Of Transgender Bodies that Matter: Queering the Media Narratives in Kerala

Anu Kuriakose

Abstract: This paper locates the construction and contestation of transgender identities in the state of Kerala post the government sponsored transgender survey, the introduction of the transgender policy 2015 and the shifting trends of representing transgenders in visual media (television and cyber space) and print media in the state since then. The regional public sphere is historically configured in terms of transphobia and homophobia even though the queer political activism in Kerala emerged much earlier and has gained significant grounds. The Kristevian notions of abjection, pathologizing and the excess of moral anxieties have been observed in the regional public sphere concerned with transgender identities and a number of socio-cultural programs are shifting from the fractured aesthetics on the transgender body as a tabooed object to the Lacanian notion of object of desire or object petit a. This paper, using visual ethnography and literature review grounded on emerging transgender theories demonstrates that the new discussions on gender issues in the state of Kerala are enmeshed in the debates on transgender identities in the public sphere. The media reports form transgender narratives in the region — their struggles for existence, knowledge production, critiques of the social imagination of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, and the celebration of transgendered bodies.

Keywords: Transgender identities, Kerala, Transphobia, Abjection, Transgender body, object petit a.

‘Transgender’ encompasses the unique potential for personal expression and transsexuals, cross-dressers, intersex people, bi-gendered or multi gendered individuals fill the spectrum of transgender identity. As Indrani Sen in her Human Rights of Minority and Women’s (Transgender Human Rights Volume 2) (2005) puts it, “transgender is the most commonly used term to describe people who cross socially constructed gender boundaries”(4). In the early 1990s transgender as a politics as well as transgender studies as a twin of queer studies (Susan) emerged in the West, intertwined with feminist politics. The founding essay in transgender

1 A person who has undergone the Sex Reassignment Surgery, See. Raymond, Janice. The Transexual Empire, Teachers College Press, 1979.
studies “The Empire Strikes Back: A (post)transsexual Manifesto” sees transsexuals as “oppressed minority” and proposes that transsexuals “currently occupy a position nowhere, which is outside the binary opposition of gendered discourse” (Stone 230). The transgender model in the West has been based on the recognition of gender-based oppression, the positioning of trans people as problematically situated with respect to the binary categories of man and woman and the endorsement of the politics of visibility. The transnational expansion of ‘transgender’ as an identity and activism varies in the Global South, especially in India, from the Western understanding of transgender identity- construction and theoretical positions. Aniruddha Dutta and Raina Roy critique the risks involved in replicating the colonial models of transnational transgender identities and marginalizing the South Asian discourses and practices of sexual variance as merely “‘local’ expressions of transgender identity” (320). They have also inquired into the fights for existence in society to the citizenship debates of transgender people in the contemporary Indian scenario. This paper examines the visibilisation (to coin a term) of the transgender identity in Kerala, a state on the South-West of the Indian subcontinent, and the paradigm shift in representing the non-normative gender identities in the regional newspapers, television and cyber space post 2014, when the state conducted a transgender survey\(^3\) and adopted a transgender policy,\(^4\) a first of its kind. The media in Kerala influences the collective imagination on transgenders in the public sphere which was once enmeshed with the debates on


\(^4\)The policy document affirms the rights of transgender people in line with the Supreme Court verdict 2014: <https://kerala.gov.in/documents/10180/46596/State%20Policy%20for%20Transgenders%20in%20Kerala%202015> (21 December 2017).
homosexuality and gender non-conformity, seen as aberrations, and ostracised the homosexuals and transgenders, who were silenced or migrated to other states in search of identity and solace. The paper traces transgender identities in the region prior to the transgender policy, with a close reading of the available recorded history before proceeding to analyse the contemporary queer politics and how the varieties of media forms at present record the transformation in the academic, cultural, and political sphere and these records form media narratives concerned with the identity quest and emancipation of transgenders in Kerala. It studies media reports on transgender participation in the Kottankulangara Bhagavati temple’s Chamayavilakku festival, the queer pride parades in the urban spaces in Kerala and associated queer cultural festivals, trans beauty pageants, transgender art-photo exhibitions, the sensationalism of transgender marriages in Kerala, which it sees as an instance of a political act of ‘coming out’. It also takes a close look at the media response and publicity of transgender visibility surrounding the recent Malayalam film Njan Marykkutty (Dir. Ranjith Sankar).

The media reports show the shift of transgender representation from the Kristevian notions of abjection, to object petit a or objects of desire for the public. The paper also critiques the consumption of the heterosexual imagination on the ‘normalised’ or surgically re-appropriated transgender bodies in television and print media which is being celebrated. In North India and a few South Indian states the effeminate males who live as a community are known by different names like hijra, jogappa, jogta, kothi, aravani, etc. They are the visible transgenders and who have been traditionally earning their livelihood by begging and prostitution. In her study within the discipline of anthropology, Serena Nanda posits that these

Kristeva describes subjective horror (abjection) as the feeling when an individual experiences, or is confronted by (both mentally and as a body), what Kristeva terms one's “corporeal reality”, or a breakdown in the distinction between what is ‘self’ and what is ‘Other’, See. Julia, Kristeva, The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. Columbia UP, 1986.
identities have no exact match in Western taxonomy of sex and gender and challenge such Western classification. It is limiting/narrowing down the complexities of identities if one tries to view transgender solely within the framework of sex/gender binaries as the quintessential ‘third sex’ or ‘neither men nor women’, for they seem to dismantle the categories of sex/gender as viewed by the society and create a new category of binary division of their own. Anyone who appears to deviate in any way from the ‘perceived norm’ of a population may thereby become subject to marginalization.

The term ‘transgender’ was historically silenced and rendered invisible in Kerala, as it is “the farthest, geographically as well as culturally from a Hindi speaking metropolitan mainstream contemporary India” (Muraleedharan 47), and remained aloof from the LGBT discourses for a long time. However, there were invisibilized homosexual practices in certain regions as the scholarly inquiries in the field bring to light that male intimacies were central to masculine practices of social gathering in Kozhikode (Osella) and the slang ‘kundan’ was used to refer to the homosexual culture in Malabar. In Thrissur, a district of central Kerala, flutes were identified with the practice of same sex in ethnographic studies conducted in the region (Rajeev). The foundation of the same sex group Men in India Movement in Kochi was a culminating moment, and the Malabar Cultural Forum formed in Calicut in the late 90s promoted the creative expression of homosexuals and transgenders through art and culture. However, the strong patriarchal familial social system prevailed in Kerala forced the queer people to migrate to other states in search of identity, livelihood and existence as the state lacked support system for the LGBT community like the hijada subcultures in other Indian states. Social activism and the emergence of queer movement as intellectual and political development also contributed to the fledging of paradigm shift in gender and sexuality debates in Kerala’s
recent history. The impact of Western education and post 1990 globalization process largely affected imaginations beyond the limits of the homo-hetero binarism. Though the existence of the people who belong to gender variance cannot be ruled out, it is pertinent to note that transgender community is historically invisibilized in Kerala due to the following reasons: the society is very reluctant to accept those who deviate from the norm, also transgender identity is perceived by the public imagination on the hijra community in urban areas outside Kerala, and those people feel gender dysphoria often escape to these places that offer livelihood for their existence (Krishna).

The non-normative gender performances claimed the space in the public sphere and discussion concerned with gender identities in Kerala has been going through a continuous and rigorous transformation. For transgenders, the struggle by themselves, the support from Community Based Organisations (CBOs), government initiatives, and queer political activism helped in reclaiming the spaces that ostracised and dislocated them. Multiple developmental indices titled Kerala as a ‘model’ state and the post 1990s increasing urbanisation and economic liberalisation formed queer subculture (Khan) in the state like the other cities in India and the new media act as an organizer for different queer groups. The media in Kerala recorded these events and a close examination of the history would demarcate the transformation happened in the region. The local newspapers, news magazines and the visual media sensationalised same sex relations, lesbian suicides and gender non-conformity as non-normative initially (Muraleedharan, Vasudevan). However, with the state sponsored Transgender Survey, and Transgender Policy, a shift began to happen. The print and visual media in Kerala “at once made possible a spatially organised public and a narratively constituted one” (Radhakrishnan 196). The political activism and the re-shaping of the public sphere in Kerala are highly influenced by the print, visual and
the social media in cyber platforms as Kerala has the “cultural practice of reading - pointing to one of the significant aspects of Kerala as a state, its avid, everyday consumption of print and visual culture”(Mokkil 4).

A paradigm shift on transgender visibility happened in the social scenario of Kerala with the 2014 Supreme Court Verdict recognizing the transgender’s political and civic rights and the Social Justice Department of Kerala conducted a transgender survey in 2014-2015 which covered the social and personal aspect of their life. The term ‘transgender’ was officially documented for the first time instead of locally used derogatory terms like ‘penpoosu’, ‘onpath’, ‘Monaca’ etc. Based on the findings in the survey, the state adopted a Transgender policy in 2015 which was unveiled at the International Conference on Gender Equality held in the same year in Kerala. The transgender survey covered the basic details of a person, one’s gender awareness and about the body, civil rights, self-esteem, and access to health service ability to live with dignity and freedom, there is also a section to understand the priorities, needs and aspirations of transgenders in the document (State Policy for Transgenders in Kerala2015). The transgender Survey and Transgender Policy can be discerned as the first effort to the modern understanding of transgender as a citizen and the effort to locate such identities in Kerala which closed its eye at the individuals experiencing gender dysphoria for a long time. Also, the policy document is the first official document and an initiation of the recorded history of transgenders in Kerala, both the Male to Female (MtF) as well as Female to Male (FtM) transgenders, endorsing ‘regionalism’ in it. The Transgender Survey ruptured the hetero-normative understanding of the public sphere in Kerala moreover it invited the attention of the state government to a number of programs and policies like the recognition of transgenders as the citizens and giving them the right to vote (John). The premier university in the state, the
University of Kerala for the first of its kind adopted a Transgender Policy\(^6\) for its transgender students modelling on the state policy for addressing equal opportunity, respect and educational needs. To bring the transgender students to the mainstream by education and to remove the social stigma is the main concern of the policy document. As a consequence, the university ensured anti-ragging and counselling services, syllabus revision, scholarships and other benefits apart from the other TG friendly infrastructures (University of Kerala Policy for Transgender Students). The media in the state recorded these activities and the queering happens in the space which opened the floor for further debates on transgender people’s social mobilization.

The gender performances that deviate from the social expectation are marked as non-normative and transgenders in Kerala have been traumatised and silenced in their home and society for a long time. However, the gender inversion at the Kottankulangara temple has the religious sanctity as a ritual that seeks the blessing of the Bhagavati. The festival is depicted in a few Malayalam films like \textit{Odum Raja Adum Rani} (directed by Viju Verma) and \textit{Tamaar Padaar} (directed by Dileesh Nair, 2014). Though it is a part of the temple festival, the cross-dressed men’s lamp holding ceremony, single-handedly made it a bustling site of pilgrimage.

The festival has seen the participation of an increasing number of homosexual and transgender people from Kerala, for them, it is a celebration of their own identity. The temple premise offers a temporary realm of transgendering for the gender non-conforming biological male. It is stated in media that the event offered transgenders “the freedom to dress up as woman and travel in buses without much stigma” (Arya). Connecting with the Bhaktinian notion of carnival and the festival in the media reports as, during \textit{Chamayavilakku}, the temple space

transforms to “carnival site where, under the aegis of a religiously sanctioned festival, the transgenders ‘appear’ for two nights” (Nair). The hetero-patriarchal familial system that shuns the transgenders and eschews their presence at home and in public places ironically let the male children to hold the lamp in cross dress to commemorate the myth concerned with the origin of the temple. The transgender people in the state initially saw it as a religious sanction to exhibit themselves among the cross-dressed males. The ritual is recorded in contemporary media in Kerala as transgenders find the space as normalising, and for the public it gives a sense of visual spectacle. The media reports, especially the footage of the visuals of the lamp holding rituals of the transgender people circulated in YouTube channels and cyber platforms document the shifting trend of transgender visibility in Kerala. If transgender people attended the festival without acknowledging their identity, the contemporary media coverage transforms the act of participation into a political act of ‘coming out’ and a reclaiming of forbidden spaces.

Queer pride parades have been conducted in Kerala by the support groups for the local LGBT community, CBOs and queer activists in the state map the pride and protest in the state since 2010. The parades happened so far at major cities in the state transformed the public sphere

![Fig.1&2 The poster of 7th Queer Pride parade and media report on the parade.](image-url)
and ‘temporarily queered’ them (Rushbrook). The event gathered attention from academicians as well as the media in the region who covered the event as a political move by the community to persuade the public to recognize their identity, gender visibility and rights.

The allied cultural festivals in the queer pride parade like seminars, art exhibitions, film screening, beauty pageants and fashion show make the festival a carnival. Like the Bakhtinian notion of carnival, the city space is transformed to a carnival site, and an expression of the community, Terry Eagleton observes Bakhtinian carnival as “a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony” (148). The hegemony of the dominant is resisted in the festivals. It questions the normative gender roles and the social construction of gender and also exhibits the fluidity of gender performance in the public sphere. The fashion show in the queer festival provided platforms for the transgenders to walk on ramp for the first of its kind. Those transgender bodies which were looked at with aversion and designated as taboos in the public sphere were celebrated during the festival. They became the fascination for the spectators and other participants in the festival. The Kristevian notions of abjection as well as the Lacanian notions of object petit a can be connected while reading the restructuring of the space during the festival. When the transgender bodies are dismissed as abjects or something that is devoid of any dignity, the Lacanian notion corresponds to the opposite as the object that creates fascination in the spectator. The transgenders turn out to be desired figures during the fashion show and the beauty pageants. The transgender fashion shows allied to the queer cultural festival and the first ever beauty contest *Queen of Dhwaya 2017* for transgenders have also been sensationalised by the new media as the brand new models of transgender emancipation.
Fig.3- The pride parade in Kerala reported in print media.

The media representations capture queer pride parades and present in a way that, the parade and the events associated with it shake the hegemonic construction of gender and mobilise the support for pride, in taking the voice of the marginalised genders to the mainstream. Thus, the print and visual media mainstream transgender identities in Kerala and register a regional version that accords the transnational queer political activism.

The Left government in Kerala made several interventions to mainstream the transgender community in Kerala and push them to social participation through education and employment. A number of magazines and newspapers brought out news items that popularised the welfare schemes for transgenders by the government in Kerala. The leading local vernacular Mathrubhumi serialized transgender experiences. Articles in similar nature began to appear in certain other periodicals in the regional vernacular like Mangalam and Madhyamam too.
The instance when MtF Deepthi Kalyani became the cover girl of a widely spread women’s magazine, Vanitha, a news portal observed it as a move that “acknowledge(s) the identity of a third gender in public life” (“Historic! Kerala’s Vanitha Features a Transgender on its Cover”). In the cover page itself the magazine claimed it as historic another media endorsed the same. These were some of the more prominent instances of the media ensuring the visibility of transgenders in the public sphere and glossing it as their ‘coming out’.
What the media forget while reporting this is the fact that it has re-created the hetero-sexualised, normative image of an MtF for popular consumption when it sensationalised the emergence of the transwoman as the cover girl, terming it a milestone or achievement for the entire transgender community.

The Kerala society practices the hetero-sexual marriages and a family outside this structure never gained social sanction to exist. The MtF transgender people ostracized in their own families, thus found solace by migrating to urbane spaces in metro cities like Bombay, Kolkata, Bangalore, Hyderabad, etc. and lived there forming an alternative family system closely following certain rules (Nanada, Reddy, Resmi & Anil Kumar). A major event that captured the media attention in Kerala is the transgender marriages happened in 2018. Two transsexual couples married in the year and among them Surya and Ishaan, the MtF and FtM transsexuals and the event was celebrated by the media as it was the first of its kind and termed it a historic occasion.
However, it is to be noted that the couple conformed to the social construction of concepts of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ to get legal sanctity for their marriage though gender inversion happened through surgical re-appropriation of their bodies. The transgender marriage was spotlighted in such a way that the discerning student of culture could discern the cultural matrix of the society, from the variety of spheres that are required to be renegotiated to give space to transgenders. Further, the transgender marriage becomes a trope for the hetero-sexualisation of transgendering as any close reading of the event would show. It was reported as a huge step for the trans community, who were hitherto denied happiness or opportunities (Balan), but it was in fact an act of mainstreaming the trans community, through a few modifications to the family as an institution of the society.

Like the pride parades, media is also engaged in recording two trans exhibitions happened in Kochin and Tiruvananthapuram as empowering and exploring transgender identities and their bodies. “Trans, a transition for life” and “Man, I am” interestingly depicted the queer bodies of Malayali transgenders. These exhibitions conducted in different cities offered glance at the transgender bodies, which become visual spectacles for the public. While it is seen as a protest and authentication of the trans-body through art, the positive media coverage these exhibitions gained, show the appreciation of the society as well as an acknowledgement of the transgenders living in Kerala.
Fig. 7-The posters of two transgender art-photo exhibitions in Kerala

It is pertinent to note that, “Man, I am” exclusively captured the life of FtM transgenders in Kerala by the press photographer P. Abhijith. “I am trying to introduce transmen into the society. After SRS surgery, transmen find it hard to get a job and also find it difficult to get acceptance in the society. I hope that the visibility received through the exhibition will help them get jobs” (“Lives of Transmen in Varied Hues”).

The visual media host a number of transgender programs, mostly talk shows and a few the product of investigative journalism. Those programs include “Moonnamlingakkarkku parayanullathu”- Sreekandan Nair Show, “Bhinnaralla Nammalarum”-Malayali Darbar, “Onnayaninneyiha Randennu Kandalavil”- Selfie, “JB Junction-Transgenders-Surya and Sheetal”, “Interview with Surya”, “Heart wrenching story of a Transgender”- D4 Dance Episode 1227, “Stree Diamension”- Life of transgenders in social Kerala”, “Nerkkuner”, “Moonnamlingakkari Suji”- Kannadi, “Niyanthranarekha”- Malayala Manorama aired a few programs in the recent past that narrated the life of transgenders their cultural and social space in Kerala context. Initially, most of these programs were aired as lampoons and later the nature of them began to change with a shift in perspective. Programs like “Nerkazhcha”, in Amritha TV discussed how transgenders in Kerala are ostracized and denied the basic rights as human beings and citizens. Also the program sought an end of the lynching of transgenders by the police and the need for gender sensitization. All of these initiatives aimed at sensitizing the public sphere, empowering the transgender to speak out, to end the violence against them.
The paper would be examining the release and circulation of a transgender themed film *Njan Marykkutty* in 2018, and its popularity which renegotiated the transgender identity in the history of Malayalam Cinema. In the film, the transgender is celebrated as ‘Shero’ as a counter-discourse to the flaws in other minor transgender representations in Malayalam films so far. The transgender character in the film emerges as a successful ‘person’ rather than a sexualised figure in the end. The media sensationalised the film as “a step into the world of transpeople and their mindscapes and their emotional and physical trauma” (Nagarajan 2018), and it was seen “to remove the myths and prejudices about transgender people to an extent” (Cris 2018).

![Fig. 8&9](image)

The poster of *Njan Marykkutty* (2018) and the ramp walk of the hero along with five transwomen celebrities in Kochi, during the audio launch of the film

Though the popular support for a transgender lead character is sensationalised in the media as a huge success saga, it also makes the transgender a commodity. Following the release of the film, transgender groups, activists and the movie gazing public re-imagined transgenders as figures to be celebrated as the media reports concerned themselves with the cisgender actor who played the role visiting the legislators in the state, his interaction with transgenders aired in news channels as entertainment programs, the sensationalism of the launch of the trailers of the film - “it was released by five transwoman-make up artist Renju Renjimar, IT Professional Zara Sheikh, entrepreneur Thripthy Shetty, social activist Sheethal Shyam and legal advisor Riya, at Lulu
Fashion Week held in Lulu Mall, Kochi” (“Jayasurya’s Njan Marykkutti Trailer Out”). The excess in normalisation of the transgender ironically endorses the heterosexual values of the gender performance when the surgically re-appropriated body is celebrated, clapped at the big screen and sensationalised as an achievement, as the central character voices the misconception that “I am not a transgender, I am transsexual”.

In the age of new media, social networking sites and blogs engage as mobilisers and support systems by giving space to transgenders. They are able to create a ripple in the queer temporality and space in Kerala. As CBOs, Queerala and Queerrythm are working for the entire LGBTQI community living in Kerala and outside by preparing and publishing news concerned with non-normative identities. The freedom offered by the cyber platform is empowering for transgenders themselves as one’s face book pages can be used as a self-expression and empowerment. The cyber platforms cross the transnational boundaries and record the new queer history in Kerala.

The paper looked at the representation of transgender identities in Kerala and how they constitute narratives on transgenders in the contemporary times based on the media reports. The public sphere in Kerala is structured around the patriarchal values of gender performance, the role expectations from the society concerned with masculinity and femininity. Transgenders, being a `transgression` from the norm, was invisibilised and marginalised for a long time. The paradigm shift in the second decade of the twentieth century has seen the restructuring of the public sphere in a way that it welcomes the transgenders and accommodates them in the region. Different media in the state epitomise the transformation as the media give space to cover queer events, the visual space discusses and debates on transgender identities and their rights as citizens. The cyber platforms are creatively used to mobilize public support for transgender
events and as a space for queer activism. Cinema in the region also reflects the shift in perspectives when it depicts transgender as the successful central figure. It is argued that though, the excess of heterosexualisation of the trans identities still persist, these media narratives form the crux of the shifting trends of transgender representations from abject figures to object petit a or desired figures and records the queer temporality.

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