



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introspecting Queer Identities in Mainstream Indian Regional Cinema

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Abstract

The public notion across cultures in most societies has always thrived largely towards Hetero Sexuality. Historically, around the world, there is a general tendency to showcase intolerance towards sexual minorities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and identify them as people with abnormalities. In India, talking about people with varied sexual identities and orientations is still considered to be taboo. Their voices and concerns are often unheard or unattended, and they remain underrepresented in the mainstream media. Such communities deserve a space for public discourse so that their voices are heard in a more sensitive manner. The representation of sexual minorities in Indian cinema has often historically been stereotyped, which denies them from getting acceptance in a given society. However, there are attempts to explore the themes of sexual minorities and their concerns in South Indian Cinema. Hence, it is important to study such portrayals and understand how the industry is slowly embracing the community through its narratives. In this context, the study aims to examine the construction and representation of Homosexuality in two selected Malayalam films, Moothan (2019) and The Kaathal - the Core (2023). Using a queer theoretical framework, the study further traces the emotional complexities of homosexual characters portrayed in these films. Eventually, it evaluates how these films voice homosexuals and helps to create a positive perspective about homosexuality among its viewers.

Keyword: Malayalam Cinema, Sexual Minorities, Representation, Identity, Homosexuality

Introduction

Sexuality is a multidimensional aspect of human identity that refers to an individual's experiences, expressions, and understandings of sexual and romantic attraction, behaviour, and identity. Of all the dimensions of sexuality, heterosexuality, which is the romantic or sexual attraction between two individuals of the opposite sex or gender, has been a central and often normative position in many societies for a long time. This is because of its traditional association with biological reproduction and social institutions, such as marriage and family. Heterosexuality as the norm within institutions has led to the notion of heteronormativity- a framework in which heterosexuality is taken to be the norm or 'natural' orientation. It marginalises or even invalidates non-heterosexual identities. Such marginalization results in cultural norms, societal expectations, and individual experiences.

Historically, around the world, there is a general tendency to showcase intolerance towards sexual minorities such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) and identify them as people with abnormalities. Though great strides have been taken to improve the rights and representation of LGBTQ+, many deep-rooted cultural, religious, and political traditions have persisted to fuel negative views and practices against homosexuals.

Herek (2009) states that Homosexuality has often been stigmatized for cultural and religious beliefs that see non-heteronormative identities as deviant or immoral. In a society with more conservative customs, especially one whose religion is practised strictly, homosexuality is often viewed as an offence against societal values. Such attitudes are perpetuated by institutional teachings that enforce binary gender roles and heteronormative expectations.

Originally, 'queer' was broadly used to refer to what was odd, strange, abnormal or sick, and it was also used as an insult for homosexuality (Halperin, 2003). In the 1980s, the LGBTQ community reclaimed 'queer' as an umbrella term to designate non-normative sexuality. This was a way to move beyond strict labels like gay or lesbian. When queer was adopted in the late 1980s, it was chosen because it evoked a long history of insult and abuse (Love, 2007). Butler (1993) has also argued, it is precisely queer's links to 'accusation, pathologization, insult' that give 'queer' its discursive power when re-used and repeated as a self-identifier. From its early use in theoretical terms, 'queer' operated as a wish and a hope for a different kind of thinking and engagement with questions of sexuality, gender, identity, power and the politics of oppression. Adding to this thought, Britzman (1995) opines that Queer theory questions the foundations of sexual identity. For much of its history, queer theory has situated itself as challenging normativity, particularly heteronormativity, in society (Gamson and Moon, 2004).

Most historians, while talking about sexuality, highlight that "same-sex" relationships have always existed in some form or other across all cultures, but that the identity categories through which we understand sexuality today (including heterosexuality) have not always existed.

Though there have been improvements in accepting sexuality and sexual variation in the past decades in society, homophobia still exists. The fight against this social and

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cultural phenomenon must be considered as an immediate priority. The term, Homophobia is defined as the fear or aversion towards homosexuality coupled with hatred. It is fundamental to describe the causes and effects of intolerance. Not only are such beliefs stereotypical, but they are also deeply embedded in the structures of a society - laws and regulations, the media, and the educational system, which perpetuate the acts of discrimination. Hence, homosexual people are forced to lead an isolated life of their own and live in isolation. Though they never threaten society, they always lead a threatened life because of the disrespectful attitude of the people towards them. Homosexuals lack the structural support that heterosexual people possess (Modi, 2022).

Rejection by society and the people is a common experience for LGBTQIA+ individuals in intolerant societies. Fear of exclusion from society often compels individuals to hide their true identities, which results in psychological distress. Studies show that LGBTQIA+ individuals face higher rates of harassment, bullying, and violence compared to their heterosexual peers, significantly affecting their mental health and well-being (Meyer, 2003).

Fostering Homonormativity

Globally, challenging the well-established heterosexual norms and the rise in fostering of homonormativity reflects how societal attitudes are changing towards sexuality and how it started embracing inclusion. Many activist movements and cultural shifts have questioned the dominance of heterosexuality and considered it as the default or "natural" mode of existence, advocating for the recognition of diverse sexual identities and relationships. Though the decriminalisation of homosexuality in India in 2018 was a landmark, the acceptance of homosexuality remains uneven. Indian queer discourses often struggle between challenging heteronormative structures and adopting homonormative ideals (Rao, 2020).

Historically, in India, one can see references to LGBTQ+ in ancient texts and temple carvings. However, modern society is divided and biased in accepting these communities.

Underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Homosexuality in Cinema

Homosexuality often remains underrepresented and misrepresented in the media, particularly in cinema. Representation of homosexuality in cinema reflects societal prejudices rather than actual experiences of the community. This is shown through stereotypical representation and by the marginalization of LGBT narratives in cinema. In mainstream cinema, homosexual characters are often relegated to supporting roles or depicted as caricatures, reinforcing stereotypes rather than presenting multi-dimensional individuals. For instance, homosexual characters are frequently portrayed as comic relief or as villains, perpetuating harmful tropes and undermining their legitimacy as full-fledged protagonists (Rao, 2020).

In many societies, the stigma surrounding homosexuality extends into media production, where narratives involving LGBTQIA+ characters are either sidelined or treated as taboo. In Indian cinema, for instance, LGBTQIA+ characters have historically been depicted in a sensationalized or derogatory manner, with films prioritizing heteronormative storylines. Even progressive films often cater to cis-heterosexual audiences, diluting the authenticity of queer experiences to ensure broader acceptability (Gauram & Dugaje, 2024).

Though the representation of homosexuality in cinema has improved in recent times, however, it frequently fails to address the complexities of their lives (Duggan, 2002). Challenging these patterns of stereotypical narratives and normalizing the narratives of the emotional complexities of homosexuals in cinema is the need of the hour.

The Emergence of Homosexuality Themes in Indian Cinema

India is a country with a vibrant culture and tradition to celebrate, and these are shown in the Indian cinema, which is viewed and accepted with passionate enthusiasm. Cinema is often seen as a powerful tool to accelerate social change by **subtly influencing people's way of thinking**. While various issues are becoming the base for filmmaking in India, Homosexuality did not take up much space in the Indian cinema. In a country where talking about sex remains taboo, very few attempts were made to explore same-sex relationships. The few films which showed homosexuals were limited to giving a humour touch to the storytelling. Those films failed to touch upon the issues and problems of the community. When it comes to the representation of homosexuality in Indian cinema, one can divide it into two broad categories: one as protagonists and one with the secondary narrative. In mainstream films, one rarely witnesses a homosexual as a lead character, the filmmakers often use non-heterosexuals as supporting roles. Few short films talk and act upon the community but fail to grab the general public's attention as mainstream films do. When the Queer community is represented in the mainstream cinema, they only reproduce the prejudice that already exists in society rather than addressing the real problems the community is facing.

Hindi films such as *Kal Ho Na Ho* (2003), directed by Nikkhil Advani, and *Dostana* (2008), directed by Tarun Mansukhani, spoke about homosexuality but never contributed to the issues of homosexuals; rather, they melodramatised the issue. However, films like *Fire* (1996) by Deepa Mehta and *My Brother Nikhil* (2005) by Onir, with their sensitivity and empathy towards homosexuals, initiated a new wave of storytelling (Gauram & Dugaje, 2024).

Compared to Hindi cinema, the representation of homosexuality was slower and rare in South Indian cinema because of its cultural conservatism. The representation was either sidelined or was a comic relief. The films often used the effeminate male character as a source of humour. However, South Indian filmmakers have begun to address the LGBTQIA+ themes with greater nuance in recent years. Tamil film, *Super Deluxe* (2019), directed by Thiagarajan Kumararajan, explored gender and sexuality in layered narratives showing the LGBTQIA+ character as an integral part of the story rather than the supporting character (Ramesh, 2020).

The Malayalam cinema, which is known for its realistic storytelling, remained silent in the depiction of homosexuality. The mainstream movies in Malayalam failed to discuss openly the theme of homosexuality to a greater extent. However, there are a few attempts to talk about in the early cinema *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978) by Mohan, *Deshadanakkili Karayarilla* (1986) by Padmarajan, *Sancharam* (2004) by Liji J Pullappally are some of them that have dealt with the theme homosexuality (Babu, 2021). It is significant to study the portrayals of homosexuality and understand how the industry is slowly embracing the community through its narratives.

Research Gap

Reviewing the existing literature on the representation of LGBTQ+ in Indian cinema reveals that there are studies available that focus on the Bollywood Hindi Cinema, which leads to a significant research gap concerning South Indian industries. There exists a strong gap in understanding the distinct regional narratives shaped by unique cultural, linguistic, and political contexts. Another major gap identified is the very absence of studies from an intersectional dimension beyond sexuality—particularly caste, religion, regional identity, and age, which is essential for a holistic understanding of identity in the Indian context.

Methodology

The study aims to introspect the queer identities in the mainstream Indian cinema, with special reference to Malayalam Cinema. Using a queer theoretical framework, the study traces the emotional complexities of homosexual

characters portrayed in these films and evaluates how these films voice homosexuals and help to create a positive perspective about homosexuality. The study also explores how family represents the homophobic society in the selected films. Queer theory provided a critical framework to analyse the films by challenging the normative understanding of gender, identity, and sexuality. Deconstruction of heteronormativity gave the pathway to analyse how these films challenge heteronormativity. The theory provided the concept of social construction, based on the concept of performativity by Judith Butler (1990), we could analyse how gender is performed rather than an essential trait.

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis to deeply engage with the complex cultural, symbolic, and narrative layers that quantitative methods often overlook. Further, this methodological choice for analyzing Indian queer cinema is rich, as it examines the complex character portrayals, emotional depth, and intersectional identities that require interpretative engagement that is sensitive to context and subjectivity. It is important to acknowledge that queerness in India is inextricably linked with other identity markers like caste, class, religion, and regionality. The approach further introspects the embodied experiences of queer individuals and allows researchers to dissect how these films challenge heteronormative structures and offer alternative perspectives on kinship and belonging. This method is essential to understand not just *that* a character is queer, but *how* their identity is constructed, the psychological tensions they navigate, and how their story critiques or reflects social realities, moving beyond mere quantification to uncover rich, ideological meaning.

In this context, this study looks into contemporary Malayalam cinema, particularly films made with queer themes over the last six years (2019 to 2025). Further, the films were selected primarily where the protagonists of the films identify themselves as homosexuals. In this context, *Moothan* (2019), directed by Geetu Mohandas and *Kaathal - the Core* (2023), directed by Jeo Baby, were chosen for the analysis. These films are significant as the key protagonist roles were played by popular screen actors of Malayalam cinema, such as Nivin Pauly and Mammotty, respectively, coming out of the traditional notion of a hero image that is masculine, which is deeply rooted in heteronormativity.

Plot Synopsis

Moothan (2019), directed by Geetu Mohandas, portrays the journey of Mulla, a young teenager from Lakshadweep, in search of their elder brother, Akbar, who stays in Mumbai. **Mulla's search for elder brother uncovers Akbar's hidden past, caught in Mumbai's gritty underworld and a forbidden queer love story.** The film weaves themes of identity, sexuality, and survival, exploring the complexities of human emotions and relationships against a backdrop of crime and urban despair.

Kaathal: The Core (2023) by Jeo Baby has Mathew Devassy, an ex-bank manager who resides in Kerala and is motivated to contest local panchayat elections. The election campaign does not go very smoothly when his wife, Omana, files a divorce suit on the grounds that he is homosexual. This litigation and public scrutiny compel Mathew to reflect upon his identity, leading to deeper personal discoveries that eventually impact his political goals.

Significance of the study

The selected films represent a shift from the stereotypical portrayal of LGBTQ+ Unlike earlier cinema that used queer characters as comic relief or tragic side plots. These films explore more complex queer experiences, including family roles, desire, and internal conflict. Hence, it is important to study such portrayals and understand how the industry is slowly embracing the community through its narratives and promote inclusivity in the minds of its audience.

Analysis & Discussion: The Emotional Complexities

Moothan and *Kaathal: The Core* are two notable Malayalam films which explore the complexities of the Queer community within the context of social and personal acceptance. Both films deconstruct the traditional heterosexual hero image and show the homosexual hero falling in love with the man of his choice. These films stand different by showing the queer community without any pre-existing prejudice about the community, which one witnesses in the Indian cinema regularly. The intensity of the feelings in relationships between homosexuals is portrayed by the directors without any vulgarity or erotic gestures in the movies. The films showcase the mental trauma that queer people undergo while expressing their inner selves in a homophobic society.

Societal Rejection / Judgment

In *Moothan*, the journey of Mulla reveals the hidden life and the forbidden queer love story of Akbar. The movie portrays the emotional rollercoaster Akbar faces, namely societal rejection and emotional conflict about his identity. His tragic love story depicts the pain of navigating a world hostile to queer relationships.

Kaathal: The Core delves into the life of Mathew Devassy, whose suppressed sexual orientation comes to light when his wife files for divorce, alleging he is a homosexual. This disclosure initiates a series of emotional difficulties for Mathew. He is forced to face societal judgment. The films showcase the emotional complexities of being homosexual in a **deeply conservative society.** Here **protagonist's journey** explores the theme of shame, betrayal and also the courage to embrace the identity.

The films highlight the multifaceted emotional struggles of their queer characters. The protagonists encounter rejection and societal constraints that deny them the ability to live with their own identity. These films also explore the ripple effects of queerness on their relationships, portraying the pain of alienation, the fear of judgment, and the wanting for love and acceptance. With the fear of rejection and judgment, we see a silent tender love between Akbar and Amir in the *Moothan*, fading with the death of Amir.

Suppression of Identity

In *Moothan*, after Akbar and Amir got humiliated by the family and after witnessing the death of his partner Amir, Akbar shifts to Mumbai, escaping from his identity and creating a new identity in a new place. He transforms into a goon and is named as bhai, who performs extreme masculine actions and silences his gay self. Amir commits suicide after getting married against his identity and being rejected by his family. In the same film, we see Transgender Latheef, a friend of Akbar, advising the little sister Mulla, who is seen cross-dressing from the beginning of the movie, to dress and behave like a girl, knowing the rejection towards queer people in society. Similarly, in *Kaathal: The Core*, Mathew suppresses his identity **and marries Omana according to his father's wish and has a daughter with her.** He performs the duty of a family man to the outer world to remain in the societal norms and to be accepted by society. With the revelation of his homosexuality, he is judged by his political peers and society at large

Internal Conflict

In both *Moothan* and *Kaathal: The Core*, the protagonists experience a profound emotional journey marked by a shared struggle with fear of rejection, internal conflict, loneliness, and the pain of concealing their true selves. Akbar in *Moothan* and Mathew in *Kaathal: The Core* both fear societal judgment and experience intense self-doubt regarding their sexual identities. This internal turmoil leads to emotional isolation as they yearn for acceptance, love, and the freedom to express their true selves. The pain of hiding their identities weighs heavily on them, but their stories also convey hope for transformation and self-acceptance. Both films highlight the complex emotional

realities of living as queer individuals in a society that imposes restrictive norms, illustrating the emotional cost of concealment.

Voicing Queer Through Films

In *Moothan* and *Kaathal: The Core*, Queer are given voices by exploring their inner emotional struggles, desires, and the complexities of their relationships in a society that marginalises and suppresses queer identities. Unlike other Indian cinema, which portrays the stereotypical representation and as a comic character, these films show the real complexities in acceptance of the identity, both by the self and society. The selected films voice the real struggle and support needed for the Queer people by the family and society at large.

In *Moothan*, Akbar's hidden love for Amir is central to the plot, portraying the challenges faced by queer individuals in oppressive environments. Akbar's journey of hiding his sexuality, navigating the dangerous underworld, and eventually seeking emotional fulfilment gives voice to the painful reality of living as a homosexual in a world that enforces strict heteronormative ideals. Through Akbar's story, the film not only highlights the emotional devastation of repression but also emphasizes the human need for authentic connections and love, even in the face of societal hostility. The character Amir represents forbidden queer love and the emotional vulnerability of marginalized individuals in a hostile society. His relationship with Akbar, marked by secrecy and danger, highlights the pain and sacrifice of concealed love, symbolizing the struggle for authenticity in a world that punishes non-normative sexuality. Amir, who is mute, is a metaphor for the Queer community, who are not given the right to speak about their desires and are kept in the darkness. **Amir's tragic fate further amplifies the emotional toll of concealing one's true identity, yet their love remains a strong symbol of desire, longing, and the hope for acceptance, despite the societal constraints.**

Similarly, *Kaathal: The Core* voices the experiences of a closeted man, Mathew, whose sexuality is exposed through his wife's divorce claim. The film uses a subtle approach to Queerness within the constraints of the traditional family. The emotional complexity of Mathew's situation—his fear of rejection, shame, and the fallout from living a double life—is portrayed with sensitivity. As Mathew faces societal scrutiny, political consequences, and personal turmoil, the film offers a nuanced portrayal of the emotional burden borne by those who live in the shadows of their identity. The emotional impact on Mathew is compounded by his role in society as a politician, making his coming out a public spectacle. The film allows Mathew to voice his truth, revealing the challenges of embracing one's homosexuality when it threatens not just personal relationships but also social status.

The selected films amplify the voices of queer characters by centring their emotional journeys, moving beyond mere victimization to explore themes of self-discovery, acceptance, and the fight for love and belonging. The characters in these films are presented as multifaceted individuals, showing that their struggles are not only about their sexuality but also about negotiating a world that refuses to fully accept them. These films voice homosexuals by offering a raw, authentic portrayal of their lives and emotions, presenting them as individuals with agency who challenge the heteronormative structures surrounding them.

Moothan portrays a more tragic narrative with Akbar's eventual demise, while *Kaathal - The Core* ends on a hopeful note with Mathew's acceptance and support from his wife. Mathew's character experiences a supportive relationship that allows for personal freedom, contrasting with Akbar's isolation.

Family Representing Homophobic Society

The films portray the challenges faced by Queer individuals in deeply religious and traditional communities. Where homophobia is often justified with religious and cultural arguments. It portrays homosexuality as a secret identity, which reinforces that being homosexual is something to be

ashamed of. This narration aligns with the social stigma which treats homosexuality as abnormal. The film depicts the harsh reactions of the family in both *Moothan* and *Kaathal: The Core* when the sexuality of the Protagonist is revealed. This shows the Homophobic attitudes of the Indian society. Here, the family represents the society, which shows the rejection and violence faced by the Queer individuals.

In *Kaathal: The Core*, though Mathew's father is aware of his sexuality, but forces Mathew to get married to Omana, saying that it will cure him after getting married. This shows how Indian families try to hide the real identities of the family members for fear of social judgment. Here, Mathew's journey also reflects internalised homophobia, where he struggles to accept his own sexuality due to societal conditions. His decision to marry Omana and lead a normal life is the coping mechanism he adopts in a Homophobic society. In *Moothan*, we see Akbar going out of Lakshadweep, leaving back his family and culture and settling in Mumbai with a new identity also represents the same coping mechanism.

From a homophobic perspective, *Kaathal: The Core* is seen as both reinforcing and challenging societal prejudices associated with Queer Community. While it portrays the pain and stigma associated with homosexuality, it also critiques these attitudes and advocates for greater empathy and understanding. The film ends with the message of acceptance towards homosexuality.

In *Moothan*, Akbar's relationship with Ameer in the Lakshadweep islands ended with violence and rejection from their own family. And we see the dialogues like spoiled kids in the movie, which reflects the deeply ingrained homophobia in rural and traditional Indian communities. Even in *Moothan*, one can witness the internalised homophobia when he eventually decides to leave Ameer and move to Mumbai, this reflects the pressure to conform to heteronormative norms.

In both films, the family represents a repressive force that denies individuals the freedom to express their true sexual identity. Their inability to accept Mathew and Akbar highlights the deep-rooted prejudice and lack of understanding about the Queer community, which characterizes the homophobic society. This attitude reflects how families in homophobic societies often prioritize societal approval over the well-being of their family members. The film also highlights how the families enforce heteronormative expectations and contribute to internalizing homophobia, forcing the individual to deny their true selves and accord heterosexuality.

Conclusion

The films *Moothan* (2019) and *Kaathal: The Core* (2023) reveal the evolving landscape of the LGBTQ+ community and its narration in Indian cinema, particularly in Malayalam cinema. These films challenge societal norms and offer a powerful exploration of identity, love, and self-acceptance. They delve into the emotional turmoil of repression, the pain of concealing one's true self, and the yearning for connection in a hostile world. It is very important to make such films which foster, understand and accept Homosexuals. These representations advocate the establishment of queer spaces and normalise the diverse sexual identities in society. It also opens up a dialogue about acceptance and understanding.

Both *Moothan* and *Kaathal: The Core* stand as important works which voice the emotional conflicts and struggles that queer individuals undergo in the homophobic society that corners them. While both films portray the family as a place of homophobic behaviour, they also critique the attitude of the family by highlighting the pain and suffering they cause in the individuals. These narrations encourage the audience to question and challenge homophobic norms within the family and society.

The selected Malayalam films serve as an important cultural text which reflects the transitions in the societal attitudes towards the Queer. These films delve into the complexities of homosexuality within the context of societal and personal acceptance. Though cinema is a medium mainly

for entertainment, it also addresses many social issues in its narratives. People look up to actors and try to imitate them. When such actors embrace the character of homosexuals in cinema, it allows people to accept and stand up for themselves. With leading actors like Nivin Pauly and Mammotty portrayed as Queer characters, these films help to bring the Queer identity into mainstream discourse.

As cinema has a huge impact on society, these representations can serve as catalysts for social change and dialogue about Queer and contribute to changing cultural attitudes. It is a powerful medium that influences public perception, fosters empathy and challenges the biasedness one has on the Queer community. The representation of Queer identity in cinema is not only a matter of artistic expression but also a crucial component of social discourse, which contributes to the normalization and visibility of the LGBTQ+ experience. Therefore, there should be more inclusivity and intersectionality in Queer narration in Indian cinema in the coming days, which can influence society's progress towards inclusivity and acceptance of the queer community.

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