



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Education

HOW LESBIAN LOVE IS VIEWED IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

KEY WORDS: Gender identity, Lesbianism, Queer, Representation, Sexual orientation

Dr Prajitha P*

Associate Professor *Corresponding Author

Aleena K Noble

Research Scholar

ABSTRACT

The family concept in Malayalam cinema was based on the man/ woman binary. Up to a point of time in cinema, those belonging to gender and sexual minorities (LGBTQIA+) were dance teachers, buffoons, sex maniacs, sex workers etc and they were represented only as villainous, comic or weak characters. It was only after 2000 when the coming out of gays, lesbians and trans-genders became visible, that Malayalam cinema was willing to speak about sexual diversities and issues related to gender. When the influence of feminist studies, cultural studies and queer theory was apparent in other disciplines, cinema turned its back to it for a long time. It is only in the twenty-first century that films have been produced in Malayalam with issues of gays, lesbians etc as main themes. Even in those films, the attempt has been to accommodate so called 'unnatural' sexual relationships into the same good old routines of heterosexuality, which alone is deemed to be 'normal'.

In this paper, there is a general attempt to introduce those Malayalam films which have taken up lesbian themes for their content. Along with that, it critically analyses Liji J. Pulppalli's *Sancharam (The Journey 2004)* which, as a film on female homosexuality has shattered orthodox thought patterns on female sexuality. The production and acceptance of *Sancharam* take place within the framework of political and theoretical discourse on Queer. As the majority, the film addresses is the lesbian minority and as it is the debut film of a woman director, *Sancharam* is a minority- feminist film. The film has been discussed in and outside India as the first lesbian film in Malayalam. As society does, films also reflect several misunderstandings about sexuality. Though society and its viewing habits have undergone changes since the release of *Sancharam* 17 years ago, there hasn't been any mainstream film that has maturely dealt with lesbianism so far. The society of Kerala after 2018 which has declared homosexual marriages legal, is not the same as that of Kerala in 2004, when homosexuality was considered a criminal offence. Today, in Kerala there are groups of spectators who can accept the ideas *Sancharam* tried to communicate. If a film released in 2004, when homosexuality was a crime, could retain its impact after all these years, it is not simply the success of that film that is to be noticed, but the failure of new cinema, unable to take up such themes. When we talk about films on female same sex love in Malayalam, *Sancharam* becomes relevant even today, also since there has been no other film in this category after *Sancharam* and *Velutha Rathrikal* to be marked historically.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is a sophisticated tool for the formation of general social consciousness. It has played an important role in shaping the cultural values, beliefs and assumptions of Malayalis. The visual expressions in cinema rather than in any other media could establish in our society notions about concepts such as family, sexuality, gender status, power and reproduction.

Women are represented in cinema with a general awareness of the male gaze. This general awareness consists of the view that woman in cinema is weak, powerless, submissive, craving to be under the protection of a man, and bound to bear and look after his children. To quote Laura Mulvey "In this world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/ female" (1989:19). Teresa De Lauretis observes on male views "When I look at the movies, film theorists try to tell me that the gaze is male, the camera eye is masculine, and my look is also not a woman's. But I don't believe that anymore, because now I think I know what it is to look at a film as a woman" (1987:113). It was very difficult to carry films forward from not only male view but beyond traditional concepts and towards possibilities of a lesbian viewpoint. Women, sexual minorities and Dalits have all been relegated to a secondary position in the power hierarchies of the film world.

The position of women in society is determined on the basis of sexuality and sexual relationships. The male partner dominates by reinforcing heterosexuality and thereby retains women as the second sex. That is why it has become inevitable for lesbian feminists to quarrel with ideas of heterosexuality. Lesbian feminism is a path to freedom which women themselves have discovered in order to liberate their mind and body from the fear of male- female sexuality. It is a political thought for women's liberation, evolved from Radical Feminism. Women uphold the slogan that they themselves, and not men, have rights over their bodies. The ultimate aim is

women's freedom in all respects. Teresa De Lauretis remarks that "it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian" (1994:92).

Literature Review

The female same sex love in Malayalam cinema is the least explored area in the field of film studies. The text '*Kanyakayude Durnadappukal*' by Muhammed Rafi N.V. is a socio political analysis of patriarchy, women's subordination and lesbianism in Malayalam films. Articles by Gurpreet Kaar such as '*The issue of lesbianism in contemporary Indian films: A comparative study of transnational, Bollywood and regional films*' and M. Navaneetha's '*Deshadanakkilikal paranjathum sancharam parayathathum*' are the reading of the film *Sancharam*. M. Sathian's '*Malayalam film and gender politics a study based on selected Malayalam films*' and '*Alternative Sexualities in Visual Narratives; A Reading of Liji J. Pulppally's film The Journey*' by Snehalatha C. A. & Sreenath Muraleedharan K. also discusses the topic female same sex love in Malayalam cinema.

Lesbian Films in Malayalam

Randu Penkuttikal directed by Mohan and released in 1978 can be considered the first lesbian film in Malayalam. The film deals with the lost love and later married life of Kokila and Girija two classmates. The film is presented as a model parable of both becoming ideal wives after their education. Padmarajan's *Deshatanakkilikal Karayarilla* (1986) which presented the indefinable love between two girls Nimmi and Sali, was later subjected to lesbian interpretation. The theme of the film is the elopement of two girl friends during a school excursion and its aftermath. It is when the film ends with their suicide that the question on what sort of a relationship these two had between them arises. *Sancharam* (2004), directed by Liji. J. Pulppally, has as its theme the emotional attachment between two playmates from their childhood, Kiran and Delilah, turning into passionate love. When the love letter Kiran hands over to Delilah is leaked, the girls become butts of

ridicule everywhere and then, Delilah's marriage is being arranged in a hurry. The film ends when, desperate as she could not make Delilah her partner, Kiran cuts down her pretty long hair and walks away as a free woman.

At a time when issues of the queer are being discussed as a theoretically based thought, Syed Usman's *Silent Valley* (2012) has presented a reactionary idea. A girl named Shabna, living alone brings with her Swathi, a girl jinxed by her lover, and a relationship develops between them. Shabna has the sexual perversion of attacking men to possess their women and indulging in necrophilia. The film is an attempt to establish lesbians as sexual perverts. *Velutha Rathrikal* (2015) directed by Razi Muhammed is a film based on Dostoevsky's short story *White Nights*. The protagonist Chelli has a bisexual tendency. After staying for four nights with her lover Manu, who declares his love for her, she rejects him and wants to live with Jyothi, her girl friend. Their mutual relationship is more intimate and stronger than man-woman relationship.

Women 'Transgressors' in *Sancharam*

While in Malayalam films woman was defined only by juxtaposition with man, the merit of *Sancharam* consists in that woman is liberated and provided with opportunity to express frankly her sexual slant. Queer activist Aravind Narayan celebrates this film as a move to recognize a different sexuality (Navaneetha M: Mathrubhumi: 2019: 38). Kiran and Delilah, the heroines of *Sancharam*, reject the stereotypes constructed in earlier films. They are transgressors, those who have trespassed to what society views as forbidden territories. The content of the film is the perception and choice of female desires deemed by society as worthy of repression. The binary of prey/predator formed through male narrative is absent here. The girls Kiran and Delilah reject altogether predetermined notions about body, sexual identity, sexuality etc. It is their courage to take a decision on their own partner that makes their path formidable; and their story doesn't end on a happy note.

Perception and Choice

"Above all else know thyself! Without which, in shadow dwells all else!". This is what the fortune teller tells the girls at the beginning of the film. Words which are believed to become true require the girls to perceive their individual identity. Towards the end of the story, the scene of the fortune teller laughing aloud watching Kiran having cut her hair and walking away, suggests that her prediction has become true.

It is Kiran who perceives her sexual slant first. When Delilah tries to change her dress in front of her after arriving from school, Kiran is running away. When Delilah's fingers touch her leg in darkness, she tries to keep her feet apart. When Delilah reads Rajan's love letter, Kiran is able to complete the lines. When Delilah realizes that it was Kiran who wrote that letter, unable to face Delilah, Kiran leaves the place. On many occasions Kiran is powerless to talk to Delilah, looking at her face. When the teacher asks her about the content of Sugathakumari's love poetry Kiran explains to her that Sugathakumari is writing about the loneliness of love and that it is hell. The intensity of her experience of love and the conflict it creates in her are revealed in these words.

In a scene Kiran and Rajan are looking at Delilah standing on the other side of a wall. There is nothing abnormal about Rajan's look; but Kiran's look is not acceptable. Kiran is conscious about it; that is why she runs away in shock when she knows that Rajan has seen her looking at Delilah. Kiran and Rajan watch alike Delilah giving training in Thiruvathirakkali. Though Kiran wants to change her look, she is not able to do that. When Rajan tells her that somebody is coming to see Delilah with a marriage proposal, her face turns pale.

Social Construct-Continuity and Growth

"One is not born a woman; but rather becomes one" (1972:

30). This statement by Simon De Beauvoir points to the institutionalization of women to suit the system. In the film, Kiran and Delilah give up their likes and dislikes to undergo the process of 'becoming' woman. Social, psychological and physical oppression is directly or indirectly inflicted on woman. Kiran liked to play foot ball, it was her father who dissuaded her from it. Kiran repeats the words of her father "playing with balls is only for boys." She says that she has opted for poetry as she was dissuaded from sports. Family and society teach girls from early childhood what are desirable for girls. The father remarks that "It is not proper for a girl to be into sports after a certain age".

The film starts when the little girl Kiran along with her parents arrives from Delhi to their Tharavad (ancestral home) in the village. The ancestral home is a seat of conventional thinking and commoditization. When first they approach home the high angle camera depicts the family as small and the home as big. It points to the confinement of the individual/family to the orthodox system of the Tharavad. When the housekeeper hands over the bunch of keys to the mother, and she hands over the ornaments traditionally inherited from the family to the daughter; it is hinted that women are the protectors of tradition. The words of the mother- "Once your children will be born and brought up here. Thus, our heritage will continue through you" - reminds the daughter of her duty to continue their heritage. The duty of procreation of coming generation and the maintenance of the tradition is inflicted on a girl child who has not yet reached maturity. A majority of girls naturally agree with this kind of an arrangement thrust upon them!

All the characters except Kiran and Delilah try to maintain the status quo of male power. Open defense of a sexuality prohibited for women puts Kiran in a crisis. Even her father who supported her in everything, admonishes her on this issue. Society views them in another perspective, since the relationship between the girls have become known. Rajan who once loved Delilah takes revenge on her for rejecting his love by informing everyone of their relationship. The parish priest brought in by Delilah's mother, advise profusely on sins and good deeds. At last, unable to condemn religious faith, Delilah agrees to forego her relationship with Kiran and to accept a routine marriage. Even though she hints that their relationship will continue secretly, it appears that the popular notion that a male support will protect a woman has been inflicted on her too. That is why, as a fatherless girl, she is compelled to get married and to relieve the burden of the family.

It is the very same lady teacher who praised Kiran's love poems who seizes the love letter and considers the girls 'dirty'. As in the case of the first Tharavad shots, the shots of Kiran and Delilah going to school are depicted in high angle to belittle the children. It implies that the school, like home, is another place where orthodox/ traditional/moralistic codes are sustained and promoted as such.

Moving in hideouts

Sancharam has a story in which the narrative moves in hideouts. The camera moves along the interior parts of the house, its bedroom, its premises, the pool etc in keeping with the idea that a woman's place is home. The backdrop of the film is a thinly populated village. It is in the absence of public spaces that the mutual relationship between the girls is presented. Spatially, the cinema confines to private and secure hideouts. *Sancharam* predominantly resorts to visuals of home, an institution always supposed to be safe and of events that happen inside it. The girl is caught when she goes out of those hideouts. The characters never move away anywhere other than their home, backyard, way to school, and school. Kiran's journey to the town to buy essential things and Delilah's marriage in church are the only occasions when public places come in; but, there they are completely alienated.

Both the characters express their wish to travel, transcending the restrictions imposed on women; but the film's narrative curbs their path and confines them to hideouts. In the course of a dialogue in a play, Delilah shows her eager desire to travel everywhere in the world. "I see love waiting for me like a thundercloud caught in the far horizon of my life's journey. Like a cold dark night, love must one day wed our skies. You and I, like fireflies, will soar into that darkening sky". These lines from Kiran's love letter express the wish to travel to the distant horizons of love. But, this wish is not fulfilled within the narrative limits of the story. When one tries to move out of the prison built by religion and morality, doors are slammed shut. Relationships of love between two girls are looked upon by society as unnatural and obscene. Most people believe that this is a disease that can be cured by proper treatment/ advice/ intimidation and so on. Teresa De Laureti's observation on the limitations of psychoanalysis seems to be relevant in this context "That is why psychoanalysis does not address, cannot address, the complex and contradictory relation of women to women, which it instead defines as woman=woman=mother" (1987: 20). In Kerala's situation where women are defined only in relation to men, their independent travel is not allowed even in cinema. Travel ends up only as characters wish to journey into freedom.

Stereotypes

There is an undercurrent of heterosexuality even in the emotional relationship that Kiran has towards Delilah, though it has no trace of authoritarianism. The very name of the central character, Kiran, has male connotation. Kiran, who wish to play football and cut her long hair is a character bearing a latent 'maleness' in her. The confidence she exudes in her dress, manners and behavior is an indication of this 'maleness'.

The perception of the sexual identity of Kiran and Delilah has been presented through symbolic visuals and dialogues. One night they are sitting together to study. Suddenly, there is heavy rain and thunder. Power fails. Really, these are situations created in cinema to picture love. There is a shadow play arranged in candlelight, reflecting shadows of a male doll and a female doll on the wall. The dialogue between the dolls runs as follows:

Delilah: *I am a princess. Is there anyone who will rescue me from my prison of drudgery and boredom? Is there no one to rescue this exquisitely beautiful princess?*

Kiran: *Who is that? Get back to work.*

Delilah: *Yes sir, but, first would you kindly rescue me and escort me to the nearest palace?*

Kiran: *If it is a consort you are looking for, won't I do? I am a hard working farmer with a house of my own. But, I will love you. I will love you and cherish you forever...*

Delilah: *I love you too. But, I won't be content to live on a farm. I wish to travel the world. I want everything! Everything. So, see you.*

It is not accidental that in this shadow play Delilah comes in the position of the female doll and Kiran comes in that of the male doll. Is it casual or not, the male-female aspects are projected even on to homosexual relations. After the shadow play they stand close together, reminding one of Shiva and Parvathi. The creation of the image of this godly couple is to reinforce the traditional concept of sexuality in which male and female are partners.

Kiran's body language and conduct are similar to those of boys. Yielding to Delilah's compulsion, she agrees with displeasure to pierce one ear. When Delilah pierces her ear with a green spike, Kiran demonstrates a courage that is considered to be masculine. When she asks her "did it hurt

you?" Kiran replies "why not? But, at the same time I am not going to weep for such things". She doesn't wear conventional women's dress and wants her long hair to be cut. She says, "I can't stand all this hair. If my parents would let me, I'd hack it all right now".

C.S. Chandrika comments "A few feminist activists have recently challenged Malayali man-made sexual moral codes, by exposing and opposing the power relations within the family, by searching for alternative family forms, by openly making love and living together without marrying, by giving up unbearable marital relationships, by marrying more than one person, and so on. It is at this stage that many have started wearing jeans and loose cotton kurthas, avoiding ornaments and cutting long hair. This is part of a deliberate rejection of conventional concepts about femininity" (2016:142). This type of a conscious rejection of conventional concepts about femininity, is visible in the case of Kiran. Still there is chance for spectators to suspect whether Kiran's is an attempt to imitate men or to change into a male subject.

DISCUSSION

Sexuality of an individual, an individual's sexual personality etc cannot be contained within existing definitions. "Speaking of lesbian culture or lesbian politics, knowing full well that the vast diversity of class, race, ethnicity, geography and even sexuality among us, makes describing such coherent entities difficult, if not impossible" (Arlene Stein:1993:16). Divisions occur further in LGBTQ on the basis of caste, religion, race, sex etc. In social discourses, the place of female homosexuality is not that of male homosexuality. Though the media try to utilize the visual possibilities of lesbianism to the maximum, in films, demarcation between gay and lesbian scenes is evident.

Homosexual men and women who had silently communicated their presence since 2000, have now got married with the support of Law. An inevitable change has occurred so that public life as gays and lesbians has become possible by 2020. Mainstream actors with star value have begun to appear in films with gay themes and these films are being discussed worldwide. Yet, it is important to note that feminist, lesbian films are not able to accept the political stand put forward by gay films such as *Moothon* (2019). It was only after 2000 that *Randu Penkuttikal* was recognized as the first film with lesbian theme, *Deshatanakkili Karayarilla* was subjected to lesbian readings and *Sancharam* was included in academic discussions. Despite all this, in all Malayalam films on homosexuality there is an attempt to idealize heterosexuality. Kokila and Girija in *Randu Penkuttikal*, Nimmi and Sali in *Deshatanakkili Karayarilla*, Kiran and Delilah in *Sancharam* - all of them had to walk back, though unwillingly, to the conscribed area of moral consciousness constructed by society. Love between Kiran and Delilah is presented in *Sancharam* without any vulgarity with the help of a series of montage. Kissing and intimate physical contacts openly appearing in heterosexual love scenes are, however, avoided in lesbian love scenes. Here, what is acceptable in heterosexual relations is being negated in homosexual relations. Distancing lesbianism from intimate physical contacts is a symptom of the orthodoxy that Malayalam cinema has not yet abandoned. Apart from the theme, these lesbian films do not put forth any novel idea on sexual identity. Changing the existing practice of measuring sexuality in a single homogenous dimension only, is a must in Malayalam filmdom.

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