Research Paper

Queering Film: Intersectional Performativity of Art and the Performing Bodies in *Moothon*

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ABSTRACT: *The film Moothon/ The Elder One, released in 2019 has its plot revolving around an array of queer people that breaks the stereotypes of LGBTQ representation in cinema. Through this study, I aim to analyze the performative narratives of the film, using the theory of Performativity put forward by Judith Butler. The study attempts to analyze the performance of the movie as an art form, placing it in the queer history of Indian cinema, and tries to dissect the performance of the major characters striding against the social constructions. The movie portrays the homophobic society, the nature of closets, the process of coming out, and the gender stereotypes, yet break the conventional typecasting of the same as negative or weak. It leads to the application of the concept of 'homosocial', majorly promoted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to learn how the narratives about the LGBTQ can grow beyond eroticism and can be 'endowed with the highest emotional and symbolic value'. As a result, the movie turns out to be a revolutionary representative art. However, the individual revolutions of the characters in the movie are failed by the society they live in. In short, the movie is a radical rendering of the characters' failed attempts, to validate their performance as unique identities. In conclusion, the acceptance of the attempt to queer a film, with unconventional narratives shows how our culture may have grown enough to recognize the non-stereotypical representations. However, its plot and the performativity of the characters indicate, how distant we are from a 'homosocial' culture that is inclusive of the LGBTQ community, despite their struggle against social conditioning. Yet, to the queer cinema, just one Moothon is not enough.*
KEYWORDS: *Queering film, LGBTQ, Queer Performativity, Homosocial, breaking stereotypes, representation*

I. INTRODUCTION

The foremost and the simplest idea towards inclusiveness is to understand that no kind of love is unusual, or iniquitous. It is only unjust when we debate them under such deliberations. Even when the intent is to create a discourse that points towards marginalization, it often creates niches where these identities are supposedly safe and treated special, but not as one of the common. By replacing the exclusiveness of same-sex love and the negative stereotyping with the habitual, can sift the normalcy of any kind of love into the thought process of the audience. To an audience that is used to the narratives that treat the whole spectrum of identity and sexuality as natural as the portrayal of any heterosexual relationship, it might be easier to build inclusivity in their daily life. It would also be less strenuous than preaching about it, to build a subconscious inclusive mentality like a habit.

"Queer theory posits that sexuality is a vast and complex terrain that encompasses not just personal orientation and/or behavior, but also the social, cultural, and historical factors that define and create the conditions for orientations and behaviors. As such, queer theory rejects essentialist or biological notions of gender and sexuality and sees them instead as fluid and socially constructed positionalities. The term queer, once a pejorative epithet used to humiliate gay men and women, is now used by academics to describe the broad, fluid, and ever-changing expanse of human sexualities. Queer can be used to describe any sexuality not defined as heterosexual procreative monogamy (usually the presumed goal of most classical Hollywood couplings); queers are people (including heterosexuals) who do not organize their sexuality according to that rubric" (Benshoff and Griffin, 1)

Queering a movie should also undergo the same process of recognizing and representation the spectrum of identities and sexualities. Representing queer in Cinema is not so uncommon in Indian Cinema now. However, an active question that lurks around these narrations is how much justice these narratives do to the characters. Often, the movies portray the LGBTQ community as a special category of people. They are very commonly used to enhance humour, by ridiculing their identity. Otherwise, they are these special groups of people/ or a person, whose story is depicted as a survival. They are often considered weak, struggling characters that are sidelined from society. Whenever there is a presence of an LGBTQ member, the part becomes special, not only because of their sexuality and because of gender, but also because it is an uncommon presence in the mainstream. There are many negative portrayals and often the cinema turns a blind eye towards the possible social reformation that can be brought in with a responsible representation. It often fails to portray what queer fundamentally means. As representation is one major event through which we understand the unfamiliar, it is also important to make the representation with political correctness.

Malayalam Cinema has been a bit forward in the bold depictions of same sex love, as in the movies like *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978), *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (1986), and *Sancharam* (2004). Even though such movies were released in earlier times, there is not a visible progress that followed them. In fact, many movies that came up later had regressive representations, like in the movie *Chanthupottu* (2005). There are only a few movies that could be termed queer, or having queer elements, which means that there isn't enough representation. The latest movie that had a distinct depiction of queer is *Moothon* (2019). However, in Indian Cinema and specially in Malayalam Cinema, less study has been done to trace and interpret the nature of representation, that would compel for more queer affirmative narrations and thereby promote lesser homophobic, binary constructions. It is necessary to understand the path towards which the cinematic portrayals are headed.

II. QUEER IN THE MALAYALAM FILM *MOOTHON*

The film *Moothon*/ *The Elder One*, released in 2019 has its plot revolving around an array of queer people that breaks the stereotypes of LGBTQ representation in cinema. The movie, under the direction of Geethu Mohandas, who also wrote the screenplay originally under the title *Insha' Allah: In Pursuit of Akbar*, for which she won the Global Filmmaking Award at the 2016 Sundance Film Festival. It later amassed huge recognition internationally after its premiere at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival as *The Elder One*. The narrative is bilingual featuring the Jeseri dialect of Malayalam and Hindi. The exceptional performance of the actors, Nivin Pauly, Roshan Mathew, Sanjana Dipu, Shashank Arora, Sobhita Dhulipala, Melissa Raju Thomas, Sujith Shankar, etc. rightly complement the nuances of the characterization. Nivin Pauly secured the best actor award in the New York Indian Film Festival and got a speMcial mention in the 2019 Kerala States Film Awards. The movie was awarded the best film award and Geethu Mohandas was nominated for the best director award in the New York Indian Film Festival. Sanjana Dipu acquired the best child actor award in the same.

The movie is weaved around Mulla, played by Sanjana Dipu, a 14-year-old from Lakshadweep who has been making plans to go to Mumbai and find her long lost brother, Akbar. Mulla is always seen dressed in baggy shirts and trousers. We understand that she is a girl only after a few events in the movie. She hangs out with two boys who are probably the only friends she has. Akbar, if alive, is the only family left for her. On the island, she lives under the care of Moosa, a former friend of Akbar. Several incidents like the one with the teacher in the school who shames her for dressing like a boy and being a bad influence on her friends, some boys who force her to wear makeup and a veil, etc establish Mulla's life on the island. People around her including Moosa questions her dressing and repeatedly advise about how to dress and behave. She is fed up with how she is treated as a liability and is determined to go to Mumbai to find her elder brother who had long left the island. She has limited knowledge about her brother and assumes that he left the island as an aftermath of an affair with Aamina, their neighbor.

One night she decides to make her way on a boat to Mumbai which eventually gets destroyed in a storm. She is rescued by a ship destined to Mumbai, spends time in an orphanage, fleas from there, and ends up in Kamathipura. She gets bullied by the local boys and eventually ends up with Bhai/ Akbar who was into dealing with drugs and child trafficking. All this time she is mistaken for a boy, by the way, she dresses. Akbar eventually understands that Mulla is a girl and that he is her brother. This brings back his memories of the island, from which he had to abscond because of an affair not with Aamina, but with Ameer her brother. He never reveals that he was Mulla's brother, for whom she was searching.

The flashback reveals the other side of Akbar, where he falls in love with Ameer who was a mute. The depiction of their romance is so beautiful that takes full advantage of the beauty of Lakshadweep. It breaks the conventional erotic depictions of homosexuality. It is almost platonic, highly emotional. However, their desire demanded a 'homosocial' society for its fulfillment. Living in a homophobic society, they tried to resist the people around them. However, Ameer is compelled to marry a girl, and Akbar disagrees with the idea to elope and settle in Mumbai. Ameer commits suicide before Akbar could change his mind and go back to him.

Now, knowing that Mulla is not safe with him, he approaches Latheef who was transgender. Latheef compels Mulla to dress like a girl since he knew the difficulties in not conforming to societal standards. Mulla runs away from Latheef hoping to go back to Akbar and lands at the hands of Salim who tries to sell her. Akbar comes in search of her and is shot. The movie ends by showing a happy Mulla in a brothel, all adorned in women's clothes and flowers. This existential drama thus, has its plot revolving around an array of queer people that breaks the stereotypes of LGBTQ representation in cinema. The performance of the movie, artists, and the characters are bold, explores the virgin terrains of storytelling, and asserts the idea of non-binary identities and sexualities.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) revolutionized the thoughts about sex, gender, and sexuality. It challenges the basic categories of human identities and asks questions about their origin and their purpose in society. She does not agree with the basic idea of feminist theory, which is limited to the assertion of the need for identity and its representation in the mainstream. She says that it results only in categorizing people into more labels and false distinctions, which will eventually create more split in the society rather than unifying it. She explains how questioning these prejudiced labels can help society. She reconstructs the differences between sex and gender, which are defined as naturally given and socially constructed, respectively. However, she states that sex is also a social construction and thereby interrogates the politics, social and cultural exercises behind the binary labelling of people into male/female, masculine/famine, etc. While studying a movie for its queer performance, we can observe it like we follow the performance of a text or a person, for their repeated actions and social interactions. While considering a single movie, the plurality of the performances occurs, when we take into account every performance of the actors and the characters. Placing a movie in the historic timeline can lead to a comparative study, analyzing the repeated queer representations and the accuracy of it.

Butler attempts to give an account of how the identities are formed by examining the activities and performance of the individuals rather than the inherent quintessence with which they are said to be born. She develops her famous performative theory based on these observations, which states that gender is performance. She argues that

"acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as the cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means." (Butler, 185)

Thus, everyday actions, language, social roles, lifestyle, dress code, taboos, restrictions, etc. play an important role in building up the identity of an individual, which in turn is professed as masculine and feminine qualities. She explains her understanding of heterosexuality as the base of performativity. According to her traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity are decided based on heterosexuality, which is normalized while all other sexualities are sidelined. She liberates these notions of established identities from the sexual essence and the human body. These deconstructions of previous notions lead to a transformation in the understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality in philosophy and literature.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick backs this theory and says that "I don't remember the phrase, "queer performativity used before, but it seems to be made necessary by, if nothing else, the work of Judith Butler in and since her important book *Gender Trouble*." She later adds on that this performativity should also be able "to prove useful in some way of understanding the obliquities among meaning, being, and doing, not only around the examples of drag performances and (it's derivative?) gendered self-representation, but equally for such complex speech acts as coming out, for workaround AIDS and other grave identity-implicating illnesses, and the self-labelled, transversely but urgently representational placarded body of demonstration."

When sexuality and gender in the film are studied using textual analysis, we study them for their performance. Performance can vary with context. When we analyze the film the performativity is placed against the context of the history of cinema and its treatment of the queer. Likewise, the performativity of the actors is placed within the history of the queer performance of the artists as the characters. Also, considering these characters as prototypes of the LGBTQ community, the analysis of the performativity can shed light on the life of the members of the LGBTQ community.

In this context, while analyzing the movie, the performing bodies are the film, the artists, and the characters in the film itself. The study attempts to analyze the performance of the movie as art and tries to dissect the performance of the major characters striding against the social constructions. The movie portrays the homophobic society, the nature of closets, the process of coming out, and other gender stereotypes and yet breaks the conventional typecasting of the same as negative or weak. It leads to the application of the concept of 'homosocial', majorly promoted by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to learn how the narratives about the LGBTQ can grow beyond eroticism and can be 'endowed with the highest emotional and symbolic value'. As a result, the movie turns out to be a revolutionary representative art.

While considering the movie and its performance in the history of cinema, it is can be called a revolution in the narration of queer. It has its drawbacks in the plot and has unconvincing coincidences that somehow disturb the course of storytelling. Events like Mulla ending up in Mumbai after the boat wreck and reaching straight to the police station where Akbar is arrested, are not easily palatable. It gave the impression that the scriptwriter was somehow rushing through the part of getting Mulla to Mumbai so that she could concentrate on the major events of the story.

When a movie with a heterosexual tragic love story is considered normal or usual, a homosexual movie is treated as a portrayal of special people with special relationships- gets a different perspective of survival movie- When the reason for the failure in the heterosexual relationship's is placed on many things, here it is exclusively their sexuality. However, *Moothon* is certainly a fresh take on the portrayal of the marginalized. It stands out from the traditional narratives by eliminating the notion of meek, helplessness, powerlessness from the characters. They are strong, confident, and fight all the odds proudly, and holds on to their fight as far as they can. Eventually, they fail. However, it is more appropriate to say that society and its adamant stereotypical constructions failed them. The movie made queer beautiful, deviating from the traditional narrations of immoral love, possessed or tarnished transgender, the glorification of hegemonic masculinity, and made jokes out of queer people. Thus, the movie is queer and inclusive in itself. In a world of homophobic movies, *Moothon* stands out as an example of inclusive, mature narration that normalizes love as love alone. It normalizes the exclusiveness out of everything that does not come under heteronormativity and is queer.

"*Moothon* is what happens when a powerful story meets a competent director who ropes in some of the best artists and technicians, knowing exactly what to get from them, and how. *Moothon* is a brave film." - *The Times of India*

The movie thrives on the spectacular performance of the artists. The movie's name *Moothon* refers to the character of Nivin Pauly, literally meaning "the elder one". It is can be said that Akbar is the best character Pauly had played so far. He succeeded in bringing out the nuances of a well- known performer of Kuthu Ratheeb, a Muslim ritual. Nivin Pauly captured the contrasting gestures of a young man falling in love and the man who turns out to be a felon, so effortlessly. The narration and the actor only stress the fact that he is in love, and the fact that he is in love with another man is treated as normal as any heterosexual love story. It is uncommon for a film to not stress the fact that it is dealing with gay romance. Instead, the director decides to consider it as a usual romance that ended tragically and concentrates on the quest of Mulla in search of her brother, who is leading an unlawful life in Mumbai. At the same time, the story knocks on the stubborn social constructions, smoothly introducing taboos such as a gay couple, cross-dressing girl, transgender, prostitute, etc, as a very normal part of life. It is an interwoven existential drama of a bunch of sidelined people.

Sanjana Dipu's as Mulla is yet another important performance. She becomes Mulla with utmost easiness. The artist does total justice to the performing body of Mulla, who is dressed up as a boy. The audience assumes her as a boy at the beginning of the movie. Mulla is most confident about her identity. She is uncomfortable in dressing like a girl and boldly fights off every instance that asks her to do so. She is asked to behave like a girl on several occasions, by some boys from the school, the teacher, Moosa and Latheef in Mumbai. She powerfully vocalizes her identity throughout all these incidents. Latheef played by Sujith Shankar, is a transgender who had enough of the world that thinks only in binaries. She advises Mulla that it is a trap and that it is easier to live according to what others think is right. She even forces some bangles and lipstick on Mulla just like the boys from the island did. Mulla runs away to find a world that will accept her as she was. Sujith Shankar is unbelievably flexible in portraying Latheef.

Roshan Mathew's Ameer is a sensitive character, which can be seen as a metaphor for all the people living in the closet. He is mute and many instances indicate how people have no right to talk about how they wanted to live. Even his marriage symbolizes how the family and society he lived in decided his consent. His helplessness and suicide heavily correspond to the LGBTQ community that is forced to stay in the dark corners of the closet without being able to voice their identity.

However, the individual revolutions of the characters in the movie are failed by the society they live in. In short, the movie is a radical rendering of the characters' failed attempts, to validate their performance as unique identities. Ameer commits suicide, Akbar is hot dead, Mulla finally starts dressing up as a girl, and Latheef is seen wearing men's clothes by the end of the movie. They expressed and performed what they wanted, however, that was not enough for society to change. The homophobic, binary people around them outnumbered them. Their repeated performance was not sufficient to transform the traditional stereotypes. However, they might change with further persuasion. Similarly, the movie and the actors broke stereotypes to represent these performing bodies. However, only if more bodies were performed to question the stereotypes would it suffice to destroy the conventional narratives on queer in cinema. Yet, this movie is one of the few of the kind. However, according to Butler's theory, the act remains real only until it is performed. Therefore, it needs to be reiterated repeatedly to make an impact. Thus, one movie is not enough to queer the cinema but can set a paradigm that can initiate politically correct representations of the queer spectrum.

III.   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the acceptance of the attempt to queer a film, with unconventional narratives shows how our culture may have grown enough to recognize the non-stereotypical representations. However, its plot and the performativity of the characters indicate, how distant we are from a 'homosocial' culture that is inclusive of the LGBTQ community, despite their entire struggle against social conditioning. Also, *Mothoon* as a movie is a queer performing body, as the cinematic experience in its treatment of characters trashes binaries. However, just like the repeated performances that contribute to the formation of identities, cinema also needs to perform inclusivity repeatedly to queer the whole process of filmmaking. It needs to be a continuous process, which follows the lead of pioneering movies like "Moothon" to promote inclusivity.

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