

# Transcending Silences: Queer(ing) Cinematic Memory of the Malayalee ‘Spectacle’

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## **Abstract**

The queering of cinematic memory emerges as a transformative force in Malayalam cinema, challenging historical silences and the marginalization of the “Other,” with these evolving portrayals significantly shaping cultural narratives and reflecting the dynamic socio-cultural landscape. The concept of “other” represents a spectrum of gender expressions and sexual orientations. The increase in queer visibility within film holds the promise of broadening the scope of queer subjectivity, fostering alternative or non-binary counter-narratives that challenge entrenched binary discourses, and confront traditional strategies that often oscillate between marginalization and normalization. It is in this context that we conceptualize this article, unravelling the cinematic memory of homosexual representation through the specific lens of the Malayalam film *Kaathal – The Core* (2023). The confluence of ecclesiastical influence, political maneuvering, and entrenched societal conventions coalesce, crafting a complex and nuanced matrix that profoundly shapes the master narrative. The film’s visual language, steeped in the subtleties of masculinity of a closeted gay man and his family spatiality, serves as a poignant social commentary. The film emerges as a transformative cinematic prism, dissecting the dynamics of cinematic memory and identity formation while critically examining the state's influence in sculpting societal attitudes towards queer identities.

**Keywords:** homosexuality, cinematic social memory, Malayalam cinema, queer representation, cultural narratives, *Kaathal - The Core*

## **Introduction: Sexuality and Its Visual Incitements**

Sita in Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* addresses her lover Radha, “There is no word in our language to describe what we are or how we feel for each other.”<sup>1</sup> This statement serves as a metaphorical crossroad, emblematic of the broader linguistic and cultural challenges that set the stage for an exploration into the representation of queer identities in Malayalam cinema. The queer(ing) of cinematic memory emerges as a transformative force, challenging the historical silences and marginalization of the 'Other.' This conceptualization of the notion of 'Other' transcends a static identity into a fluid construct, that frequently operates beyond the traditional binary confines of

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<sup>1</sup> Deepa Mehta (dir.), *Fire* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 1996).

gender and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> This redefinition not only disrupts the traditional 'spectacle' but also reimagines it through a prism of inclusivity and diversity. Within Malayalam cinema, the 'Other' represents a spectrum of identities and narratives that diverge from conventional heteronormative norms, embracing a wide array of gender expressions and sexual orientations that subvert and reshape cinematic depictions of gender and sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

Cinematic memory, a term that encapsulates the collective recollections and cultural narratives perpetuated through film, operates as a dynamic interface between past and present, and individual and collective experiences. This concept posits that films are not mere entertainment mediums but potent vessels for societal memory, shaping and reshaping public consciousness.<sup>4</sup> Films become conduits through which memories are not only preserved but also experienced and internalized by audiences far removed from the original context.<sup>5</sup> This process is particularly significant in the context of queer identities, where cinema often becomes a tool for reclaiming and rearticulating histories that mainstream narratives have overlooked or suppressed and pave way for constructing and deconstructing gender identities and sexual orientations, thereby influencing societal perceptions and memories related to these identities. This notion extends beyond the mere portrayal of events or stories; it encapsulates the collective ethos, historical nuances, and socio-political undercurrents. Cinematic memory, in its portrayal of queer identities, also confronts the concept of 'sexual silences,' a term that refers to the historical and ongoing omission or suppression of non-heteronormative narratives and experiences within mainstream discourse. Rooted in the repression of sexual discourse,<sup>6</sup> these silences are not merely absences but active processes of marginalization that shape societal attitudes towards sexuality.

While the extent to which films shape public opinions and attitudes remains a topic of scholarly debate, there is a consensus on the significant impact they can have on viewers.<sup>7</sup> Beyond their role as a source of entertainment, films often convey messages and adopt stances, offering a reflective lens through which cultural and ideological shifts are observed and interpreted.<sup>8</sup> Although cinema predominantly upholds conventional views on themes such as love, domestic life, class, and sexuality, its capacity to challenge and re-evaluate societal norms in these areas has been effectively demonstrated. Producers, while sometimes exploring novel themes, generally gravitate towards content that conforms to broadly recognized societal standards, a tactic imperative for securing financial success and maintaining alignment with the audience's ethical expectations. This approach often results in the invisibility or negatively skewed portrayal of

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Rajesh James and Sathyaraj Venkatesan, 'Mapping the Queer Body: Queer Tropes and Malayalam Cinema', *Wacana Seni: Journal of Arts Discourse*, vol. 21 (2022), pp. 85-92.

<sup>4</sup> Astrid Erll, 'The Hidden Power of Implicit Collective Memory', *Memory, Mind and Media*, vol. 1 (2022): pp. 1-17; Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Alison Landsberg, 'Memory, Empathy, and the Politics of Identification', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2009): pp. 221-229.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton, 1981)

<sup>8</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Coppola, Scorsese, Altman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

homosexuality, superficially engaging with the topic at best, and at worst, reinforcing and perpetuating harmful stereotypes that hinder a nuanced understanding of the issue.

Stereotyping facilitates a simplistic categorization of individuals based on certain traits, thereby circumventing the complexity inherent in acknowledging individual differences. Such categorization often results in the marginalization of those who deviate from the norms of the dominant societal structure, portraying them as inadequate, inferior, or even grotesque. The perpetuation of these stereotypes, as seen in films, for instance, not only reinforces the narrow perspectives of the majority but also validates their prejudices.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, this negative portrayal can lead to the internalization of these stereotypes by the minority group members themselves, resulting in self-oppression and behaviours that conform to these stereotypes, thereby perpetuating the cycle of stereotyping.<sup>10</sup> Just as films possess the capacity to reinforce stereotypes, they equally hold the potential to dismantle them.<sup>11</sup> Beyond their influence as a mass medium, motion pictures can provide viewers with deeply personal experiences. Through these experiences, audiences are presented not with mere character archetypes, but with distinct, individual personalities that underscore the uniqueness of every human being. It is through this process of becoming acquainted with and identifying with these individual characters that stereotypes are most effectively challenged and dispelled.

The increase in queer visibility within media, especially in films and reality television, represents a transformative shift in the portrayal of queer identities, with film emerging as a pioneering platform that challenges and reshapes conventional narrative frameworks. The portrayal of queer individuals, alongside familial and community interactions, unveils the intricate dynamics of relational negotiation, complicating and enriching queer representation in media. Such portrayals hold the promise of broadening the scope of queer subjectivity, fostering alternative or non-binary counter-narratives that challenge the entrenched binary discourses, and confronting traditional media strategies that swing between marginalization and normalization.<sup>12</sup>

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman have introduced the concept of ‘doing gender,’ redefining it as a construct shaped by societal interactions rather than being inherently tied to biological sex.<sup>13</sup> These interactions extend to assigning activities and behaviours as expressions of masculine or feminine “natures.”<sup>14</sup> This notion often conflates gender with biological sex and upholds heterosexual practices as the norm.<sup>15</sup> Gender hegemony, through this lens, is seen as a

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<sup>9</sup> Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading,: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer and Julianne Pidduck, *Now You See It* (London: Routledge, 2013); Robert Park, *Social Control and Collective Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Powell, *Coming Together: The Cinematic Elaboration of Gay Male Life, 1945-1979* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Jen Richards, ‘What Trans Movement?’, *Advocate*, 14 July (2015). At: <https://www.advocate.com/print-issue/current-issue/2015/07/14/what-trans-movement>.

<sup>13</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, ‘Doing Gender’, *Gender & Society*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1987), pp. 125-151.

<sup>14</sup> Carla A. Pfeffer, ‘Women’s Work? Women Partners of Transgender Men Doing Housework and Emotion Work’, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2010), pp. 165-183.

<sup>15</sup> Richard MocarSKI, Shannon Butler, Brett Emmons, and Riley Smallwood, ‘“A Different Kind of Man”: Mediated Transgendered Subjectivity, Chaz Bono on *Dancing with the Stars*’, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2013), pp. 249-264.

societal construct that enforces a biological determinism of gender roles, often to the detriment of those who do not conform. Within this subtext, the traditional cinematic narrative often scripts masculinity and femininity within rigid confines of male and female sex categories, reinforcing a patriarchal social order.<sup>16</sup> When characters in film narratives cross these gender boundaries, they often face gender policing and social repercussions, highlighting the need for an intersectional approach in film studies to understand the multifaceted nature of gender.<sup>17</sup>

### **Cinematic Memory of the ‘Other’**

The portrayal of queer individuals on screen often navigates the complex terrain of gender performance and societal expectations. While some queer characters may adhere to the gender binary, especially in narratives focusing on body transition, others present alternative gender discourses, challenging the dominant binary gender narrative.<sup>18</sup> This antagonism is essential in understanding queer subjectivity in film, moving beyond mere replication of binary gender realities to a unique lived experience.

The experiences of queer individuals, while interconnected, are fundamentally distinct from those of their cisgender counterparts, presenting a unique existential paradigm.<sup>19</sup> This subjectivity transcends the mere replication of traditional male or female experiences, embodying a reality characterized by profound psychological and physical complexities.<sup>20</sup> Unlike gender identity, which emerges from psychological and cultural processes allowing for self-construction and expression, subjectivity is about positioning oneself within the matrix of power influenced by economic, legal, societal, and historical forces.<sup>21</sup>

The representation of queerness in the realm of cinema is shaped by evolving socio-cultural dynamics, and these portrayals play a significant role in the construction of cultural narratives surrounding queer identities. The nuanced experiences of marginalization and subjugation faced by queer individuals are pivotal in enriching our understanding of their subjectivity. This knowledge resists the erasure and domination by prevailing cultural norms, striving to maintain visibility and integrity in the face of systemic oppression. Bobby Noble advocates for the metaphor of "grafting" instead of "transition" to describe queer experiences, framing it as a process of self-

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender & Society*, vol. 19, no. 6 (2005), pp. 829-859.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Yancey Martin, 'Gender as Social Institution', *Social Forces*, vol. 82, no. 4 (2004), pp. 1249-1273.

<sup>18</sup> Genny Beemyn and Susan Rankin, *The Lives of Transgender People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Sandy Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', in *The Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, eds Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston (New York: Routledge, 2022), pp. 15-30.

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Juett, "'Just Travelin' Thru': Transgendered Spaces in *Transamerica*", in *Coming Out to the Mainstream: New Queer Cinema in the 21st Century*, eds Jennifer Juett and David Jones (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), pp. 60-90.

<sup>21</sup> Nancy Hartsock, 'Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory', *Cultural Critique*, vol. 14 (1989), pp. 15-33.

reinvention and queer reproduction that challenges the heteronormative framework.<sup>22</sup> This approach deconstructs biological essentialism and recontextualizes cultural deviations and norms. This understanding of queer subjectivity necessitates a cinematic narrative that goes beyond traditional gender binaries. It calls for a portrayal that captures the multifaceted and intersectional realities of queer lives, challenging the audience to reconceptualize gender beyond biological determinism. Films that embrace this complexity not only contribute to a more nuanced understanding of queer experiences but also play a critical role in deconstructing entrenched gender stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive and diverse cinematic landscape. A conventional archetype of masculinity is sculpted as “hefty and fair-complexioned,” catering to the self-aggrandizing illusions of its intended audience.<sup>23</sup> The pervasive normalization and trivialization of homosexuality, where it emerges as the quintessential characteristic defining both masculinity and femininity, necessitates a relentless cycle of public reaffirmation and regulatory oversight.<sup>24</sup> It is in this context that we conceptualize this article unravelling the cinematic memory of homosexual representation through the specific lens of the Malayalam film, *Kaathal – The Core*.<sup>25</sup>

Malayalam films are repositories and reflectors of the collective memory, experiences, and identity of the Malayalee community. These films, through their narratives and aesthetics, create a 'spectacle' that is deeply intertwined with the regional consciousness and cultural identity.<sup>26</sup> They not only mirror societal realities but also contribute to the shaping of collective memory, often challenging or reinforcing cultural norms and values.<sup>27</sup> Cinema has evolved to acknowledge and represent the complexities of queer identities, reflecting a shift in societal attitudes and cultural narratives, and challenging linear, heteronormative ideas of history and memory.<sup>28</sup>

*Kaathal* is as a notable work in this trajectory, not only for its portrayal of a homosexual protagonist but also for its nuanced exploration of the societal and familial spatiality surrounding queer identities in Kerala. The film, through its narrative and visual storytelling, engages deeply with the concepts of ‘queer memory’ and ‘cinematic visibility,’ serving as a critical medium for reflecting and reshaping the collective memory of the Malayalee spectacle regarding homosexuality, moving beyond stereotypes to a more realistic depiction.

In the formative years of Malayalam cinema, spanning art-house, middle-stream, and mainstream films, the exploration of queer identities was sidestepped, choosing instead to focus

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<sup>22</sup> Bobby Noble, ‘Our Bodies Are Not Ourselves: Tranny Guys and the Racialized Class Politics of Incoherence’, in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 248-258.

<sup>23</sup> Rajesh James, ‘Queerdom and Pleasure in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema’, *The London Film and Media Reader 3* (London: The London Symposium, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Filippo Osella, ‘Malabar Secrets: South Indian Muslim Men’s (Homo)sociality across the Indian Ocean’, *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2012), pp. 531-549.

<sup>25</sup> Jeo Baby (dir.), *Kaathal – The Core* (India: Mammooty Kampany, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Andrew Jones, *Memory and Material Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 47-50.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 201-203; John M. Sloop, ‘In a Queer Time and Place and Race: Intersectionality Comes of Age’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 91, no. 3 (2005), pp. 312-326.

on narratives that adhered to normative family values and sexual morality.<sup>29</sup> Queerness was perceived as a deviation, with characters embodying such identities often being regarded as outcomes of flawed upbringing.<sup>30</sup> The representation of queer individuals has historically been marred by cisheteronormative biases and transphobia,<sup>31</sup> often relegating them to roles of mockery, ridicule, or as marginalized social outcasts, as seen in films like *Soothradharan* (2001),<sup>32</sup> *Chandupottu* (2005),<sup>33</sup> and *Parthan Kanda Paralokam* (2008).<sup>34</sup> The perpetuation of traditional gender binaries and the marginalization of queer identities continued to be evident in several mainstream Malayalam films, including *Rithu* (2009),<sup>35</sup> *Sufi Paranja Katha* (2010),<sup>36</sup> *Salt n' Pepper* (2011),<sup>37</sup> *English: An Autumn in London* (2012),<sup>38</sup> *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012),<sup>39</sup> *Mumbai Police* (2013),<sup>40</sup> *Thira* (2013),<sup>41</sup> *Punyalan Agarbattis* (2013),<sup>42</sup> *Two Countries* (2015),<sup>43</sup> *Nee-Na* (2015),<sup>44</sup> *Kasaba* (2016),<sup>45</sup> *Action Hero Biju* (2016),<sup>46</sup> and *Mike* (2022).<sup>47</sup> However, a paradigmatic transformation in the depiction of queer characters started post-2012, as seen in *Ardhanaari* (2012),<sup>48</sup> *Aalorukkam* (2018),<sup>49</sup> and *Njan Marykutty* (2018).<sup>50</sup> These films positioned queer characters in central roles and also engaged deeply with their lived experiences and perspectives. This marked a critical juncture in altering audience perceptions and reshaping the narrative fabric of Malayalam cinema, signifying a substantial departure from previous representational norms.

This evolution in representation is crucial in understanding the complex negotiation processes that reveal the multifaceted nature of queer subjectivity.<sup>51</sup> Such narrative inclusion is revolutionary in Malayalam cinema, as it showcases: 1) how family members learn to dismantle

<sup>29</sup> Anu Kuriakose and Gigy J. Alex, 'Deconstructing the Gender Binary: A Discourse on Quee(cu)ring in the Film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*', *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2017).

<sup>30</sup> T. Muraleedharan, 'Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema', in *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society*, ed. Ruth Vanita (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 157-172.

<sup>31</sup> Anu Kuriakose, 'The Hetero-Normalisation of the Transgender Identity: A Critique of *Njan Marykutty*', in *Theory and the Transformative Humanities*, eds Kunhammad K. K. and Rafseena M. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022), pp. 108-118.

<sup>32</sup> A. K. Lohithadas (dir.), *Soothradharan* (India: Chalachithra, 2001).

<sup>33</sup> Lal Jose (dir.), *Chandupottu* (India: Lal Release, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Anil (dir.), *Parthan Kanda Paralokam* (India: Lal Release, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Shyamaprasad (dir.), *Rithu* (India: Vachan Shetty Productions, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> *Sufi Paranja Katha*, directed by Priyanandan (India: Capitol Theatre, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Aashiq Abu (dir.), *Salt n' Pepper* (India: Lucsam Creations, 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Shyamaprasad (dir.), *English: An Autumn in London* (India: Dr. Avinash Unnithan, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> V. K. Prakash (dir.), *Trivandrum Lodge* (India: P. A. Sebastian, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Roshan Andrews (dir.), *Mumbai Police* (India: Nisad Haneefa, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Vineeth Sreenivasan (dir.), *Thira* (India: Rejaputhra Visual Media, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Ranjith Sankar (dir.), *Punyalan Agarbattis* (India: Dreams N Beyond, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Shafi (dir.), *Two Countries* (India: M. Renjith, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Lal Jose (dir.), *Nee-Na* (India: LJ Films, 2015).

<sup>45</sup> Nithin Renji Panicker (dir.), *Kasaba* (India: Goodwill Entertainments, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> Abhid Shine (dir.), *Action Hero Biju* (India: Full on Studios, 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Vishnu Sivaprasad (dir.), *Mike* (India: One Life Studios, 2022).

<sup>48</sup> Santhosh Souparnika (dir.), *Ardhanaari* (India: Phoenix Films, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> V. C. Abhilash (dir.), *Aalorukkam* (India: Parappurath Productions, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Ranjith Sankar (dir.), *Njan Marykutty* (India: Dreams N Beyond, 2018).

<sup>51</sup> Mingshu Li, 'Transitioning Together: Negotiating Transgender Subjectivity with Family and Other Trans People on Reality Television', *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 68, no. 3 (2021), pp. 496-521.

gender hegemony and redefine gender and sexuality; and 2) how queer individuals themselves reevaluate their identity through interactions with family and other queer people. These narratives present a multidimensional construct of queer subjectivity, transcending traditional portrayals and embracing the true essence of queer experiences. *Kaathal* represents a significant stride in this direction. The film explores the foundations of sexuality and gender, positioning them at the ‘Core’ of familial dynamics. By focusing on the protagonist's closeted sexual orientation, the film deconstructs the traditional structure and functioning of the family unit in a conservative society. This approach challenges the audience's ideas of gender and sexuality, and also navigates them through the intricate emotional transfigurations and adaptive strategies inherent in the process of transitioning alongside queer individuals. Here, the cisgender family members in the film serve as ideal negotiators, aiding the audience in better comprehending queer issues and, the inclusion of other queer partners provide a contrast to transnormativity, highlighting the diverse and often counter-discursive aspects of queer subjectivity.

This article examines the discursive encounters between the socio-cultural spheres of Kerala and its ramifications on the cinematic memory of the queer community. To decipher this collective amnesia, it is crucial to analyze how the state's influence historically shapes the creation of spaces, social identities, and the transmission of social memories that underpin these identities.<sup>52</sup> We propose that the historical silences and omissions are influenced by the state's endorsement of certain locales and the prevailing media narratives about queer identities at the time. This discussion is framed within the context of *Kaathal*) which offers a contemporary lens to understand these dynamics.

### **Performing Homosexuality: Visuality of the Closeted Man**

The visual representation of Mathew is crucial in understanding the subtleties of his closeted homosexual identity. Mathew's character adheres to the masculine norms prevalent in cinematic representations of Malayalee masculinity. In the protagonist's life, concealment of his identity becomes a survival mechanism in a society that largely rejects non-heteronormative orientations. The film adeptly explores the dichotomy between public persona and private reality, where Mathew is compelled to lead a dual life as a survival strategy. This conflict is skillfully depicted in scenes where the protagonist interacts with family and others, projecting a façade that aligns with societal expectations. For example, the protagonist's demeanour at public events, characterized by a carefully maintained composure, starkly contrasts with his moments of solitude, where his emotions and turmoil surface. Scenes where the protagonist is alone, or in moments of unguarded interaction with characters who are aware of his repressed identity, reveal the profound internal conflicts he faces. This portrayal resonates with the concept of “performative acts,” where gender identity is a performance, often dictated by societal norms.<sup>53</sup> One particularly notable scene

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<sup>52</sup> L. L. H. Loong, ‘Deconstructing the Silences: Gay Social Memory’, *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 59, no. 5 (2012), pp. 675-688.

<sup>53</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

shows the protagonist looking at himself in the mirror, a moment of introspection, symbolizing the internal struggle between his self and the persona he is forced to adopt. The mirror is a metaphor for self-confrontation, capturing the protagonist's struggle with self-acceptance in a society that invalidates his identity. This disparity underscores the exhausting nature of maintaining a socially acceptable exterior, which becomes a relentless psychological burden.

The narrative subverts C. S. Venkiteswaran's assertion that the mobility of protagonists from oppressive rural settings to liberating urban environments is reimagined into a more nuanced portrayal where personal and societal conflicts coexist within rural settings. The political affirmation of identity through the queering of heterosexual spaces transforms urban landscapes into realms of transgressed boundaries.<sup>54</sup> The social and political 'spaces' of Teekoy serve a pivotal role in effectively deconstructing the hero's journey, where personal crises are intricately intertwined with the broader narrative threads of survival, identity, and acceptance. The tea shop and party office serve as a microcosm of the prevailing societal fabric, where diverse opinions and life stories percolate: the tea shop as a symbol of organic engagement where the undercurrents of individual identity and societal judgment play; out and the party-office as a locus of structured, ideological exertions. The film's treatment of public spaces mirrors this clash, highlighting the evolving nature of diegetic familial spatiality.

A scene during a family gathering, where subtle changes in body language and conversation hint at underlying discomfort and unspoken judgments, shows the film's approach to portraying societal attitudes, not through overt confrontations, but through nuanced, realistic interactions. Another striking instance is a sequence involving community gossip, where the protagonist becomes the subject of whispered conversations and veiled insinuations, effectively illustrating the prevalence of judgment and the stigmatization of non-conformity within society.

The film's treatment of societal acceptance and rejection is not unidimensional; it acknowledges the existence of both supportive and antagonistic elements within the community. For instance, there are moments where certain family members exhibit a degree of understanding or empathy towards the protagonist, suggesting a gradual shift in perception and the possibility of acceptance. Contrarily, the film also depicts instances of rejection and hostility, as seen in scenes where the protagonist faces derogatory remarks and social ostracization. These contrasting responses within the community highlight the polarized nature of societal attitudes towards sexual orientation in Kerala. Examining the societal dynamics within the film reveals a gradual shift from antagonism to acceptance, the intersection of traditional perspectives and the evolving perception of gender norms. This transition is adeptly captured, mirroring the contemporary landscape where longstanding attitudes are increasingly converging with progressive views on gender identity.

In a scene, a party worker, Sibin, is advising Mathew, whose confidence is shown as deeply affected, "When you ask for votes, please show a little more confidence. Others should feel that these problems haven't affected us at all. Anyone who knows you personally won't believe this."

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<sup>54</sup> Anu Kuriakose and Gigy J. Alex, 'Queering Space, (Trans)Forming Kerala: An Analysis of the Cultural Politics in the Emergent Queer Pride Parades and Allied Trans-Beauty Pageants', *Theorising Space: Three Day National Conference on the Intersections of Space and Culture* (2017). At: <https://www.iist.ac.in/conference/NCISC2017>.



This spectacle underscores the struggle for ‘authentic identity’ where there exists a discord between Mathew’s internal sense of self and the external expectations or judgments of their physical embodiment.<sup>55</sup> The distinction between normative and non-normative bodies lies not in their physicality but in the experiential realm of existence against the backdrop of one’s corporeal form.<sup>56</sup> In this light, Mathew’s shaken confidence can be seen as a response to the societal pressure to conform to normative standards. Film, especially when addressing queerness, frequently adopts a narrative that acknowledges and actively voices the necessity to challenge and transform these normatively oppressed identities.<sup>57</sup> This assists validation and normalization in wider social and cultural contexts. Yet, these portrayals frequently manifest as constrained heteronormative adaptations, predominantly characterized by cisgender male actors assuming queer roles.<sup>58</sup>

The film introduces its central characters through a church setting wherein the Sunday mass is in progress. The church, often a symbol of moral authority and traditional values, sets the stage for a narrative that challenges these very norms. The dialogue between the young boy and his mother, attending the church; “Only since amma told me that you will give me tapioca and pork, I had agreed to come to church,” subtly reflects a growing disconnection or pragmatism among the younger generation towards traditional rituals, viewing them more as cultural practices rather than spiritual experiences. It also hints at the evolving perspectives of the youth, who might be more open to varied orientations and less bound by the rigid moral frameworks associated with religion. The narrative places individual autonomy and self-identity in direct conflict with the collective beliefs of the Church. This is evident in the priest’s remark “This is your family matter. Church will not interfere in this matter beyond a point” to Omana, also reflecting the polarity between public morality and private life, where institutions may choose to limit their interference in what is deemed private, yet these private matters are often already influenced by public norms and institutional attitudes. The reluctance to fully engage with or accept the complexities of individual experiences that deviate from its teachings is also on display here.

In another scene Mathew’s sister is seen questioning her father over Omana’s decision for divorce, asking “Why is Omana going with this decision at this age? If she has some disease ask her to go and meet a doctor. How will I face people when I go to Sunday mass? How will my husband look into the faces of people in the Malayalee association?” The sister’s reaction is a manifestation of the collective conscience of the Malayalee community, which values traditional family structures and gender roles and serves as a profound examination of the interplay between societal conventions and personal identity. Her fear of social ostracization reflects how deviation from societal norms leads to a state of normlessness or a mismatch between societal standards and

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<sup>55</sup> Cressida J. Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 38-40.

<sup>56</sup> Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 60-63.

<sup>57</sup> S. Jalarajan and Adith K. Suresh, ‘Bodies That Need Queering: The Queer Hetero-Topias in Malayalam Cinema’, in *Gender, Sexuality, and Indian Cinema*, ed. by S. Sanyal (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), pp. 39-57.

<sup>58</sup> Anu Kuriakose, ‘Construction and Contestation of Identity and Politics: Transgender People in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema’, *South Asian Popular Culture*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2020), pp. 283-289.

individual behaviour.<sup>59</sup> Omana's decision to divorce exemplifies the strain between culturally prescribed goals and the socially structured means to achieve them,<sup>60</sup> while navigating a matrix of domination that highlights the influence of societal conventions and power structures on individual decisions and identities,<sup>61</sup> and simultaneously undertaking significant emotional and psychological efforts in either conforming to or challenging these societal expectations.<sup>62</sup>

Mathew's response to the lawyer's inquiry about his marriage with Omana, "There are no specific issues between us. It has been twenty years since we were married. What is there to talk much?" signifies a latent conflict between autonomy and connection, a central tenet of relational dialectics. His words reflect a resigned acceptance of a relationship that has settled into a routine devoid of meaningful interaction, highlighting the paradox of being together yet emotionally distant.<sup>63</sup> This scenario is symbolic of long-term relationships where partners coexist in a state of complacent familiarity, often leading to a communication stalemate.

The verbal exchange between the party members offers a compelling lens to examine the intersection of personal identity and public perception within the framework of political sociology. When one said, "This is Mathew's personal thing." The other replied, "Such personal things can even result in the downfall of the cabinet. Also, we won't get votes from any of the homes that do evening Christian prayers." This on the one hand vitalized how the boundary between private life and public action becomes blurred in the context of political representation and reflects the reality of how personal matters, especially those conflicting with societal norms, can significantly impact public opinion and political outcomes.<sup>64</sup> The latter is the reinforcement of the idea that in politics, the personal is indeed political,<sup>65</sup> also highlighting the sustenance of cultural hegemony through religious beliefs and community standards.<sup>66</sup>

When a party worker says, "This becomes a statement. Our party respects an individual's freedom and identity. You will be the first candidate from Kerala with this identity," by presenting Mathew as a symbol of progressive values, the party is not just acknowledging his identity but also performing a progressive stance for political advantage. This manoeuvre is a striking illustration of the politicization and commodification of personal identities within the public sphere to navigate and manipulate public opinion for political gain.<sup>67</sup> At this stage, the film uses Mathew's character

<sup>59</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1893).

<sup>60</sup> Robert K. Merton, 'Social Structure and Anomie', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 3, no. 5 (1938), pp. 672-682.

<sup>61</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1976).

<sup>62</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

<sup>63</sup> Leslie A. Baxter, 'Relational Dialectics Theory: Multivocal Dialogues of Family Communication', in *Engaging Theories in Family Communication: Multiple Perspectives*, eds Dawn O. Braithwaite and Leslie A. Baxter (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), pp. 130-145.

<sup>64</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>65</sup> Carol Hanisch, 'The Personal Is Political', in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*, eds Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970),

<sup>66</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

<sup>67</sup> Kate Millett, 'The Theory of Sexual Politics', in *Classic and Contemporary Readings in Sociology*, ed. Ian Marsh (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 56-60.

to comment on the intersection of personal identity and public life, a theme that resonates with the audience's growing awareness and acceptance of diverse identities.

The scene wherein the opposition party tries to convince the voter by saying “I asked your son to go inside the house because this is something he shouldn’t hear. The party has decided Mathew as a candidate just to show that they are progressive. If kids are prone to such things what will be the condition of our society? We shouldn’t let him win. If he becomes a member imagine the condition of our ward,” reflects a strategic manipulation of societal fears and prejudices for political gain. The opposition party's rhetoric aims to create a sense of fear and anxiety among the electorate about the potential impact of Mathew's sexuality on societal norms and the younger generation. This tactic of inciting moral panic is often used by political entities to mobilize public opinion against a perceived threat to societal values, in this case, represented by Mathew's non-normative sexual identity. The party's attempt to frame Mathew's candidacy as a mere performative act of progressivism, rather than a genuine commitment to inclusivity, reflects the ongoing struggle for queer representation and acceptance in politics.<sup>68</sup> The attempt to control the narrative frames the exercise of biopower, as it seeks to regulate societal norms and maintain control over what is deemed acceptable or deviant.<sup>69</sup>

The scene where Kuttapayi says to his mother “I will come to visit your home only when your husband dies,” reflects his personal experiences and the meanings he attaches to his mother's marriage, highlighting the subjective nature of relationship dynamics. Jeo Baby here constructs the idea of symbolic interactionism, to understand and value, how individual experiences and interactions shape one's perception of relationships.<sup>70</sup> Omana’s plea to her brother, “If you are aiming at my peace and happiness, you should stand with me,” is not just a call for familial solidarity but a demand for recognition of her individuality and choices. She acknowledges that while she seeks autonomy, her identity and decisions are influenced and validated through her relationships.<sup>71</sup>

Mathew's generational wealth affords him a level of protection and privilege that Thangan, as a less affluent individual, does not have. Thangan's experience cannot be understood solely in terms of his sexuality or economic status, but as a combination of both. In a scene, we see him being alarmed by another character saying, “They will easily get done with the case and court.

<sup>68</sup> Susan J. Hayle, ‘Folk Devils without Moral Panics: Discovering Concepts in the Sociology of Evil’, *International Journal of Criminology and Sociological Theory*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2013), pp. 1125-1137.

<sup>69</sup> Brooke M. Beloso, ‘Queer Theory, Sex Work, and Foucault’s Unreason’, *Foucault Studies*, vol. 23 (2017), pp. 141-166; Catalina B. Bustamante, ‘Truth-Telling, Caring and Governing: The Significance of Foucault’s Interpretation of Parrhesia to Governance’, *Scientia - The International Journal on the Liberal Arts*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2019), pp. 1-24; Joshua Gamson, Craig Calhoun, Enrique Larana, Hank Johnston, and Joseph R. Gusfield, ‘Social Theory and the Politics of Identity’, *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1995), pp. 294-298.

<sup>70</sup> Karen M. Benzies and Marlene N. Allen, ‘Symbolic Interactionism as a Theoretical Perspective for Multiple Method Research’, *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2001), pp. 541-547; Andrea Salvini, ‘The Methodological Convergences between Symbolic Interactionism and Constructivist Grounded Theory’, *Qualitative Sociology Review*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2019), pp. 10-29.

<sup>71</sup> Marilyn Friedman, ‘Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women’, in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, eds Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 98-112.

You are the one who is going to get trapped. Mathew has enough generational wealth. Your case is different. You have also agreed to take care of Kuttappayi. Since you have got this name, no one will bother to help you at the time of your need.”

### **Conclusion: The Mirror and the Mask**

In *Kaathal – The Core* the interplay of cinematic memory and sexual silences converges within the Malayalee spectacle, creating a reflective mirror that both reveals and masks the complexities of queer identities in Kerala.<sup>72</sup> This film transcends traditional Malayalee narratives, serving as a transformative cinematic prism that intricately dissects the dynamics of social memory and identity formation, while critically examining the state's influence in sculpting societal attitudes towards queer identities. The narrative, by subverting conventional Malayalee norms, indelibly imprints itself in the collective queer consciousness, catalyzing a nuanced comprehension and embracement of diverse sexual identities within Kerala's expansive social, cultural, and political landscape.

The cinematic portrayal of Mathew, navigating the dichotomous realms of public and private existence, epitomizes the performative nature of gender and sexual identity. The film's visual language, steeped in the subtleties of Malayalee masculinity, serves as a poignant commentary on the binary existence of queer individuals in traditional societies. The protagonist's life, oscillating between societal conformity and personal authenticity, underscores the profound psychological toll exacted by the societal imperative to adhere to normative gender roles. This duality is not merely a personal narrative but a reflection of the collective social memory and the historical amnesia surrounding queer identities in Kerala. The film, thus, becomes a canvas upon which historical silences and omissions in the state's narrative about queer identities are illustrated.

The film's nuanced depiction of societal reactions – ranging from acceptance and rejection, capturing the polarized nature of responses to non-heteronormative orientations, aligns with the disjunction between societal goals and the means available to individuals, particularly within marginalized identities. This transition, captured within the film, resonates with the contemporary landscape where longstanding attitudes are increasingly converging with progressive views on gender identity. Jeo Baby also challenges the collective consciousness of the Malayalee community, particularly in its depiction of the church, traditionally a bastion of moral authority, which here becomes a site reflecting the shifting paradigms in societal attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

By utilizing memory as a dynamic tool to revitalize and reconstruct diverse identities and experiences, *Kaathal – The Core* illuminates an obscured narrative, thereby fostering a broader and more inclusive understanding of these realities.<sup>73</sup> It offers a critical lens through which the cinematic memory of queer identities in Kerala can be re-examined, paving the way for a more equitable and accepting social landscape by embodying the metaphorical interplay of 'The Mirror and the Mask'.

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<sup>72</sup> Baby, *Kaathal – The Core*.

<sup>73</sup> Baby, *Kaathal – The Core*.