “dead lesbian syndrome” in which the female protagonists kill themselves. The film uses lesbianism as “metatextual villain” (Hulan 2017, 17), in order to escape the risk of social backlash for promoting sexuality. As a result, the lesbian lovers are punished for their love. The film gave its spectators an indirect message that homosexual love is not “safe” here in this land, and what awaits homosexuals who dare to cross the limit is nothing but the same fate of the lovers in the film. Moreover, it romanticises death as means to escape the precariousness of being a queer in Kerala to a safe, distant, and utopian space (“the safe space far, far away” as Nimmy puts it) where their love is reciprocated.

But, Mokkil (2019) in her recent book identifies certain countercultural discourses in the film in tune with the burgeoning contemporary queer politics that undo “the normative codes of desiring” (136). According to her, using the label of “good art” that the film carries and through the public screening of the film in commercial theatres, it disrupts and queers the public sphere of Kerala. Moreover, by criss-crossing network of relationships it weaves in the narrative (between Nimmy and Sally, Harishankar and Nimmy, and Harishankar and Devika) which “overlaps and throws a shadow on the other” (138) and by visualising lesbian couples in public places than in a private niche, the film questions the centrality of heterosexuality and foregrounds performative queer relationships (134–138). Inside such burgeoning queer scholarships in Kerala, Ligy J. Pullapally’s *Sancharram* (2004) is perhaps another significant film from Kerala that received much critical attention. It was called the first Malayalam film that uncompromisingly “defies the patriarchal abjection of female–female sexuality” (Ross 2016, 57). *Sancharram* problematises the “dead lesbian syndrome” prevalent in earlier films and drives the whole narrative into a new resolution. The film follows two childhood friends

(Kiran and Deliliah) and their coming-of-age lesbian love. The film depicts their erotic love as a challenge to the heterosexually groomed spectators of Kerala. According to Navneetha Mokkal “*Sancharram* makes a strong claim for positive representations of lesbian desire in order to counter societal violence against sexual arrangements that are outside the frame of heterosexuality. It aims to create a cinematic space within which lesbian desire is openly affirmed” (Mokkal 2019, 126). The film also consciously disrupts the stereotype that homosexuality has nothing to do with love or romance but only with sex (Russo 1981, 95) by visualising a romantic lesbian niche in a village. However, because of its apparent queer imaginary and political standpoint, the film was not released in theatres and could be shown only in festival circles. The film had only one screening in Kerala and there was a heckling reaction against it as if it was “immoral” and attempted to “turn” the youth into homosexuals.

Kuriakose (2020) identifies the cultural shifts that have occurred in the contemporary Kerala public sphere regarding the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters, particularly the representation of transgender subjectivities. To paraphrase her, the queer political movements in the state such as the pride parades since 2010, the transgender policy adopted by the state government in 2015, and the 2018 Supreme Court verdict that decriminalised same-sex love between two consenting adults have resulted in a “queer turn” in the socio-political economies of Kerala as well as in Malayalam cinema. For instance, in films like *Ardhanari* (2013), *My Life Partner* (2014), *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* (2014), *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016), *Aalorukkam* (2018) and *Njan Marykutty* (2018), there is a progressive shift regarding the representation of LGBTQIA+ subjectivities. Most of these films are either compassionate portrayals of LGBTQIA+ lives or situated within the domains of the burgeoning queer politics in Kerala. For instance, Jijo Kuriakose, one of the chief spokespersons of queer movements in Kerala, was part of the making of the film *Ka Bodyscapes*. Set in the city of Calicut, *Ka Bodyscapes* dealt with the struggles of three young people Harris, Vishnu, and Sia who tries to find their happiness beyond the hegemonic structures of capitalist patriarchy and its conservative moral values. The most distinguishing feature of the film is its erotic take on the male body and its aesthetic engagement with male nudity. In the opening scene, the film homoerotically maps the body of Vishnu through the camera eyes of the protagonist Harris. Following a queer activist aesthetics, the camera focuses on his nipples, thighs, and crotch erotically. This unusual poetic homoerotic gaze is employed in the film as a counter response to the existing hegemony of male gaze in Malayalam cinema. The film makes a conscious choice to focus on the erotic male body even when the characters engage in spectacular religious and sports activities. For instance, when Vishnu does the *Surya Namaskaram*,⁴ the camera through the perspective of Harris focuses on his erotic body. Also in the opening scene, dismissing all the drama of kabaddi (a sporting game), the film focuses entirely to the body of Vishnu. The film in many places visualises intimate physical exchange between Harris and Vishnu. By bringing the image of Egyptian Ka enclosed in a phallus (both in the logo and title of the film) that suggests the vitality of homoeroticism, the film foregrounds the importance of male physique and its homoeroticism in everyday lives. Through its detailed depiction of male body such as the wet athletic male body, aroused penis, plump buttocks, and anal penetration among others, the film attempts a topographical survey of the male body as a landscape. While Malayalam cinema positions its shirtless protagonists and half nude characters with innerwear in precarious and compromising situations such as in jail, *Ka Bodyscapes* uses nudity and half naked body as a site to express its loud take on erotic intimacy. Although it was produced in a period when homosexuality was seen as crime, the film assertively uses various signs of dissent against the heteronormative society and its various homophobic articulations through homoerotic paintings, wall papers which carries the words like “My Body My Rights” and “Fuck IPC 377” among others which appear in the living room of Harris. *Ka Bodyscapes* with an activist zeal transgresses the conventional gender and sexual hierarchies in the narratives of Malayalam cinema. It has broken the anathema of depicting explicit homosexual eroticism and behaviours of the earlier Malayalam cinema (Vanita 2002, 146).

In this context, it would be worth considering the question: What might have facilitated these filmmakers to visualise lesbian desires while restraining themselves from making a gay film? It is also intriguing that the filmmakers who made these films (*Randu Penkuttikal* and *Deshadanakili Karayarilla*) have also made heterosexual romantic films with a cult following like *Shalini Ente Koottukari* (1980) and *Thoovanathumbikal* (1988). If we look at the genealogy of queer films in Kerala, “gay eroticism” has never got its presence on the silver screen until recently. The early closeted Malayalam films that discussed “male bonding” has never dared to visibly explore the “eroticism” in their relationships. Such attempts, as argued before, can only be seen in two recent independent films *My Life Partner* and *Ka Bodyscapes* that were produced outside of the apparatus of mainstream cinema. Perhaps, *Moothon* (2019) is the first Malayalam commercial cinema that erotically visualised a gay relationship. The absence of gay eroticism in the early period of queer Malayalam films is perhaps because the stigma of a lesbian woman was supposedly less than that of an effeminate male,

since the image of an effeminate male was discrediting the authoritarian and aspirational values of masculinity. Lesbianism, on the other hand, was never seen as a threatening reality for its chauvinist viewers any more than female sexuality. Since mainstream Malayalam cinema has predominantly catered to the heterosexual desires of its domineering male spectators and, as Vito Russo argues, in heterosexual pornographic fantasies lesbian eroticism was imagined in the service of male sexuality, the early visual reference to lesbian eroticism in Malayalam cinema was less disruptive and shocking to its viewers (Russo 1981, 9). Perhaps, another reason for the appearance of lesbian relationships in Malayalam cinema could be the celebration of toxic masculinities in the cinematic space that has rendered everything else invisible, including lesbian desires. As a result, it never appeared as a threat to the heterosexist desires of its male viewers. Moreover, in a star centric film industry like Malayalam cinema, it is almost impossible for its spectators to imagine that their superstars are performing a gay role. For instance, the main reason for the shoddy success of a commercial cinema like *Mumbai Police* (2013) has been attributed to the gay shades of its protagonist. On the other hand, such reservations were not there for its female actors. But, while going through the demography of LGBTQIA+ representations in Malayalam cinema since 1990s, it can be argued that the representational strategies of LGBTQIA+ subjectivities in Malayalam cinema have become so discursive and a much evolving terrain. Although it cannot be argued that Malayalam cinema has become a desired queer sensitive space, the discursive changes happening in the field are now visible in the characterisation of LGBTQIA+ subjectivities, in the visibility of queer politics and in the emergence of filmmakers from queer communities among many others.

CONCLUSION

While cinema has become a complex cultural artefact in contemporary Kerala by opening up new political/critical spaces of representations, LGBTQIA+ lives also find better expressions in Malayalam cinema. As opposed to earlier depictions of LGBTQIA+ characters as unruly figures, there is a flourishing expression of diverse LGBTQIA+ subjectivities in mainstream Malayalam cinema now. For instance, films like *Njan Marykutty* (2018) and *Moothon* (2019) among others in their own distinctive ways and by taking into account the nuances of the contemporary LGBTQIA+ politics, depict LGBTQIA+ desires in an affirmative and political way. Under the sway of patriarchy, though many of the mainstream films still cater to the gratifying and the escapist aspirations of its heterosexual and homophobic spectators, there is a welcome increase in queer characters on Kerala screens. However, as Kuriakose argues, questions regarding the representation of LGBTQIA+ lives in Malayalam cinema in terms of heteronormative cinematic space, construction of their sexuality, familial and social spaces (2020, 289) need more critical and qualitative engagement.

NOTES

1. Based in Kerala, Malayalam cinema is part of the Indian film industry dedicated to the production of motion pictures in Malayalam (an Indian language spoken by the people of Kerala).
2. Section 377 is a section in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) established during the British rule in India criminalises homosexuality and other non-normative sexual practices in India. But, in its landmark judgment dated 6 September 2018, the Supreme Court of India decriminalised homosexuality and other non-normative sexual practices (except same-sex marriage) in India.
3. *Pennukanal chadangu* is a South Indian practice before marriage where the groom along with his family visits the bride as a way of marriage initiation.
4. *Surya Namaskaram* is a yoga practice performed as a salutation to sun.

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