



# Cinematic Dissent and Gender Identity: Transgender Representation as Cultural Resistance in Malayalam Cinema

Dr. Joseph Mathew<sup>1</sup> & C. B. Ambili<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu



Manuscript ID:  
BIJ-SPL1-OCT25-ML-007

Subject: English

Received : 25.06.2025  
Accepted : 11.07.2025  
Published : 31.10.2025

DOI: 10.64938/bijsi.v10si1.25.Oct007

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under  
a Creative Commons Attribution-  
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

## Abstract

*The study critically examines the evolving portrayal of transgender identities in Malayalam cinema, spanning from the 1970s to the present. Utilizing Stuart Hall's theory of representation and drawing upon both content and discourse analysis, the paper explores how films have historically marginalized, misrepresented, or ignored transgender lives, and how more recent productions attempt to offer nuanced narratives. Through close readings of pivotal films such as Chanthupottu, Ardhanaari, Njan Marykutty, Moothon, and Mike, the study interrogates the socio-political frameworks that shape gender identities on screen. It identifies a shift from ridicule and caricature to more empathetic portrayals, while also critiquing lingering biases and harmful stereotypes that continue to pervade cinematic discourse. This analysis underscores the role of Malayalam cinema in both reflecting and contesting societal norms regarding gender and sexuality.*

**Keywords:** transgender representation, malayalam cinema, queer studies, gender identity

## Introduction

The chronicle of Malayalam cinema extendeth as far back as the 1930s, well before the formal constitution of the state of Kerala in the year 1956. The decades of the 1960s and 1970s bore witness to a notable increase in cinematic production, with many films drawing heavily upon the socio-political ferment of the age and the rich literary tradition of the land (Guru et al., 2015; Sreehari, 2008). During the 1970s, a slew of films was produced bearing themes of sensuality, though their purview remained largely within the confines of heteronormative love and desire. Throughout the broader Indian cinematic landscape—be it Malayalam, Bollywood, or Tollywood—motion pictures espousing LGBTQ

themes have remained conspicuously scant (James & Venkatesan, 2022). In the case of Malayalam cinema, the portrayal of transgender individuals hath been, at times, laden with stereotypes or employed as instruments of ridicule and mirth (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018). Particularly in the twentieth century, only two Malayalam films bore reference to homosexual desire.

The earliest recorded instance of such representation within Malayalam film may be traced to *Randu Penkuttikal* (*The Two Girls*, 1978), a film helmed by the director Mohan (Mammen, 2021). This narrative recounteth the tale of two maidens, Kokila and Girija, both practitioners of the art of dance. Kokila, consumed by an affection bordering



upon possessiveness, doth seek to express her yearning for Girija, who, however, hath affections for a young photographer. In the end, Girija persuadeth Kokila that their mutual attraction is naught but a “feminine fancy,” and that they must, as dutiful daughters of society, conform to the dictates of heterosexual propriety (Jalrajan Raj et al., 2018). The 1986 Malayalam motion picture *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* (rendered into English as *The Bird of Passage Never Weeps*), directed by the eminent auteur Padmarajan, doth narrate the tale of a tender and complex bond shared betwixt two adolescent schoolgirls, Sally and Nimmy. Though the narrative doth not make overt declaration of a homosexual liaison, the film is oft interpreted as a poignant evocation of same-sex affection. The protagonists, depicted as social outcasts burdened with inclinations towards amorous regard for one another, are shown to be neglected by their families and subjected to indignity within the confines of their scholastic environment (Mokkil, 2009).

### **Representation of Transgender Individuals in Malayalam Cinema during the 2000s**

The motion picture *Soothradharan* (translated *The Strategist*), released in the year of our Lord 2001, is to be counted amongst the earliest Malayalam films that contain reference to transgender identity. Nevertheless, the film doth not centre its narrative upon the cultural intricacies or quotidian existence of transgender persons. The tale followeth the fortunes of one Rameshan, who fleeth from his native hamlet unto a village bordering Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. There, he encountereth his boyhood companion, Leelakrishnan, now a member of the transgender community (Lohithadas, 2001, 00:24:46). Leelakrishnan leadeth a double life—he maintaineth the outward guise of a family man with wife and progeny in his homeland, yet assumeth the identity of a transwoman for the sake of livelihood. In the year 2005, the motion picture *Chanthupottu* (literally translated as *Bindi*), directed by the noted Lal Jose, did grace the silver screen. In this work, the lead role is portrayed by the actor Dileep, who assumeth the character of Radhakrishnan, also

known as Radha—a boy reared as a girl by his grandmother, who harboured a desire for a granddaughter (Jose, 2005, 00:05:04–00:08:49; Joseph, 2019). Upon reaching manhood, Radha yet displayeth mannerisms traditionally deemed feminine: his gait, his attire, and the adornment of his face with cosmetics. To earn his bread, Radha teacheth dance to young maidens in a coastal village (Jose, 2005, 00:17:10). These effeminate traits render him the object of scorn and ostracism amongst his fellow villagers (Jose, 2005, 00:45:05; Roshni & Nithya, 2013).

### **Ardhanaari (The Half-Woman), 2012**

Directed by Dr. Santosh Sauparnika, *Ardhanaari* doth constitute a pioneering cinematic effort to present the culture and lived experiences of the hijra and transgender communities—subjects long neglected or misrepresented in Malayalam film, which heretofore concerned itself primarily with the binary delineations of male and female (Kuriakose, 2020). The film doth challenge the conventions of mainstream portrayal, and doth furnish rare insights into the internal and external struggles faced by gender non-conforming individuals.

In its essence, *Ardhanaari* doth illuminate the urgent need for greater comprehension, more faithful representation, and structural reforms in both societal attitudes and the apparatus of governance concerning the transgender populace. The film doth advocate for a more inclusive and humane civil order—one wherein members of the hijra community might live with dignity, access to justice, and health care (Nair, 2012). It is, without doubt, a meaningful contribution toward awareness and visibility. Yet, some critics hold that it portrayeth an antiquated vision of transgender existence in present-day Kerala. Though it marketh a milestone by casting Surya Ishan—a transgender actress—her role, regrettably, remaineth more emblematic than substantive. Transgender activist Sheetal Shyam hath voiced concern that the film's singular focus on the hijra tradition doth not reflect the nuanced realities of the broader transgender experience in contemporary Kerala (PU, 2017).



### **Thira (The Wave), 2013**

The motion picture *Thira*, directed by the young and enterprising Mr. Vineeth Sreenivasan, was released unto the public in the year of our Lord 2013. The narrative doth centre upon the grave and harrowing matter of child trafficking, particularly as it unfoldeth across the territories of Karnataka and Goa. The principal character, Rohini Mayi, is portrayed with great distinction by the esteemed actress Shobana. Rohini Mayi is depicted as the matronly head of a charitable establishment, devoted to the care and protection of destitute children and victims of trafficking.

Of particular note within the film is the character of Basu, a transgender individual most nobly portrayed by the actor Savitha, herself of the transgender community. Basu rendereth great assistance to Rohini Mayi in her noble enterprise to rescue the afflicted children (Sreenivasan, 2013, 00:07:00; 00:52:00–00:56:50; 01:34:10; 01:59:30). The representation of Basu, as conceived by the director, doth stand in striking contrast to the customary portrayals within Indian cinema, which oft cast transgender persons in roles of ridicule or villainy. Instead, Basu is rendered with dignity—resolute, self-reliant, and composed—thus offering a rare and respectful portrayal of transgender identity upon the Malayalam silver screen (PU, 2017).

### **Odum Raja Aadum Rani (The Sprinting King and the Dancing Queen), 2014**

The motion picture *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*, penned by Mr. Manikandan Pattambi and directed by Mr. Viju Varma, made its debut in the year 2014. This film addresseth, in unambiguous terms, the manifold trials endured by transgender persons within the social order of Kerala. It hath been duly recognised for its import and was presented at the Bangalore Queer Film Festival in the year following its release.

The protagonist of the tale, Ayyappan—also known by the name Thamburu—is a transgender individual who gaineth her livelihood by performing *Att*, a ritualistic dance native to temple ceremonies in rural Kerala (Varma, 2014, 01:51:35). Though Thamburu's identity as a transgender person is

known amongst the villagers, it is tolerated owing to her sacred affiliation with temple arts. Nevertheless, Thamburu is coerced by her mother into the bonds of matrimony with a woman (01:52:00). Tragedy doth swiftly befall her, as her deranged brother, in a fit of madness, doth violate Thamburu's wife and slay their mother (01:55:30). Thereafter, Thamburu abandoneth her native hamlet and seeketh solace in a distant village, where she joineth a troupe of dancers (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018).

In this new locale, Thamburu encountereth one Venkiti—a wandering peddler—and growtheth fond of his rugged masculinity. Yet Venkiti rebuffeth Thamburu's affection, and with the aid of his companions, doth attempt to compel Thamburu into the mould of traditional masculinity. This he seeketh to accomplish through verbal abuse, cruel taunts (such as the slur 'penkoosan'), and humiliations including the forcible removal of garments (Varma, 2014, 00:21:05; 00:26:52; 00:35:59; 00:53:17; 01:09:30). He even introduceth a woman named Maala in a pitiful effort to incite masculine desire within Thamburu. When Thamburu protesteth against Venkiti's entanglement with Maala, he doth respond with physical violence (01:37:49; 01:47:20). Thus, Thamburu disappeareth, abandoned by all (Rashmi & Anilkumar, 2018). Lastly, the depiction of Thamburu as a jealous obstacle to Venkiti's heterosexual pursuits doth perpetuate the pernicious myth that transgender persons pose a threat to normative romantic arrangements. Though the film doth offer insight into the challenges of gender performance, it regrettably falleth short of addressing the profound and systemic issues that plague the transgender community of Kerala (Varma, 2014).

### **Njan Marykutty (I Am Marykutty), 2018**

*Njan Marykutty*, a motion picture in the Malayalam tongue released in the year of Our Lord 2018 and directed by Mr. Ranjith Sankar, portrayeth with great poignancy the life and trials of a transwoman named Marykutty. The lead role, essayed by the celebrated thespian Mr. Jayasurya, doth traverse both comedic and tragic dimensions, offering a profound inquiry into the condition of transgender folk in a society oft



unkind to such identities (Sankar, 2018). The narrative depicteth Marykutty's ardent desire to become the first transgender Sub-Inspector of the Kerala Police (Sankar, 2018, 00:06:55). Born in a quaint hill-station town wherein patriarchal and transphobic mores prevail, Marykutty, upon choosing to affirm her true self, is renounced by her own sire and sister (Sankar, 2018, 00:01:20). She departeth from her home, leaving behind a missive for her kin. With the benediction and succour of a benevolent parish priest and loyal friends, she gaineth employment as a radio jockey for a local ecclesiastical station (Sankar, 2018, 00:04:55, 00:10:20), yet doth continue in her quest to join the constabulary (Sudhish, 2018).

Throughout her journey, Marykutty suffereth manifold indignities, both verbal and physical, cast upon her by a narrow-minded populace. These affronts illuminate the trials borne by transgender persons who must, daily, guard their dignity amidst a hostile public sphere—be it lecherous gazes, untoward contact on conveyances, or vulgar propositions (Sankar, 2018, 00:12:16, 00:13:11, 00:21:28, 00:45:35) (Cris, 2018). Notwithstanding her erudition and prior vocation in the realm of information technology, she is met with scorn and derision due to her identity (Prakash, 2018). *Njan Marykutty* departeth from past portrayals in Malayalam cinema by affording its protagonist authenticity unclouded by caricature (Cris, 2018). Though the performance of Mr. Jayasurya is lauded, it hath been argued that the casting of a transgender actor would have lent greater veracity to the portrayal (Sudhish, 2018).

### **Aalorukkam (The Makeup), 2018**

Directed by Mr. V.C. Abhilash in the selfsame year, *Aalorukkam* recounteth the tale of Pappu Pisharodi, a septuagenarian who seeketh his long-lost son. After suffering a fall and being conveyed to a hospital (Abhilash, 2018, 00:02:14, 00:05:40-00:22:06), Pappu is reunited with his offspring, who hath transitioned and now liveth as a transwoman named Priyanka (Abhilash, 2018, 01:08:33). The revelation grieveth Pappu, who findeth himself unable to

reconcile his memories of Sajeevan, whom he and his consort reared as a lad, with the woman Priyanka hath become (Abhilash, 2018, 01:32:55). Despite the counsel of physicians and Priyanka's husband, Pappu rejecteth his child's identity. Though he is ailing and alone, he refuseth to dwell with Priyanka and returneth to his village, forlorn. The film likewise sheweth the plight of Priyanka's family—her husband and daughter—who, owing to prevailing statutes, are denied the right to adopt, given Priyanka's status as a transgender woman (Abhilash, 2018, 01:26:29). Threats of eviction from their lodgings bespeak the broader societal refusal to afford housing to transgender folk, regardless of means (01:18:02).

### **Iratta Jeevitham (The Dual Life), 2018**

One of the earliest Malayalam productions to shed light upon the existence of a transman, *Iratta Jeevitham* dealeth with gender identity, familial estrangement, social contempt, and economic privation (Madhyamam, 2018). At its heart lieth the story of Amina, a maiden of the coastal realms, who, following her transition, returneth home bearing a new name—Anthraman. Despite living true to himself, Anthraman is met with scorn and neglect from his kin and society alike (Narayan, 2018; Filmbeat, n.d.; Venkiteswaran, 2018). Though an independent production, *Iratta Jeevitham* was screened in diverse venues—cinemas, libraries, and cultural assemblies—and was duly selected for exhibition at the Bangalore Queer Film Festival, 2018. In the learned opinion of Anu Chandra, the film standeth alone in Malayalam cinema for its profound excavation of gender identity and its intersection with societal prejudice (Chandra, 2018).

### **Abhaasam (Short for Aarsha Bharath Sanskar) (2018)**

In this motion picture, directed by one Jubith Namradath, Mistress Sheethal Shyam doth portray her very self—a transgender gentlewoman of notable activism and a seller of toys. Her character doth journey to the land of Kerala, there to partake in a festival devoted to the transgender folk at a sacred



temple. The film affords Mistress Shyam due prominence, shedding light upon her manifold roles as both activist and actress. Through her character and those of two other such individuals, the film doth probe the fabric of modern Indian society, unveiling the manifold tribulations and the resilience of those who dwell beyond the normative binaries.

Set upon an overnight coach voyage from Bangalore to Kerala, this social satire exposeth the inner turmoils, prejudices, and desires of its passengers. Not one of these characters beareth a name, a narrative choice that lendeth the film an air of allegorical detachment (Athira, 2018). It doth take to task the entrenched gender expectations and the orthodoxies of society through dialogue and reflection.

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

Directed by Lady Geetu Mohandas, *Moothon* marketh a significant turn in the portrayal of queer lives within Malayalam cinema. The tender romance 'twixt Akbar and Ameer is depicted with a sensitivity rare in Indian letters, capturing the ineffable qualities of same-sex love, devoid of cliché and unencumbered by caricature. Among the dramatis personae are Mulla, a youth of gender-fluid disposition, and Lateef, a transgender soul rendered with depth and humanity.

Lateef dwelleth amidst the Hijra folk in Kamathipura, Mumbai, and there encountereth Mulla—a maiden clothed in masculine raiment, seeking her elder brother. Despite the harshness of her world, Lateef provideth warmth and direction to Mulla in her quest for identity and truth. Rarely doth the Indian screen depict a transgender person not as a mere jest or a figure of pathos, but with the fullness of being that Lateef commandeth.

Reviewer Geetanjali Rajmohan, writing in *Film Companion*, commendeth the film's daring exploration of gender and the fluidity of human affection. It ventureth far beyond the mere physical, and refuseth labels, preferring instead the ambiguity and richness of human emotion (Rajmohan, 2020). Vinay Kumar, in a contrasting light, doth observe the chiaroscuro of Lateef's presence—her visage

alternating between angel and demon. The film's use of Jeseri and Hindustani tongues addeth a layer of authenticity, though it doth stray from the Malayalam familiar to many (Kumar, 2020).

### ***Mike (2022)***

In this tale, one Sarah—known by the sobriquet “Mike”—harboureth an aspiration to transition from the feminine to the masculine. Her motives, as the narrative unfoldeth, seem less born of an earnest desire for manhood, and more of an impulse to flee the restrictions thrust upon the female sex. Among her reasoning: escape from the male gaze, avoidance of dowry, the unshackling of domestic expectations, and the liberty to walk alone past dusk (Sivaprasad, 2022).

Critics aver that the film doth grievously err in conflating gender identity with rebellion and adolescent confusion. Adam Harry, a transman and vocal critic, declaims the piece as a misrepresentation of transgender lives—suggesting that trans men are but “confused girls” in quest of male privilege (Cris, 2022). The work hath also been censured for its facile approach to trauma and for depicting toxic masculinity as a salve. It offereth little in the way of nuanced understanding of the corporeal, psychological, or sociological dimensions of transition.

### ***Kooman (The Owl) – The Night Rider (2022)***

A strange tale unfolds in this film, where one Giri, a constable by profession, turneth to thievery upon overhearing boastful talk of the security of others' possessions. As he investigateth mysterious deaths, he uncovereth foul dealings involving black magic and sacrificial rites. In the denouement, it is revealed that Lakshmi—his lady love—was born of intersex condition and now liveth as a transwoman. She hath resorted to the occult in pursuit of power, driven by exile and rejection from her kin (Joseph, 2022).

Whilst the film doth intend to portray the anguish and alienation of those in the transgender community, it grievously risketh reinforcing dark and noxious tropes—that of the ‘deviant’ or ‘sorceresses’. The character of Lakshmi, though complex, treadeth



a dangerous path, for her resort to arcane rituals and bloodletting shall not be easily distinguished by the common folk from a condemnation of her kind (Praveen, 2022).

## Conclusion

The representation of transgender individuals in Malayalam cinema has undergone a slow but notable transformation. Early portrayals, such as those in *Soothradharan* and *Chanthupottu*, were steeped in misrepresentation, often painting transgender characters as deceptive, comedic, or inherently tragic. These films mirrored societal discomfort with gender nonconformity and reinforced heteronormative values. Trans characters were more often used as plot devices or comic relief rather than as complex human beings with interiority and agency. The 2010s, however, marked a turning point. Films like *Ardhanaari* and *Thira* sought to humanize transgender experiences, challenging long-standing stereotypes. *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* and *Iratta Jeevitham* broke new ground by focusing on the emotional and psychological struggles of gender nonconforming individuals, albeit with varying degrees of narrative depth and sensitivity. More recently, *Njan Marykutty* and *Moothon* have offered richly layered characters that resist reductionist labels. These works signal a growing awareness and willingness within the industry to engage with transgender issues more earnestly. Yet, these advances coexist with regressive narratives like *Mike* and *Kooman*, which undermine progress by conflating gender transition with confusion, rebellion, or moral decay. A key concern that emerges is the casting of cisgender actors in transgender roles. While performances may be compelling, this practice denies opportunities for trans actors and limits authenticity. Moreover, the persistent association of trans characters with mysticism, suffering, or violence—as seen in *Kooman*—reveals the enduring power of cultural myths that position transgender identity as aberrant or threatening. For Malayalam cinema to move toward genuine inclusivity, it must embrace intersectional perspectives, diversify the voices

behind the camera, and prioritize lived experience in storytelling. Representation must go beyond visibility; it must encompass dignity, agency, and complexity. Only then can the medium contribute meaningfully to the dismantling of prejudice and the affirmation of transgender lives in both narrative and society.

## References

1. Abhilash, V. C. (Director). (2018, April 6). *Aalorukkam* [Film].
2. Banu, A. P., & Yasmin, M. S. (2020). History of Transgender Portrayal in Indian Cinema. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews (IJRAR)*, 7(1), 206–209.
3. Bharadwaj, A. (2018, April 19). *Aalorukkam* Malayalam movie review. *Lensmen Reviews*. Retrieved from <https://lensmenreviews.com/aalorukkam-malayalam-movie-review-2018/>
4. Bhaskar, A. (n.d.). Of monsters and more: A deep dive into LGBTQ+ narratives in Malayalam cinema. December 30, 2022. <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/o-f-monsters-and-more-a-deep-dive-into-lgbtq-narratives-in-malayalam-cinema-8352536/>
5. Iyengar, N. (2022, November 4). 'Kooman: The Night Rider' ending, explained – How does Giri investigate his cases? *Film Fugitives*.
6. Jalrajan Raj, S., Sreekumar, R., & Gopinath, S. (2018). On the Margins of Heterosexuality! Representation of Queerness in Malayalam cinema. *Chalachitra Sameeksha*, 8(1).
7. James, N., & Venkatesan, S. (2022). Mapping the Queer Body: Queer Tropes and Malayalam Cinema. *Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.21315/ws2022.21.7>
8. Jose, L. (Director). (2005, August 26). *Chanthupottu* [Film].
9. Joseph, E., (2019). Public gaze and behavioural traits on transgenders in films: A study on Malayalam films Chanthupottu and Njan Marykutty. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 6(3), 236. <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR1903640.pdf>



10. Joseph, J. (Director). (2022, November 4). Kooman [Film]. [https://app.primevideo.com/detail?gti=amzn1.dv.gti.42aaee07-f4cb-4229-948f-bd0499f31cc7&ref\\_=atv\\_dp\\_share\\_mv&r=web](https://app.primevideo.com/detail?gti=amzn1.dv.gti.42aaee07-f4cb-4229-948f-bd0499f31cc7&ref_=atv_dp_share_mv&r=web).
11. Joseph, N. (2019, November 20). Queer activists slam Lal Jose for defending problematic 2005 film “Chanthupottu.” The News Minute. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/queer-activists-slam-lal-jose-defending-problematic-2005-film-chanthupottu-112378>
12. Kumar, V. V. (2020, October 6). Film review: Moothon is a tale of love, loss and fading personhood. Feminism in India. Retrieved from <https://feminisminindia.com/2020/10/06/film-review-moothon-love-loss-fading-personhood/>
13. Kuriakose, A. (2020). Construction and contestation of identity and politics: Transgender people in contemporary Malayalam cinema. *South Asian Popular Culture*, 18(3), 283–289. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2020.1815455>
14. Kuriakose, A., & J.Alex, G. (2017). Deconstructing the Gender Binary: A Discourse on Quee(cu)ring in the Film Odum Raja Aadum Rani. *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 8.
15. Lohitadas, A. K. (Director). (2001, December 15). Soothradaran [Film]. <https://www.sunnxt.com/malayalam-movie-soothradharan-2001-2001/detail/13448>
16. Madhyamam. (2018, February 19). Iratta Jeevithangal: Movie review. Madhyamam. <https://www.madhyamam.com/movies/reviews/iratta-jeevitham-movie-review-movie-review/2018/feb/19/431382>
17. Mammen, A. A. (2021). Queer Ecologies: The Portrayal of Queerness in Malayalam Films. *SMART MOVES JOURNAL IJELHH*, 9(5), 277–296. <https://doi.org/10.24113/ijellh.v9i5.11066>
18. McLaren, J. T. (2018). "Recognize Me": An Analysis of Transgender Media Representation. Major Research Paper. University of Windsor. Retrieved from <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/major-papers/45/>
19. Media Smarts (2014, June). Representation in Diversity in Media- Overview. Mediasmarts. <https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/media-issues/diversity-media/representation-diversity-media-overview>
20. Mohandas, G. (Director). (2019, November 8). Moothon [Film]. <https://www.aha.video/movie/moothon>
21. Mohandas, V. (2018, February 20). Less-told tales of a transman. Deccan Chronicle. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/mollywood/200218/less-told-tales-of-a-transman.html>