

From Stigmatic Representations to the Palpable Depictions; A Portrayal of Trans-Persons in The Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

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ABSTRACT.

This paper examines the portrayal of Transpersons in Malayalam cinema. Their representation has always been stigmatic and stereotyped. Transpersons portrayals are still as sex workers and procurers, and the characterisation has always been ridiculing. The mainstream Malayalam cinema was always reluctant in capturing the real-world existence of third gender communities. The core objective of the study is to examine the changing trend in the portrayal of transpersons in Malayalam cinema. Here we opt film content analysis as our methodology, we choose the film "NjanMarykutty", and we have also included the historical survey of transgender representations in Malayalam cinema. Findings of the study implied that there is a significant positive change in the portrayal of transpersons in Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: *Trans person, Malayalam Cinema, Stereotype, Film Content Analysis*

KERALA TRANSGENDER POLICY

Transgender is a broad term that Society uses to describe people whose gender identity is different from the gender they were thought to be when they were born. "Trans" is often used as shorthand for transgender. (<https://transequality.org>). "Transsexual" refers to a trans person who has undergone either surgical, hormonal, or legal means to live full time as the sex opposite that of their birth-assigned sex. "Transition" refers to the period in which a trans person learns to live as the sex opposite that of their birth-assigned sex (transhealth.ucsf.edu, 2013).

Kerala is the first Indian state to have a transgender policy in 2015 (<https://www.dailypioneer.com>, 2015). The policy covers all the categories of transgender people, including female to male, male to female and intersex people. It also emphasises the rights of the minority group to self-identify themselves as man, woman or transgender as stated in a Supreme Court verdict.

Government of Kerala made a significant move by employing trans genders in the functioning of Kochi Metro. Almost 23 transgender people are working in Kochi metro, which was first of its kind (<https://www.thehindu.com>). Kerala organises the first-ever beauty pageant for trans genders [Queen of Dhwayah 2017](#). The event was held on June 15 at CIAL Convention Centre in Nedumbassery, where ShyamaSanju bagged the first spot (Fathima). These all display the changing perspective of Kerala towards the transgender community.

There is a tremendous positive change from the government for the welfare of transgender people. This changing viewpoint also influences every field of art in Kerala, especially Malayalam Cinema because Cinema is seen as the reflection of the society.

MALAYALAM CINEMA

Malayalam cinema is always in flux from the first movie 'Vigathakumaran'. The director of the film is JC Daniel, and he is considered the father of Malayalam cinema. In 1938 the first Malayalam cinema with sound "Balan" was released which was released by S Notani. At early stages, storylines of Malayalam cinema deals with history and divinity.

After that, we can see rapid advancement in the Malayalam film industry both in content and class. In 1951 the film "Jeevithanaouka" was released. It was a first family drama and considered as the early box-office success in Malayalam. In 1954 "Neelakuyyil" won the presidents silver medal. The first Neo-realistic film in Malayalam releases in the year 1955 which was directed by P. Ramdas. In 1961 Kandanbacha Coat, the first full-length colour film in Malayalam was released. In 1964 "Chemeen" directed by Ramukaryiat won the presidents gold medal. It was the first time a south Indian film won this prestigious award. In the 1970s Malayalam Cinema found to be engaging in a so-called new wave Malayalam cinema or Malayalam parallel cinema that was pioneered by AdoorGopalakrishnan, G Aravindan, M T Vasudevan Nair etc. Eminent writers like M.T Vasudevan Nair, VaikomMuhammedBasheer and ThakazhiSivashakarapillai wrote some brilliant scripts for Malayalam cinema during this period. In the 1980's the new category of Cinema what we called as middle Cinema came into prominence. This film movement was under the initiatives of directors like Bharathan, Padmarajan, K.G.George etc.

Scholars consider this period as the golden age of Malayalam cinema because the films during that era is a culmination of the Malayali spirit that is characterised by full-length screenplays, excellently directed by master-directors, dealing with everyday life with an eloquent narration of plot intermingling with humour and melancholy.

In 1982 the first 70mm film 'Padayottam' was released. And in 1984 first 3D film in India My Dear Kuttichathan was released in Malayalam. In 1997 the movie "Guru" was released which is the first Malayalam movie nomination for the oscar. During the 1990's the quality of Malayalam cinema was gradually decreasing and there arise the age of larger than life heroes in Malayalam cinema. After 2000, commercialisation and star centred films became a curse for Malayalam cinema so as in Indian Cinema.

But after the first decade of millennium Malayalam cinema is changing to the next level. The superiority of superstars in the industry is gradually decreasing, and new directors were becoming prominent. New making styles, New storylines are coming. Technology is improving, and the social habit to sidelining the sexual minority groups are also changing in the current industry. New directors are not only willing to make transgender characters in their Cinema, but also their roles are given prominence. Previously transgender people are only seen as makeup artists in the Malayalam film industry. Still, in one of the newly released Tamil movie "Peranbu", a transgender person in real life Anjali Ameer played the role of a transgender heroine. These all are welcome changes in the film industry. Even though the scenario is changing transpersons portrayal is very less in Indian Cinema so as the Malayalam Cinema. Malayalam cinema always portrays transgender as stereotypes like comic characters, ridiculing them and mocking them in front of the Society is very common. The mainstream Malayalam cinema was still reluctant in capturing the real-life existence of third gender communities. Mainstream film industry always depicts transgender characters as sex workers or procurers. Here we are analysing the film "NjanMarykutty" a movie, which characterise a

transgender character in the lead role which was released in the year 2018 and we are discussing how the portrayal of transgender has been changing in the Malayalam cinema.

TRANSGENDERS IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

Transgender people are portrayed very dubious in Malayalam cinema. Mainstream Malayalam Cinema never goes inside the legitimate conditions of transgender lives. Either the portrayals are unrealistic or vague. The characterisation was always ridiculing, mocking and inciting comedy. Transgender comedies always trivialize the real problems of transgender people. Some of the noteworthy mentions of transgender characters in Malayalam cinema are discussed to get an idea about the ambiguous portrayal of transgender people in the Malayalam film industry.

Soothradharan

Soothradharan was a film which was directed by AkLohithadas which was released in the year 2001. In the movie Soothradharan, there is one character whose name is "Leela Krishnan" the role played by Salim Kumar, a male character dressed as transgender for living. He is living with transgender people as one of them. This film portrayed transgender characters in a very dubious way ridiculing and stereotyping them as beggars. This characterisation of Leela Krishnan nullifies the hardships faced by the transgender community.

That is Leela Krishnan being a male also living as transgender for money. The other stereotypical portrayal in this film was transgender groups attacking the people for money. And they threaten people with bad words. This stigmatic portrayal doesn't fit with the actual reality trans genders facing in their everyday life. The film shows an overly simplistic representation of transgender experience, ignoring the real-life intimidation they face in the Society.

Chandhupottu

Chandhupottu is a 2005 Malayalam language film which was directed by Lal Jose. In this film Dileep the actor who played the role of a feminine character Radha Krishnan who became like that because he is bought up like a girl. Here the film is not portraying any transgender characters. But there are so many instances in this film where the antagonist and so many other characters mocking and ridiculing Dileep's character by questioning his third gender identity. In this film, Dileep uses so many characteristic traits of transgender people in his role like body movements, facial expressions, etc. The main aim of the characterisation of Radha Krishnan is to make the people laugh but using transgender personality traits to make people laugh is not a good example in front of the Society.

Ardhanari

Ardhanari is a 2012 film which was directed by SanthoshSowparnika. The film tries to take up the story of the Hijada town in Tamilnadu. The customs and culture of transgender people in the Hijada town. The story underlines the absence of legal protection of the third gender community in the Indian Society. The film also shows light into how the third genders are treated in ancient religious texts in various parts of the world. In this film, Manoj K Jayan and ManiyanPillaiRaju played the role of transgender people. Ardhanari is one of the movies which portrays the individual transgender lives, especially the life of hijada community through the film.

Thira

Thira is a Malayalam movie which was released in 2013 directed by the young director VineethSreenivasan. Thira portrays a transgender character, Basu. The director treats the role with no difference as the other sex groups. Basu is a character who helps the protagonist to get information about human trafficking. This film portrays the character of Basu in a very positive manner without ridiculing and mocking. The director has given a functional space for the transgender character.

Action Hero Biju

Action Hero Biju is a 2016 Malayalam film which was directed and co-written by Abrid Shine. The film canvassed the professional life of Biju Paulose Sub-Inspector of police, Kochi. NivinPauly played the role of Biju Paulose. There is a scene in this film where the Sub Inspector character saw the transgender character with some disgusting facial expressions. He doesn't even want to talk to the transgender character. The movie shows a wrong example for the public. Narrowcasting and avoiding the transgender people from the mainstream Society is reestablishing with this scene. The portrayal that sub-inspector of police can't tolerate speaking to transgender will set an unfortunate trend in Society. The other major setback is the so-called ethical, heroic protagonist of the movie whom the film portrayed as an excellent able police officer also shows intolerance against weaker sections like transgender people is wholly unconvincing.

These are some of the notable transgender portrayals in mainstream Malayalam Cinema before NjanMarykutty. In all these films, transgender people are portrayed as comical, ridicule or mock characters. They don't have enough screen space, and their life problems are not discussed in-depth. But 'NjanMarykutty' shatters all conventional stereotypes in the portrayal of transgender people, and it shows a new trend in presenting transgender people to the Indian cinema world.

NJAN MARYKUTTY

NjanMarykutty is a Malayalam film which was released in 2018. The film was written and directed by Ranjith Shankar and co-produced by the actor Jayasurya. In this film actor, Jayasurya played the role of a transwoman. 'NjanMarykutty' is one of the first films which portrays a transsexual character in lead role and with dignity and respect. The film also deals with the nitty-gritty of being a transperson in Kerala. Marykutty depicts the life of a transwoman who fights against Society to achieve her dream to be a police officer. She faces so many obstacles in her way to achieving her goal. But she overcomes all these obstacles and fulfils her dream.

It is the first time in mainstream Malayalam Cinema where a transperson character being a protagonist. Malayalam cinema was always reluctant to deal with the transgender characters and their real life.

But *NjanMarykutty* deals with the real-life existence of transgender without generalisation and stereotypes. NjanMarykutty breaks all the stereotypical portrayal of trans women in the Malayalam film industry.

NjanMarykutty portrays transgender as a positive character which has been occurred very rarely in Malayalam cinema. In mainstream Malayalam cinema, transgender people were always portrayed as procurers and sex workers. But NjanMarykutty is an exception to this.

NjanMarykutty portrays transwoman character as ambitious that is novel in Malayalam cinema. Marykutty wants to become a sub-inspector of police. She works for her ambition overcoming all the odds placed in front of her by the Society. The male gaze which is a part

of every transgender lives is portrayed realistically in the movie. Unlike other mainstream Malayalam cinema transgender character gets recognition from the Society in NjanMarykutty. She was working as a Radio Jockey and got acceptance by the Society. The film depicts some people who are aware of the transgender rights and others who see transgender people as a curse to the Society in a balanced way. The other notable mention is the character of the priest of a church played by Innocent. Through this character, the film shows us the changing viewpoint of the Christian church to the transgender community. The portrayal seems quite realistic, never seen before without exaggeration and clichés associated with transgender characters. The film also shows us that Government officials are not aware of transgender rights. They are becoming the prosecutors of transgender people showing hatred against them. There are three instances in this which shows the disrespect and unawareness of transgender rights by the government officials. In one scene, a gazette officer mocking Marykutty because of her transgender identity. In another shot, police officers harass Marykutty and charge cases against her which shows the ground reality of the conditions of transgender people in Kerala. The film also shows us some of the common problems faced by transgender people in Kerala like toilet issue, human rights issue, etc.

This film also shatters the stereotypical thinking that all trans genders are sex workers. Transgender people are living in this Society doing various other jobs. They are very much succeeded as makeup artists, beauticians and in all sorts of jobs. Now they are giving reservation for government jobs also. So there must be portrayed other than sex workers or procurers. The most famous speciality of the film is that it does not make the protagonist a source of humour like the other contemporary films had done before. With a strong storyline and a very relevant theme, we can say that NjanMarykutty has done justice to the theme.

CONCLUSION

The portrayal of transpersons is not all common in mainstream Malayalam cinema. However, with changing Society and people began to accept trans people in conventional Society, media and also film is also taking up relevant subjects relating to the transgender people. The government have a significant role in the upliftment of transgender people to the mainstream of Society. Then it will gradually lead to the acceptance of transgender people in Society. So NjanMarykutty is a brave attempt and a welcome change for Malayalam cinema. With the success of NjanMarykutty, Malayalam Cinema proved that transperson protagonists could also be accepted in Society. The success of the movie 'NjanMarykutty' facilitated an extensive scholarly discussion on the transgender identity. NjanMarykutty is just a small step. Let us hope there will be numerous steps like NjanMarykutty in the realistic portrayal of transgender lives.

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