

Celluloid Closet: Condensed Queerity and Displacement in *Harikrishnans*

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Abstract: Mainstream films are predicated on the cultural logic of straightness that prioritize normative value systems and its manifestations. Within such a context unusual ambiances and relationships are always suspected, scrutinized and (un)justly punished. However, with the rise of queer theory and 'straight queeriness' the stable fictions of heterosexuality are challenged and unsettled. The present paper taking cues from the theoretical postulates of Eve Sedgwick and Michael Warner and through close reading the critically acclaimed and star studded *Harikrishnans* (1998) movie attempts to tease out the queer subtexts and their imperatives underlying this seemingly 'straight' movie. Although *Harikrishnans* apparently subscribes and sanctions heterosexual proclivities, what is overlooked is the suppressed queer desires and homoerotic codes that subtly forms the unconscious of the movie. The purpose of such a queer reading is neither to convert an 'innocent' heterosexual text into a queer text nor to problematize desexualized spaces of academy as Michael Warner contends; instead, the project seeks to unravel queer elements in an apparently straight movie and, more specifically, attempts to expand reading possibilities of non-normative identities who are often silenced within our socio-cultural systems.

Keywords: Queer cinema, Harikrishnans, Homosexuality, Heterosexual fictions.

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Regional Cinema and the Regimes of the Normal

In spite of theoretical resistance towards the "regimes of the normal" (Warner xxvii), there is in Indian cinema a damaging bias that normalizes and sanctions heterosexists narratives (Sedgwick 60). Although there are rare exceptions such as Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1997), Karan Razdan's *Girl Friend* (2004) and Tarun Manukshishi's *Dostana* (2008), the Bollywood films most often victimize/mock queer characters in order to conform to the ideological contours of heterosexual society. In fact, the culture of compulsory heterosexuality determines and even distorts the arc of cinematic narrative and the visual grammar of 'non straight' movies in India. Put differently, in spite of its limited interest in same gender/transgender relationships, Indian cinema as an influential ideological apparatus continues to censure 'non straight' subjectivities and pleasures.

Cinema in Kerala, though one of the most acclaimed film industries in the country, is not an exception to this homo/queerphobia. On the contrary, the vernacular/regional movies are more homo/queerphobic and have no space beyond straight heterosexual love or, as Italo Calvino puts it, "[i]t doesn't go beyond heterosexual marriages and death endings" (259). By accident if queer elements exist, they are relegated or minoritized by the dominant heterosexual discourses to the extent that a 'public queer' movie is almost impossible. Consequently, the Malayalam films conceding as it were with the ideological contours of heterosexual society, perpetuate images and symbols of heteronormativity and sustain old visual grammar which the audience can easily identify. However, there are cases of subversive forms of queerness which might not be explicit within the existing codes of cinematography. As Muraleedharan T. astutely puts it, "the sporadic sojourn to the domain of queer intimacies is immediately reinterated in

most of Malayalam films by quick re-establishment of a normative order. This is generally accomplished through a reinscription of the main character into the heterosexual matrix that, in most films, constitutes the final marriage of the hero and heroine” (79). A case in point is *Harikrishnans*. Though apparently a conventional ‘straight’ film, this Fazil directed movie strategically meshes queer elements into its heterosexual matrix and has several non-straight queer traces which in a way subverts the ‘straight’ credentials of the movie.

Queer Subtexts: Case of *Harikrishnans*

The Harikrishnans are one of the most famous lawyer duos in India and proprietors of an organization of lawyers called Harikrishnan Associates. They get engaged in a murder case of Guptan, who was allegedly killed by Gabriel (Sreeraman). Gabriel is a friend of Ammalu (Shamili), Hari’s (Mammooty) sister and Harikrishnans become the defence lawyers on her request. They begin investigation and come across Meera (Juhi Chawla), a friend of Guptan. They, apparently, fall in love with Meera and arduously woo her. This leads to a strife between Hari and Krishnan who otherwise are thick friends. Racking her brain to choose between the two, she finally asks Hari and Krishnan (Mohan Lal) to decide between themselves. Since their sacrifice of giving away Meera for each other doesn’t solve the dilemma, they leave the decision to Meera. Given the star cast, the movie has multiple climaxes to appease the fandom of Mohanlal and Mammooty respectively. While a major section of cineastes and critics reasoned that such a strategy is a way of ensuring box office success, the director Fazil opined that “all he wanted to prove is that the real star of the film is neither Mohan Lal nor Mammooty, but the story line”. If so, why did the director compromise the heroic story line to the interests of the fans by presenting multiple climaxes thereby obliterating his initial plan of marrying Meera with another lead character in the movie? Perhaps a deep analysis of the movie will provide an answer.

Hari and Krishnan are unmarried, and intriguingly, they are even hesitant to get married since they very well know that marriage would be detrimental to their profession as well as to their friendship. In fact, the textual unconscious of the movie unambiguously articulates their hesitancy through Ammalu. Is this hesitancy related to their queer attachment? The frequent deployment of homosexual metaphors/symbols in the movie perhaps answers this question. Alexander Doty,

a major American queer theorist, suggests that “cultural texts offer the potential for queer readings that focus on connotative rather than denotative meaning, that is, to find credible readings hidden in text that a culture of homophobia and heterosexism bars us from seeing” (17). Thus, for instance, while Hari and Krishnan discuss certain evidences of a case they share a cigarette. This casual sharing of a cigarette cannot be dispensed with because the camera pivots around this action even though the content discussed is more important than their act of sharing/smoking cigarette. Why then are the audience drawn to the innocuous sharing of a cigarette between two individuals? The text unconsciously elevates the casual act of sharing a cigarette to symbolic realm of sexual exchange. Although the cigarette authenticates the masculinity of its ‘heroes’ it also connotes to the queer undercurrents between them. To add more depth to such a queer laden scene, the symbolic action of sharing/smoking cigarette happens in parallel to certain dialogues where Hari and Krishnan discuss the sexual relationship between Meera and Guptan. Equally important is the way Hari and Krishnan view the heterosexual union of Meera and Guptan. Even though Harkrishnans are the leading advocates of the country, they are reluctant to accept heterosexual relationship. In fact, they discuss the event in an unusual tone—for instance, Krishnan says “they have gone to the extent of sharing Bed!” (Guptanum Meerayum kidakka pankiduka vare ceytu!) to which Hari replies, “Is it?” (ano?). It can be argued that it is not their moral earnestness that provokes them to revile the act but because of their queer sensitivity.

When Meera enters into their life, the audience is given the impression that both Hari and Krishnan strive to woo her by competing with each other. But a close analysis reveals that they never romanticize their state of being in love with Meera. The apparent romantic song Ponnambbal Puzhayirambil Nammal is less romantic since the clownish behaviours of the heroes disrupt and subvert the romantic content of the song. Though, apparently it is an expression of their heterosexual potency, the text prominently ‘performs’ the clowneries of the heroes thereby destabilizing the urgency of the heterosexuality.

In another scene, where Hari and Krishnan stay with Meera as part of their investigation, the audience are convinced of their heterosexual orientation and further of their attraction towards Meera’s exquisiteness. However, later in a scene, in order to prevent themselves from meeting Meera they bind their hands and sleep together in the same bed.

Although this gesture could be interpreted as a heterosexual struggle, it is only the queer reading that would unravel the actual significance of the act of binding their hands. Why do Hari and Krishnan truss their hands? Is it merely to prevent themselves from meeting Meera or does the scene has any queer undertones? Although Hari's reply—"We don't want to be separated even in sleep" (Njanganl urakkatil polum piriya tirikananu)—is innocuous, he unconsciously articulates that they are inseparable. In fact, his act of binding is to assert this conviction. In a different terms, the act can be interpreted as a metaphorical marriage. Even though the text apparently picturizes the sexual urges of two bachelors in front of 'their lover', they unconsciously fear losing their queer bonds. Albeit it was expected that Meera's presence would threaten their bond, ironically, it is Meera's presence which intensifies and deepens their relationship. It is argued that Juhi Chawla was introduced into Malayalam film to satisfy the heterosexual gaze of the Kerala audience. However, in *Harikrishnans* Juhi Chawla's character is less glamourized compared to her earlier films. Why is a Bollywood actress introduced into the filmic narrative and her body is not exposed as in her earlier films? Convening a glamour girl like Juhi wrapped in cloths foregrounds the fact that her female body has no role between two homosexuals.

Meera towards the end asks Hari and Krishnan to decide who is going to marry her since she is unable to make a choice between the two. Hari asks Krishnan to suggest the name of the person who has to marry Meera. But Krishnan says: "When I take crucial decisions in my life, I leave it that to you Hari" (Valare pradanapetta tirumanangal edukkendivarumbol atu njan Hariku vidukayanu pativu, a pativu njan tettikunnilla, Hari paranjolu). This statement shows how Krishnan regards Hari as a dominant partner in his life and in the process, he implicitly concedes his passivity. Here the textual unconsciousness exposes the dominant/passive relationship between Hari and Krishnan. If this is a usual heterosexual text, the ongoing dilemma should have ended with Hari's choice for Krishnan as the latter has already confessed that he is willing to accept whatever decision Hari makes. Instead of thinking about the existing dilemma, Hari keeps talking about how he regards Krishnan and what he means to him. Hari says: "There is only one person who had a place in my heart from the first day. That is not Meera and none other than my Krishnan. My 'Kinnan' who is dear to me more than my life" (Ente nenjinte nadubhagatu kandumutiaya nal mutal kerikoodia orale ullu. Atu Meera all, verarum

alla ente Krishnan ...ente Kinnan...ente prananekkal valutu). It is clear from Hari's words that Meera is not in his heart thereby suggesting that Krishnan is his 'pradishta' (idol). Moreover, Hari calls Krishnan 'kinnan' which is equivalent to Kinnam (a container). By calling Krishnan 'Kinnan', Hari alludes to the receptive/passive nature of Krishnan. Moreover, the name 'Kinnan' is used euphemistically in Northern part of Kerala to connote a gay.

In fact, Meera as a heterosexual understands the queer intimacy between Hari and Krishnan and even publically confesses her failure in choosing her partner. To quote her, "Hari and Krishnan can love only each other. There is no place for anyone else" (Hariku krishnaneyum Krishnanu Hariyeyum Matreme snehikkan kazhiyu matoralkavide sthanamilla) suggesting the difficulty for Hari and Krishnan to accept heterosexual relationship. Moreover, when the murder mystery is revealed, Krishnan asks a favour from Tampuran (Nedumudi Venu) "to permit them to sleep together in the bed where Gupta used to lie". The apparent innocence of the question cracks when Nedumudi Venu replies sarcastically thus: "what are you saying" (entha e parayane). The euphemistic question of Krishnan gets a queer colouring in the exclamatory remarks of Nedumudi. Further, a mood of suspense is created consciously by delaying the answer to the question as to who is going to marry Meera?

Dual Climax: Defying the Heterosexual Closure?

The movie ends with a heterosexual note: "Finally, Hari becomes Meera's friend. Now Hari can decide Meera's life partner." This apparent solution doesn't work in the film since it is Hari who has to decide her life partner. Even though Krishnan had offered Hari a similar choice, Hari fails to reach a conclusion. So it is difficult to believe that Hari will do away with his partner by selecting Krishnan as Meera's life partner for he already treats Krishnan as his 'pradishta'. Moreover, the filmic text lacks the apparent signification of Krishnan's marriage with Meera. In fact, it is the culture of compulsory heterosexuality that puts the film within heterosexual expectation which is evident from the last song sequence. When the song Ponnambal puzhayirambil begins, we have an impression that Krishnan and Meera are united. But Hari interferes and breaks such heterosexual imaginations openly frustrating all heterosexual possibilities offered in the climax. As Muraleedhran T. says Harikrishnans do not compromise the queer intimacy by quickly re-establishing the straight normative order, instead, the film complicates

marital closure with two climaxes. Although it was initially resolved that an actor from Bollywood would marry Meera in order to reconcile the expectations of the audience (viz., Who is going to marry Meera?) it was later withdrawn fearing a box office debacle especially when it involves compromising the interests of two leading Malayalam actors. Given such a context, two alternative climaxes were proposed strategically with regional variations—accordingly, while in northern Kerala the film presented Hari as the winning suitor of Meera, in the southern Kerala (in Trivandrum and Kollam) it is Krishnan who succeeds in marrying Meera. Malayalam films' obsession with its characters' heterosexual marriage though not new, such regionally variant climaxes were unprecedented. Taking these cues, it could be argued that the movie deftly complicates the heterosexual closure so as to accommodate its silent queer narrative.

Judith Mayne observes, “[f]or the longest time, I think I naively accepted that [film] theorists weren’t addressing the kinds of issues I addressed because they weren’t personally interested in them—you know a basic liberal approach to the field. But [now]...it’s obvious that [these silences]...are in a sense ... [the result] of conscious refusals within film theory to acknowledge the lesbian or gay other” (144). Here Mayne contends that heterosexuality (along with its theoretical propositions) is an inalienable condition that disallows and silences queer pleasures and desires. As a result gay spectatorship and straight queer movies become a conceptual impossibility. Despite efforts from the margins to undermine and transmogrify the existing commodification of heterosexual filmic values, it is almost impossible to move beyond such performative stasis and produce a full-fledged quintessential queer movie. Since normative vision of heterosexuality finds an easy acceptance in Malayalam cinema, queer themed movies are silenced. However, *Harikishnans* is one such filmic text that reveals a palpable tension between the heterosexual surface and the unconscious queer desires that undergrid the movie.

Coda

To conclude, *Harikishnans* although apparently subscribes and sanctions heterosexual proclivities and conveniently panders to the audience’s need for heterosexual romance the movie suppresses queer subtexts and relegates it to the symbolic realm of the closet. This paper has unravelled the unconscious queer desires and pleasures that underlie this seemingly ‘straight’ text. Although Hari and Krishnan’s

queer relationship is never brought to fruition, the movie through strategically invoking homoerotic codes defies and further unsettles the conventional heterosexual assumptions and, in the process, creates representations of queerness. Specifically, by providing dual endings to the movie, the director not only inverts the privileged heterosexual climax but also improvises the queer traces in the movie. In so doing, the movie in subtle ways resists the heterosexual closure so as to accommodate its silent queerness.

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