

Article

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Gay Representation in Popular Culture: A Study in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema



Abstract

Cinema, a popular media that has a massive influence over society, has at times taken the role of a change maker. Recent Malayalam Films have strongly addressed homosexuality through lead characters. With a significant transformation in its portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters, a reflection towards broader societal shifts and an expansion in acceptance of diverse sexual identities can be seen. By exploring Gay characters and analysing the evolution of these portrayals and their impact on popular culture, this article tries to bring in the progressive transitions of Malayalam Cinema's portrayal of such characters on screen. Dealing with the politics of homosexuality by being a platform that has reached a wider populous, cinema has always been influential in changing the perspectives and perceptions of the generation. A critical examination of films released in the past decade, this paper tries to scrutinise the narratives, character development and thematic elements associated with gay characters. Contemporary Malayalam Cinema has explored gender and sexuality to its core in every aspect. With Qualitative nature and Content Analysis and by highlighting the progressive measures undertaken by filmmakers that challenge stereotypes and offer refined representations of gay relationships, an identification of areas where the industry remains deficient. By placing these films within the larger framework of Indian cinema and the global LGBTQ+ discourse, a comprehensive role of Malayalam cinema in shaping public perceptions and promoting inclusivity can be considered.

Keywords: Sexuality, Malayalam Cinema, Homosexuality, Gay, Popular Culture

Introduction

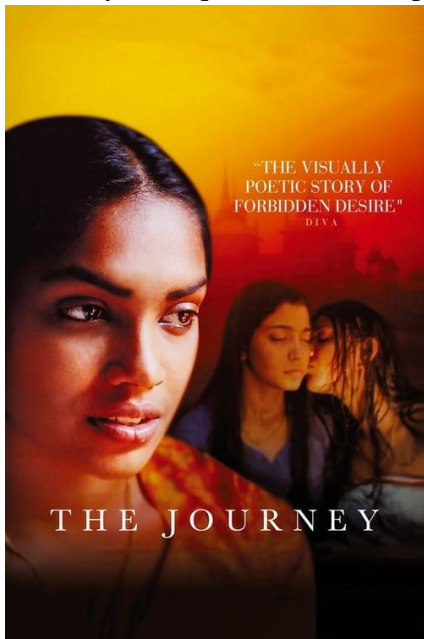
"The cinema is a marvelous medium for storytelling."

- Akira Kurosawa

A long-served powerful medium that ignites social reflection and transformation, cinema has constantly shaped and reshaped societal norms and attitudes. In recent years, Malayalam cinema has emerged as a significant arena for the vibrant exploration and representation of LGBTQ+ identities, focusing on portraying

gay characters. Malayalam films highlight a notable shift towards more nuanced and progressive representations as societal attitudes toward homosexuality have evolved, an increase in reflecting changes providing a platform for diverse sexual identities and challenging existing stereotypes. Contemporary Malayalam films take homosexuality as a critical element of storytelling by analysing narrative structures through character development and thematic elements associated with gay characters. With the broader societal changes in Kerala and the gradual evolution of cultural landscapes, Malayalam cinema slowly underwent a shift in favour towards LGBTQ+ identities that was deeper and more positive. Malayalam cinema in the early decades largely ignored LGBTQ+ themes. There were stereotypes and silence in representation. Homosexuality, in the early days, saw a silver screen with negative typecasting. It reinforced societal prejudices more effectively by placing queer characters comically rather than empathy. A subtle and gradual inclusion through representation happened majorly between the 1990s and 2000s: Few films attempted to depict gay characters, but existing social discomfort led to making them ambiguous or putting them in negative endings.

Initially marked with marginalisation and discomfort, gay representations in Malayalam cinema reflected majorly on the concept of lesbianism on screens rather than bringing in male romantic partnerships. *"Deshadanakili Karayarilla"* (1986) by Padmarajan was a powerful story on teenage life which explored sexuality and queer relationships from a lesbian angle surrounded by complex and moral social stigmas



through characteristics of the roles played by Shari (Sally) and Karthika (Nirmala). The movie also depicts the greys of human relationships, vulnerabilities and the alienation faced by queer individuals and shows their confusion about sexual identity. *"Randu Penkuttikal"* (1978) by Mohan, and *"Sancharram"* (2004), directed by Ligy J. Pullappally, were other earliest films in Malayalam to explore themes of lesbianism in a nuanced manner. Malayalam cinema addressed homosexuality in its earlier days, but when looking deeper, the references all turned their heads into cinemas that acknowledged lesbian and female relationships. Even though mentioning it as a progressive mindset of the industry, a deeper understanding can light up a discussion that Men are macho, straight and never queer. A male lead portraying a goon is considered to be good at heart amid his heinous crimes because he cares, while a woman falling in love with another is unacceptable. This existing notion has shadowed the bringing of male lovers and partnerships as characters on screen as a real-

life mirroring of Gay couples was not a cup of tea to the film audience. This article situates Malayalam cinema within the broader context of Indian cinema and the global LGBTQ+ discourse, with the intention to explore its role in shaping public perceptions and promoting inclusivity and also in evaluating how cinema has undergone transitions in the representation of lesbianism to gay couples onscreen with more respect and openness. A critical examination of films that keep gay relations on key focus, this article aims to draw attention to how Malayalam cinema not only reflects but also actively influences social dilemmas that surround and attitudes that prevail toward homosexuality and a valuable offering of insights into the existing dialogue engulfing gender and sexuality in contemporary media.

Decriminalising and Terminology

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) has historically criminalised consensual sexual intercourse between individuals of the same sex, considering such acts to be "*against the order of nature.*" In 2009, the Naz Foundation (India) Trust ("Naz") contested the constitutionality of Section 377 before the Delhi High Court, fighting that it violates Articles 14, 15, 19, and 21 of the Indian Constitution. After the Supreme Court

ruling *Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v. Union of India. Secretary Ministry of Law and Justice (2018)*, all consensual sex among adults became decriminalised, which included homosexual sex. The Delhi High Court afterwards ruled that punishing for sexual activity between consenting adults under Section 377 constitutes a violation of their rights to personal liberty, equality, and privacy concerns.

Being different from most of the communities in society that are not ready to accept homosexuals and the queer community, Kerala, after Tamil Nadu, slowly became open to this in the year 2016 by bringing up the proposal of implementing free gender affirmation surgery through government hospitals. Kerala is also one of the first states in India to establish welfare policies for transgender communities. Following this, many LGBT-related events happened across Kerala.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary refers to *homosexual* as,
of, relating to, or characterised by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's same-sex
of, relating to, or involving sexual activity between people of the same sex

The definition focuses on the feelings, emotions, and physical and romantic connections a person might experience when attracted to others of the same sex and directed towards individuals of the same gender. It also refers to the physical acts of intimacy that occur between individuals. In this context, the definition addresses the behaviours between people of the same sex beyond feelings or attractions. By the late 20th century, the use of the adjective homosexual gradually fell a downfall in texts and is considered offensive, evoking negative stereotypes and outdated clinical understandings of homosexuality as a psychiatric condition. Thus, it was replaced by the term *'Gay'*, which can describe sexual or romantic attraction or activity between men or between women; by lesbian, which applies only to the latter; or by inclusive abbreviations such as LGBT ("lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender"). Decriminalised by the Supreme Court of India on September 6, 2018, the stigma towards same-sex love and relationships stands unchallenged and unchanged to an undefinable extent. Indian society, especially popular culture, did not do much to support the LGBTQ community, but years and people progressed.



Gay Representation in Popular Culture: A Comparative Outlook of Malayalam Literature and Cinema

Starting from Plato's *The Symposium* as an early reference to homosexuality, studies and representation on this topic have become viral and vital in the present scenario. *A Year in Arcadia: Kyllenion*, written by Augustus, Duke of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg in 1805, is a historical novel. Being known as an early novel that centres on male-male love affairs with explicit detailing, it is recognised for its early and bold exploration of homosexual themes, which marked a prominent literary representation of same-sex relationships. In Malayalam literature, the references to gay characters can be traced. Even though subtle due to the underlying politics of shadowing down gender references, it's often layered within broader narratives by trying to reflect the complexities of sexuality in a conservative society. *Ramaraja Bahadur*, written by C V Raman Pillai (1918–1919), had mentions of gay character reference through Kodanthaashan (കൊണ്ടന്തയാശാൻ). M Mukundan's *"Daivathinte Vikrithikal"* features characters who challenge traditional gender and sexual identities. O. V. Vijayan wrote *"Khasakkinte Ithihasam"*, which portrays *Allappicha Mollakka* through an alluding same-sex relationship. P. Kunhiraman Nair's *Kaliyachan* also has depictions.

Cinema transcended barriers by representing and bringing in such characters. To address and survive in a community that still needs ways to unwind the roots of scepticism on Gender and Queer, *Kaathal-The Core*, released in 2023, directed by Jeo Baby, stands on conventional family drama and tackles societal taboos in both industry and society. It became a hot cake for discussion as it offers a significant case study in contemporary Malayalam cinema. The handling of LGBTQ+ themes starring Mammooty as Mathew Devassy, a known and respected village figure planning to run as an independent candidate for local body elections. Omana, his wife, played by Jyothika, files for divorce, mentioning the denial of her physical needs due to Mathew's homosexual orientation. This plot point introduces a complex interplay of personal and societal conflicts. Society has marginalised gay people, and cinema has side-lined them into hidden supporting roles. Representations on screen have happened before, but the prominence was mere, relegating them to caricatures or criminals. Here, the screenwriters Adarsh Sukumaran and Paulson Skaria have presented a straightforward narrative zooming into a central conflict between Mathew and Omana. A largely silent Thankan by Sudhi Kozhikode and the depiction of the homosexual relationship between Mathew is less developed. *The core stands out from the ever-made gay movies or films with such characters* through its direct portrayal rather than moulding up symbolic imageries and frames. The film's reception suggested a positive shift towards more inclusiveness and openness in the diverse representations in Indian film.

While *Kaathal* embodies a substantial step forward in Malayalam cinema's representation of gay characters, let's look into early contemporary movies. *Chanthupottu* (2005) marked a strong milestone in the Malayalam film industry. Laljose introduced a queer-coded male lead to the mainstream spectators. This film revolves around the life of Radha, played by Dileep, an unmanly character who undergoes exclusion from the conservative residents of his coastal village. Radha is initially shown as a bold character who brushes aside the taunts of his community and stays loyal to his nature, which provides the audience with insights into community and societal pressures. As the story unfolds, Radha's journey ultimately grows to a transformation where he gradually turns into masculine behaviours. Being a joke of his community and later proving to them his masculinity when his girlfriend delivers their baby, changes in his dressing style and ending the film where his dialogue denotes bringing his child as a boy itself, the film also brings into the mainstream society a wrong message of being gay.

A mere reference is also brought into the screen by Shyamaprasad in his 2009 movie *Ritu* through a conversation between Jamal (Vinay Forrt) and Sunny (Asif Ali), where they exchange expressions that might later lead to a gay partnership between them. The short was just suggestive, but the actors' skills have made development in the mindsets of the audience to speculate a relationship in a lighter note.

Mumbai Police (2013) sparked considerable controversy for its depiction of homosexuality on screen. Directed by Rosshan Andrews and with Bobby-Sanjay's nonlinear narrative, the film unties the murder of ACP Aryan IPS (Jayasurya), who was shot dead at a public event. As the story progresses, it is revealed that the murderer, the investigating officer himself, ACP Antony Moses (Prithviraj), is a close friend of the victim. The root cause that leads to the murder is unveiled as Antony's homosexual behaviour. The sexual encounter of Antony with another man was witnessed by Aryan, which becomes the film's pivotal plot twist.

The movie also reinforces the idea that the lives of homosexuals are marked with misery and tragedy. From a celebrated, brave officer, there is a quick transition into an anti-hero once his sexual orientation is exposed. Antony is placed as a traditionally masculine figure who is strong. Yet, in his personal life, he is haunted by his identity of being homosexual and his secrecy in having a sexual relationship with his male partner. The

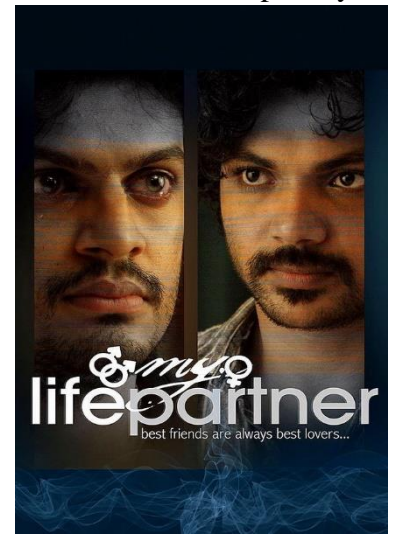


film does not openly acknowledge their sexual orientation in public life. Their deep trouble with exposure and fear of disclosure lead to the lead plot of the movie, which is the decision to murder Aryan. In front of his gay partner, Antony breaks down in tears, recalling his homosexual identity, which sends a problematic message that being homosexual is shameful. Even though it is brought to mainstream audiences, the film offers a positive nor neutral picture of homosexuality. There is dichotomy and marginalisation of gay characters and negative stereotypes. *Mumbai Police* puts in prejudice rather than empathy or understanding, promoting underlying homophobic tendencies in front of the audience.

The very next year, another film was released that placed and explored homosexuality as the main plot.

My Life Partner (2014), directed by M. B. Padmakumar, talked about the complications of a same-sex relationship, a widely underrepresented subject in Malayalam Cinema. The film is noticeable as it portrays a very sensitive homosexual relationship by moving away from stereotypes. Kiran (Sudev Nair) and Richard (Ameer Niyas) live together as a committed and attached couple. Kiran is more emotional and vulnerable and is invested in the idea of having a child. Richard supports him but is aware of the challenges they undergo. The movie takes a twist and turns when Kiran has to deal with his mental health, which leads to a series of events which question the framework of their relationship and the constraints that surround it.

A nuanced portrayal of a same-sex relationship can be seen here, and it centres on feelings and psychological aspects. The film properly depicts the two men's deep connection, shared dreams and affection with a ground-breaking approach by challenging the existing notions of heterosexuality and masculinity. While addressing the stigma faced by LGBTQ+ people, the film actively narrates the challenges faced by same-sex couples in society. Sudev Nair's depiction of Kiran earned him the Kerala State Film Award for Best Actor. *My Life Partner* can be labelled as a crucial work in Malayalam cinema as it extensively explores gay characters.



A free-spirited painter, Haris, and his love interest and friend Vishnu, an athlete, play pivotal roles in the 2016 movie *Ka Bodyscapes* by Jayan Cherian. It confidently explores LGBTQ+ themes, gender identity, societal oppression, and traditional values that often clash with modern ideas of identity and sexuality. Haris is a gay painter and the central character who uses art to express his sexuality, thereby challenging the existing social taboos. His relationship with Vishnu travels sensitively and highlights the complications they face in the conservative atmosphere around them. *Ka Bodyscapes* had censorship issues citing "**vulgarity**" and "**explicit content.**" The censorship battle itself became a focal point for discussions about freedom of expression in India, particularly concerning films that deal with LGBTQ+ themes. The controversy surrounding *Ka Bodyscapes* highlighted the ongoing struggle faced by filmmakers who wish to challenge societal norms and bring marginalised voices to the forefront.

A bold exploration of identity and sexuality can be traced in Geetu Mohanda's movie *Moothon*, released in 2019. It revolves around themes of identity, sexuality and the human condition. The story is about a young boy from Lakshadweep who boards on a search to find his elder brother, Akbar (Nivin Pauly), in Mumbai. The movie's exploration of Mulla's identity and the hidden past of his brother is a pivotal theme. Akbar dealt with a complex life, which included his romantic relationship with a gangster, Ameer (Roshan Mathews). Their relationship is described with utmost sensitivity. Akbar's sexuality and multi-dimensional character are among the most powerful explorations of identity. There is a contrast between Akbar's homosexuality and the film ending with the actual gender reveal of Mulla's character. The film has marked the way for more inclusive

narratives of homosexuality, focusing more on gay characters in the industry and offering a more realistic and empathetic portrayal of homosexuality.

Films like *Two Countries* (2015), *Adventures of Omanakkuttan* (2017), and *Bheeshma Parvam* (2022) also had slight references to gay characters. Shine Tom Chacko's character, Anjootti Peter has a bisexual nature. He has a wife and child, but his interest in men is also shown during the song sequences of the film. Sidharth Iyer by Rahul Madhav and Riyas Khas as Kiran are examples of mocking and comic gay characters.

A gay relationship with a positive depiction in a commercial comedy entertainer is memorable. *Little Hearts*, directed by Aby Treesa Paul and Anto Jose Pereira (2024), explores gay romance on a peripheral level. The love story of Sharon (Shine Tom Chacko) with a UK citizen is a major film highlight. This queer relationship is dealt with sensible and sensitive nuances. In a society where gay relationships are still a sin, the parental response to their son's queer relationship has been handled responsibly.

Conclusion

The representation of homosexuality in Malayalam cinema reflects a journey from discomfort and stereotyping to more nuanced and empathetic depictions. While early films often marginalised gay characters by silencing their presence or by strengthening harmful stereotypes, there has been a steady shift towards more complex and inclusive portrayals. A film like *Little Hearts* attempting to incorporate progressive elements and sometimes struggling to integrate these themes meaningfully figures out the tension between genuine intent and execution. Filmmakers wrestling with progressive content can sometimes be as rough on audiences as they break the conventions of the language Malayali has ever known. *Little Hearts* illustrates this challenge by introducing progressive elements into a conventional film and providing a satisfying resolution. Jeo Baby's *Kaathal* contributed positively to discussions around homosexuality with its genuine and thoughtful approach. The development of gay representation in Malayalam cinema highlights a broader cultural shift. From discomfort and silencing to empathetic portrayals. Significant obstacles remain with conservative attitudes and systemic issues. Censorship and societal backlash are an ongoing issue. The future of LGBTQ+ representation in Malayalam cinema has travelled far from the social taboos and restrictions, but its progressive portrayal depends on the continued commitment of filmmakers and enthusiasts. An action to challenge societal norms and boundaries and to frame stories that reflect and represent gay characters and homosexuality in Malayalam Cinema still stands as an ongoing quest. There is a growing credit for the need for representations of homosexuality focusing on male relationships, which moves beyond stereotypes and offers a valid perspective within the LGBTQ+ community.

The shift away from viewing same-sex relationships as taboo and the construction of space for transsexual, transgender, and homosexual narratives in Indian cinema, and Malayalam cinema in particular, is a testament to this evolving landscape. As Malayalam cinema continues to navigate these complex issues, the ultimate goal remains clear: to present LGBTQ+ characters and stories with the depth, respect, and authenticity they deserve. This shift is about breaking taboos and enriching the cinematic narrative with diverse and meaningful human experiences. The future of LGBTQ+ representation in Malayalam cinema hinges on the industry's ability to embrace this challenge and tell stories that reflect the true diversity of its audience.

Jahnvi Nair is a Research Scholar at the Department of Sociology, University of Kerala, a former Program Assistant at the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy, a winner of the National Balshree Award for Creative Writing (Malayalam).