



Nearing Gender Fluidity: A Queer Analysis of *Moothon*

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Abstract

Queer representation in mainstream Malayalam cinema witnessed a radical change with the release of the movie *Moothon/ The Elder One*. The movie is a realistic portrayal of the conservative Indian society with its rigid gender constraints. The brilliant characterization of Akbar, Amir, Mulla and Latheef exalted the film to another level by breaking stereotypes. This paper attempts to analyse the queer representation in the movie against the backdrop of a heteronormative society. “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 sexualities.” (Benshoff and Griffin 1) Sexuality and gender identity are two indispensable factors which shape the identity of a person. Compulsory heterosexuality leaves no choice for the queer community other than to blend into either feminine or masculine gender for acceptance and belonging in the society. This study attempts to analyze the failed performances of the characters to validate their sexual orientation and identity and also the need for a homosocial, inclusive and gender fluid society

Keywords : Queer theory, homophobia, gender identity, heteronormativity

Introduction

“Cinema is a mirror by which we often see ourselves.” – Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu

Cinema, the enthralling piece of art is moreover a medium of social and cultural expression. As rightly commented by Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, cinema does mirrors the culture, beliefs, norms and practices of a particular society. With its overpowering visuals, soul stirring background scores and phenomenal performances, cinema hypnotizes the viewers which indeed makes it the most popular mass media of the century. If we analyse the history of films, we can see how they often create or complement cultural, social and political movements. Most often certain films become trendsetters, which acts as a framework for other films to follow.

As far as Malayalam film fraternity is concerned, there was a stereotypical way in which gender norms were portrayed in films since ages. Although the icing differed from time to time, the underlying flavour or essence remained more or less the same. With the emerging new wave of gender consciousness in multidisciplinary studies, there is happening a deviational approach in Malayalam films as well. *Moothon: The Elder One*, the directorial debut film of Geetu Mohandas in Malayalam is one such trendbreaker. The movie is brimming with plethora of themes ranging from social hierarchy, transvestism, child trafficking, child abuse, homosexuality, complexities of transgender to gender politics. Though an overabundance of themes make the plot some what wobbly, Mohandas was successful in giving depth to the main characters, which makes the movie stand out. This paper aims to place the characteristics against the heteronormative society .

Gender Analysis of *Moothon/ The Elder One*

The film *Moothon/ The Elder One* directed by Geethu Mohandas and released in 2019 is one of the critically acclaimed movies of the decade. The plot is weaved around an array of characters facing the burden of gender constructions and biases. The movie revolves around Mulla, a thirteen year old girl, played by Sanjana Dipu who is in search of her elder brother Akbar played by Nivin Pauly. Mulla lives in Lakshadweep under the guardianship of Moosa, a former friend of Akbar. Mulla always dresses like a boy in baggy shirts and trousers, the gender identity of Mulla is revealed only later in the movie. She hangs out with two boys in the island and is often bullied by other boys at school due to her cross-dressing. Frustrated with the life in the

island, she is determinant to go to Bombay to reunite with her brother. But she only has a little knowledge about her brother since he left when she was too young. Mulla believes that Akbar left Lakshadweep due to an affair with their neighbour Amina. With the help of her friends, Mulla manages to find the contact number of Amina.

One night, Mulla sets out alone in a small boat to go to Bombay which gets washed away in the high tides. Luckily she got rescued and finally ends up in Kamathipura, a street in Mumbai. There she is taken under the protection of Bhai/Akbar who is into dealing drugs and child trafficking. Neither Mulla nor Akbar realizes that they are siblings. Misunderstanding Mulla to be a boy, Akbar and his friend Salim decides to sell Mulla after proper grooming. But Akbar eventually understands that Mulla is actually his sister who came to find him. This brings back flashbacks from Lakshadweep.

A brighter and happier side of Akbar is visualized in the flashbacks. He was an ardent believer in God who used to perform the religious ritual, *kuthu ratheeb*. He falls in love with Amir, Amina's brother who is a mute. Powerless to strive against the constraints of society which defies homosexual love, they decide to succumb. Amir marries another girl but tries to persuade Akbar to elope with him to Mumbai, but finally commits suicide when all his dreams shatter. A heartbroken Akbar leaves for Mumbai.

Akbar leaves Mulla in the custody of a transgender Latheef since she is not safe with him. But Mulla somehow ends up in the hands of Salim who sells her. Akbar gets shot during his search for Mulla. The movie finally ends with the image of Mulla in a brothel, all decked up. Thus the movie is a manifestation of how gender constraints shape and shatter individual lives. The movie zooms into the lives of LGBTQ community in India. The queer portrayal in the movie is a shift from the stereotypical queer characterization in mainstream Bollywood films.

A gender stereotype can be defined as a standardized and often pejorative idea or image held about an individual on the basis of their gender. Traditionally in Indian cinema, including Bollywood the LGBTQ community or queer in general has been portrayed as sidekicks, villains or for comic relief which became the stereotype for queer representation. Although at times, certain movies such as *Deshadanakili Karayarilla*, *Ardhanari*, *Sancharam* etc stood out. *Moothon* is a recent addition and probably the first mainstream Malayalam movie which explored the different dimensions of queer in a broad spectrum.

Initially, the term queer was used to connote something odd or weird. Now it is an umbrella term which includes gay, lesbian and LGBTQ community.

“Queer can function as shorthand for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) community more generally. Queer is more often embraced to point to fluidity in identity, recognizing identity as a historically- contingent and socially constructed fiction that prescribes and prescribes against certain feelings and action.”(Hunt and Yip 2)

Queer theory which emerged in the 1990s has its roots in queer studies and women studies. It advocates against heteronormativity, homophobia and emphasizes inclusion and gender fluidity. Judith Butler is one among the most influential theorists in this area. In her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity*, she proposes the concept of performance or performativity in gender. Performance and performativity are deemed as the means by which body becomes a signifying system within social formations. “ Gender proves to be performance – that constitutes the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre- exist the deed.” (32) The characters in the movie can be seen as performing to satisfy their constructed gender roles. While male and female performances are deemed normal, the performances of those which doesn't belong to this framework are rejected. Akbar's performance was praised and acknowledged in the island till his relationship with Amir. Both Akbar and Amir failed to convince the homophobic society with their performance. Mulla's gender drag performance as a boy is challenged in multiple situations throughout the course of the film. For the common lot, their performances are masked and fake and renders them invisible.

Heteronormativity and homophobia are the root causes of queer trouble. Heteronormativity is the notion that deems heterosexuality as the normal, preferred and natural expression of sexuality which automatically puts the homosexual, bisexual and transgender community as the other or abhorrent. World communities are predominantly heteronormative. In the movie Geethu Mohandas tries to disclose the injustices meted out to the minority LGBTQ community solely because of the rigid homophobic ideals enrooted in society. In such a community, individuals have no choice other than to belong to either of the genders. Adrienne Rich in her essay *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* suggests that

“ compulsory heterosexuality, the drive to make everything heterosexual shapes our sexual socialization to such an extent that the only choice is to be straight.” Akbar and Amir's platonic love couldn't reach ultimate gratification due to this construction. Moosa who beats up Amir when he finds about their affair, Amir's sister and family who forces him to marry another girl, Akbar's mother who beats him up are all representatives of the heteronormative society. Even in family they are discriminated. Amir's muteness and Akbar's helplessness signify their incompetency to rally against the world. This is indeed the reality of a majority of gay or lesbian couple even in the contemporary society.

Geetu Mohandas has been successful in visualizing the warmth and passion between Akbar and Amir which goes beyond eroticism. The pristine beauty of Lakshadweep was like a cherry on top. The scenes where their eyes lock in the first meet, their embrace in the sea under full moon, the euphoria in Akbar's eyes when he stares at his own reflection in the mirror, Amir trying to mouth Akbar's name all brings out the intensity, sensitivity and tenderness of their love. This poignant portrayal compels the audience to forget about their sexual orientation atleast for the time being. Mohandas calls for the inclusion of love irrespective of sexual or gender differences.

The conflict between identity and sexuality is another theme brilliantly dealt with in the film. Sexuality may be defined as a complex array of social codes and forces, forms of individual activity and institutional power, which interact to shape the ideas of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment and which then operate under the rubric of what is 'natural', 'essential', 'biological', or 'god given'. In the movie, Akbar, Amir, Latheef and Mulla faces identity crisis. There is a scene where Akbar looks at his own reflection in the mirror smiling in excitement while his kohl rimmed eyes brimming with tears. It was the moment when Akbar realised his sexual orientation. He was ready to accept this new found identity with equal exhilaration and apprehension. Latheef who is a transgender could not adhere to either the masculine or feminine gender, hence he is derogated to the status of the other. Mulla who cross dresses as a boy is very confident about his identity. But societal norms expect her to behave or perform in a way befitting her sexual orientation. There are instances where the boys at school trying to put lipstick and makeup on Mulla which she resists boldly. In another scene Latheef forces lipstick and bangles on her. Latheef also adds, “Isn't it

better to live according to what others think?" This itself reveals how much importance is placed upon the sexual orientation of a person in defining his or her identity. Akbar who was once an ideal and respected youth in his island suddenly becomes an outcaste with the revelation of his gay inclinations. These characters stand as envoys for a community who's have been bearing the weight of gender constitutions.

All the characters in the movie are in a constant quest for home, security or stability, especially Akbar and Mulla. They had to flee from their homes to find a sense of belonging. For queer community, once they come out of the closet they will lose the sense of belonging. Amir is a representation of all those people who stays in the closet since they are mute and unable to vocalize their resistance. While Akbar and Latheef stand symbols to those who come out of the closet but are ripped of their identity and entrenched into the lower rungs of society. Mulla somehow tries her level best to remain gender fluid. But her efforts might also have been thwarted since we see her all decked up like a girl towards the climax. The darkness which pervades all through the movie is figurative of the darkness in the lives of LGBTQ community. But it is the subtle moonlight that is seeping in through the dark that keep the people going.

Conclusion

Geetu Mohandas directorial *Moothon/ The Elder One* is a revolutionary movie of the century which portrayed queer in its varied dimensions. The plot revolves around Mulla who is in a quest for her brother. The movie with its multiple narratives talks about gender constructions and gender troubles from the beginning. A queer analysis of the film reveals the heteronormative and homophobic attitude deep rooted in the Indian society and culture. In such a compulsory heterosexual society, the performances of the queer sections fails. They are either forced to remain in the closet in order to belong or to come out and be outcasted. In conclusion, the movie is a plea for an inclusive and gender fluid society.

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