



*Cinema and  
Theatre*

*Edited by*  
**Ajay K. Chaubey**  
**Ashvin I. Devasundaram**

# **South Asian Diasporic Cinema and Theatre**

*Re-visiting Screen and Stage  
in the New Millennium*

*Edited by*  
**Ajay K. Chaubey**  
**Ashvin I. Devasundaram**



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# 11

## Queer Tropes in Post 1990s Malayalam Cinema<sup>1</sup>

RAJESH JAMES

The narrative logic of Malayalam mainstream films is usually predicated on an apparent straightness that prioritizes the heteronormative value systems of social enterprises and its cultural manifestations. Such constructs of sexuality offer interesting insights into the politics of heteronormativity in modern, contemporary Malayalam Cinema. Cinema in Kerala is quite reluctant to explore 'the love that had for so long been left out in the cold' (Griffiths: 130). But there are cases of subversive forms of queerness in contemporary Malayalam films making their presence either implicitly or explicitly in the existing categories of cinematography. These cultural texts, as Alexander Doty argues, have connotative rather than denotative queer sentiments that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism bars us from seeing (1). There are ghosts, to use Doty's phrase that inhibited the cultural texts of Malayalam cinema which are to be driven out of their closets.

This study is an analysis of post-1990s Malayalam films at a time when 'New Queer Cinema' was emerging in the West. Unlike the earlier, films after 1990s have series of queer patterns in it, though marginal. There are four recurring tropes of queer representation in Malayalam cinema after 1990s. The first pattern - closeted appearance of LGBT characters that should be brought out - acknowledges how homophobic Kerala society is

and how tough it is to be out of the closet. The second trope is that of queerness as an absence or as an aberration. The third pattern is that of queer body as a comic spectacle that has less to do with the non-straight sentiments of *malayalee*<sup>2</sup> and more to do with how queerness is understood and metaphorized in Kerala. Such spectacular images though not directly enjoyed or appreciated on the screen, are constantly redeployed to reassure heterosexual drives of the popular audience, thereby perpetuating the superiority of a machismo. The last pattern is that of queer characters who are visibly queer with all nuances and ambiguity.

### Celluloid Closets in post 1990s Malayalam Films

In his *Celluloid Closet*, a classic survey of homosexuality in Hollywood films, Vito Russo explores the stereotypes in the representation of gays and lesbians till date. Until 1980s, according to him, they were presented as an unseen danger and as the dark side of the American dream. With the enforcement of Hays Code in 1934, homosexuality became officially unspeakable and gay characters were rendered using various types of innuendo. Malayalam film industry like Hollywood, in its unique way, projected heterosexual imagination simultaneously offering limited vision of the 'actual queer life' in Kerala. In this process, the real life of Keralites with same sex desires - gays, bisexuals and some who don't align themselves with any particular sexual identity - were ignored. According to the Article 377 of the Indian Constitution, homosexuality is a criminal act. Public anathema caused by the homophobic sensibility of Keralites has also made forced filmmakers from mapping this issue. Mainstream films of the 1990s and after maintained a strange silence about queerness as if queerness is absent in Kerala or as if it constitutes purely a Western identity. Though the films of the post-1990s have got heterosexuality as its central focus, there are cases of subversive closeted metaphors which in turn challenged heteronormative conventionality of popular films.

According to Muraleedharan Tharayil, a pioneering scholar of queer studies in Kerala, 'homoeroticism in Malayalam cinema



is indicated through male intimacies which are often contrasted with near absence of male desire for women' (2002: 8). Male bonding has always been an important theme in Malayalam cinema from its earliest days and it has so far been read through a heterosexist perspective that turns a blind eye towards the complex articulation of physical intimacies and desire they regularly appropriate. Films like *Harikrishnans* (1999) and *Thenkashipattanam* (2001) elaborate this by presenting men who have set up an alternative domestic system, including a child who is invariably a girl. *Thenkashipattanam* presents two men (Suresh Gopi and Lal<sup>3</sup>) within an alternate domestic structure with their sister Devi (Kavya Madhavan<sup>4</sup>).

*Chakram* (2003), a film by Lenin Rajendran, further extends the language of male domesticity by presenting two men falling subject to a far more unequally constituted family formation. The younger male in this film assumes a subordinate role that borders on a replication of patriarchal heterosexual domesticity. The character, Vijesh, cooks and washes for the older male Prithviraj, a popular Indian actor and even declares 'I have been serving him like a wife'. An explicit invocation of the sensual in a location of male intimacy appears in *One Man Show* (2002), in the sequence in which the hero Jayakrishnan enters his decorated bedroom on his wedding night, only to encounter his eccentric male friend Hari both in groom's attire. In his deranged fancy, Hari supposedly thinks himself as the groom who married Radhika, Jaykrishnan's wife. The situation is complicated by the presence of a lunatic (Salim Kumar<sup>5</sup>), also in groom's attire, who strays into the same bedroom, adding to the confusion. Hari and Jayakrishnan seem to erase the element of the erotic through exaggerated disavowal of their desire for each other, while the mad man re-inscribes it with equal vehemence by openly soliciting it. The culture of compulsory heterosexuality determines and distorts the narrative dynamics of these entire non-straight queer subtexts by a quick re-establishment of a normative order which is accomplished through a re-inscription of the main character into the heterosexual matrix that constitutes the final marriage of the hero and the heroine. Following is a close analysis of a 2011 Malayalam film called *Urumi* as an envoy of Malayalam filmic closet.

### *Urumi: The Warriors who Wanted to Kill Vasco Da Gama* (2011): A Close Reading

As a historical fantasy film that pumps oodles of testosterone on to the screen, Santhosh Sivan's *Urumi* is a recent touchstone of closeted Kerala filmic self. Set in the back drop of fierce warrior clans of northern Kerala in the 16th century, it hubs on the cult of Chirakkal Kelu Nayanar (Prithviraj).<sup>6</sup> His target and mission is Don Vasco da Gama (Robin Prat<sup>7</sup>). The film is spread between the second and third visit of Gama to India and chronicles a varied version of how Vasco da Gama could have met a bloody death in AD 1524. In his task, Kelu is supported by Vavvaali (Prabhudeva)<sup>8</sup>, his childhood friend. They remain together through thick and thin and soon find their destinies inseparably intertwined, even though they eventually fail in their mission of killing Gama. Apparently a movie set in the context of Portuguese invasion in India, *Urumi* inherently unfolds a new saga of 'friendship', untouched in the usual courses Mollywood narratives.

Amidst of its historical centredness and its cultural vivacity, *Urumi* focuses on the lively bond between Vavvali and Kelu. They are intimately intertwined and inseparable. Vavvali calls Kelu 'Changayi', a cosy expression of intimacy in Malayalam language, and doesn't want to pursue his desires apart from that of Kelu. Even though it's Vavvali who takes Kelu to his dwelling when he was thrown alone on the shore devastated, Kelu supersedes him and guides him. Although he is younger to Vavvali, Kelu calls him 'eda Vavvali' and takes decisions in his life delinquently. But Vavvali is ready to accept the choices that Kelu make for his life and finds joyance in it. When Kelu decides to fight directly against Gama, he was reluctant enough to go with him. But goes with him by saying 'if you say I will ...' (*Changayi paranga njan ceyyum*). Moreover, Kelu advises Vavvali that 'you should not go after a lady. If you go, you will be vanquished', when he gazes at Bala (Nithya Menen<sup>9</sup>). He never performs such (mis)behaviours thereafter. She himself asks him why he is reluctant to love to her in spite of her promptings in a song sequence: (*Enthellam paditum mindate minditum nokkiyilla ni ennittum ni enthe ...*) 'Why don't you love even after my song and my silent talk?' But Vavvali keeps silence and goes away from her.



In another scene, Bala asks Vavvali suspiciously that why he is so attached to Kelu 'mysteriously', when he explains his ligature with Kelu and he replies, 'I could have told to you not about it'. His remarks indirectly profess why he is not interested in Bala and the liaison that he has with Kelu. Moreover the name Vavvali itself is highly stereotypical since it has effeminate tone in itself. Vavvali is presented in a typical effeminate way that affords heterosexual vision of what a homosexual is like. Even though stereotypes have a contained silent discourse, it makes something invisible visible as Richard Dyer observes (6–18). By representing Vavvali as passive and effeminate, the text makes visible the apparent invisibility of gayness in his character. Moreover, the controlling symbol of the movie is Urumi, a traditional war weapon. It is the source of Kelu's strength. As a forceful symbol, it works as his metaphorical phallus that asserts his masculinity. However, it is clear from the text that, more than the weapon, actual source of his power is his 'friend' Vavvali. He himself feels that he is able to defeat Portuguese troupes when Vavvali is with him and he has done it erstwhile. Once he is removed from his life, he fails helplessly. Urumi as the source of their power condenses and displaces their firm gay bond. Even though Kelu sexually interlaces Aracakkal Ayisha (Genelia<sup>10</sup>), he himself says that he has done it only to materialize his procreative motives and to ensure his race's continuity. In spite of its apparent historical zeal, the movie reflects, refracts and recreates a firm gay acquaintance of Kelu and Vavvali, though obliquely. Even though the movie is an apparent fight against Portuguese ascendancy, there is a silent stringency of war in it against the dominating heterosexist discourses and all its cultural (mal) practices.

### Queerness as an Absence/Aberration

Malayalam filmscape in spite of all its progressive and dialogical trends have always been defined by spectacular paradigms reinforcing its own chosen hegemonic assumptions. Malayalam cinema after 1990s prefers and codifies an assumed brawny, macho figure. Films like *Devasuram* (1993), *Aram Thampuran* (1997), *Ravanaprabhu* (2001) align the bodies with the elusive and normative ideal of the male, fair-complexioned hefty body

gratifying the egotistical masculine desires of its implicit audience. Most male bodies presented are normative and masculine. Those bodies that 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 in reverse endorse the 'normalcy' of macho figures.

The queer body is one such, spectacularly represented, constantly re-employed to establish the spectacle of queer body as absence or aberration, which satiate the egotistical, heteromasculinist cultural assumptions of a typical 'normal' Malayali. This is evident in Lal Jose's *Chandupottu* (2005). The protagonist of the film is an effeminate young man, Radhakrishnan whom everybody calls Radha, which is a Malayali feminine name. 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 eventual excommunication from the village for allegedly bringing bad omen. He is rescued and taken to a more modern beach resort where his new friends provide him training in becoming a man. The rest of the film narrates how Radha returns to his village, defeats his antagonist in a fist cuff and takes charge of *Malu* and the little boy born to her. He then enthusiastically joins a band of fishermen to go to the sea and earn a manly living. The protagonist is body and persona who signifies as a male, yet lacking masculinity. This 'lack' sets the narrative in motion and captures audience's attention. Freddie, a friend of Radha, attempts to train him in masculine manners that results in a ludicrous caricature of the hyper masculine persona of a macho male star of the 1970s. Malayalam cinema, *Jayan*, which becomes a source of slapstick humour.

In another scene, a group of men forcefully unclote him to check whether he is a man or a woman, which actually satiates the spectator's curiosity to know the gender of an effeminate man. The narrative transforms such images of lack into a gratifying spectacle whose very continuation appears to generate and perpetuate pleasure. In the final shot of the movie, Radha jumps into the fishing boat assuming the role of a wage-earning householder as if his earlier nature was imperfect. Thus, the movie



conforms to the conventions of mainstream Malayalam cinema by coercing an effeminate protagonist to fall in love with the heroine and father a child. This incident in the movie infuriated some of the queer groups in Kerala who questioned the authenticity of such representations. They stated that the film made a laughing stock of them portraying Radha as a ridiculous caricature and filed a case against the film, claiming that ever since the film came out, they faced harsher discriminations from the society. They alleged that, like Freddie and his friends in the film, people started ill-treating and even physically assaulting them to cure their effeminacy. But director Lal Jose tried to nullify the protesters by saying that the protagonist of the movie is not a queer but just an effeminate male, a product of faulty upbringing (Tharayil: 33).

### Queer Body as a Comic Spectacle

Laura Mulvey in her path-breaking essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) explores how female body becomes a spectacle of pleasure in Hollywood cinema. 'In a world ordered by patriarchal fantasies, pleasure in looking has been active/male and passive/female. The projected fantasy of male gaze determines how a female form should be stylized' (10). In his critique of the Mulvian paradigm, Richard Dyer theorized the cultural construction of masculinity as intersected to categories of identities like race, ethnicity and sexuality. Such tropes of masculinity construe certain versions of masculinity as inferior to become spectacles. Nevertheless, his speculations on masculinity had not explored how the queer body is deployed on the screen as spectacle. Queer body as spectacle has been a recurring component in the comic interludes in contemporary Malayalam films. It can be an effeminate man with squeaky walks or a macho man with feminine voice or a transgender or a cross dresser. In such cases, the character would be marginal to the narrative and function as the other celebrating the proper femininity of the upper caste heroine or the normative patriarchy of the hero. This indirectly reassures the heterosexual drives and expectations of the spectator by becoming a source of humour, providing audio-visual pleasure.

Typical of this kind is Ashique Abu's *Salt and Pepper*. The movie features Baburaj, a south Indian actor, as the chief cook who serves his master Kalidasan, an archeologist. The text replaces all the conventional masculine *goonda*<sup>11</sup> features of Baburaj and presents him as an effeminate male. He is spectacularly introduced in the movie with his rare demands for face creams in the background of a butcher shop which is unexpected from other hyper masculine roles which he has essayed in many films. In another occasion he is introduced to the middle aged hero in the background of a *pennukanal chadangu*<sup>12</sup> where he is doing a typical feminine kitchen routine of grinding flour. Babu's presence becomes a spectacle in his squeaky way of talks and effeminate mannerisms. Majority of the spectators laugh at the way he speaks and the way he walks. This particular role-reversal was celebrated in Kerala not because of its grandeur inherent comic possibilities but for Baburaj's effeminate mannerisms involved in it in spite of his macho figure and his comic way of imitating the typically feminine gestures and body language roles. By picturing an effeminate character and making his presence as a comic spectacle in contrast to a macho hero, the movie indirectly asserts superiority of a heterosexual masculine hero in contrast to an effeminate body.

Shaffi's *101 Weddings* also presents a queer character Jyothi as a foil to other masculine heroes of the movie. He is represented as a notorious other to be looked at and smiled at. The other two characters of Kunjako Boban and Biju Menon, two popular South Indian actors, become the replica of a charming suave Kerala figures. At the release of the movie, certain posters were circulated in which Jayasurya, an actor from Kerala, is imitating a Raja Ravi Varma's famous painting *Shakuntala*.<sup>13</sup> This spectacular representation pointed to the comic essentiality attributed to his character. The movie continuously contrasts his effeminate nature with other macho characters of the movie. His dancing steps and love for Rukhia are shot with the intention of producing smiles thereby becoming spectacles for enjoyment. Ironically enough, the character has been reviewed as one of the unique comic characters in the history of Malayalam cinema by some film reviewers of the day.



## Queer Independent Films of Post 90s Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam film industry with its 80 years of filmmaking has supposedly touched the possible subtleties of everyday life in spite of all its feudal and patriarchal fervours. But it is very enigmatic the way queerity has been displaced from the mainstream psyche of films. Being part of a country which has got a queer god Ardhanareeswara and lord Ayyappa who is born out of a queer bond, it is highly ironic that the general psyche of Malayali is homophobic to which the industry cater to. Mathew Kurian, in his article 'Church and Education in Kerala', explores the exclusivity of Christian education in Kerala. The convent education system in Kerala, which is a colonial import, has played a major part in determining the sexual ethos of Malayali psyche and positing homosexuality as a taboo. Since normative vision of heterosexuality gets a comfortable popularity and acceptance, it was tough for the filmmakers to ideologically destabilize it and offer an alternative perspective that heterosexuality is not the only form of sexuality. However, there are independent films, commonly called Art Cinema, which carry visible queer characters and ethos so far untouched and tabooed.

In 1978 a film named *Randu Penkuttikal (Two Girls)* directed by an independent filmmaker Mohanan, had discussed homosexual bond between two girls Kokila and Girija. The characters themselves project the nature of their relationship which is very revolutionary as far as the existing ethos of Kerala society are concerned though the film ends with Girija's comment on Kokila that 'homoerotic sensation was all a phase in teenagers' life and she should be married and lead a happy productive life'. Padmarajan's 1986 film *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla (Migrant Bird Doesn't Weep)* also depicts female bonding, though the film never explicitly claims of it being a lesbian bonding.

The release of *Sancharam* (2004), a film by Ligy J. Pullapaply, was an epoch making event in the history of Malayalam films. The film foregrounded homosexuality as a pattern of human life and sexuality and explored the subtleties of lesbian life in Kerala uncompromisingly and blatantly. The narrative follows two childhood friends - Kiran and Delilliah -

and their coming of age lesbian love. The film depicted their blossoming love erotically as a challenge to the heterosexually groomed spectators of Kerala. The film perfectly constructed their intimate moments though not physically explicit. According to Ligy 'the film will help the young queer generation the option of going ahead in life instead of committing suicide' (<http://www.afterellen.com/interview-with-ligy-pullappally>). But the film was not released in the theatres of Kerala and run only in festival circles. The film had only one screening in Kerala and there was heckling reaction against it as if it is immoral and turning Kerala youth queer.

In 2013, Santhosh Sawpernika directed a film *Ardhanari* (Sawpernika) that discussed the lives of transgenders in Kerala. The movie gyrates through the inner conflicts of Vinayan, a transgender, who has got male physique and female emotions. As he becomes a butt of ridicule, shame and snide remarks from his friends and family, he goes away and reaches a place called Hamam, a community of hijras, an Indian term for transgender group in the temple town of Tamil Nadu. He becomes a hijras by staying there. But he is forced to go out of the community since he is wrongly thought to be involved in the murder of another hijras. Betrayed and misunderstood, Vinayan is mentally broken in the end. The movie ends futuristically in 2020 where Vinayan thinks about the meaning of being a hijras.

As an unconventional film dedicated to the life of hijras, it is an adventurous attempt and a welcome effort. Being an exploration of what it means to be a transgender in contemporary Kerala, the film finds the roots of transgender in Vedic god Ardhanareeswara, who is a composite of Hindu god Shiva and his consort Parvati. In a televised interview, Sawpernika said, 'There are many 'hijras' (eunuchs) in our state but sadly they are not being accepted, hence this film on 'hijadas' is for the 'hijras'. We would be really happy if a small step is made to accept 'hijras' who remain confined to themselves' (<http://www.nowrunning.com>). The film was released in the theatres of Kerala and got critical acclaim. As an attempt to educate the audience about a group that has so far marginalized and denied basic human rights (Nair 3), it glimpses the poignant lives of transgenders especially their emotional struggles and the way law treats them.



## Conclusion

Cinema has become a revolutionary medium in Kerala disseminating the earlier ritualistic functions of art and offers a new political space in terms of its intellectual scope, aesthetic treatment and its political act. This is evident in the way Malayalam cinema of the post-1990s treats queer sensibilities. The increase in queer characters on Kerala film screen definitely reflects purportedly a shift in the everyday discourse of culture towards a greater awareness and understanding of queer community. Films of post-1990s reflect this ongoing queer continuum and its silent/professed existence. Diane Raymond in his article 'Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective' points out three recurring queer patterns in western films. They are appearances of queer major or supporting characters, gay pretender and straight mistaken for gay (99). But in Kerala, queerness was apparently absent till 1990s with a few exceptions. But after 1990s, Malayalam cinema represents queerness in variety of tropes either denotatively or connotatively unlike previous periods. Tropes like closeted queers, queerness as default, queerness as comic spectacle and queerness in its entirety have become recurring patterns even though such images are tokenized and stereotyped. Though Malayalam cinema is still a powerful medium that spins around heterosexual patriarchal, masculine, racial and moral codes, there are subversive attempts from the margins to topple the heteronormative cultural products and its ideological formulations.

## Notes

1. It is an Indian film industry based in Kerala which produces films in Malayalam language.
2. *Malayalee* is a popular word regionally in practice which is used to refer someone from Kerala.
3. Suresh Gopi and Lal are two popular actors in Malayalam film industry.
4. Kavya Madhvan is a popular actress in south Indian Film Industry.
5. Salim Kumar is a national award winning actor and Comedian from Kerala.

6. Prithviraj is a popular South Indian actor. He is one of the leading actors in Malayalam Cinema.
7. Robin Prat is a British actor known for his role in *Kerala Varma Pazhasi Raja* (2009) and *EK Veer Stree Ki Kahani ... Jhansi Ki Rani*.
8. Prabhudeva is a South Indian film actor and internationally known dancer Nithya Menen is a South Indian actress.
9. Nithya Menen is a South Indian actress.
10. Genelia is a Bollywood actress.
11. *Goonda* is a regional Malayalam word which is used to refer a villain.
12. *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.
13. It is a painting by Raja Ravi Varma. It depicts Shakuntala, a character from an Indian epic *Mahabharata*, who pretends to remove a thorn from her feet while looking for her lover Dushyantha

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