

Celluloid Closet: Condensed Queerity and Displacement in *Harikrishnans*

Rajesh James and Sathyaraj Venkatesan

Abstract: Mainstream films are predicated on the cultural logic of straightness that prioritize normative value systems and its manifestations. Within such a context unusual ambiences and relationships are always suspected, scrutinized and (un)justly punished. However, with the rise of queer theory and 'straight queerness' 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 heterosexist 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

