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Performing The Self: Gender, Caste, And Agency In South Indian Trans Cinema

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ABSTRACT

Transgender representation in South Indian cinema has shifted from caricature and spectacle to narratives grounded in authenticity, struggle, and agency. This paper analyses three key films—Naanu Avanalla...Avalu (Kannada, 2015), Thangam from Paava Kadhaigal (Tamil, 2020), and Njan Marykutty (Malayalam, 2018)—to examine how gender identity, caste, social rejection, and personal resilience intersect within cinematic storytelling. Using Judith Butler's gender performativity, Susan Stryker's transgender studies framework, Halberstam's queer time, and Crenshaw's intersectionality, this study evaluates how films negotiate suffering, dignity, and empowerment. Audience reception from mainstream reviews and social discourse helps contextualize cultural shifts. Findings show that South Indian trans cinema balances realism and aspiration, exposing persistent violence while envisioning empowered futures.

Keywords: Transgender, South Indian Cinema, Gender Performativity, Intersectionality, Queer Studies, Caste, Identity, Representation.

INTRODUCTION

Indian cinema has long depicted transgender individuals through stereotypes—comic roles, predatory figures, or ritualized hijra appearances. These portrayals stripped transgender characters of humanity and agency. South Indian cinema largely followed the same pattern.

However, following activism, the NALSA (2014) judgment, and increased visibility of transgender communities, filmmakers began reframing transgender lives with nuance and respect. The selected films represent this transition:

Suffering-focused narratives (Naanu Avanalla...Avalu, Thangam)

Empowerment-driven narrative (Njan Marykutty)

This paper examines how these films construct transgender subjectivity through body, performance, caste, class, and emotional labor. The study argues that South Indian cinema is gradually moving from symbolic marginality to empathetic realism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Transgender Representation in Indian Cinema

Earlier Indian cinema relied on exaggerated portrayals (Ghosh, 2020). Hijras were depicted as intrusive or comedic. Recent scholarship notes progress in regional films (Nair, 2024), shifting toward authentic storytelling and recognition of lived realities.

2. Gender Performativity in Film

Butler's performativity positions gender as a series of repeated acts, visible in voice, costume, posture, and public interaction.

In the selected films:

Vidya (Naanu Avanalla...Avalu) performs femininity against rigid social norms.

Sathar (Thangam) embodies gender under caste restriction.

Marykutty (Njan Marykutty) articulates confident, self-defined womanhood.

3. Transgender Studies & Lived Realities

Stryker (2006) and Revathi (2014) document marginalization, police violence, exploitation, and resilience. These frameworks contextualize the emotional suffering depicted in Thangam and Naanu Avanalla...Avalu.

4. Intersectionality

Crenshaw's intersectionality is essential in Indian contexts where caste, gender, and class intersect.

Thangam foregrounds caste violence.

Naanu Avanalla...Avalu shows rural poverty and class disadvantage.

Njan Marykutty reflects middle-class respectability politics.

5. Audience Reception

Reviews from major newspapers and online platforms reveal:

Thangam → evokes intense empathy

Naanu Avanalla...Avalu → praised for realism

Njan Marykutty → applauded for dignity and professionalism

These responses reflect changing social attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, comparative approach is used through:

Close textual analysis

Theoretical application (Butler, Stryker, Crenshaw, Halberstam)

Reception analysis

Themes coded include rejection, gender performance, caste/class, suffering, empowerment, and public perception.

FILM ANALYSIS

1. Naanu Avanalla...Avalu (Kannada)

The film narrates Vidya's journey from childhood self-awareness to gender affirmation.

Key Insights:

Family rejection reflects structural transphobia.

Community rituals connect her to hijra cultural heritage.

The naming ceremony becomes an act of self-recognition.

Cinematic techniques—lingering close-ups and natural lighting—humanize Vidya.

The film highlights social cruelty while honoring resilience.

2. Thangam – Paava Kadhaigal (Tamil)

Sathar's story intertwines gender identity, caste violence, and forbidden love.

Key Insights:

Caste structures tightly control gender expression.

Letters symbolize yearning and unattainable love.

The tragic ending exposes societal brutality rather than individual failure.

The narrative uses suffering as social indictment.

3. Njan Marykutty (Malayalam)

Breaks away from the suffering trope through an empowered protagonist.

Key Insights

Begins with Marykutty's self-confidence and ambition.

Challenges prejudice through rational dialogue.

Her professional achievement redefines transgender representation.

The police uniform symbolizes state-recognized identity.

This film reimagines what transgender futures can look like in cinema.

DISCUSSION

1. Cinema as Emotional Reorientation

All three films counter historical ridicule by fostering empathy.

2. Dual Narrative Modes

Suffering narratives → expose systemic cruelty.

Empowerment narratives → model dignity and aspiration.

3. Intersectionality

Caste, class, and gender converge to shape each protagonist's experience.

4. Ethics of Representation

Autobiographical roots in Naanu Avanalla...Avalu increase authenticity.

5. Future Imaginaries

Marykutty's success story challenges cinematic limitations and expands the horizon of transgender representation.

CONCLUSION

South Indian cinema is evolving from stereotypical, marginal portrayals to complex, human-centered narratives.

The three films collectively illustrate this transition:

Kannada and Tamil → highlight violence, rejection, and systemic oppression.

Malayalam → offers empowerment and social integration.

While suffering remains a dominant narrative device, contemporary films increasingly embrace agency, dignity, and professional achievement. Future research should examine trans-directed films, commercial cinema, and evolving public discourse to deepen scholarship in this field.

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