



Research article

Unveiling Transgender Narratives: A Critical Analysis of Their Representation in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

For over a century, cinema has been an influential medium through which stories are told, and culture is expressed. Stories come to life through filmmaking and exploring various themes, experiences and perspectives. Film's visual and narrative elements can shape public opinion, subvert social conventions, provoke thinking and significantly impact the culture and social discourse. This study examines the representation of transgender individuals in Malayalam cinema, analysing the evolving narrative landscape and its societal impact. Regardless of a rich cinematic history dating back to the 1930s, Malayalam films have only recently begun to include transgender themes with depth and sensitivity. The study scrutinises early depictions that often resorted to stereotypes and comedic mockery, contrasting them with contemporary portrayals that uphold understanding and acceptance. By dissecting specific films, this work reveals the changing tides in cultural perception and points out the importance of responsible storytelling in media. This study calls for a continued push towards authentic and respectful representation, emphasising the transformative potential of cinema in shaping public attitudes towards the transgender community. This study used historical, content, and discourse analysis as methodology and representation theory as the theoretical framework to examine the portrayal of transgender in Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: Film Making, Malayalam Cinema, Social Impact, Stereotypes, Transgender Representation.

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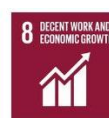
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Introduction:

Representation in media refers to how various forms of media, including cinema, television, books, news, social media, and other formats, portray different groups of people and issues, especially the depiction of social categories such as class, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, ethnicity, and national or regional identity. Media representation shapes how society views different groups and individuals perceive themselves. Many groups, such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, are often underrepresented in media. This lack of visibility can contribute to their marginalisation and reinforce social hierarchies. (BBC. nd), (Mediasmarts. nd), (Shakuntala 2013).

Cinema plays a dual role in shaping perceptions of transgender individuals. Positive portrayals in films can increase awareness, understanding, and social acceptance of the transgender community. Reitz (2017) states that such representations may lead to more outstanding advocacy for transgender rights. Conversely, negative depictions can reinforce harmful stereotypes. Banu and Yasmin (2020) and Ravindar (2018) Note that accurate cinematic portrayals provide visibility and help dispel misconceptions about transgender persons in the community (Banu A & Yasmin, 2020), (Ravindar, 2018).

Antagonistic or stereotypical representations of transgender people in films can reinforce harmful prejudices and discrimination, contributing to a culture of marginalisation and violence toward the transgender community. This includes the use of derogatory language and the portrayal of transgender people as deviant or abnormal. An overly sexualised portrayal of transgender individuals also harms them (Sriraam, 2022), (Ravindar, 2018), (Reitz, 2017).

Studying the representation in cinema is important for several reasons. Examining their representation in cinema provides insight into how societal attitudes towards transgender individuals have changed. Researchers can identify critical and harmful stereotypes, tropes, and inaccuracies. This analysis can contribute to more refined and accurate portrayals in the future (Mclaren, 2018), (Ravindar, 2018). This study probes into the representation of transgender individuals and characters in Malayalam (a language in Kerala, India) films.

Methodology of the Study:

Both content and discourse analyses were used to investigate the research questions on the representation of transgender individuals in Malayalam cinema. The historical analysis outlines significant trends from the 1930s to the present. Content analysis focuses on specific films, examining narratives, character development, and contexts. Discourse analysis explores cultural and societal discourses, reflecting and influencing public attitudes towards transgender individuals. This study analysed two categories of Malayalam movies: transgender or gender queer-themed films and movies with transgender characters, using Stuart Hall's representation theory. This theory emphasises that media representations are not mere reflections of reality but are constructed through various processes influenced by cultural, social, and ideological contexts. (Hall, 1997). By applying Representation Theory to the study of transgender representation in Malayalam cinema, we can better understand how these portrayals shape societal attitudes and contribute to the evolving narrative landscape.

Early Depictions of LGBTQ Themes in Malayalam Cinema (1930s-1990's):

The history of the Malayalam film industry dates back to the 1930s, before the formation of the state of Kerala in 1956. The early 1960s and 1970s witnessed significant growth in the production of Malayalam movies. These films often drew inspiration from social and political issues and literature (Guru et al., 2015), (Sreehari, 2008). In the 1970s, a series of sexually-themed films were produced, but these stories primarily focused on heteronormative love and sexuality. In the film industry, there are only a limited number of movies with LGBTQ themes, including in the Malayalam film industry, Bollywood, and Tollywood (James & Venkatesan, 2022). Malayalam movies have had a mixed history in portraying transgender characters. In some cases, transgender characters have been represented stereotypically or offensively, often for comedic effect or as a source of ridicule (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018). In the 20th century, there were only two Malayalam films that featured references to homosexuality. The first portrayal of homosexuality in the Malayalam film industry appeared in the 1978 movie *Randu Penkuttikal* (The Two Girls), directed by Mohan (Mammen, 2021). The film tells the story of two schoolgirls, Kokila and Girija, both dancers. Kokila becomes possessive of Girija and tries to express her desire for her, but Girija is involved with a young photographer. Eventually, Girija convinces Kokila that their feelings for each other are just a "female fantasy" and that they should conform to society's expectations of heterosexual relationships (Jalrajan Raj et al., 2018). Though the film is not considered an ideal representation of homosexuality, it marked a milestone in Indian cinema as it was one of the first films to depict a homosexual character in a regional language as early as 1978 (James & Venkatesan, 2022) (Cinema Kerala, 2023).



Figure No. 1: The final scene from *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* (1986) depicting the tragic culmination of Sally and Nimmy's story. Source: (Padmarajan, 1986 2:16:00).

The 1986 Malayalam film *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* (translated as The Bird of Passage Never Weeps), directed by Padmarajan, tells the story of a relationship between two teenage schoolgirls, Sally and Nimmy. The film is often interpreted as a depiction of a homosexual love story, even though it is not explicitly portrayed as such. The characters, who are outcasts with inclinations towards same-sex love, are portrayed as feeling uncared for by their families and ill-treated in school (Mokkil, 2009). They flee to the city during a school trip, seeking a "haven" to be

themselves (Padmarajan, 1986, 00:30:00). As the story develops, they meet a male stranger named Harishankar, with whom Nimmy becomes romantically involved (01:04:02). When she realises that Harishankar is in love with their teacher, she becomes confused and chooses to return to school. Meanwhile, Sally, who has deep feelings of love towards Nimmy, returns to stop Nimmy from committing suicide (02:10:00). The film ends tragically with both characters dead (02:16:00), leaving many questions for the viewers ((Jalrajan Raj et al., 2018), (Padmarajan, 1986).

The film *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* is significant for portraying a powerful emotional bond between Nimmy and Sally, the two main characters, which can be seen as a representation of gender identity politics, queerness, and female solidarity (James & Venkatesan, 2022). The film also highlights the insensitivity and moral rigidity of the educational system and teachers towards teenage relationships, especially for female students (Padmarajan, 1986, 00:19:00 and 00:21:42). It is exceptional that the film does not sensationalise or exoticise same-sex relationships but instead strives to normalise them through a sensitive portrayal of the character's emotions and experiences (James & Venkatesan, 2022), (Mokkil, 2009).

Discussion:

In the Malayalam film industry, similar to other film industries, there is a shortage of productions that accurately represent the cultural background and life experiences of transgender and queer individuals. From the 1930s to the 1990s, the Malayalam film industry often focused on heterosexual stories and ignored queer lives in Kerala. This was due to societal homophobia and legal restrictions such as IPC Section 377, which made it hard for filmmakers to address LGBTQIA+ issues (Tharayil, 2005), (James & Venkatesan, 2022). Representation of transgender characters in Malayalam films can be found in various forms, including male, female, or transgender actors portraying transgender characters in movies based on the real-life struggles faced by transgender persons and male or female actors performing as the opposite gender to meet the demands of the movie's character (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).

Representation of Transgender in Malayalam Cinema in the 2000s:

The movie *Soothradharan* (translated as "The Strategist"), released in 2001, is one of the first Malayalam movies with a transgender reference. The movie is not primarily focused on the culture or lifestyle of transgender individuals. The film revolves around Rameshan, who flees from his village to another on the Andhra Pradesh-Karnataka border, where he finds his childhood friend Leelakrishnan in the transgender community (Lohithadas, 2001, 00:24:46). Leelakrishnan leads a double life as a man with a wife and children back home while also posing as a transwoman to make a living.



Figure No. 2: Moment of recognition between Rameshan and Leelakrishnan. (Source: Lohithadas, 2001, 01:13:45)

The portrayal of Leelakrishnan reinforces the stereotype that transgender individuals are deceitful and inauthentic. The film also portrays the transgender community as a group of abductors and attackers, perpetuating the harmful notion that they are violent and dangerous (Lohithadas, 2001, 00:23:40, 00:31:20). Even though the movie tried to illustrate the life of the Indian transgender community in a small part of the film, the portrayal of transgender life lacks realism and accuracy. Many aspects of their life experiences are left out, and many scenes are instead filled with negative and stereotypical portrayals of the transgender community.

In 2005, the Malayalam film *Chanthupottu* (which means "Bindi"), directed by Lal Jose, was released. The movie stars actor Dileep and tells the story of Radhakrishnan (also known as Radha), who was born male but raised as a girl by his grandmother due to her desire for a granddaughter (00:05:4-00:08:49, Jose, 2005) (Joseph, 2019). As an adult, Radha exhibits female mannerisms such as walking, dressing, and wearing female makeup. To earn a living, Radha teaches dance to girls in a coastal village (00:17:10, Jose, 2005). His effeminate traits lead to ridicule and alienation from his community (00:45:05, *ibid*), ((Roshni & Nithya, 2013).



Figure No. 3: Radha Teaching Dance to Students. Source : (Jose, 2005, 00:17:10)

When a scarcity of fish in the sea causes hardship for the villagers, they blame Radha and his effeminate nature, claiming he is a curse to the village (Jose, 2005, 00:59:10). Villagers force him to leave the village. Instead, Radha goes fishing alone in the sea on a small boat to prove his

masculinity to the villagers. However, a group of villagers, along with the antagonist Kumaran, follows him, attacks him at sea, and drowns him. However, a group of other fishermen rescues him from the sea and transports him to another coastal village (01:05:00 to 01:012:00). There, he befriends a family who tries to convince him that he should be more masculine (01:35:00). They empower him to fight as a male, and he gains confidence after fighting with the family rivals of his friend's family (Jose, 2005, 01:42:00).



Figure No. 4: A group of drunken villagers attacks and humiliates Radha by undressing him to examine his gender identity.

Source:(Jose, 2005, 00:41:40).

After discovering his masculine self, he returns to the village. He fights to prove his masculinity by engaging in physical battles with Kumaran, who burned his home and was responsible for his father's death(01:55:30 to 02:02:10). After the villagers realise Radha is the father of his lover Malu's child, they finally accept his manhood (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).

Discussion:

The impact of the film *Chanthupottu* on society has been significant and largely negative, particularly for the LGBTQ community. The movie's title was used as a slur to insult and harass genderqueer individuals, particularly effeminate gay men and transgender persons (Bhaskar, 2022). Although the movie is not specifically about transgender individuals, it serves as an example of how the portrayal of gender and sexuality can have adverse effects on the lives of transgender and genderqueer individuals, perpetuating misconceptions about these groups in the general population (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).

In the years following the film's release in 2005, LGBTQ politics began to be discussed more widely, and many activists from the LGBTQ community testified against the movie for its role in making their lives more difficult. In 2017, a genderqueer activist in Kerala, Unais, shared a social media post detailing the extreme harassment he faced in school from teachers soon after the film's release, who used the film's title as a slur to harass him for being effeminate. This post received much support, and many others in the LGBTQ community shared similar experiences

they had faced due to the film. Even straight, effeminate men also shared similar experiences of being called "*Chanthuupottu*" as an insult for not being masculine enough (Staff, 2017).

Fifteen years after its release, the film has become controversial and has sparked many discussions. In response to these controversies, the film's director, Lal Jose, has stated that he stands by his work and defends the film, stating that there is no gender issue in the movie and that the allegations made by LGBTQ activists are an intrusion on his freedom of expression (Joseph, 2019). In response to the controversy surrounding the film "*Chanthupottu*," transgender film actor and activist Anjali Ameer recounted how she was subjected to blame, humiliation, and harassment due to the movie. In contrast, upon meeting the film's director, Lal Jose, she was convinced that the movie simply portrayed an effeminate male character and had nothing to do with gender, sexuality, or the transgender community. The director subsequently apologised to her for any hardship the movie caused. Ameer concluded that the problem lies with society, which mistakenly took the movie's fictional character as a reason to harass genderqueer and transgender persons (Samayam, 2019).

The film *Chanthuupottu* ultimately portrays the transformation of Radhakrishnan into a traditionally masculine role by societal expectations to counter the "curse" associated with his effeminate character. On the other hand, the film also portrays societal discrimination faced by individuals who exhibit gender nonconformity, particularly men who exhibit femininity. The director and screenplay writer, to ensure the movie's commercial success, do not try to challenge the heteronormative societal norms and ultimately reinforce the idea that individuals with gender nonconformity can and should change to fit into the gender role expectations of a heteronormative society (Jose, 2005).

The 2010s: Transition Period of Transgender Representation in Malayalam Cinema:

Since 2012, a progressive shift in the representation of the hijra community has become evident in the Malayalam film industry, starting with the release of "*Ardhanaari*." Compared to previous portrayals, this one presents more compassionate treatment and provides a platform for the perspectives of transgender people (Kuriakose, 2020).

***Ardhanari* (The Half Women) 2012:**

Ardhanaari, directed by Dr. Santosh Sauparnika, provides a groundbreaking representation of the life and culture of the Hijra community and transgender persons in Malayalam cinema, which has previously neglected this topic and only focused on male or female representations (Kuriakose, 2020). The film challenges conventional portrayals and offers unique insights into the experiences of transgender individuals. The film features mainstream Malayalam actors Manoj K Jayan (Vinayan/Vineeta/Manjula), Jayakrishnan (Bala), Thilakan (Nayak), Sukumari (Guru), Maniyanpilla Raju (Jameela), among others, in lead roles (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).

The film traces the journey of the protagonist, Vinayan, who is identified as male at birth but displays feminine traits and ultimately self-identifies as female, Vineeta. The protagonist's father responds to these changes with sympathy, while his brother reacts angrily. Despite facing harassment and taunts from his brother and the local community, Vinayan struggles with the contradiction between his male physical form and his feminine identity (Souparnika 2012,

00:13:50-00:24:00). Upon realising that his brother intends to harm him, Vinayan flees to a village in Tamil Nadu (Souparnika 2012, 00:24:46), where he encounters a hijra community and is welcomed into their world with the assistance of another transwoman, Kokila.



Figure No. 5: Kokila Introducing Vinayan to the *Hijra Jamaat*.

Source: (Souparnika, 2012, 00:32:26).

The community leader, *Nayak*, introduces Vinayan to the *hijra* community and its customs, bestowing him a new female identity, Manjula. Under the guidance of a Guru, Manjula assimilates into the hijra gharana and is accepted as a *Chela* by another transgender person, Jameela. After a year, *Nayak* conducts a *Dil-Mehandi* ceremony, during which Manjula reveals that she experiences sexual attraction to both men and women. *Nayak* declares Manjula as an *Ardhanaari* (a person embodying both male and female qualities) (Souparnika, 2012, 00:33:25-00:48:00). He allows her the freedom to live and marry as either a man or a woman, both within and outside of the hijra community (Souparnika, 2012), (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).



Figure No. 6: *Nayak* and *Guru* introduce Vinayan to the *Jamaat* and name her Manjula. Source: (Souparnika, 2012, 00:47:35).

The film *Ardhanaari* endeavours to depict Indian society's views towards the hijra community and transgender individuals through various incidents. It illuminates the marginalisation and exclusion faced by members of the hijra and transgender community in India,

who are often subjected to negative stereotypes and portrayed as sexually promiscuous and immoral (Souparnika, 2012). Through the portrayal of Jameela's character as a hypersexualised transgender individual, the film sheds light on the consequences of unsafe sexual practices and the reluctance of the healthcare system to provide treatment to transgender individuals, owing to the fear of infectious diseases and societal stigma (Souparnika, 2012, 01:03:22-01:07:00), (Rashmi. & Anilkumar, 2018).

When the protagonist, Manjula, expresses her love for Kokila and desires to marry her, Kokila declines as she is in a relationship with another man, Sanjay (Souparnika, 2012, 01:00:20). Manjula then marries her childhood friend, Balu, but cannot fulfil her female desires for pregnancy and motherhood and realises that Balu has another wife and daughter. This leads Manjula to return to the hijra community after leaving her husband (ibid, 01:15:07, 01:33:47). On her way to visit her ill father in Kerala, Manjula is arrested by the police and subjected to physical and sexual abuse in the lock-up. Her brother eventually releases her, warning her not to return to the village or see any of her family members (01:20:55-01:23:45). Through these incidents, the director of the film aims to depict the difficulties and hardships faced by gender non-binary individuals, including by their own families and law enforcement authorities (Souparnika, 2012).

Upon her return to the hijra village, Kokila marries Sanjay despite Manjula's objection(01:35:46). Shortly after that, Kokila is found murdered in her home, and the police accuse Manjula of the murder (01:37:28, 01:39:35). The hijra community members also believe the accusations are due to Manjula's prior romantic interest in Kokila and ask him to leave the *Jamaat*. The framing of Manjula as Kokila's murderer by the law enforcement authorities represents a more significant issue of the criminalisation of transgender individuals and the denial of their rights in a heteronormative majoritarian society (Souparnika. 2012).

The film *Ardhanaari* also portrays the exclusion of hijra community members from the justice delivery system by law enforcement authorities. When they approach the police seeking justice for Kokila's murder, their complaints are denied because the complaint forms only have male and female columns. The police also threaten to register cases and send transgender individuals to jail if they do not leave the police station premises (Souparnika. 2012, 01:40:58). This emphasises the denial of justice faced by transgender individuals, particularly those living in the hijra community, and the violation of their rights in a society that operates within a rigid gender binary (Souparnika, 2012), (G, R. & Kumar, 2018).

Ardhanaari sheds light on the need for better representation and understanding of the transgender community in Indian society and the challenges they face regarding societal views, legal rights, and health care. The film also outlines the significance of creating a more inclusive and accepting society for the hijra community and transgender individuals (Nair, 2012). *Ardhanaari* contributes to raising awareness and promoting acceptance for the hijra community, yet it arguably presents an outdated interpretation of transgender experiences in Kerala today. The film casts Surya Ishan, a transgender actress, in a groundbreaking step toward authentic representation. Nevertheless, her role remains symbolic mainly and lacks depth. Transgender activist Sheetal Shyam criticises the film for centring on the hijra culture, which does not accurately reflect the current circumstances of the broader transgender population in Kerala (PU, 2017).

Thira (the Wave) (2013)

Thira, a Malayalam feature film directed by the youthful filmmaker Vineeth Sreenivasan, was released in 2013 and centres on the issue of child trafficking in the regions of Karnataka and Goa. The lead role of Rohini Mayi, an individual who operates an NGO for impoverished children and victims of trafficking, is portrayed by the renowned actor Shobana. Savitha, a transgender actor, played the character of Basu, a trans individual who has a crucial role in the film's narrative. Basu assists Rohini Mayi in her endeavours to rescue trafficked children (Sreenivasan, 2013, 00:7:00, 00:52:00-00:56:50, 01:34:10,1:59:30). The portrayal of this character by the director Vineeth Sreenivasan is marked by a unique and positive approach, unlike the typical negative representation of transgender characters in other films (PU, 2017). Basu is represented as determined, self-sufficient, and level-headed, adding a rare and respectful representation of transgender individuals on the silver screen in the Malayalam film industry. (Sreenivasan, 2013).

Odum Raja Aadum Rani (2014)

The film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* (roughly translated as Sprinting King and Dancing Queen), written by Manikandan Pattambi and directed by Viju Varma, premiered in 2014 and straightforwardly describes the challenges faced by transgender individuals in Kerala society. The film was selected for screening at the Bangalore Queer Film Festival (2015) as a transgender movie. In this film, the protagonist Ayyappan, or Thamburu, is a transgender person who earns money by performing 'Att' (a temple ritual dance) in a Kerala village (Varma, 2014, 01:51:35). Thamburu's transgender identity and feminine nature are well known to the villagers, but they are not bothered due to his association with the temple dance. Thamburu is compelled by his mother to marry a woman (Varma, 2014, 01:52:00). Thamburu's life takes a turn for the worse when his psychotic brother rapes his wife and kills his mother (01:55:30-01:55:3). He leaves his native village after that incident and joins a dance group in another village (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).



Figure No. 7: Two scenes in which Thamburu Performs *Aattu* and Folk Dance. Source: (Varma, 2014, 00:16:00 and 01:51:32).

There, Thamburu meets Venkiti, a vagabond and door-to-door vendor. Thamburu is attracted to Venkiti's masculine character and develops feelings for him, but Venkiti ignores Thamburu's affection (Varma, 2014, 00:21:05, 00:26:52, 00:35:59, 00:53:17), (Kuriakose. & J. Alex, 2017). Venkiti makes several attempts to reinforce masculinity in Thamburu with the help of his friends through verbal humiliation, calling him names such as '*penkoosan*' (feminine man), and stripping; Venkiti also brings another woman, Maala, to provoke Thamburu's masculinity (Varma, 2014,01:09:30). Thamburu opposes Venkiti's romantic relationship with Maala, provoking Venkiti

and leading him to manhandle Thamburu badly (Varma, 2014,01:37:49, 01:47:20). Thamburu disappears from the village and is not cared for by anyone (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).



Figure No. 8: Venkiti's Friends Try to Strip When they find Thamburu Wearing Sari. Source: (Varma, 2014, 00:59:52).



Figure No. 9: Venkiti tries to alter Thamburu's shyness by compelling them to change their dress before him. Source: (Varma, 2014, 00:45:12).

Nevertheless, Venkiti and Maala decide to find Thamburu and bring them back to the village. Venkiti and his friends go to Koovagam in Tamil Nadu to find Thamburu during the Koothandavar festival, where all transgender individuals gather for a ritual ceremony (Varma, 2014, 02:01:10). There, they find Thamburu living happily as a transwoman, but Venkiti and his friends decide not to spoil Thamburu's happiness by taking him back to the miseries of the village (Varma, 2014).



Figure No. 10: Thamburu celebrating the *Koovagam* Festival after finding their true self. Source: (Varma, 2014, 01:58:54).

The film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* challenges the macho masculinity historically endorsed by Malayalam cinema and contrasts Venkiti's macho masculinity and Thamburu's de-masculinised feminine character (Kuriakose. & J. Alex, 2017). The film's portrayal of the torture and harassment faced by Thamburu as a genderqueer individual in his village and the homosocial space of Venkiti and his friends sheds light on the human rights violations of nonbinary gender individuals in Kerala society. The film's depiction of the failed 'curing' process imposed upon Thamburu for being genderqueer can be viewed as an attempt by the filmmakers to mock and criticise the hegemonic gender codes, heteronormativity, and patriarchal family system, which hesitate to accept gender non-binary individuals in society. Thamburu's exile to another state to escape from hardships faced in the village reveals the depth of the insensitive attitude of Kerala society towards the issues of gender nonconforming and transgender individuals, which systematically leads to their exclusion from society (Varma, 2014) (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).

There is no doubt that the film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* has questioned the dominant cultural norms of Malayalam cinema through its portrayal of gender and sexuality in a non-normative way. However, as a transgender film, it includes many stereotypical portrayals, such as presenting Thamburu's character as a feminine male who prefers stereotypical female gender roles like housekeeping, cooking, and washing rather than portraying her directly as a transwoman. The film illustrates Thamburu's ultimate problem of being unable to have a romantic relationship with Venkiti (Varma, 2014). Presenting this as the significant reason for Thamburu's exile from the village bears no relation to reality; there are multiple reasons for the exile, ranging from being forced to hide her transgender identity from the villagers' attacks to the humiliation from Venkiti and his friends. The movie did not focus on those reasons (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).

Even though there are possibilities for a romantic relationship between Thamburu and Venkiti that could break the heterosexual conventions followed by Malayalam cinema, the filmmakers instead tried to present Venkiti not only as a heterosexual masculine male but also as a womaniser who tries to reinstate masculinity and heterosexuality in Thamburu (Varma, 2014). The 'curing' process visualised in this film may not change the majority of Malayali viewers'

perception of gender fluidity as being abnormal due to their adherence to heterosexual norms (Kuriakose. & J. Alex, 2017). The portrayal of Thamburu's vengefulness towards Venkiti's relationship with other women gives the wrong idea to viewers that transgender individuals are a threat to heterosexual relationships. The film has portrayed the difficulties of gender performativity of transgender individuals in Kerala society, but it failed to dig into the deeper issues they face (Varma, 2014).

Njan Marykutty (Iam Marykutty) (2018)

Njan Marykkutty (I Am Marykutty) is a 2018 Malayalam film directed by Ranjith Sankar, starring Jayasurya in the lead role. This film is a powerful dramedy that inquires about the life of a transwoman named Marykutty and explores the challenges she faces in a society that is often hostile towards the transgender community (Sankar, 2018). The film sketches Marykutty's aspirations to become the first transgender Sub Inspector of the Kerala police (Sankar, 2018, 00:06:55) and her arduous journey toward achieving her career goal through exceptional willpower and fortitude (Kuriakose, 2020).

Marykkutty was born in a small hill station town in Kerala, where the population is less aware of LGBTQ rights and adheres to patriarchal norms and transphobia. When Marykkutty decided to transition from her male gender identity assigned at birth to a female identity (Sankar 2018, 00:01:20), her father and sister disowned her. She then leaves home after writing a letter to her parents and sister. With the support of her parish priest and friends, she secured a job as a radio jockey at a local church radio station (Sankar 2018, 00:04:55, 00:10:20), but she continued her efforts to become a police officer (Sudhish, 2018), (Sankar, 2018).



Figure No.11 Marykutty Working As Radio Jockey in the Church Radio.

Source: (Sankar 2018, 00:37:07 & 00:37:34).

As a transwoman, Marykkutty faced a multitude of verbal and physical harassment from society, highlighting the difficulties that any transgender individual may face when coming out in a society with highly restrictive gender norms. The movie reproduces the daily struggles of transgender individuals to maintain their dignity and rights, such as coping with public gazes, groping on public transportation, and random 'hitting on', which are experiences often faced by women and transgender individuals on the streets in Kerala (Sankar, 2018, 00:12:16, 00:13:11, 00:21:28, 00:45:35) (Cris, 2018). Despite her privileged background and education (Post

graduation and professional experience in an IT company), Marykutty is humiliated and persecuted by society because of her gender identity (Prakash, 2018).



Figure No. 12: Two scenes from the movie show a man standing behind, attempting to grope Marykutty, and a group of men moral policing Marykutty for being seen on the streets at night with a girl (her friend's daughter).

Source: (Sanker, 2018,00:13:07 and 00:45:30).

The primary reason behind Marykutty's decision to join the police force was the atrocities and harassment faced by transgender individuals at the hands of the police. The film characterises a high-ranking police officer who tries to stop Marykutty from becoming a police officer by any means necessary; he also tortures her inside the police station (Shankar, 2018, 00:47:22-00:54:00). Despite the hurdles of red-tapism and legal battles, Marykutty realises her dream of becoming a police officer (Cris, 2018).



Figure No. 13: Two Scenes where Marykutty faces harassment from the Police; the first scene is in the police station, and the second is on the road. Source: (Shankar, 2018, 00:51:00 & 01:27:31).

The film *Njaan Marykkutty* stresses numerous crucial human rights issues faced by the transgender community in Kerala, including discrimination, violence, and limited access to employment and healthcare (Prakash, 2018). The film shows how Marykkutty's right to express her true identity is constantly challenged by the attitudes of others and the limitations imposed by a conservative society. The film also touches upon the issue of employment discrimination faced by the transgender community in Kerala, especially in the government sector (Sanker,

00:26:45). Marykkutty's struggles to find employment affirm the challenges faced by many transgender individuals who are often denied employment opportunities due to their gender identity. This lack of access to employment usually exacerbates the already dire financial situation faced by many transgender individuals and puts them at increased risk for poverty and homelessness. Marykkutty's journey is a powerful reminder of the struggles faced by many transgender individuals who are often marginalised and excluded from society (Shankar, 2018).



Figure No. 14: Marykkutty Becomes a Police Officer. Source: (Shankar, 2018, 01:48:34).

Njan Marykkutty departs from traditional portrayals of transgender characters in Malayalam films by realistically visualising Marykkutty, free from stereotypical exaggerations (Cris, 2018). The film significantly contributes to overcoming myths and prejudices about transgender individuals. Its powerful message aims to inspire and uplift audiences, promoting greater understanding and acceptance of the transgender community in Kerala. Although Jayasurya's acting as Marykkutty was highly commendable, some argue that casting a transgender actor for the role would have been a more authentic representation (Sudhish, 2018), (Cris, 2018).

Aalorukkam (The Makeup) (2018):

The 2018 film *Aalorukkam*, directed by VC Abhilash, centres on the story of a 75-year-old man, Pappu Pisharodi, who embarks on a journey to locate his son, who had departed home 16 years ago. After a fall, Pappu finds himself in a hospital, where the staff takes on the responsibility of locating his missing son (Abhilash, 2018, 00:02:14, 00:05:40-00:22:06). Despite seeing his son after a prolonged search, Pappu discovers that his son has undergone a transformation he did not anticipate (Abhilash, 2018, 01:08:33). Sajeevan, his son, left home 16 years earlier due to gender nonconformity and found a new identity as a transwoman named Priyanka (Abhilash, 2018).



Figure No. 15: Pappu Pisharadi and Priyanka. Source: (Abhilash, 2018,01:53:20).

Sajeevan's gender transition has an intense impact on Pappu, who struggles to accept his child's new identity. Priyanka's husband and Pappu's doctor attempt to help Pappu accept that Sajeevan is now Priyanka, a woman, rather than the *'Shikhandi'* he imagines (Abhilash, 2018,01:32:55). Despite their efforts, Pappu is unable to accept the truth. Pappu expresses his difficulty in seeing Sajeevan as Priyanka, a transwoman, as he and his wife raised Sajeevan as a boy for 20 years (Cris, 2018).



Figure No. 16: The landlord threatens to evict Priyanka from their home.

Source: (Abhilash, 2018, 01:18:09).

Despite being ill, old, and lonely, Pappu cannot bring himself to live with Priyanka, and he leaves her and returns to his village. The film also depicts the challenges that Priyanka, her husband, and her daughter face as a family, such as the inability to adopt their child due to Priyanka's transgender identity legally (Abhilash, 2018, 01:26:29). This spotlights the legal system's shortcomings in granting adoption rights to married transgender individuals and their spouses. The frequent threats of eviction from their landlord highlight the helplessness of Priyanka and her

husband in finding inclusive housing for transgender individuals, regardless of their social and financial status (01:18:02, Abhilash, 2018).

Iratta Jeevitham (The Dual Life) " (2018)

Iratta Jeevitham is one of the first films to shed light on a transman and his life struggles throughout the movie (Madhyamam, 2018). The film explores various aspects of transgender life, including gender identity, family rejection, social stigma, discrimination, and poverty (Chandra, 2018).

One of the central characters in the film is Amina, a coastal village girl who returns home after undergoing a physical transition as a transman with a new male name, "Anthraman," after a long period of disappearance since his teenage years (Mohandas, 2018). He faces intense ridicule and neglect from his conservative family and society despite his attempts to live as a man. His efforts are constantly thwarted by societal pressure and discrimination (Narayan, 2018), (Filmbeat, nd.), (Venkiteswaran, 2018).



Figure No. 17: Iratta Jeevitham Poster. Source:(Irattajeevitham Movie, 2018)

The film describes Anthraman's struggles with empathy and sensitivity, showing the emotional and psychological toll of living in a society that refuses to accept one's true identity (Chandra, 2018). It also highlights the challenges that transgender individuals face in reuniting with family and friends who may not accept or understand their identity (Madhyamam, 2018), (Narayan, 2018).

The film illustrates the complex emotional relationships between Anthraman and his childhood friend, Zainu. In their childhood, Amina's friendship with Zainu was considered just like a friendship between two girls by their family and society. After Amina became Anthraman, Zainu's conservative Muslim family members became hostile toward their friendship. They prevented Zainu from meeting Anthraman and maintaining a relationship with him. Even though people are not ready to accept Anthraman as a complete man, they try to prevent him from establishing relationships with women (Venkiteswaran, 2018). This highlights the complexities of accepting the gender identity of a transgender man in a conservative heteronormative society (Narayan, 2018).

The film also touches on the issue of poverty and how it affects transgender individuals. It portrays the difficulties of finding work and earning a living, especially in a society that discriminates against transgender individuals (Venkiteswaran, 2018). "Iratte Jeevitham" is a fascinating movie that reveals the often-ignored difficulties transgender people face in villages in Kerala. By telling the stories of Anthraman and Amina, the film raises awareness about the discrimination and marginalisation that transgender individuals face and calls for greater acceptance and understanding (Chandra, 2018), (Madhyamam, 2018). In Anu Chandra's opinion, "Iratte Jeevitham" stands out distinctly because it is unparalleled in Malayalam cinema for its profound exploration of gender issues (Chandra, 2018). This is an independent feature film not released in many theatres. It was screened parallelly in movie theatres, libraries, and other arts and cultural venues. This film was also selected to be screened in Bangalore Queer Film Festival 2018.

Discussion:

The Malayalam film industry, like Bollywood, predominantly followed a heterosexual framework for many years. A major factor was the criminalisation of homosexuality under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. However, global acceptance of LGBTQ issues and the decriminalisation of Section 377 in 2009 brought a shift in Indian cinema, leading to more sensitive portrayals of LGBTQ themes (Srivastava, 2016). "*Ardhanari*", for instance, depicts Hijra culture, typically absent in Kerala, through a village in Tamil Nadu. Previously, many transgender individuals from Kerala sought refuge in neighbouring states due to societal rejection (Habin, 2021). Recent government policies and growing social acceptance have improved the situation, though challenges like hostile family environments and unemployment persist (Poornima, 2022).

In the movie *Thira*, the character Basu, although impactful, is a non-Keralite transgender person who speaks Hindi. This depiction, therefore, may not accurately represent a Malayali transgender individual.

Thamburu's character in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* depicts how a non-heteronormative person faces different levels of torture from society. The film sensitively portrays the life struggle of transgender in a typical Kerala village, with performances from the entire cast (Habin, 2021). Marykutty's role in "*Njan Marykutty*" faced criticism for not exploring other gender identities, portraying a privileged transgender woman. However, Ranjith Sankar's narrative offers a realistic examination, showcasing Marykutty's immense inner strength and determination despite significant adversity (Sudhish, 2018).

Just like Marykutty's battle to become a police officer, Arjun Geetha, a transman from Kochi, has successfully challenged the Kerala Public Service Commission's (KPSC) decision declaring him ineligible for the armed police sub-inspector post. The High Court of Kerala dismissed the KPSC's appeal, emphasising that denying opportunities to transgender individuals contravenes the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act. (Raghunath, 2023).

While *Aalorukkam* attempts to tackle complex themes, reviews suggest it falls short of fully developing its characters, particularly in conveying their emotional struggles. For instance, the protagonist's internal conflict is portrayed effectively, but other characters, especially Priyanka's

character, are not explored as intensely, leading to a somewhat superficial treatment of the narrative (Bharadwaj, 2018), (Veeyen, 2018)

2018 marked a significant milestone for transgender representation in Malayalam cinema, with three films featuring transgender themes. Two mainstream movies received critical acclaim and won awards, while "Irattajeevitham" had limited theatrical release, hindering wider access. Among these, two films focused on transwomen and one on a transman.

Transgender Characters in Contemporary Malayalam Film:

***Abhaasam* (as in Short of The *Aarsha Bharath Sanskar*) (2018):**

In the movie directed by Jubith Namradath, Sheethal Shyam plays herself as a transgender activist and toy seller. Her character travels to Kerala to attend a trans festival at a temple. The film gives Sheethal significant visibility, highlighting her roles as an activist and an actress. Through Sheethal's and two other actors' characters, the movie delves into contemporary Indian society and elucidates the lives and challenges of transgender individuals (Namaradath, 2018).

This social satire film unfolds during an overnight bus journey from Bangalore to Kerala, where a diverse group of travellers confronts societal issues and suppressed desires—the narrative critiques gender stereotypes and societal norms through the interactions and reflections of its character. None of the characters in this movie has a name (Athira, 2018).



Figure No.18: Sheethal, along with two of his transgender friends, sells handcrafted toys. Source: (Namaradath, 2018, 00:09:21).

***Moothon* (The Elder One) (2019):**

The Malayalam film *Moothon*, directed by Geetu Mohandas, is a remarkable breakthrough in portraying LGBTQ characters. Through the gentle romance between Akbar and Ameer, the film beautifully captures same-sex love, defying clichés and sensitively addressing queer life

(Mohandas, 2019, 00:55:20, 00:56:30, 01:03:26) . This movie also features Mulla, a gender-fluid teenager, and Latheef, a transgender character, illustrated with depth and realism. The film distinguishes itself from previous Malayalam productions by authentically presenting LGBTQ relationships and identities, steering clear of stereotypes and biases.



Figure No. 19: Sujith Shanker as Lateef Source: (Mohandas 2019, 01:29:17)

Lateef, in this film, is a transgender living with the Hijra community in the red-light area of Kamathipura, Mumbai. She meets Mulla, a young girl dressed as a boy, who is landing in Mumbai, searching for her elder brother Akbar. Despite Lateef's harsh realities and struggles, she plays a crucial role in the protagonist, Mulla's journey of self-discovery and acceptance (Mohandas, 2019, 01:42:00, 01:53:50) . In this film, Lateef is shown as a multi-dimensional character with her struggles, strengths, and moments of tenderness, rather than the stereotypical portrayal of transgender characters as sources of ridicule or purely in a tragic light (Mohandas, 2019).

In Geetanjali Rajmohan's review for Film Companion, "Moothon" is praised as a rare Indian mainstream film that delves into gender and sexuality. The film explores various perspectives on masculinity, presents love with depth beyond physical displays, and uses a queer narrative to universalise intimacy without stereotyping, emphasising fluidity and uncertainty over definite labels (Rajmohan, 2020).



Figure No. 20 Lateef convinces Mulla to be truthful to her gender identity rather than dressing up like a boy. Source : (Mohandas, 2019, 01:42:10)

Another review by Vinay Kumar opines that the film's contrasting light and dark scenes highlight Latheef's duality, portraying angelic and devilish qualities. Latheef's interactions with Mulla reflect an imposition of gender roles that Latheef has previously discarded (Mohandas, 2019, 01:43:00), (Kumar, 2020). Even though it is a Malayalam movie, the story is set in Lakshadweep and Mumbai, so the dialogues are mainly in Jeseri (the Lakshadweep dialect of Malayalam) and Hindi.

Mike (2022):

The film *Mike* narrates the story of Sarah, also known as Mike. Mike is portrayed as a free-spirited person who aspires to undergo a gender transition from female to male. The decision is rationalised by various factors, including the desire to avoid the male gaze, the ability to sleep next to anyone without apprehension, exemption from cooking responsibilities, the prospect of getting married without a dowry, the freedom to urinate anywhere, and the ability to stroll on the streets past 6 pm (Sivaprasad, 2022, 00:19:52, 00:53:08), (Entertainment Times, 2022). The underlying reasons behind Sarah's motivation appear to be primarily rooted in a spirit of rebellion against her parents. Her mother chose to cohabit with a more masculine partner, neglecting her husband, who is perceived as frail. Her father is viewed as having neglected his responsibilities toward her (Sivaprasad, 2022).



Figure No. 21: Sarah's Attempts to Establish Masculinity Through Gender Roles. Source: (Sivaprasad, 2022)

Sarah associates masculinity with the use of alcohol and tobacco (Sivaprasad, 2022, 00:7:04-00:7:56, 00:20:00), which prompts her to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Her friendship with Antony, a young man struggling with alcohol use disorder, leads them to embark on Mike's gender-transitioning journey together (Sivaprasad, 2022, 00:17:18). Nonetheless, Sarah becomes

confused when she realises she has romantic feelings for Antony and falls in love with him (Sivaprasad, 2022, 01:13:53, 01:14:25). Consequently, she reconsiders her gender transition and ultimately decides to remain a girl (ibid 01:38:45, 1:44:44).



Figure No. 22: A transman convincing Sarah that her reasons for sex reassignment are purely social.
Source:(Sivaprasad, 2022, 01:44:55)

The portrayal of Mike's desire to transition to male appears to stem more from a desire to escape societal expectations imposed on women and a strained relationship with her parents rather than a genuine desire to embrace a male identity (Praveen 2022). The film's treatment of substance misuse, aimlessness, and self-harm as a means of healing trauma is problematic and potentially harmful, especially for gender-fluid individuals and transgender people who are in their gender transition period. The film perpetuates harmful stereotypes about toxic masculinity and conveys a regressive message regarding gender roles and inclusivity (Sivaprasad, 2022), (Cris, 2022).

While the film addresses a relevant topic related to non-binary gender identities, it falls short in exploring the sociological, psychological, and physiological aspects of gender transition. This may contribute to misunderstandings and negative attitudes toward the transgender community (Times of India, 2022). The movie perpetuates the harmful stereotype that heterosexual relationships can remedy gender nonconformity, a notion that could further complicate the experiences of transgender individuals undergoing or contemplating gender transition (Cris, 2022). Given Kerala's highly heteronormative society, films like "Mike" have the potential to inflict harm upon the transgender community, which has only recently begun to assert its identity in the mainstream of society (Praveen, 2022), (Sivaprasad, 2022).

Kooman (The Owl) The Night Rider 2022:

The movie "Kooman: The Night Rider" tells the story of Giri, a policeman at a local police station who turns to kleptomania after hearing people boast about their wealth being safe in their houses. He meets Manniyann, a local thief, and learns the tricks of the trade from him (Joseph, 2022, 00:29:38). Later, he discovers a conspiracy happening in the town and starts his investigation on the side with the help of his former police friend (Joseph, 2022, 00:29:38). As he probes deeper, he finds that all the people who committed suicide carry a paper with a peculiar scent on it, leading him to uncover black magic and human sacrifices. In the end, he discovers that Lakshmi, his love

interest, was born intersex and is currently living as a transwoman. She was conducting rituals to attain a higher form of supernatural power with the help of a Hindu priest, Dorai Swamy, who specialises in exorcism and black magic. Due to the misconception that transgender individuals are cursed, Lakshmi and her parents had to leave their native place and move to Giri's village (Joseph, 2022, 02:19:19). There, Lakshmi and her father had to take extreme measures to find their way in the world through exorcism and human sacrifices (Iyengar, 2022), (Joseph, 2022).



Figure No. 23: Dorai Swami and Lakshmi performing *Pooja* for human sacrifice, Giri as the victim. Scenes from the movie's climax. Source: (Joseph, 2022, 02:17:30-02:26:24)

From a transgender perspective, the movie portrays the struggles of Lakshmi, who is forced to resort to black magic to cope with her situation due to the lack of support and acceptance of gender identity from her extended family and friends. Gender identity and sexuality are topics that are still not well understood by all members of society, particularly in rural and suburban areas of Kerala. The movie highlights the importance of acceptance and support for individuals who come out about their sexuality. Nonetheless, the portrayal of Lakshmi as a person who turns to exorcism to attain a higher form of supernatural power may reinforce negative stereotypes about transgender people being involved in occult practices, which are not representative of the transgender community (Praveen, 2022).

All the above movies featuring transgender or gender-fluid characters, from Radha in *Chanthupottu* to Lakshmi in *Kooman*, share a common storyline: each is forced to leave their birthplace. This underscores that, despite over a decade of LGBTQ movements and discussions in Kerala, the acceptance of transgender individuals remains questionable. In this scenario, the negative portrayal of transgender characters in movies will make a significant impact on the lives of transgender individuals.

Adam Harry, a transman, criticised the film *Mike* for reinforcing gender stereotypes, which he and others have been trying to dismantle. He argues that it misrepresents the experiences of transgender people. He pointed out that the film suggests that trans men are merely "confused girls" seeking male privileges, which undermines their identities and experiences (Cris, 2022).

Conclusion

The evolution of transgender representation in Malayalam cinema, as analysed through the lens of representation theory, reveals significant shifts in how transgender identities are portrayed and perceived. Early visualisations often relied on stereotypes and comedic elements, reinforcing societal prejudices and marginalising transgender individuals. Films like *Chanthupottu* exemplified this trend by presenting effeminate men as objects of ridicule, thus perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to the stigmatisation of gender nonconformity (Joseph, 2019).

In contrast, the trend began to change with films like *Ardhanaari* and *Njan Marykutty*, which offered more nuanced and empathetic portrayals of transgender characters. These films marked a departure from earlier representations by focusing on the struggles, aspirations, and resilience of transgender individuals. *Ardhanaari* provided a compassionate portrayal of the hijra community, challenging viewers to empathise with their experiences and recognise their humanity. *Njan Marykutty* portrayed a transwoman's journey towards societal acceptance and professional success, addressing issues such as employment discrimination and societal prejudice.

Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, which emphasises the constructed nature of media representations and their role in shaping societal attitudes, is particularly relevant in this context. Hall's concepts of encoding and decoding illustrate how filmmakers encode messages about transgender identities into their narratives and how audiences decode these messages based on their own social and cultural contexts. The positive reception of films like *Njan Marykutty* suggests that audiences increasingly decode these messages in ways that foster empathy and acceptance, reflecting broader societal shifts towards inclusivity.

Contemporary films like *Moothon* continue this trend by presenting complex and multi-dimensional transgender characters, moving beyond stereotypes to explore deeper themes of identity and love. These films contribute to a more positive and inclusive representation of transgender individuals, challenging viewers to reconsider their preconceptions and embrace diversity. The analysis of transgender representation in Malayalam cinema showcases the transformative potential of media in shaping public attitudes. By moving away from stereotypical portrayals and towards more authentic and respectful representations, future research should continue to explore the impact of these representations on societal attitudes and the lived experiences of transgender individuals in Kerala.

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