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Queer Narratives in Malayalam: Explicating the Politics of Authorial Cisgender Gaze in *Ram C/o Anandhi*

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Abstract: This article critically examines the representation of queer and transgender identities in Malayalam literature, focusing on the pervasive influence of authorial cisgender gaze in shaping these narratives. Through an analysis of works such as *Ram C/o Anandhi*, *Randu Penkuttikal*, and *Shabdangal*, the study highlights how cisgender authors often frame queer lives through heteronormative lenses, reducing them to tropes of suffering, or moralistic resolutions. Drawing on theorists like Butler, Halberstam and Stryker, the study argues that such portrayals reinforce heteronormative comfort rather than transgender authenticity. Transgender characters are frequently excluded from visual narratives or depicted as tragic figures, while lesbian relationships are invalidated through forced heteronormative conclusions. The article also explores the commodification of trans trauma and reader-pleasing strategies that prioritize sympathy over agency. By contextualizing these literary trends within broader theoretical frameworks such as performativity, the male gaze, and transgender critiques, the paper underscores the need for authentic, inclusive storytelling that transcends cisgender perspectives. Moving on from tracing the evolution of queer studies, this study examines a few queer narratives in

Malayalam, and concludes with an examination of the politics of authorial cisgender gaze in Akhil P. Dharmajan's *Ram C/o Anandhi* (first published in 2019), emphasizing the need to move beyond reductive portrayals and embrace the complexity of queer lived experiences.

Keywords: Queer narratives, cisgender gaze, heteronormativity, transgender representation, trauma commodification.

I: Introduction: Evolution of Queer Studies

Queer theory can be considered as a theoretical approach that engages with defining and interpreting non-binary gender identities and experiences. It is an academic and political framework that encompasses gender and sexual diversity prioritizing the politics of visibility. It developed by questioning the power structures embedded in traditional gender and sexual norms and by problematizing existing systems of dominance. In terms of knowledge production, queer theory introduces a radically new perspective that challenges conventional understandings of gender and sexuality. Although studies on sexual diversities such as lesbian and gay identities were part of feminist thought since the 1970s, it was only after the 1990s that the term "queer" developed into a theoretical approach in academic discourses. Subsequently, discussions on lesbianism and gender diversities began to gain strength in society. Therefore, queer theory's conceptual framework is closely linked to feminist studies. Susan Stryker states that trans-studies was "queer theory's evil twin (214). Andrea Long Chu in dialogue with Emmett Harsin Drager, rephrases it: "Trans studies is the twin that queer studies ate in the womb. The womb, as usual, was feminism" (Chu and Drager 2019, 103)

Both feminist thought and queer theory simultaneously challenge the politics of traditional patriarchy and actively participate in efforts to deconstruct it. Queer theory establishes that gender and sexuality are distinct, asserting that gender is not determined by traditional notions of the body but rather by the brain (Butler). By emphasizing that gender and sexuality are matters of personal choice, queer theory completely dismantles conventional gender norms. Bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities have come to recognize their shared experiences and similarities. Halberstam observes that while “feminism has historically interrogated the oppression of women under patriarchy, queer theory extends this critique to the policing of sexuality and gender norms. Together, they destabilize the foundational assumptions of heteronormative power” (108).

Within this context, queer theory brings visibility to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and fluid identities, undermining the idea of a singular, fixed understanding of gender and sexuality. A common thread among these identities is that they all question and resist the power structure of heteronormativity. Linda Schlossberg observes that ‘heterosexual culture continually passes itself off as being merely natural, the undisputed and unmarked norm (5). Gender diversity has no social sanction in such societies. Berlant and Warner comment: “Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce; medicine; and education; as well as in the conventions and affects of narrativity, romance, and other protected spaces of culture (554-5).

The queer movement, which began in America, carried the politics of visibility and spread to various parts of the world. The 1969 Gay-Lesbian Movement, the Lesbian Movement, and later the emerging transgender communities all played a

crucial role in shaping the political landscape of queer theory. By the 1980s, the LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) collective was the first to align under the queer umbrella. It was only later that transgender individuals became part of this expanding framework. "While early gay and lesbian movements laid the groundwork for queer resistance, their politics often reinforced a binary understanding of gender. The incorporation of transgender critiques in the 1990s fundamentally disrupted this logic, forcing queer theory to confront its own exclusions and expand its liberatory potential." (Valentine 58). Now, queer studies have evolved into a broad and inclusive space, encompassing LGBTIQA+ identities, recognizing the diversity of gender and sexuality.

The relationships and diversities of queer identities cannot be confined within the heterosexual socio-legal structures. Queer struggles primarily focus on securing their identity within the citizen society they live in, and integrating it with broader social and cultural frameworks. The word 'queer' has traditionally been defined in dictionaries as meaning 'different,' 'distinct,' 'strange,' or 'unnatural. However, today, the term queer has evolved into a theoretical, political, social, and academic concept. Instead of signifying isolation or otherness, the term has evolved celebrating diversity and inclusivity. Jagose observes: "Once a term of exclusion and pathologization, 'queer' has been reclaimed as a defiant theoretical and political stance—one that embraces fluidity, resists fixed categories, and challenges normative structures of gender and sexuality. In its contemporary usage, queer theory does not merely include marginalized identities but actively critiques the systems that produce marginalization itself."(3). The queer community advocates for revising the traditional understanding about sex, gender, and sexuality. It asserts that the expressions of gender identity are either constructed or shaped in accordance with social structures.

The political nature of queer theory began to be articulated through writings and organizations in the early 20th century. However, two texts written in 4th century BCE Greece '*Symposium*' and '*Laws*' are considered among the earliest studies discussing queer individuals. These works were authored by Plato. By the 1990s, serious academic studies on queer identities were consolidated, defining a new political landscape for queer theory. William G. Tierney's '*Academic Outlaws*' (1997) and Patrick Dilley's '*Queer Man on Campus: A History of Non-Heterosexual College Man 1945-2000*' attempt to explain queer theory based on these ideas.

Sexuality and gender identity are social constructs. It is society that dictates the idea that only male and female genders are natural while everything else is unnatural. In '*Gender Trouble*', Butler asserts that both gender and sexuality are performative. A person is not born a man but becomes one through cultural shaping. In other words, gender is constructed through social and cultural practices including an individual's lifestyle, clothing choices, psychological aspects, and social structures. Butler emphasizes that gender and sexuality are not fixed states but are fluid and constantly changing. She argues that binaries such as man/woman, masculinity/femininity, and gender roles are constructs and are performative in nature. Simone de Beauvoir's interpretation of gender aligns closely with Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Beauvoir famously stated, "One is not born a woman but becomes one" (*Second Sex* 283). Similarly, Butler's '*Bodies That Matter*' (1993) explores how cultural and social constructs shape perceptions of sexuality. Butler's ideas delve into how identity and selfhood are constructed through social practices. She argues that gender and sexuality are both produced and defined within these practices. Understanding this helps to contextualize the claim that gender is not innate but performatively constructed (2). In addition to Judith Butler, scholars such as Eve Kosofsky

Sedgwick, Michel Foucault, Teresa de Lauretis, Diana Fuss, Michael Warner, and William G. Tierney have also attempted to theorize the construction of gender. Post-structuralism challenged essentialist notions of identity. Michael Foucault's '*The History of Sexuality*' argues that sexuality is not a natural essence but a socially constructed discourse shaped by power (43). Derrida's concept of deconstruction inspired queer theory to dismantle binaries like male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, and natural/unnatural. Queer theories challenge the authoritative spaces of the male-female binary and symbolically unite under the umbrella of rainbow colors.

II: Situating Queer Narratives in Malayalam Literature

The representation of queer identities in Malayalam literature must be understood within the broader socio-historical context of Kerala's complex relationship with gender and sexuality. While Kerala boasts high literacy rates and progressive social indicators, its cultural narratives have often been constrained by rigid heteronormative frameworks. Early Malayalam literature either erased queer existence or relegated it to tragic tropes; a trend Judith Butler's concept of the "heterosexual matrix" (*Gender Trouble* 6) helps explain, where narratives naturalize binary gender and cis-heterosexuality. The few works that engaged with queer themes taken for scrutiny here; such as *Randu Penkuttikal (Two Girls)* by V.T. Nandakumar (1974), *Shabdangal (Voices)* (1947) by Vaikom Muhammed Basheer, and *Napumsakangal (Impotent)* (1983) a story by Madhavikutty; did so through what Laura Mulvey terms the 'male gaze' (*Visual Pleasure* 11), here extended to a 'cisgender gaze,' reducing queer lives to objects of pity or moral instruction. Such portrayals exemplify Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's critique of how

heteronormativity operates through "the conventions and affects of narrativity" ("Sex in Public" 554), where queer characters serve as plot devices rather than fully realized subjects. By examining these texts through queer theory's disruptive framework, this section exposes how Malayalam literature has both resisted and reproduced the power structures it claims to challenge.

Queer themes were rare and indirect in Malayalam literature in the early stages, and they were often framed as intense friendships or doomed relationships. Lesbian narratives appeared earlier than gay ones, possibly due to the greater social acceptance of female intimacy, and such stories often ended in separation, madness or death, reinforcing heteronormative morality. *Randu Penkuttikal* (1974) by V. T Nandakumar is a poignant tale of the emotional intensity of the warm affection between two young girls. It is considered the first novel in Malayalam to address the theme of same-sex love. The novel narrates the extraordinary story of Girija and Kokila, two schoolgirls, and their mutual affection. Written in the popular narrative style of the time, the novel traces how their friendship gradually transforms into love, ultimately culminating in a physical relationship. The deep and inseparable bond between Girija and Kokila is beautifully portrayed. However, all the conventional stereotypes of lesbian relationships seen through the perspective of heterosexual male imagination are present in this novel. Though the story was controversial for its time, it opened discussions on same-sex love in Malayalam literature.

Lesbianism is one of the sexual orientations under the broader LGBTQA+ spectrum and focuses specifically on women's same-sex attraction. Studies have not succeeded in substantiating the origin of lesbianism, but suggest that it may have biological, familial and environmental reasons (Shree and Gayathri 1002). However, in *Randu Penkuttikal*, the author portrays lesbianism in a misguided manner, suggesting

that any kind of 'shock' or traumatic experience in a person's life can lead them to become a lesbian. This depiction creates a false understanding of what lesbianism truly is among readers. Similarly, the author's heteronormative perspective becomes evident in this novel. Towards the end of the narrative, there is a departure from its core theme. Girija and Kokila's bonding is shattered. Instead of choosing to live together, their romantic bond is broken, and they move toward what society would consider a "normal" marital relationship. Girija is set to marry Dr. Babu in the final part of the novel, and Babu speaks to her about their separation. "It doesn't matter, Girija. That's how it happens. Nature has created men and women to come together and create future generations. Anything outside of that cannot last. All of it is just an illusion, a kind of obsession" (283). Considering the nature of the theme, the ending of the novel seems forced. Adrienne Rich's seminal work, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980) argues that 'heterosexuality, like motherhood, needs to be recognized and studied as a political institution' (637) challenging the idea that heterosexuality is natural and instinctual but ideological. Heterosexuality enforces a power relation which succeeds in othering lesbians as 'deviant, as pathological, or as emotionally and sensually deprived' (652). She suggests a 'lesbian continuum' as possible remedy to compulsory heterosexuality and a collective resistance to patriarchy, which can efficiently counter the binary between 'women' and 'lesbians' (657). The novel's abrupt shift to heterosexuality mirrors what Rich terms 'compulsory heterosexuality;' a patriarchal institution that enforces heterosexuality as the only viable outcome. Girija's marriage to Dr. Babu reflects societal pressure to conform, reducing lesbianism to a 'phase' or 'obsession.'

The cisgender author's heteronormative voice is heard prominently in the narrative, and it disseminates several

misconceptions about lesbianism and ultimately privileges heterosexuality. The novel fails to clearly distinguish between sexuality and identity. It emphasizes the notion that same-sex attraction arises due to circumstances. Adapted into a film in 1978, *Randu Penkuttikal* was one of the first Indian movies to address lesbianism. As Carroll argues, heteronormativity not only oppresses non-heterosexual identities but also penalizes heterosexuals who deviate from marital or reproductive norms. This dynamic is evident in works like *Randu Penkuttikal*, where lesbian desire is invalidated through forced heterosexual resolutions. Directed by Mohan, many elements of the novel were excluded in the film, and the same-sex love depicted in the novel was reduced to mere friendship. As a result, the film *Randu Penkuttikal* failed to do justice to the revolutionary theme, and to those who belong to the LGBTQA+ spectrum.

In Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's novel '*Shabdangal*' (Voices) published in 1947, there is a transgender character who appears to have all the physical attributes of a woman. However, after engaging in a physical relationship, her rough voice startles the protagonist. The seventh chapter ends with the question, "*Why? You were born a man after all!* (431)". The protagonist, who initially fell in love with her, believing her to be a woman, realizes his mistake upon discovering that she is transgender. Basheer's narrative style and language reflect the thought process of a heterosexual male writer. Basheer titles the eighth chapter "*Aanveshya*" (translated as 'male prostitute') (432), which presents a linguistic and cultural issue. The use of terms writers employ to address transgender individuals influences readers and contributes to the practice of labeling them with politically incorrect terminology. Basheer does not perceive transgender lives in terms of gender diversity; rather, the narrative unfolds through a lens heavily focused on sexuality. The emphasis is

placed more on the material problems they face rather than their identities or psychological experiences beyond suffering.

“Napumsakangal” (Eunuchs) is a short story written by Madhavikutty in 1983. The story is set against the backdrop of Bombay city. It unfolds in a slum area, amidst squalid surroundings, where people who cross-dress as women yet must shave their faces daily. The author describes that their primary means of livelihood include blessing people, begging, and sex work. The main characters are Ram Kinkari, the leader of the hijra community, and a mother who lost her child years ago. Believing that hijras had abducted her child, the mother arrives at their slum in search of it. Madhavikutty gives significant emphasis to the theme of motherhood in this story. Here, sexually deviant individuals are positioned outside the framework of maternal emotions. The narrative is influenced by notions of heteronormativity and abhorrence of gender diversity. By evaluating hijras through the lens of mainstream society, the author portrays them as aggressive and violent.

III. Authorial Cisgender Gaze in *Ram C/o Anandhi*

In Malayalam literature, there is still a noticeable dearth of works that vividly depict transgender characters and their struggles; notwithstanding the contributions made both directly or indirectly by Vijayarajamallika, Living Smile Vidya, Akkai Padmashali, Jeeva Rajagopal, Kalki Subramaniam, Nandini Krishnan, Kishore Kumar, K. Vaishali, and Adarsh E to name a few. In some novels, these characters appear fleetingly only to vanish quickly. A few cisgender authors have ventured into this territory; Akhil P. Dharmajan, the author of *Ram c/o Anandhi*, being a recent example. In *Ram c/o Anandhi*,” Malli a transwoman character, occupies a significant role throughout the novel. However, her image is

not included in the illustration on the cover of the novel whereas all the other important characters are given a place in it, serves as a metaphoric representation of the social exclusion that transpeople face. This omission may be due to the uncertainty around how to portray a trans woman. The societal ideas of womanhood are at odds with Malli's identity. Or it could be to satisfy the society's secret wish to make invisible everything that does not conform to its notions of 'normalcy.'

There is a politics behind the exclusion of the character Malli from the cover. It can be attributed to the author's cisgender gaze. According to Lora Mulvey, gaze creates a subjective power dynamic. Both the gazer and the gazed at feel this power difference, as the latter becomes objectified. Three types of gazes namely 'the spectator's gaze,' 'the male gaze, and 'the woman's gaze' are in vogue in literary discourses since Mulvey's problematization of 'gaze' as it operates in visual culture. Similarly, the extended term 'cisgender gaze' used here refers to the perspective that a cisgender person is conditioned to practice, being a subject heteronormativity. Such a gaze would tend to portray transgender individuals through a narrow lens that reflects societal norms and biases, leading to misrepresentation or oversimplification of their identities and experiences. Similar to the male gaze, the author's cisgender gaze can form a new power dynamic, where cisgender perspectives dominate transgender lives.

Another reason for the exclusion of Malli from the cover page may be the commodification of trans trauma. It is primarily a book marketing strategy. In the novel, the writer compares the love that Ram has for Anandhi to the life of the pearl spot fish (*karimeen*) (301). The fish has only one partner during its lifetime, and if it loses that partner, it does not choose another. This reflects the intensity and beauty of Ram's love for Anandhi. As a result, this love finds a special place in the hearts of the readers. Now, Malli reveals her past to Ram. She

tells him that her old name was Kalidas and that her father's friends had raped her. When it was discovered that Kalidas chose to identify as a girl, her education was stopped, and Kalidas left the village after falling in love with someone else, but that person deceived her. She was gang raped, and then she was discarded like trash. She eventually joined a group of transgenders and accepted the name Malli. In a particular context, when Anandhi asks what does Kalidas say, Ram responds, "Kalidas is dead; now it is Malli who lives (108)." Later, when Malli decides to return to her home, she meets Ram for the last time. She writes her name next to Ram's and says, "Let me have a place beside your name, at least on this cement bench (199)." At this moment that Ram realizes that Malli's love is genuine. Ram holds Malli in a tight hug and calls her Kalidas," and says, "I'll pray to God that you become my child in the next life, and then I'll protect you as my dearest, keeping you safe from all harm (200)". Despite having earlier said that "Kalidas is dead, and now Malli lives," Ram now calls her Kalidas in this moment. Here, the writer's heteronormative thinking becomes evident. The writer is unable to free himself from the traditional concept of love that was previously mentioned. The writer is suggesting that Malli, as a transwoman, cannot transcend into that idealized notion of love. Queer theory exposes how heteronormativity constructs homosexuality as 'deviant.' This is where Malli's trans identity is othered; her exclusion from the book cover and Ram's final words reinforce a binary logic that denies her agency.

Gratifying the heterosexual society's expectations maybe necessary for a writer to ensure financial success and career advancements. The heterosexual society fetishizes the rape, suffering and victimhood of transpeople. The novelist finally ensures a safe landing by affirming the reader's existing worldview. Rather than challenging or expanding the reader's perspective, the writer seems to strive to meet readers'

expectations, ultimately succeeding in doing so. Some readers may view Malli through the lens of sympathy, as they are conditioned to see transgenders as deserving only sympathy.

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