

Bodies Performing Politics: Conceptualizing Queerness in *Sancharram*

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Abstract

Homosexuality has always been a less talked about subject in the Indian context. Kerala especially, adopts an even more 'conservative-homophobic' approach in its dealings with issues of sexuality. Popular culture has begun to provide us with positive glimpses of lesbian lives and desires, yet young women who identify themselves as lesbians negotiate sexual subjectivity and desire in a cultural context. This may be because, the fears and social stigma associated with the lesbian 'other' are rife and lesbians are liable to be rejected by the society. The film *Sancharram* sheds a more positive light on the portrayal of lesbian women. It stresses on the fact that this form of sexual orientation is a matter of free-will and choice and not because of coercion from any external influence. This paper intends to argue that the portrayal of lesbian women in the film *Sancharram* reemphasizes the dominant sexual orientation as heterosexuality. Thus even though heterosexuality is interrogated, ultimately it retains its dominance.

Keywords: Queer, homosexuality, matrilineality

It was during the nineteen seventies and eighties that parallel cinema occupied the position in Malayalam film industry along with commercial cinemas. "Queer designates an approach that neither acknowledges nor subscribes to dualisms in thinking" (Muraleedharan, "Crisis in Desire," 71). Directors like Mohan and Padmarajan came to the forefront with films depicting queer desires between women. In their picturization of queer desires, "a queer reading is NOT one that attempts to look at things from a 'different' angle, but one that seeks to demolish those very angles that perpetuate hetero-patriarchal visions" (Muraleedharan, "Crisis in Desire," 71). They treated cinema as a popular medium and as "a powerful ideological apparatus negotiating with subjectivities and pleasure" (Muraleedharan, "Crisis in Desire," 72). Also these films were produced with a view to deconstruct the ways in which patriarchy negotiates with potentially disruptive desires, thereby

maintaining a normative order. These reimagining of gendered subjectivities also constitute the technologies of pleasure deployed by these films. These films nonetheless demonstrate that “gendered subjectivities and desire in contemporary India overflow conventional heterosexist frameworks of reading” (Muraleedharan, “Queer Bonds,” 191).

The film *Sancharram* or *The Journey* (2004) by Ligy J. Pullapally is an attempt to place the lesbian narrative in the Kerala context. It is a pointer to the fact that lesbianism as a form of sexuality is prevalent even in Kerala, where it is less heard of. The film *Sancharram* can be said to be ‘the lesbian film’ owing to its forthright depiction of explicit lesbianism. The behavior and psychological agony undergone by the lesbians in a highly conservative society like Kerala is focused upon. The protagonists of the film are two young girls, Kiran and Delilah, a Hindu Nair and a Christian. They become friends and grow up together sharing their joys and sorrows. Soon they realize the lesbian love they have for each other.

Matrilineality is a system in which the descent is traced through the mother and maternal ancestors. This societal system can also involve the inheritance of the maternal property. ‘Marumakkathayam’ as a system prevalent in Kerala is, to an extent, matrilineal. Women were considered to be the carriers of the man’s family name and legacy and were conferred a higher social status. The Hindu Nair community in Kerala boasts of a matrilineal heritage even today. The matrilineal system prevalent is highlighted in the film. Kiran’s mother inherits her mother’s property and they shift to Kerala from Delhi. As the reel rolls to give life to the past - the childhood of Kiran and Delilah – we see the proud mother of Kiran describing the familial heritage to her daughter. They were the descendants of great warriors and also owned the age-old ‘tharavadu’ where once, martial arts were practiced. Martial arts are considered to be the indicator of a rich cultural and familial heritage. Quite ironically, the mother happens to be sure that her daughter’s

children will be born and brought up in that same 'tharavadu' thereby continuing their ancestral heritage.

A society which gave importance to the mother is projected. But still we get to see the relative dominance of hetero-patriarchy throughout the film. Matrilineality also controlled the lives of the women. All the woman characters are given considerable screen space in the film. Delilah is shown to be a fun loving girl. Being the youngest in the family, she is pampered by her grandmother. She plays pranks with her friends and takes life as it comes. But she is bored with the monotonous life at home where she is often scolded by her mother to study. Meanwhile Kiran is more mature in character and actions. She writes poems and even gets a few of them published. Kiran is a person who views life critically and the spirit and depth of love permeates in her poems. As opposed to the stereotypical image of the all-suffering, docile and dutiful woman moulded by the society, she is strong minded.

Delilah's mother is a strong character who takes up the responsibility of the house single-handedly after the sudden demise of her husband. She struggles to meet both ends and gets irritated by the fun loving nature of her daughter. More than her mother, it is Delilah's grandmother who understands her. She senses the variations in the behavior of her granddaughter and empathizes with her. As a result of the conditioning of the patriarchal society, it shocks her when she witnesses Kiran and Delilah caressing each other.

Homosexuality is shunned by the society but we also find a critique of heterosexuality in the film. The trauma undergone by a classmate of theirs after the failure of a hetero-love affair is exposed. She is teased by the other students and kept aloof. Another girl Sabiha, a Muslim, elopes with a Hindu boy but her parents bring her back. The society considers her to be a disgrace to the

family and also to the society in which they live. This indicates that even compulsory heterosexuality is not free from shame and disrepute. More than the exercise of free will and choice in the selection of a life partner, what matters is the approval of the society.

The etiquette considered 'proper' for the girls is echoed in the words of Ezhuthachan, the caretaker, who says, 'girls must dress well, adorn themselves and be proper ladies.' Gayatri Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" posits the idea that "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant" (32). How the women should behave is determined by the patriarchy. Rajeshwari Sunderrajan in her book *Real and Imagined Woman: Gender, Culture and Post Colonialism*, maintains that "femaleness is constructed" (129). Women are expected to develop their feminine attributes like beauty, calmness, docility, patience and so on.

Initially we feel that Delilah does not reciprocate the feelings of Kiran but she slowly sets the possessiveness factor working by describing their classmate and neighbor Rajan as 'sweet'. Slowly the sexual attraction takes on a higher degree when they kiss each other and feel each other's body. According to Rich, the forms of "primary intensity between and among women" includes "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support" (213). The intensity of the relationship between Kiran and Delilah deepens as they feel that they are destined to be together forever. Kiran gives the bangle of her great grandmother to Delilah as a testimony of her profound love and self-sacrifice. The film succeeds in moving beyond the characterization of 'butch' and 'femme' roles where Kiran and Delilah are concerned. Even though we witness the dominant and submissive dynamics in their relationship, Ligy J. Pullappally does not attempt to make the two protagonists mimic the butch/femme role play.

In a turn of events, the male gaze of Rajan discovers the physical desire of the two girls and informs Delilah's mother. A general stereotypical sentiment associated with lesbianism is that it is related to sexual promiscuity and therefore has a demoralizing character. It is this notion which urges Rajan to report the physical intimacy of Kiran and Delilah to Delilah's mother. From here we witness a subversion of the romanticized entity called family. The family until then had been very encouraging and supportive but this incident turns them against the girls. Once both families find out about the intensity of their 'romance', Delilah is pushed into an arranged marriage and Kiran to the brink of suicide. Relationships between the family members become complicated and distanced. More than the happiness of her daughter, the family's reputation is what matters to Delilah's mother. According to her, it is her identity as a married woman which makes her respectable in the society. It also lends her credibility in a heteropatriarchal society. She breaks the bangle on Delilah's hand and blood oozes out. This can stand for the violent nature of the family. Kiran's mother puts forth damaging and negative stereotypes about lesbians when she says that Kiran is so 'unnatural' and requires treatment. Lillian Faderman has demonstrated that sexologists of the late nineteenth century had 'morbidity' intense love relationships between women, attributing to those relationships a varying array of pathologies and also minimized the importance of the affection that women felt for one another (Turner 86).

The words of the priest, on the day of the marriage of Delilah and Sebastian, "wives, be submissive to your husbands as to the Lord", is a clear exaltation of the law of patriarchy in the society. Here we can compare the matrilineal system of the Hindu Nair community and the treatment of women by Christianity. Delilah surrenders to the cries and pleas of her mother who wants to get her married as she fears their whole family will be excommunicated from the church

for this travesty. The portrayal of sexual repression through specific cultural restraints is very much clear in the film.

Towards the final scene, Delilah breaks off her marriage to Sebastian and shouts for Kiran. One possibility is that Delilah realizes that she can never feel loved or complete in this forced heterosexual marriage. It is the time of self-realization when she places her priorities at the highest pedestal. She completely becomes aware of who she is and whom she wants to share her life with. In a highly ambiguous ending, Delilah is shown entering her house with a smile – a smile of victory possibly; that she has achieved what her mind had always wanted to.

Meanwhile we are shown Kiran who stands at the edge of the steep rocks. While attempting to touch the cocoon under a leaf, she slips and falls down but narrowly escapes. This fall can be read along with the ceremony of the Holy matrimony taking place in the church. Both the protagonists are in a trying situation but they move on. Like Delilah who breaks off her marriage, Kiran too embraces freedom when she cuts off her hair and walks off with renewed determination, defying all constraints. Kiran chooses not to kill herself but instead to embark on her own sancharram or journey, presumably away from the home and its oppressive gender and sexual ideologies. While Kiran becomes increasingly more masculine as the film progresses, particularly in relation to Delilah's sensuous femininity, the last scene pulls back from any hint of gender non-conformity and instead positions Kiran as a modern, metropolitan lesbian/feminist subject rather than a queer-or butch-one (Gopinath, "Queer Regions," 347). The cutting of the hair can be read along with the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, where Delilah cuts the hair of Samson while he is asleep. This leaves him completely powerless as his hair was the source of his strength. But here, quite interestingly, the cutting of Kiran's hair attributes a sense of freedom to her. The butterfly, symbolic of Kiran and Delilah, breaks free from the cocoon and flies high. Though we are not sure whether Kiran and Delilah decide to live together, the film ends on a positive note and hope. The director has underlined the premise that lesbianism as a form of sexuality is not borne out of a failure in a heterosexual relationship.

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