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## **An anomalous representation of transgender identity**

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### **Abstract**

“We know what we are, but not what we may be.” -William Shakespeare.

As Patrick Rothfuss says, every time we all tell a story about ourselves inside our own head, which makes us what we are. And we build ourselves out of that story. Infact an individual himself is the maker of his own identity. Behavioral traits of an individual are formed right from his or her childhood. Gender identity is something which is very significant. Today, the word ‘Transgender’ is echoed widely in variant media. Popular media is the most influential of this. As a matter of fact, media’s role in propagating gender difference cannot be neglected. There is an increase in trans visibility in popular films and media in the contemporary world. Transgender representation is seen to be distanced from the audience as objects of ridicule or hatred. They are rarely exposed as a community accepted by the society. (‘Cross-dressing Cinema: An analysis of transgender representation in film’) This study intends to bringforth the delineation of transgenders in popular media based on 4 Malayalam movies, ‘Soothradharan’(2001), ‘Chanthupottu’(2005), ‘Ardhanari’(2012) and ‘Thira’(2013).

**Keywords:** anomalous representation, Behavioral, Transgender

### **Introduction**

An offensive representation of transgenders is widely seen in films, newspapers and in various Medias. These characters are often represented as a victim, villain, comic characters, antisocials, sex workers etc. Third gender equals negative characterization. For an individual gender identity is a sense of being, be it a male or a female. The term transgender refers to the gender expression of a person different from his assigned sex. The universal ideology, Man is a social animal becomes relevant here. Being a social animal he is free to choose his own way of life. He has the right to take his decisions. This liberty is being challenged here. The third gender people come from different walks of life. They are often seen as vulgar comic characters. Many films in Malayalam language have encompassed trans characters. The plight of the so called third gender people in the society is brought out here, on the basis of four movies with different plots.

‘Soothradharan’ is quite a popular movie in Malayalam directed by the veteran of Malayalam cinema A.K. Lohithadas. The plot of the film has nothing to do with the topic of this study. Even though the plot of the film is somewhat welcoming; certain character depiction seems to be improper. The character named Leelakrishnan, who has a family in his native village in Kerala, disguises himself as a Hijada to eke out a living. He joins the Hijada group without revealing his identity. The character appears in the movie as a comic relief which finds to be nasty and horrid. Here the individuality of the third genders is degraded by casting them as elements of cheap humour. It is indeed a sad fact that an individual’s identity is trampled down by exhibiting him or her as a low grade fun element for the audience.

A different approach could be seen in the film titled ‘Chanthupottu’ which became a box office hit in Kerala. Radhakrishnan, who is the hero of the movie, is brought up by his grandmother as a girl, who longed to have a granddaughter. The boy grows up with feminine traits and is ridiculed throughout the movie. He walks like a woman, wears make-up, dresses up like a woman, and earns money by taking dance classes for the girls on the shore where he lives. The character is forced to exile from his shore when everyone alleged him as a cursed soul. His effeminacy is mercilessly scorned by the people. This scorn intends to stir up laughter among the audience which was a great accomplishment for the team behind the film. Although Radhakrishnan gradually discovers the masculine strength in him and is transformed from his female traits the manner in which the character is treated in the movie is subjected to serious thoughts in the mind of the viewers.

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This is absolutely not a transgender movie. Here effeminacy is employed as a source to commercialize the silver screen. Films are a powerful medium of influence to kids as well as elders. This movie has created a great impact among the audience especially children for it is only after the release of this film that most of them became aware of the word 'chanthupottu' in Malayalam.

When Radhakrishnan is brought up like a girl which instilled in him feminine behavioral traits, the character Vinayan in the film 'Ardhanari' by Santhosh Souparnika ascertains that he possess the attributes of a woman in himself though he has the masculine features. (Wikipedia) Certain scenes in the movie demonstrate that he actually behaves like a physically powerful man but at the next moment he is transformed into a man with feminine traits. The movie is aptly titled 'Ardhanari'. The concept of Ardhanarisvara is partly male and partly female. The movie depicts the life and history of 'Hijas'. An account of their origin, life style, rituals etc is rendered here. The social status of Hijadas is a vital subject for discussion. Even though the film has tried to confer the plight of Hijadas, the rendition evokes a sense of revulsion.

Unlike all these films, a different approach towards the transgender group is adopted in the movie 'Thira' (The Wave) by the young director/actor Vineeth Sreenivasan. The character of Basu, played by the TG Savitha is worth mentioning. Basu, who is the part and parcel of Rohini Maayi the lead role played by the actress Shobana tend to transform the stereotypical concept of the transgenders in silver screen. Basu is quite fervent and level-headed. Contrary to the usual vulgar representation of transgenders this character has maintained a sense of dignity. (In an article by the transgender activist Sheetal Shyam, titled "The many holes in the depiction of transgender persons in Malayalam Cinema"- [www.fullpicture.in](http://www.fullpicture.in)) In this piece of writing she has openly remarked that 'Thira' is the only movie where the transgenders were given some eminence. Instead of presenting them as vulgar and offensive this movie has tried to show the TG character as a self-sufficient and strong willed individual. Basu marks a space for the transgenders.

The four films mentioned above presents four variant representations of the trans group. Often the transgenders or the third-genders are identified by their make-up, outfits, body language, gestures, tone and mannerisms. All the three movies except 'Thira' have made use of these characteristics. In the movie 'Soothradharan' it is quite evident that the character played by the actor Salim Kumar is solely for a comic relief for the audience. Here, the identity of a group is depicted in popular media with the intention of commercialization as remarked earlier. When the hero of the movie identifies Leelakrishnan who is disguised as a eunuch, he tries to run away from the place without wanting to reveal his identity. This reluctance to reveal the true identity itself implies the non acceptance of the TG group; the society's rejection of this group. The gross dressing, body language and tone seem to be so impudent that the outlook of the people towards this group remains unchanged. The film 'Chanthupottu' is yet another exemplar of ignominy. The hero of the movie who is brought up as girl, possess female attributes, which is gradually changed. Sheetal Shyam points out her objection against the humiliation the third genders have to confront. As cited earlier, the character Radhakrishnan is ridiculed

throughout the film. The spiteful humour and the insolent dialogues and scenes appear to be so embarrassing. Children to aged people liked the movie for the comic elements employed. This is done by crushing the pride of a group who also belong to this society. The impact of the film is so intense that common people's idea of third gender is confined to the behavioural traits and appearance of Radhakrishnan. People started using the word 'Chanthupottu' to sneer at men with womanly traits. The belief that these groups are to be rated as low graded instigates from the popular media which indisputably proves that the influence of media particularly cinema cannot be viewed as trivial. Many discussions involving the transgenders brought out their sheer protest towards the plot of this movie. Identity assassination has taken place here.

'Ardhanari' travails the plight of 'Hijra' community. The trans persons themselves comment that the movie suffered from an obsolete story line. Here, third genders are equated with the Hijra community which is a wrong conception. Sheetal Shyam in her write up clearly states that transgender people are different from Hijras. Just as there are variant socio cultural political and religious identities, trans is the gender identity whereas Hijra is the cultural identity. According to them even the policemen are not aware of their rights. Different from all these films, Vineeth Sreenivasan's 'Thira' had a sensible treatment of the transgender people all together. Basu seemed to be a dignified character portrayal. Unlike other stereotypical depiction of the third genders, with vulgar attire and made to beg for sex, Basu seemed to be very normal and dignified. The fact that this group is still viewed as substandard is something which cannot be neglected.

The word 'Transgender' is an umbrella term which refers to someone who doesn't identify with the gender they are allocated at birth. ([www.quora.com](http://www.quora.com)) Today we can see that the trans people are active participants in society's various fronts. They are to be seen in different roles in our society which helps them to have a space for themselves. Media's role is very important, predominantly, the role of popular media like cinema. But, it's so unfortunate that despite being the part of a developing world, and the part of all sorts of change in terms of technicalities and other aspects in different fields including film making, the themes involving the third gender community and its treatment is still unchanged. The portrayal of this community is still stereotypical. Their search for identity is widely seen portrayed through diverse medium. Today there are many organizations for the welfare of the Trans people. Many transgender activists like Kalki Subramanyam who is a writer, actor, entrepreneur and activist from Tamil Nadu who also starred in the Tamil film, 'Narthagi' in 2011, Akkai Padmashali, who is the transsexual-gender minority activist, Sheetal Shyam a known transgender activist are some of them. It is worth mentioning that, there are transgenders who have now become a part of the silver screen. This reflects that at least a small section of the society exhibit their willingness to approach the TG's to be approved as one among them.

Even though there are plenty of social groups for the upliftment of the transgenders, the conservative culture of Kerala is still reluctant to endorse them as social beings unlike Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Many writers and scholars have written for this group of people. Every living being has the right to have its own space in this world.

Gender is not an obstacle for this. There has to be a drastic change in the society's approach towards this community. Hence, it is not appropriate to keep them away from the society but let them be in the vanguard of the socio cultural political and economic domain of the social order.

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