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Transcending Gender Boundaries: An Introspection of Transvestism in Select Malayalam Movies

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Abstract:

Transvestism, an act of cross-dressing, is done for several reasons like pleasure, comfort, sexual gratification, etc. but it is employed in movies for other purposes. The paper subjects selected Malayalam movies, from the last decade of the twentieth century to the present, to critical study of the element of transvestism employed in it. Transvestism reinforces the gender theorist Judith Butler's performativity theory and asserts that gender is fluid. Gender performances keep on changing. Gender roles are assigned by the society and it has nothing to do with the biological sex of individuals. The paper holds in question the society's insistence on confining to the gender roles prescribed for each sex.

Keywords: Transvestism, identity, gender roles, performativity, fluidity.

The paper attempts to prove that gender identities are fluid, by analysing select Malayalam movies that feature transvestism. The paper throws light on the patriarchal ideologies that impose restrictions, even, on dressing. The paper highlights the social conditioning, from very old times, in which neither women nor men are allowed free expression and are tied under the iron chains of gender identities.

The study mainly focuses on the movies *Daya* (1998) by Venu, *Thillana Thillana* (2003) by T. S. Saji, *Rasathanthram* (2006) by Sathyan Anthikad, and *Mayamohini* (2012) by Jose Thomas. The paper calls into question the rigid patriarchal notions of how men and women must dress up. Cohan in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* describes masculinity or femininity as "an effect of culture- a construction, a performance, a masquerade- rather than a universal and unchanging essence" (7).

Transvestism is the act of dressing up in the costumes which is generally attributed to the opposite sex. It is performed for several reasons including sexual gratification. The word 'transvestite' was coined in 1910 by the German sexologist, Magnus Hirschfeld, to denote the

sexual interest in cross-dressing. In some cultures cross-dressing is done for religious reasons. Examples of cross-dressing exist in Greek, Norse and Hindu mythology. Transvestism acquires the form of transvestic fetishism when individuals get sexually aroused by the act of cross-dressing. Some male transvestic fetishists collect feminine garments and wear it when they are living out their fantasies. Some others wear dress of the opposite sex just to experience being the opposite sex temporarily and it does not involve any sexual desires. In earlier theatre performances, men used to dress themselves up in the costumes of females and played their roles on the stage. Nowadays, transvestism on stage is a means to generate laughter in the audience. Several instances of cross-dressing can be found in literary works from time immemorial to the present. Cross-dressing in movies can be traced back to the silent era of movies. History provides instances of women cross-dressing as men to take part in male-exclusive professions like military service.

Daya, the directorial debut of cinematographer Venu, the winner of national and Kerala State film awards, is an adaptation of *The Thousand and One Nights*. The film written by the prolific and versatile screenplay writer, M T Vasudevan Nair is set in pre-Islamic period. The film has won national and Kerala state film awards. The eponymous character, Daya, masquerades as Sameer, a young man and travels to another kingdom where the king is in search of a new minister. She undergoes difficult tests like an archery competition, a sword fighting duel, horse riding and a game of chess. She brings in a series of administrative reforms throughout the country as the newly appointed minister. 'Daya' becomes 'Sameer' to save her life. She shows enormous courage and will power. She administers justice, punishes all the evildoers and establishes peace in the country. The King's daughter gets attracted to Daya thinking that Daya is a man. Sultan decides to punish Daya as 'she dares to challenge men' by cross-dressing. Women are often confined to kitchen chores and are not deemed worthy of taking wise decisions or of participating in intellectual discussions. Daya, who was a maid, is elevated to the role of a minister who leads a country only when she appears before others as a 'man'. This proves that the commonplace notion that women are subordinate to men in intellectual affairs is baseless and is fabricated.

Thillana Thillana, 2003 malayalam movie starred by Krishna, Jomol, Kalyani, Kalabhavan Navas and Jagathy Sreekumar in lead roles, showcases elements of cross-dressing when the protagonist Bobby (Krishna) adopts female dressing to get into Malavika's (Jomol) hostel to know who loves him secretly. He participates in a beauty contest under the guise of Sreelakshmi, surpasses Malavika, and wins the title. Transvestism is employed for

the purpose of making the hero and the heroine meet and to develop a love for each other. Sreelakshmi, the disguised Bobby, shares the room with Malavika, talks about Bobby all the time, thus strengthening the relation. Prakash, Malavika's brother falls in love with Bobby, mistaking her to be a girl. The confusion and commotion caused by cross-dressing generates laughter. But when Bobby's real identity gets revealed, laughter paves way for anguish and confusion. Here, in this movie, transvestism is not a means of self-expression or sexual gratification for the hero but it is a scheme to carry out his plans. Malavika's brother's attraction for Bobby (mistaken for a girl) creates laughter but at the same time reminds us that gender is a social construct. A parallel can be found in the English movie *A Woman* in which the character played by Charlie Chaplin dresses up in female attire to spend more time with his girlfriend.

Rasathanthram, written and directed by Sathyan Anthikkad, has a brief episode of cross-dressing involved in it. The character Kanmani, played by Meera Jasmine, dresses up as Velayuthankutty and works with Premachandran (Mohan Lal) after she is being rescued from a suicide attempt by him. She stays with Premachandran and Balan Master, his father. As in *Daya*, transvestism is performed for rescuing Kanmani's life. Kanmani, who is totally rejected by the society, enjoys special position and status as Velayuthankutty. She gains respect and recognition as a human being when she changes her female identity. She engages in physical labour (carpentry) which is often considered to be the prerogative of men. Her status in society is also raised as she becomes a carpenter instead of a household servant. Thus Kanmani is able to break the iron chains of gender which confines her to menial jobs. She enjoys freedom as she changes her identity. But when her act of cross dressing is revealed, she gets again chained up. Her freedom, happiness and social status suffer a serious setback. Her life again becomes vulnerable as she switches back to her original feminine identity. A woman who does cross-dressing is viewed as climbing up the social ladder in the gendered society.

The joint authorial venture of Udayakrishna and Sibi K. Thomas, *Mayamohini* presents popular actor Dileep as 'Mayamohini'. The movie directed by Jose Thomas is starred by Biju Menon, Lakshmi Rai, Baburaj, Mythili, Spadikam George, etc. and it was a box office hit in the year 2012. Though the film is a comedy entertainer, there is a desire for revenge lurking in it. Mohanakrishnan becomes 'Mayamohini' to know the secret of his father's death. Men get enamoured by 'her' beauty, without knowing 'her' true identity. 'Mayamohini' dances before Raj Kumar Patella, makes him a puppet in 'her' hands, and gets

him arrested by the police. Cross-dressing, here, is a cover for secret enquiry into the cold-hearted murder of Shankaran Potti. Mohan thinks it to be an effective tool to bring the murderer, here, a highly influential businessman, in front of the Law. 'Mayamohini' does not connote 'to-be-looked-at-ness' but has agency.

Pramod K. Nayar, Assistant Professor in English at the University of Hyderabad, in *An Introduction to Cultural Studies* writes:

Identity is a switching of roles. Identity is not closed, stable or unitary thing which is separate from an Other. The Self and the Other are not mutually distinct species. The Other is thus installed in the Self to attain a self-identity: the Self thus contains the other within it. The citation/repetition of queer identity may be used to destabilise the very discourse of heterosexuality. (74)

Bolich defines cross dressing as "any use of dress to cross any recognized line drawn by dress expectation or convention" (172). It is done for the purposes of disguise, comfort, self-actualisation and sometimes, sexual pleasure. Hans Bertens in *Literary Theory: The Basics* writes:

Cross-dressing is perfect for destabilizing generally accepted views of gender and sexuality...Clearly the act of cross-dressing-that is, the appropriation of gender characteristics normally associated with the other sex- has significance beyond gender and is simultaneously a *sexual* act (229).

G. G. Bolich also takes a similar stand: "In an era where more and more people are concerned with gender equality, there is a profuse irony here. Cross dressing can be understood as a behavior *par excellence* in gender-levelling" (233). Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is reinforced by drag performances. She claims: "...in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency" (175)

In all these movies, men and women perform certain gender roles and at some other point of time, as the situation demands, perform yet another role. Jenny Rowena argues: "Male identities come to be crucially situated on performance- a performance of mastery and command that stretch from the workplace to bedroom" (128). The masculine identities of Daya and Kanmani, achieved by cross-dressing, are rooted on their mastery of performance that range from physical to intellectual power. The characters that cross-dress in these movies

perform roles that are prescribed as 'ideal' for the opposite gender. Judith Butler, an American philosopher and gender theorist, in her epoch making work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of identity* opines:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free floating artifice, with the consequence that men and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one (9).

These characters prove that differences in behaviour between men and women are not fully based on the universal biological factors but largely on social conventions. Andrew Edgar in *Key Concepts in Cultural Theory* states:

Gender may therefore be taken to refer to learned patterns of behaviour and action as opposed to that which is biologically determined...This is to suggest that while what makes a person male or female is universal and grounded in laws of nature, the precise ways in which women express their femininity and man express their masculinity will vary from culture to culture (158).

Carl Gustav Jung's Anima Theory states that feminine psychological traits find a place in the unconscious of a man and the masculine ones are possessed by a woman, which he termed as 'anima' and 'animus', respectively. Both words originated from Latin. Catherine L. Anderson in an article titled "Jung's Anima Theory and How it Relates to Cross dressing" says that at midlife a boy or girl 'experiences unhappiness due to the unrealistic and limiting nature' of his masculine or her feminine persona, which leads to a stage of confusion. Cross-dressing here acts as a healing agent. The urge to cross-dress may diminish during the later stages. The impulse to cross-dress cannot be denied forever. They emerge partly and in disguised form so as to elude the mechanisms of repression.

Pramod K. Nayar in *An Introduction to Cultural Studies* writes:

Feminists suggest that inequality of sexes does not have a biological basis or origin, it originates in the cultural constructions of gender difference. Gendering is a practice of power, where masculinity is always associated with authority. Further, authoritarian discourses such as those of law or science are based on certain assumptions and binary thinking about women, sexuality and 'welfare'. (68)

He also adds:

Culture is a mode of enforcing identities and constructing 'subjects'. These subjects are *subject* to control by the dominant classes, a process that makes use of representations and images. These representations 'naturalise' differences and exploitative mechanisms, and suggest that these social structures have always been. (84)

Judith butler, the influential gender theorist, states that Gender is a continuous performance and that it negates the ideas of fixity and universality. She notes in her epoch making work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*:

If gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of "men" will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that "women" will interpret only female bodies. (9)

She further notes:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (9)

Kanmani and Daya, the central female leads in the select movies, cross-dress in order to save their lives while men, Mohanakrishnan and Bobby has other motives like taking revenge, winning a girl's love, etc. The prime task before a woman is to save her life and honour while it is never a concern of the men. Mayamohini lures the business magnet, Pattela, using the charms of his 'feminine' body. He is not becoming an object but has control over the things. But women does not have agency and become mere objects of men's sexual pleasure. The women in the select movies overcome this hindrance by the act of cross-

dressings. Jean E. Howard in the article titled ‘Cross dressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England’ feels that cross-dressing threatens the normative social order and notes: “...Cross dressing, as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women’s subordination to man was a chief instance, trumpeted from pulpit, instantiated in law, and acted upon by monarch and commoner alike” (418).

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