

**The Representation of Female Bonding in Select Malayalam
Cinema: A Study**

**A Thesis Submitted During 2023 to the University of
Hyderabad**

in Partial Fulfilment of the Award of a Ph.D. Degree

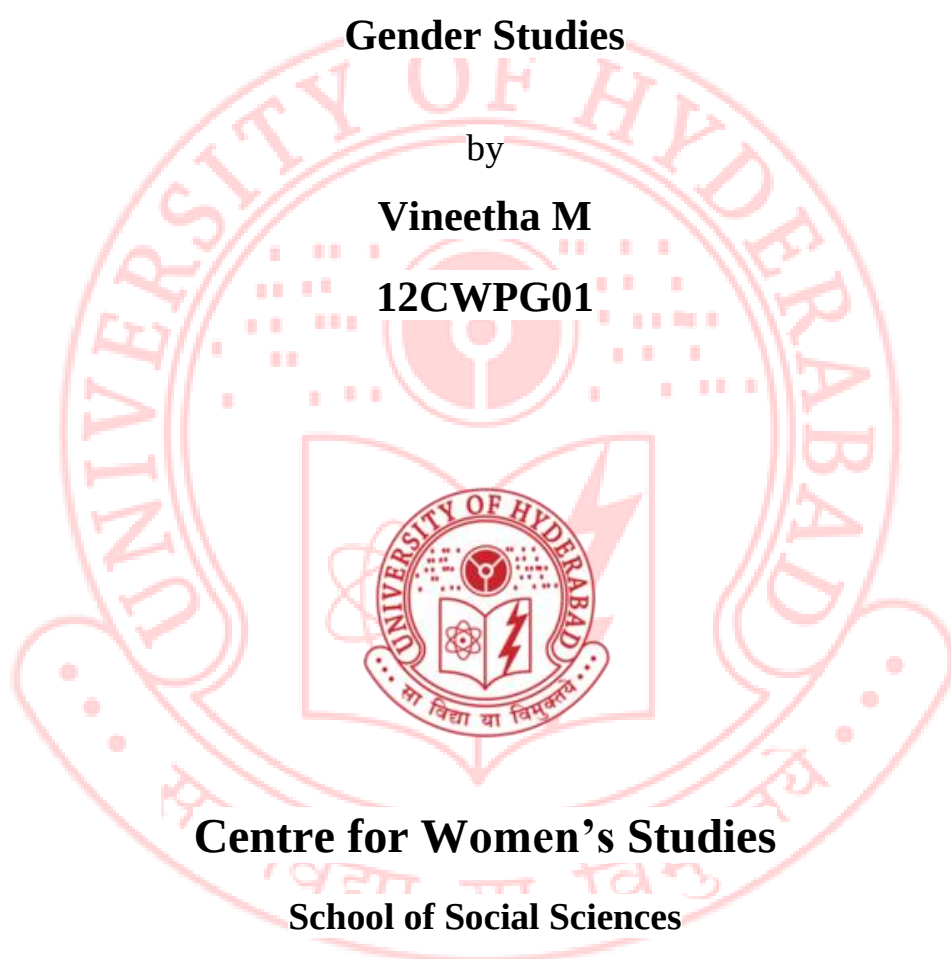
in

Gender Studies

by

Vineetha M

12CWPG01



Centre for Women's Studies

School of Social Sciences

University of Hyderabad

(P.O) Central University, Gachibowli,

Hyderabad – 500046, Telangana

India

October 2023



Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled **The Representation of Female Bonding in Select Malayalam Cinema: A Study** submitted by **Vineetha M** bearing Registration Number **12CWPG01** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for award of Doctor of Philosophy in **Gender Studies** from Centre for Women's Studies, School of Social Sciences is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

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Further, the student has passed the following courses towards fulfilment of coursework requirement for Ph.D.

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GS 804	Society and Sexuality	4	Pass
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Deepa Sreenivas
Prof. Deepa Sreenivas
Research Supervisor
Centre for Women's Studies

पर्यवेक्षक / Supervisor
 महिला अध्ययन केन्द्र / Centre for Women's Studies
 समाजिक विज्ञान संकाय / School of Social Sciences
 हैदराबाद विश्वविद्यालय / University of Hyderabad
 हैदराबाद-४६ / Hyderabad-46, T.S.

K. Suneetha Rani
Prof. K. Suneetha Rani
Head
Centre for Women's Studies

अध्यक्ष / Head
 महिला अध्ययन केन्द्र / Centre for Women's Studies
 समाजिक विज्ञान संकाय / School of Social Sciences
 हैदराबाद विश्वविद्यालय / University of Hyderabad
 हैदराबाद-४६ / Hyderabad-46, T.S.

Jyotirmaya Sharma
Prof. Jyotirmaya Sharma
Dean
School of Social Sciences

अध्यक्ष / DEAN
 समाज विज्ञान संकाय
 School of Social Sciences
 हैदराबाद विश्वविद्यालय
 University of Hyderabad
 हैदराबाद-500 046., भारत
 Hyderabad-500 046. INDIA.



Declaration

I, **Vineetha M**, hereby declare that this thesis entitled “**The Representation of Female Bonding in Select Malayalam Cinema: A Study**” submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. Deepa Sreenivas is a bonafide research work. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

Name: Vineetha M

Signature of the Student

Regd. No: 12CWPG01

Date: 16.10.2023

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Female Bonding in Malayalam Cinema: Frames and Trajectories

In Suniti Namjoshi's story, *St.Suniti and the Dragon*, a woman befriends a wolf:

And so the two friends walked away, and when at the third village they were rudely greeted by sticks and stones, because it was claimed, their reputation had preceded them, they were not greatly surprised, but just walked on until, at last, they entered a realm that is not as yet familiar to us (Namjoshi 1998, p. 87).

From the Malayalam cinema *Desadanakili Karayarilla*:

Nimmi is lying on Sali's lap, and both are sitting under the tree on the hostel premises. Sali is caressing Nimmi's hair while Nimmi shares her anxieties about getting detained from school. She says, "I will not return home; Father will plan my marriage." Sali consoles her and says, "If that happens, we will go far... to a faraway place, a safe place" (Padmarajan, 1998).

From Kamala Das's novel *Chandana Marangal*:

For ages, I was a slave to her sensuous arms and legs. I became her love thereafter. The taste and wetness of her mouth became mine. I coexisted with her body's softness and resistance. Finally, to part us, mother found no other way but to marry me off to a wealthy and educated relative" (Das, 2005, p. 16).

The relations between women are crucial in constituting the concept of gender and sexuality. In the history of the study of gender, women were defined in relation to men.

By disregarding women's relationships, the understanding of gender, desire, sexuality, and other structures of society is rendered partial. As Maya Sharma has indicated, "Women's sexual experiences are generally understood solely within the established parameters of reproduction. Within this framework, the life experiences of lesbian women have been almost completely invalidated because sex/sexuality are generally understood only in relation to a heterosexual paradigm of oppositional duality" (Sharma, 2006, p.1).

Rosemary George observes how the non-heteronormative tropes of Kamala Das's *My Story* are flattened out in mainstream literary criticism:

English-language literary criticism has written extensively on Kamala Das. Yet, in these criticisms, all the non-heteronormative protests and pleasures in *My Story* were (and continue to be) straightened out. Many Indian-based, English-language literary feminists have a highly developed sense of patriarchal oppression but do not feel any compulsion or urgency to work through the links between heterosexism and the oppressive weight of patriarchal systems. The scholars offer considerable discussion of sexuality in Das's work, and such discussion continues to be almost exclusively on heterosexual relationships in these texts (George, 2000, p.732).

Feminist scholars Mary John and Janaki Nair write in *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economics of Modern India*, that "a focus on the conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality in India, whether within political and social movements or in scholarship," must not "blind us to the multiple sites where 'sexuality' has long been embedded" (John and Nair, 1998, p.15). This scholarship is at the vanguard of recognising feminist theorising

that aims to achieve a decolonised understanding of power and gender. Indian feminists have extensively researched sexuality in these circumstances. However, as Jacqui Alexander has highlighted, even in feminist critiques that are aware of the significance of sexuality to institutional apparatus, considerable work needs to be done "on articulating the processes of heterosexualisation at work within the state apparatus" (Alexander, 1997, as cited in George, 2000). From the 1970s to the present, feminist critics writing on Kamala Das have been willing to celebrate and second her critique of the institution of marriage, of marital rape, and of the obligation to wifely fidelity in marriage at all costs but not her critique of heterosexuality itself. Following Alexander, one could argue that such feminist projects unintentionally fall into the service of the state by striving to make heterosexual and reproductive roles (crucial to the state and citizenship) more amenable to women.

Methodology

My thesis is *The Representation of Female Bonding in Select Malayalam Cinema: A Study*. The study focuses on cinematic representations and an enquiry into the strategies of cinema in representing female-to-female desires. Queer reading facilitates the subtextual analysis of cinema: the sexual, erotic, and romantic implicitness and the slipperiness of these representations in cinema. Female bonding addresses an array of same-sex relationships, which are uncategorised and considered fluid. This study explores the understanding that there are different possible relationships that cannot be observed based on the limitations of understanding female experiences in a heterocentric-reproductive culture. Unfortunately, feminist analysis is also often trapped in these binaries. Most of the popular cultural representations are mainly hetero-centric but a

queer reading could examine the function of popular culture, especially cinema, in remoulding subjectivities, desires, and pleasures. Female bonding intensifies the technique of pleasure in cinema. Queer reading allows one to read non-heteronormative arrangements within rigidly heterosexual structures and muse how queer articulations of desire and pleasure draw on and infiltrate popular culture (Gopinath, 2007).

Muraleedharan (2002) states:

This seeming absence of a recognisable gay/lesbian cinema need not undermine the relevance of queer mass culture studies in India. Neither should such studies be limited to the few recent Hindi films with overt “queer” representations. On the contrary, such studies need to venture beyond the overtly articulated and explore the unnamed expressions of queerness that structure popular culture in this part of the world (p. 181).

My thesis focuses on the unnamed or unfamiliar expressions of desires and pleasures and their representation in cinema.

“*Queer* can be a narrative moment, a performance, or a stance that negates the oppressive binaries of the dominant hegemony” (Muraleedharan, 2002, p.181). Cinema is not a representation of fixed reality. As a cultural text, it creates reality, forms meaning, and creates visions and imaginations that help one construct the real and construct oneself within the real. (Muraleedharan, 2005, p.73). Thus, this research also focuses on constructing the meaning of gender and sexuality through representations. A queer reading raises several pertinent questions: How does a subtextual reading, political in its approach, reclaim marginal representations? What are the repressed desires buried in the

psyche and practice of the dominant culture? What are the purposes of subtextual readings?

Cultural texts represent queerness in different ways consciously or unconsciously. Queer elements can appear in heterocentric heterosexual texts, and straight-identified people can experience queer moments. Spectator engagement with any cultural text is complex and is negotiated variously through the multiplicity of identities. Queer reading complicates the strategies popular cultural texts employ in the representation of desires and pleasures. Focusing on marginal desires can question the devices and aims of the dominant culture in subtle and resilient ways.

Alexander Doty reminds one that the queerness of most mass culture texts results from acts of production or reception. He maintains that the queerness some readers or viewers attribute to mass culture texts is not in any way less real than the straightness others would claim for these texts. There is queerness of and in straight cultures (Muraleedharan, 2002, p. 181). Doty has observed that the queerness of mass culture develops in three areas:

- influences during the production of texts
- historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and queers
- reception positions that can be considered “queer” regardless of a person’s declared sexual and gender allegiances

Here the researcher's position can be identified as an ally to the LGBTQIA+ movement in Kerala: a cisgender woman, her female companionship, and discussions with them that facilitate queer perspective in viewing Malayalam cinema.

Research Questions

My research goes beyond the reading of female bonding to offer a queer reading of female-to-female bonding and desires, complicating it with an understanding of queer politics. A queer reading extends beyond the essentialist notions of gender, sexual and social norms. This study addresses broader questions of sexuality and desire in the representation of female-to-female desires in Malayalam Cinema. This study addresses questions like how sexuality is represented outside the heteronormative relationship, how specific romantic and visual codes operate in films so as to express queer desire and in what ways these representations address, subvert, or submit to the hegemonic Malayali normativity/masculinity?

I draw from Adrienne Rich's idea of the lesbian continuum to analyse female bonding. Female bonding encompasses all kinds of female-to-female relationships, including relationships between mother and daughter, sisters, romantic friendships, or lesbian relationships. My study endeavours to unsettle the distinctions between sexual and non-sexual relationships and shifts from the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality. My study of female bonding explores these relations as inherently and potentially fluid. The study examines the sexual, erotic, romantic, and platonic dimensions implicit in these same-sex relations. It also examines its interchangeabilities in its representation of female-to-female desires in different cultural texts and specifically in cinema. Desires are

represented in connotative ways as this is differently presented in different cultures and the mode of cinema accommodates different ways of representing pleasures and desires.

Textual Analysis

In this work, I have looked at select Malayalam films as primary texts for a close textual analysis. The selection of cinema is based on different genres chosen for different chapters for a detailed theoretical analysis. A feminist/queer approach is followed to interpret the film narrative, visual codes, and overall content. Most of the films I have selected represent female relations as the centre of narration. In a number of films, female desires can be observed in the songs or marginalised spaces.

To study the narrative structure, I have analysed the film's plot, mise-en-scène, songs, dialogues, characters, climax and resolution, and other visual elements in detail to uncover queer subtexts. Female-to-female relationships are fluid in cinematic representation and I read the underlying desire and possibility of multiple sexual imaginations. This is carried out by analysing romantic or visual codes in female romantic friendships. In the spatial arrangement of the cinematic space, imaginative and physical (presented as real and not real) are significant to understanding the conventions of representation. Trust and commitment between women will be analysed the visual romantic codes to represent intimacies and desires. Transgression of gender and sexuality order will be analysed to read subtle non-normative desires subvert/submit to the gender sexuality norms. In the convention of representation of songs, the reflection of romantic-erotic desires will be analysed. Songs and lyrics create a space for female-to-female desires as well as cinematic resolutions. As the movies are rooted in a heterosexual

matrix, films employ strategies to recuperate heteronormativity as a resolution. I analyse resolution as a representative strategy cinema employs in a cultural text.

Genre and conventions are some more themes that are analysed in the thesis. I have selected the horror genre representing female-to-female desires and its slipperiness into eroticism is analysed in detail. Cinema's representation of masculinity and heteronormativity will be delved into for analysis. Besides, the cultural and historical context in which the film was made and how it may influence its content and reception is analysed. However, audience reception/spectatorship is one of the aspects that is not extensively studied in this work.

Chapterisation

The first chapter is the "Introduction" where I explain the concepts from various sources and literature that I have derived to theorise female bonding. I explore a feminist, queer conceptual background of female bonding. The concepts also include the lesbian continuum of Adrienne Rich, the concept of homosociality theorised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and the concept of heteronormativity. I will analyse how feminist consciousness or feminist politics support the idea of female bonding. I also analyse feminism, the concept of female sisterhood, the idea of female outrage against heterosexuality, and the politics of representation of female bonding in cultural texts. In order to understand the trope of desires between women in the Kerala context, I have also looked at the female-to-female desires in Malayalam literary texts including *Chandanamarangal* (Sandalwood Trees) and *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls) where films have adapted the literary texts. I specifically analyse the tropes and differences of representation when the strategies of cinematic text are applied to literary adaptations.

Chapter two concerns the representation of normative femininities in Malayalam cinema. I have discussed the institutionalisation of heteronormativity in this chapter as this is a specifically constructed sexuality in general and women's sexuality in particular, especially when such an institutionalisation is part of the construction of modern womanhood, often dominant womanhood. In this chapter, I look into how intersectionality determines the construction of heteronormativity. In chapter three which addresses queering the Yakshi, I have focused on female-to-female desire among women in select Malayalam cinema particularly in the horror genre. I have selected two horror movies, *Manichitrathazhu* (The Ornate Lock, 1993) and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (Yours Janakikutty, 1997) for analysis. Some of the questions I address here are: a) How are *impossible* desires possible in these horror modes of representation? b) Do cinematic conventions bury homosocial desires in its boundary? I analyse how gender, sexual, and caste identities are transgressed by the representation of Yakshi. In the case of horror films, the complex ranges of queerness circulated through and around the figure of the Yakshi.

In chapter four, female romantic friendships in Malayalam cinema are studied which looks into female desires and female romantic friendship as a trope of representation. The selected films are *Desadanakili Karayarilla* (Migratory Birds Do Not Cry, 1986), *Salini Ente Kootukari* (Salini, My Friend, 1980), *Novemberinte Nashtam* (Loss of November 1982), *Pranaya Varnangal* (Colours of Love, 1998), *Note Book* (2006), *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004), *Rani Padmini* (2015), *Asangadithar* (Unorganised, 2022) and *B 32 to 44* (2023). Here, I study the cinematic conventions in representing a pattern of female

romantic friendship and the configuration of friendship-love and its representation in cinema.

In chapter five, I analyse hetero-patriarchy and masculine performances in Malayalam cinema. In this chapter, I discuss how the heteropatriarchy structured in Malayalam cinema determines and influences the cinema industry. The visual culture intensifies violent culture and misogyny through the cinematic frame. In this chapter, I also analyse the concept of sisterhood that is developed in Malayalam cinema as a counter-hegemonic resistance to counter the hetero-patriarchy. This chapter finds it significant to discuss the politics and formation of the women's collective in the Malayalam film industry.

Chapter six is the conclusion of this dissertation.

In this introductory chapter, I explore a feminist, queer conceptual background of female bonding. I focus on female romantic friendships, which will be examined as a possible desire in what Adrienne Rich (1996) has described as the lesbian continuum. The concept of feminist sisterhood may have influenced the representation of female bonding in cinema. In this chapter, I try to conceptualise female bonding with the idea of "feminist sisterhood".

Female bonding is a tool encoded in strategies that deconstruct patriarchal logic and handle patriarchal structures. In different sections of this dissertation, female bonding as a strategy in real space and visual space to challenge heteropatriarchy will be studied. I explore the possibilities of the representations of same-sex desires in social and cultural spaces in Kerala with a specific focus on cinema as a cultural text influenced by social factors. Prominent representation of same-sex relationships remains largely invisible in

Malayalam cinema. Cinema, as a cultural text produces and explores desires and pleasures in the context of heterosexual relationships. Cinema is not a representation of fixed reality, as a cultural text, it creates reality, it forms meaning which might be rooted in the framework of hetero and non-normative subtle forms of desires. This research focuses on the construction of the meaning of gender and sexuality through representations.

The research on same-sex desire has been curtailed by the negligence and removal of the history of same-sex desires in cultural texts. It is imperative to study the attitude towards historical writing in Kerala towards female-to-female relationships. Therefore, this thesis will pertain to the homosocial tradition of same-sex desire and its modes of representation in Kerala.

Literature Review, Conceptual Frames

This introductory chapter travels through select Malayalam literary novels and short stories to trace intimate female relationships. It reads the tradition of eroticism and explores the female relationship in cultural and literary works. My research focuses on these concerns – the patterns of women's intimate relationships, which can be read as homosocial, homoerotic, or homosexual, the specific socio-cultural formations in Kerala to explain relationships among women and these contexts where a trajectory can be formed from Malayalam cinema. I draw on a range of literature and theoretical works to develop my conceptual framework. Below, I refer to some of the critical texts that helped me to develop my arguments.

I use the term *homosociality* for the broad understanding of the bonds between persons of the same sex. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes on the concept of “homosociality”: “For

women who share strong bonds that can be maternal, familial, social, economic, political, or erotic, homosociality is not necessarily dichotomous with homosexuality. On the contrary, the lines between the two categories are blurred, at times even fluid” (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1). She further explains:

“Homosocial” is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex. It is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with “homosexual”, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from “homosexual”. In fact, it is applied to such activities as “male bonding”, which may, as in our society, be characterised by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 1).

The question arises as to whether homosociality is a characteristic of a homophobic society. This requires further deliberation and study. To draw the homosocial into the orbit of desire and the potentially erotic is to imagine the un-brokenness of the continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual. This continuum and its visibility are disrupted among male homosocial relations. Sedgwick observes that it is not genital homosexual desire at the root of male homosociality. The term makes a historical difference in men’s relations with other men. “Male homosocial desire writes over the entire continuum” (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 2). The whole continuum is, I argue, more visible among women. What it means historically for something to be *sexual* is a more important question, which problematises the understanding of sexuality as something taken for granted. Understanding homosociality historically can deconstruct the normative idea of sexuality. Rather than confining sexual experience into certain defined categories, my approach is to explore various sexual experiences.

Sedgwick uses the concept of *homosociality* in her studies on men and masculinities. She defines it as a mechanism and dynamic social process that explains the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity. Sedgwick also uses the concept to discuss the relationship between different types of desires and intimate relationships between men. It is essential to look at the power relations between men when considering the social bonds between men. Sedgwick also examined the bonding between men in connection to women. For maintaining solidarity between men, male bonding gives privilege to maintaining a hegemonic power over women (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 3). Drawing from Sedgwick's conception of male bonding, my thesis analyses the characteristics of female-to-female relationships. My primary research questions begin with whether female bonding is a way of resistance against patriarchal male domination. It will also try to locate and analyse the social spaces that make the homosocial lives of women possible.

I specifically focus on romantic female friendships located in the particular socio-cultural contexts of Kerala. One reason is that sexuality and desire are represented in South Asian texts differently from the way they are represented in Western texts. For example, Ruth Vanita has written about how same-sex desires have been represented in history. Explicit reference to homosexuality has, until recently, hardly been represented in South Asian cultural texts, especially in cinema (Vanita, 2008). This work focuses on the representation of female romantic friendships, with particular attention given to Malayalam popular cinema.

This minor tradition of female-to-female love that I trace has been termed as 'romantic friendship.' Rather than look at the dynamics of particular female romantic couples, I focus on the overall pattern of female bonding in Kerala in general and how the cultural

texts represent same-sex romance in particular. This study attempts to correlate the politics of representation with the larger politics of sexuality in Kerala. By examining the social conditioning/factors that construct a certain kind of relationship, which can be heterosexual or homosexual, I assess that the love between women can be physical or social. Social and biological factors could be interconnected in deciding the nature of these relationships. These relations may be formed naturally while others could have had an unusual social conception and representation. I explore how social-structural reasons for same-sex desires reveal how they are disguised and portrayed in cultural texts differently.

Heterosexuality is imposed upon women and reinforced by a variety of social constraints. In Rich's proposed idea of a lesbian continuum, all forms of female intimacy would be related by their common rejection of "compulsory heterosexuality." Rich suggests that rather than being divided between lesbian and heterosexual women, one's experience can be located along a lesbian continuum. Rich pointed out two matters of concern here: one is how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, and community has been crushed, invalidated, and forced into hiding and disguise (Rich, 1996, p. 139). The second concern is that there has been a virtual or total neglect of the lesbian existence in a wide range of writing, including feminist scholarship (Rich, 1996, p. 131).

Adrienne Rich situates all women somewhere in the lesbian continuum, whether they identify as lesbian or not. For Rich, lesbianism easily encompasses many more forms of emotional intensity, not just the conscious desire for a sexual experience with other

women, but also the sharing of a rich inner life, bonding against male tyranny, and giving and receiving practical and political support (Rich, 1996, p. 139). She states:

The assumption that most women are innately heterosexual stands as a theoretical and political block for feminism. Such assumption remains tenable partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as an exception rather than intrinsic, and partly because to acknowledge that women's heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has been imposed, managed, organised, propagandised, and maintained by force is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and 'innately' heterosexual. Yet the failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system or racism is maintained by a variety of forces (Rich, 1996, p. 135).

Feminist/Queer Discourse on Female Bonding and the Politics of Representation

How would feminist consciousness or feminist politics help support the idea of female bonding? Are these relationships based on the politics of feminist collectiveness? Here, I look at feminism, the concept of female sisterhood, and the idea of female outrage against compulsory heterosexuality together. I assume female solidarity is a resistance against patriarchal, sexist ideology.

Before using the concept of sisterhood, I would like to problematise the term and reclaim it for the constructive purposes it can lend itself. Tripti Karekatti says that *sisterhood* emerged in the West as a dominant model for feminist intercommunity relations. It is a political solidarity between women carrying the meaning of shared oppression, common

victimisation, a community of interests, solidarity, and collective activism. In addition, the term is used to advocate interracial, international, trans-global, and cross-cultural bonds among women (Karekatti, 2005, p. 96). The ideal promoted by the political terms of *sisterhood*, of understanding, solidarity, and equality among all women irrespective of differences among them, has faced considerable criticism from feminists from developing countries and from Black feminists.

The term is increasingly seen as a product of white, Euro-centric feminism that neglects women's distinct political, cultural, and financial conditions in different countries. African-American feminists have pointed out the hypocrisy and the dishonesty of white feminists advocating for unconditional love and solidarity amongst all women, even as they exercise their race and class privileges. My research attempts to question *women* as a universal category and consider the complexities of caste, class, gender, and sexuality. Instead, I use the term *sisterhood* to denote the power relations between women when looking at the romantic relationships between these women.

According to bell hooks (2002), it was primarily bourgeois white women, liberal and radical in perspective, who believed in *common oppression*. However, the idea of common oppression is a false and corrupt platform that disguises and mystifies the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privileges, and other prejudices. A sustained form of bonding between women can occur only when these divisions are confronted and necessary steps are taken to eliminate them (p. 12).

While the Western model of *sisterhood* is based on the ideas of shared victimisation, the emphasis is on common oppression. bell hooks further says that by basing the bonding of

all women as *victims*, white women liberationists were not required to assume responsibility for confronting the complexities of their own experiences and privilege. They did not challenge each another to examine the sexist attitude towards women unlike themselves or explore the impact of race and class privilege on their relationship to women outside their race and class groups.

The existence of different cultural backgrounds can make communication challenging as has been evidenced by studies on black and white female relationships. Many black women saw *sisterhood* as a plea for help and support for a movement that did not address them. The White sisterhood took a long time to realise that racism and sexism are intricately connected rather than being only comparable. Black feminists also understood that sisterhood blatantly missed out on racism as detrimental to the progress of all women across races.

bell hooks (2002) has insisted that despite past differences of opinion, women can still be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, joined in their appreciation for diversity, united in the same struggle to end sexist oppression, and united in political solidarity. I follow hooks in my thesis and propose that female bonding based on the idea of sisterhood where women share common problems has rich political possibilities. The concept of sisterhood, when approached with the subtext of the lesbian continuum, is opposed to compulsory heterosexuality. By rejecting the norms of heteronormativity, including where the idea of heteronormative sexuality is caste-oriented, same-sex desires challenge the endogamous heterosexual normative power structure. The love between women becomes a subversion and a challenge to caste/sexual hierarchy in society. Same-sex desire threatens the caste-based feudal society in the context of Kerala. Thus, I argue

that female bonding is a political struggle against the twin oppressions of heterosexuality and caste hegemony.

Karekatti (2005) articulates that in Indian English literature, even if the trend of female bonding and companionship is fast catching up, its nature is very different from Western literature. In Indian literature, female-to-female relations are subdued and mellow, pertaining more to an emotional level than the political and sexual level. According to her, the concept of sisterhood has always been present in Indian literature, but it is not proposed as a stable and permanent alternative to marriage and family institutions (Karekatti, 2005, p. 97). There are intersections where feminist ideology, female bonding, and popular culture representation mutually influence each other which is exemplified in the feminist film studies scholar Karen Hollinger's essay:

The concept of sisterhood has always been a central tenet of the women's movement. The vision of a woman-identified community united by common interests and a determination to combat sexist oppression has fueled feminist rhetoric and ideological commitment. It should not be surprising, therefore, that this notion of sisterhood should have filtered into popular cultural representation aimed at a female audience. Indeed, the recent wave of films and television series dealing with female friendships, mother-daughter relationships, and biological sisterhood testifies to the influence the feminist concept of female bonding has had on the popular imagination" (Hollinger, 1997, p. 53).

In this essay, Hollinger further engages with film theorist Mary Ann Doane's views on sisterhood in popular culture. The essay explains that feminist critics have often been too anxious to positively evaluate popular cultural texts directed to a female audience simply

because women viewers have found that these works speak to them somehow. According to Hollinger, Doane believes this tendency represents an eagerness to locate in popular cultural forms something that “escapes the patriarchal stronghold” and belongs to women. (Hollinger, 1997, p. 53) They propose that what happens in these works is a process of “recuperation.” But Hollinger then adds that radical, oppositional ideas, like the feminist concepts of sisterhood and female bonding, can be assimilated by the dominant culture through popular representation in ways that cause them to lose their critical bite.

To feminists such as Hollinger, such recuperative strategies utilised by popular culture exploit contemporary issues championed by the women’s movement and simultaneously avoid allowing these issues to provoke in female viewers a serious consideration of women’s positioning within the contemporary social order. Instead, each work presents new and liberating images of sisterhood but concludes by repositioning its female characters safely within conventional patterns. Female-to-female bonding in popular culture identifies its project as breaking the stronghold of patriarchy, but it reiterates the conventional patterns of gender and sexuality. Hollinger (1997) said that the recuperative strategy only reshapes dominant cultures in ways that further consolidate the heterosexist norms (p. 53).

Shohini Ghosh has pointed out a distinctive function that popular culture has played in queer life in India. She says:

Popular films enjoy an iconic status among gay and lesbian subcultures in India even though explicit references to homosexuality have been largely absent from mainstream commercial films. A spectator’s engagement with any cultural text is

complex and is negotiated variously through a multiplicity of identities. In an overwhelmingly heterosexual popular culture, reading against the grain becomes a significant imperative (Ghosh, 2002, p. 207).

Ghosh claims that popular films, even when heterosexist, find their validation in queer circles in the subverted queer readings of their text from the viewer's perspective. Alexander Doty (1993) has analysed that the queerness of most mass culture texts is the act of production and reception. The queerness some readers or viewers attribute to mass culture texts is not in any way less real than the straightness others could claim for these same texts. There is queerness of and in straight cultures.

Representation of Same-Sex Desires in Cultural Texts

In their anthology on same-sex desire in India, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000) write that the history of *Rekhti* poetry embodies both the last vestiges of medieval freedoms and new voices of modernity (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000, p. 217). *Rekhti* in Urdu poetry is written in the female voice by male poets. Until recently, through undue strategic explanations serving heteronormativity, these representations were disregarded and deleted from mainstream culture and its history. In this manner, explicit references to same-sex desires are suppressed and deleted from the cultural texts. Ruth Vanita intervenes here and explains that *Rekhti* largely influences cinema and other literary material which has adopted the sub-text of same-sex desires represented in different possibilities.

Rekhti poetry has been criticised and labelled *obscene* for its explicit depiction of female sexuality, especially lesbian sexuality. Another radical criticism of *Rekhti* termed it misogynist as it entertained a primarily male audience by objectifying women. However,

Ruth Vanita says whatever the intention of its detractors, Rekhti poetry was not altogether removed from the lived experience of women and the society they inhabited, as is indicated by the use of words such as *chapatbaz* (vulgar and popular slang for “lesbian”) (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000, p. 252). However, Ruth Vanita goes on to explain that the love between women represented in Rekhti poetry is sexual but also emotional and romantic.

The dominant culture in India remains homophobic, and heterosexual norms are rigidly maintained. The institutions of marriage and family only permit the relationship between heterosexual individuals yet these spaces are also rigidly monitored for premarital and extramarital transgressions. Segregation is common in social spaces in India, enabled by parents who approve of same-sex friendships and homosocial spaces over cross-sex friendships and mixed-gender spaces. There are several same-sex institutions and homosocial spaces because of strict gender segregation. The paradox of this situation leads many to argue that homosexuals have more spaces for a sexual connection than heterosexuals in society who undergo sexual exploration without social suspicion. Vanita and Kidwai (2000) note that a same-sex relationship is tolerated and approved only if it is masqueraded as a non-sexual friendship and does not conflict with marriage and parenthood. In this context, Vanita says homosexuality in India is indistinguishable from heterosexuality (p. 2).

Carrying forth this argument, the opportunities for female-to-female bonding are easily practised in one’s day-to-day lived circumstances in Indian society due to the context of sex segregation in India. There is no threat to the spaces inhabited by same-sex people

any more than there is to persons who are heterosexual. The element of intolerance manifests when sexual activity explicitly spills out of these liminal spaces.

This study recognises but does not delve into complicating and disrupting same-sex people's comfortable and 'behind-the-closed-doors' social life. There is enough domestic violence behind closed doors to curb homosexual activities and same-sex romantic relations and significant intolerance for female bonding that is connected with sexual and erotic aspects. In Kerala, lesbian suicides and lesbian elopement are not publicly acknowledged. The newspapers report these issues as mere cases of suicide and elopement while hiding the aspects of sexual relations between the women in question. Many lesbians marry and live a double life and same-sex life is hidden in the domestic space and fiercely contested. Explicit and *deviant* sexuality is hidden or suppressed in our society to erase and justify that there are no harmful or hidden desires and sexuality. The idea is to keep the institution of the heterosexual and patriarchal family from unspooling. Deepa Mehta's movie *Fire* (1998) was criticised because it depicted the presence of alternative sexuality and survival modes for Indian women in the *sacrosanct* space of the household. Vanita and Kidwai analyse the legacy of Rekhti and other pre-colonial traditions for Indian cinema, which, from the beginning has displayed an overwhelming, even if implicit, interest in same-sex bonding. The heterosexual romantic interest in numerous films is often accompanied by an equally intense or even more intense same-sex romantic friendship. The implicit same-sex component in cinematic tradition is crucial in how Indians view same-sex love.

In my thesis, I look at the different possibilities of gender relations that can break the dominant ideologies and practices. The relationship between women is capable of

critiquing the normative practice of heterosexuality as same-sex desires can break normative gender, caste, sexuality norms, etc.

Same-Sex Desires in Malayalam Literary Spaces

This section explores the same-sex tradition in Kerala's social, ritual, cultural, and literary spaces. Since literary works reflect social and cultural situations, reciprocally, influencing reality, I analyse female bonding in some select literature in Malayalam to trace the dynamics of same-sex desires in Kerala. This helps me look at cultural productions of queerness and focus specifically on cinema which is mutually interconnected with literature and other cultural texts. It is crucial to study non-normative sexualities and desires in literature as these help us to reflect upon same-sex representation in general. The literary production in the same period embodies the social, cultural, historical, and structural conditions of the time.

The questions I seek are how representation in literature differs from cinematic representation and what allows literary texts to represent sexuality and desires differently. Works like autobiography, novels, and poetry may contain autobiographical elements where one's self is represented by providing an autobiographical dimension to the action or the characters, constructed to represent one's socio-cultural background. The writer's imagination and memories sometimes reconstruct or reiterate social conditions. Compared to cinema, literary language can reveal and signal the complexities of desires. There are plenty of films in Kerala adapted from literary works. One must look at the transformation from literary text to the cinematic visual frame to understand the representative strategies in addressing desires and pleasures.

Some literary writers of interest in this study are Madhavikutty (who adopted the pen name Kamala Das in English) with a focus on her novel *Chandana Marangal* (The Sandal Trees, 1988 and V T Nandakumar's novel *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1974)) both of which unravels the implications of female-to-female desire. Both *Chandana Marangal* and *Randu Penkuttikal* are generally considered examples of the representation of lesbianism in Malayalam literature. Another novel of interest is Lalithambika Antharajanam's novel, *Agnisakshi* (With Fire as Witness, 1976), which portrays female bonding without an overt depiction of sexual desires.

Madhavikutty is widely accepted as a Malayalam and Indian English writer, and her works consist of autobiography, novels, short stories, and poetry. She has courted controversies for her sensitive works, which touch on sexuality and female desires. She was born into an upper caste matrilineal Nair family in Kerala. Her background is essential to help the reader understand her position while attempting to speak about one's life experience in her time. She elucidates that if a woman, especially from a dominant caste background, perceived as a *kulina sthree* (a woman of a good clan), speaks about her desires and sexuality, it would be considered a direct challenge to the traditional discourse of caste, gender, and morality. In her autobiographical works, she speaks of her experiences bringing out the patriarchal oppression she was subjected to as well as her resistance to the same. Sexuality and its representations are central concepts in her works.

Reading Madhavikutty's work will explore differences in female desires and sexuality rarely explored by Malayalam women writers. Reading queerness in Madhavikutty's work develops a pattern found in Kerala. It specifically links female sexuality and desires located in a caste-endogamous, hetero-normative society. By presenting such queerness

throughout the stories, one can also explore the interchanging nature of the representation of same-sex desires in these texts.

Rosemary George's article "Queernesses all Mine" (2013) analyses the queerness of Kamala Das's work. Rosemary George argues that "*Chandana Marangal* calls for a radical rethinking of the heterosexist terms. *Chandana Marangal* brings a same-sex dynamic that has always been woven into Das's writing" (George, 2002, p. 112). Lesbian relationships in *Chandana Marangal* are bound in narratives of heterosexual relationships. *My Story*, Das's autobiography, looks into a friendship between women similar to that of lesbian relations in *Chandana Marangal*. This reason pushes us to think that queerness is a significant theme pervades almost all of her writings. We cannot see a demarcation between the relationships of desire between women that they are also compelled to sustain. These feminist scholars do not disturb the heterosexual logic in Das's works, even though she exposes lesbianism in these works. Rosemary George says:

Feminist critics writing on Das have been willing to celebrate and second her critique of the institution of marriage, of marital rape, of the obligation to wifely fidelity in marriage at all costs but not her critique of heterosexuality itself. She argues that such feminist projects unintentionally fall into the service of the state by striving to make heterosexual and reproductive roles more amenable to women that are necessary to the state and citizenship (George, 2002, p. 734).

Feminists see the protest against patriarchal oppression as the most politically significant feature of Madhavikutty's work. Within such feminist plotting, it is Das's heterosexual extramarital sexual adventures that mount this protest against patriarchy. The same-sex

encounters and erotics that abound within these pages are immediately dismissed as distractions or as further proof of the distortions that patriarchal oppression imposes upon women which can be seen in the representation of same-sex desires. Feminists interpret this as the consequence of women's dissatisfaction with a heterosexual relationship in an oppressive patriarchal setup. The slipperiness in her writing, resulting from a perennially unstable set of referential contexts, heightens the queer charge of the autobiography. Same-sex desire in *My Story* is always intimately bound to heterosexual relationships. Even at the level of structure, there is no neat dichotomy between such sexual practices.

Characters in the novel tend to maintain normality though they fail in their attempt. The relationship between Sheela and Kalyanikutty in her novel *The Sandal Trees* continues throughout their lifetime. Sheela is pressured to keep the relationship with her lover Kalyanikutty and her husband. Sheela lives in the memories of Kalyanikutty, who captured her love interest from childhood. However, she is not ready to accept Kalyanikutty's love. Both women belong to the Nair family. Kalyanikutty is from an economically weaker family, and she suspects that they share the same father because Sheela's father supports Kalyanikutty's education too. Sheela remembers:

For ages, I was a slave to her sensuous arms and legs. I became her love thereafter. The taste and wetness of her mouth became mine. I coexisted with her body's softness and resistance. Finally, to part us, mother found no other way but to marry me off to a wealthy and educated relative" (Das, 2005, p. 16).

Sheela is given in marriage to a family friend who is twenty-one years older than her. She compares her husband with Kalyanikutty on her honeymoon. Sheela, the narrator, remembers:

I kept comparing the two. He failed when I compared his mouth, which smelt of beer, cigarette, and onion, with hers, which had the sweet smell of *durva* grass. However hard I tried, I could not forget the way she caressed me, pressed her fingers hard into me and satisfied me with her lips, all to give me pleasure (*Chandana Marangal*, 2004, p. 17).

These women are under pressure to reject their inner feelings on behalf of the normative society. Sheela rejects Kalyanikutty's love and gets married. On the eve of the wedding day, Kalyanikutty suggests eloping and living somewhere else. Kalyanikutty often tests Sheela by bringing up her disinterest in her husband.

George says, "Das consistently encodes the homoerotic into her and then just as consistently devalues its purchase." She asks, "Why does Das repeatedly go through the pleasures of such disciplining? How long can this strategy which, some may see ultimately as homophobic be maintained?" (George, 2002, p. 112). Madhavikutty presents same-sex desire as a pleasurable alternative to socially sanctioned heterosexuality. The novel becomes a mockery of the hetero-normative society as she compares her experience with Kalyanikutty and her husband. The novel projects how their love for their heterosexual partners becomes disturbing and annoying for them. It is represented within the heterosexual matrix where their relationship can always open.

Friend and Lover: The Evasiveness of Representation

Due to the similarities between the details of *The Sandal Trees* and some of the events in *My Story*, her autobiographical work, it is impossible to dismiss same-sex desires in this short story as a mere literary theme. *The Sandal Trees* considers the relationship between

the young Kamala and her “girlfriend” in *My Story*. Madhavikutty’s work *My Story* is criticised for its socially unsanctioned sexual relationship. Feminist readers interpret it as a result of her cruel husband’s infidelity. George observes that the affair with the college girl is given scant attention since it takes place before Das’s marriage and is not accepted as a sexual relationship. In the autobiography, there is no mention of a girlfriend after marriage. *Chandana Marangal* is also similarly arranged, but the relationship remains throughout her life. George says:

In the literary criticisms of Das and often in her works, homoeroticism is differently played out according to gender. When men are portrayed as engaged in same-sex relationships, this is interpreted as part of the sexual license available to men in patriarchal societies. When women indulge in same-sex desires, it does not always register as sex— which is why in *My Story* the protagonist can engage in a seemingly satisfying physical relationship with a girlfriend and still claim to have no experience of sexual pleasures prior to sex with her husband (George, 2002, p. 119).

This reveals the visibility and recognition that same-sex representation receives in different narrative forms. Same-sex desires of men and women are represented differently even though both are subdued in a heterosexist culture. This leads us to explore sub-cultures of representation of female romantic friendship. Are male desires legitimised in the sexual license available to them? Are women-to-women relationships mostly subdued in friendship? Same-sex desires have minimal representations; when it is between men, it is presented slightly more openly.

Visibility and the act of *coming out* need to be complicated. The kind of body that gets visibility in the narrative form as a representation opens up discussion on the possibilities of female desires which gives an insight to subdued female-to-female desires. Das's autobiography acts as an instrument to get recognition and visibility in public spaces. One needs to look at caste, class, gender, and sexuality as an intersectional embodiment of the body in different spaces. Madhavikutty's work has often been considered as the exploration of the experience of a privileged woman. Women from different castes and classes experience same-sex desires differently. Women from other classes do not have the privilege to identify or claim their identity. Yet, Das's assertion of her sexual identity may be considered as a questioning of the "*kulina sthree*" norm and resisting the caste endogamy by reclaiming one's sexual identity. In *Chandana Marangal*, caste and the sexual normality of society put the protagonist under pressure, and she struggles to maintain her relationship by hiding her longing and desires. The story presents characters struggling to maintain their normality by keeping themselves in class, caste, and sexual status. While analysing the film *Sancharram* (2004), Mokkil says the shift from a marginalised woman to a woman firmly located in a privileged setting shows how the form of a romantic love story and the coming out narrative calls for a Nair woman as the protagonist. She says this is because the narrative convention of this romantic story is woven around the conception of a desiring woman who is positioned as *agential* (Mokkil, 2019, p. 165).

She analyses that Kamala Suraiyya, an iconoclastic persona, celebrates a form of resistance through sexual transgression in writing. Her writing on privileged women who use their bodies as a site of rebellion gained national and global attention and acclaim.

Similar to Suraiyya, there is greater availability of narrative forms presenting upper-caste women as autonomous, transgressive subjects. The *other* woman who belongs to a non-dominant caste or a non-privileged class is shown as one who lacks ownership over her own body, and there is a paucity of canonised narrative forms within which her story can be told. She does not fit into the model of the agential Kerala woman, and her desire does not find a place in many celebrated predecessors' narratives.

VT Nandakumar's novel *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls), published in 1974, went into three editions in the same year and was filmed in 1978. Nandakumar writes of this story in the author's forward to the second edition of his novel. While working for *Yathra Weekly*, he handled a regular column titled "Solution for Problems." Its purpose was to suggest solutions to the personal problems of the readers. He came across the details of an unusual love story of two young girls studying at a tutorial college. The problem was raised by the girl who had been in love with a friend. She wrote that her heart was captivated by a male teacher. The letter she had written was to get advice on how to discourage her from the infatuation. Through the subsequent letters, she admitted the queer details of her love affair and the physical relationship of the two girls.

The story of these girls shaped the novel *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls). When The Two Girls was serialised in *Chitrakarthika* weekly, those who read it eagerly were mainly women and girl students. He recalled that a warden of a ladies' hostel confessed that she encountered many cases similar to the lesbian relationship shared by the characters in *Randu Penkuttikal*, Giriya and Kokila. The author continues that in contemporary times, such instances are not treated with as much secrecy, nor are they too uncommon. He concludes the note by praying for the growth and prosperity of lesbianism. Nandakumar

says that lesbianis which means love between women is now ubiquitous. According to him, such relationships have some healthy and positive potential so they are important. In the forward, he adds that the novel's film adaptation was rejected by a director, perhaps because of the undertone of lesbianism which was the soul of his story. Both same-sex desires and heterosexual relations are narrated in the novel. Kokila is confused between lesbian and heterosexual desires. She imagines and compares the pleasure she conceives while engaging in these relationships. Finally, she settles for a heterosexual expression of her sexuality. In this way, cinema represents same-sex desires as an essential element.

Chandana Marangal and *Randu Penkuttikal* are the two earliest novels in Malayalam representing same-sex desires, located in Kerala. Reading queerness in these novels helps me to trace a pattern found in the Kerala context. Many of the films I am analysing in the thesis are adaptations of literary texts. This work intends to analyse the representation of non-normative desires in Malayalam cinema within the heteromatrix. Lesbian relationships in these literary texts are bound in narratives of heterosexual relationship. Madhavikkutty's autobiography, *My Story*, looks into the friendship between women that is similar to that of the lesbian relation in *Chandana Marangal*. One can find a trajectory of queerness underlying all her writing. These texts offer us frames that are non-dichotomous, constantly shifting through the boundaries between heterosexual and queer, female friendships and female erotic relationships. This mediates my understanding of the representation of female-to-female desire in Malayalam cinema, specifically because most of the Malayalam films I analyse in the subsequent chapters are adapted from literary traditions.

Chapter 2

Representation of Normative Femininities in Malayalam Cinema

Introduction

In a male-dominated society, where women's experiences of sexuality and desires are silent, it is significant to pay attention to how sexuality is policed continuously and is imagined and justified for the purpose of reproduction. One must inquire about what forms of love and desire are considered sexual and in what conditions or norms it is defined as sexual. The influence of cinema on contemporary society, especially in producing and representing desire, can be explored with special reference to the portrayal of female relationships. While same-sex desires are represented in social and cultural spaces in myriad ways, cinema offers new approaches to understand how sexualities are imagined.

My thesis mainly examines the pattern of women-to-women relations, specifically concerning Kerala. Different sexualities and gender relations are more invisible in the heteronormative structure of Kerala society though it evolves in a particular configuration. Women's sexuality is often marginalised in heterosexual culture. In the introductory chapter, I examined the pattern of women-to-women relationships and homosocial spaces in folk cultures in the social and literary spaces in Kerala. In the heteronormative social order in Kerala, sociality is constructed normatively to benefit and strengthen the hold of patriarchy. This chapter will therefore scrutinise the construction of the meaning of *normativity*, *normal*, and the historicity of what it means for something to be *sexual*. An important focus will be on the representation of "sexuality" in the

cinematic frame. Moreover, this chapter questions whether non-normative desires also contest the normative pattern of femininities.

In the broader scheme of this research, I address a significant research question: do woman-to-woman relationships redefine or critique the way of looking at femininities? This chapter will review the approaches to studying femininities. Non-normative sexualities trouble the gender order through the medium of cinema, which represents possible desires. Do non-normative sexualities subvert heteronormative order which is a dominant form of sexuality, or do they maintain or reiterate the same gender roles?

Modernity and the Institutionalization of Heteronormativity: Shifts in Conjugal Family and Womanhood

Heteronormativity is a specifically moulded sexuality and it is important to study the construction of modern womanhood through the lens of women's sexuality. The discourses and structures which construct dominant womanhood will also be examined in detail. Gendering is vital to the maintenance of heteronormative order—sexualities built within the domain of the state and other institutions controlled by the dominant ideologies. One cannot see the construction of sexuality separate from other intersecting social aspects to determine the construction of women's sexuality. Heteronormativity is based on the construction of binaries such as men/women or homosexual/heterosexual among other categories. How do intersectionality and the matrix of caste, gender, sexuality, and religion constitute a heteronormative culture in Kerala? How does heteronormative culture determine the sexual experience of women? Understanding heteronormative culture and its problems leads us to explore the possibilities of

homosocial space in cultures that are nondominant but still contain marginalized sexualities and genders.

Nivedita Menon writes, “The term heteronormativity refers to the overwhelming power of the assumption that heterosexuality is natural and normal, and the norm is to be emulated” (Menon, 2007, p. 95). Family is considered the basic unit of society which gave a foundation to heterosexuality. Osella (2006) observes that one must discern the emergence of a more structured and rigidly policed self-living within the confines of a family structured by a neo-patriarchal hegemony. Production of the normative household through the institution of marriage is the outcome of the process of gendering. Men and women perform different roles according to their gender to maintain this social order. With the help of these institutions, society disciplines the normative gender, sexuality, and caste order.

How did heteronormativity become a norm? How do minor cultures counter/subvert society's dominant norms and values? What is the perceived idea of families? It raises the importance of looking at marginal spaces, cultures, and lives. Nivedita Menon notes that a group of friends, homosexual couples with adopted children, unmarried mothers, and women living with their siblings are not recognised as a family. So, a state or a law recognises and defines only certain patterns as a family to maintain patrilineal succession. A family is ideal for the Hindu nation to protect purity through these institutions. Caste and the ideal of sexual purity are questioned whenever these borders are transgressed.

Gender-appropriate behaviour is linked to legitimate procreative sexuality. Sexuality is strictly policed to ensure the purity and continuation of crucial identities, such as caste, race, and religion. Violence is often inflicted to maintain the accepted social order. Non-

heterosexual desire threatens the continuation of these identities since it is not biologically directly procreative. Hence, the purity of these identities is under threat. Even heterosexual, potentially procreative desire is seen as threatening when it refuses to take a legitimate direction. Thus, violence is unleashed on those who fall in love with people of different castes or religions. The patriarchal heterosexual family manages this policing of sexuality. As it exists, the family is the core that sustains the social order.

The social order recognises that non-heterosexual desires and defiance of gendered appearance are, in fact, signals of a refusal to participate in the business of reproducing society with all its given identities intact. Menon recognises that “these structures build by these protocols which appear to be so ‘natural’, unquestionable and immutable is shakier than it seems. There are fissures and leakages, and its borders are porous and vulnerable. The structure is so fragile” (Menon, 2007, p. 3).

The concept of a *natural* family is the idea of a nuclear, patriarchal, patrilineal form of family. However, there are cultures and lineages different from this order. In Kerala, matrilineal families existed legally until the late nineteenth century. Arunima describes that *matriliny* existed before the intervention of the colonial legal system, that “relationships were traced through the mother; at any time, membership of the household would consist of all women and their grandchildren. They would live together. This family pattern differs from the dominant model” (Arunima, 2003, p. 12).

It is necessary to look at matriliney and its transformation to understand the significant structural changes in Kerala's colonial history as a system that has influenced the sexual economy or the family structure. This system has changed patterns of gender, sexuality, and kinship. This part of the thesis investigates modernity and its influence on imagining

a normative heterosexual order in Kerala society and an imagination of sexuality by these normative structures in Kerala. I look at matriliney as a system not by romanticising it but by critically analysing its transformation over the years. This chapter does not view the loss of matriliney as the loss of power for women. At the same time, it does not imagine the new form of marriage and the nuclear family as liberatory, progressive, and choice-based. Rather, my concern is to look at gender and sexuality through the transformation of structures.

Conceptually, a matrilineal household was composed of people related to each other in the female line. This form of family legally ended in the late nineteenth century through the interventions brought by the British in partnership with the Nair male elite. Though it was no longer legal, its vestiges remained till the late 1970s.

The intervention of colonial modernity and other processes played a significant role in imagining a conjugal family or normativity. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan argues that modernity was understood primarily with two changes. Firstly, the formation of nuclear families resulted from restructuring economic activity within and without the family. Secondly, female sexuality came to be understood in the context of new conjugal models (Radhakrishnan, 2006). The most important change during this time was moving away from joint families to nuclear families as the normative structure of modern conjugality. Contemporary notions of romantic love and conjugality that have been intrinsically connected to the formation of the nuclear family produced moral normative notions of female sexuality like monogamy, unlike the customs of the past. The conjugal system in the matrilineal system was called *sambandham*. *Sambandham* allowed the woman to stay at her place while her male partner had visiting rights. *Sambandham* was not arranged

by the families and the man and woman could discontinue the relationship at any point. It would be erroneous to call this conjugal system a marriage since marriage is a specifically modern arrangement based on modern law. Colonialists regarded *sambandham* as a form of concubinage, and reformists likened this to the sexually exploitative practice of Nambudhiris upon Nair women. It was considered “primitive” and “uncivilised” because substituting one partner for the other was regarded by colonialists and reformers as sexually immoral.

The new normative model of womanhood has evolved in negotiation with tradition and modernity. Popular Malayalam literary writer Chandu Menon argues for the practice of *sambandham* prevalent among the Nair community. He states that its invalidation by the act of marriage would be offensive to the customs of the community and the sense of *nationality*. Here we see the homogenisation of morals and practices for the making of nationhood.

Indulekha is considered the first major novel written in Malayalam in 1889 by Chandu Menon and its story is based on matrilineal practices. Udaya Kumar notes the different approaches to *Indulekha*. On the one hand, *Indulekha* is a critical take on the matrilineal system, joint family system, and the power of the *karanavar*¹, but on the other hand, it tries to maintain women's autonomy in the matrilineal system (Kumar, 2016, p. 71). In the novel, Chandu Menon looks positively at the autonomy of women. His ideas are influenced by modern education, where he attempts to follow both the tradition of English novels and the Sanskrit tradition. “Menon makes a powerful attempt to interpret naïve custom as being in tune with modern Western conceptions of matrimony and

¹ The word "karanavar" is typically used to refer to the eldest male member or the head of a matrilineal family or tharavadu in Kerala society.

monogamy” (72). The novel's heroine strongly argues for the autonomy customarily enjoyed by Nair women. She claims that her community's matrilineal practices have resulted in the enhancement and not the weakening of the respect for chastity, purity, and virtue among Nair women. *Indulekha* symbolises the transformation of the period that embraced the turbulence of the transition stage characterised by conjugal relationship, romance, and family structure. The new womanhood unsettled both the conventional and the modern by negotiating between tradition and modernity and constructed for themselves, new meanings of self, individuality, or womanhood.

The critic Kumar observes how the approach to desire coincides with an earlier moment in the novel. In Indulekha's conversation with Madhavan, she denies the possibility of unattainable desire. Her mind, she says, possesses a natural ability not to set its desires on unreachable objects. She claims this to be an innate attribute of her mind rather than a result of external control or conscious self-disciplining. Even after recognising her desire for Madhavan, Indulekha is shown to deny her feelings until his examination results are declared and marriage becomes a clear possibility. Her feelings are presented as even more intense than Madhavan's, as she contains them within herself without expressing them outwardly. The stress on self-restraint does not mean an ascetic denial of the sensual; desire, in the appropriate circumstances, does not shy away from sensual gratification. Indulekha finally acknowledges her desire. Her words combine expressive gestures of physical intimacy with a declaration of conjugal commitment. The novel does not completely desexualise Indulekha but presents her desires within conjugal fidelity. Similar to *Indulekha*, romantic desire in the early novels of Kerala, written primarily by Nair novelists, finds its most intense expressions in a marital and institutional vocabulary.

Kumar says that romantic gestures and the declaration of love, even in the institutionalisation of conjugal contracts, do not entirely eliminate anxieties over the woman's autonomy, making her the object of male desires in the early novel.

At this juncture, the politics of the body must be analysed at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and caste. Attire, jewellery, and hairstyles are physical markers of caste in nineteenth-century Kerala. These markers are not separable from the body, and the body bears them as a natural extension and external manifestation. Clothes do not conceal the body but make the caste body visible. Caste identities may be seen as a mode of political existence that works within the frame of intersubjective visibility and recognition. For instance, in *Indulekha*, Chandu Menon describes the beauty of Indulekha through the mode of her physical attributes and attire:

[O]nly by touch could one distinguish between her skin and the brocade border of the *mundu* which normally covered her midriff. It was impossible to tell by mere sight where her body began. The deep black of her locks, their length, abundance, and softness were most alluring...her eyes-their length, their triple tone, their sparkle, the way she uses them on occasion, and the intense fire on them-can only be described by young men who have been subjected to their effect. In addition, she was at an age when her bosom was filling out. Is there a man invulnerable to the power of those growing breasts? Can anyone describe the bewitching beauty of the Indulekha? (p. 6).

Representation of “Normative Femininities” in Malayalam Cinema

Focusing on normative femininities, the major concern is looking at the power dynamics between women. The experience of sexualities is confined to the heteronormative culture where women are expected to be submissive to the dominant and their other sexual experiences are marginalised. Cinema will be studied as a cultural production that paves the way for the construction of *dominant* women. By using the term *dominant women*, I recognise them as a few women who qualify as *dominant* in contrast with the constructed *other*. Contemporary feminist scholarships have focused on the differences in women's identities. It highlights the idea that women are not a homogenous category. A prominent feminist activist from Kerala, Rekha Raj, has argued how Dalit and Tribal women's issues are codified in Kerala's public discourse as part of *women's* issues (2005). An unaddressed issue lies with looking at women's sisterhood without problematising women's power relations. Sharmila Rege (2004) argues that the autonomous women's group collapsed caste into sisterhood, leaving Brahmanism unchallenged. If so, feminist sisterhood serves only to disguise the aggrandisement of power by such dominant women and disguises the hierarchical relation between women. Therefore, power relations while discussing same-sex desires among women become further complex. Understanding caste position and its configuration with gender and sexuality is one way of understanding power relationships. The Dalit feminist standpoint on *differences* would help study the commonalities among the women.

When this chapter discusses normative femininities in Malayalam cinema, its primary engagement is also to understand representations of femininity that also question how femininities are positioned in comparison to masculinity. As Sedgwick (1985) points out,

masculinity is to be studied in relation to femininity. To explore the intersectionality of gender and other identities is also to study the social constructs of femininity and masculinity. Even in a heteronormative society, people engage differently with their sexuality and homosocial spaces are one among these possibilities.

The chapter considers cinema and *reality* to explore the heteronormative culture of Kerala society; cinema represents and constructs a reality which does not exist outside the process of representation. The role of *representation* in constructing gender, sexuality, and other categories and considering whether cinema represents this history is an important route of study. Arunima, in her analysis of paintings, denotes that, as an illustration, a visual is both epiphenomenal to history as it attests to its existence. Thus, visual images in cinema and its history can configure the heteronormativity in Kerala. In the making of heteronormative culture, when the chapter looks at early Malayalam cinema to examine the construction of gender and sexuality, the work finds the space of queerness all along the heterosexual matrix. How does visual culture produce differences through its techniques?

It is integral to look at the engendering process of the representation of femininity and female relationships specific to Kerala. The desire which I study is the *non-normative* one within a heteronormative culture. The term *alternative sexuality* is commonly used even in studies on sexualities. One must enquire about what is an alternative to gender or sexuality. Heterosexuality is considered normal, and other sexualities are presented as *deviance*. It is similar to the concern raised by LGBT activists for using the term *third gender* instead of *transgender*. People have developed a strong perception of what is considered *normal* and understanding normativity is an initial step to exploring the

differences. Prior research has emphasised the mismatch between the glorified image of *progressive women* and the real-life experience of women in Kerala. The different identities are continuously marginalised and made invisible within Kerala. There are complex ways in which Kerala's narrative progress is achieved through the disciplining of women's bodies and sexual practices.

The chapter is focused on normative bodies and the respectable bodies constructed historically by Malayalam cinema. Both a discussion of the construction of normativity and the representation of normative femininity rooted in various sociocultural factors further determine the construction of normative femininity. This chapter delves into the socially acceptable bodies and analyses how the notion of deviance is culturally, socially, and historically situated in Malayalam cinema.

Cinema is a medium that constructs pleasures and desires, a cultural production that acts as text to the audience as an assemblage of dominant ideologies. Ravi Vasudevan writes that the state, as it evolves censorship policies, taxation, and institutional formation, is influential in defining cinema's status as a cultural institution. State ideologies are transmitted through cinema; for this purpose, the state imposes its power directly or indirectly. Thus, the *modus operandi* of state apparatus in making cinema appealing stresses the desire for a *traditional* and *authentic* India, fulfilling the imperatives of a modern national identity and shaping a certain narrative of dominant ideologies (Vasudevan, 2000, p. 5).

Sujith Parayil (2014) argues that memories of caste become an integral part of the visual perception of the Malayali spectator. According to him, films often follow two schemes of visual and narrative strategies. One scheme redeploys the static image of a social

group through the visible and direct representation of the character. The other scheme deploys indirect, invisible social and cultural signifiers that mark the identity of the character. Indirect but legitimised signs and norms such as occupied spaces, language, habit, behaviour, body, etc., have to be studied (Parayil, 2014, p. 1). These visual perceptions of caste bodies result from social positioning and other hierarchical relations and such popular dominant images will be analysed for the preconceived notions of caste and body that play a crucial role in these films. Besides, when nonconformist sexual subjects threaten the social, cultural, and economic boundaries of national imagination and challenge the ideological apparatus, the nation-state becomes the site of anxiety and negotiation. Researching cinema as a signifying practice to analyse it as the medium of text contributes to understanding how ideology determines the text and influences ways of representation. The representations also question the separation of subcultures or different marginalised genders and sexualities from dominant cultures, not as binaries but as various entities. The non-normative culture acts as an interlude with dominant cultures which push its boundaries and exist in relation to each other in cultural texts.

In the landscape of Malayali cinema, a space where dominant ideologies are being perpetuated, the Malayali identity is being constructed through these cinemas. The Malayali identities are formed within the idea of nationalism. Cinema represents experiences from different locations and in Malayalam cinema, as a sub-national or regional industry, *malayaliness* is imagined in a manner that shapes objects and subjects in the contemporary socio-cultural life of Kerala. It re-territorialises Kerala not as an exclusive and demarcated geographical and political space but as one with a fluid subjectivity is constantly remapping itself. Though cinema is not a stable and uniform

category, it is a powerful form that is both rigid and still represents a diverse culture. Since there is a possibility that any cultural text will follow the dominant pattern, it is necessary to have a detailed analysis from different locations and perspectives.

Pillai (2010) says cinema can exploit women to conform to certain ideals defined by hegemonic structures while rejecting other representations and, in the process, unconsciously assisting in reproducing these hegemonies. She writes:

One is not born a woman but is configured as one in language and its representations. Post-structural feminism challenges all representations as conforming to the paradigm built on binary opposition that justifies male supremacy. So, any deconstruction of gender as an analytic category ought to begin in language the infinite and arbitrary play of signs and signifiers, and the varied hues and shades attached to them across cultures and contexts” (Pillai, 2010, p. 7).

Pillai quotes Hélène Cixous who writes on the politics of language:

For as soon as we exist, we are born into language, and language speaks(to) us, dictates its law, a law of death: it lays down its familial model, lays down its conjugal model, and even at the moment of uttering a sentence, admitting a notion of “being”, a question of being, an ontology, we are already seized by a certain kind of masculine desire, the desire that mobilises philosophical discourse” (Pillai, 2010, p. 7).

This thesis asserts that Malayalam cinema inscribes and reinscribes dominant ideologies signalling how gender and sexuality are constituted and performed through caste in

Kerala. Parayil (2014) analyses how collective unconscious memory plays a dominant role in conceiving the subaltern and Dalit bodies and their consciousness within the representational strategies followed by mainstream Malayalam cinema (p. 67).

Rowena (2012) writes of how upper-caste women become ideal based on their chastity. The ideal feminine subject of Kerala modernity erases Dalits and lower castes from cultural production. Rather than posting this as the universal experience of women in Kerala, the embodied experience of a few women was rendered as the blueprint of all the women in the state. I specifically look at the female bodies belonging to the cinematic spaces, focusing on *Neelakuyil* (1954). These texts would be studied to discuss the construction of normality in terms of making feminine bodies in Malayalam cinema during its formative moments. It would also explore how the unconscious memory represents images of dominant women's bodies and sexualities and regenerates ideas of heteronormativity.

The caste–gender configuration follows specific representation strategies for reproducing a nationalist society, especially to construct dominant women as the normative. Cinema follows the same pattern where the visible and invisible signifiers mark the dominant identity and are construed as *normal*. By considering the representation of these signifiers representing dominant women, I look at the historical construction of dominant womanhood and how these particular signifiers have historical significance in caste determination. Caste is an integral part of the visual perception of the Malayali spectator. There are invisible and visible social and cultural signifiers that mark the caste identity of the character. These signifiers have historical significance in determining caste.

Neelakuyil (The Blue Cuckoo, 1954) is a renowned Malayalam cinema directed by P. Baskeran Nair and Ramu Kariat. Its success was not only celebrated during its release but also ushered in a new era of progressive filmmaking in Kerala since the state witnessed benchmark socio-political changes. This film follows a dramatic presentation as it was influenced by stage plays widely performed by the KPAC. The drama of the 50s such as *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me a Communist, 1952) protested against the rampant practice of feudalism prevalent in Kerala with the main character transitioning from the role of an upper caste conservative man into a communist. In the background of the communist movement in Kerala, the movie *Neelakuyil* dealt with the main themes of feudalism and caste issues. As a film that is known for being progressive, *Neelakuyil* deals with the evils of the caste system. Communist ideology presents, in its ideal form, the portrayal of a casteless society in cinematic representation.

Neeli, a Dalit woman, is the protagonist in the movie. The movie begins with the harvest festival and the happiness, celebration, and hardships of the community situated in their working space. As a woman working in the field with her community, Neeli is also shown as one among the lower caste, downtrodden men and women depicted in the movie. Neeli and their community occupy the outside space. Besides the area, the other space she occupies is their *koora* (small hut) and the premises of the village. She is shown singing and dancing happily in the outward premises. The film proceeds to place at the center the love affair of Neeli and an upper caste man Sreedharan master. In the film, there is an episode where Neeli tries to find shelter in the house of Sreedharan master to escape from the heavy rain after her work in the field. Following Master's offer of a safe space, they engage in a sexual relationship which ignites their love for one

another. The “illicit” nature of their relationship is portrayed symbolically by the heavy thunder that often acts as a conventional sound device in cinema to invoke crisis. While Neeli and Sreedhar are in a transgressive relationship, hierarchy dictates that not only physical contact but also encountering Dalits in their sight is considered a curse by the upper caste.

Their relationship comes to an end when she becomes pregnant by him. The movie's focus shifts to portraying the crisis of the *Nair* family and the nostalgic past of Nair *tharawad* (ancestral home). It shows the crumbling of the foundations of a Nair family symbolised by the *karanavan* (guardian of maternal home) who reminisces about their former prosperity and high status and is worried about their bleak future. This nostalgia for Nair's past was a common trope in Malayalam cinema of the time. Sreedharan master, the story's hero, represents the educated upper caste, *modern* Malayali men. Similarly, the character of the postman, Shankaran Nair, is equally important as he represents the *progressive* Nair man in cinema. In the movie, Shankaran Nair informs the Namboothiri man, “...she is also a human...don't you know about the new rules? You cannot send away a human. They have the right” (Baskeran & Kariat, 1954). Nair intervenes in all the affairs in the village; his name indicates that he belongs to a privileged caste. His surname, Nair gives him a certain position of power in society. Shankaran Nair always offers ideal and progressive lectures to others, but the precarity underlying his ideals and claims come to the fore when he proposes that Sreedharan Nair marry an upper-caste woman Nalini. He advises Sreedharan Nair, “marriage is the good solution to escape from the ill fame” (Baskeran & Kariat, 1954). This suggestion to Sreedharan Nair emerges from his entrenched understanding and adherence to caste norms. Thus, he

chooses Nalini for Sreedharan Nair. When Neeli realises she is pregnant, she talks to Master whom she believed loved her. However, he is only focused on finding ways to escape from the *manakedu* (ill fame), choosing to maintain the honour of his community. She, in turn, is ghettoised from her community and lives in the outer space of the village. Neeli is an outcast from her community for choosing to love an upper-caste man and thus, violates a caste norm written in stone.

Master readily marries Nalini, an upper caste woman, when the postman Shankaran Nair suggests this marriage proposal. The postman explained that they were a traditional family with aristocratic family values, denoted by phrases like *tharawad parambaryam* and *vallya tharawad*. Nalini, belongs to the homely spaces, the *tharawad*, a sacred place. She wears the typical Kerala *veshti* and *mundu*, golden ornaments, and flowers. As a sign of dedication to her marital relationship, Nalini prioritises her family's well-being and fasts for her husband. *Ammavan* (maternal uncle) instructs her to fire a lamp for the prosperity of the *tharawad*, exclaiming that women no longer know how to follow the traditions and rituals. *Karanavan*, the gatekeeper or guardian of the *tharawad* is vigilant about the prosperity of the home. The virtue of the home which comes through *sree* (prosperity) should be protected by the woman in the *tharawad* as much as the sacred space protects her.

Sreedharan Master receives the acceptance of the community through marriage but Neeli is ousted from her social space for unaccepted, transgressive love. The narrative isolates Neeli from her community, thus repressing or preempting any mobilisation on her behalf or politicisation. To construct Neeli as the *other*, as the sexualised deviant subject, she needs to be depoliticised and distanced. *Neelakuyil* shows the act of casting out *Neeli*

along with the marriage of Sreedharan Master. Neeli's desire beyond the caste order is punished. She is an outcast from the family and community yet she shows the courage to live alone in the outer spaces of the village without anyone's assistance. However, the film depicts her as becoming frail in the fight and unable to continue her initial sense of revolt due to various social pressures and dies. With the death of Neeli, the film succeeds in projecting Sreedharan Nair as a *progressive* and *good-hearted* hero who finally adopts her child. The violation of the lower caste woman by upper caste man is elided by the narrative focus on the upper-caste woman's spirit of sacrifice and *pativrata* values in legitimising and accepting the child born out of wedlock.

By focusing on normative femininities, I try to foreground how the structure of sexualities are deeply embedded in Kerala's caste and social relations. In such a heteronormative culture, women as sexual subjects are passivised, subordinated to the masculine figure and their sexual experiences are marginalised. There are complex ways in which Kerala's narrative of progress is achieved through disciplining women's bodies and sexual practices. This chapter explores how women's bodies are constituted as socially acceptable or unacceptable. Notably, Neeli's "deviance" and destitution are facilitated and consolidated by the installation of Nalini as the "wife." In this sense, the women are pitted against one another in caste and sexual relations. As we shall see in the fourth chapter, *Thoovanathumbikal* (1987), the same trope recurs, the hero Jayakrishnan is in love with a sex worker Clara, but eventually she must fade away to make way for a conjugal relationship.

In the subsequent chapter, I talk about how a different set of possible relationships between women emerge in the horror genre in Malayalam cinema perhaps through how the genre allows for an addressing of that which is buried and repressed.

Chapter 3

Queering the *Yakshi*: Female-to-Female Desires in Horror Genre in Malayalam

Cinema

Female homosociality began to assume prominence, especially in the movies of the 1970s and 80s in the Malayali imagination. Ideologies of feminist movements and other social movements in Kerala at that time clearly influenced the visibility of female sociality in the cinema. While non-normative gender and sexuality were represented, normative values were recuperated in the resolution in cinema. Though the spectators could identify with the bold female character or the homosocial friendships in cinema, the initial celebration of female boldness found its narrative resolution only in sickness and death. Likewise, same-sex desires have also found a cinematic space. Yet, Malayalam cinema continues to be a male-centred space where normative gender and sexualities are reiterated. Female-to-female bonding, however, is significant and its representation in the Malayalam cinema is remarkable. This chapter explores the representation strategies of cinema in managing pleasures and desires.

This chapter probes the non-normative desires in Malayalam cinema. The term non-normative desire refers to the marginalised desires which strive to question the dominant culture, values, and norms of Kerala society. The non-normative desires are considered *abnormal* because they are unaccepted by the social conventions of the society despite being an integral part of Kerala's culture and life. Cinema as a site of cultural production is often a medium of perpetuating dominant values and norms of the society. Cinema, especially Indian cinema, is rich in queerness which is conspicuous to queer viewers. Discussions with my women friends and my curiosity to explore the queer possibilities in

popular films made me engage with these texts. Given this context, two Malayalam films *Manichitrathazhu* (*The Ornate Lock*, 1993) and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (*Yours Janakikutty*, 1997) are selected to analyse the pattern of women-to-women relationships portrayed in the horror genre. These films contain strong female bonding which gets a prominent space in the cinema and I identify a strong intimate relationship which is overshadowed by the heterosexual matrix.

The Conceptual Axis of Homosociality

The term *homosocial* has been used for the broad understanding of female-to-female desires. In order to better understand these different kinds of relationships, Sedgwick (1985) coined the term homosociality, a term that differs from homosexuality, in that it is a broad understanding of the “sexual bonds between persons of the same sex” (p. 1). The diacritical opposition between the homosocial and the homosexual seems much less thorough and dichotomous for women (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 2). The continuum between women loving women and women promoting the interests of women extends over the erotic, social, familial, economic, and political realms (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 3).

In this case, homosociality is not dichotomous with homosexuality and the lines between the two categories are blurred and fluid. Homosociality is a peculiar feature in a sexually segregated, male-dominated society. In the cinematic space, the pattern of relationship is interchangeable in accordance with the strategies cinema employs. Romanticism is interchanged into eroticism in some films. This reflects the cinematic strategies in representation. Thus, the concept of homosociality is a broad term that can explain the representation of same-sex desires and inter-changeability within heterosexual matrix.

The two movies this chapter will explore, *Manichitrathazhu* (The Ornate Lock, 1993) and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (Yours Janakikutty, 1997), have obvious horror elements. Using these movies as texts of my study, I look at the representation of female bonding within the horror genre. Further, it enquires how the horror element and the *abnormality* it contains, present a way of viewing homosociality. What does the representation of a spectre imply in these movies? These movies are not labelled as horror despite containing prominent horror elements. *Manichitrathazhu* is a popular commercial cinema that has been adapted into other regional languages. *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*, though not as popular as *Manichitrathazhu*, is also not labelled as a horror movie despite dealing with a female spirit (*Yakshi*) who is a companion or female friend to the main protagonist rather than a horrifying image. The *Yakshi* or the female spirit as the main character is a common feature of both films. I analyse the queerness of the figure of *Yakshi* and its relationship with the other characters, also analysing the meaning of the horror ambience that the films create.

What do the *abnormalities* of the spectre signify in the cinema? By looking into the concept of the *Yakshi* based on the mythical belief of the return of the dead in Kerala, I seek to contextualise the representation of the spectre which implicitly implies sexuality and desire. This chapter will also problematise this representation with the sexuality politics of Kerala. How do the horror elements in the cinema, the presence of abnormalities and the complexities of representation in cultural texts create queer possibilities? Benshoff (1997) discusses the possibilities of queer reading particularly in horror cinema. According to him,

Queer readings aren't alternative readings, wishful or willful misreading, or “reading too much into things” readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audience all along. In the case of horror films and monster movies, this “complex range of queerness” circulates through and around the figure of the monster, and his/her relation to normality (p. 15).

Representation of sexualities and desires in horror are contextual and it is analysed here in the context of Kerala's socio-cultural specificities. Representation of love is not overt in Malayalam cinema since there is no convention of presenting sexuality directly. Love and friendship are embedded in heteronormative culture. Gayathri Gopinath explains the same gender desire in the movies set in the South Asian context and the relevance of alternative modes of reading and seeing in order to locate non-normative erotic and gender configurations which erupt within sites of extreme heteronormativity.

What constitutes “same gender” desire in the South Asian context both look and function differently than it does within Euro-American social and historic formations. Citing instances from mainstream Hindi cinema which articulate same-gender desires within the frames and locations of hegemonic heteronormativity, Gayathri Gopinath points out that South Asian popular culture acts as a repository of queer desiring relations which may remain illegible to a heterosexual viewing public but legible to the queer viewership (Gopinath, 2007, as cited in Muraleedharan, 2010, p. 168).

Except for a few Bollywood films like *Fire*, which addresses female desires and is labelled as a lesbian movie, mainstream movies often construct normative values. Movies are a device for constructing pleasure and sexual desires, especially popular Hindi cinema's conventions of representation which are fraught with depicting love in general. It is interesting to see how these movies often accommodate different sexualities and how they consciously/unconsciously produce queer desires. There is a symbolic way of representing love. Vanita (2002) writes, "When sexual activity is explicitly depicted as in the Hollywood movie, the sexual relationship becomes clearly distinguished from non-sexual relationship. When as in Hindi movies, sexual identity is not explicitly depicted; it can be signalled in other ways" (p. 147).

Mokkil (2009) makes an important point in her article which compares the lesbian-labelled movie *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004) and *Desadanakili Karayarilla* (Wandering Birds Do Not Cry, 1986) which have lesbian undertones. *Desadanakili Karayarilla* has not claimed its subject position as lesbian:

The specific lesbian movie like *Sancharram*, the celebration of visible bodies, gets radically questioned when it turns to non-metropolitan sites of analysis. In setting up a stable trajectory for queer desire, it also freezes the spatial and social terrains of Kerala. The process of queering that *Desadanakili Karayarilla* undertakes is not one that attempts to set up a particular subject position as the queer subject position nor does it plot a blueprint for the direction that same-sex desire should take. It sets out to trouble the naturalised construction of heterosexual couples and injects a sense of instability into the social sphere itself (p. 2).

Unproclaimed radical representations of desires directly or indirectly push the boundaries of normativity even though very few queer movies and queer readings of mainstream movies explore the possibilities of sexual desires in different social contexts. Such a reading troubles the naturalised construction of heterosexual desire. It problematises the linear way of approaching sexual politics.

In this chapter, female bonding is explored beyond the sexual/non-sexual divide in defining and conceiving desire and pleasure. Desires are represented in connotative ways as this is presented differently across cultures and cinema accommodates these representations. This study addresses broader questions of sexuality and desire in the representation of Yakshi in Malayalam Cinema such as how sexuality is represented outside the heteronormative relationship, how certain romantic/visual codes operate in these films so as to express queer desire and in what ways these representations address, subvert or submit to the hegemonic Malayali normativity/masculinity. Further, this chapter also studies how the *impossible* desires are possible in this horror pattern of representation and most importantly, if cinematic conventions bury homosocial desires in its boundary.

Benshoff (1997) has pointed out the political significance of horror films, very often ignored:

Political significance in fictional films is reserved for realist social problems, while horror movies lie at the bottom of those particular media hierarchies. Horror stories, monster movies, perhaps more than any other, actively invoke queer

reading because of their obvious metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo (p. 6).

What these horror movies might have to say about the culture they encode and provoke is frequently overlooked or discounted. Horror movies receive less attention in the media hierarchy as they tend to be analysed only for their horror element. They need to be examined because they accommodate differences which do not feature explicitly in non-horror movies. I analyse how gender, sexual, and caste identities are transgressed by the representation of the specter. In the Kerala context, especially in mainstream cinema, female-to-female desires enter through sub-textual or connotative ways. Benshoff (1997) observes that in the horror genre, homosexuality on screen has been quite allusive; it lurks around the edges of texts and characters rather than announcing itself forthrightly. In these films, homosexuality becomes a subtle but undoubtedly present signifier (p. 15).

Reading Spectrality and Possession

In a cultural text like cinema, women are often portrayed in the binary of good or evil. Those women who do not fit into the gender normative category or those women identified as deviant, including the ones discussed here, are represented as *Yakshi* in Malayalam movies. The depiction of a *Yakshi* signifies someone of sexually loose morals, usually a lower caste/class character. The *Yakshi* is portrayed as one who can walk freely without any barriers, who has her own agency, is not confined to gender norms and is able to break the normativity. In some other movies, the *Yakshi* need not be visible but the women who play negative roles are often ascribed the characteristics of a *Yakshi*. In *Yakshi* movies and non-horror movies, women are disguised as spectres for

certain purposes and such women are given some kind of power, are portrayed negatively as Yakshi or have an invisible fang.

As Udaya Kumar (2013) mentions:

[T]he world of deaths and spirits and ritual of propitiation has occupied an important place in the cultural history of lower caste practices in Kerala. Rituals like the *Theyyattam* have been studied as commemorating the unjust killing of lower caste subjects; invoking them as gods and propitiating them. Such ritual commemoration is inscribing a history of oppression and injustice (p. 177).

A specter is the protagonist in most of C. Ayyappan² stories.

“Specters haunt Ayyappan’s stories: dead people appear before the protagonists of these stories to accompany them and speak to them. Ayyappan’s fictional narratives are the imaginative retelling of the lived experience of the marginalised in Kerala society. Ayyappan stories become the inclusive territory for voices of the outcastes in the Kerala society including the mad, the accused, the banished, the expelled, the ghostly and the ghastly and so on” (Jaleel, 2012, p. 57).

Spectres appear to speak of their stories and their experiences of marginalisation. It is an inclusive territory of the voice of the outcaste. How does it accommodate different sexualities? What abnormalities of spectre does it imply?

C. Ayyappan employs abnormality as the central feature of these stories. In most of the stories, the monologue of the ghost is the central feature. These

² C Ayyappan was a Dalit writer from Kerala who passed away in 2011. His works are powerful but he was relatively obscure until recently.

monologues are the nature of “explanatory notes” in which the ghosts or spectral being speak to the addressee in order to make her/him understand the reason for her/his death and why she/he has come back. In all these cases these people survive death and transform into ghosts in order to accomplish certain things: to tell some story, to give some explanation to avenge and so on (Jaleel, 2012, p. 12).

The spectres in these stories are of different kinds. The majority among these become more powerful after death, returning to the real world and accomplish what they were unable to do before. Death allows the narratability of life. “Spectrality, in these Dalit narrators, is the very condition of their voice and agentiveness” (Kumar, 2013, p. 177). Udaya Kumar uses *badha* instead of ghost for the analysis of Ayyappan stories, “In the context of spectral transaction *badha* refers to the possession by the spirit of the dead. *Badha* also refers to the spirit which possesses you, the ghost that enters human bodies, possessing them and taking over their action” (Kumar 2013, p. 177). *Durmaranam* is a bad, violent death that causes ghosts to return and set right the injustice done to them. The forced exit from life is the act of injustice against which the spectre continues the desire for speech and life struggle (Kumar, 2013, p. 177).

Badha or possession or spectral inhabitation is not domination or taking over but rather a situation where the possessing spirit or *badha* views it as a relationship between two subjectivities. In the spectral speech, the *badha* addresses the subject it appears to or possesses, to explain the rationale of the actions being performed by the *badha* and especially explains why the *badha* has inhabited the body of the addressee. Kumar (2013) says spirits carry their gendered identities and personal histories with them (p. 178). It is relevant to say that the comfortable relationship is maintained by the spirit with the

possessed for the accomplishment of desire. In Ayyappan's stories, spectrality is the voice and agency of the oppressed. Even though in the horror movie genre, specter is primarily represented to create horror among viewer, it is inclusive of abnormalities and queer readings finds space when reading these abnormalities within a heteromatrix.

Queering the *Yakshi* (the Female Spirit)

I will analyse two Malayalam movies namely *Manichitrathazhu* (The Ornate Lock, 1993) and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (Yours Janakikutty, 1997). *Manichitrathazhu* is a very successful movie directed by Fazil in which prominent actors play the roles of the protagonists. The movie became a blockbuster success and was remade in various languages. I examine the relationship of the characters Ganga (the female lead) and Nagavally (the female spirit) and their bonding and friendship. The movie commences by showing the mythical stories surrounding a traditional home named Madampally. People experience great fear to go to Madampally. The movie begins by showing men's anxiety with Madampally, which is believed to be haunted by a female spectre or Yakshi. The inhabitants of the household are told the tales of the vengeful spirit of Nagavally, who was buried in the traditional house by a *karanavar* (elder male member) of the family. Nakulan, the male heir of the ancestral home and his wife Ganga, the leading protagonists, come to Madampally, to spend their honeymoon. The mysterious home and many stories in Madampally entice Ganga. Even though they are newly married, the viewer does not see a bond between Nakulan and Ganga. In Madampally, Ganga searches for her own personal space in an attempt to find a suitable place to set up her books. She finds a room which is locked with a talisman. It can be read symbolically that an enchanted talisman keeps her away from the room, one that controls her desire. For

others from the family, however, the talisman stands as protection from the reach of the destructive Yakshi. The members of the family continuously remind Ganga to keep a distance from *thekkini*, the place where it is believed that Nagavally, the spirit, resides. Here I give the lyrics of a song sung by Ganga:

Someone is going to come on this way one day, I know that.

A dear one will come on this way, is what I wish for.

Even now it's what I hope for today.

She is waiting for someone to give her company. In her loneliness, she is eager to seek another for the fulfilment of her wish which is evident in the lines. Ganga is possessed by the spirit of Nagavally. Nakulan makes a phone call to his best friend Dr Sunny, a psychiatrist, for solving the issue. When Dr Sunny arrives, his primary concern was what prompted Ganga to succumb to the power of Nagavally. Dr Sunny investigates and “resolves” this issue as a psychiatrist. The cinema focuses on Sunny’s expertise in solving the issue; he assures that he will lock Nagavally with the *ornate lock*.

The film draws the viewers’ attention to Ganga’s past life, to find the root for her psychotic condition. Dr. Sunny’s version of Ganga’s *abnormal behaviour* is the loneliness she faced in her childhood which has disturbed her mind; she lives within the mythic and legendary stories narrated by her grandmother which propelled her into a traumatic psychological state. According to Sunny, her childhood loneliness might have resulted in her mental state a pathological trance stemming from a psychological breakdown during her adolescence. The film narrates Ganga’s narration for the Yakshi Nagavalli as a mental illness stemming from childhood traumas and experiences.

Figure 1

Image from the movie *Manichitrathazhu*



(<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0214915/>)

In the movie, Ganga is profoundly drawn to the locked room *thekkini*. Later, she discovers the strangeness of the ‘forbidden’ room and the myth associated with it. It does not stop Ganga’s desire to enter the *thekkini*; she makes a duplicate key for the room. Once she obtains a copy of the key, Ganga runs to the *thekkini* to fulfil her desire and opens it. She discovers that the door is bound by an ornate lock. She breaks the lock and enters the room. While surveying the room, Ganga notices the portrait of an old man (*karanavar*), who had, according to the legend surrounding the female spirit, suppressed the desire of Nagavally towards her male lover when she was alive, and murdered her. The film plays an eerie tune which is considered Nagavally’s song, playing in the background. It is a Tamil song whose verses express sadness, and longing and convey her suppression. Ganga suddenly moves to Nagavally’s painting and imitates her dance pose.

Ganga is attracted towards Nagavally's portrait. She knows that she is alone in a secluded haunted room, standing in front of a 'wandering soul'. The song sung by Nagavally and later by Ganga in the movie has some similarities. Here I make an attempt to translate the lyrics of the song which Nagavally sings when Ganga enters the *thekkini*:

Come once and see, won't you see the gate?

Please come

Let me get a glance of yours today

Just once

Please fulfil my longing to see you

Fulfil it.

The lyrics of the songs sung by Ganga and Nagavally reflect hope, sadness and isolation. Overtly, it supports Dr Sunny's theory that Ganga was sympathetically attracted to Nagavally while lost in a trance. However, several cues, in the form of visuals and songs, draw the viewer's attention to the absence of intimacy between Nakulan and Ganga, even though they are newly married. This results in a doubt that Nakulan could not satisfy her fantasies. The spectator has a nagging sense of discontent with their marriage, that appears to be subverting the heterosexual norm of Malayalam cinema, though heterosexual romance is also not overtly performed in Malayalam cinema. Ganga's orientation towards homosociality is more visible. She needs a companion as she faces loneliness which began during her childhood. While exploring the *thekkini*, when Ganga opens Nagavally's treasure box, the viewer observes the erotic pleasure from discovering

Nagavally's jewelry on her face. The more she discovers the objects in the room and interacts with Nagavally's priceless possessions, the more it seems to address her desire. By dancing, singing and dressing like Nagavally, she appears to be acting out her subterranean desires.

In the beginning, she herself seeks to attract Nagavally. At a later stage, Ganga sees herself as Nagavally. By the end of the movie, one can see that Nagavally dominates Ganga. Ganga's suppressed desires make her attracted to Nagavally. Ganga's time spent in Madampally was one of seclusion, with books and the myth of *theekini* as her companion which evoked her repressed emotions. Throughout the story, Ganga takes on the role of Nagavally and tries to kill Nakulan by seeing him as the *karanavar*. This can also be read as the following: Nakulan, her husband is the only obstacle on the path of fulfilling her desire. So, killing Nakulan would be an act of wish fulfilment. Thus, the unfulfilled passions and loves of Nagavally and Ganga crisscross and merge, making the boundaries between the two blurry. Drawing upon Udaya Kumar's observation on Ayyappan stories in which the spirit possesses the lover's body, Nagavally's possession of Ganga can be read as a relationship between the spirit and the possessed person for the accomplishment of desire.

Nagavally, the Tamil dancer buried in *theekini*, the forbidden room, was killed by the *karanavar*, the old man, in the Madampally *tharavad* (traditional home). She was a dancer murdered as punishment for her transgressive love. For years in Madampally, the haunted story of Nagavally was a nightmare for men. Ganga, curious about the stories of Nagavally, is attracted to Nagavally to the extent that she starts to identify herself as Nagavally. She is eventually possessed by Nagavally. In one scene of the movie, Dr

Sunny proves this by questioning Ganga about Nagavally. Suddenly, Ganga turns *abnormal*, as though she was possessed by the spirit of Nagavally. One can concur that Ganga identifies as Nagavally or later disguises herself as possessed by spirit of Nagavally for the fulfilment of her buried desires. Dr Sunny wants to return the Ganga as she was preceding her possession, an obedient wife, to her husband Nakulan. Nagavally represents a Tamil identity, a character that can only serve as an alter ego for Ganga's deviances, such that Ganga remains as pure upper caste *Malayali* woman who upholds the upper-caste dominant structure.

The spectral form of Yakshi is shown as someone who becomes more powerful after their death. Nagavally returns as a spirit to avenge her death and to drink the blood of the old man (*karanavar*) who was the cause of her death. Ganga disguises herself as Nagavally and attempts to murder Nakulan as the female spirit who returned to the earthly realm and accomplished what they were unable to do before. Here, death provides closure for that which remains incomplete in life. *Badha* or the possession of Ganga by Nagavally is viewed as a relationship between two subjectivities unveiling an erotic, physical form of sexuality. By introducing *Yakshi* and the idea of abnormality, cinema depicts the transformation of sexuality from the erotic to that of an overtly physical form of sexual relation through the possession of the female protagonist by the Yakshi. Ganga becomes "abnormal", acquires power deviating from her docile self, and narrates her purpose for coming back in a trance which terrifies others. The bodies of Ganga and Nagavally emerge as one and it is formed as a destructive one. This signalling of homosexuality or palpable desire between two women underlies and animates the horror of the narrative. The process of re-making Ganga *mentally normal* requires the exorcism of the female

spirit Nagavally. It is inferred that it is paramount to maintain a docile body of the woman and protect the stability of a reproductive family. The imagination of such 'pure femininity' is in stark contrast to Nagavally who embodies the subservient status of caste and deviant sexuality. Nagavally's spirit comes with the connotations of her gender and caste identities.

Here, I refer to Muraleedharan's reading of male bonding seen in the *Manichitrathazhu*. Muraleedharan has analysed the queer subtext in Mohanlal films. The role of Dr Sunny, played by Mohanlal, is a close friend of Nakulan, Ganga's husband, who is invited to resolve the turmoils in his conjugal life in Madampally. At the outset, Dr Sunny is located outside normative heterosexual bonding. According to Muraleedharan (2010), Dr Sunny does not express an overt desire for his male friend yet this friendship counts as an important commitment in their lives (p. 185). So, it is interesting to analyse how female and male bonding work in a parallel manner in this film even as there are heterosexual resolutions.

Ennu Swantham Janakikutty (Yours Janakikutty, 1997) is another movie which I read in relation to *Manichitrathazu* (The Ornate Lock). This movie is based on the short story "Little, Little Earthquakes" (*Cheriya Cheriya Bhookambangal*, 1992) by the eminent Malayali author MT Vasudevan Nair. I analyse both the novel and the movie and look at the novel's transformation when it was adapted into a movie. The relationship between Yakshi and Janakikutty is prominent in both the novel and the movie. Through an examination of the movie, Janakikutty is the narrator who addresses the Yakshi with affection using the name Kunjathol. She believes that the Yakshi also likes to be addressed this way too.

The novel begins thus, “Do you want to hear an interesting thing; everybody is fearfully talking about this matter. Even I believed it to a certain extent. Everyone says, Yakshi will suck the blood and chew the bone ... This story is about the poor Kunjathol”. This story portrays the intimate relationship between Janakikutty and Yakshi and people around them are terribly afraid of Janakikutty and are always trying to move away from her. Janakikutty is restricted from roaming, especially in the afternoon and night, the time when Yakshi is also believed to be roaming around.

Janakikutty describes her cousin, Sarojiniyedathi as another Yakshi. Calling her as *Yakshi* denotes her illegitimate affairs. Janakikutty complains that nobody notices or even restricts the Yakshi Sarojiniyedathi, her cousin, and her affair with the person named *Gandharvan*, which means a male spirit. Here the Yakshi in the film is represented as a seductive woman. The relationship between Yakshi and Janakikutty is the focal point of the story. When Janakikutty mentions the Yakshi's visit and their games to her grandmother, her grandmother replies, “Keep quiet! I know them, they won't do anything”. Janakikutty realises that grandmother knows all about the Yakshi. The grandmother even introduces Janakikutty to Karineeli, a companion of the Yakshi. When grandmother becomes sick and bedridden, Janakikutty takes her place. Yakshi enquires about her grandmother in her first meeting with Janakikutty. The latter narrates, “Everyone believed that I was afraid of something when I was walking around as if something has possessed me. They are saying that all this happened when that accursed grandmother came” and “I didn't get sleep at night. It is not because I am sick as others are saying. It's a secret. Neeli and Kunjathol were playing even at night. I feel jealous of them”.

Figure 2

Image from the movie *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*



(<https://alchetron.com/Ennu-Swantham-Janakikutty>)

Yakshi, a being who has fangs, is projected as the symbol of power. Sometimes Janakikutty disguises as Yakshi to frighten others. “The cousin’s marriage is going on. Kunjathol is not looking at me. She is looking at the man who married Sarojineyedathi. I screamed when Kunjathol jumped on the person who married Sarojini”.

An old priest conducts a ritual to exorcise the *badha*. “Kunjathol held me when I fainted and fell down. I was laying in Kunjathol’s lap and smiled.” The old priest said to all. “*Badha* is dispossessed...nothing will happen now”.

In the film, the bonding of Yakshi and Janakikutty, the main thread of the story is portrayed within the brackets of heterosexual love. Janakikutty is fascinated by the stories of the Yakshi and spirits from her grandmother similar to the childhood life of Ganga in *Manichitrathazu*. Other family members always exclude Janakikutty. In the movie, the

concern shown by Baskaran, a relative, prompts Janakikutty to develop romantic feelings towards him. Later she finds that Baskaran, whom she has a crush, was in love with her cousin. The immediate arrival of Yakshi helps Janakikutty to overcome the trauma. Eventually, the Yakshi and Janakikutty develop a close relationship.

The relationship of *Yakshi* and Janakikutty is the prominent theme of the film, palpable notwithstanding the heterosexual strands of the narrative. In this film, homosociality is addressed as an ‘abnormal’ relationship. In the novel, Yakshi is with Janakikutty from the beginning till the end of the narration. The novel ends with them happily continuing their relationship. In the movie, the narration of the relationship of Janakikutty and Yakshi begins when Janakikutty is traumatised after a heterosexual break-up. Suddenly Yakshi replaces the position of her companion. The movie ends with Janakikutty admitted to the hospital for psychiatric treatment, her male lover returning and the Yakshi bidding farewell. The movie secures the male desires in the end and justifies the female desires as situational.

Unlike the novel, the movie provides a background of the Yakshi. It is narrated that she was the wife of a feudal lord who had sexual relationships with lower-caste women. She was killed when she resisted her husband’s multiple relationships. The film presents Janakikutty and Yakshi as having bad experiences from their earlier relationship with men. In the first meeting, Janakikutty expresses her fear about the Yakshi and, in a conversation with her, asks about her fangs, to which the Yakshi replies that it will be used only against men.

Janakikutty dreams about Yakshi in the night. Sometimes she talks about the Yakshi with her grandmother. They play and dance together. The film contains an exchange of romantic glances between Yakshi and Janakikutty, consolidating the underlying desire between them. The film portrays desire, longing, and friendship as a continuum. Queer reading facilitates understanding the continuum in the relationship and the possibility of representation explicit in the narration. As Ruth Vanita says, this is a continuum between romantic friendship and love, the slippery space where affection slides into or is coded as erotic without being overtly depicted as sexual (Vanita, 2002, p. 146). I argue that same-sex desire has all the possibilities to be erotic or sexual or non-sexual as the other relationships.

Women's sexual agency is most often invisible in the Malayalam cinema. Mainstream cinema portrays the sexual agency of the women through a supernatural power like Yakshi or a vampire. The threat to the heterosexual, patriarchal society looms large in these instances. In a scene in *Manichitrathazu*, Ganga or Ganga possessed by Nagavally, attempts to kill Nakulan who is an obstacle to her desire. Her sexual agency and questioning of patriarchy are confined within the acts of a spirit. However, Ganga is remade as a good, dedicated wife at the conclusion of the movie. In the film, *pooja* (rituals) and a psychiatrist's treatment purify Ganga forever. In the last scene, after all the ritualistic acts, she collapses as Nagavally is completely exorcised from her. After that, Dr Sunny asks her name as she is cured, and she replies, "Ganga." Sunny insists on her full name, and she replies, "Ganga Nakulan", thereby reasserting and submitting to her identity, as defined by a man/husband in heteropatriarchy.

Yakshi is the repository of some of the most taboo or repressed thoughts. Horror movies represent sexuality which deals with historical suppression. The ghost in these movies carries gender, caste, sexual identities and personal histories with them. Weinstock (2012) writes,

It is just too simple and reductive to say that the vampire is a metaphorical embodiment of devouring female sexuality or alternative configurations of sexual desire, rather, the cinematic vampire is invariably an over-determined body that condenses a constellation of culturally specific anxieties and desires into one super-saturated form (p. 13).

Another scholar, Barbara Creed (1993), describes the cinematic representation of the monstrous feminine, the “‘phallic woman’ as one who has either a phallus or a phallic attribute-represented prominently by fangs, knives etc. The phallic attribute of the *Yakshi* is her fangs which she eventually reveals and about which Janakikutty is perpetually curious. Their disinterest in and domination over the men also assigns them a symbolic phallic power” (Barbara Creed, as cited in Muraleedharan, 2010).

Janakikutty and Ganga are representations of the feminine stereotypes, of which the *Yakshi* and Ganga in the form of Nagavally, are constructed as the Other, the liberated women who break the conventions of patriarchy. Nagavally represents the sexuality of the racial other as she is a subservient *dasi*, a Tamil woman in a feudal house. Here, the *Yakshi* is a *composite of otherness* that bears the marks of the constructions of femininity, race, and sexuality.

Monsters are always performing gender; they must pass for human, disguise their true natures and hide their desires. They too perform gender stereotypes. They are more womanly, more attractive, and more seductive. The result is that cinematic vampires are inevitably queer, that is, they reveal in dangerous and exciting ways the extent to which both manliness and womanliness are always masquerades, inevitably flawed performances of cultural expectations (Weinstock, 2012, p. 8).

As Karollil and Bindu bring out, the notion of the “monstrous feminine” allows a critical examination of gendering in any society. Examined by feminists in a range of social and historical contexts, and registers, the figure is always subversive of the norm. It may be located in the realm of horror, disgust, and simultaneously, desire. In the various representations in Kerala, such as myths, folk tales, songs, novels, and cinema, the Yakshi dominates in the region's horrifying and seductive imaginations, dreams, and fantasies. She is at once seductive and threatening, embodying a castrating sexual prowess. She is a figure at the margins of society, disrupting the norms of acceptable femininity, and thus, representing the other of respectable, ideal femininity (Karollil and Bindu, 2023).

The movie *Manichitrathazu* (*The Ornate Lock*) drew large audiences compared to *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (*Yours Janakikutty*). One can conclude that these movies attract different audiences from different sexualities in different ways. In the case of *Janakikutty*, when it is adapted from a novel to cinema, the director has attempted to fit it into a heterosexual narration. There are no hypermasculine characters in the movie *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* compared to *Manichitrathazu*. In *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*. As a heteronormative resolution, men stand in between women to assume a norm whereas, in

the novel, no male members interfere between Yakshi and Janakikutty. Malayalam cinema is a male-centred space where normative gender and sexualities are reiterated. However, the female-to-female bonding is significant and its representation in the Malayalam cinema is remarkable. In this chapter, I have analysed the cinematic strategies representing same-sex desires. Queer reading facilitates alternative modes of reading and seeing to locate non-normative erotic and gender configurations which erupt within the site of extreme heteronormativity. Normative values were recuperated as a resolution in these cinemas. However, the hidden representations of non-normative desires directly or indirectly push the boundaries of normativity.

Chapter 4

Female Romantic Friendship in Malayalam Cinema

The concepts like gender and sexuality cannot be fully understood if it is defined as two related oppositions: men versus women and homosexuality versus heterosexuality. Muraleedharan (2005) quotes Corber and Valocchi, in the process of critiquing the binary and essentialist categories seeking “to unsettle the intellectual assumptions and methodological conventions that motivate any study of gender and sexuality using binary terms” (p. 71). Female bonding addresses an array of same-sex relationships, uncategorised and considered fluid. My search for understanding different possible relationships is based on the idea that there are limitations to understand female experiences in a heterocentric-reproductive culture. A narrow focus on women's status as relative individuals, defined by their difference from and their subordination to only men, has limited the understanding of gender, kinship, and sexuality. There are minor cultures in a dominant heterosexuality-based society where understanding different possibilities of desires is a counter-hegemonic activity.

The first chapter has looked at the heteronormative structure of Kerala society, where sexuality, desires, and pleasures are assumed in a normative way. I have enquired about the meaning of sexuality in this particular Kerala context. I understand heteronormativity from a sense that normative heterosexuality is socially constructed like all other sexualities. In this chapter, I analyse the representation of non-normative desires in a heteronormative dominant culture. How does cinema, as a text, construct and manage its technique of pleasure? The chapter looks specifically into the representation of female

desires and female romantic friendship as a trope of representation. Gayathri Gopinath writes,

Cinematic images in their 'originary' locations reiterate conventional nationalist and gender ideologies, may in the South Asian diasporic context, be refashioned to become the foundation of a queer, transnational culture. Queer diasporic reading within such a framework allows us to read non-heteronormative arrangements within rigidly heterosexual structures and how queer articulations of desire and pleasure draw on and infiltrate popular culture (284).

The queer diasporic framework allows one to conceive the text and the viewer in motion. *Queer* can be a narrative moment, a performance, or a stance that negates the oppressive binaries of the dominant hegemony.

Prior researchers understand sexuality in the South Asian context as a continuum rather than a category. There is no homosocial or homosexual divide, and fluidity continues from friendship to eroticism. Female bonding intensifies the technique of pleasure in cinema. Muraleedharan (2005) notes that a "queer reading examines the function of cinema in remoulding subjectivities, desires, and pleasures" (p. 73). This chapter looks at the cinematic conventions in representing a pattern of female romantic friendships, the configuration of friendship-love and its representation in cinema, and how this has been understood in the larger context of sexuality in Kerala. By observing female romantic friendships as a pattern representing female desires, I analyse the various ways popular cinema encodes non-normative sexualities and desires. Though overt same-sex physical relations are hardly represented in cinema, a larger pattern of female friendship and its

slippery phase into eroticism is the focus of the study. “This seeming absence of a recognisable gay/lesbian cinema need not undermine the relevance of queer mass culture studies in India. The studies need to venture beyond the overtly articulated and explore the unnamed expressions of queerness that structure popular culture in this part of the world” (Muraleedharan, 2002, p. 181). The continuum of friendship-romantic-erotic moments emerges at the fissures of rigidly heterosexual structures that can be transformed into queer imaginings, which can be the technique of cinema in producing pleasures and desires. Ruth Vanita (2002) elaborates,

The continuum between romantic friendship and love is a slippery space where affection slides into or is coded as erotic without being overtly represented as sexual. Representation of *dosti* is also influenced by the older Indian tradition of same-sex love. An examination of *dosti* films from 1970 through 2004 demonstrates how the newly queered homoerotic *dosti* points to a possible national move away from a hegemonic heteronormativity that enforces marriage and reproduction (p. 146).

Dinah Holtzman writes,

In these cinemas, *Sholey*, *Dosti*, etc., same-sex friendship complicates the institutionalisation of monogamous marital heterosexuality. Although *dosti* is appropriated for the early stages of life, it must be sublimated (often via death) to maintain and propagate the nation via heterosexual reproduction. The film concludes with heterosexual coupling combined with a pervasive sense of grief over the loss of a *yaar* (Holtzman, 2011, p. 111).

Can sexualities or desires that are represented in mainstream cinema address the queer possibilities of the sexual or romantic imagination of the spectator? Raj Rao, a gay activist, and writer (2012) in his presentation, talked about *Sholey*, a 1975 Bollywood movie. The film portrays the friendship between the characters played by popular actors Amitabh Bachchan as Jai and Dharmendra as Veeru. He asked the students to imagine a female character in one of these roles which prompted the response from the audience to recognise the relationship as love.

The cinema mirrors a conventional pattern of bonding of heterosexual love, though it portrays same-gender partners in this instance. This perspective helped students deconstruct their views and read a subtext of cinema. While the gaze would allow observing the intimate, physical same-sex relation in its implicit friendship, it is essential to deconstruct the very idea of the gaze of the viewer as one constructed in a space where heterosexuality is normal. Thus, it is important to look at the romantic and visual codes which queer the viewer's gaze to analyse non-normative desires.

Methodologically, this chapter follows a subtextual reading of female-to-female desires. Multiple imaginations are possible in viewing a text, such as cinema. The primary concern of this chapter is to look at different patterns portrayed in the subtext of cinema which evoke queerness. There are certain stereotypical assumptions that cinema produces meanings as a part of constructing dominant ideologies. Muraleedharan (2005) writes, "queer reading is not one that attempts to look at things from a 'different' angle but seeks to demolish that very angle that perpetuates hetero-patriarchal visions" (p. 71). A queer reading of the spectator goes beyond the cinematic strategies of representing non-normative pleasures and desires within the heterosexual matrix.

In mainstream cinema, sexuality is recognised only when linked to reproduction within conjugality. The love between heterosexual couples is accepted for the formation of an ultimate heteronormative family. There is a continuous construction of a Malayali nation through the masculine ideology. A common structure in cinema follows the story of an authoritative male figure who possesses property, and depicts women who are subservient to him; men from other castes repeatedly get humiliated or dominated by the male hero. There are subtle transgressions and minor cultures that address different desires in representing gender and sexuality. Aneeta Rajendran (2015) pointed out that the case of sexualities contradicts the private/ public divide. She says, "Inside/outside dichotomy is not so easily evident in the question of sexuality, where presumably 'private' and privatised behaviours not only have public consequences but are also shaped, disciplined and modelled by public structure or 'network of desire' (p. 12). Homoerotic desires to re-draw some of the lines; making women available to one another.

In popular cinema, while heterosexuality is romanticised, female sexuality and desires are marginalised or looked at from a male heteronormative perspective. Female pleasure is represented as a form of pleasure-seeking subservient to men. In studying homosociality and female friendships within a heterosexual matrix, I am also reading the tradition of female togetherness represented in Malayalam cinema. Even though these representations are subcultures to a dominant frame, female-to-female desires are both present yet inconspicuous in Malayalam cinema. To focus on female friendship patterns in Malayalam cinema, I use the term *female romantic friendships* and select films with undertones of female-to-female desires portrayed in a pattern of female friendship. I analyze cinematic representations of female romantic friendships where friendship

overlaps with romance. Female-to-female relationships are fluid in cinematic representation and I read the underlying desire and possibility of multiple sexual imaginations. This work will cut across the fixed or normal categories of sexuality, including heterosexuality and other select categories of same-sex desires. This is carried out through the analysis of romantic or visual codes in female romantic friendships which reads:

- **spatial arrangement:** The cinematic space, imaginative and physical (presented as real and not-real), is significant to understand the conventions of representation. There is space demarcation in representing gender, sexuality, and desires. To understand the non-normative relations in the public-private spaces, I look at the homosocial spaces, where female-to-female relationships play out. The spaces where cinema portrays romantic female couples, their celebrations, their challenges to normativity, their struggles and negotiations, and the kind of representations in a mainstream normative order have to be looked at from this dimension. The question of visibility, the process of *coming out*, and the negotiation between visibility and closet will be discussed through cinematic imagination. The representation of same-sex desires has to be analysed in the context of female-to-female desires in Kerala public and private spaces. I will also analyse the politics of sexuality concerning space in understanding non-normative desires.
- **trust or commitment between the partners:** In romantic friendships in public-private spaces, I identify the slippages to eroticism to look at the stronger thread of female bonding in cinema. The commitment and trust between the female cinema

partners will be examined through the visual and romantic codes that symbolise their intimacies and desires.

- **transgression in gender and sexuality order:** Non-normative desires subvert notions of the politics around gender and sexuality, following the representation of female-to-female desires in cinema.
- **the convention of representation of songs:** Indian cinema, in general, and other regional cinema, in particular, are enriched with the culture of songs. Songs serve different functions in the text of cinema; the main narration of the movie is revealed through the background songs (and background music) and imaginations are often reflected in the songs, which may not have a direct connection with the narration. Some songs create ambiguity in presenting realistic and unrealistic themes where romance is the predominant expression. The ambiguities of realism and unrealism make space for queer imaginations as well, including the songs and lyrics that indicate female-to-female desires.
- **cinematic resolution:** As these movies are represented within a heterosexual matrix, cinema deploys strategies as a resolution measure to recuperate heteronormativity. I discuss resolution as a representative strategy cinema employs in a cultural text. I question whether resolutions truly cure the queerness of mainstream cinema evoked through the texts and subtexts. I also enquire if queerness finds a place beyond the fixtures of normative pleasures and desires.

To discuss different representations of implicit same-sex desires within mainstream cinema, this work does not solely focus on the love between men or between women. I

observe how they love without merely being labelled as women lovers in particular contexts. The study of sexualities leads beyond examining identities and subjectivities towards investigating social spaces, historical conventions, and cultural institutions.

To trace history in the field of what I read as romantic friendships, the terms *Yaar*, *Dosti*, and *Sakhi* denote friendship. However, do these terms signify merely friendship? In Malayalam literature, the concept of *Sakhi* or *Thozhi* is that of a female companion to the female protagonist. However, the term *Sakhi* reveals that it is a connection beyond friendship. *Sakhi* is a female partner, and it is different in power compared to the terms *bhartahvu* and *bharya* (husband and wife). These terms are formed based on power and domination in a heteronormative structure where a husband dominates and the other is subject to authority.

The analysis does not investigate how women love women or men love men but the modes through which love is articulated in cinema, its boundaries and transgressions. Intimate relationships between same-sex persons, even between a man and a woman, may or may not be acted upon sexually. Vanita (2000) writes,

In most cases, the attachments between same-sex persons are documented or represented in history, literature, or myth. We cannot know whether they were technically “sexual” or not. It is also not particularly important to establish such facts, especially since the idea of what is sexual and what is not changes with place and time. We are more interested in how, at different times and places, primary passionate or romantic attachments between men and women were

viewed; whether they were accepted as an invisible part of human experience, glorified as admirable and imitable or vilified as strange and abnormal (p. 1).

Many societies have viewed romantic attachments between men and women as perfectly compatible with marriage and procreation. A person may be a responsible spouse and parent, but their primary emotional attachment may be to a friend of their gender. As Vanita notes, "It is only relatively recently in human history that the heterosexual monogamous relationship has come to be viewed as necessary in a married person's chief emotional outlet" (Vanita, 2000, p. 1). Although the view is dominant today, the earlier view still coexists with it. Vanita (2000) observes:

Love need not take an explicitly sexual form, but it is nearly always expressed in a language of poetic excess and metaphoric power. For written text, language is one marker for characterising an attachment as "love." Each text has to be studied in the context of the literary conventions of the time to establish whether language justifies such characterisation. The text does not describe what they did in private space. What matters is not the precise nature of intimate interaction but how lifelong attachments are depicted and judged (p. 2).

Vanita further says, "We have come across creative use of the word to indicate same-sex emotions that include and transcend friendship, for instance, *swayamvara sakhi* in the eleventh century *Kathasaritsagara*" (p. 99). *Swayamvara* literally means self-chosen bride or bridegroom. The term is generally used for the ceremony where a woman chooses her husband from a group of suitors. Here, the term *Sakhi* (a female friend) is unexpectedly added to *Swayamvara*.

I draw my arguments from Ruth Vanita's *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (2000). This anthology traces the history of ideas in Indian tradition about love between women and the love between men. Same-sex desires in literature were unexplored at a time when Ruth Vanita's anthology initially appeared. It explored women loving women in the literary writings of India. My trajectory looks at the female romantic relations traced from words to images in which poetic and metaphoric language conveys the *unfamiliar* desires between women. In contrast, cinema reflects desires and pleasures through images. I briefly look at literature, myths, etc., to understand the pattern of literary conventions in representing romantic friendship.

Ruth Vanita (2000) included Somadeva Bhatta's *Kathasaritsagara*, a string of eleventh-century stories. In this story, the pre-marital love of a princess for a married woman anticipates in interesting ways the pre-marital collegiate of woman-woman romances common in twentieth-century Indian fiction. Vanita writes,

Princess Kalingasena grew up among her female companions in her father's house. One day, the Asura Maya's daughter, Somaprabha, saw her beauty and fell in love with her. She felt that indeed, both were female friends from a previous birth. With their overwhelming affection for her, she thought, it was only appropriate that I should choose her as my friend once again (Vanita, 2000, p. 99).

After seeing Somaprabha, Kalingasena's parents thought that the princess, who is very beautiful, had chosen to approach Somaprabha on her own and deserved to be her friend. She rises from her seat, takes one another's hands and swears to be friends. With affection for their daughter, Kalingasena's parents said to Somaprabha, "Dear child, we give

Kalingasena into your hands. Now both of you can enjoy yourselves as you wish"(Vanita, 2000, p. 101).

Because of the immense love between them, Somaprabha convinces Kalingasena to accept the ideal man she has found for her. Somaprabha also cautions that once Kalingasena has obtained her beloved, she will forget even Somaprabha. Hearing this, the princess cries and says, "Then, O friend, bring the king of Vatsa here because I will not be able to live without you even for a moment." (Vanita,2000, p. 103) Somaprabha says, "O friend, I will never return to you who is installed in your husband's house. Good women do not visit a friend's husband's house." (Vanita, 2000, p. 103) Here, the story of the same-sex couple follows the same pattern of normative heterosexual relationships, with the narration of union, bonding and separation.

The Rig Veda Samhita (1500 BC) presents an ideal of friendship as a very sacred relation. While it represents the man-woman relationship as oriented toward procreation, it constructs friendship not as reproductive but as creative (p. 4). The preoccupation with friendship continues in the Hindu epics. Krishna and Arjuna are perhaps the most famous pair of male friends from the ancient text of Mahabharata (p. 4). *Adi Parva (First Book)* concludes with Krishna asking Indra, the king of gods, for the boon of eternal friendship with Arjuna. Every decisive turn of events in the war is occasioned by Krishna's intervention, which he invariably explains as motivated by his love for Arjuna. Krishna states that Arjuna is more important to him than his wives, children, or kinsmen, that there can be many spouses and sons, but there is only one Arjuna, without whom he cannot live, as evidenced by the following quote:

My wives, my kinsmen, my relatives, none amongst these are dearer to me than Arjuna. O Daruka, I shall not be able to cast my eyes, even for a single moment, on the earth bereft of Arjuna... know that Arjuna is half of my body (Vanita, 2000, p. 6).

The sanctity of companionate love in marriage is indicated in the symbolism of the seven steps taken together during a wedding ceremony. The companionship and love of friends are depicted in many ancient texts, giving an equal status in the recurrent, and apparently almost proverbial, phrase *saptapadam hi mitram*, which translates as “seven steps taken together constitute friendship,” or seven words spoken together constitute friendship (Vanita, 2000, p. 9). I hope to demonstrate how romantic friendships in the select cinema I have chosen align with the concept in these stories.

Tradition of Female Romantic Friendship in Malayalam Cinema

Complex engagements with female friendship in cinema can be found in films like *Desadanakili Karayarilla* (Migratory Birds Do Not Cry, 1986), *Salini Ente Kootukari* (Salini, My Friend, 1980), *Novemberinte Nashtam* (Loss of November, 1982), *Pranaya Varnangal* (Colors of Love, 1998), *Note Book* (2006), *Sancharram* (The Journey, 2004), *Rani Padmini* (2015), *Asangadithar* (Unorganised, 2022) and *B 32 to 44* (2023). Malayalam cinema continues to remain a male-centred space where the conventional concepts of masculinities and femininities are reiterated. However, the female romantic friendship has a significant, if inconspicuous, hidden beneath-the-surface, presence in Malayalam cinema. As James and Venkatesan point out, Malayalam cinema favoured

heterosexual and homophobic narratives, invisibilising the actual existence of non-heterosexual and non-binary people within the society:

Public anathema caused by the homophobic sensibility of Keralites also accentuates the filmmaker's hesitancy to map such issues. Moreover, section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, valid till 2018, made homosexuality a criminal act and a punishable offence. As a result, mainstream films maintained a strange silence about LGBTQA+ issues as if queerness was either completely absent in Kerala or treated as a Western import, despite films like *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1978) *Desadanakkili Karayarilla* (Migratory Bird Never Cries, 1986) which “compromisingly” address lesbian desires (2022, p. 86).

This chapter looks at the tradition of female romantic friendships. Mohan's *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1978), *Salini Ente Kootukari*, written by P. Padmarajan (who was a filmmaker par excellence and a stalwart in Malayalam cinema), *Novemberinte Nashtam* (November's Loss, 1982) and *Desadanakkili Karayarilla* (Migratory Birds Do Not Cry, 1986) represented female bonding in the late 70s and the 80s.

Filmmaker Mohan's *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls, 1978) is based on a well-known Malayalam novel about a lesbian relationship. The film had newcomers portraying the lead roles, narrating the friendship of two girls, Girija and Kokila. Girija, who is from a wealthy family, becomes emotionally dependent on her friend, who belongs to a poor household. She is heartbroken when Kokila's mother arranges her marriage. The cinema ends with a predictable resolution coinciding with the entry of a young male doctor into Girija's life. The director received appreciation from the critics for having transformed

the novelist Nandakumar's work from a *perverted* relationship into a *pure* friendship. Interestingly, the film version translated it into a romantic friendship without overt sexual engagement between its female protagonists. The politics of Malayalam cinema, to accommodate the morality of the Malayali community, perhaps forced the director to make the film fit into the mainstream narrative.

Figure 3

Image from the movie *Randu Penkuttikal*



(<https://mubi.com/en/in/films/randu-penkuttikal>)

Novemberinte Nashtam (*November's Loss*, 1982) narrates the story of a woman's emotional turmoil after a breakup. The protagonist Meera's relationship with her sister-in-law helps her to overcome her heartbreak. The scenes of a song signal the intimate romance between Meera and her sister-in-law, disrupting even as it blends into the main narrative. The lyrics "*arikilo...akalayo...evidyanu nee...*" (translated as "Where are you...are you far or near to me") is a song with conventional romantic phrases that

express eroticism in cinema. The gaze between the women mirrors the longing and desire between them against the foreground of heterosexual romance.

Figure 4

Film poster, *Novemberinte Nashtam*



(<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0249062/>)

Salini Ente Kootukari (*Salini, My Friend*, 1980) is another successful commercial film directed by Mohan, who gained popularity with his first movie, *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls). *Salini Ente Kootukari* is based on a well-known short story, “Parvathikutty” by P. Padmarajan. It has the status of being the most commercially successful film depicting female friendship in Malayalam cinema. Muraleedharan (2010) observes that both *Randu Penkuttikal* and *Salini, My Friend*, represent female romantic friendships in similar ways. *Salini, My Friend*, as the title reveals, is about the friendship between Salini and Ammu, two middle-class, upper-caste college girls. Ammu remembers her

friend Salini, as indicated by the letters and her diary that are seen on her table. Ammu looks sad and cries when she recalls her friendship with Salini. The film unfolds in a flashback to their past when Salini and Ammu were college-going women. They were friends from childhood. The film opens with the degradation of the Nair men, a common convention of the cinema of the time. Salini's unemployed brother is depressed and spends his time reading and writing. Their father marries for a second time. The common trope of the cruel stepmother image in early Malayalam movies plays out here and Salini seems unhappy in the family. Her relationship with Ammu is her only consolation and Salini is emotionally dependent on Ammu. Salini is bold in contrast to Ammu's character. Salini is smart and naughty in college, an object of desire for men. She responds boldly and even teases the men who are romantically interested in her. When Roy, Salini's classmate, proposes to her, Salini responds that he doesn't know her well enough. Even though the film explores heterosexual relationships, and Salini's involvement with men, the friendship between her and Ammu remains strong. The protagonist, Salini, contests the norms of normative femininity in an overt manner, and the modest, submissive Ammu, on the other hand, appears traditional. For instance, Ammu scolds Salini that she creates a ruckus in the class and reminds her that she is a woman and should be careful. I would argue that their relationship mirrors that of a heterosexual couple, with Salini taking on a more "masculine" active role and Ammu being more restrained in her demeanour.

In one scene, the idea of women's sociality is evident when the two women commute to college. Their togetherness and friendship are developed on the college premises, which, paradoxically, has always been a setting for heterosexual romance in Malayalam/Indian

cinema. Their participation in the women's volleyball team, in NCC, in sports events, and their proximity in social spaces offered some unique images that were hitherto not seen in many mainstream Malayalam cinema of the time.

I would like to highlight a few scenes in the film that disrupt and queer the established heterosexual pattern. In one scene, Salini and Ammu are shown sitting beneath the tree. Malayalam cinema routinely portrays conventional romantic scenes with the lovers placed beneath or around a tree. Both of them wear a white saree that looks similar. Salini lies on Ammu's lap while Ammu gently weaves Salini's hair. They share their sorrows and find pleasure in their togetherness.

Salini takes Ammu to her brother's room, and they stumble upon his works of poetry. Salini requests Ammu to sing the poem. With shyness, she declines. Salini closes the door and sets a condition that if Ammu wishes to go out, she must sing. The romantic gaze between women is noticeable. With loving words, they hold each other's hands. Ammu touches Salini's cheeks with affection and love as romantic scenes invoke pleasure. The song ends with Ammu leaving the room shyly. The body language and mannerisms remind the viewers of a conventional male-female romantic scene. At this point, the film introduces a male character who stands between Salini and Ammu. When Ammu opens the door, Salini's brother waits outside, listening to the song without disrupting them.

The romantic reciprocation between these women breaks an outer world behind closed doors. This scene then (re)turns to normality with the introduction of the male character. Ammu compliments the brother's poetry, and he responds that her singing was better

than the lines of his poetry. These mainstream expressions of heterosexual attraction and love, as in mainstream cinema, run parallel to the female-to-female desire. There is a strong trope of women bonding, and male characters are placed in a marginal space representing the love that follows the “normal” and recognisable path. Thus, the recuperative strategy of cinema to reproduce heteronormativity is in conflict with and works to contain the transgressive desire.

Figure 5

Image from the movie *Salini Ente Kootukari*



(<https://malayalaulagam.wordpress.com/2017/01/20/shalini-ente-kootukari/>)

When Salini's brother commits suicide, Ammu soliloquises, "She will never become our old Salini. This incident puts a stop to all her playfulness. Her brother's loss has ended the last drop of happiness." In each subsequent situation, Salini shares with Ammu the emotional trauma generated by the tragedy of her brother's death and lingering memory.

The film unfolds through the narration of Ammu and the memories of these women, shared through their diary entries and letters.

After Ammu's marriage is fixed, she informs Salini of her marriage. Salini asks for the photograph of the man Ammu is about to marry. Salini chases a shy Ammu, picks out the photo from Ammu's blouse, and remarks, "It is the better place for safekeeping." The women share their happiness over Ammu's marriage and their worries about separation. Pleasure and separation are shared among these two women. Love and marriage are represented as the ultimate destiny in mainstream Malayalam cinema. Both Ammu and Salini's life gets diverted into heterosexual partners as the ultimate destiny of their life. However, curiously, Ammu's husband-to-be does not appear in the movie until marriage happens. Thus, it appears that a heterosexual marriage is merely a resolution of the transgressive potential of the relationship between the two women.

In another scene, both women are sitting on the bed. Salini is once again lying on Ammu's lap in a relaxed fashion, and they both laugh and share details of Salini's relationship with Jayakrishnan. Ammu says, "I know this will end this way. My only tension concerns you; you are mad, and I am also not with you during the New Year. Don't take too much freedom with him."

Significantly, more than with their male partners, they share, laugh, and have erotic conversations between themselves. On her marriage day, Ammu extracts a promise from Salini that she will write letters to her weekly. She says, "Salini, I will write even if you do not reply." The letter becomes a medium of love after their separation. Salini is shown as experiencing loneliness and isolation in her relationship with Jayakrishnan after

Ammu leaves her. The movie shifts its focus to how letters become an important medium to continue their relationship. In one of Ammu's soliloquies, she says, "She writes everything that happens in the college. She doesn't have anything to hide from me. My Salini..." Tragedy strikes constantly in Salini's life; she is disturbed in college and at home. She appears lost and haunted after Ammu also leaves her. Finally, death becomes a solution for her and a cinematic solution to the narrative of unsanctioned desires. Before her death, Salini writes her letters and diary, a symbol of their friendship, to Ammu.

The main protagonists, Salini and Ammu belong to upper-caste families and thus must carry and endorse its prescription on their bodies. Their college and the premises of the home become a space of togetherness. The film unfolds in a flashback. When we see Ammu positioned in the bedroom of her marital house, looking outside the window and weeping in memory of Salini, the flashback strategy signals Ammu's pre-marital life and unfulfilled desires towards Salini. Their bonding and friendship seep into and disrupt the heterosexual conjugal setting. Mainstream Malayalam cinema has routinely represented the narratives of normative dominant women whose desires remained confined to the marital family. *Salini, My Friend* represents women's desires against a normative family background, attempting a conciliation with domestic/heterosexual desires and yet rife with subversion.

As we see, the college forms an alternative space where Salini forgets familial pressure. The love and friendship of Salini and Ammu unravel within the college spaces, offering scope for homosocial engagements. Salini, although bold and outspoken, especially in college, is emotionally dependent on Ammu. In outer spaces, Ammu, as an introverted

woman, survives in the shade of Salini. Thus, they depend on and complement each other. Located in a small town setting, female intimate relationships find expression in the cracks of the domestic and public spaces, although cut short and regulated by marriage. However, as we see, marriage is not fully contained or secured by heteronormativity, the love/desire between the two women continues through letters, and even after one of them dies. The mourning by Ammu for her “friend” re-asserts and reconsolidates the bond, even in separation and death.

Salini, My Friend is emblematic of how homosocial romantic relations intersperse the domains of heterosexuality. Ammu, a newly married woman sitting in her bedroom, is assailed by the memories of her friend Salini. There are no romantic or intimate scenes between Ammu and her husband. Whether in the bedroom or her home, she is alone with Salini's letter. One can only see that she is either writing or reading letters to Salini. Ammu writes: "... there is nothing she hides from me...she writes everything to me." In contrast to this deep bond and sharing that she experiences with Salini, the absence of companionship or romance with her husband stands out. Paradoxically, she is married to a man and located in conjugal life, but her relationship with another woman (even in her absence) lingers and grows stronger. The lovelessness of the marriage only brings out the passionate intimacy of the other relationship.

Another mainstream Malayalam movie, *Desadanakili Karayarilla* (*Migratory Birds Do Not Cry*), was released in 1986. The director, P. Padmarajan experimented with new themes in Malayalam cinema. His movies had a wide reach and have been romanticised among the Malayali audience after his death. In social media, it is common for women to share romantic pictures of *Desadanakili Karayarilla* and *Salini, Ente Kootukari*,

expressing nostalgia or relating their friendships with these characters. These movies became part of Malayali women's imagination of female romantic relationships or friendships. A woman on social media writes, "All of us have one Nimmi or Sali in our life. I do have one Nimmi". Nimmi and Sali are the two teenage protagonists of *Desadanakili Karayarilla*.

When the movie begins, Sali and Nimmi face the camera, and Sali confides to Nimmi about a mischief she has just carried out. Nimmi says, "You ran away; that always helps escape troubles." They are produced before the school principal, Devika, this time for the bunking class to watch a film in the theatre. They refute their teacher's allegation until she gives proof of their activity, and they finally accept their act silently and receive punishment. Sali and Nimmi are students who live in a disciplinarian boarding school. Sali and Nimmi are aware they can get a detention order anytime for any violation. Their teacher's expression and her gaze at Sali and Nimmi signal her suspicions that boundaries might be crossed and a possible "misconduct" is on the way. Sali is a rebel by nature who is neither ready to change her deeds nor conform to the school's disciplinarian norms. Nimmi, in contrast to Sali, is dependent, emotional, and feminine. Nevertheless, Sali wins Nimmi's heart and always successfully convinces her to agree to her plans. Nimmi, notwithstanding her timid nature, trusts Sali. Sali is much more tempestuous, yet it is notable how she makes Nimmi happy and free from her worries. As the headmistress comments, Nimmi is Sali's "tail."

Figure 6

Image from the movie *Desadanakili Karayarilla*



(<https://feminisminindia.com/>)

They express their empathy and love for each other in the school corridors. They are caught and receive punishment for escaping from the boarding school and watching a movie in the cinema theatre. Sali takes Nimmi's hand, gently caressing the bruises from the punishment, and says, "Don't worry, my dear!" She uses the word *mole* to address Nimmi, a term of endearment usually used between lovers. Nimmi's face expresses sadness, love, concern, and care. She, too checks Sali's hand and says: "Nothing is seen". Sali laughs and replies: "For that, they would have to be born again". Sali's words comfort her Nimmi and cheer her up.

Devika, their school teacher, acts as the disciplinary force in the absence of family or parents in the setting of the boarding school. Another teacher speaks of their "incomplete

families,” as to how they are from broken families with divorced parents and thus, their rebellious/deviant conduct. Devika is apprehensive that they would act as a negative influence on students who are interested in studies. Conversely, Sali and Nimmi develop a revenge plan against the vigilant and disciplining authority of the teacher, Devika.

Following the romantic convention in mainstream cinema, there is a scene with Nimmi lying on Sali's lap under a tree on the hostel premises. As Sali caresses Nimmi's hair she shares her anxieties about getting detained from school. She says, “I will not return home; Father will plan my marriage”. Sali consoles her and says, “If that happens, we will go far... to a faraway place, a safe place”. They share smiles and gazes with the hope of being together in a utopic faraway place. During a school picnic, they both decide to run away together, as revenge against their teacher Devika, who, they assume would be to be suspended from school due to their actions. As per Sali's plan, they decide to quit school. She assures Nimmi that she will care for her and convinces her of the plan. Even though Nimmi is nervous, Sali's confidence helps to reduce her anxiety.

After they escape from the picnic team, Sali tells Nimmi, “The thing we should do first is change the uniform. In uniform, we are students. When we change out of the uniform, we are free birds. Nobody can then say who we are; then we will decide who we will be”. They change out of their uniform, and their body language reflects the freedom they enjoy. Next, they have to find a place to stay for the night. Sali says, “The night is still young, my dear”, and they feel happiness and freedom. A police officer is suspicious of the two women roaming at night. Nimmi and Sali enquire of a women's convent to divert the policeman's suspicion. The policeman asks if they are sisters and assists them in finding a convent.

Sali and Nimmi beg for one day's shelter in the Christian convent and get the necessary permission to stay there. They are seen as the happiest when they get a room for themselves. Sali hugs and kisses her friend with great happiness. The room is shown to have milk and fruits, which are symbolic of how a newly wedded couple would start their first night together with milk and fruits. This mirrors stock scenes in Malayalam cinema, indicating the beginning of conjugal intimacy.

After they escape from the convent, Nimmi and Sali are shown running toward the camera in slow motion. Such frames routinely depict man-woman romantic scenes. The camera focuses on the different parts of their bodies, their smiles, and gazes at each other in an endeavour to capture their togetherness. Sali cuts her hair to disguise herself from people and looks like a tomboy. Nimmi's expression changes from some happiness with the new style but also with sadness simultaneously. Nimmi's expression reveals both sadness and happiness at her companion's transformation. Sali looks at Nimmi, realises her sadness, the exchange of gaze between them signals longing and desire. Eventually, they find a new hostel to stay in. When they reach their room, Nimmi asks Sali, "Is this the place you talked about earlier? A far... far... faraway place...?" Sali replies, "This may be the place until we are recognised and then we'll find another place."

In the songs that play during Sali and Nimmi's time together in an urban space, their embodied gestures and movements are those of romantically involved heterosexual partners, as routinely represented in mainstream cinema. Some of these scenes include erotic gestures such as Nimmi whispering secrets to Sali, Sali chasing Nimmi and other romantic intimacies like their naughtiness and silly fights. A particular song in the film contains scenes mirroring a heteronormative tradition where both women run down the

stairs, one after the other. This is an oft-repeated scene in Malayalam cinema portraying a typical romantic scene. There is another scene with a beautiful sunset in the background while both walk while holding hands. In another shot, Sali waits for Nimmi outside the working place, a scene that is usually portrayed in mainstream cinema following a lover's tiff, the hero waiting outside to meet the heroine and appease her. Similar scenes, invoking the romantic tradition place Nimmi and Sali in settings such as an ice cream parlour and swimming pool. These are stock settings for blooming love in Malayalam cinema. In the swimming pool sequence, Nimmi, feminine and wife-like in a saree, walks towards Sali, who is clad in a swimming suit with a towel and wraps it around the latter. Each scene is reminiscent of male-female romantic/erotic scenes, replicating the same conventional love pattern.

A male character enters this feminine space like the film we discussed earlier. Nimmi is drawn towards Hari Shankar. Significantly, Hari Shankar considers them a heterosexual couple at first sight: "On first sight, I thought you were boy and girl and did not want to disturb you". While Sali supports her friend's desire, the discontent and sadness beneath animate the dialogues and sequences. For instance, Sali warns Nimmi: "It is good that you feel an attachment with someone, but one should be very careful." She questions Nimmi when she goes to meet Hari Shankar without her knowledge. She wonders how Nimmi could hide anything from her. Sali asks the whereabouts of Hari Shankar as he becomes her beloved Nimmi's affection. We find that the emotional dynamics and bond between the women become stronger and more fraught, especially when a man is placed between them.

Nimmi reveals to Hari Shankar the details of her past including how she journeyed into the city with Sali. Later, in an emotional scene, Nimmi admits that she revealed the facts she promised not to share with anyone. Sali consoles her and says that if Nimmi finds this as an outlet or if she gets peace out of this, then sharing is worth it. Nimmi finally realises that she was a tool used by Hari Shankar to help Devika, their teacher and his fiancée, by finding out the whereabouts of the girls. Sali urges her to leave the hostel with her but Nimmi does not agree. Sali gives her beloved friend a parting embrace and quickly walks outside. However, she finds herself unable to leave Nimmi behind and returns to the room. The room is locked, and Nimmi does not respond to Sali's knocks. Anxiously, Sali knocks and calls out her name loudly. Finally, Nimmi opens the door. Sali searches the room and finds poison on the table, which Nimmi was about to consume. Sali is shocked and scolds Nimmi, and asks her: "Why did you do this? How can I leave you and let you be alone? I am with you. Don't you understand me?".

Hari Sankar brings Devika and the other school teachers to the runaway girls' room. They find Sali and Nimmi in an embrace, as though sleeping on the bed. However, they are shocked to find the girls dead, and a caption appears across the scene, "to a far... far away... a safe place...."

The visual codes of film, as well as the narration, language, lyrics, images, songs, spatial arrangements, background music, and gender codes, offer a rich sub-textual reading of non-normative desires. As I have attempted to analyse above, non-normative desires overlap the romantic and the erotic. The continuum between romantic friendship and love is a slippery space where affection slides into or is coded as erotic without being overtly represented as *sexual*. In the social and sexual contexts of Kerala, the representation of

female-to-female desires simultaneously subverts and submits to the heteronormative structure of cinema.

As the title denotes, *Desadanakili Karayarilla (Migratory Birds Do Not Cry)* refers to the conflicted and subliminal location of women couples. The film addresses the representation of female desires and their identification with the lesbian issues of Kerala at the time. *Desadanam* means wandering from one place to another without any destination. It refers metaphorically to migratory birds and their search for a better, safer place as they do not have a permanent, settled place within the hegemonic social imaginations. Initially, Sali and Nimmi run away from their disciplinary school. Their disobedience reveals their nonconformist attitude in a disciplinarian school. After they quit the school, Sali tells Nimmi that when they shed their uniforms, they can be free birds who can decide their destiny. When they travel to an urban space, they celebrate their happiness and freedom there. In a new city, they are shown roaming in the street at night. The policeman closely watches them, and to escape his (an official representative of the state) surveillance, they ask if there is a convent hostel where they can stay. In the convent, they are apprehensive that the news of them missing from school might be out in the newspaper, and, hence, Sali decides to cut her hair short to disguise her identity. Sali and Nimmi disguise their identities as tourists and researchers, though they are visibly present in public spaces. They had, at the beginning of their intimacy, turned the corridors of a residential school into their private space. After running away from the school, they access greater freedom in the urban space as it is shown as more inclusive of all kinds of differences. Thus, like wanderers, they strategically place themselves within/between private and public spaces, snatching moments of intimacy and freedom.

Hari Shankar disrupts the relationship and the spaces they find and inhabit, and thus he emerges as the bearer of patriarchal authority, seeking to restore the heteronormative order.

Desadanakili Karayarilla (Migratory Birds Do Not Cry) explores the theme of homosexuality at a time when queerness was not only socially and morally prosecuted but remained unspeakable and unseeable. The film brings out the complexities of struggling with sexual identity while being a young girls in a conservative, patriarchal society. There were several suicide cases reported in Kerala during that time, which might have influenced the director, Padmarajan, to focus on this theme. Even though it is not titled or overtly declared as a lesbian film, it portrays the struggles and negotiations of women loving women in private or public spaces in Kerala society.

Desadanakili Karayarilla ends in the suicide of the women. Some reviews opine that *Desadanakili Karayarilla* does not direct a path for same-sex lovers to follow. As Mokkil writes: "Struggle itself in *Desadanakili Karayarilla* establishes a couplehood. The couplehood established is beyond doubt through their suicide." She reminds us that suicide in literature and cinema is often represented as a union. Celebrated heterosexual romance in Malayalam literature and film is where the ultimate triumph of love is to die together, especially in the face of social opposition (Mokkil, 2009, p. 147).

The anticipation of death constitutes the existential time of life. That is, 'to be in the world' in anticipation of death. Death renders the 'being' complete, while life in politics remains incomplete; life in anticipation of death becomes complete. If

we mean death as negation, we could conclude that the 'negation' completes the 'being.' Negation is the ultimate form of completion (Mokkil, 2009, p. 147).

Figure 7

Image from the movie *Desadanakili karayarilla*.



(<https://timelessrandoms.wordpress.com/>)

Further: "Social forms of desiring are multiple and dynamic. But power works through a process of reifying certain desires. So certain bodies came to be matter, and certain others became unseen, illegible, and unrecognisable" (Mokkil, 2011, p. 402). Mokkil notes how Reshma Bharadwaj, an editor of the book *Beyond Myth: Homosexuality in Kerala* (Mithyalkapuram Swarga laingikatha Keralathil, 2004) sees the act of suicide as "a framework to look at the lesbian women in Kerala" (p. 402). Bharadwaj notes that resistance happens in multiple forms, but "because they do not fit into conventional political definitions, they are often elided" (p. 402). Two women lovers whose story the *Sahayathrika* fact-finding team documents do not fit into the familiar agency model. Sali and Nimmi's lives end in suicide, which is often seen as the ultimate move toward disempowerment as suicide is regarded as the ultimate event of disempowerment or

victimhood, notwithstanding the numerous negotiations and resistances in life. Bharadwaj explains that empowerment agency or victimhood are notions that need to be problematised (Mokkil, 2011, p. 402).

In one of Suniti Namjoshi's stories, "Saint Suniti and the Dragon" (1994) a woman befriends a Wolf. The two friends walk away and at the third village, are rudely greeted by sticks and stones because their reputation has preceded them. They were not greatly surprised but walked on until, at last, they entered a realm that was not yet familiar to us. (Namjoshi, 1998, p. 87). In another story by Namjoshi titled "Subsequent History," the tale is carried forward from the wolf, where a young woman is friends with a wolf. Initially, all the men are full of admiration because they think the woman has tamed the wolf. The narrator says that the claim was nonsensical because there had never been any question of taming. (Namjoshi, 1998, p. 85).

Soon, the men spread rumours, seeing both creatures retain their earlier shapes and propensities. They set up a wolf hunting expedition, where the wolf would be captured with the women serving as bait. The woman tries to escape, but they truss her up as bait anyway and begin the hunt, but the woman and wolf somehow manage to disappear. The men, who are now the elders of the village, after what appears to be an infinite period of waiting, "put up a sign on the edge of their town in large letters red letters warning the unwary that there were wolves about" (Namjoshi, 1998, p. 85).

"Subsequent History" narrates that the woman and wolf have wandered around looking for a new home where they are not greeted literally by sticks and stones, a metaphor for the repression's heteronormativity. The woman is frequently told to get married else

tranquilisers would be used to capture the wolf and these are forced upon them as their *options*. Finally, they leave the realm of the realistic convention, disappearing from both the story and the book into what Namjoshi claims is an unknown realm (Namjoshi, 1998, p. 87).

Namjoshi's story hints at how lesbianism is perceived and how lesbian women continue to exist in the everyday world around us, wandering through some or the other homophobic realm and how new spaces or histories are created by continuing to resist heteronormativity. Namjoshi focuses on women who argue with normative femininity-heterosexual femininity that privileges reproductive temporality, including motherhood, in the service of the family and the nation. It promises there will be a 'subsequent history' after oppression based on one's sexuality is endured. Namjoshi's articulation of the vulnerability of the *wolf* as an animal amongst the alien culture of *homo-sapiens* is a particularly pertinent trope for how sexual othering comes to be vilified as the non-human other to the universally human heterosexual. Women with the human other, the wolf - the lesbian women, the other of heterosexuality, challenge reproductive temporalities and heteronormative expectations as does the wolf to dislocate our critical anthropomorphism. Woman and wolf together, talking to one another, upset reproductive temporality.

The theme of Suniti Namjoshi's story can be read into *Desadanakili Karayarilla* in the way it narrates the structure of heteronormativity and how it perceives women. Women are monitored, mistrusted, or followed with suspicion. Sali and Nimmi are students at the threshold of receiving a suspension anytime. Sali is a rebellious character and is non-conforming toward the disciplinarian norms of the school. The teacher alleges that

though Nimmi is kind and docile, Sali spoils other students. However, Sali and Nimmi's love and partnership grow stronger to resist the discipline. The women are perceived as non-conforming, *strange* and *dangerous*; disciplining them is the task of the normative structure, as the non-normative challenges reproductive temporalities and heteronormative expectations. As the name of the movie suggests, *Migratory Birds Do Not Cry*; in the end, they move to a new and safe place unfamiliar to the viewers just as in Namjoshi's stories.

The next film to be analysed is *Note Book*, released in 2006. It portrays the friendship among three teenage school girls, Pooja, Sridevi, and Sarah who study in a strict boarding school. Sreedevi is from an overprotective, semi-rural patriarchal household. She is vulnerable and depends on her friends for everything. Pooja, the daughter of a military widow, is serious and practical-minded. Sarah, the only child of divorced parents, is a trickster but also bold and smart. Sreedevi falls in love with a classmate, Suraj. Her female friends scrutinise the relationship and provide regular guidance.

The film starts with the three girls escaping from the school's New Year celebrations and ushering the new year in their girl's circle, celebrating their love and friendship. They plant a tree for their friendship and as a symbol of their love.

Notably, the plant is named *Venus* after the goddess of love. Sarah declares Venus the fourth person who will be there even when the three friends have left. The girls find a place, a hole in the tree, as a space to keep their valuable things, as a home in a convent school space. The movie shows their fondness and love, and they keep encouraging each

other. This differs from the heterosexual or heteronormative frame cinema usually takes in the following ways:

- It creates a woman's space, how the women in the audience identify viewing or relating or finding a comfortable women's space for spectatorship. Whereas women-to-women identification is limited in Malayalam cinema, the space of the hostel is one of female bonding.
- Girls lead the space as women become the film's main protagonists. When Sridevi falls in love with a classmate, Suraj, she seeks consent from Pooja and Sarah. Sridevi is shown as more dependent on the other two friends. She is depicted as more feminine and is subject to romance and love during school time. Pooja and Sarah are more smart, active, and into sports, cultural activities, and leadership. They take care of Sreedevi when she menstruates, guides her in her romantic relationship, and later when she becomes pregnant from a relationship.

At a school picnic, Sridevi discovers that she is pregnant. Afraid of their parents and the school authorities, the girls keep the news secret. Pooja and Sarah desperately make arrangements to get the pregnancy secretly terminated, but the procedure goes wrong in the hospital, and Sridevi dies. Sarah and Pooja become separated due to the subsequent incidents and receive severe punishment from the school administration. Sarah is rusticated from the school for her role in the events at school, and Pooja, wallows in regret and later suffers a nervous breakdown, even though she escapes punishment. A flash-forward takes the film's narrative to a period six years later when Sarah has just completed her medical education at a prestigious institution in Delhi. An unexpected letter prompts her to go back to Ooty to meet Pooja, who has just recovered from her

illness. As the two girls revive their friendship, they feel the presence of Sridevi coming alive between them.

Notebook found success as a mainstream Malayalam cinema with new actors playing the lead roles. The film had most of the trappings of a commercial film with spectacular songs, dances, and intense melodrama. Yet, the film evades several patriarchal conventions while developing its narrative. There is a self-conscious refusal to celebrate normative heterosexist institutions. Among the three protagonists in the film, only Sridevi is from a conventional, patriarchal family, but she is also the one who ends up in trouble. The climax implies that her tragedy resulted from the male-centeredness of such family formations, which allows no space for expressions of or discussions on female sexualities. Sreedevi is the one who always needs support to make decisions. Pooja and Sarah give encouragement and support for her actions. Simultaneously, Sarah's broken family and Pooja's single mother's family are shown providing ample support to these girls in their hour of need. Sarah's father's timely intervention saves her from persecution by the school and police authorities. Pooja's single mother brings her daughter back to health without overt melodrama.

Heterosexual romance in *Notebook* appears compatible with and secondary to the female friendship at the narrative centre. It causes some minor disruptions but cannot undermine the female bond. The final pleasurable resolution of the narrative is the reconstruction of the temporarily severed friendship among women. Thus, the film, in fact, celebrates sisterhood as a source of solidarity and mutual support.

Figure 8

Image from the movie *Notebook*



<https://www.justdial.com/streaming/watch-moviesonline/Notebook/1533660761117?type=popup>

Another important movie for discussion here is *Pranayavarnangal* (Colours of Love, 1998), about the friendship of two college girls, Maya and Aarathi, who are roommates in a hostel. This film was a commercially successful entertainer which mainly focused on friendship, love, and college life. The popular artists Manju Warriar and Divya Unni, acted in the roles of Aarathi and Maya, respectively. Maya is a tomboyish extrovert while Aarathi is a pensive introvert with poetic sensibilities. Aarathi finds it difficult to survive the college environment, which is an alien space for her. She is a poet who lives in daydreams and keeps finding excuses to return to her village house, dreaming of bathing in the river and being with nature. In her personal space, she loves to be with her maternal aunt, lovable sister-in-law, and two little nieces with whom she has an easy

rapport. Related to Aarathi's character, cinema exemplifies her horrified response to the oracle of a local temple. This is connected with the mental breakdown and psychological issues she later undergoes in the film.

Figure 9

Poster of the movie *Pranayavarnangal*



(<https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fm3db.com%2Ffilm%2Fpranyavarnangal&psig=AOvVaw0->)

In comparing it with the other films already discussed in the third chapter, though there are differences between these two movies, *Yours*, *Janakikutty*, and *Colours of Love*, in the way of presentation and plot, there are some similarities in the tropes of presenting female characters. Janakikutty is an introvert, infatuated with Baskaran. Aarathi is also introverted, exploring her space while indulging in a creative life. Aarathi too had a crush. The Yakshi in *Yours*, *Janakikutty* came into Janakikutty's life when her infatuation with Bhaskaran led to a breakup. Aarathi also goes through a mental breakdown when

Maya, her intimate friend, creates a problem. Even though there is a parallel heterosexual relationship, the relationship between Aarathi and Maya is the primary commitment.

Aarathi and Janakikutty are feminine stereotypes. Maya and Yakshi, on the other hand, are constructed as “others” liberated women capable of breaking the conventions of patriarchy. Maya is tall like Yakshi in the film *Yours, Janakikutty*. Maya wears Western outfits and roams around freely on her two-wheeler. She is a tomboy from a wealthy family who freely engages with her parents without any constraints and lives independently where nobody controls her. In college, she freely interacts with men.

Aarathi and Maya are roommates. Maya feels more protective and shows possessiveness toward Aarathi. She also tries to help Aarathi emerge out of her introverted shell. In one scene, Maya waits on the library premises on her bike for Aarathi, impatiently honking which disturbs others sitting there. Aarathi slowly emerges from the library, feeling diffident and wondering what others would think. Maya responds to Aarathi, “I am waiting for my Aarathi when no one waits for anyone.”

Aarathi has a crush on Vinay Chandran, the handsome deputy collector who is also a poet. Maya misleads Aarathi that Vinay Chandran, too, is in love with her. She started writing letters to Aarathi in the name of Vinaya Chandran. This can be read as Maya expressing her love for Aarathi. However, Vinay Chandran is in love with Maya and soon makes a formal proposal. Though Maya is shocked, she immediately consents, and they get engaged.

This leads to a quarrel between the girlfriends, and Aarathi has a nervous breakdown. Maya is haunted by guilt and invites Aarathi to her wedding. At the right moment,

Vinaya Chandran intervenes and clears the misunderstanding between the friends, telling them they are both too immature for marriage or a serious romance. He leaves them to enjoy their college life, promising to return and marry Maya when she is ready.

Victor, their college mate, is interested in Aarathi. After singing Aarathi's poem at a college function, he approaches Aarathi to express his love. Maya interferes between him and Aarathi, exercising authority over Aarathi and depriving Victor of a chance to talk to Aarathi.

A heterosexual relationship with Vinaya Chandran and the possibility of a relationship with Victor is presented in the cinema, but the female relationship receives centrality while that which is considered *normal* and *common* is side-lined. There are instances of Maya constantly making men uncomfortable. She finds pleasure in humiliating her college principal and teases her male college mates. She challenges young men for physical combat in arm wrestling and defeats them while pretending to offer a kiss, thus leading to their symbolic emasculation. *Pranayavarnangal* and *Yours, Janakikutty* envision same-gender friendship as the replaceable equivalent of a heterosexual relationship.

Sancharram (The Journey) was released in 2004 and directed by Ligi Pullapally, a Chicago-based director who specifically works on women's issues. *Sancharram* has received awards for being a brave film that challenges convention and received praise from critics. The movie attracted more viewers from the West; perhaps because it spoke to them more than to a more conventional Kerala-based audience. The film *Sancharram*

may be located within the global LGBT counterculture. *Sancharram* did not have a release in theatres in Keala.

Figure 10

Image from *Sancharram*



(<https://wlwfilmreviews.com/journey/>)

Well-known gay rights activists in India like Arvind Narrain praised it as "an incredible act of affirmation of queer desire" (Narrain, 2004). The film problematises queer desire from a Kerala contextual experience. *Sancharram* is the story of two women, Delilah (Lilah) and Kiran. The cinema opens with Kiran trying to commit suicide. The movie unfolds in a flashback narrating their story, and at the end of the movie, the viewer sees that Kiran chooses life over death. The film is set in a rural area in Kerala: Kiran and her family return to Kerala after a long life in Delhi. The film sheds light on their traditional Nair *tharawad* and the matrilineal past of her mother. Kiran's mother narrates stories of their ancestors and grandmother, her rebellion in marrying the man of her wish. Kiran

meets Delilah, her neighbour from a wealthy Christian family. The girl children grow up together, study in the same school, and share their everyday lives. They spend intimate time in their home during the study hours. Kiran is reluctant to express her sexual attraction to Delilah. When compelled to express her feelings, she is surprised that Lilah loves her too. Here, against the backdrop of a green pond in a traditional *tharawad*, the queer desire unfolds, replacing the convention of heterosexual love in such settings.

Rajan, who loves Lilah, catches her and Kiran in an intimate moment. Rajan reports this incident to Lilah's mother, and they arrange her marriage, and she is compelled to agree due to the tremendous pressure on her. Kiran insists that Lilah escape from their place. She tries to arrange money to carry out their plan. She phones her uncle in Delhi, who is gay and hopes to move outside Kerala with Lilah.

Sancharram is based on a real suicide event in Kerala. Ligi Pullapally, director of the film, says that she considered this as the theme for the cinema because she was concerned about lesbian suicides in Kerala. Mokkil quotes from Ligi Pullapally's interview: "I hope my film helps young people consider the option of moving ahead with their lives, instead of taking the devastating step that will resonate for years within their own families and communities" (2009, p.147).

However, in the suicide case on which Ligi Pullapally bases her film, the woman involved was a lower caste woman, in contrast to what is depicted in the film, with Nair and upper caste women as the protagonists. Pullapally projects the event in a matrilineal setting. The story on which the film is based is the suicide of a Dalit student at Kerala Varma College, Thrissur, in 1999. This case is documented in the article "Sahayathrika:

Some Experiences” written by Devaki Menon in the book *Beyond Myths: Homosexuality in Kerala* (2004). The Dalit student ran away from the hostel with her female friend and was brought back home. Her suicide note revealed that false rumours spread about her on the college campus forced her to commit suicide. Sexual marginalisation and caste marginalisation together make the issue complicated. When the girls were returned to the hostel, they were immediately handed over to the police. The students' relatives argued that if the students had been any other high caste in their place, the authorities would have sent them back to their families and saved them from public humiliation. It was her caste identity that was the cause of the college administration's harsh handling of the case. She was labelled as immoral as she was a non-dominant caste woman.

This suicide offers insight into how caste and the violent exclusions surrounding it influence the violence that sexual minorities encounter in Kerala. Here, director Ligi Pullapally says she strives to reflect lesbian suicides in her work. Yet, significantly, upper-caste women had to play the central protagonists when the event of a Dalit woman's suicide was adapted into a cinematic version. The central character, Kiran, is represented as an upper-caste dominant figure. She is intelligent and creative; she is the one who takes the initiative to express her desire to Lilah at the end of the film and chooses life over death. The woman's courageous act and agency are connected with her identity as an upper-caste woman.

Navaneetha argues that in *Sancharram*, desire is posited as unconnected to the existing social structure. It is enacted to its fullest only by Kiran, who is shown to have an external horizon of possibility. She is the one who understands the language of same-sex desire and articulates it. Lilah's grandmother is shocked to see the intimacy between

Kiran and Lilah. She expresses fear about how the Church might receive the news. How does a local community understand the language of lesbianism? The real-life experiences are discussed in the book *Homosexuality in Kerala: Beyond Myths*. Lesbian relationships are more likely to be recognised if one of the partners expresses masculine traits and if resolved through a heterosexual marriage for one partner among the couple. As Sahayathrika³ discovered in their study on lesbian suicides, Pullapally's choice of social setting for her primary characters glosses over the extraordinary violence that subaltern groups such as Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis, and other marginalised groups are subjected to when combined with sexual marginalisation. Many have limited economic resources, and fewer options to relocate to urbanized areas like Kiran plans in *Sancharram*.

Love, Poetry, Social Locations

Films explore the verbal and visual discourse of romantic love in the space their relationship developed. Kiran writes poems and has Delhi-based exposure proficiency in English and Malayalam. Rajan, who has a crush on Lilah, asks Kiran to write a letter to express his love for Lilah to win her heart. At one point, he decides to write a love poem on his own to her, and she feels disgusted by the sensual sentiments he expresses through the lines. However, Lilah is impressed by the poems written by Kiran on behalf of Rajan which reflect the high poetic tradition of Malayalam literature. The themes of classical love discussed in the Malayalam literature classroom create a background for the Kiran-Lilah relationship. Paradoxically, while Rajan's love is within the heterosexual frame, he

³ Sahayathrika: Sahayathrika literally means co-traveler. Sahayathrika is the first organization for the LGBT community in Kerala. Devaki Menon is a pseudonym Deepa VN used in her earlier phase of activist life in Kerala. She is the founder member of Sahayathrika.

simultaneously represents a lower caste background. His love and language are delegitimised here, standing for a sensuality that is as “degraded” as the language he expresses it in. According to Navaneetha, placing the love between the women in this high-romantic tradition creates a reified object of same-sex love, which can only be practised by a select group of privileged individuals. The queering of the public sphere in *Desadanakili Karayarilla* and the reification of lesbian desire in *Sancharram* are paralleled in the contrasting spatial dynamics of both these films (Navaneetha, 2009, p.147).

A more contemporary movie *Rani Padmini* (2015), directed by Ashiq Abu provides an initial understanding of female-centric or female-focused cinema. Popular artists Manju Warrier and Rima Kallingal carry the leading roles of Rani and Padmini in this cinema. This cinema portrays friendship and sisterhood that resist patriarchal notions.

This is one of the first films in Manju Warrier’s filmography after a break from the film industry. The movie was planned and designed for Manju Warrier. Woman-centeredness emerges as a key trope in Manju Warrier's movies, especially after she returns to cinema after her divorce. Female bonding is a theme conceptualised for this movie, planned with Warrier and Kallingal as the main protagonists. In Warrier’s real life, sisterhood and friendships provided her with the support and solidarity to overcome the issues in her personal life. Finally, they acquired a divorce from well-known actor Dileep. Women's movements and issues of that time, resistance to harassment issues, social media discussions, and new media interventions have all influenced Malayalam cinema in those times.

The film *Rani Padmini* zooms into the lives of two women. It introduces two types of femininities against the backdrop of the lives of two growing girls. The film portrays the contrasting gender behaviours of the two women and their different social and gender exposures in their childhood, upbringing, and societal expectations of them. Padmini leans into traditional life and culture, while Rani lives in a semi-urban culture; she likes to play with boys' toys, is mischievous, and is interested in adventures, sports, and fights, breaking conventional feminine qualities. Rani's mother is shown as uncomfortable with her daughter's gender transgressions.

Figure 11

Image from the movie *Rani Padmini*



(<https://pinklungi.com/rani-padmini-an-underwatched-gem/>)

Padmini marries into a conventional family with a mother-in-law who clearly expects a disciplined companion and daughter-in-law as the son is too busy with work. After the

marriage, Padmini relocates to Delhi. The film depicts the lack of romance in Padmini's life, with her husband always busy with his job, which involves off-road car driving. Padmini eventually decides to escape the restrictive, conventional home in search of her husband on a Himachal trip. On the trip to the Himalayas, she meets Rani, a non-traditional, non-feminine woman who is independent and manages the crises that life throws up with Elan. Padmini depends on Rani in the journey to help her find her husband in the Himalayas. The friendship and sisterhood between Rani and Padmini develop during this journey, set against patriarchal realities.

Padmini eventually finds her husband, but he belongs to a world of his male friends, sports, and competition. The husband feels he signs a divorce petition as part of a plan to discipline Padmini. The movie's last frame affirms female bonding, with Rani and Padmini sitting together and Padmini's child sitting between them. During their journey to the Himalayas, their co-travellers flirt with them, and Rani shocks them with, "Yes, we are lesbian; this is our honeymoon trip."

Asangadithar (2022) is one segment from the anthology of movies *Freedom Fight* directed by Kunjila Mascillamani. *Asangadithar* is a docufiction that narrates the historic protest of women workers for the right to urinate and access to toilets for women in the unorganised sector in Kozhikode district of Kerala. This women's movement was led by Viji, a tailor-turned-activist portrayed in the same role in cinema.

The right to urinate is a gender issue that the film is trying to convey by portraying the problems faced by the women's community on a daily basis. The film illustrates the resistance against this movement. Women talk about their everyday issues in the

unorganised sector. Later, they become a collective and realise this is happening because they are women, and they realise their need for collective action because they all have experienced these issues in different forms. The film also illustrates resistance and movements against issues in the unorganised sector. Saleswomen's right to sit, unorganised women's right to urinate and access to toilet in Kozhikode Street, the struggle of women nurses for decent wages, and *Pombilai Orumai*⁴ (women united) are some of the new women's movements in Kerala, which are the outcomes of women's sisterhood and women collectives. *Asangadithar* opens with a group of women trying to break the lock and open a shop in the Calicut market at night to try to build a toilet there. The film portrays the struggle carried out by the women's organisation called *Penkoottu* (women's companion). Viji Penkoottu, the real activist who led the women's movement, plays the same character in the film.

Women in the unorganised sector who work in textile shops as saleswomen or do other jobs depend on nearby hotels to relieve themselves. To access these toilets, they have to pay to buy tea from those hotels. During their work, the women retain urine for a long time and, in urgency, run to the hotels to urinate. There, too, only after a long wait can they use the restrooms kept in unsanitary conditions. These women have to face filthy jokes and sexualised comments from the men in the middle of their highly challenging working conditions. The film foregrounds the gender-unfriendly working atmosphere in Kerala, especially in the unorganised sector. When the public space remains a masculine space, the women collectives emerge from the daily struggles faced by working-class

⁴ Pombilai Orumai- Women workers united as a women's collective named *Pombilai Orumai* began a resistance against plantation corporation in Munnar in Kerala, challenged their trade unions, and demanded fair wages and bonus payment. Thousands of Dalit women broke away from their trade unions and joined the resistance.

lower caste women, uniting them to address the common problems they face due to their gendered and labouring locations.

Figure 10

Image from the movie *Asangadithar*



(<https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/women-s-right-toilet-facilities-why-you-should-watch-malayalam-film-now-161030>)

The women talk about the issues they face at the hotel where they meet. They depend on this hotel to use the toilet and to drink tea. As a textile saleswoman, the shop owner expects a cheerful face and polite behaviour from them, notwithstanding the terrible working conditions. Many times, women talk to the owner about the need for a toilet for them, but the owner responds to them in a register loaded with insults and sexual innuendo.

Initially, women spoke individually to ask about their rights and the need for toilets in the building plan. Subsequently, the women workers plan to meet the workers union together. They work ten to eleven hours and only get thirty minutes lunch break. They are not even allowed to sit in the shop. They approach trade unions to discuss these issues. These women were dismissed from their jobs because they dared to meet the union. However, the women's collective emerges and provides a platform for women's voices against men's strategy for business and profit. Transgender persons also joined the women's group by bringing issues from their own communities. Trade unions have tried to solve the problem in various ways. Efforts are also underway to build this toilet under the leadership of the district Collector. However, these efforts have not yielded many concrete results addressing the issues of women. Kunjila Mascillamani portrays the women's movements and solidarities built around the lived issues of women from the unorganised sector.

Another film, *B 32 to 44* (2023), directed by Sruthi Sharanyam, must be viewed as the outcome of the resistance and struggles that have taken place in the Malayalam film industry over the past few years. The movie's title references the bra sizes of the protagonists. Ensuring a safe working space in the film industry is one of the demands of the Women's Cinema Collective (WCC) that emerged after the MeToo# movement. Women have demanded equal space and consideration in all aspects of movie-making. They have raised concerns and criticised the institutional structure and content that make Malayalam cinema immensely patriarchal.

There has also been a demand for economic assistance to encourage women directors. Finance Minister Thomas Isaac lauded the efforts of WCC for gender equality. Kerala's

budget provides a special scheme to support filmmakers financially. He said, “We need to increase the presence of women in the industry. To support and encourage, the government will allot three crores for the women directors”. The work of Sruthi Sharanyam, selected for funding, used the opportunity to directed the film *B 32 to 44*. Negotiating for and achieving funding for a woman-centric film in terms of content and the production process is a crucial milestone in Malayalam cinema's recent history. The films by women directors specifically address the politics of the body, which offers hope for a new kind of Malayalam cinema.

An old Malayalam proverb goes like this: “Even if two mountains meet, four breasts will not meet”, referring to the inherent hostility and lack of empathy between women. Such sayings reveal patriarchal values that negate love and solidarity among women as a myth. *B 32 to 44* speaks about women's sisterhood, specifically about the stories and issues of women of varying breast sizes and their experiences. The movie is about five women and a transman. They include Malini, a woman who has just undergone breast cancer surgery; Iman, a junior employee in Kerala's thriving hospitality sector; Nidhi, an underage mother; Jaya, a domestic worker; Rachel, an aspiring young movie actor, and Ziya, a transman.

The film introduces each of these characters one by one along with their issues and the experiences they undergo in connection with their body, focusing on the experiences related to the breast of these women. The references to breasts include the removed breast, the small breast, the lactating breast, the breast that is marketable, and the breast that is a burden to a transman. In cinema, the breast has always been represented as a sexual symbol geared to the male gaze. Further, the breast continues to be associated with

obscurity and, in some cases, represents a means of glorifying motherhood. The movie explores the question of what women with different sizes of breasts experience in different walks of life. By representing women as living in different bodies, and the issues surrounding these bodies, the film *B 32 to 44* understands the breast not as an object of desire but as a subject to the experiences of the women in different locations. The film opens with a moment of violation intended to represent transmen's anxieties regarding breasts. Ziya is a transman who feels burdened by their breast, as they desire to be a transman. Ziya binds their chest to escape and erase the existence of breasts. Another character, Malini, is shown to manage post-surgery trauma after a mastectomy. She tries to find ways to overcome the trauma by engaging herself in a job and planning trips, but her husband remains detached and disinterested. There are gaps in their communication and the two of them often repeat, "You were not like this earlier." Mastectomy is shown to affect the "completeness of the woman." It affects the lives of Malini and her husband in major ways, leading them to a break-up. The film follows her to show how she pieces together and negotiates her life. She is an employee in the women and child department, and she starts fostering underage children, thus finding new familial relationships.

Nidhi, an underage mother, is a school-going girl. Her family attempts to hide her pregnancy and transfers her to another new school. After becoming a mother, Nidhi struggles to conceal her breasts overflowing with milk at school. She is denied the right to breastfeed; her mother brings up the baby, extracting the milk from Nidhi to feed the baby, thus detaching the mother and child.

Figure 11

Image from the movie B 32 to 44



(<https://www.nowrunning.com/movie/26291/b32-muthal-44-vare/>)

A domestic worker, Jaya is depicted as the thread connecting all the women and the transman. She struggles to work as a domestic worker in many households but is primarily shown as working as a maid in Malini's home. Malini supports her during emergencies when she needs help for treating her husband. Malini's husband plans to use Jaya as a model for a lingerie ad but hides this plan from her. Taking advantage of Jaya's desperate economic conditions, he convinces her to model for a bra brand. Malini's husband exploits Jaya as cheap labour, though he earns huge funds from this project. At the same time, the film introduces a dark body for the advertisement, and this is a welcoming change. Ziya, the transman and women crew, handle the production and make Jaya comfortable during the shoot. Initially, Jaya is confused and scared but Ziya's comforting presence relaxes Jaya. The film foregrounds the possibilities for change inherent in the alliance between a trans director, the women crew and a working-class model, pushing against the grain of the patriarchal film industry. When the advertisement

is out, Jaya's family faces censure from the community and her husband, while knowing the economic pressures that drove her to take up the job, still taunts her. Refreshingly, her mother-in-law supports her: "You don't have any problem when others do this. We are poor."

In another thread of the film, Iman, a junior employee at a popular hospitality sector, is denied promotion due to being underweight, despite her dedication to the job. Iman is driven to pursue means for enlargement of her breast size for social acceptance and professional growth.

Yet another trajectory of the film follows Rachel, a young woman who is passionate about acting. She receives her family's support and her friend, a man, accompanies her as she looks out for roles and auditions. A young director of a film offers her a screen test where she has to act as a character reacting to an act of rape. The next day, the director invites her into his hotel room and sexually assaults her. The incident occurs in the hotel where Imam works and here, Iman and Rachel become acquainted. Iman's managers discourage her from supporting Rachel and reporting the case to the authorities. However, Iman boldly stands with Rachel when the latter registers a complaint about sexual harassment to the police. In the police station, the police officers reiterate the violence already faced by Rachel by displaying pleasure while writing down the first information report. The woman police officer morally police the victim by judging her photos on Facebook. However, the senior police officers appear at this point and warn the other police officers against such behaviour and advise that they create a woman-friendly space. Rachel's family also supports her.

The fragmented stories of women slowly get connected. Ziya, the director of the advertisement develops a friendship with the domestic worker Jaya during the modelling campaign. Iman supports Rachel in the sexual harassment issue and a bond develops between the two. Rachel and Jaya are neighbours, and Rachel's mother cares for and protects Jaya. Malini, a WCD employee fosters Nidhi and her baby, creating a home for them.

Malini, who later learns that her husband employed Jaya as a model, discovers that her husband earned huge payments for the campaign but employed Jaya as a cheap source of labour. Malini offers appropriate payment for Jaya's work. Here, women support each other and love prevails between the women. In a hetero-patriarchal framework, mainstream films routinely portray women as rivals. In contrast, Sruthi Sharanyam consciously and proactively portrays women's sisterhood as an overt and sustaining theme of the film. Women of these different stories converge at the end of the story and establish a utopia of sisterhood. Iman resigns from the firm that undervalues her work and judges her by her bra size. Ziya, Iman's roommate, provides her mental support through her mental traumas at the workplace and discourages her from taking medicine for breast enhancement. Iman resigns, and one sees Iman share sexual, romantic interests with Ziya, a transman who always displayed love and warmth towards her. with Iman. Iman, freed from the pressures of femininity, finally responds to Ziya's love, going beyond the prescribed gender and sexuality norms, and has a passionate sexual relationship with her.

Devika, a feminist historian, comments on *B 32 to 44* as follows:

Breasts clearly figure in the problem-posing part of the individual stories in this movie, but they do not figure in the resolution in all stories. Indeed, at the stage of “solution,” “body politics” seems to be replaced by an abiding concern for the family (2023).

Devika argues that the general format of *women-centred* films in Malayalam seems to pose a problem first and then narrate a solution with a minimal exploration of inner worlds, dilemmas, and contradictions. Indeed, the problem-and-solution format seems more governmental than cinematic. Devika writes,

Malini resolves her emotional crisis by fostering the underage mother and her child. Rachel prepares to fight sexual violence with the active support of her family. Iman loses her job – and I don’t see how this resolves her crisis of losing her own income but she seems fine once she becomes a couple with Ziya. Jaya, once she becomes a model and starts earning well, is shielded from the moral police by her mom-in-law. The underage mother seems to be saved by her assumption of motherhood and reinsertion into a more hospitable family. In other words, the reinventing of the family as more hospitable to women takes precedence over body politics for sure. Definitely, this concern with the family is eminently governmental, in all governments, liberal and illiberal (2023).

However, for this research, the movie was instructive of how governmentalized understandings of the anti-patriarchal struggle – highly neoliberal and individualized – have taken over one’s political imagination. This can be interpreted as the scenario where

women's entry into the market helps emancipate women from the multiple forms of oppression. The state offers protection through the women and child development bureaucracy. Jaya, who enters the field of modelling represents a body that enters into a neo-liberalized agenda.

This film sees empowerment in, and roots for, the safe entry of women into the market as sellers of bodily skills made possible by protective state machinery, of kind officials of the Department of Women and Children and senior police officers on the one hand, and by gender-sensitive and non-colorist successful artist-entrepreneurs like Ziya, who seem magically protected from the vagaries of the market, on the other hand.

Devika argues, "Iman loses her job – and I don't see how this resolves her crisis of losing her income, but she seems fine once she becomes a couple with Ziya" (Devika, 2023). Devika does not see this as a solution. I argue that a transman and a woman, their relationship, companionship, and support of each other might be a solution that can be considered an alternative family or need not even be a family. Indeed, the couplehood of a Transman and a straight woman reinvent the idea of the family.

Malini's lack of completeness as a woman affects her conjugal relationship even though she fosters an underage mother and child, forming an alternative family. Rachel's father supports her by stating that the family would stand by her in whatever manner she decides to address the harassment she has faced. Jaya is shown to grow more confident in modelling as she receives the support of Zia and the women's crew. Ziya and Iman start a relationship. The film brings out how in a neo-liberalized context, the possibilities of work and opportunities, in a way, dismantle gender and caste. Yet, notwithstanding the

mapping of the liberal progressive discourse onto the neoliberal framework, I would argue that the perspective of women directors is one that deals with women as subjects of the politics of the body, and new possibilities and readings emerge.

Chapter 5

Analysing Hetero-patriarchy in Malayalam Cinema: Masculine Performances

This chapter will discuss how the Malayalam film industry is structured through the norms of hetero-patriarchy. Heteropatriarchal values are rendered normalized through repetition and reiteration in visual culture and have structured and defined Malayalam cinema. To examine how hetero-patriarchy or hetero-normativity functions in cinema, it is important to reflect upon the ideological frames within which such cinema is produced, and the groups that control the production. This chapter enquires how the subculture of non-normativity is positioned to examine how it operates in the dominant space. Hetero-patriarchal values that exist in cinema are historically contextualized. I continue to analyze the concept of sisterhood developed in Malayalam cinema as a counter-hegemonic resistance to hetero-patriarchy. In this context, I discuss the politics and formation of the women's collective in the Malayalam film industry.

Hetero-normativity as a concept analyses the hegemonic practices or norms defined by the heterosexual matrix. Butler's heterosexual matrix not only produces the intelligibility of bodies and gender but regulates sexual desire (Butler, 1990). It is important to have an intersectional approach to analyze hetero-patriarchy in cinema. Caste, religion, and ethnicity are determinant factors in perceiving dominant masculine or feminine identities. Gender and sexuality intersect with these factors in determining how various identities are positioned within social hierarchies.

In a hetero-normative space like cinema, femininity, and masculinity are framed, and romance, love, and relationships are coded through the signs of hetero-normativity.

Hetero-patriarchal structure in cinema is the frame that is considered natural and taken for granted, mirroring the gender, caste, and class hierarchies of larger society.

“Malayaliness” in Visual Representation

How is *Malayaliness* imagined in Malayalam cinema? The history of Malayalam cinema has coded the *visuality* of cinema, naturalizing and privileging upper middle-class morality such that the subaltern or lower-class society are mere consumers of this cinema. Rather than addressing the differences or the plurality of society, cinema follows a strategy of unifying or positioning differences into a singular aesthetic template. Cinema constructs a visual culture that develops the idea that social relations and unequal social hierarchies are a natural part of the system. Cinema participates in the hierarchized, heteronormative values of the society such that watching a film demands a kind of subordination. The dominant discourse of cinema is deployed around and centers the urban middle-class social life.

Malayalam cinema’s visual history is a complex trajectory of local histories, cultures, diversities, and their interrelations. Although diversities exist, narrative discourses confirm the accepted models through representations. Through cinema, the caste system is reproduced and re-established. One can easily identify the histories of caste hierarchy mirrored in Malayalam cinema, where the central characters invariably flaunt upper caste surnames like Varma, Menon, Nambeesan, Namboothiri, Nambiar, and Nair. The very naming of important characters normalizes the caste positioning.

Upper-caste men are often at the centre of the hetero-normative structure. Men are represented to be in control of the structure, the bodies and sexuality of women is the

object of subjugation and control. The experience of the lower caste and working-class communities remains invisible; where it is visible, those bodies are the representative of all wrongs; they are vilified and criminalized, lacking in morals. In reformist narratives, the lower-class-caste woman may be a damsel in distress helplessly waiting to be rescued by the heroic middle or upper-class/caste protagonist.

One can see how caste and gender interplay while presenting the honour of the family, and the esteem of the *tharawad*. On the other hand, the men have the responsibility to safeguard and protect the women's honour. Women have an obligation to keep the honour of the family by living within the *lakshmana rekha* or under the protection of their husband, brother, and father. These are some common themes found across most of Malayalam cinema.

The movie *Chemmeen* (1965) portrays the story of coastal life, most importantly the love relation between Karuthamma and Pareekkutty. The film reproduces the societal/community norm that would position the relationship between the woman protagonist Karuthamma and Pareekkutty as a fatal transgression. Her "illegitimate" affair is presented as the cause of the tragedy that happens to her husband. The film's message is that losing a woman's chastity may destroy the land. The fishing community believes that Goddess Sea brings prosperity and happiness to them when they maintain the codes of conduct, gender norms, and caste restrictions to maintain normativity. These norms are centred on women's bodies and sexuality. It also expects masculinity to be aggressive, provide protection, and feed the family as the breadwinner. Masculinity is represented as the courage of the men to venture into the sea to fish and feed the family. I would argue that the film represents the coastal community not from a marginalized perspective but

through the lens of mainstream ideas of gender and caste. The local contexts of the norms and beliefs of the fishing community, placed in a precarious world of the unpredictable sea and the need to survive, would have yielded a different picture. However, the desire between the protagonists is posited as “immoral” from a dominant caste perspective and becomes the frame through which the narrative unfolds.

In the movie *Neelakuyil* (1954), the male protagonist abandons his lover, a low-caste woman, when she gets pregnant. The male character is represented as one who will maintain caste morality and the honour of the family and thus must adhere to the practice of endogamy by marrying a woman from his community. Neeli, the abandoned woman, dies on the street. Notwithstanding the sexual exploitation and subsequent abandonment of the lower caste woman, the film projects the inner turmoil of the upper caste man in the routine high melodramatic format of Malayalam cinema. It further represents the adoption of Neeli’s child by the upper caste Nair man and his wife as a noble, reformist act. Neeli’s tragic, untimely death is thus erased and undermined, thus the intricate links between caste, gender, sexuality, and desire in a hetero-patriarchal society are left unexplored.

Malayalam cinema after the 1950s tries to present a model of women-men relationships suited to nationalism. This idea of nationalism is essential when looking at the Malayali identity formation through cinema because the idea of the *Naadu* or local space is imagined within the nationalized imagination. Cinema identifies some major themes in the local way of lived realities. Marital relationship is identified as one of the major themes in movies. The privacy of marital relationships is commodified through cinema.

There are clearly defined powers vested in each character based on their gender, sexuality, caste, and other identities.

From 1960 onwards, rural life settings/figures--the Nair *tharawad*, *nallukett* (Nair ancestral home), an *Ammavan* (maternal uncle), and a *murapennu* (the right of a man in the Nari community to marry the daughter of the maternal uncle) are the tropes that recur in Malayalam cinema. Upper caste figures from the Nairs and the Namboothiri communities are prominent in the narration. Language, costume, food, and space reveal caste structures. The *tharawad*, the Nair home, is nostalgically depicted by cinema as the traditional cultural Malayali space. Marginalized communities are positioned outside of this space. The othering of marginalized communities, along with the over-representation of the upper caste, overwhelmingly marks Malayalam cinema.

For instance, in *Thoovanathumbikal* (Dragonflies in the Spraying Rain, 1987), the protagonist is the popular actor Mohanlal. Mohanlal performs the character of Jaya Krishnan, the upper-caste male figure. Jayakrishnan is an upper-caste middle-class man from a feudal background who is privileged enough to study and enjoy life in the city. The character embodies a nostalgia for the feudal past. Jayakrishnan and Clara's romantic and sexual relationship is represented as a model for the Malayali audience. Even though the character Jayakrishnan is presented as an anarchist wishing to transcend the borders of life through his desires and anxieties, the irony is that he continues to reproduce rural feudal ideologies. Jayakrishnan feels guilty when he comes to know that Clara was a virgin of which he was not aware before their sexual encounter. In the film, Clara's frequent entry into Jayakrishnan's life is compared to frequent rain. Her visibility is presented as a mystery, as a strategy of the film to overcome caste morals and sexual

morality. The masculinity in Jayakrishnan is established and sustained through rural feudalism. The caste system is also centred on women's sexuality. Clara, a sex worker is presented as one who always stands outside the narration and one whose visibility is presented as a mystery, reminding us of Mulvey's argument that the woman in classic Hollywood cinema is a mystery that challenges the masculinity of the man and thus, she needs to be unravelled, by the man. (Mulvey, 1975) At the end of the film, Clara marries an old man. The film represents Clara's marriage to an old man as a *limitation*, a destiny she cannot overcome. The male protagonist's marriage, on the other hand, upholds the caste order, and endogamous marriage upholds *purity*, sanctioned by family and community. Jayakrishnan marries Radha, a family woman from an upper caste. Radha is an insider to the conjugal family, unlike the other woman Clara, a sex worker standing outside the bounds of the family, even though the film glorifies the romance between Jayakrishnan and Clara. Clara moves out of Jayakrishnan's life, a tragic event for the hero and the audience. Yet, as in *Neelakuyil*, the tragedy is more about the emotional turmoil of the man than about the caste/sexual exploitation of the woman. The marriage between Radha and Jayakrishnan becomes the film's normative and only acceptable resolution, re-affirming endogamy.

Stardom is constituted by the notions of honour, labour, masculinity, and elitism, which constitute the cinematic imagination. Osello (2006) observes that stardom in Malayalam cinema is rooted in Malayaliness and society (p. 189).

Hetero-patriarchy in Malayalam cinema may be analyzed/critiqued with a focus on (a) masculinity, a dominant gender performance, which determines the cinematic text and cinema industry, and (b) female sisterhood or the women's collective in cinema, its

formation and resistance of heterosexual patriarchy in Malayalam cinema. The foundation of hetero-patriarchy is the masculine agenda which includes misogyny as an overruling aspect in the cinematic space and film industry. I discuss sexism and masculine culture, how it circulates in the film industry, and how it is reflected through cinematic visuals and narrative. The masculine culture constructed through the visual culture is also sustained in the cinema industry. Misogyny in the cinema industry has to be analyzed in connection with the masculine, aggressive cultural representation in cinematic space.

The *superhero* is at the centre, determining other subject positions in cinema. Malayalam film actresses have in recent years shared their experiences of how superstars decide the heroines in their movies and can easily switch to another female actor if they wish. Within the film, a female character's subservient status enhances the image of the male hero. Women are largely represented as submissive wives to the dominant husband or as obedient subordinate officers to the senior boss. Even if the woman is a superior officer, the status/persona of the male protagonist is a reminder to her that she is *just a woman*. The masculine performances carried onscreen by the superstar icons are also replicated in real-life Malayalam film associations. One of the senior actress in the Malayalam film industry, Revathi, reveals the pattern of leadership in the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA): "Images are larger than the real self". The stardom of the male actors are sustained in the masculine performance in real life too, running parallel to an unequal, masculinized film industry.

It is relevant to understand masculine ideology in the cinematic space (text) and the cinema industry. Star persona and fan associations aside, the masses relate to and identify

with the larger-than-life image of the hero, symbolically addressing and fulfilling what they lack in real life. In Malayalam cinema, Mohanlal and Mammooty have been the main superstars for decades since the 1980s. They have often acted in and glorified upper-caste masculine roles.

Masculine performances: Mohanlal and Mammooty as Kings of Stars

“A spectre is haunting Malayalam cinema the spectre of male superstardom.”

“Kerala cultural industry is written over by male desires, both economic and libidinal, and has become a superstructural expression of a reified capitalist patriarchy” (Pillai, 2017, p. 52).

Film scholar Meena Pillai analyses new networks developed between cultural industries, ideological state apparatuses, a transformed civil society, corporate agendas, and individual actors that evolve newer forms of surveillance and punishment of bodies marginalized by gender and sexuality. She observes that Kerala’s cinematic discourses, particularly those centred on its current investment in male superstardom, are the most eloquent examples of the aporia of Kerala’s modernity that results in certain retrograde tendencies (Pillai, 2017, p. 52). This is a crucial frame to examine the pattern of masculine performances both in cinema as a text and in the cinema industry. Below, I look at a few performances of Mammooty and Mohanlal, who have ruled the Malayalam cinema world for decades. GP Ramachandran observes a prominent binary of masculine identity visible in Malayalam cinema. In the case of the Malayalam film industry, Mohanlal and Mammooty represent these dual masculine expressions. Ramachandran

observes that dual or binary characters have always existed in Malayalam cinema from its origin (2017, p. 17).

Osello and Osello observe that the origin of such binaries are also established in a Malayali's mind and reflects in the society too. They observe that Mohanlal is dear to all because of his acting flexibility and represents *modern Thiruvudhamkoor upper-caste men*. Superstars embody caste dominance, revealing caste hierarchy when one looks at the masculinities in the dominant space and in the margins. This masculine body implies the dominance of upper-caste men in controlling women and subaltern subjects.

Women sexuality and women's submissiveness are central to the masculine domain. Masculinity is defined in relation to femaleness or the positioning of women and other genders. The *bad woman/good woman* binaries help to discipline women's bodies and construct a docile body. The male gaze, voyeuristic, patronizing, and sexualizing, facilitates a space for female audiences in the misogynist space, with limited possibilities. How do women view this misogynist arena as a part of a patriarchal society? Women, through the dominant apparatus of cinema, are pushed to look at themselves through the male gaze and masculine violence and its celebration persists at the cost of the identity and the agency of womanhood.

Malayali men imitate and internalize the masculine performances visualized in cinema as addressing and filling the lack of power (in terms of class/caste/gender performance) in real life. The star is identified with the character in cinema. Mammooty or Mohanlal as actors personify the character and sustain the masculine aura even after the film has

ended. They use this masculine effect of the character (masculine aura) in their personal life too.

Movie Stars and Spectators

A fan's expectations and imagination about the stars determine the market value and the space for the star persona. The star's persona is constructed within this discourse and it is important to examine how society's expectations and desires play out in the star persona. Star imaginations imbibe and constitute the notions of caste, class, and gender relations in a societal space. This process of gendering, from one generation to another, reproduces the masculine ideal even as that idea is transformed and modernized. The idea of masculinity is not constant. Constantly changing star concepts constitute class, caste, gender differences, and consciousness. Stardom is conceived in hierarchies and presented in a normative way. Female audiences are also receptors of the misogynist dialogues and violence onscreen while participating in the same patriarchal system. Superstardom works in complex ways in every society.

The presence of the upper caste, their body, and their values are normalized and embedded in collective memory that conceives a particular character, that of the upper caste man or a subaltern or Dalit man in contrast to each other. This 'unconsciousness' determines the representational strategies of mainstream Malayalam cinema. Parayil (2014) explains that popular Indian films often follow two schemes of visual and narrative strategies to represent a certain community. One is a visible and direct representation of the physiognomy of the character. The second is through the indirect,

invisible social and cultural signifiers such as name, language, occupation, habits, and nature, which connote the specific identity of caste and ethnic group (p. 67).

The superstar and fan relationship reveals how masculine ideology is embedded in structural power that yields in it homosociality and male-to-male desires, not to forget the power and violence that accompanies it. The fan associations that support the stars in the Malayalam industry have the power to control the success of the film. Studies show it is a male domain, devoted to male stars and comprising male fans. There is a significant absence of female members in the fans' associations; further, there is no female fan association in Kerala.

Muraleedharan writes, "In the relationship of the male fan to the male movie star lies one of the keys to an understanding of the politics of screen masculinities in Indian commercial cinema, as it is a bond mediating between identification and desire" (2005, p. 75). A film that depends chiefly on the popularity of its male star for commercial success directly addresses this fascination and presents the star as both an object of desire and a figure of identification. Muraleedharan focuses on the male body as an object of desire and a figure of identification. Muraleedharan claims that the male friend of the hero becomes a convenient location from which this fascination is addressed, thereby providing the fan or the viewer a comfortable site of identification with desirable male bodies. Identification is also the imbibing of masculinist ideology, where the power hierarchy is shared among the homosocial spaces. The subculture of male homosociality is built on a foundation of misogyny and male solidarity.

The ideology of masculinity based on class, caste, sexuality, and power differences influences the star persona. Looking at Mohanlal and Mammooty, celebrated actors of the Malayalam industry, scholar CS Venkideswaran observes that both the heroes have portrayed different types of characters suitable to them. He has studied the pattern of roles Mammooty and Mohanlal performed in Malayalam cinema; I refer to these differences in the subsequent discussion. (2011, p. 36).

T Muraleedharan describes Mammooty's star persona and his positioning in cinema as the "family head" as an important feature of his star identity. He is often presented as the patriarch, a family head who, with his iron hands, controls, and disciplines the family, its morality, and sexual norms. Sometimes, the representation of the patriarch changes from within the space of the family to that of society. Mammooty's character represents the patriarch who supports patriarchal family values even if the bureaucrat entrusted with the safeguarding of law (2002, p. 183).

In the early 1980s, Mammooty was represented as an ideal masculine figure. He was presented as a hero who appealed to women and as a romantic actor. Later, he emerged as the king of stars without opposition. His masculine role transformed him from representing the individual and family to the society and the nation. His roles amalgamated masculinity and power, signalling his journey from actor to star. He reaffirms the masculine task of taking on the responsibility of protecting the family-community-nation. In the 90s, many of Mammooty's films were family-oriented. For example, *The King* (1995) and *Sethuramayyan Iyyer* (2004) his roles steeped in patriarchal heroism represented the state and the community.

Chronic Bachelor (2003), *Azhakiya Ramanan* (1996), *Mekham* (1999), and *Pattalam* (2003) are further examples of films that depict Mammooty repeating rigid masculine performances. Mammooty faced some criticism for the non-flexible masculine nature of the roles he played. There are very few films in which Mammooty deviates from such characterization, taking up the role of a Dalit or a specially-abled character. Notably, when Mammooty tried to experiment with playing new, more vulnerable characters, his routine audience did not think such characters suited his persona. Mammooty is considered best suited for the role of a Brahmin associated with high caste status and dominance. He is imaged as the protector of patriarchal familial values, and of women and children.

Osello's study brings out how Mammooty's performance is revered and admired by his fans: "With his body and voice, he is the image of the real man in our imagination. He is an ideal man. He is the man of all" (2006, p. 175). Osello observes that while Mohanlal is the ideal man to depict premarital romantic fantasy, Mammooty's character deals with more serious relationships like marital, and family life (2006, p. 175). Muraleedharan opines that Mohanlal has demonstrated a less rigid masculinity by having male companions and maintaining a flexible body language. Mohanlal as a superstar embodied an image constructed in the 90s. The second half of the 1990s demonstrates a significant transformation of Mohanlal's stardom. An exaggerated, *asura* kind of masculinity takes the place of three kinds of stereotypical characters earlier available to stars –the romantic lover, the tragic hero, and the common man. The characters played by Mohanlal constantly violate frameworks, structures, and boundaries, transgressing the defined, normative structures of sexuality and family.

T. Muraleedharan reads Mohanlal's characters as transgressive in nature. In contrast to Mammooty's film persona, Mohanlal's masculine roles violate systemic structures. Muraleedharan examines the homosocial dimension of the characters played by Mohanlal and the analysis reveals that the biggest feature of Mohanlal's character is that "he is a man of the man" (2005, p. 79). Mohanlal's roles as father, son, lover, and husband, are characterized by constant slippages and transformation from one identity to another, connoting an ideal, an adventure, an inner urge, a motivation for tradition, or even to conquer the outside world. In contrast to Mammooty, Mohanlal's character exists in identity ambiguity. His character is always wanting to be something that is not perfect and therefore always imperfect or inadequate. Sexual ambiguity underlies his performances.

Pulimurugan (2016) starring Mohanlal as the protagonist Murugan is an example of hypermasculinity in Malayalam cinema. The film revolves around Murugan who is a hunter. In his childhood, he experienced the tragic event of the loss of his father who was killed by a man-eating tiger. His anger towards this situation led to the evolution of the figure of Murugan, a powerful masculine figure. Physically powerful, Murugan can run with the tiger and fight it with bare hands. He has the strength to subjugate, kill, and tame even animals. In a broader context, Mohanlal's character embodies the power over Muslims. There is a stereotypical representation of Muslims here. *Kayyikka*, a Muslim man, is represented as the goon or *goonda*. *Kayikka* is criminalized, demonized, and represented as a threat to the nation-community. In Hindu mythology, Murugan is a popular Hindu deity who is associated with war, victory, and wisdom. Murugan is the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati, born to defeat the demon, Tarakasura. Thus, upper caste

mythological narratives serve as a backdrop for the film, and Murugan's containment of Kayyikka is underwritten by the norms of the Hindu nation.

Misogyny in Malayalam cinema: Analysing Dileep's Cinema

With the withdrawal of state subsidies and funding for cinema, cinema is the only art form that could weave itself seamlessly into the production, consumption, and industrial model within a market economy. Kerala's culture industry is written over by male desires, both economic and libidinal, and has become superstructural expressions of a reified capitalist patriarchy. It is a commercial enterprise afflicted with varying degrees of mafiaisation. (Pillai, 2017, p. 52)

Certain recent events have generated discussions around the misogyny that has underwritten the Malayalam cinema industry. A young established actress, on a night in February 2017, was waylaid on the national highway en route to Kochi, forced into another vehicle, sexually molested, and the assault was filmed by seven men in a moving car. The actress filed a police complaint. The prime accused were arrested, but the case was written off. However, after the relentless media and public outcry, a month later, Dileep- a self-styled 'superstar' of the Malayalam film industry was arrested on charges of criminal conspiracy.

Institutional misogyny and its entrenchment in the larger religious, social, cultural, and political unconscious of the state, renders acts of sexual assault on women and instances of misogyny invisible, often coercing the silence of the survivors. Paradoxically, the family values embodied by male stars in cinema, also provide the legitimization for the

violence against those subordinate. Malayalam films have routinely ridiculed feminist worldviews that promise emancipation for women.

Historically, Dileep's films have propagated anti-women positions and registers. Most of them are a celebration of obscene misogyny. In many of his films, Dileep embodies some amount of femininity, and the films may have a more dominant woman character; however, the domestication of the woman or *housewifification* marks a majority of his films. I discuss below some of Dileep's films which normalize rape and other forms of violence against women. I would argue that his star persona and films have initiated a culture of violence, such that his films became an extension of his violence against female actor in real life. Predictably enough, the actors' association stood with the actor when he was marked as a perpetrator of the crime.

In *Mr. Marumakan* (2012), Dileep and Saleem Kumar (as Sankaranunni) get drunk and disrupt a women's day function, ridiculing the women gathered there. The collective of women are part of a campaign conveying the message that a women's body is not a commodity. Dileep plays the character who mocks the president of the women's association and makes male protectionist arguments calling for the need to *protect men from such women*. The film, embedded in the hegemonic discourse of Malayalam cinema, participates in the anti-feminist consciousness that permeates mainstream Kerala society. Stereotypical representations in cinema have constructed the image of the feminist as someone who is inherently against men goes to clubs, and wears sunglasses and sleeveless blouses. She gives priority to her pet dog over her husband. In many such films, the husband of the woman may restore by slapping her—thus, legitimating punishment as a way of reforming deviant women. Particularly in the comedy genre,

sexist abuse and rape are represented as ways of vengeance against “erring, uncontrolled women”.

Dileep has constructed his persona by representing himself as the *Janapriya Nayakan* or popular hero. Significantly, his stardom and popularity is founded on a string of blatantly misogynistic films. He has acted in numerous films that celebrate the cult of domesticity and depict traditional relationships in which a woman can only find identity or meaning in their lives through a man. Such domestication and ‘housewifization’ must be read together with the events in his personal life. Dileep married a most accomplished actress in Malayalam cinema, Manju Warriar, at the height of her career. After marriage, Warriar stopped acting in films. Dileep has repeatedly stated in his interviews that his wife belonged at home, satisfied with her life as a wife and a mother. After 17 years, Manju secured a divorce and returned to cinema.

Scholar Meena Pillai foregrounds the phenomena of *housewifization* of women which is the cultural logic of Dileep’s and many other films in post-liberalized Kerala. As she points out, “Women’s rights and means of subsistence in Kerala must be understood in the context of the rise of new patriarchies in the state, particularly in the context of the dominance of the market economy with the culture of commodification, where it has been established that the home serves as the primary market and housewives serve as the primary agents of consumption. A tendency to control artists and technicians emerged in the recently liberalized economy as a result of the processes of syndication in the film industry. Also crucial is the valorization of the star. This is a continuum with the re-feudalization of intimacy on the one hand and feudal nostalgia on the other” (Pillai, 2017, p. 53).

In the post-liberalized period, the foundation of the newly emerging consumerist capitalism culture was based on big budgets and profit maximization. Additionally, *the death of the director* was presented at this pivotal historical moment. The birth of a star occurred in parallel with the death of the director. Earlier, stars in Malayalam cinema were controlled by directors. Post 1990, the rise of monikers like *megastar*, *superstar*, and *people's stars* consolidated the significance of glamour and spectacle in cinema. Male superstars began to decide the directors, the cast, and the crew. The star system is an apparatus that posits the star as the truth of the film, thereby reducing the capacity of the film to question the true identity of the actor (Pillai, 2017, p. 53). Stardom is a mechanism that holds the star to be the *truth* of the films, eliminating the ability of the reality of a film to question the actor's true identity and leading the viewers to what is behind or beyond the image (de Cordova, 1991, p. 18).

***Kumbalangi Nights*: Disruption of the Hegemonic Masculine**

Kumbalangi Nights (2019) is representative of the *new generation cinema* in Malayalam. This film questions and subverts mainstream narratives of hypermasculinity constructed by Malayalam cinema. As a film reviewer notes: "The cinema remains with you for a long time, seep into your body and mind, disturbing your consciousness, especially the way you build your male identity ...above all in the development of the male 'being' itself" (Jhon, 2019). The movie was released at a time when the Women Cinema Collective (WCC) challenged and countered patriarchal hegemony in the Malayalam film industry, seeking to unmask the undemocratic face of the Malayalam cinema industry. In this moment of shift, the film initiates a new radical imagination of the Malayali family.

Four brothers, Saji, Bobby, Bonny, and Franky, live in an unfinished house located by the seaside, Kumbalangi. Franky, the youngest brother, says the house is the worst place in the panchayath, which is repeated by Bobby in the climax of the movie, “The worst place in the panchayath, this is a dumping yard.” Later, this place becomes a space that opens up to welcome abandoned people. In this home, there is no discipline, no particular routine, no single authority, and no regular income. Mostly these brothers are seen idling with friends at the seaside or the bar. The brothers are not born in a single heterosexual family unit but have different mothers and fathers. This was a major reason why society looked down on them. All of them seem purposeless in their life, frustrated, and insecure.

The role of Shammy is played by Fahadh Fasil, a prominent Malayalam actor. He self-describes himself as the *hero* and *the complete man*. He admires his mustache in the mirror, a symbol of masculinity. He scrapes off a *bindi* pasted in the mirror with his shaving blade, a reminder of femininity that creeps into his world. However, Shammy performs the menace and fragility underlying normative masculinity—as embodied in the complete man. Fasil, as Shammy, brings out how it stunts and damages men psychologically. In this sense, his performance of this broken masculinity is a comment on the pervading hypermasculinity in Malayalam cinema.

The female characters in the film *Sumeesha* and *Babymol* are employed in local resorts and are confident and in control in their personal and professional spaces, unlike the stock women characters of Malayalam cinema, as well as the men in *Kumbalangi Nights*, who are beset by masculine dilemmas. The women exercise sexual choices as well. *Babymol* and Bobby are in a relationship but when he tries to kiss her without consent, she slaps him. Disrupting the mainstream discourse of masculinity, the film turns its gaze

on the fragility of Bobby's masculine ego, as a teenage boy transitioning into manhood. In their relationship, Babymol takes the lead in all critical moments. Babymol's empathetic attitude to Bobby helped him to tackle his crisis, and he took up a job as a fisherman overcoming his negative attitude towards this profession as lowly. Sumeesha, proposes to Bobby's friend notwithstanding Bobby's disparaging comments on his appearance. What stands out is that the women decide on their romantic/sexual partners, on their own terms.

The elder brother, Saji, goes through a personal crisis. The incompleteness of a family comprising of different fathers and mothers, his own *imperfect manliness* and their social/spatial location living in a dilapidated house beside a dumping ground frustrates him. The siblings get into verbal and physical fights for no reason. Bobby asserts his manliness in the disrespect he shows his friends, brothers, and partner. He yearns for love, affection, and care, but his sense of fear and shame results in outward-aggressive expressions. In the course of time, he is vulnerable and remorseful as he explains his unusual family arrangement to Babymol. Her acceptance of Bobby's siblings/family is a form of *completeness* that the film represents. This also completely subverts the notion that women are drawn to masculine power and control.

Sathi, a pregnant woman, decides not to name Saji as the responsible for her husband's death. Her empathy helps Saji to contend with his conflicted self. Bobby, in a quarrel with Saji, insults him as dependent on others. This hurts Saji's male ego and the brothers get into a fight. The film, through many such incidents, brings out the fragility that underlies masculinity. Additionally, it offers hope, by showing how the brothers come to terms with their insecurities.

Bobby and Saji visit Shammy, Babymol's brother-in-law, to ask for her hand in marriage for Bobby. Shammy humiliates Saji and Bobby referring to their jobless states and the deplorable condition of the house. Such vulnerabilities, inferior status, and masculine crisis lead Saji to attempt suicide. Murugan, in an attempt to save Saji, loses his own life in the accident. Saji opens up his emotional burden before a psychiatrist and breaks down crying. In Malayalam cinema, male characters breaking down in tears are a sign of unmanliness and are often deployed as a source of comedy. However, Kumbalangi Nights deploys a different strategy, portraying the vulnerabilities and precarities of men with empathy, and inviting spectators to identify with such characters.

Shammy, a handsome, well-shaved man with a well-groomed moustache, always smiling, and riding a bullet motorbike, is a self-proclaimed *complete man*. He calls his wife, Simi, *mole* in Malayalam. Though it sounds romantic and intimate, Shammy maintains his masculine authority, which transmits a demand for fearful respect from the women in the household. In the name of protection and love towards the family, the man controls the family. He says, “I am the only one to look after three helpless women” and “Ours is a modern family which gives enough freedom to women.” The film, instead of endorsing his idea of the self, pushes us to take a wry look at his persona, and the underlying insecurities.

The image of the complete man has shaped Malayalam cinema historically. As I discussed in the earlier section, Mammooty routinely played the breadwinner and protector of the family, unequivocally commanding the commitment and subordination of all the other members of the family. Shammy is an extension of these male figures, traditionally constructed in Malayalam cinema. Shammy takes the seat of the male

patriarch in the women-only household. Through Shammy, the film engages with the toxicity of hypermasculinity.

Kumbalangi Nights breaks from mainstream Malayalam cinema by portraying masculinities in crisis and marginalized masculinities. It takes a deep look at the psychological and social consequences of performing masculinity. Simultaneously, it opens emancipatory and egalitarian spaces for women in the film, also offering new possibilities of identification for the women spectators.

Women in Cinema Collective in Malayalam Industry

Cinema as a text cannot be removed from the industry that provides the social and economic contexts in which it is produced. It is relevant to look at the cinema industry in connection with films produced; cinematic culture is constituted through the film industry where male domination and sexism prevail, and casteism is a normative phenomenon.

The Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) emerged due to the pervasive misogyny of the Malayalam film industry. It is a pathbreaking initiative of a collective of women artists in Malayalam cinema, including actresses, technicians, singers, directors, and other women workers from cinema, and was founded in 2017. As I have mentioned before, an established actress was subjected to a heinous incident of sexual assault in Kochi. A collective of eighteen women from the Malayalam film industry came together to stand by the survivor.

This event of sexual assault and the subsequent reactions reasserted the stronghold of patriarchal beliefs in the film industry bringing to the fore the challenges faced by

survivors in pursuing justice. The WCC group met with the Chief Minister of Kerala to draw the government's attention to the discriminatory gender norms harassment of women rife in the film industry. On the formation of Women in Cinema Collective, the Woke Journal reports:

[It is a] group of women trying to make members of the film community understand that it is not a private land owned by a few males, but a workplace where, whether they like it or not, women have rights. They raised the point there is no forum for redressal. Sexual harassment and sexism are normalized and accepted to be unavoidable realities in their profession. A group of women formed a collective to make the film community understand that it is not a private land owned by a few males but a workplace where they have rights (The News Minute, 2019).

The main demand of Women in Cinema Collective was to consider cinema as a workplace. WCC's first petition to the chief minister, signed by 21 women who worked in the film industry, suggested that an Internal Complaints Committee for sexual harassment be formed for every film. The letter also asked the government to make sure that the producers of a film be given permission to make a film only if this criteria were met. They challenged the tradition of the male superstar deciding on the actress for a film. We can see how their demands emerged from the unfair practices in the industry; actresses could be dismissed according to the star's wishes. In this context, the actresses would either be afraid to raise their voices against sexual and gender exploitation or

would need to depend on other regional film industries for their survival. Not surprisingly, the WCC faced mob attacks in cyberspace from the fans of the superstars.

Figure 12

Women cinema collective in Malayalam cinema



(<https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/the-malayalam-film-industry-has-no-dearth-of-committees-but-concrete-action-is-missing/article67255415.ece>)

In the history of Malayalam cinema, it was the first-time women artists created a collective to protest against male hierarchy in the film industry. They challenged the unassailable status of the male star a hetero-patriarchal film setup A number of actresses came forward to report cases of sexual harassment, following which they were targeted and lost roles. Major stars like Parvathy lost roles because they were part of the WCC that stood up against sexism within the cinema industry. While the WCC received massive support from across the nation, it also created great anxiety within the industry,

the male stars, their fans and in general, men who could not accept the assertion of these women against customary gender discriminatory practices.

Sexual harassment of women in cinema has a history as long as the history of Malayalam cinema itself. Here, it is important to remember PK Rosy, the first actress in Malayalam cinema, a Dalit woman, who performed at a time when women were not allowed to act in films. The Nair men attacked her home and burnt down the screen as she dared to play the role of a Nair woman. Rosy was hounded out of Kerala and spent the rest of her life in Tamil Nadu. A woman was characterized as one with loose morals if she acted in films or dramas. The actress was the other of the *Kulina sthree* (chaste woman) whose bodily integrity could be violated by the male stars and the other men at the helm of cinema.

The actresses who played lead roles in cinema after Rosy were largely women from the upper castes. This brings out the imbrications of caste and gender that regulated the Malayalam film industry. A series of actors from older films like Ragini, Padmini, Sharada, Jaya Bharathi, and more contemporary actors like Manju Warrier, Samayuktha Varma, and Navya Nair are all from upper-caste backgrounds as revealed by their surnames. Parvathy Thiruvoth, Rima Kallingal, Ramya Nambheesan, Geethu Mohandas, and a list of contemporary women showed the courage to boycott AMMA (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists) because of its pervasive masculinity and misogyny. Many of the new generation actresses are conscious of the discriminatory gender practices in the industry even though they represent a privileged section of society.

AMMA displayed a double standard in relation to the accused and the survivor. They chose to side with Dileep, the alleged culprit in a sexual harassment case. Ironically,

AMMA, the abbreviation connotes “mother”, romanticizing the organization. When Parvathy Thiruvoth, a Malayalam actress, spoke out about the issue of the casting couch in the film industry, she was slotted as a woman of loose morals. Parvathy received further vilification when she criticized *Kasaba* (2016), a Mammooty starrer. Members of WCC had to deal with threatening messages and verbal attacks after Dileep was booked in relation to the incident of the sexual assault of the actress mentioned above.

PK Rosy, a Dalit Christian woman, was the heroine of the first film in Malayalam, *Vigathakumaranan*, which was directed and produced by JC Daniel in 1928. Jenny Rowena notes while delivering the PK Rosy memorial lecture:

[I] is important that we are having this memorial lecture because it is a way in which we are able to insert the question of caste and gender into the Malayalam film festival circuit, which has always kept away from engaging with such issues (Rowena, 2013).

In 2013, the story of PK Rosy and the violence she faced was adapted into a film titled *Celluloid*, directed by Kamal. Rowena claims that all the discussions about PK Rosy take her out from history and display her as some kind of museum piece in narrating how she was violently attacked by the upper castes in a gory, casteist past. Mainstream discourse contrasts the progressiveness and castelessness of the present with the with the pre-modern and casteist times PK Rosy. The cinema celluloid is presented as a violent past-wonderful present form, the way the past is described as an age when caste domination prevailed. The film *Vigathakumaranan*, the first movie in Malayalam, is reinstalled through the film *Celluloid* which suddenly speaks about the past, the violence faced by

Rosy, after more than half a century. However, Rowena emphasizes that the racism and casteism of the past continue into the present. Cinematic space is presented as a caste-free, progressive space. Caste, gender, and religious differences are sanitized, and yet, Rowena asserts this is a space where caste violence and discrimination persist. To cite:

[T]he Malayalam film screen has been strictly monopolized by various Nair and upper-caste women like Ambika, Shobhana, Revathy, Urvashi, Karthika, Parvathy. (It is interesting to think that many non-Upper caste women in prominent positions in Malayalam cinema like Saritha were also non-Malayalee). In the last few decades, many Malayalee heroines started taking on their upper caste names also along with their names and thus we have Manju Warriar, Samyuktha Varma, Navya Nair, Priya Pillai, Nithya Menon, Karthika Nair and many others, all of whom played many roles as Dalit, OBC and even Muslim women but with their caste names loudly proclaiming who and what they are (Rowena, 2013).

Women's position in the industry since *Vigathakumaran*, has not changed much because women filmmakers, technicians, and actors in Malayalam cinema continue to struggle for their right to dignity in the film industry. Women in Cinema Collective demanded that the state government intervene in the film industry. Asha Achi Joseph, one of the members of WCC who was also a signatory in the petition to the Chief Minister, states, “In cinema, the workplace is not defined. Even though it is called an industry, from the government's point of view, cinema is not one” (Kayyalakath, 2018).

The arguments and the main demand of Women in Cinema Collective was to urge cinema as a legitimate workspace and have their rights protected. Another popular actress

in Malayalam cinema, Rima Kallingal, talked about gender discrimination, resulting in significant outrage in social media and the term *feminichi* was used widely in social media to mock feminism. As I have tried to bring out through my analysis of Dileep's films, feminism has been routinely demonized and sexist language is used against *feminist* women who fight against gender discrimination. Feminists and feminism are represented as elite and misandrist.

The second press meeting of WCC held on 13 October 2018 was a historic moment that is inscribed indelibly in the history of the women's right movement in the state of Kerala. WCC demanded the right for actresses to work with dignity, women's right to security at the workplace, and their right to mobility. When their demands were not met nor did they get recognition from the association, the WCC representatives decided to continue to fight and expose the things they were subjected to on a routine basis in the industry. In the aftermath of taking on the powers that be, the actors were relentlessly targeted and victimized. Rima Kallingal, a member of WCC, says, "Everywhere, in the industry and on social media, we have been treated with hatred. People consider actresses as "public properties" who could be asked anything"(The News Minute, 2019) She asks if the same media would dare to pose the same questions to AMMA members.

Kallingal knows the power wielded by the AMMA leadership, but she admits that the film fraternity does not present a lovey-dovey happy family photo. (The News Minute, 2019) Yet, she looks forward to a more emancipatory future through the WCC: "We are planning a legal camp for women to let them know what their rights in their professional space are. Another focus is on awareness; people need to realize that an uncomfortable touch is abuse and a lewd joke in the set is verbal abuse if the listener is discomfited."

(The News Minute, 2019) She also draws attention to the lack of basic amenities like toilets for women in the industry. Women like Kallingal lost work opportunities and faced constant abuse on social media. Yet, the solidarities between these women and the space provided by the WCC have sustained them. Eighty-eight years after the first Malayalam film, a group of women demanded recognition of cinema as a workplace, demanding an internal complaints committee. This is a groundbreaking endeavour. As the Woke Journal report says, “In India, neither the state government nor the central government has any say in what goes on in the film industry except when it comes to censorship issues” (The News Minute, 2019).

Organizations like the Kerala Film Chamber of Commerce and the Kerala Film Association have been concerned with the commercial aspects of filmmaking and do not address the rights of the people employed in cinema. According to the WCC,

The PK Rosy Film Society is an endeavour to establish a viewing space for cinema, which has often been an all-male space. Headed and run by an all-ciswomen/transwomen panel, we aim at showcasing, discussing, and celebrating women filmmakers, women film professionals, and feminist cinema aesthetics. (Darshana S, 2022)

Devika, a feminist activist, and historian, wrote a letter in solidarity with WCC. The letter reflects political solidarity and feminist sisterhood towards them. I would like to cite excerpts from the letter:

Dear friends in the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), I am writing to you at a time so dark that unless we hold hands and feel the warmth of each other’s palms,

we may even lose our sense of reality. This is my way of holding your hand and gaining strength from your presence. I think we need “empowerment” in that sense at this moment, and we need to slow down, wait, work and wait for two things, one, wait for this spreading evil to implode and decay. Also, wait for what we planted to sprout and grow (Devika, 2020).

She further writes:

You are dreaded precisely because you have exposed the cinema industry’s rotten feudal core. The feudal roots of the highly exploitative, caste-ridden, gender-iniquitous culture of traditional entertainment and performance produce the toxic mix of modern cinema. I dare say that in its everyday practices and human relationships, there must have been little that was ‘modern’ about modern cinema. The sexual control of women workers in the other forms of labour, such as agriculture and factory work, was wiped out by the rising unions in Kerala; cinema remained largely untouched, mostly because its status as an industry” remained ambiguous (Devika, 2020).

Devika continues in her letter of solidarity that the “connection of art, culture, and labor would be hard to recognize, especially when the practices of an earlier feudal, male-oriented culture continues:”

It is this rottenness and its implication for women in the industry that the WCC exposed so powerfully. Your discourse cut through the ambiguity like a powerful headlight, leaving no doubt that what mattered in cinema was labour and not just ‘creativity’ or ‘passion.’ You demanded that the different aspects of filmmaking,

from cinematography to makeup, be treated as professions. You refused the feudal demand for sexual favours (Devika, 2020).

Thus, Devika pays her tribute to the women, who have sowed the seeds for a new future in a difficult environment. Perhaps, many women across the country and in different walks and workspaces felt a similar sense of empathy with the women of WCC.

WCC has its own limitations. It has been criticized on multiple grounds, including the elite composition of its membership. Yet, it must be acknowledged that WCC, dared to challenge the strong patriarchal norms of the Malayalam film industry. Through its interventions to the Chief Minister of Kerala, under Justice K Hema, a commission was set up. The Hema Commission submitted its report to the Kerala government after conducting research and interviews. There was a pro-women approach from the government in 2019 and women filmmakers were granted three crores in the state budget. However, the process has never been smooth, with the WCC accusing that they were not provided with the full report of the Hema Commission and that there were ambiguities in the recommendations. Notwithstanding the setbacks and constraints, the struggle of WCC is remarkable as they continue to reclaim their space in a misogynist space of male-world.

The WCC cannot be thought of as a model for feminist political action. The presence and activity of other democratic forces will make their voice be louder and more effective. Dalit women's discourse, queer politics, the rights discourse of sex workers and the self-organization of women workers have been raised in Kerala at different points. These created hard-won spaces, however limited, for other radical voices like the WCC to

emerge. I hope that the comparatively privileged section of women in the Women in Cinema Collective will increasingly form alliances with less privileged groups from Dalit and other minoritized backgrounds. The ethics of feminism demand that struggles for solidarity extend to and include those with less negotiating power or voice, such as a transgender person who works in the film industry, women workers in the unorganized sector, and junior artists who often are from Dalit and performing castes, among others. A women director, Vidhu Vincent, resigned from WCC, protesting against the elitism in WCC. Clearly, a democratic struggle against heteropatriarchy needs also constant introspection and renewed engagements with democracy in the face of critique, especially from those from subaltern locations. WCC has played a significant role in resisting and challenging the violence against women in the cinema industry. Still, there is much work to be done to address the issues of the unprivileged sections in the cinema industry. I would like to end this chapter with the unforgettable words of Audre Lorde:

It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular, and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make our strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house (2018).

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have analysed female-to-female desire and female romantic friendship as a subculture in Malayalam cinema. In a heteronormative space, a non-normative space provides a possibility for identification. Films like *Desadanakili Karayarilla* and *Salini Ente Koottukari* are still discussed and celebrated among female friends. In social media, female friends share images of female romantic friendships from these films to express their bonding in real life. This reflects how the female spectators identify with female bonding in cinema. These movies are part of the Malayali women's imagination of female romantic friendships. The female-to-female relationship is a mechanism to resist heteropatriarchal dominance. It creates a woman-centric space and shows how a woman audience is constructed who views, relates, and finds a comfortable space for spectatorship. This creates space for the female audience, a non-normative space for the spectator.

Cinema constructs reality by producing meaning through representations that, through its repeated performance, create meaning of normativity. How does non-normativity find space in this heteromatrix and create meaning? How did this minor tradition of representation work? Deconstructing the dominant understanding of the meaning of gender, sexuality, and desires is significant. By doing a queer reading of Malayalam cinema, this thesis focused on the codes of representation and repeated performances in cinema. This study also analyses the cultural representation and strategies in representing same-sex desires.

My primary question was how a sub-textual reading, political in its approach, reclaims marginal representations. While cultural representations are mainly hetero-centric, a queer reading examines the function of popular culture, especially cinema, in remolding subjectivities, desires, and pleasures. I espouse the importance of studying marginal desires and the politics of sub-textual analysis of the heterosexual matrix. Focusing on marginal desires can question the devices and aims of the dominant culture in subtle yet resilient ways. I attempt to flesh out the importance of ‘minor culture’ or sub-cultures that are underrepresented or buried in popular culture. Queer reading makes possible a deconstructive understanding of the cinematic text, as queerness is complex and can act as an interlude in the uninterrupted narrative of the dominant culture.

Shohini Ghosh has pointed out that a spectator’s engagement with any cultural text is complex and is negotiated variously through a multiplicity of identities (Ghosh, 2002, p.207). In an overwhelmingly heterosexual popular culture, reading against the grain becomes a significant imperative. Gayathri Gopinath proposes that it is necessary to develop an alternative model of reading and seeing to locate the non-normative erotic and gender configuration which erupt within sites of extreme heteronormativity (Gopinath, 2007). Navaneetha Mokkal compares *Sancharram*, a lesbian-labelled film, and *Desadanakili Karayarilla*, which has lesbian undertones, in her article. According to Mokkal, *Sancharram* freezes the spatial and social landscapes of Kerala while establishing a stable trajectory for queer desire (2009). The queering method that *Desadanakili Karayarilla* employs does not aim to define a specific subject position, it enables plural meanings of bodies and desires.

Drawing from the different approaches, theories, and contexts my study focused on Malayalam cinema, analysing how same-sex desires are represented in the hetromatrix and how certain romantic and visual codes operate in these films in articulating queer desire. The study also enquired how same-sex desires address, subvert, and submit to the hegemonic Malayali normativity and masculinity.

In the introductory chapter, I explored a feminist, queer conceptual background of female bonding. This introductory chapter travelled through select Malayalam literary novels to trace intimate female relationships to understand the pattern of female-to-female desires in the Kerala context. Rather than confining to certain categories, the study understands the desires in the continuum between homosocial and homosexual. The chapter analyzes the intersection of feminist ideology, female bonding, and popular culture representation. While analyzing the feminist sisterhood and female bonding, its popular representation loses its critical bite when it is assimilated into the dominant culture. Hollinger narrates that, feminist theorists' popular representations present new and liberating images of sisterhood but concludes by repositioning its female characters within the conventional patterns of gender and sexuality. Hollinger said that recuperative strategy only reshapes dominant cultures in ways that further consolidate the heterosexist norms (Hollinger, 1997, p. 53).

The literary works I analysed in the first chapter are Madhavikutty's novel *Chandana Marangal* (*The Sandal Trees*, 1988) and V T Nandakumar's novel *Randu Penkuttikal* (*Two Girls*, 1974), both of which unravel the implications of female-to-female desire. "Chandana Marangal calls for a radical rethinking of the heterosexist terms. *Chandana Marangal* brings a same-sex dynamic that has always been woven into Das's writing"

(George, 2002, P.112). Lesbian relationships in *Chandana Marangal* are bound to narratives of heterosexual relationships. The protagonist of *Chandana Marangal* fights to keep her relationship by hiding her longings and desires due to societal expectations of caste and sexual normativity. Characters in the novel struggle to retain their normalcy by adhering to their class, caste, and sexual orientation. Feminists view this as a consequence of women's discontent with heterosexual relationships in a patriarchal environment. The novel projects how the love for their heterosexual partners becomes disturbing and annoying for the main female characters. It is represented within a heterosexual matrix where their relationship can always be open.

Chapter two focuses on the nature and evolution of heteronormativity in Kerala culture. This part of the thesis investigates modernity and its influence on imagining a normative heterosexual order in Kerala society and an imagination of sexuality by these normative structures. The intervention of colonial modernity and other processes played a significant role in imagining a conjugal family or maintaining normativity. Understanding of female sexuality evolved in the setting of new conjugal models and the new normative model of womanhood evolved in negotiation with tradition and modernity. *Indulekha* symbolizes the transformation of the period that embraced the turbulence of the transition stage characterized by conjugal relationship, romance and family structure. The 'new womanhood' unsettled both the conventional and the modern by negotiating between tradition and modernity and constructed new meanings of self, individuality, and womanhood. The novel does not completely desexualize Indulekha but presents her desires within conjugal fidelity.

By focusing on normative femininities, the major concern is looking at the power dynamics between women. The experience of sexualities is confined to the heteronormative culture where women are expected to be submissive to the dominant and their other sexual experiences are marginalised. Thus, different identities are continuously marginalised and made invisible within the heteronormative structure of Kerala. I specifically look at the female bodies belonging to the cinematic spaces, focusing on the film *Neelakuyil*. This chapter delves into how acceptable and deviant bodies are culturally, socially, and historically situated in Malayalam cinema.

Chapter three analyses two horror movies *Manichitrathazhu* (*The Ornate Lock*, 1993) and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (*Yours Janakikutty*, 1997). Horror movies, perhaps more than any other genre, actively invoke queer reading because of their obvious metaphorical (non-realist) forms and narrative formats which disrupt the heterosexual status quo. In the case of horror films, this *complex range of queerness* circulates through and around the figure of the spectre, and his/her relation to normality (Benshoff, 1997, p. 15).

I have explored the stories of C. Ayyappan to understand the representation of spectre in cultural texts in the Malayalam context. In Ayyappan's stories, spectrality is the voice and agency of the oppressed. I attempt a queer reading of the representation of the "abnormal" within the heteromatrix. In the film *Manichitrathazhu*, I examine the relationship of the characters Ganga (the female lead) and Nagavally (the female spirit), the bonding and desire between them. Ganga is attracted to Nagavally and subsequently, possessed by Nagavally. The possession by the yakshi of the female protagonist is animated by sexual and erotic desires. Nagavally's spirit embodies her gender and caste

identity. Through her attraction for Nagavally, Ganga deviates from the path of an upper caste, obedient housewife. Dr Sunny recuperates and re-possesses Ganga for the Malayali heteropatriarchal societal structure.

Yakshi is the product of the repositories of some of the most tabooed or repressed thoughts. The ghost in these movies carries gender, caste, sexual identities, and personal histories with them. The cinematic vampire is invariably an over-determined body that condenses a constellation of culturally specific anxieties and desires into one super-saturated form (Weinstock, 2012, p. 13).

Janakikutty and Ganga are representations of feminine stereotypes and the yakshi and Ganga in the form of Nagavally are constructed as their others, as hypersexualized women who break the conventions of patriarchy. The female spirit/yakshi bears the marks of caste and racial otherness, threatening the normative sexual order.

Chapter four looks at the representation of female desires and female romantic friendship probing non-normative arrangements within rigidly heterosexual structures and how queer articulation of desire and pleasure draws on and infiltrates popular culture. *Notebook*, for instance, represents the strong relationship between three girlfriends celebrating their love and friendship. Their female bond is the theme of the cinema. This film transgressed several patriarchal conventions in narrating the story from the perspective of female friendship.

In another commercial film *Pranayavarnangal*, one can observe the hostel as a space for the building of the strong relationship of Arathi and Maya. To draw a comparison with the other films discussed in this conclusion, women's hostels are spaces where girls

develop a strong bond. In *Desadanakili Karayarilla*, one can see Nimmi and Saly together at the school premises. Such spaces for their friendship are developed. When Nimmi and Saly escape from school, they search for a new safe space for living together. They find a convent school which they convert into a space of their own. In the film *Sancharram*, right from childhood, the characters find their own space for playing and studying where they develop a companionship. *Salini ente Koottukari* (*Salini, My Friend*) also follows the same pattern. The relationship between Salini and Ammu is developed during the teenage phase, their college days, and continues after Ammu's marriage. In *Rani Padmini*, the main characters go together on a journey to the Himalayas. In the final scene, Rani and Padmini sit together and Padmini's baby lies in the cradle between them, mirroring a conjugal heterosexual space. In *Sancharram*, a relationship is developed inside the family. In *B 32 to 44*, Iman and Ziya also develop their relationship in a hostel outside the family. In the film *Asangadithar*, I have focused on how women's collective of working-class women come together to fight against patriarchal workspaces. The women's collective in this film fights for access to public and working spaces; the collective offers them spaces to share their struggles and the harassment they face in their daily lives.

Do these films find heteronormative resolutions or do the relationships continue in the same way? Is it a subversion of patriarchal ideologies or a submission to the patriarchy? Even though many of the films find heteronormative solutions, the gender and sexual transgressions in the narrative cannot be erased.

What is most striking is that there is a refusal to celebrate normative heterosexist institutions. In *Salini Ente Koottukari*, tragedy after tragedy occurs in Salini's life. Her

death alone is a containment of the impossible desire between two women friends. Yet she leaves her letters and diary for Ammu, and we know that these are traces of the unacceptable desire that would continue in Ammu's conjugal space. The death of the character creates a strong sense of empathy in viewers, resulting in identification with a relationship that would otherwise be "illegitimate." The final resolution in the film does not limit the queer possibilities of this text. *Desadanakili Karayarilla* ends in the suicide of the women. As Mokkal says, "Struggle itself in *Desadanakili Karayarilla* establishes a couplehood. The couplehood established is beyond doubt through their suicide." She says that suicide in literature and many films are represented as a union. In the celebrated heterosexual romances of Malayalam literature and cinema, the ultimate triumph of love is to die together, especially in the face of social opposition (Mokkal, 2009, p. 147).

Even though there are parallel heterosexual relationships, the relationship between Aarathi and Maya emerges as a primary commitment in *Pranayavarnangal*. The friendship between Maya and Aarathi lasts just till Vinay Chandran enters Maya's life. In the movie's conclusion, Vinay Chandran leaves Maya's life, if only temporarily, for the women to become friends once more. In *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty*, the yakshi befriends Janakikutty when she goes through a breakup and bids farewell when Baskaran, her crush, enters Janakikutty's life. These films imagine same-gender friendship as a replaceable and interchangeable equivalent of a heterosexual relationship, thus the idea of sexuality becoming a slippery space.

A strong romantic and sensual desire amongst female protagonists can be observed in the song sequences of many of the films discussed above, for instance in Padmarajan's movie *Novemberinte Nashtam*. The song sequence that depicts Meera and her sister-in-law's

intimate romance has not seen in the narration. Songs create a space to portray non-normativity or a space for unconventional representations. In *Salini Ente Koottukari*, Salini compels Ammu to sing to the lyrics written by her brother, and the girls exchange romantic glances as the latter sings. We find that queer/non-normative desires are conveyed through the same codes and conventions of heterosexuality. While this may be read as heterosexual by the mainstream viewer, it opens up possibilities for women spectators who identify with female-to-female desires. Queer reading enables alternative readings of the subtext underwriting the films.

These films evade and redeploy several patriarchal conventions while developing their narrative. Same-sex desires work as a mechanism that counters patriarchal conventions. Cinema, through the representation of female bonding, submits to and subverts heteropatriarchal assumptions.

The binaries of feminine-masculine and gender are not dismantled by female-to-female relations. Among the characters, the one who performs masculine roles or who breaks the conventional order takes the initiative to maintain the relationship. Even as gender roles are maintained, female-to-female desires directly or indirectly push the binaries of gender and sexuality. Female friendships construct an equal (desiring) space that is comfortable and supportive for the women involved; offering an alternative to the often rigid and hierarchised domain of heterosexual desire.

Desadanakkili Karayarilla is not recognised or classified as a queer film, but the close relationship between two women is the film's central theme. Sancharram, on the other hand, is labelled as a lesbian movie dealing with sexual politics through its content. The

trajectory of *breaking the silence* is appropriate for the movie *Sancharram* as it is linked with the language of visibility and invisibility. The intricate relationship between sexuality and the public sphere is examined in *Desadanakkili Karayarilla*'s cinematic text to dramatize some of the strategic negotiations the film's heroines must make to walk the fine line between visibility and safety (Mokkil, 2009, p. 152). Mokkil argues that *Desadanakkili Karayarilla* disrupts and queers Kerala's social realm in a more critical way than *Sancharram* does through its more stable ways of working (Mokkil, 2009, p.152). *Desadanakkili Karayarilla* does not have its heroine claim the queer subject overtly. Through her reading of *Sancharram*, Mokkil argues how the film establishes a rigid and narrow notion of what the process of queering entails.

In the chapter of Bodies that Matter titled, "critically Queer", Judith Butler writes that "the assertion of "queer" must never purport to fully describe those it seeks to represent. A critique of the "queer subject" should be built within a critical queer politics which is aware that a single trajectory of queerness cannot be universally applicable. " For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked character to the demand for universal "outness" who is represented by which use of the term and who is excluded?". She asks, drawing attention to the complexities bound to arise when certain crystallized forms of queerness are exported universally (Butler, 1993, as cited in Mokkil, 2009, p. 153).

By identifying as a lesbian cinema, *Sancharram* establishes a claim for an expression of queer desire that defies social norms. In contrast, *Desadanakkili Karayarilla* dismantles the dichotomy between a "dominant culture and a counterculture" by spatializing desire

and allowing multiple meanings to emerge (Mokkil, 2009, p. 153). Significantly enough, this film was broadcast on television and entered the domestic spaces. The acceptance of this film among family audiences demonstrates how films with flexible interpretations may both inhabit and destabilise the dominant public space that offers fluid readings. In the film, the placing of the female couple in public spaces demonstrates how the director draws on heterosexual codes and conventions to represent a more transgressive desire. It is difficult to place the female couple as “illegitimate”, as opposed to heterosexual couplehood, because of the replication of representational codes and the spaces inhabited by the female couple in the film. In many ways, couplehood is shown as a public construction with established codes of narrativization within the film.

In these films, both heterosexual and same-sex desires mirror each other. This manifests the conventions of the making of the couple and reflects how cultural forms like cinema play a role in such a construction. The normative heterosexual ritual is frequently repeated in films to the point where its ritualistic norms are accepted as normal. However, when two women as a couple perform the codes of heterosexual couplehood, it opens up gaps and fissures that foreground the constitutive instability of romantic couplehood. The public construction of couplehood in such films undercuts the assumption that heterosexual couplehood is a stable and natural formation. It thus enables the opening up of the possibility of multiple trajectories of desire within the social realm. *Desadanakkili Karayarilla* queers Kerala's public sphere by drawing attention to the conventions of the construction of heterosexual couplehood rather than setting a separate space that would function as counter-cultural.

Chapter five discusses the initiatives of the Women's Cinema Collective and its feminist politics in the Malayalam film industry. I have discussed feminism, female sisterhood and the idea of female outrage against the heteropatriarchy of Malayalam cinema and film industry. I have also discussed masculinity, a dominant gender performance, which determines the cinematic text and cinema industry, and female sisterhood or the women collective in cinema, its formation, and resistance to heterosexual patriarchy in Malayalam cinema.

Malayalam cinema has been a male-centred space where normative gender and sexualities are reiterated. However, the female-to-female bonding is significant and its representation in Malayalam cinema is remarkable. Female-to-female desire is represented in different ways. Cinema as a popular culture gives a space for multiple imaginations. Multiple identities depict this queerness in cinema. I have analysed cinematic strategies to represent same-sex desires. Queer reading facilitates alternative modes of reading and seeing to locate non-normative erotic and gender configurations which erupt within the site of extreme heteronormativity. Normative values are recuperated as a resolution in these films. However, the unrecognized representation of non-normative desires directly or indirectly pushes the boundaries of normativity.

The study is limited to the selected Malayalam films that were selected in 2012 at the time my research started. I have tried to briefly address the new trends in Malayalam cinema in changed contexts. Emergent globalized modernity brings new knowledge about gendered existence and relations even into local contexts. We have more exposure to the global media network. LGBTQI political movements and their interventions have been active in recent times. All of these influenced the development of representations of

same-sex desires in new media. I believe that further studies can bring out how queer, non-normative desires play out in the new caste and political contexts in Kerala, and how cinema engages with it.

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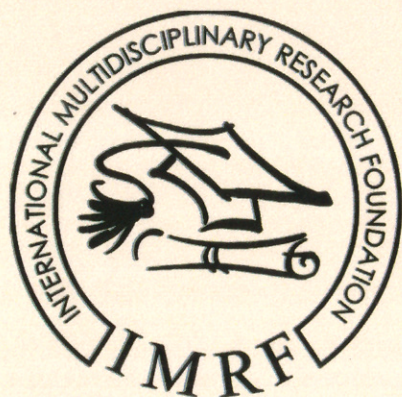
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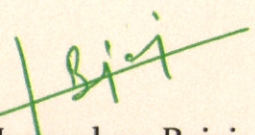
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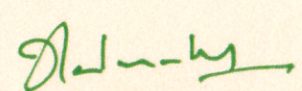
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LESBIAN SUBJECTIVITY IN KERALA PUBLIC SPACE: REPRESENTATION OF MEDIA

Written by **Vineetha M**

Faculty in Gender Studies, Kerala Institute of Local Administration, India

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I look at the construction of lesbian subjectivity through the media discourse. Media has simultaneously reflected the lives of homosexual individuals and moulded stereotypical subjects through distorted representations. This paper explores the social context related to addressing same-sex desires and looks at the ways the representation of the lesbian subject has evolved in media. The paper analyses how hetero-normative dominant ideology often looks at lesbian subjects as “deviants”. It tries to explain how factors such as gender and caste contribute to the disciplining of sexuality.

The paper broadly analyses the disciplining of sexuality in the context of events of lesbian suicides and other lesbian issues in Kerala. It looks at how Kerala society disciplines lesbian individuals through marginalisation, exclusion, and violence, which lead to the suicide or death of such individuals. The paper analyses how different institutions intervene in confirming women as ‘normal’ heterosexual agents of society and the vigilance exerted by society to control sexuality. The paper further looks at the role of media in maintaining /reproducing gender and sexual order in Kerala society.

Keywords: Lesbian Subjectivity, heteronormativity, Kerala Public space

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I look at the ways of representation of same-sex intimacy which led to the construction of a 'lesbian subjectivity' in Kerala. 1980s onwards, the term "lesbian women" was seen in the mainstream media. The term is further used, visibilised with the formation of Sahayathrika, meaning a women companion in Malayalam. Sahayathrika, a network for women-loving women, notes they successfully support women lovers, only because they address those 'who are real' even though they are in closets. Sahayathrika says they used to call "lesbian" those who are women lovers to denote women who do not even hear the word "lesbian". According to Devaki Menon, there are women who hide their orientation and get married, women who are alienated from others, women who try to die by suicide (Menon, 2004, p. 21). Sahayathrika was initiated as a supporting system for women who love women, considering them as political agents. Sahayathrika played a significant role in creating a language to talk about same sex love in Kerala. Sahayathrika strongly believes that giving visibility can only address many misconceptions about homosexuality.

Here I specifically look into two kinds of works to understand how women to women lovers/lesbian women got represented in media. The first one is an anthology published by the group of Sahayathrika, edited by Reshma Bharadwaj, "*Mythiakalkappuram Swavargalaingikadha Keralathil*" (In Beyond Myths: Homosexuality in Kerala, 2004), is a collection of academic works and experiences written by queer activists in India. It takes forward a queer discourse; it includes many English articles translated into Malayalam. Sahayathrika collected stories about the suicide of lesbian women in Kerala. Sahayathrika prepared a fact-finding report on suicide cases of lesbian partners reported in the newspapers. The other category of works includes popular media representations of same-sex relationships.

The first category, the works of Sahayathrika, looks at 'lesbian' subject as political as this is addressed by the political/queer organisation. Moreover, the work is looking at lesbian identity as a political subject. It is an important work that maps lesbian visibility and tries to give a language for queer discourse in Kerala. Sahayathrika has created a space to talk about same sex desires in the Kerala context. Their articulations through the movements and writings after the 1980's helped to develop a lesbian discourse in Kerala.

The engagement of popular media in same sex desire is more important to study as how it contributed as a popular medium in constructing a lesbian subject in Kerala. Of course, the political alternative movement has influenced the popular conception of lesbianism and vice versa, helped to understand the discourse and initiate investigative research on lesbian issues in Kerala.

This work broadly analyses the disciplining of sexuality by looking at representation in the context of events of lesbian suicides and other lesbian issues in Kerala. It is important to trace the representation of different literature on women loving women in Kerala. It is significant to look at the way this representation has led to lesbian discourses in Kerala's public sphere. The main objective of the paper is to analyse the construction of lesbian subjectivity through the media discourse. How ideology of media influenced to construct an idea of 'lesbian women' in Kerala. Through analysing these cultural texts, I illustrate how the institutions are vigilant to discipline sexuality in Kerala. After the 1980's, newspapers and other magazines reported lesbian cases. Reports of Suicide cases, harassment cases in different institutions, eloping cases, reports of vigilance paid by media in preventing lesbianism are some of the important categories of representation in media. These media reports directly or indirectly acknowledge the presence of different sexual lives in Kerala society. This work is not to visibilise lesbian as a category in Kerala but looking at how sexual identities are constructed historically-looking at the discourses, the process of lesbianism same sex love has evolved through media discourse. Popular media is usually addressing mainstream dominant heterosexual society. As propagators of hetero-normative dominant ideology, the media often see lesbian subjects as "deviants". Selected material I discuss includes news reports and other magazine features that acknowledge same-sex desires. Some reports address the facts about lesbianism, but as their role and relation to their regular content in mainstream media, they advise precautionary methods to maintain ideal femininity or to follow familial norms.

INSTITUTIONALIZING HETERONORMATIVITY IN KERALA PUBLIC SPHERE

Romantic desires in the early Malayalam novels, mostly written by Nair novelists, find their most intense, definitive expressions in a marital, institutional vocabulary. The new discourse of romantic love in the early novel suggests not only that marriages need to be found on autonomous desire but also that desire ought to be institutionally oriented. The kind of womanhood imagined by colonial modernity is an institutionalised aspiration that femaleness fits into an institutional requirement. Desires are institutionally oriented. Normative desires are defined and constructed in the reproductive Brahmanical ideology. There is a discipline imagined according to the gender, sexual, and caste order. Disciplined sexuality is imagined in the bodies of women. Sexuality is a restricted discipline among the dominant caste group assumed as women outside the sexuality. Sexuality is assumed in the bodies of marginalised women.

In the Kerala Model discourse, female bodies appear as endowed with the capacity for labour. In the development discourse, the female body appeared as the relatively healthy maternal body devoid of sexuality. The body is treated as if devoid of agency, a mere vehicle of the mind, a shell that holds a mind with the capacity for rationality, predisposed towards the domestic domain. (Devika,2013, p.96)

Devika argues since the early 1990s; there has been a fear over the sexualisation of both maternal and labouring bodies in public discourse. There is a fine line between aesthetic womanhood and the outright erotic woman. (Devika,2013) Devika notes that marginalised groups remain invisible to the dominant development discourse termed as the abject of development. Sexuality is projected upon this group.

Devika writes by 'abjection', 'I mean the social process by which the normal, the possible, the dominant, the sensible, and the mainstream are produced and supported by the creation of a domain of abnormality, impossibility, subservience and marginality.' She quotes, 'Julia Kristeva has argued that the 'abject' cause's great deal of anxiety precisely because it contains elements, which are necessary aspects of living, which, however, also causes anxiety. Drawing

on Kristeva, one should argue that socially stigmatised groups signify ‘dirt’ and ‘disorder’ to the dominant.’(Devika,2013,p.103)

“Social form of desiring is multiple and dynamic. But power works through a process of reifying certain desires, and bodies come to matter and others become unseen, illegible, and unrecognisable. Even within the site of gay, lesbian, and feminist discourse, this process of reification operates in such a way that hegemonic forms of desiring and acting emerge.”(Mokkil, 392, p.12)

The primary question this paper addressed is, how do media represent different sexualities or different identities in a society where media primarily stand for heteronormativity? By looking at the media representations of lesbian subjects, it tries to understand the construction of lesbian subjectivities in Kerala. By looking at lesbian issues in Kerala, the work analyses the disciplining of sexuality through different institutions. How are different institutions part of the construction of gender and sexuality? Here, I look at the ‘visibility’/ ‘invisibility’ of lesbian subjects and the strategies for representing them in a media discourse. Gender, caste, and sexuality matter in a society in disciplining of sexuality. How does the caste class of a person matter in deciding their sexual experience? The experience of Dalit transgender, Dalit queer is different. All these are factors in discipline a society. A ‘*kulina*’ woman, an upper caste woman, is an ideal image for mainstream cultural production. In a disciplined society, dalit, dalit homosexual or transgender will be out of the purity of these spaces. In a homonormative society where some are more acceptable in a Kerala Queer context. In the social process, the normal, the possible, the deviant, the sensible, and the mainstream are produced and supported by the creation of a domain of abnormality, impossibility and marginality.

INSTITUTIONALISING SEXUALITY

We pay to maintain normative desires and sexuality. We have moral codes, laws, educational institutions, psychiatric institutions, medical definitions, social customs, *asleela kridhikal* (degraded literature), popular songs, and literature involved in this micro-fascism. It limits our

view to imagine differences. Those who are not heterosexual become invisible and unrecognisable.

There is resistance happen in the margins. People in the margin employ strategies to find the possibilities of identities, and desires. There is a richness of differences in sexualities in different cultures. It is forbidden in one place and encouraged in another place. The idea of sexual attractions and pleasures is different. The information, illustrations, and representations of sexuality embodied cultural meaning.

How different institutions intervene in confirming women as normal heterosexual agents of society. Preconceptions on lesbianism, media reportages on lesbian suicide, cases of eloping, court permission for living together, and the cases of suspension of loving couples from the school hostels are some instances of media covered on this matter.

Sahayathrika, lesbian women's collective, create a space for queer movement in Kerala. I analyse Beyond Myth: Same-Sex Sexuality in Kerala, an anthology of Sahayathrika on lesbian suicides in Kerala and the media reports on women loving women. Concern about reports of lesbian suicides was an important starting point for the activist group and helpline Sahayathrika (Co-Traveller) to articulate sexual minority rights in Kerala. Sahayathrika is the first organisation in Kerala to focus specifically on the situation of lesbian women. Sahayathrika tried to compile a story and published a fact-finding report on lesbian suicides.

Navaneetha says suicide becomes a dark act of 'coming out' where the couple becomes established through dying together. Navaneetha says that it is a disturbing fact that the event through which the lesbian can become a figure in the imagination of Kerala is often an ending of her life. It led to a social situation where some bodies' desires are 'illegible'; in this situation, death is a political act. When a monogamous society does not accommodate the diverse desires and bodies, these bodies are pushed out of these spaces. So, the relationship appeared/represented in media in subtle/ different ways. It is important for Sahayathrika to bring out lesbian life stories as there are misconceptions about lesbians, there is propaganda against lesbians, there is a sex scandal, etc.

Here, I focused on magazines on women loving women in Kerala and the anthology of Sahayathrika to understand a commonsensical knowledge on lesbian subjects and also report of lesbian issues in magazines to understand the disciplining of sexuality in different cultural institutions. Media reflects the commonsensical understanding of women loving women. Most of the sensitive stories written in the *Painkili* are degraded literature, which is very popular in Malayalam, like Malayala Manorama Weekly, etc. Malayalam Magazine Grihalakshmi publishes a feature on women-to-women relationships. It reflects Kerala society's vigilance towards the discipline of sexuality. The social and cultural prejudices lead this relationship to risk.

SAME-SEX REPRESENTATION IN CINEMA

Sancharam, the movie directed by Ligi Pullapally, directly mirrored the lives of lesbian women in Kerala. Ligi Pullapally places the issue of lesbian suicide as her motivation for making these films and says, "I hope my films help young gay people to consider the option of moving ahead with their lives, instead of taking the devastating step that will resonate for years within their own families and communities, suicide". (393, Mokkil) The number of self-proclaimed lesbian cinema is hardly visible in Malayalam cinema. We can see that cinema very much reflected the social situation in Kerala. *Desadanakili karayarilla*(DKK) is a widely accepted movie which has lesbian undertones. Without labelling as 'lesbian,' DKK deals with same-sex intimacies more seriously and represents how it interplays or negotiates with heteronormativeness.

Cinema is directly or indirectly representing reality, reproducing a reality. So, it is not necessarily to say how important it is to look at the social situation or social context to understand the pattern of same-sex desires and the disciplining of sexuality, a significant factor in cultural production. Lesbian subjectivity reflected in cinema and as a cultural text reflects how cinema or other texts remoulded these subjects.

1. How alternative movement address the lesbian issue and their role in constructing lesbian subjects as agents.
2. How is popular media picturising lesbian women and constructing an ideology?

Analysing two kinds of material in this paper to address the research question; one is the Sahayatrika suicide report, which is intended to address suicide cases. Sahayathrika says they believed that it needs to be lesbians visible because lesbian issues are degraded on many other grounds. Identities of lesbian women are often unrecognised because of their invisibility. Sahayathrika observes that there is a strong rejection when they emphasise lesbian suicide. They strongly say that it is media sensationalism. The commonsensical belief is that suicide happens because of poverty or sex rackets. For them, it is sure that anyway, it is not same-sex desires. Sahayathrika observes that it is lesbian women have to be visible because the media is representing negative ways. Sahayathrika noted that they have to use media for visibility at the same time and, protect the privacy of women who approach them. They have to go with depending the same media. The media understood and produced this commonsensical idea about lesbian women. Sahayathrika is conscious of the visibility and, at the same time, of their privacy. There are misconceptions about the identities of lesbian women. Lesbian issues are often devalued.

FEATURE FROM GRIHALASKSHMI, MAY 2002

Grihalakshmi is a popular Malayalam women's magazine. *Grihalakshmi* can be translated as 'Goddess of Home' or 'Lakshmi Devi of home'. Popular magazines attempt to project how an ideal Malayali woman is to be, like other women's magazines, Malayala Manorama, Mangalam, etc. *Grihalakshmi* usually gives instructions for the normative family to follow. It works as a mini guide for a heteronormative reproductive Malayali family nation. It represents a middle-class, upper-caste heteronormative family. Society puts so much vigilance to control the sexuality into a heteronormative structure. We can see features in these magazines like, "Did our girls go in a right way?". "Cautions for mothers to bring up their children, things to remember for teenage girl's mothers." "What your children do in closed room?" "Whom they make friendship?" This magazine instructs everything about family, marriage, childbirth, bringing up children etc. This magazine assumes an ideal family, which will be an upper caste, middle-class, heterosexual family.

This can be seen as different institutional caution on female subjectivities specifically. Suspension of women lovers from the school Hostel indicates the vigilance of these institutions even though homosociality is more permissible in a heterosexually complex Kerala society. What does this suspension of same-sex friends of school remind us? We have a society where sexual segregation is strict, where we have different hostels for men and women, different seating arrangements in school classrooms, sex-segregated queues in school and other public spaces. We have a society where homosociality is practised and not acknowledged. In a heterosexually segregated society, homosociality is silently enjoyed. It is problematic only when homosocial space transfers into visible emotional-physical bonding. And the couples cannot separate for marriage or break the familial boundaries. Society always shows vigilance to maintain the order of the heterosexual family. These are the women's magazines that reiterate the heteronormative norms.

"Do Women love women? Is homosexual love between women increasing?" This is the title Grihalakshmi (a popular Malayalam family magazine) given for a feature on lesbian relationships. It intended to give a catching caption meant to attract or expect the attention of common people. The feature explores the reasons. Feature tries to balance the anxiety about lesbian relationships and also tries to inform the facts about a 'strange relationship'. It gives a detail of women loving women, which is hardly represented in the news; it is noticed that there are a couple of lesbian suicide cases reported in the newspaper. Mostly, this news was reported in the captions like 'two women were seeming dead'. Sahayathrika collected these reports for the fact-finding.

Grihalakshmi gives an extract of a letter written by women lovers. The magazine tries to make believe of a particular category called "women loving women". The magazine quotes a letter written by a woman to women, revealing same-sex love,

"Dear Parvathi, it is my 18th day without you. Each moment more gives pain. Will this wasted holiday period never end! Only by coming together in our love can I continue. You remember the day we separated? That night that we didn't sleep? How much you cried! Here in my house, they are inviting proposals for my marriage. We should run away someplace together. Far far away. We must just wait a little bit.

With great love,

Yours only,

Emily."

(Extract from the article, Grihalakshmi, Malayalam Magazine).

The magazine describes it as a letter written by a girl to her lover, who is a student at a famous professional college. It creates a sense that It needs attention as this 'strange relationship' is happening in the mainstream spaces, not in the marginalized space. It says it is also seen among women in upper strata and need to pay attention. Grihalakshmi addresses one of these lesbian lovers as '*Kamukan*' (male lover) as she initiates the affair and later commits suicide due to the degradation of honour. This is because social pressure compels her to commit suicide. The magazine reports that this is in recent same-sex love, suicide cases have become news in Kerala. Grihalakshmi, in a column, reports, "even they have an organization"! (Organization for women lovers). The magazine introduced Sahayathrika as a collective of women who like to live together. It reports, 'organization says that it is not their aim to encourage lesbian thinking.' Grihalakshmi assures that Sahayathrika does not encourage lesbian thinking in people. But only give support to those who cannot change their "behaviour". It also explained the reason for the formation of Sahayathrika. The other title says: Why is there homosexuality? It writes that there was homosexuality from the beginning of the world itself, even in ancient Greece and Rome. There are expert comments added. A sexologist and clinical psychologist say homosexuality can be two ways. It discusses like hormonal imbalances and life situations also make a person a homosexual. There are more homosexual who are made so by the situation than by birth, it reported. There are misconceptions about lesbianism also reproduced through the mainstream media. There is also a column titled "Homosexuality is not a disease": it says that in 1980, the American Psychiatric Association decided that homosexuality is not a disease. Also, reports say that marriage is not a solution for homosexuality.

Grihalakshmi discussed that it is not a disease. It also says they have even an organization. The organization is standing for human rights and asking for laws permitting same-sex desires. Even though it discusses lesbian relations in its history, this is not a disease, and the organization stands for same-sex lovers. It finally prescribes precautions to take as much as

possible can take against such 'aberration'. It traces all possibilities of women-to-women relationships. And advise possible ways to stop it. It says the family's parents to be vigilant about the possible relation, which can be labelled as 'abnormal' and may break the norms of the reproductive family.

Grihalakshmi promotes the ideology which discourages gender sexual transgression. The magazine keeps vigilance to protect heteronormativity. It keeps the order of society to not break the borders. "Parents, please remember" on this title, Grihalakshmi give the precautionary instructions. It writes, "From childhood itself, if parents take care, situations which lead to such 'aberrations' can be avoided."

"Even if it is a very close relative, don't allow children to lie down near to them. Thinking that it is only her aunty or sister-in-law, don't let them sleep with, lead to such aberrations can be avoided." In our society heterosexuality is highly monitored. In this case, in media sense where same-sex relations, transgressing gone to 'aberration'. magazine raises an alert on these "abnormal' relations. And advice for vigilance among the homosocial groups.

"Take care not to let relationships develop into closeness beyond limits. From the beginning itself, prevent the tendency of your daughter to sleep with her friend regularly. Even if it is the hostel, don't allow her to share bed with anyone."

Hostels are one of the homosocial spaces where women, mostly in their teenage make their alternative homes. These girls are free from family obligations and make their friendship the most important in their lives. It seems hostels put many restrictions and vigilance on these relationships and all. Even the magazine agrees to the possibility of a women-to-women relationship. More stress is given to the caution society should give to prevent the situation which leads to lesbianism.

"Keep an eye on inseparable friendships."

“Don’t misunderstand good friendships. If one gets labelled as homosexual as well, then there is a possibility to go to that tendency.” Caring in all possible ways not to be a lesbian.

“Don’t be angry if you understand that your daughter has lesbian tendencies. Through open discussion, make her understand the real matters. Lovingly advise her to not slip into such deep relationships. Do not hesitate to consult psychologists.”

“Girls from broken families can have more of a tendency to find deep relationship through homosexuality. It is lesser number of people who have homosexual tendencies from childhood itself. Situations, motivations, prolonging sexual exploitations can create pressure to become homosexuals. The parent should be cautious of these types of situations. Same sex relationships happen due to the ignorance, infatuations of their young age. Women from backward group, broken families, women who are not sexually satisfied go for same sex relations.”

These are the assumptions Grihalakshmi made through the article. “Some woman who has had no sexual satisfaction in marriage can become addicted to homosexuality if they get pleasure in that.” Grihalakshmi, a popular women's magazine, invented that these are the cases of women attracted to lesbianism. So, there should be an alert. The media is perpetuating the misconceptions on lesbianism, considering that same-sex desires are ‘deviant’ and unnatural.

Sahayathrika reports that there are cases of institutions vigilant on women's relationships. One incident is the suicide of lesbian women in Kerala Varma College. The continuous harassment by the hostel warden, and later, the warden labelled her as lesbian. The girls refuse the allegation. Later, she eloped with her friend and came back to the hostel. Due to the conspiracy of the upper caste school administrator, students raised issues against the harassment. It is relevant that we have a social prejudice made think one person to suicide. Sexual and caste marginalization makes this issue more complex. School administrators pick these students to the police when they came back to the hostel. Students’ parents argue that if the students are from well background upper caste groups, they will not do the same and might save them from public insult. Sahayathrika writes lesbian suicide is seen as a direct example of the hardest struggles women loving women experienced in Kerala.

The article written by John Mary, 'coping with lesbianism among school kids,' was published in Indian Express in January 1992. This article primarily looks at the subject of lesbianism; it is meant to report the incident that happened in Thiruvananthapuram. The newspaper reported the incident where seven students of a government girls' high school were recently found by the school authorities to have developed a lesbian group. The title indicates the precautions to take to cope with or manage lesbianism, a 'strange' kind of relationship among school kids. It basically consolidates different opinions and arguments on the incident.

The report says, "A notebook seized from the girls had entries made by one of the girls which tells everything about the group and who all are its members. The notebook contains names of a few others they had been waiting for; they were not 'yet big enough'. The head of the institution said that the girls were united in a strong mutual bond, which was more than just a physical relationship. The parent-teacher association may not like to retain the group in the school for fear that the 'menace' will spread.

The article states that "The news of the group had spread especially among the students in the high school classes despite the teachers hiding it up. They had sensed what had gone wrong and referred to the members of the group euphemistically as "Martina Navartilovas". According to the head of the institution, most of the girls were from lower-class families, with the father being an alcoholic in almost all cases. The article indicates that an investigation revealed that "lesbianism is not an uncommon phenomenon among school girls in the city. Only teachers, parents and children themselves were embarrassed to talk about it because of the social stigma attached to what is generally perceived as both moral and physical perversion."

The article quotes the words of a psychologist from Kerala University, he says, "The news does not shock me. This is a normal phenomenon; it does not need any kind of treatment. The teachers in question need not panic."

He also says girls who are more masculine than feminine also show the tendency to do the male role in the lesbian relationship. Also says that one or two girls in a hostel or school can spread

this kind of activity among their peers. Thus, small groups of lesbians may form in these places. Membership in a group gives girls not only sexual gratification but also a sense of belonging and a feeling of being adventurous. These additional benefits reinforce the homosexual bond and also it gives an idea that lesbianism in the adolescent age is a passing phase. Controlling lesbianism consists mainly of having an eye on the activities of the girls and breaking suspicion-arousing groups. The main strategy in controlling must be denying opportunities for homosexual activity by disallowing girls to sleep together or bathe together. The instructions and the expertise advise it all reject the natural condition of homosexuality. It establishes that the relationship between the same sexes is deviant or illness. It generates homophobia by creating a stereotypical understanding of the lesbian relationship.

Feminist writers in the early period did not give much focus on the issues of same-sex people, which is reflected in how Saradmoni, an early women historian, responded to the incident. Her response often reflects the lack of knowledge on issues of sexuality or homophobic attitudes that the earliest feminists stayed with. According to her, this was a single incident that need not be taken as a big size than it really is. She says this happens in the time when incest, pre-marital, extramarital sex, or even rape within marriage.

She also says I have my disagreement about your using such strong terms as 'lesbian grouping'. Some kind of homosexual attractions may not be uncommon when a large number of boys or girls stay together in close physical proximity for long hours. It can be a passing phase in the adolescent child.

This also should not be looked upon as something arising out of the 'estranged' family backgrounds found among the lower middle class. There is no reason for us to conclude that such things are absent among the upper middle class, even if the children in the present case belong to that class. Also, there is a possibility that such behaviour can emanate from the lower class because they may have greater opportunities to get exposed to this kind of life, she says.

This is mainly looking at lesbian grouping among school students, girls who are in the adolescent age. Because of gender segregation and other sexuality stigmas/ control on men-women relationships in our society, same-sex relationship is more permissible and accepted in

our society. Here in this commonsensical idea, these are the vigilance our institutions keep to make boundaries between homosociality and homosexuality. Homosociality is acceptable; our society is vigilant not to go into the 'deviances'. These reports mainly say how to defend not to be into "strangeness". This is also made visible in how media generally presents same-sex relationships.

CONCLUSION

Media perpetuate the idea that Same sex desire is deviant, disease, abnormal, and something one should not happen. The media often takes a stand that lesbianism, in general, should be 'nipped in the bud'. The magazine, like Grihalakshmi, is a mini guide for a heteronormative reproductive Malayali family nation. Malayali society put so much vigilance to control the sexuality into a heteronormative structure. This magazine assumes an ideal family, which is an upper caste, middle class and heterosexual family. As Devika points out, this normal, heterosexual, dominant, legitimized is built up on the abnormal and marginalized sections of the community. We can see how the society is disciplining a heteronormative society through continuous stereotypical construction through the popular media. These can be seen as different institutional caution on female subjectivities. This indicates the vigilance of these institutions even though homosociality is more permissible in a heterosexually complex Kerala society.

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The Representation of Female Bonding in Select Malayalam Cinema: A Study

by Vineetha M

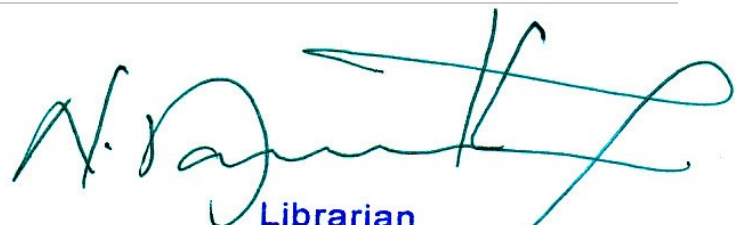
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