

# PUBLIC GAZE AND BEHAVIOURAL TRAITS ON TRANSGENDERS IN FILMS: A STUDY ON MALAYALAM FILMS CHANTHUPOTTU AND NJAN MARYKUTTY

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## Abstract

The word transgender is not unknown to our society today. We have familiarized this term through media especially main stream news media. Media plays a vital role in highlighting the issues and discussing prominent themes related to the third gender which makes it a priority for the human race to progress further. They are often presented as villains, comedian, victim etc. in films. The current research attempts to understand the public gaze and behavioral traits on transgenders in select Malayalam films. This paper tries to analyse the representation of transgender individuals in Malayalam films by concentrating on the attitudinal changes - the way they are being addressed, level of acceptance, portrayal of the character inside the movie, comparing the acceptance of both the movies among the public, public gaze on transgender and changes of behavioral traits of them in the movies. The current paper followed content analysis methodology including the films: Chanthupottu directed by Lal Jose and Njan Marykutty directed by Renjith Sanker.

**Keywords:** Behavior, Content analysis, Identity, Public gaze, Transgender

## INTRODUCTION

Film as medium has entered the minds of people within a quick span of time. Each film offers a platform for fun, enjoyment and further discussions as well such as Addaminte Variyellu, Neelakkuyil, Oru Vadakkan Veeragadha. The plot and the portrayal of the movie that gives life to the characters has to be live in audiences' mind. Some of the themes have been contributed to many discussions, evaluations and critical reading which are present even now. Many of the films in Malayalam industry have gone through such critical analysis because of the way they have presented the plot. It is natural to recall some of the realities that are borrowed from the society as living images on the screen reminiscent of them. The movies Chanthupottu and Njan Marykutty are relevant in the society by the way how the filmmakers have treated its topic. The main theme in both the movies is the life of transgenders.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As an art form, the acceptability of film is great in society when compared to drama, and it is clear that the film has taken over the minds of the audience within a short time. Movies have been able to make a spectacle of images on silver screen. The scenes displayed on the big screen attract spectators. Sometimes these films can be totally fictional or they can be based on real life. But there are some movies which are thought provoking. The Malayalam Cinema industry has the credit of collection of films which are not only artistic in nature but has a social relevance as well. Such films have been able to capture the focus from the family audiences in Kerala. Though the history of Malayalam cinema spans over the last nine decades, the slightest reference regarding queer depictions can be traced from the late 1970's only. Malayalam cinema deals with a variety of themes which has become a commercial success. Filmmakers experiment the different kinds of narrative styles as well as the technical side in the production of a movie. But till now only few filmmakers have tested the waters when related to gender identity. The film 'Randu Penkuttikal' was the first to handle

gender related subjects on silver screen. Very few films were released on the same theme after this movie. When coming forward to the millennial time, a few films depicted characters whose sexual orientation and gender identity deviate from the patriarchal heteronormativity. Queerness was interpreted as an aberration and such characters were received as the product of “faulty upbringing” (Muraleedharan (2002), 76).

The character Radhakrishnan in Chanthupottu (2005) was forced to undergo a “masculinizing” process as his male body and feminine behaviors did not conform to the binary expectations of gender expectation by the society (Prabhakaran 318). When a human being is born, it is known according to their physical characteristics. Identifying the child as a Boy/Girl or Man/Woman is based on the sexual organs. The first identity of an infant is gender identity. It is all about the knowledge of your gender. And how they express or present their gender externally by their dress code, their body movement and the voice which marks their identity in society. When a person starts to live according to their gender identity rather than the gender they were born is called gender transition (National Centre for Transgender Equality). In the general view of our society, if a person does not adhere to his real gender, it separates him to be a third gender. The third sex is a non-legal term. People those who are marginalised under this type of personality according to their nature and body are commonly called as Transgenders. Some people are in the same category with the actual physical characteristics. There are also people who are tagged as transgender by the way they behave in a surrounding. So the transgender representation is seen to be distanced from the audience as objects of ridicule or hatred. They are rarely exposed and accepted as a community by the society (‘Cross-dressing Cinema: An analysis of transgender representation in film’).

An individual’s unique traits and characteristics, family dynamics, cultural and ethnic norms, beliefs and attitudes, and experiences of oppression significantly contributes to the development of one’s inner self and social outer world (iresearchnet.com). This shows the identity of a person; gender identity is not only the identity of an individual but has an element of character. General attention from the public depends on a person's identity and behavior.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, meaning of gaze is to look steadily and intently, especially in admiration, surprise, or thought. This means gaze is the way you look at the thing to know something more about it. We can understand the meaning of their look from the way they look at a certain thing. The meaning of public gaze is looking steadily for a long time because you find them attractive or interesting, or because you are thinking about something else ( Collins English Dictionary ). There is substantial difference between looking at a person with anger, in a happy mood and looking with suspicious curiosity. The public in the film is really a representative of the society. The perception of gaze towards the protagonist –Radha and Marykutty - by a society in the movie is often influenced by the way how the public gaze is towards that stereotyped person in reality.

### **Rationale of the study**

Films that focus on LGBT issues in Malayalam cinema are less in number. Movies with this as the main theme in Malayalam films is just seven. The first film is directed by Mohan in 1978, titled ‘Randu Penkuttikal’. But this film was shot on the basis of VT Nandakumar's novel on the same title. The movie by Padmarajan ‘Desadanakkilikal Karayarilla’(1986) tells the story of relationship among teenage girls. This category also includes the following movies, Ardhaniari (2012) Mumbai Police (2013), Papillo Buddha (2013) Girls, (2016) and the latest release Njan Marykutty (2018)

The films Chanthupottu and Njan Marykutty mainly focuses on transgenders and their lives. Both the movies were widely accepted in the society. In 2015 the Government of Kerala passed the policy titled State policy for transgenders in Kerala 2015, the first state who makes a clear policy on these marginalized lives in India. These two movies are the very before and after released films the policy came. And the central character shown in this film won the Kerala State Best Actor award for this magical enact in the following years 2006 and 2019.

The movies focus on how transgenders are less familiar in the society but notable in news stories. It deals with a situation where a child is born in which society and surrounding environment around him makes a significant difference in shaping his personality. The family and community has the responsibility to provide an environment for a child to grow in its individuality, whether it is a boy or a girl. To the extent that society and social surroundings seem to be keeping a kind of attitude towards them to be more formidable than the way the society desires. The implications of this attitude results in the reflections and expectations of the parents that they have before the baby is born.

Radhakrishnan, who is nicknamed as Radha in Chanthupottu, is not a transgender ever. But there is an attempt to rear Radhakrishnan, who was born after grandmother's wish of having a girl child, into a female instead of a male despite him being a boy. In plain sight, the movie shows the central role played by a character who is a transgender. The film deals with how the society behaves with such a personality. In a close scrutiny, the marginalized approach to transgender by the people in our common social environment can be reflected. The movie released in 2005 cannot be considered as too old, but when we reach 2018, the attitudinal changes are visible not from every corner but can be treated existential in both the reel and real life. Though the family does not support the viewpoint of the society, there is an influence on the individual that affects their lives. Today, society has examples of people who are eager to live without fear for the rest of their lives. The legal protection provided by the government is a strong backbone.

The next film draws the life of Marykutty who fights against the society with disgust and fear. Some positive changes to the transgender community could be seen after the release of the film. Some of the possibilities were of employment vacancies and the society's interest in helping them to go out and attain these jobs. These two films are highlighted by a section of society where the transgender community used to be previously marginalised.

These movies screening shows how high the intake of a person's sexual identity is in society. The study analyses the lives of people who have been categorized as third gender or in an umbrella term-transgenders and how they are treated in the mainstream.

### Objectives

- To study the behavior of protagonists including the voice, intonation, and attitude
- To analyze the characterizations through body movements, gesture and posters
- To analyze the the public gaze towards transgender

### Research Question

How they are portraying the lives of people who have been categorized as transgenders in select Malayalam films and how these films are addressed their behavioral traits and public gaze in the main stream

### RESEARCH DESIGN

Chanthupottu (2005) and Njan Marykutty (2018) are the two Malayalam movies that won commercial success which carries the LGBT theme from 1978 till date. Chanthupottu is the last film which released before the state policy for transgenders in Kerala 2015 and Njan Marykutty is the first film released after comes the policy. The central character shown in these two movies Dileep ( Radha) and Jayasoorya (Marykutty) won the title of Best Actor by the Kerala Government on the respective years 2006 and 2019 for their magical performance. Based on the study, quantitative content analysis was selected for data analysis.

The total length of the study will be 2.5 hours each. The researcher divided these movies into three parts such as introduction of 30 minutes, conflict with duration of one hour and the resolution of 30 minutes. This is the common criterion for dividing film studies.

Researchers find three main parameters and supporting sub parameters for quantifying data for the study. Identity, Public gaze and behaviour are the parameters using for the study. The parameter 'identity' is measured by the way protagonists are being addressed and the parameter 'public gaze', is measured to analyse the acceptance of protagonists among the public in the movie. The question of how the society from the film looks at them is being answered by showing family, authorities, peer groups as society and so the public gaze is evaluated from this point – Society. For the better understanding of public gaze, it is divided as gaze from family, society and authorities. The study evaluates the the gaze of people from different community that looks at the protagonists for their visual pleasure and to harass them. At the same time, very few of them look at the protagonists in a supporting way and that is measured by comparing the acceptance of both the central characters among the public within the movie. The third parameter 'behaviour' is measured by portrayal of the character inside the movie.

## DATA ANALYSIS

This study tries to find out the self of the characters being addressed in movies through behavioral traits, identity and public gaze on transgenders and those who have a character like transgenders inside the movie.

The theme of Njan Marykutty is a transsexual man's attempt to realize his true orientation in a society that stigmatizes gender transformation. The story begins with Mathukutty, who is a transsexual but is addressed as a 'transgender' by the society. It continues to show him being under the pressure of being a man when he thinks of himself as a woman. He then decides to undergo a sex-change surgery to become a woman. Total duration of this movie is 2.05 hours which includes 76 scenes.

The movie Chanthupottu has 63 scenes and has a duration of 2.20 hours.

### Analyzing the identity of protagonists

In the film Njan Marykutty, there are 109 shots where the dress code identified by the protagonist and 9 in Njan Chanthupottu.

In the film Chanthupottu, there are 53 shots of given dress code to the protagonist by the society which includes family whereas 1 in the film Njan Marykutty.

In the film Chanthupottu, there are 65 shots of body movements and facial expressions of the protagonist which reflects the self-identity of them whereas in the film Njan Marykutty it is 35.

In order to assess this, the sketch maneuvers have been observed from three levels - dress code identified by the protagonist, dress code given by the society, then body movements and facial expressions. The results analyses the central character Radha using the dress code identified by himself which are shirts and pants and evaluates the dress code given by the family/ society. The facial expressions such as eye movements, smile, shyness and body movements such as the way he walks, dance and hand movements which clearly shows a feminine side towards him. Of the 65 shots out of 63 scenes clearly shows the above parameter.

When it comes to the protagonist Marykutty, she is using the dress code identified by herself which is saree in 109 shots. And there is only one shot in which she follows the dress code given by the family/ society. The facial expressions such as eye movements, smile and the way she dances, hand movements while walking clearly shows the woman inside her. There are 35 shots from the 76 scenes which clearly shows the matured expression of the above parameter.

### identity of protagonists

| Parameter                 | Sub-parameter                             | Chanthupottu | Njan Marykutty |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Identity                  | Dress code-identified by the protagonists | 9            | 109            |
|                           | Dress code-given by the society           | 53           | 1              |
|                           | Body movements and facial expressions     | 65           | 35             |
| Total shot/scene observed |                                           | 63           | 76             |

table:1

### Analyzing the Public gaze on protagonists

In the film Chanthupottu, there are 56 shots in which the society (the public not of family relatives) looks at the protagonists and 33 in Njan Marykutty.

In the film Chanthupottu, there are 6 shots of how the family sees the protagonist whereas in the film Njan Marykutty there are 16.

In the film Njan Marykutty there are 35 shots of how the officials perceives the protagonist whereas in the film Chanthupottu it is 10.

Here in the film Njan Marykutty, there are 33 shots that shows the supportive attitude towards the protagonist whereas in the film Chanthupottu it is 12.

Here, the level of public gaze on protagonist is relatively better than Chanthupottu.

| public gaze on protagonists |                              |              |                |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Parameter                   | Sub parameter                | Chanthupottu | Njan Marykutty |
| Public Gaze                 | Family                       | 6            | 16             |
|                             | Society                      | 56           | 33             |
|                             | Officials                    | 10           | 35             |
|                             | Support from different sides | 12           | 33             |
| Total shot/scene observed   |                              | 63           | 76             |

table no: 2

### Analyzing the behavioral traits of protagonists

The portrayal of behavioral traits of protagonist in the movie analyzed is categorized as the parameter behavior. The shots which are very evident for imitation of sounds, real sounds, the positive and negative attitudes are mainly considered here.

In the film Njan Marykutty, there are 75 shots of real sound used by the protagonists and 10 in Chanthupottu. And in the film Chanthupottu, there are 21 shots where the imitating sound is used by the protagonist whereas in the film Njan Marykutty it is 5.

In the film Njan Marykutty there are 33 shots that reflects the positive attitude of protagonist towards the life whereas in the film Chanthupottu it is 7.

Here in the film Njan Marykutty, there are 15 shots that shows the negative attitude of the protagonist whereas in the film Chanthupottu it is 9.

| behavioral traits of protagonists |                   |              |                |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Parameter                         | Sub parameter     | Chanthupottu | Njan Marykutty |
| Behavior                          | Real sound        | 10           | 75             |
|                                   | Sound imitation   | 21           | 5              |
|                                   | Positive attitude | 7            | 33             |
|                                   | Negative attitude | 9            | 15             |
| Total shot/scene observed         |                   | 63           | 76             |

table no: 3

### FINDINGS

The changes of the central character can be understood in three stages of the film. Here the study shows that, the protagonists' readiness to reveal their identity and the way they behave is appreciable in the movie Njan Marykutty whereas the protagonists in Chanthupottu fails to do so. The perception of transgenders by the society in real life is clearly portrayed by Radha, the main character in the movie.

The character in the film is not just a creativity but it's also a replica of reality. The character shown in the huge canvas of the film reflects a story of the mysterious life of transgenders who are familiar to the society. So some of the live images are once again shown on the big screen for a large scale attention. The two characters present the evolution of a person who goes from one of his real character to another. The behavior of the characters in the movie and the change in their attitude, is remarkable. Marykutty's courage is unparalleled when compared to Radha. Her willingness and openness to reveal her true identity is courageous and admirable. This character is not like Radha who is scared of people but shows a person who is motivated and has challenged herself to the gaze of society through her mental power and courage. The shot of her courage that shows in the movie in resolution part is noteworthy. Some of the pertinent scenes in the movies are as follows:

- a. The way she looks at Sub-Inspector Kunjippalu as she leaves the police station shows an impactful change in the transgender segments in the past few years that are legitimate and are protected by the government, courts in current scenario.
- b. The songs in Chanthupottu shows a visual pleasure to the audience while the songs in Njan Marykutty depicts the positive attitude of the protagonist in the movie.
- c. The choice made by Marykutty to go into a disabled titled toilet when there is a presence of toilets for male and female.
- d. The protagonist in Chanthupottu earns his livelihood by teaching dance to girls while the character Marykutty is a radio jockey who strives to become a police officer in the future and later on goes to achieve her dream in the movie.
- e. The scene where Radha understands that he is able to reproduce and the steps that he takes later on to bring his son as a male and not as female like he was brought up is quite appreciable.

Each person has a right to identify the creative nature of male and female and to live according to the established pattern. These films proclaim that no one will be afraid of the public gaze and accusations through these central characters.

### Scope of the study

The present study would contribute to the deeper understanding of films that portray the life of transgenders. The behavioral traits and public gaze of society on these people is considered as the main focus of this study. These films have been able to point out the approach to transgenders and the change in society brought about by them. These films clearly captured that their lives are distinguished by the marginalization and barriers of society over them. In the current scenario, every transgender has experienced their own life and also focuses on the film as an effort for resistance against the societal norms and pressures. The names that the community calls them, the way people look at them, the neglect that society shows and their approach to life handled here in these movies are noteworthy.

This study would provide introspective views to the public regarding the life and existence of transgenders by these protagonists. Such study is deemed important to guide the movie as effective medium for communication.

### CONCLUSION

It is the right time to discuss the life of people those who are under the umbrella term 'Transgender'. There are different types of category under this umbrella term, but general public has no interest to know that. Although one can see that in the recent times these notions are being changed. Government officials and court are legally accepting them to live in the society itself and providing them the legal protection for staying here. These two movies portrayed the life of a person who is categorised under the title transgender. The movie Njan Marykutty highlights the struggles and the survival of a transsexual. So she represents the whole community to those who really wants to reveal their identity to the society. And the term 'transsexual' is popularised through the character after this movie's release.

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