

Chapter IV

When Two Men Kiss (2017): Representations of Gay Masculinity in Contemporary Malayalam Literature and Cinema

The chapter analyses in detail the increasing visibility of gay masculinity in the Malayali public sphere, especially in literature and films, against the backdrop of gender and sexuality-based activism, the formation of queer organizations to support the marginalized LGBTQ+ identities, and new media. It is centred around the publication of the text titled *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay, 2017) by Kishor Kumar, which is the first autobiography by an openly gay man in Malayalam. The very structure of the text, which is divided into two parts— the first section comprising of the life narrative and coming out story of the author, and the second section mapping the queer activism and cultural representations of gay men in Kerala/Malayalam— is read in this chapter as marking the beginning of visibility for gay masculinity in Kerala public sphere and also informs the selection of texts for this chapter. The chapter is organized into three main sections based on the texts analyzed: 1) The Two-Fold Autobiography of Kishor Kumar: Reading *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* (2017), 2) Gay Masculinity in Malayalam Short Stories: The Past and the Present, and 3) Representations of Gay Masculinity in Malayalam Cinema: Tracing the History and Contextualising the Aesthetics and Politics of *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016). The chapter begins with a detailed mapping of the current discourses on LGBTQI+

identities in Kerala in the form of government initiatives, non-governmental organizations and support systems, activism, new social media interventions, queer pride shows, and film festivals. The first section offers a detailed analysis of the first Malayalam autobiography by a gay man Kishor Kumar titled *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay, 2017) as a landmark text in the history of gay writings in Malayalam and reads how it challenges the heteropatriarchal family and society and its assumptions about queer sexualities. Continuous migration for existence emerges as a method for survival for gay men in Kerala, as revealed through the autobiography, due to the denial of their identity within domestic and public spheres. The second section on literary representations of gay masculinities in Malayalam discusses how short stories emerged as a major genre that deals actively with gay characters. The politics of representation of gay masculinity in short stories is historically traced in this section and they are read against contemporary Malayalam short stories, many of which are noted for a considerate representation of gay masculinity. The short stories of authors including K. R. Meera, C. V. Balakrishnan, Shahina E. K., Pramod Raman, Jijo Kuriakose, and others are analysed in this section. The last section of the chapter traces the representation of gay characters in Malayalam cinema in an attempt to understand the changes in the representation in post-2000 films, the latest being the widely discussed film *Kathal-The Core* (2023, directed by Jeo Baby). At the centre of the section on films is *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016, directed by Jayan K. Cheriyan), which, for the first time, portrayed the visual dynamics of gay male relationships and bodies on screen in Malayalam cinema. Gay men committing suicide remains a central theme in literary

and filmic representations and in reality (the recent being the suicide of Kishor Kumar, the author of the autobiography *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* in March 2024), which points towards the difficulty of existence as a gay man in contemporary Kerala. The analysis aims to show how the increased visibility of gay masculinity through representation challenges hegemonic masculine ideals and opens up the possibility of reimagining an inclusive gender structure within a broad spectrum of identities rather than based on impossible assumptions of binary divisions.

Queer Activism in Kerala: Developments in the Last Decades

This section of the chapter elaborates on the developments in queer activism in Kerala from 2010. I argue that Kerala has seen a significant leap in queer activism since the last decade, aided by the advancement in new media technologies that helped queer individuals to organise and connect among themselves. Tracing the history of gay movements in Kerala, I also discuss in detail the earlier phase of gay activism in Kerala, where Malayali gay men who migrated out of Kerala played an important role. The late 2010s is noted for other significant developments as the period saw gay men becoming more visible through their autobiographies, writings and their new media presence, troubling the heteropatriarchy both in the domestic and the public spheres. The formation of an organisation exclusively for gay men (called the Gay Malayali Association or GAMA in 2021) is a landmark event during this phase, which is also discussed in this section.

India has witnessed a significant advancement in queer activism in the last few decades. The Supreme Court of India's decriminalization of homosexuality on 6 September 2018, quashing Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, became an important landmark in the country's history where the "Indian judiciary caught up with the queering of the Indian public" (Ghosh, 2021, p.154). The last decade also witnessed intensified queer activism in the South Indian state of Kerala, invigorated by the establishment of various queer organizations like Queerala (2013), Queerythm (2017), Malayali Transmen Association-MATA (2019), Gay Malayali Association-GAMA (2021), and others. Organizations like *Sahayatrika* (2002) have also been playing a significant role in improving queer sensitivity in Kerala. The Kerala Queer Pride March which started in 2010, is another major event that considerably increased the visibility of the group. Alternative governments too have intervened in the socio-political well-being of queers by introducing different welfare schemes. These include offering free sex-reassignment surgeries in government hospitals, the launch of G-Taxi (Gender Taxi) operated by transgenders, starting a gender park in Kozhikode, a transgender school in Kochi, and so on. In their study on welfare schemes for transgenders, Megha Kurian and Greeshma Manoj (2021) note that Kerala pioneered a model in this regard for other states in India. However, they also point out that many of these schemes have inadequacies in their implementation because of the constant marginalization of the community (Kurian & Manoj, 2021). Sexual minorities in Kerala still face diverse forms of discrimination in their public and private lives, including exclusion from families, physical violence, and economic deprivation. Though homosexuality has been decriminalized, sexual minorities continue to face numerous challenges including impediments with regard to the legal

recognition of their marriage, child adoption, and so on. While there is a growing visibility of transgenders in the LGBTQI+ community in Kerala, the representation of gay, lesbian, and others are still limited within the group (K. Kumar, 2017; Tharayil, 2014). This thesis undertakes a study of the intervention of gay masculinities in contemporary Kerala. To begin with, I trace a brief history of the gay movements in Kerala to understand the manner in which this group negotiated with the heteropatriarchy in Kerala.

Tracing the History of Gay Movements in Kerala

The political unification of the gay men in Kerala was absent for a long time compared to other queer groups like the transgenders. The earlier interventions of gay masculinity in Kerala's cultural and political spheres were primarily through literature and films. Though several of these mediums did a problematic representation of the community, literature and films played a significant role in giving visibility to the gay community in Kerala (J. Kuriakose, 2017). Even though there was a rising queer sensitivity following a series of lesbian suicides in the state in the 1990s (Mokkil, 2019), the gay community remained largely invisible within Kerala. The patriarchal dividend these men, though gay, derive from being men (Connell, 1996; Demetriou, 2001) also played a role in this regard. Moreover, the visibility could problematize their existence as men and limit them to "women's status" (Kumar, 2017, p. 53). The AIDS pandemic and the relationship drawn with the gay community also prevented gay men from coming out and collaborating actively with other minority sexual and social groups during this time

(Chakrapani et al., 2002). Scholars note that the marginalization of homosexuality in modern Kerala lies in the premise of sexual morality that is deeply embedded in the discourses on modernity in Kerala (Kumaramkandath, 2014). Here homosexuality is “represented as yet another effect of a materialist perspective that privileges the flesh over moral values” and is often “equated to trafficking, pederasty, and molestation” (Kumaramkandath, 2013, p. 219). Besides the pervasive homophobia in the “progressive” politics of Kerala, it also needs to be noted that male homosexuals in Kerala often have to engage in heterosexual marriages and they strive to head the family, thereby using the institution of marriage as a “veil behind which they pursue their same-sex desire” (Kumaramkandath, 2013, p. 215).

The rise of the gay movement in Kerala is significantly linked with the rise of new media in India, especially following the liberalization in the 1990s (Dasgupta, 2017). Sandip Roy (2003) notes that the spread of the internet tremendously helped the members of the gay community to connect with other gay men by providing a “safe space” (p. 188), but it was only limited to a section of upper-class gay men in the earlier years. Many gay men came out through such platforms provided by the internet. Kishor Kumar, recognized as the first to publicly reveal himself as gay in Kerala, came out through a musical website platform in 2004 (K. Kumar, 2017). This was done while he was working as an engineer in the USA. In his autobiography *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* (When Two Men Kiss), the first gay autobiographical account published in Malayalam in 2017, he notes that many highly educated and employed gay men migrated from Kerala to avoid the intense homophobia in Kerala in the earlier decades and they actively used the potential of internet and new media which marked the

beginning of gay activism in Kerala in the 2000s. This also marked the first phase of gay activist movements in Kerala, which was primarily elitist and limited to diasporic gay men who migrated from Kerala. However, the increasing sensibility towards homosexuality in the later years caused many of these gay men to return to Kerala. Some of them, including Kishor Kumar, Jijo Kuriakose, and others, played significant roles in taking forward the gay activism in Kerala in the later years (K. Kumar, 2017; J. Kuriakose, 2017).

Several other developments also influenced the initial phase of gay activism in Kerala. The release of the film *Fire* (1996, directed by Deepa Mehta) was one such significant event. It was a critical landmark in Indian cinema in its radical depiction of the reality of homosexuality and questioning of heteropatriarchal family. The film is influential in the history of the Indian queer movement as it played a major role in setting off the debates around homosexuality in India (Kapur, 2000). The film caused violent protests in different parts of India by religious fundamentalist groups and it also generated a series of debates in Kerala (though not violent) about homosexuality following its release in the International Film Festival of Kerala in Thiruvananthapuram (Tharayil, 2014, p. 75). The release of the Malayalam film *Sancharram* (2004, directed by Lijo Pullisery) also considerably influenced the queer movements in Kerala (Tharayil, 2014). Centred on two lesbian lovers based in Kerala, *Sancharram* significantly disturbed the hetero-patriarchal structures in Kerala, making “a strong claim for positive representations of lesbian desire in order to counter societal violence against non-normative sexual arrangements” (Mokkil, 2010, p. 145). Though both films are based on

lesbianism, they also considerably influenced the gay activism in Kerala in the initial years (K. Kumar, 2017; J. Kuriakose, 2017).

While newspapers largely remained indifferent to the shifts in the realms of homosexuality in Kerala (Tharayil, 2014, p. 75), many regional magazines in Malayalam contributed significantly by engaging with male homosexuality in the earlier phases, especially when internet penetration was in a developing stage in Kerala. Magazines like *Mathrbhumi Weekly* created such content, raising the awareness about male homosexuality among people in Kerala. A notable one among the earlier articles is Kishor Kumar's *Pranayam Oru Manushya Avakasa Prasnamanu* (Love is a Human Rights Issue), published by *Mathrbhumi Weekly* in July 2009. An article that focused on same-sex love, this was publicized by *Mathrbhumi Weekly* as the queer manifesto of Kerala. Though primarily an article on queer rights, it also reflected Kumar's life as a gay man. *Mathrbhumi Weekly* also later became the first mainstream magazine in Malayalam to start a regular column for the LGBTQI+ community in Kerala in April 2016. Malayalam magazines like *Madhyamam*, *Kala Kaumudi*, and others also have contributed in their own ways to the queer cause. This increase in queer sensitivity in the late 2000s was further aided significantly by a series of legal interventions, and the earliest of such verdicts was given by the High Court of Delhi in 2009. In "Naz Foundation vs Government of NCT of Delhi", HC decriminalized the homosexual act between two consenting adults by upholding the rights of homosexual people under Articles 14, 15 and 21 of the Indian constitution (Naz Foundation vs Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi [WP-C No.7455/2001] on 2 July 2009, 2009). This further strengthened gay activism in Kerala and paved the way for the active political

organization of the community. The first significant step in this direction was the organization of the first queer pride march in Thrissur in 2010, which saw a significant participation of gay men.

In tracing the history of the gay rights movements in Kerala, it is essential to understand the role certain organizations played. *Sahayatrika* was the first LGBTQI+ community formed in Kerala in 2002 in the background of the rising lesbian suicides in the 1990s. Though it primarily focused on lesbian or bisexual and transgender women, it played a major role in increasing the visibility of and sensitizing about queer communities in Kerala. *Vathil* was also one of the initial associations of the gay community. FIRM (Foundation for Integrated Research in Mental Health), an NGO led by Dr A. K. Jayasree and Maithreyan, also supported these organizations by providing mental health support systems to the members of queer communities, including gay men⁴⁵. The formation of multiple queer organizations was a notable shift after 2010. However, in the beginning, this was mostly confined to the levels of general organizations, including all the LGBTQI+ communities. The most notable among such communities that were formed in Kerala was the Queerala. Established in 2013 under the leadership of Jijo Kuriakose (an openly gay man), the organization is still active in supporting queer individuals, besides intervening in the socio-cultural spheres of Kerala in different ways to raise awareness about homosexuality. Queerythm (formed in 2017) is another major organization for queer people based in Thiruvananthapuram. Gradually,

⁴⁵ It is also important to note the contributions of Malayalis to the welfare of the gay communities outside Kerala. One such notable organization founded by a Malayali is “Sahodaran” (meaning “brother”) based in Chennai (founded by Sunil Menon).

separate organizations have also been formed by different queer communities. With the gay community being associated with these different associations, forming a separate organization for gay men in Kerala was a major landmark. This led to the formation of GAMA (Gay Malayali Association) in 2021, the first in the history of Kerala. The purpose of the organization is to effectively address different problems gay men face in Kerala in the diverse spheres of their lives. It also aids gay men in coming out and overcoming the impediments posed by heterosexual family and society. However, one of the major concerns the organization tries to address is the challenges posed by the hegemonic models of masculinity in Kerala (Anil, 2021). The tensions gay men have with the dominant models of masculinity mark the gay men as different, making them one of the most vulnerable groups in Kerala. Among them, the most vulnerable are the gay men from marginalized communities (Moitra et al., 2021). GAMA also actively works to bring reforms in the field of medical education, including revising the curriculum to make it more gay-friendly.

Gradually, many of these queer organizations started addressing the problems concerning caste and class among the queer communities (Resmi & Anilkumar, 2020, p. 207), which doubly oppress queer people. Gay men also came out in Kerala, revealing their cultural origins. A notable example is that of Mohammed Unais, who is from the minority Muslim community in Kerala. Unais is also a board member of GAMA. Along with the transgender, the gay community has been demanding the framing of policies supporting the gay community in Kerala. With the intense activism around gay rights, Kerala also has witnessed many gay marriages. Sonu and Nikesh emerged as the first gay married couple in Kerala in 2018. They are also playing a significant role in getting legal

recognition for the marriage as according to the Indian marriage laws, two gay men cannot legally marry but can only indulge in a cultural marriage. Kerala also witnessed other gay marriages in recent times, including those by Nived and Antony, Jebin and Manu, and others. The lack of legal recognition of marriage and other rights like the adoption of children remain as challenges for the gay community in the state.

While considering the gay rights movements in Kerala, it is also essential to note the role played by social media. The rise in popularity of social media, especially in the last decade, played a major role in organizing queer people across Kerala, helping in their “transition from invisibility to visibility” (Dimri & Goswami, 2019, p. 1). Social media platforms like Facebook help them overcome the limitations of traditional media platforms by giving them opportunities to interact with a wider audience at once (Dilley, 2010). In the case of Kerala, this is especially significant as Kerala has the highest internet and mobile penetration in India. As the first digital state in India, Kerala has more than 37% internet penetration with more than 30 million mobile connections for a population of 33 million (Paul & Pillai, 2017), and a large section of the population also uses diverse social media platforms. The queer community (including gay men) actively uses social media, which considerably contributes to the visibility and awareness about queer people. Queerala itself was an online Facebook community that later developed into a full-fledged organization. There are several social media pages on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and others that help queer people to connect and integrate with their community members. In the case of the gay community, GAMA has a Facebook page that specifically focuses on the welfare of the gay community in Kerala, besides various other pages across social media platforms that help gay men to interact. Gay men in

Kerala have also marked their presence on online video-sharing platforms like YouTube. Some of them use platforms like YouTube to come out openly (Lovelock, 2017), while others use these online platforms as an extension of their offline activism. Sonu and Nikesh, the first gay couple in Kerala, maintain a YouTube channel (“Sonu Nikesh Vlog”) with over 80,000 subscribers. Besides depicting the daily lives of a gay family, which is unusual to Kerala audiences, the channel also familiarises the lives of gay men to the people of Kerala. Though the channel primarily depicts the private lives of Sonu and Nikesh, I argue that social media platforms, especially YouTube interventions of Sonu and Nikesh are also political, marking the gay masculinity firmly by disrupting the normalcy of heterosexual families in Kerala.



Figure 1: A poster announcing a regional meeting of the ruling party CPI (M). This poster received much attention in Kerala for its representation of male homosexuals within it.

The intensified activism in the last decade, followed by the decriminalization of homosexuality by the Supreme Court of India in 2018, gave momentum to the gay movement in Kerala. Mainstream political parties in Kerala also support their cause by openly supporting them (See Figure 1). Kozhikode became the first district in Kerala to set up a grievance redressal committee chaired by the district collector to address the harassment of the LGBTQI+ community in 2016. Prominent channels also include gay men in their different programmes, further enhancing their visibility. The most noted example is that of Big Boss (broadcasted by Asianet, a leading channel in Kerala), which saw the participation of a gay man, Aswin Vijay. The last decade also saw gay men rising to prominence in many other fields in Kerala. This includes Riswan (Makeup artist), Kishor Kumar, Jijo Kuriakose (literature/social service), and others. With the enhanced queer activism, the people of Kerala have started accepting homosexuality, including gay sexuality. In an interview conducted by *Grihalekshmi*, a noted magazine in Malayalam, 62% of Malayali youth now accept homosexuality as normal (“Swarganuragam Angeekarikkunnu” [A Survey on Homosexuality], 2017). Though there has been substantial progress in the gay activist movements in the last decade, Kerala as a society remains predominantly heterosexual and a large section of queer people continue to remain invisible. In the subsequent sections, I discuss the representations of gay masculinity in popular culture, including in films and literature. I also discuss in the next section, Kishor Kumar’s *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* (2017), considered the first gay autobiographical account in Malayalam.

II

The Two-Fold Autobiography of Kishor Kumar: Reading *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* (2017)

This section discusses the first Malayalam autobiography by an openly gay man, Kishor Kumar. Positing his autobiography *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay, 2017) as a medium employed by him to further his queer activism, I argue that the text claims a subject position for gay men in Kerala, a hitherto unrecognised and marginalised category among the masculinities in the state. The section also details the compositional strategies he adopted in this text as the two-fold structure of the text—the first part detailing his “coming out” story and the next part mapping the gay activism in Kerala—unravels the complex linkages between the personal and the political. The autobiography stands as a testimonial to the life and struggles of gay men in Kerala who have to constantly fight with the heteropatriarchal structure of the family/society on personal and political fronts. In that sense, a gay man’s autobiography marks not only his life but also stands as a historical document archiving the life struggles of his community. It becomes a community narrative of gay men of his period (in a way similar to that of women, Dalit and transgender autobiographies). By locating this text at the intersections of the heteropatriarchal family and society, this section also notes that migration from Kerala emerges as a major trope in the lives of gay men.

To understand the significance of Kumar’s autobiography, it is imperative to consider the role played by autobiographies in the Malayalam literary sphere and figure

out how such narratives troubled heteropatriarchy. Though new media plays a dominant role in channelling the discourses in contemporary Kerala, literature still occupies a significant position in Kerala's cultural and political lives. As a result of the people's library movement (initiated by P. N. Panicker), the library networks are still active in Kerala and there is a larger reading public and several small and large publishing houses (Bavakutty, 1982). Kerala has also been historically a thriving market for the genre of autobiographies. It is common for notable people from diverse areas including politics, social work and others, to come up with their autobiographies. Several of them also led to a series of discussions and debates in Kerala. People from marginalized groups, including women, historically adopted autobiography as an effective means for their political consolidation and community building (Coleman, 1997). Kerala too has seen such major autobiographical accounts by women that troubled the existing heteropatriarchal order (Devika, 2006b). *Ente Kadha* (My Story, 1973) by the popular writer Kamala Das (Madhavikkuty) is notable among such earlier examples. The book sparked controversy across Kerala for its outspoken way of writing, especially about intimate matters including sex, by a woman (Darshini & Jaisre, 2023). Social and political development in the 1990s also led to socially marginalized communities employing life narratives, including autobiographies, to mark themselves in a heteropatriarchal society like Kerala (Devika, 2006b; Mokkal, 2019). Kerala has seen autobiographies by Dalit activists (*Janu: C K Januvinte Jeevita Katha* [2002] by C. K. Janu), sex workers (*The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* [2005] by Nalini Jameela), nuns (*Amen* [2009] by Sister Jesme), and others. A very notable and controversial one among these was *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* by Nalini Jameela, published in 2005. An

almost invisible category till then, sex workers were never a part of the social and political lives of post-independence Kerala. The book details the role of sex workers, especially in the 1990s, when sex workers also played the role of health workers as part of AIDS prevention campaigns in Kerala (Mokkil, 2019; Saha & Karah, 2021). Though autobiographical writing has been used as a major mode to reject heterosexual oppression in many other contexts by sexual minorities (Cohler, 2007), their engagement is still limited in life writing in Kerala. Only a few works have been produced in this category and that too mainly in the last decade. This includes *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* (2017) by the gay man Kishor Kumar, *Mallikavasantham* (2019) by the transgender activist Vijayarajamallika and others.

Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol (When Two Men Kiss) by Kishor Kumar is a significant landmark in the history of the gay movement in Kerala. The book is the first gay autobiography published in Malayalam and attracted major attention not only in Kerala but nationally as well. The publication of this book is a landmark in the history of gender movements in Kerala as it reconfigured gay as a major political category in Kerala. Here, I interrogate how this text disrupts the hegemonic models of masculinity in Kerala by foregrounding the gay male body and gay experience. I argue that by disturbing the patriarchal institutions like family or marriage, the text firmly places the marginalized gay male body within Kerala's cultural and political milieu. By breaching the boundaries of patriarchal masculinity, the account of a gay man also opens alternative modes of viewing societal institutions including family, marriage, and others. Kumar's accounts also point out the marginality of gay masculinity in the hierarchical order of masculinities in Kerala.

Autobiography as a genre is significant for queer communities to affirm themselves as other popular media like newspapers that play a significant role in the community and nation-making (B. Anderson, 1983) historically did not adequately address sexual minorities (Gorman-Murray, 2007; Marcus, 1994). Moreover, life writing for queers also played a dominant role in their “liberation project”, as Stephen Maddison (2002) refers to “the importance for gay people of destabilizing the master-narrative of sexuality which inscribes silence as naturalised heterosexuality” (p. 153). He further notes,

To identify gayness is an articulation notable not only for what it identifies (homosexual object-choice) but for its resistance of heterosexual naturalisation; that is, it is notable for its very speaking. Heterosexual people do not come out as heterosexual; gay and lesbian people are told to stop going on about it (p.153).

In the case of Kerala, by disturbing the naturalized and hierarchical heterosexual order, *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* unravels the lives of not only gay men but also the hitherto unexplored diverse and complex queer communities. In this regard, I am also interested in the compositional strategies Kumar adopts in his book, which are markedly different from the conventional models of autobiographical accounts. From the autobiographical “I” in the initial part of his book, he further moves on to narrate the history of the gay movement in Kerala in the second part of the book. The autobiographical section of the book is primarily his “coming out story”, and the rest of the book discusses the evolving landscape of gay activism in Kerala, especially in the last

decade. I argue that *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol* is remarkable not only as the first gay autobiographical record in Malayalam but also as the first comprehensive record of the gay movement in Kerala. The sections that follow his autobiographical account detail the history of representation of gay men in literature, films and others which helped considerably in improving gay sensitivity and increasing the community's visibility. Besides, there are also other sections within the book containing general essays on homosexuality as well as the interviews. I argue that this specific structure of the book is more political than personal, accounting for the complex and oppressive history of gay movements in Kerala.

Kishor Kumar was born in a middle-class family in Kozhikode, Kerala. Kumar notes that his interest towards the same sex was recognized earlier in his life itself when he was in his fourth standard. He recalls that when he sat with his best friend or touched his body, an "indescribable feeling" (Kumar, 2017, p. 21) was aroused in him. Kumar notes that his attraction towards men intensified during his teenage years. This revelation of a man's love towards another man is significant in many ways. Kumar's account unsettles the patriarchal notions of masculinity that necessitate and normalize heterosexual relationships. It also unravels the everyday experiences of a gay man in diverse spaces from childhood that naturalizes the "heterosexual identities and relationships" (Gorman-Murray, 2007, p. 3). Describing his experience, he notes that he could not recognize the specificity of his sexuality and his non-attraction towards women at this age. He writes, "even in teenage or youth years, my thinking was that these feelings will eventually go away or that I will stop them once I get married to a woman" (Kumar, 2017, p. 32). Once he joined the college, this confusion intensified, and the fear

of being recognised as gay forced him to isolate himself. Kumar's experiences in his college reveal how the premier educational institutions in India remain homophobic and provide limited social space to gay men. About his experience in these institutions, he notes,

My heart was pounding when some people used slurs about same-sex lovers to speak sarcastically and disgustedly to a friendly audience in the hostel. I did not know whether to laugh or cry at such jokes. These cruel jokes spring from the illusion that they will never have a gay person in their friend circle. I have also learned to respond by pretending that I have a sexual attraction to women in order to get along in discussions in friend circles (Kumar, 2017, p. 26).

Kumar notes that he relied on music and reading to overcome the crisis as a closeted gay while in NIT Calicut and IIT Kanpur (two prominent public engineering institutions in India) for his engineering education. Following his migration to Delhi after securing a job in a multinational company, his exploration of his gay identity further intensified, and his metropolitan location aided him in many ways in learning about homosexuality. In the case of Kumar, migration to other urban locations played a significant role in embracing his gay identity, which is also a recurring trope as revealed in the gay autobiographies in other geographical locations. Andrew Gorman-Murray (2007) notes that "in 'coming out of the closet', non-normative sexual identity (and desire) is actualised through spatial mobility" (p. 11), which is often done through migration which many times involves the rural to urban migration (Brown, 2000; Maddison, 2002). Kumar notes that the rural to

urban migration is common among gay men in Kerala as cities are often perceived as tolerant of non-heterosexual identities (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Weston, 1995) and have played a dominant role in the development of contemporary gay cultures (Aldrich, 2004; Knopp, 1998). In the case of Kerala, foreign migration is also common among queer communities, especially among gay men (Kumar, 2017, p. 92).

Kumar's initial migration to Delhi played a major role in enabling him to explore his gay identity. He notes that the internet service provided by his company (which was very uncommon in the 1990s) helped him to learn about the gay movements in the Western nations and the limited homosexual literature available in India, including gay magazines like "Bombay Dosth" and books like *Yaraana* (1999, written by the famous gay activist and writer Hoshang Merchant). It is to be noted that Kumar acknowledges that his privileged status as a well-educated and employed gay man granted him mobility and helped to gain awareness about the gay movements and literature in the West and in India in the 1990s. Kumar's autobiographical account reveals the frequent migration he has undertaken in his later years, including to the USA. This multiplicity of spaces in Kumar's autobiography also suggests how spatiality is significant in the lives of gay men (Cant, 1997; Gorman-Murray, 2007).

The compulsion for heterosexual marriage by one's own family has also been a persistent problem gay men and lesbians face in Kerala. Kumar (2017) notes that though they manage to conceal their homosexuality for a certain period, insistence on heterosexual marriage puts them under strain (p. 34). Marriage as a heteropatriarchal institution in India binds women to conjugal home (Chacko, 2003) and is a "normative

field, leaving no space for nonnormative, non-exclusive relationships” (Narrain, 2007, p. 64). “Mutual consent and family and community recognition validate a marriage” (Vanita, 2005, p. 1) in India as “family and community still confer more of the benefits of marriage than does the state” (Vanita, 2005, p. 16). In all these respects, queer communities face numerous problems in India. Though homosexuality is legalized, same-sex marriage remains illegal in India. Moreover, non-cooperation from the families and the society further complicates the community’s problems (Narrain, 2007). Kumar’s accounts reveal that being a man, though gay, gives him an advantage in diverse spheres in comparison to other sexual minorities like lesbians; the insistence on heterosexual marriage forced him to migrate to the USA. This forced migration is crucial in studying gay lives in Kerala as Kumar notes that the familial and social pressure to get married is one of the major causes for the migration of gay men to other locations. The lack of legal recognition of homosexual marriage remains one of the serious concerns of queer people in India. This is especially important as civil rights in India are intrinsically linked with the institutions of marriage and family (Narrain, 2007). Kumar’s accounts note that despite significant leaps being made in LGBTQI+ rights following the legalization of homosexuality and intensified activism in the last few decades, many challenges persist against the integration of queer persons into the mainstream.

Gay activist movements in Kerala from the beginning have been tremendously influenced by the rise of internet media and the early gay activist movement was primarily spearheaded by diasporic gay communities. Kumar also became the first openly gay man in Kerala and his coming out was through a musical website (“Ragakairali”) he founded after he migrated from Kerala. This was a historical moment in the history of the

gay movement in Kerala and subsequently, he returned to India to play a significant role in the gay movement in Kerala. It is to be noted that Kumar's coming out as gay coincided with the rise of queer movements in Kerala in the 2000s. Kumar's subsequent collaboration with the newly formed queer organisation *Sahayatrika* as well as with other queer activists like Maithreyan and A. K. Jayasree is quintessential in the gay movement in Kerala, leading to the formation of an active gay community in Kerala in the subsequent years. Kumar actively collaborates with different queer communities and has played a significant role in forming the first gay-only organisation in Kerala GAMA in 2022.

III

Gay Masculinity in Malayalam Short Stories: The Past and the Present

In this section, I explore how Malayalam literature has historically dealt with the theme of male homosexuality and the politics of representations therein. I argue that the engagement of Malayalam literature with the theme of male homosexuality has increased significantly in the last decade. The short story is also identified as a major genre that incorporated such representations in contemporary Malayalam literature in comparison to other genres like the poetry or the novel. I also argue that though the literary representations of male homosexuality have intensified in the last decade, these representations have their own limitations. While only a few works have realistically

presented male homosexuals, many present gay men as a threat to the heteropatriarchal institutions of marriage and family, and sometimes as cruel and unsympathetic.

In Malayalam, the genre of short story has dealt more actively with the theme of male homosexuality than other literary genres like novel or poetry (K. Kumar, 2017; Resmi & Anilkumar, 2020). There are allusions to male homosexuality in Malayalam short stories written even before 1950. Thakazhy Siva Sankara Pillai's short story "Sahodaryam" (Brotherhood, 1945) is a notable example. The story presents an intimate relationship between two jail inmates (who called each other as Annan [meaning brother] and Kuttan). Written in 1945, this story is the earliest record of male homoerotic relationship in a Malayalam short story. In this, Pillai effectively uses the male homosocial space of prison (Hensley, 2000) to represent the intimate male relationship. However, among the 20th century authors in Malayalam, no other writer has dealt with the theme of male homosexuality as actively as Madhavikutty [Kamala Das in English] (K. Kumar, 2017; Resmi & Anilkumar, 2016). Her story "Chandrarasmikal" (Moonbeams, 1969) represents the tensions between a married heterosexual couple after the wife finds that her husband is in a relationship with a man named Iqbal. At one point, when the wife (the narrator of the story) asks about Iqbal to her husband, he replies that he knows everything about Iqbal including his "soul and body" (Madhavikutty, 2020, p. 45). This further creates tensions in the family, and as an act of revenge against Iqbal, the wife gets pregnant from her husband. The story portrays Iqbal attempting suicide and the narrator is shown visiting him in the hospital. While the story problematises the bisexual relationship

of the narrator's husband, it further problematises the gay identity of Iqbal⁴⁶ as creating tensions in a heterosexual family. Written in 1969 when homosexuality was less discussed in the Indian context, this story was also translated into English and published in *Debonair* magazine (a noted men's magazine from Bombay) in 1974 titled "Iqbal". The problematisation of gay identity can also be found in her story "Rajaveedhikal" (Royal Paths, 1984), wherein a gay man is represented as a villain who kills the protagonist's lover and incites communal tensions in Sri Lanka. The story revolves around a famous model Manorama Jennifer Kelly, who comes to Sri Lanka for a fashion parade. Here she meets and falls in love with Jerry, the secretary of the billionaire gay man Fletcher. The story reveals that Jerry is kept as a sex slave by Fletcher, and the narrative suggests that Jerry is killed by Fletcher when he finds out about the former's relationship with Manorama. The story ends with a series of riots erupting in Sri Lanka, indicated to have been planned by Fletcher.

Madhavikutty's representations of gay identities in her stories are problematic at many levels. On the one hand, gay men are represented as a threat to the very existence of the heterosexual family, while they are also represented as villains to the extent of destabilising a country's internal security. Though gay characters have a problematic representation in her stories, they are significant as they are some of the earliest representations of male homosexuality in Malayalam literature. Besides male

⁴⁶ Interestingly Madhavikutty's autobiography *Ente Katha* (My Story, 1976) also represents the tensions she had with her husband over his relationship with a man. Described as her husband's "friend" and "constant companion" (Das, 1976, p. 118), this instance in her autobiography led to further queer reading of Madahvikkuty (R. M. George, 2000).

homosexuality, Madhavikkuty also dealt with many other sexual identities in her stories, including lesbianism (“Sthree”, “Chandanamarangal”), transgenderism (“Napumsakangal”) and others; many of them also led to several controversies during the time (O. Ross, 2016). Madhavikkuty’s revelation of same-sex interests through her autobiography *Ente Katha* (My Story, 1976) also sparked controversies (Devika, 2006b; R. M. George, 2000) across Kerala. Though “dismissed as sensationalist melodramatic fiction” (George, 2000, p. 744) during the time, her autobiography accounted for an active queer reading in Kerala.

Contemporary Malayalam Literature and Male Homosexuality

There is a more extensive engagement with male homosexuality in contemporary Malayalam literature. However, many such works (mostly short stories) came out after the late 2000s, coinciding with the rise in queer activism in Kerala. A few works published before this reflect the authors’ confusions regarding same-sex desires. K. P. Ramanunni’s story “Kadha, Kadhapathram, Kadhakruthu” (Story, Character, Storywriter, 1999) belongs to this category. It addresses the difficulties of representing homosexuality in Malayalam literature as it was widely considered as a taboo subject in Kerala. Written around 20 years before the decriminalisation of homosexuality (published in his short story collection *Jathi Chodikkuka* [Ask About Caste, 1999]), the story shows the male homosexual relationship between two men from different communities: Madhu (a Hindu) and Kunjali (a Muslim). Written in different parts like “Kadhapathram” (character), “Kadhakruthu” (story writer) and “Kadha” (story), which is an uncommon technique in

Malayalam short story writing, the author also asks the readers to interpret homosexuality in their own ways. I argue that the ambiguity the author leaves in the story also reflects Ramanunni's contesting stance on homosexuality. In one of his interviews, he remarks,

I disagree with promoting homosexuality and turning it into a fashion... heterosexuals becoming homosexual is also not good. I cannot accept the trend of promoting hatred between men and women in society and the tendency to promote homosexuality (Resmi & Anilkumar, 2016, p. 94).

G. R. Indugopan's story "Uranagathirikkuka, Kallane Pidikkam" (Do not Sleep, Let's Catch the Thief, 2017) is a satire of gay sexual identity. The story represents a gay male householder in a forced heterosexual marriage attempting to have a sexual relationship with the thief who comes to steal in his house. Besides giving a satirical representation of homosexuality, the story further problematizes the gay identity of the male householder through the representation of the thief's extreme contempt towards the gay man. C. V. Balakrishnan's "Edwin Paul" (2015) represents the crisis in the lives of a gay couple, Edwin and Paul. Edwin, born in a traditional Christian family, comes out as gay in his family and introduces Paul as his partner. This creates problems in the lives of these men, and Paul is shown committing suicide by the end of the story. Suicide, a recurring theme in many of the gay accounts (Kulkin et al., 2000), is also a major theme in this story. The trope of "death" also pervades in another short story "Coming Out" (2008) by K. R. Meera. Often described as the first short story in Malayalam to objectively represent gay lives (Resmi & Anilkumar, 2016), this story is set

simultaneously in London and Kerala. Narrated from the perspective of Seba, the story shows her witnessing the funeral service of an English gay man John, undertaken by his partner David. Touched by the intimacy between these men, Seba remembers her married life with a gay man in Kerala. It is her experience in London that reveals to her that homosexuality is a normal phenomenon. The story reveals that Seba's husband committed suicide and the story links this event to the tragic death of John, who has died in front of her due to health complications caused by AIDS. Death comes as a recurring trope throughout the story, besides which is the symbol of AIDS, which is often employed to stigmatise gay men globally (Smit et al., 2012). C. S. Chandrika's story "Kani" (2011) also shows the troubles in the marital life of Abhijith and Jayanti due to Abhijith's homosexual orientation. As a gay, Abhijith is forced into a heterosexual marriage with Jayanti by his parents, and it is after the marriage that Jayanti comes to know about his sexual orientation. Unlike many other stories, "Kani" shows Jayanti committing suicide at the end. The story also represents the trauma Abhijith is undergoing as part of the gay conversion therapy.

Pramod Raman is another notable contemporary Malayalam short story writer who has actively dealt with queer lives in his stories. His short story collection *Rathimathavinte Puthran* (2011, Son of Mother Rathi) received critical acclaim for portraying people with multiple sexual identities. Some of the stories in this book also engage with the theme of male homosexuality. "Napumsakarude Pathu Padavukal" (The Ten Steps of Eunuchs, 2011) is a story about two childhood friends who engage in a homosexual relationship. The story also unravels the intricacies of their relationships, wherein one plays a dominant role and the other is subordinate to him. Narrated by the

latter, whose name is not revealed, the dominant Tara Nadhan calls his partner Tara (usually a name given to women in Kerala), and he performs as the masculine Nadhan (usually a man's name in Kerala) during their intimate moments. The power dynamics between these gay men, as presented in the story, also unveils the inequality in relationships among certain gay couples (Patterson, 2000). In the story "Rathimathavinte Puthran" (Son of Mother Rathi, 2011), a gay man Jeevan marries Rathi, a female colleague who works in his company. Jeevan fails to establish a sexual relationship with Rathi, and finally he impregnates Rathi with the aid of some pills that enhance his sex drive. However, the narrative is further complicated with his male partner Rathan's intervention, who persuades Jeevan to have certain quack medicines to grow his breasts. With an interplay of complex sexual identities, the story showcases the problems in certain gay relationships when one attempts to be dominant. The story also problematises the institution of marriage in Kerala, which marginalises not only women but also gay men (K. Kumar, 2017). "Oru Bracketil Ethra Perkkku Jeevikkam?" (How Many People can Live in a Bracket?, 2011) narrates the complex relationship between three childhood friends: Rosy (the only female in the group), Jolly and Eldo. As the three of them are always together, people of their village believe that Jolly and Rosy are in a romantic relationship but Jolly's romantic interest is towards his male friend Eldho. The forced heterosexual marriage between Rosy and Jolly reveals the latter's gay identity, and the story ends with Rosy killing Jolly. Written against the backdrop of traditional Christian families in Kerala, the story also evokes the Bible psalms that reiterate compulsory heterosexuality and the sanctity of the marriage between women and men. As opposed to the stories that depict the problems created by forced

heterosexual marriages in the lives of homosexual couples, K Dileep Kumar's "Vinodinteyum Aravindinteyum Makal" (The Daughter of Vinod and Aravind, 2017) presents the story of Dayana, daughter of a gay couple Vinod and Aravindan. Narrated by Dayana, the story is the first of such kind in Malayalam that discusses the familial life and children of gay partners in Kerala. Dayana notes that her parents perform themselves as *Achan* (father) and *Amma* (mother) for her, like in heterosexual families. The dynamics of the power relationship between father and mother, as in heteropatriarchal families, can be found in the story. The intricacies involved when two gay men become parents of a girl child are presented effectively in this story.

Though there have been attempts by Malayalam story writers to represent gay men objectively, there are also stories that evoke contempt towards gay masculinity, marking them as a threat to the heterosexual masculine order. Besides, some of these stories also confuse the readers about gay sexuality. Nisha Anilkumar's "Parinamam" (Evolution, 2016) belongs to that category. The story suggests that the father's "bad" deeds caused his teenage son to turn into a gay. The story affirms the popular misconception that homosexuality is not biological but rather acquired by the influence of external factors (Lal et al., 2000). Nisha Anil Kumar's another story, "Pennadayalangal" (Female Marks, 2017), also reiterates this unscientific notion of male homosexuality. The story portrays the life of a woman Priya, who is cheated by her gay husband Anurag. According to the narrative, Anurag showed sexual attraction towards Priya before marriage. It is after marriage that Priya finds he is sexually attracted to men. Mini P.C.'s "Oru Swavarganuragiyodu Cheythu Koodathath" (What You Cannot Do to a Homosexual Individual, 2018) also gives a negative notion about male

homosexuals by representing them as a threat to the heterosexual family. It shows Chhaya Krishnan's husband Krishna Kant becoming a male homosexual after some years of their marriage. The story suggests that a heterosexual man can become homosexual during his lifetime.

Shahina E. K.'s "Kundan" (2014) and "Oru Mullappoo Yathra" (A Jasmine Journey, 2019) also deal with male homosexuality. *Kundan* is a derogatory term used to indicate male homosexuals, especially in northern Kerala. By using this term in the title, Shahina indicates the stigma against male homosexuals in several parts of Kerala. The story "Kundan" (2014) presents a heterosexual man who is called *kundan* as he works as a male prostitute. The poor condition of the male prostitutes and their families is depicted within the narrative. The narrative also shows the character being forced to remain silent about his job to his family due to the taboo associated with it. "Kundan" is one among the few stories in Malayalam that depict the life of male prostitutes. "Oru Mullappoo Yathra" (A Jasmine Journey, 2019) narrates the encounter of a young heterosexual man Nitin with a middle-aged gay man Gopi. The story shows Gopi trying to befriend Nitin and later trying to seduce him. However, Nitin slaps him and runs away from Gopi. The story also satirically presents the gay sexual identity.

Another significant development in the last decade was the rise of gay writers in Malayalam. Besides Kishor Kumar, who wrote several articles on homosexuality and published his autobiography, Jijo Kuriakose is another prominent gay author in Malayalam. His stories occupy a significant position in Malayalam literature as these are the first set of Malayalam stories written by a gay writer. His stories are also marked for

their objective representation of male homosexuality in contrast to the existing ones in Malayalam depicting male homosexuals as a threat to the heteropatriarchal state and society. A character named Tharian (a gay man) is common in most of his stories, and through him, Kuriakose's stories reflect the challenges gay men face in their lives in contemporary Kerala. His story "Aadyanuragam" (First Love, 2020) portrays the homosexual attraction between two teenagers Tharian and Ajmal Avara. The story reveals that they could not recognise their homosexual attraction when they were teenagers. Born in Christian families (Tharian belongs to a dominant Christian group, and Avara is from a converted Christian family), their specific cultural origins have impacts on their homosexual identities. In "Vara-Vari-Velipadu" (Sketches-Lines-Revelation, 2021), Tharian is distressed about his engagement with a woman named Nayana. Tharian's experiences reveal how marriage becomes a major challenge to the lives of gay men. Finally, influenced by a gay artist Varkichan, Tharian embraces his homosexual identity discarding his arranged heterosexual marriage. "Marine Drive" (2023) narrates how Marine Drive, a promenade in Ernakulam, became a meeting point for gay men in Kerala. The story depicts the meeting between two male homosexuals Tharian and Rajani Nadh in Marine Drive. Developing through the conversation between Tharian and Rajani Nadh, the story also discusses different problems gay men face to find partners in a predominantly heteropatriarchal state like Kerala.

Compared to short stories, very few novels have touched upon male homosexuality. Resmi and Anilkumar (2020) note the fleeting references to male homosexuality in the novels *Khasakinte Ithihasam* (Legend of Khasak, 1969) by O. V. Vijayan, *Oru Desathinte Kadha* (Tales of Athiranippadam, 1971) by S. K. Pottekkad, and

Ravum Pakalum (Day and Night, 1982) by M. Mukundan. However, they note that these novels do not develop the theme significantly. K. P. Ramanunni's novel *Sufi Paranja Katha* (The Tale Told by a Sufi, 1989) has an instance of a homosexual relationship between the protagonist Mamooty and his cousin Amir, leading to tensions in the former's married life. His novel *Charama Varshikam* (Death Anniversary, 1996) also has an instance of homosexual love between the characters Damu and Ismail. However, these novels deal with male homosexuality only briefly and do not develop it actively in their narratives. Vijayan Kodancherry's *Sodom Papathinte Seshapathram* (The Aftermath of the Sin of Sodom, 2005) discusses male homosexuality against the backdrop of the Bible's Old Testament. Developed on the myth of the city of Sodom, a sinful city which God destroyed for its wickedness, Kodancherry also discusses how the people in the city became homosexuals. Though not set in the background of Kerala, the novel is significant in the history of Malayalam literature for being the first novel that dealt with male homosexuality definitively. However, the work did not receive much critical attention.

I argue that in the last decade, gay literature has developed itself into a specific genre in Malayalam. However, the short stories dealt with the theme of male homosexuality more than other genres of literature like novels or poems. Though there are problems with these representations, these works are significant for problematising the heteropatriarchy, disturbing the existing models of family and marriage in Kerala. The marginality of gay masculinity in Kerala is also revealed through several of these works.

IV

Representations of Gay Masculinity in Malayalam Cinema: Tracing the History, Contextualising the Aesthetics and Politics of *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016)

This section of the chapter historically traces the representation of male homosexuality in Malayalam cinema. By placing the study against the backdrop of developments in the contemporary Malayalam film industry, I further argue that Malayalam cinema started incorporating male homosexuality more actively and definitively within the narrative in the 2010s. By problematising these representations of male homosexuality in the popular Malayalam cinema, including in the widely noted *Kaathal-The Core* (2023), I place *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016), directed by Jayan K. Cherian, as making a significant intervention in terms of the aesthetics and politics of representation of gay sexuality. This section begins by detailing certain other important developments in the last decade, which have also influenced the production of films representing queers in Malayalam cinema.

Along with the transition in queer regimes in Kerala in the last decade, Malayalam cinema too has undergone a marked shift, incorporating alternative sexualities within film narratives. This change is made possible by several other factors including the coming in of “New Generation” cinema, the formation of a women’s organisation in the industry (Women in Cinema Collective [WCC]) and the emergence of a new critical cinema viewing public created through international and local film festivals conducted in Kerala. This development in the last decade has to be considered along with the other significant changes within the industry, especially following the “New Generation” wave

in Malayalam cinema in the 2010s. “New Generation” is a term used to refer to a set of films that mark a departure from the established styles of popular movies in Malayalam “not only[in] the content of cinema, but its form of social diffusion and effects as well” (Kadavath, 2017). Reminiscent of the 1980s Malayalam cinema, the features of this genre include “simple, novel and socially relevant themes; the absence of any major film stars; the presence of young new actors, both on- and offscreen; and colloquial dialogue, including profane language” and so on (Gopinath & Raj, 2015, p.66).

Amidst such shifts onscreen, the Malayalam film industry also witnessed resentments against the male domination in the industry. The formation of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in 2017, following a heinous attack on a famous actress in Kochi, marked a turning point in Malayalam cinema. The arrest of Dileep, one of the most popular actors in the industry, in connection with the attack further revealed the inherent tensions in the industry which was already under criticism for the banning of veteran actors like Thilakan and directors like Vinayan who openly criticized casteism, star domination and the “mafiaisation’ of Malayalam filmmaking” (Nair, 2017, p. 15). The WCC aligns itself with “the feminist imaginaries advanced by various women collectives since the 1980s” (Mannil, 2020, p. 195) in Kerala, and it questions the male domination (Venkiteswaran, 2013) in the existing film organizations like AMMA (Association of Malayalam Movie Artists), FEFKA (Film Employees Federation of Kerala) and others. By widely campaigning for a safe workspace for women in the Malayalam cinema industry, WCC also spearheaded the “Me-Too” Movement in the Malayalam industry that began during the same time.

It is in this larger backdrop of the shifts within the gender/queer regimes of Kerala and in the film industry in the last decade that the Malayalam cinema started engaging with queer themes more seriously. The era also saw the commencement of queer film festivals in Kerala including Q-Loid, KASHISH @ Thiruvananthapuram, and others. IFFK (International Film Festival of Kerala), the annual film festival of Kerala held under the aegis of the Government of Kerala, has also been screening several queer films from across the globe over the years. This also played a significant role in the emergence of a new visual culture in Kerala. Though there has been a notable increase in the number of films representing queers in Malayalam in the last decade, they are not yet integrated entirely into the filmic and public milieu of Kerala dominated by heterosexuality (A. Kuriakose, 2020). The following section attempts to historically map and critically engage with representations of gay sexuality in Malayalam cinema, mainly focusing on the last decade.

To map the representations of gay sexuality in Malayalam films, it is imperative to place them within the existing theoretical frameworks available for reading queer cinema. Ruby Rich coined the phrase “New Queer Cinema” to discuss the increased presence of independent gay and lesbian films in the major film festivals of the West in the early 1990s. She describes these films as a watershed moment in the history of independent, experimental, gay and lesbian films (Rich, 2013). New Queer Cinema (NQC), she adds, was disconnected from mainstream popular culture by choice and by exclusion and got acceptance and recognition mainly through film circuits and film festivals. Rich also points out that the NQC films do not share “a single aesthetic vocabulary, strategy or concern” but they are united by a common style which she calls as

“homo-pomo” or homosexual postmodern, as “in all of them there are traces of appropriation, pastiche and irony as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind” (p. 18). She identifies NQC as breaking from “the old humanist approach” and also from “the films that accompanied identity politics” and as “irreverent, energetic, alternatively minimalist and excessive” (p. 18). Another important feature she identifies about these films is that “they are full of pleasure” (p. 18). The narratives of the films were also described as “unapologetic, sexy, and stylistically daring” (p.131) and it helped the queers, especially homosexuals, readily identify with the film. Scholars also identified the NQC as “proudly assertive”, “unapologetic about their characters’ faults or rather crimes”, “sharing an attitude of defiance” and “exhibiting a certain exigency about queer culture” (Aaron, 2004, p. 3-14; Juett & Jones, 2010, p. 9-13). While most of the works agree that the NQC wave with its definitive features ended in the West in the 2000s (Juett & Jones, 2010; Rich, 2013), paving the way for different kinds of appropriation of the same in mainstream and independent filmmaking, the case of queer cinema in the Indian context is very different. While films like *Fire* (1996) inaugurated a public discourse on representing homosexuality on screen, it was only after the 2000s that Hindi cinema and different regional film industries in India started having notable queer representations (Ghosh, 2021; Kapur, 2000; Tanupriya & Singh, 2023). Unlike in the West, queer films or representations in the post-colonial Indian context have to encounter issues of state censorship, especially at the intersection of questions of sexuality with religion and caste (Bhowmik, 2003; N. Bose, 2010; Dwyer, 2006; Maity, 2023; Narrain & Bhan, 2005). While it is evident that queer cinema in the West and in India emerged in different

periods, an understanding of the history and features of NQC gives a background to trace the history of representations of male homosexuality in Malayalam cinema.

Innallenkil Nale (1982) and *Yathra* (1985) are two of the earliest films referring to male homosexuality in Malayalam. The former indicates the practice of homosexuality in Calicut, a city in north Kerala, presented through the character played by Kuthiravattam Pappu. In the latter, there is a hint of homosexuality in the male prisons in Kerala. Kishor Kumar, an academic and a gay activist, points out an instance of homoeroticism between the characters played by Mammooty and Mohanlal (two prominent male stars in contemporary Malayalam cinema) early in their careers in the lip-to-lip kissing scene in *Nanayam* [1983] (K. Kumar, 2017). Tharayil (2005), in his notable work on male desires in Malayalam cinema, observes the queerness in straight films in Malayalam. He notes the evolution of the male body as an “object of visual pleasure and desire” (p. 87) with the arrival of Kamal Haasan in the 1970s, which further reached an “important stage in eroticization” (p. 89) with the rise of Jayan as a superstar in Malayalam cinema. By the 1990s, it underwent further changes with the replacement of heterosexual figures with a focus on the “physical intimacy of two males” which was “not merely the friendship of two men but also the spectacle of the physical intimacy of two handsome males” (Tharayil, 2005, p. 89). Tharayil elaborates this by citing popular films like *Aaram Thampuran*(1997), *Harikrishnans* (1998), *Thenkasi Pattanam*, (2000) and others where two prominent male actors played equally important roles. Rowena (2010) notes the non-dominant men’s homoerotic attraction for the dominant figures in the laughter films of the 1990s. By elaborating on the characterization of actors like Sreenivasan (usually posited against the characters played by Mohanlal in popular Malayalam films), she notes

that the theme of homoeroticism is used as “reactionary” in these films wherein the “non-masculinity of powerless men” is employed to circulate the idea that heterosexuality is a “needed masculine virtue” (Rowena, 2010, p. 144). The widely popular movie *Chandupottu* (2005) presents an effeminate man Radhakrishnan or Radha (played by Dileep). The film, though it has a “compromising narrative closure” and was widely criticized, is significant in the history of queer representation in Malayalam cinema as Tharayil notes that the “social and political responses evoked by this film are indicative of a network of new discursive formations that facilitated the diverse significations of Radha: as ‘gender queer’, a male homosexual, and a transgender person” (Tharayil, 2014, p.76). Cross-dressing has also been a part of many successful Malayalam films (*Ammayane Sathyam* [1993], *Daya* [1998], *Aakasha Ganga* [1999], *Rasathanthram* [2006], and others) and is significant for falling “outside the confines of traditional heterosexuality” (Gopinath, 2008, p. 292).

Around 2010, particularly with the advent of the New Generation cinema in Malayalam, there has been an increase in the representation of homosexual male characters and I argue that in Malayalam cinema, male homosexuality began to be represented definitively in the last decade. However, the representations of homosexuality are limited in terms of queer sensibility and, most of the time, are placed as a threat to the heterosexual family and the state. Shyama Prasad’s film *English: The Autumn in London* (2013) represents the tensions in a heterosexual family when the husband (Murali Menon) is romantically involved with another man. In *Sufi Paranja Katha* (2010), the male protagonist Mammooty (Prakash Bare) has sexual relations with his young cousin. Witnessed by Mammooty’s wife Karthi (Sharbani Mukherjee), this gay

text in the movie acts as the “catalyst that drives the narrative to its tragic climax” (Mathew, 2012, p. 51). *My Life Partner* (2014), released during the same period, depicts the homosexual relationship between Richard (Ameer Niyas) and Kiran (Sudev Nair). The two men decide that either of them should marry a woman to have a child and hence, Richard marries Pavitra (Anusree), an orphan. In one of the scenes, Kiran also suggests to Richard to kill Pavitra once the child is born. The stereotypical representation of the link between homosexuality and criminality also emerges in the film plot. Besides the problematic representation of homosexuality, the film also marginalizes women within the narrative by representing them as victimised by homosexuality. Though the film was released sympathizing with sexual minorities⁴⁷, the narrative reinstates the heterosexual family while representing homosexuality as a threat to the heterosexual family. This is bolstered through the character of Leela Iyyer (Sukanya), a homophobic doctor. She plays a pivotal role in separating Richard and Kiran, eventually leading to the latter’s suicide. While the film captures the reality of suicides by homosexuals in Kerala, the film narrative has at its centre the crisis homosexuality poses to heterosexual family life. The *Life of Josutty* (2015) shows the problems of a woman (Priya, played by Ranjini Rupesh) whose husband is homosexual. Deprived of love and care from her husband, Priya falls in love with Josutty (Dileep). The film also conveys Priya’s reluctance to divorce her gay husband since it would adversely affect her family’s prestige. Though the gay character is nowhere represented in the film, he is shown as a pervasive problem throughout the narrative.

⁴⁷ See <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/140628/entertainment-mollywood/article/my-life-partner-was-delayed-due-stigma-attached-gay-community>

If we classify the problematic representations of male homosexuality in Malayalam cinema, on the one hand, there are films that represent male homosexual characters as a menace to the heterosexual family and patriarchal masculinity; on the other hand, there are films which depict them as problematic and villainous. One such earlier example is Shyama Prasad's *Ritu* (2009). Considered to be a major trendsetter among the New Generation movies, this film has Asif Ali playing a gay character Sunny. Sunny is represented as a shady character who deceives his best friends for his professional benefit. However, he is trapped by another character Jamal (Vinay Fort), who is indicated to be a homosexual in the narrative. The effeminacy of the gay characters is a recurring trope in Malayalam films' queer representations. In this film, Jamal is portrayed as effeminate within the narrative and as a dubious character luring Sunny. Typically, in Malayalam films, the effeminate (gay) characters are mocked by other characters and are marginalized within the narrative. They also evoke contempt, which in turn reiterates that femininity has to be discarded by the male body including that of the gay (Taywaditep, 2008). In a notable scene in the film *Action Hero Biju* (2016), a gay effeminate character is shown flirting with the hero Biju Paulose (Nivin Pauly), when the latter, a police officer, catches him for not wearing a helmet. Paulose responds to this with contempt and sends him away without penalizing him. This scene implies a revulsion not only towards the gay male body but also towards the effeminacy of the gay character. The scene, which became a popular comedy scene, reveals the inherent homophobia that is still prevalent in mainstream Malayalam cinema. *Flat No 4B* (2014) also presents an effeminate gay character Sabu (played by Sreejith Ravi). The film shows Sabu working as a middleman arranging sex workers for clients. The narrative

portrays him as a villain trying to trap the female protagonist Revathi (Swarna Thomas) through his partner Manu (Abid Anwar), which forms the film's central plot. This film, which has its project of underscoring the vital role of the male householder within a heterosexual family, however, achieves the same by problematizing gay masculinity. *Salt N' Pepper* (2011) as well as its sequel *Black Coffee* (2021), also represent an effeminate male character Babu (Baburaj) with gay undertones only to invoke laughter and to discard without developing the character further. Jayan K Cheriyan's film *Papilio Buddha* (2013) also represents male homosexuality. The protagonist Sankaran (S. P. Sreekumar), a Dalit man, is shown making love with an American gay man Jack (David Briggs), a lepidopterist Sankaran assists. Critically acclaimed for representing the lives of Dalits in contemporary Kerala, the film also presents a queer Dalit character, the first of its type in Malayalam cinema. The film, in this respect, has a significant place in the representation of gay sexuality in Malayalam. It is to be noted that the film was screened mostly in film festivals and never achieved the popularity of mainstream films. There are also some recently released Malayalam films which touch upon homosexual male love like *Unto the Dusk* (2014), *Two Countries* (2015), *Aami* (2018) and *Vaanku* (2020), among others. But most of these films are limited to a mere reference to or with a few scenes portraying homosexuality lacking any significant character development. Song and dance sequences, a prominent feature of Malayalam popular cinema, also provide "space for the play of forbidden love and transgressive desires" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 56). A notable recent example is the "*Rathipushapam*" song in the film *Bheeshma Parvam* (2022). The song, with a gay subtext, became immensely popular in Kerala and South India.

Prithviraj Sukumaran starrer *Mumbai Police* (2013) is notable in the history of Malayalam cinema for a leading star playing a gay character. While queering the star's body, the film places the gay character Antony Moses (played by Prithviraj) as an antagonist and toxically masculine. Moses, being a police officer, is shown as unsympathetic and cruel towards others, including women, children, and marginalized men. Such a representation culminates with the portrayal of Moses killing his close friend Aryan (Jayasurya) when the latter accidentally finds Moses in a physical relationship with his gay partner in his apartment. Aryan accuses Moses of donning the mask of an aggressive, hypermasculine police officer to hide, in Aryan's words, Moses's "lack of masculinity", referring to the latter being gay. Aryan also threatens to report Moses's "criminal behaviour" to his superior officers. Aryan's emotional outburst when confronted with his best friend's homosexuality and Moses's going to the extent of killing his best friend to hide his sexual orientation further problematizes the representation. The film ends with Moses being arrested by the police. Another film where a leading star of the Malayalam film industry, Nivin Pauly, plays a homosexual character is *Moothon* (2019, directed by Geethu Mohandas). Set in a traditional Islamic background in the Lakshadweep Islands, the film portrays Akbar (Nivin Pauly) and Ameer (Roshan Mathew) falling in love with each other. There are sequences of romantic scenes between them, which is almost new to the Malayalam film industry dominated by heterosexual romantic scenes. The narrative shows Ameer committing suicide over his forced heterosexual marriage and due to the rejection from Akbar. After Ameer's death, Akbar leaves the island to become a don in Mumbai and is later killed by gangsters. These two films are significant while mapping the history of representation of gay male characters

in Malayalam cinema as two prominent actors/stars of the industry, Prithviraj and Nivin Pauly, played the gay characters, thereby augmenting the visibility of male homosexuality on screen.

While mapping the representation of male homosexuality as a central theme in Malayalam cinema, *Kaathal-The Core* (2023, directed by Jeo Baby) becomes a landmark mainstream film noted for its economic success, critical acclaim and queer sensitivity. Mammootty, one of the two major superstars in Malayalam (the other being Mohanlal), plays the gay character Mathew Devassy in the movie, further adding to its significance in the queer film history of Malayalam cinema. It became the first Malayalam queer-centred movie to become a box office hit and is streamed by the prominent OTT platform Amazon Prime Video. Being produced by Mammootty Kampany (a leading production house in Malayalam cinema managed by Mammootty himself) and two major stars in South India—Mammootty and Jyothika—playing the lead roles also contributed to the vast popularity of the film. The film incited serious discussions on male homosexuality as well as on the status of the lives of LGBTQI+ people in Kerala like never before, mainly because the superstar Mammootty plays the role of a homosexual character. However, whether *Kaathal-The Core* can be considered as marking the arrival of “New Queer Cinema” in Malayalam is a question which demands close attention to the politics and aesthetics of the film. If we consider factors other than the presence of the star actor Mammootty which contributed to the success of the film, certain concerns emerge, which necessitates a critical reading of the film within a queer theoretical framework. A significant feature to be examined here is the heterosexual visual aesthetics and frames of the film. Mammootty and Jyothika, as a couple, occupy most of the scenes, frames and

The protagonist Mathew, played by Mammooty, does not pronounce his sexual orientation even in the court and he negates the claims made by his wife Omana (Jyothika) during their divorce proceedings. The court scenes in the film are significant considering the role of law in making life livable (or unlivable) for sexual minorities in the post-colonial Indian context. However, the revelations in the court of law within the narrative have to be considered alongside the consciously maintained silence about the existence of homosexuality within the traditional middle-class families in Kerala. It also needs to be noted that the costume and makeup, mostly single-colour silk/cotton shirts and white dhoti and neatly trimmed moustache, body language and appearance of Mammooty are maintained in *Kaathal-The Core* (2023), matching with his most successful hegemonic masculine heroic characters (Ramachandran, 2007). His partner Thankan is shown facing more problems and humiliation than Mathew. While it can be explained as representing how class difference affects sexual minorities in Kerala (K. Kumar, 2023), it also has to be noted that the character of Thankan occupies less visual space in the film. The film, in this context, commercially uses the already successful hegemonic heterosexual star image of Mammooty established by the Malayalam mainstream film industry. While the method did work and the film played its part in communicating the life struggles and mental agonies of gay men in Kerala, it did so using heterosexual frames and techniques, making it challenging to mark it as a queer cinema per se.

There are also other significant issues in the queer representations within the film. The film shows Mathew coming out as gay not by himself but through his wife Omana who files a divorce case stating the husband's homosexuality. This non-voluntary

exposure of the protagonist's queer identity within the narrative is a menacing situation as noted by many queer individuals (K. Kumar, 2023). The scene where Mathew rejects the help offered by a representative of Queerala (an LGBTQAI+ organization in Kerala) presents the gay character as an apolitical subject unaware of the queer activism in Kerala. The film acknowledges the presence of queer organizations in Kerala through the scene while maintaining the film's narrative as apolitical, following the popular melodramatic format of mainstream Malayalam cinema.

Queer visual pleasure and unapologetic portrayal of queer characters are considered as significant features of queer cinema (Aaron, 2004), but *Kaathal-The Core* (2023) misses out on both these fronts. Studies have pointed out that mainstream films in the West which claim to be queer often reinforce “the ideological project of neoliberal multiculturalism, neutralizing the radical potential of independent queer cinema, and mollifying straight audiences with unthreatening characters and stories, that lodged queerness within the hegemonic logic of compulsory heterosexuality and global capitalism” (Juett & Jones, 2010, p. 10). This criticism is relevant to *Kaathal-The Core* too, in identifying it as a queer film. The film uses the heteropatriarchal star image of Mammooty by consciously placing his character in a heterosexual upper-class religious background and projecting him as an influential political figure in the village around which the plot of the film develops. I argue that the cinematic crisis and the melodrama around the character of star actor Mammooty compromises the queer narrative and adds to the commercial viability of the film. *Kaathal-The Core* is undoubtedly a landmark film in the history of representation of gay masculinity and it created a queer sensibility inaugurating open discussions on homosexuality in Kerala public sphere, besides creating

a space for queer sensitive representations in Malayalam cinema. However, it is devoid of the visual aesthetics of portraying male homosexuality on screen.

Only a few films in Malayalam took up male homosexuality actively within the narrative, and most films dealt with it briefly. I argue that while the homosexual male characters complicate the heterosexual family and state within the narrative, these characters are limited to certain stereotypical representations and are marginalized. Consistently represented to meet with a tragic end, they are presented as problematic or toxically masculine and tough figures mistreating women, children and subaltern men. In some other films, they are represented as effeminate, invoking laughter or as a threat to the heterosexual family. Identifying such problems in the representations of male homosexuals in popular Malayalam films, I argue that these films catered to the mainstream film aesthetics in Kerala, primarily targeting heterosexual audience. While some films, including the recently released Mammootty starrer *Kaathal-The Core* (2023), strive to become queer sensitive, they are limited to the heteronormative narrativization of queer realities othering queer intimacy and queer politics, catering to the commerciality of the heterosexual film industry. It is in this larger context of increasing but problematic representation of male homosexuality in the popular Malayalam cinema that I evaluate *Ka Bodyscapes* as playing a significant role in visualizing gay sexuality in Kerala besides politicizing it within a heteropatriarchal state like Kerala.

Censoring (Homo)sexuality: Contextualizing the Aesthetics and Politics of *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016)

While many recently released films in Malayalam represent male homosexuality, *Ka Bodyscapes* is a significant film which undertook a political project akin to the “New Queer Cinema” (Rich, 2013) movement that emerged in the 1990s in the West. Against the larger backdrop of several socio-political developments and protests in Kerala in the last decade, the film unapologetically and explicitly depicts same-sex relationship within its narrative, thereby defying the “homophobic past” (Aaron, 2004, p.19) of the Malayalam film industry. The film represents the gay relationship between Harris, a Muslim painter and Vishnu, a village Kabbadi player and Hindutva supporter. Portraying homosexuality at the intersections of religion and heteropatriarchy, the film faced several oppositions in India. Though it was released in other countries in 2016, it was released in India after a prolonged legal contestation over the Central Board of Film Certification’s (CBFC) repeated denial of the movie’s certification (Raj, 2017). Censorship has been a pertinent issue in India, and it reflects a “highly problematic engagement between the colonial past and the post-colonial present” (Bhowmik, 2003, p. 3148). Historically several movies faced issues with regard to censorship in India, and sexuality has been a major contestation in this regard (Mehta, 2011). This was seen in the case of the films like Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* (1996), Mira Nair’s *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996), and others. The successive governments also attempted to bring more regulations in film censoring, including the recent proposal to amend the Cinematography Act, thereby

granting the right to the censor board to reexamine already cleared films⁴⁸. In the case of *Ka Bodyscapes*, it was refused certification for its “glorification” of the “gay and homosexual relationship”, especially through focusing on the “vital parts of male body”, and also for the representation of female masturbation. However, one of the major grounds for the disapproval of CBFC was the film hurting religious sentiments by portraying the Hindu religion in a “poor light”⁴⁹. Continuing what Bose calls the “censor wave” (Bose, 2010, p.78), CBFC’s intervention in the case of *Ka Bodyscapes* reiterates the ruling Hindu nationalist fear of sex and sexuality as threatening the very existence of the nation and its culture (Chatterjee, 1989; Kapur, 2000; Mani, 1987). Finally, upon its release after two years (2018) in Kerala, with several visuals removed, the film was still not received well among the conservative circles in the state. The makers of the movie received several threats and there was a large-scale campaign to boycott the film screening (“Jayan Cherian Gets Fatwa Threat,” 2017). Though there were attempts to disrupt the screening in theatres, like in the case of several other Indian queer films, the rise in popularity of video streaming and OTT platforms in recent years (Khutia & Krishna, 2022) helped the film reach a larger audience not only in Kerala but outside of the state and the country. It has emerged as one of the most critically acclaimed films on queer sexuality in Kerala after *Sancharram* (2004). The film also won accolades at the national and international levels besides initiating a serious discussion on the status of gay men in Kerala.

⁴⁸ See <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/censor-board-film-certification-cinematograph-bill-cbfc-7365589/>

⁴⁹ See <https://thewire.in/culture/ka-bodyscapes-cbfc-refusal>

Aestheticizing the Male Body: Representation of Gay Sexuality in *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016)

Male homosexuality has been a less explored subject, both visually and thematically, in Malayalam cinema. However, *Sancharram* (directed by Ligy Pullappally, 2004), marked as the first “lesbian film” in Malayalam, is significant in the history of queer cinema. *Sancharram* (2004) represents the relationship between two girls Kiran and Delilah in a rural setting in Kerala. This film was not available for public viewing in theatres in Kerala but received critical attention in India and outside, mainly through its screenings at film festivals. The film succeeded in bringing to the public discourse the marginal lives of queer sexual subjects, the question of desire and the reality of lesbian suicides in Kerala (Kumaramkandath, 2014). *Sancharram*, hence, needs to be noted for “inaugurating a radical sexual politics within Malayalam cinema” (Mokkil, 2019, p. 126). Though *Sancharram* was released in 2004 initiating a discussion on female homosexuality, the industry was reluctant to engage with gay-related themes for a long time. This can also be because of preoccupation with female sexuality in popular Malayalam and Indian cinema (Resmi & Anilkumar, 2016) where the “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” and “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 1989, p. 19). In this regard, the release of *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016) wherein the male body is reconfigured to an “erotic spectacle” (Schuckmann, 1998, p. 671), was an important landmark in the history of Malayalam cinema. By aestheticizing gay sexuality, the film employs the male body to complicate the hegemonic heterosexual male gaze that

represses male homosexuality on screen (Neale, 1983). This is a significant shift as the earlier Malayalam films represent the male desire and homoeroticism within the heterosexual framework of narrativization (Tharayil, 2005).



Figure 3: Poster announcing the release of *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016)

Ka Bodyscapes is titled after the Egyptian myth of “Ka”, dealing with the unexplored terrain of the body and its eroticism that is often left untold in popular movies of Malayalam. The film’s title is also accompanied by an icon consisting of the Malayalam letter “ക” (*ka*) in a manner that resembles a sketch of male genitalia (See Figure 3), reiterating the central theme of male sexuality. About the atypical title of the film, its director Jayan K. Cheriyan notes

The word “Ka” has a deeper meaning. It is an essential spiritual vehicle according to Egyptian mythology. It also has relevance in Sanskrit text, which describes about the body aura, which is the vital spark of the body.

There is also an understanding of body, pleasure and lust and accepting it, with a correlation of the yogic practice known as Kabody (Ipe, 2016).

Ka Bodyscapes, as the title signifies, explores the body as a terrain through which it reconfigures the making and viewing practices in Malayalam films. The film begins with a series of long and medium shots of a set of half-naked men playing Kabaddi which is being watched by other men in a village in Kerala. This homosocial male group is further shown as being viewed through the eyes of a gay man Harris. From the initial representation of the set of the half-naked male bodies, the film gradually focuses on Vishnu's body. With a series of close-up shots through the camera lens of Harris, the scene captures the buttocks, nipples, and thighs and eventually the whole muscular body of Vishnu. Through such a cinematic representation, the film reconstructs the homosocial masculine act of playing Kabaddi as generating homosexual desires that bring in a significant shift in the filmic practices in Malayalam cinema in a way that not only "we learn to see the queer" but also "we learn to see queerly" (Ghosh, 2010, p.59).

Besides the cinematic techniques that deconstruct the visual conventions in Malayalam cinema, several signifiers are employed in the film to reiterate the existence and protests of gay men in a predominantly heterosexual society like Kerala. Harris's paintings are one such recurring symbol in the film. The paintings depict eroticism in an otherwise "non-erotic" male body "devoid of homosexual subjectivity" in Malayalam films (James & Venkatesan, 2022, p.87). They employ the male body as an effective aesthetic tool to highlight the gay masculine agency. Anal penetration, as captured in many of Harris's paintings, represents the protest against the anal taboo, the "sexual

border dividing heterosexual/masculine/normal men from homosexual/feminine/abnormal men” (Branfman & Ekberg Stiritz, 2012, p.409). Vishnu is the “central erotic object” (Schuckmann, 1998, p. 677) of most paintings, while some represent the sexual relationship between Harris and Vishnu. In that sense, Harris’s painting is employed as a narrative and aesthetic tool to bypass the censorship issues that may possibly arise through the definitive representation of the gay sex within the film narrative. Visual aesthetic representation of gay sexuality is achieved in the film through paintings rather than motion pictures. The naked gay male body is the most recurring image in Harris’s paintings; besides these, there is a set of paintings that depict gay men engaging in anal sex and mutual masturbation. The recurrent image of penile-anal intercourse in the paintings rejects the norms that link masculinity with phallic dominance and penile-vaginal penetration. Harris’s paintings subvert the aestheticisation of heterosexuality and female body in fine arts and visual culture by providing a homoerotic viewing pleasure for queer people. Moreover, his paintings also signify that sex is a regulatory mechanism that governs the bodies. Harris’s paintings are also inspired by the French artist Roland Caillaux, who is best known for his images of male homosexuality and for his friendship with Jean Genet, another noted French artist. By depicting the portraits of Genet along with Harris’s paintings, the film underscores the historicity of gay paintings besides reiterating the “self-esteem” of the homosexual men breaching “the barriers of censorship that precluded open discussion of the love that dared not speak its name” (Summers, 2004, p. 10). This preoccupation with body politics and protest against phallic domination within the film is not limited to paintings representing anal penetration; the film also has a long sequence of female masturbation,

the first in the history of Malayalam cinema. The film marks that the anal taboo is akin to the stigma on the clitoris and female masturbation, the symbols associated with the suppression of female sexuality (Koedt, 1973; Maines, 1999).

Ka Bodyscapes is noted for placing the male body as the center of contest in a hetero-patriarchal society like Kerala. It reiterates that male bodies outside of the hegemonic masculine structures are marginalized in the state. In the film, homosexual male bodies unsettle patriarchal masculinity, and Harris and Vishnu face problems in their professional and personal lives. Though men in a highly patriarchal society, they are marginalized on account of their non-confirmation with compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Homophobia which is at the core of the enactment of patriarchal masculinity (Diefendorf & Bridges, 2019) is highlighted in the film. Being men, though gay, gives some advantage (Connell, 1992) to these men as represented in the initial parts of the movie⁵⁰, while the female protagonist is shown to be in perpetual crisis. By representing the everydayness of women's problems along with that of gay men, the film places the narrative firmly in the contemporary feminist politics of Kerala.

Situating Gay Lives within the Contemporary Feminist Politics in Kerala

While representing homophobia within its narrative, *Ka Bodyscapes* also foregrounds the persisting heteropatriarchy in Kerala society by drawing parallels between the problems

⁵⁰ The film shows Harris and Vishnu living together in an apartment, working as a painter and a newspaper intern respectively. However, the female protagonist Sia is shown facing problems with patriarchy both at her home and work place.

of women and gay men. Gay masculinities in Kerala are marginalized within the hegemonic order of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) and are feminized, hardly considered as men (Miller, 1990). By representing women's problems along with those of gay men, the film reiterates the nature of patriarchy that continues to thrive at the intersections of religion and caste in Kerala (Abraham, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991). In the film, Sia (Naseera), a Muslim woman, faces difficulties in her professional and domestic spaces because of her non-conformity to the conventional feminine ethos. Sia is expelled from her job for objecting to the forced stripping of women by the supervisor (Saritha Kukku) after the owner (Hareesh Peradi) complains of finding used menstrual pads⁵¹ in the toilet. Sia is then shown leading the *Aarthava Samaram* (Menstruation Protest), wearing only a banner depicting a bleeding vagina, announcing "My Body My Right" to protest against the policing of menstruation. Here the film highlights the policing of female sexuality in contemporary Kerala where menstruation is used as a major tool to control women's sexuality⁵² "and by extension the boundaries of the religious community and maintenance of social hierarchies which are regulated according to particular ideologies, propagating the idea that women are the bearers of tradition and are responsible for the well-being of the family, society, and religion itself" (Cohen, 2020, p.

⁵¹This is similar to an incident that happened in a factory in Kochi where 42 women were stripped and searched on finding a sanitary napkin in the toilet. This led to a public uproar that eventually led to a campaign called "Red Alert: You've Got a Napkin!" where the protesters mailed used and unused sanitary napkins to the company. See <https://scroll.in/article/698178/kerala-activists-fight-menstrual-taboos-by-mailing-napkins-to-factory-where-women-were-strip-searched>

⁵² It is interesting to note that the film was released just before the Sabarimala protest in Kerala following the Supreme Court of India verdict allowing women of menstruating age to enter the temple. The verdict was a watershed moment in the history of the state revealing the tensions in the gender regimes of Kerala (Devika, 2020).

126). The film also shows Sia being confronted by Muslim men in her work and domestic spaces. She is ousted from both for not conforming to the patriarchal commands. Through the character of Sia's grandmother Kadisumma (Nilambur Ayisha) and other women in her family, the film further portrays how women are made part of perpetuating and practising patriarchy (Connell, 1987) in Kerala. The film also depicts relationships that disturb the dominant heterosexual dynamics of the popular Malayalam film. Sia is aided by two gay men— Harris and Vishnu— when she is expelled from home and work. She shifts to the men's apartment and is shown sleeping between Harris and Vishnu. But they are evicted by the apartment authorities, citing the unstated rule that unmarried women and men should not stay together. This scene points to the frequent cases of moral policing in Kerala while also highlighting the domains of gender and sexual relations that are beyond the heterosexual regimes of Kerala society. However, the film also suggests that the further marginalized sexual categories like lesbians, transgenders, and others face more problems in the heterosexual structure of the state and society.

Ka Bodyscapes is narrated against the backdrop of the series of protests that occurred in Kerala concerning the rights of marginalized groups like tribals, women and others, as well as against the heteropatriarchal control of sexuality. These include the *Aarthava Samaram* (Mensustruation Protest), *Nilppu Samaram* (Standing Strike), *Irippu Samaram* (Sitting Strike) and others⁵³. The director of the movie Jayan K. Cheriyan notes

⁵³ Menstruation protests are the series of protests that occurred in Kerala against the menstrual taboo persisting in various spheres. Standing Strike was a protest organized in the capital city of

that the idea of *Ka Bodyscapes* was inspired by a series of protests that took place in Kerala in recent times where the body was employed as a means of resistance (K. Kumar, 2019). The film is also noted for the active participation of several gender activists and academicians in the filmmaking, including Nalini Jameela, J. Devika, Kishor Kumar, Arundhathi B. and others. Through a constant interaction with contemporary social movements, the film underscores the importance of queer politics in understanding gender dynamics in contemporary Kerala society at the intersection of caste, class, and religion (Narain & Bhan, 2005).

Gay Men, Religion, and the State

Ka Bodyscapes is noted for placing male homosexuality at the intersection of religion and patriarchy in Kerala. The film underscores that religion and caste continue to provide channels for the patriarchal control on women and marginalized sexual communities like gay men. The film narrative presents many characters symbolic of these oppressive structures in Kerala society that thrive at the intersection of religion and caste. Bhakthavalsalan (Ashwin Mathew), who is Vishnu's uncle, is one such character. He runs "Bharathabhumi" (meaning Land of Bharat/India), a newspaper to propagate the Hindutva view of life. He objects to Vishnu's relationship with a Muslim gay man Harris and contempts the latter's paintings that represent nudity and homosexuality. One of the

Thiruvananthapuram for solving the problems in the allotment of land to the tribals communities in Kerala. Sitting Strike was organized by women who work in the textile shops in Kerala for their rights to sit when they work.

concluding scenes in the film shows Bhakthavalsalan taking Vishnu to a quack to “treat” his homosexuality, reiterating the popular misconception that homosexuality can be medically cured. Through the character of Bhakthavalsalan, the film also unravels the long-standing problem of Hindutva nationalism with homosexuality in India (Narain, 2004) while “at most times and places in pre-nineteenth-century India, love between women and between men, even when disapproved of, was not actively persecuted” (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000, p. 18).

While an emotionally meek Vishnu has to align with Bhakthavalsalan’s commands, Harris is shown committing suicide over the attack on his creative and personal lives. One of the concluding scenes shows Harris’s painting exhibition being set ablaze by religious extremists, and his partner Vishnu being forcefully taken away from the scene by Bhakthavalsalan. The film’s climax shows Harris committing suicide by walking into the sea after undressing in front of the religious fundamentalists who attack him. The film, which ends by portraying Harris’s death, shows the political significance of the act of suicide (Mokkil, 2019). Suicide in the case of Dalits and queer becomes a political statement that signifies larger structural problems in terms of social inclusion and equality rather than individual failures (Erwin, 1993; Teltumbde, 2016); in that sense the suicides are many a times institutional murders perpetuated by state and/or its machineries. The scene also employs the body as a means to protest against the religious heteropatriarchal structures that oppressed gay sexuality in Kerala (Upadhyay, 2020). In the film, Harris is marginalized because of his sexuality and religion. This underscores the role of religion in the problems of being queer in India. The marginalized religious

and caste identity doubly oppresses the lives of vulnerable sexual groups like gays, lesbians and transgenders.

V

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the increased visibility of gay masculinity in the Malayali public sphere in the last decade and how it questions the hegemonic masculinities and heteropatriarchal structures in Kerala. Against the backdrop of the advancements in queer activism in Kerala in the 2010s, the publication of the first gay autobiography in Malayalam *Randu Purushanmar Chumbikkumbol: Malayali Gayude Athmakathayum Ezhuthukalum* (When Two Men Kiss: An Autobiography and Writings of a Malayali Gay, 2017) by Kishor Kumar is identified as an important event in the history of gay movements in Kerala. By analysing his autobiography as a community narrative of and for gay masculinities in Kerala of his period, I noted that the adoption of a two-fold structure in the text is a political act in itself. The chapter in the latter part discussed the representation of gay masculinity in literature and films in Malayalam. I argue that while there has been an increase in the visibility of male homosexuality both in films and literature in the last decade, it comes up with its own problems of representation. By analysing such representations, I note that gay men are often presented as a threat to the hetero-patriarchal family and the state. As I conclude this chapter, it is to be noted that the interventions of gay men in the public sphere are a notable development in the contemporary history of gender in Kerala. By disturbing the rigid gender regimes, gay

men open up the possibility of looking at Kerala society in significantly newer ways beyond the binary by questioning hegemonic masculine assumptions regarding gender and sexuality. In that sense, the chapter attempted to map how the increasing visibility and presence of gay masculinities in the Malayalam public sphere poses a tension to the existing heteropatriarchal masculine order in contemporary Kerala and signals a more inclusive and just social order in terms of gender.