

Unveiling Institutionalised Heteronormativity the Social Context of Kerala: A Comparative Study of the Novel *Jezebel* by K. R. Meera and the Malayalam Cinema *Kaadhal-The Core* by Jeo Baby

Arshad CM

Research Scholar,
Department of English (EoFL),
School of Applied Sciences and Humanities,
Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research.
(Deemed to be University).
cmarshad8@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9419-7520>

Gomatam Mohana Charyulu

Professor,
Department of English (EoFL),
School of Applied Sciences and Humanities,
Vignan's Foundation for Science, Technology and Research (Deemed to be University),
Vadlamudi, Guntur District,
Andhra Pradesh, Pin: 522213, India.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1347-4913>

Abstract:

This paper argues that institutionalised heteronormativity operates as a social system that impacts individuals across the gender spectrum, as manifested within Kerala society, India, through a comparative analysis of K. R. Meera's novel *Jezebel* and Jeo Baby's film *Kaadhal-The Core*. Both narratives depict critical perspectives on the rigid social structures and expectations that privilege heterosexuality and traditional gender roles within the region, and how heteronormative social order regulates desire and normalises unequal gendered roles. *Jezebel* was victimised and suffered under her homosexual husband, who was imposed to hegemonic gender order. In contrast, *Kaadhal-The Core* presents a nuanced portrayal of a same-sex relationship, highlighting the significant challenges individuals face when navigating their identities within a predominantly heteronormative society. The analysis examines how these distinct narratives converge in their critique of the pervasive pressures to conform, the resultant marginalisation of those who do not, and the inherent potential for resistance and societal change. It aims to illuminate both the resilience of oppressive structures and the emergent possibilities for social transformation, offering a comprehensive understanding of how these artistic works reflect and critique contemporary Keralite society.

Keywords: heteronormativity, gender, sexual identity, cinema, cultural, comparative.

Article History: Submitted-23/01/2026, Revised-14/02/2026, Accepted-19/02/2026, Published-28/02/2026.

Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Introduction:

“Heterosexuality is the erotic and social order in which the majority of people live, but it is also always, in modern times, one of the organising fictions of sex” (Sedgwick 1). The concept of Gender binary is socially constructed through societal norms, religious beliefs, and expectations rather than empirical evidence, unlike biological sex. Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition” (Connell 22). Many religious traditions influence gender roles, often prescribing distinct roles and behaviours for men and women, which can impact how individuals perceive their own masculinity or femininity. “The vicar of St Barnabas proclaims... that the gender order is ordained by God, and like other parts of the moral order is perilous to tamper with” (Connell 32). Consequently, a reserved man might see himself as less masculine, and an assertive woman might feel less feminine, relative to these societal and religious ideals. However, these self-perceptions are shaped largely by societal and religious pressures rather than biological determinism or empirical foundations.

Social expectations tied to gender are historically contingent and subject to change, as feminine and masculine qualities altered several times. As a result, people now increasingly view many qualities once considered gender-specific as gender-neutral. Yuval Noah Harari asserts that neither masculine nor feminine qualities are inherently permanent. He demonstrates this by providing examples that highlight the fluidity of gender traits, showing how these characteristics are not biologically fixed but influenced by social and cultural constructs. “So-called ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ qualities are inter-subjective and undergo constant changes. For example, there are far-reaching differences in the behaviour, desires, dress and even body posture expected from women in classical Athens and women in modern Athens” (Harari 160). Harari further exemplifies this

fluidity by referencing 18th-century masculinity: “An official portrait of King Louis XIV of France. Note the long wig, stockings, high-heeled shoes, dancers posture – and huge sword. In contemporary Europe, all these (except for the sword) would be considered marks of effeminacy. however, in his time, Louis was a European paragon of manhood and virility” (Harari 158).

Social movements and the debate over sexuality have played a pivotal role in shaping Kerala's socio-political landscape. Gender and sexuality were crucial concerns of most reform movements initiated in Kerala in the early half of the 20th century, motivated mainly by colonial education and nationalist fervour. The community-based movements of this period largely sought to discipline diverse conjugal practices in the region and consolidate normative citizenship within the moral fold of the nation. As is well known, postcolonial national modernity in India was premised on the rigorous disciplining of sexualities and their rehabilitation within a hetero-patriarchal moral order (Tharayil 71).

In fact, historical factors, along with prominent cultural productions such as literary texts and films, have played pivotal roles in shaping and redefining the course of debates on gender and sexuality in Kerala. Malayalam fiction writers, including Madhavikutty, Uroob, and Narayan, have highlighted the struggles faced by marginalised communities, including gender non-conforming individuals. Similarly, films such as *Sancharram* (2004), *Njan Marykutty* (2018), and *Moothon* (2019) have depicted the socio-political challenges encountered by non-binary individuals in a society pressured to adhere to heteronormative norms.

Over the past decade, Kerala has seen a notable increase in the visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, as queer organisations and public initiatives have expanded social presence and institutional recognition, marking a departure from earlier enforced heteronormativity

(NewsMinute; *India Today*). The State of Kerala in India is considered to be a progressive one, especially in its approach towards the transgender community in recent years. Following the Supreme Court verdict of 2014 (NALSA Judgement). Recognising transgender people as the third gender and granting them the right to self-identification, Kerala was the first to formulate a Transgender policy in 2015 (Poornima 141). Issues such as same-sex relationships, marriages, and transgender movements have gained traction in mainstream discourse, with initial public criticism gradually transforming into support, especially from left-leaning political parties and NGOs. These developments have sparked debates between conservative family values and progressive social views.

Nived and Rahim were likely the first gay couple from the State to get married after the Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court decriminalised Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in September 2018 (Sudhi). The Malayalis Adhila and Noora hit the headlines in June when they came out as lesbians. Adhila filed a petition in court, alleging that Noora's parents had forcibly taken her away and kept her captive. In a landmark judgment, the Kerala High Court allowed the couple to live together (Krishna). Nikesh Usha Pushkaran and Sonu M. S., both from Kochi, got married four years ago. "Our wedding was on 5 July, 2018. This was months before the Supreme Court repealed Article 377 and legalised same-sex relations," recalls Nikesh (Krishna).

The time period of intense and controversial debates and movements, particularly surrounding same-sex marriage, has lasted over the past decade in Kerala. The release of K. R. Meera's novel *Jezebel* and Jeo Baby's film *Kaathal: The Core* gives these works significant relevance. Both works serve as microcosms of Kerala society, illustrating the profound impact of socially constructed beliefs on individual lives. By examining how deeply ingrained societal norms shape

and influence human experiences, these works offer a timely and valuable lens through which to explore contemporary debates on sexuality and societal norms in the region

In a comparative study between film and novel, as different media, approach similar ideas and subjects from distinct perspectives. These varying texts offer unique methods of engagement, which broaden the scope of discussion by catering to diverse audiences. Discussing similar subjects across different media, such as film and literature, allows the discourse to become more serious and penetrating within society. Although a film is shaped by the director's perspective, its audiovisual form can effectively convey the gravity of an issue by reflecting lived realities.

The primary aim of this paper is to analyse the portrayal of forced heteronormativity in K. R. Meera's *Jezebel* (2022) and Jeo Baby's *Kaathal - The Core* (2023), through a comparative study of both works. By comparing and contrasting the literary and cinematic representations, the paper examines how literature and film act as catalysts for social reform, particularly in reinforcing heterosexual, gender-binary norms. This study will also explore the growing recognition and addressing of LGBTQ+ concerns in Kerala, identifying the underlying factors, such as cultural sophistication and the development of knowledge, that contribute to these shifts. Additionally, the paper will assess the impact of heteronormative reinforcement not only on homosexual individuals but also on others across the gender spectrum. It will investigate the socio-political and psychological factors that perpetuate heteronormative ideologies, considering the motivations and barriers to change. Furthermore, this study discusses policy interventions, support mechanisms, and educational strategies to promote inclusivity, proposing measures to challenge the societal constraints imposed by enforced heteronormativity. It ultimately underscores the power of

literature and film in fostering dialogue, reshaping societal perceptions, and encouraging acceptance.

About the Novel *Jezebel* Written by KR Meera

K. R Meera as an author

K. R. Meera is a renowned Malayalam novelist born on 19 February 1970 in Sasthamkotta, Kollam district in Kerala. She is also a journalist who holds a master's degree in Communicative English from Gandhigram Rural Institute, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu. As a journalist, she worked for the Malayalam daily Malayala Manorama. She focused on her passion by resigning from Malayala Manorama to concentrate more on fictional writing. She started writing fiction in 2001. Her first short story collection was published in 2002 under the title *Ormayude Njarambu*. Since then, she has published 5 collections of short stories, 2 novellas, 5 novels and 2 children's books. She received the prestigious Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 2009 for her short story *Ave Maria*. Her novel *Aarachaar* (2012) is widely regarded as one of the finest works of fiction in Malayalam. The novel received numerous accolades, including the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award (2013), the Odakkuzhal Award (2013), the Vayalar Award (2014), and the Kendra Sahitya Akademi Award (2015). The novel was also shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2016. Her novels include: "*Nethronmeelanam (The Unseeing Idol of Light)*, *Meerasadhu (The Poison of Love)*, *Yudasinte Suvishesham (The Gospel of Yudas)*, *Malakayude Marukukal*, *Karineela*, *Aa Maratheyum Marannu Marannu Njan (And Slowly Forgetting that Tree)*, *Aarachaar* (2012) (*Hangwoman: Everyone Loves a Good Hanging*), *Sooryane Aninja Oru Sthree (Jezebel)*, *Ghathakan (The Assassin)*, *Khabar (Qabar)*" ("K. R. Meera.").

***Jezebel* by K. R Meera: A Brief Summary**

The novel *Jezebel*, authored by K. R. Meera, was originally written in Malayalam and later translated into English by Abhirami Girija Sriram and K. S. Bijukumar. It is a distinctly female-centred narrative shaped by the perspective of Jezebel, the novel's central character, who is named after a much-criticised figure in the Bible. The novel traces the life of Jezebel John, whose family arranges her marriage to Jerome George Marakkaran. Marakkaran has openly expressed his affection for Jezebel, and both are practising physicians. Initially, he comes to meet Tresa, a distant cousin who elopes on the day of the marriage, who is a homosexual. Jerome does not live up to Jezebel's vague expectations. Jerome George Marakkaran, a homosexual individual, secretly kept a relationship with a fellow doctor named Avinash. He married Jezebel. John normally tried to hide his sexual orientation. Jezebel, a heterosexual woman, dreamed of having a loving husband and hoped to find that love in Jerome. However, Jerome's subconscious insecurities manifested in his mental state, where he perceived his homosexuality as abnormal and expressed behaviours contrary to his true feelings. Such defensive behaviour aligns with a common psychological phenomenon in which individuals exaggerate certain traits to mask their vulnerabilities. A key psychoanalytic concept that addresses this is reaction formation. Reaction formation refers to an ego defence mechanism in which an unacceptable instinctual impulse is transformed into its opposite, allowing the ego to maintain control over anxiety-producing desires (Freud 8–9)

Reaction formation was first conceptualised by the Austrian-born British psychoanalyst Anna Freud and identified as one of the ten defence mechanisms in her influential book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936) (*“Reaction Formation”*). Additionally, researchers have linked internalised homophobia to anxiety and depression through coping strategies such as denial and self-blame. Denial emerges as a promising therapeutic target for gay men with high levels of

anxiety and/or depression (Plumas et al., 2024). Consequently, Jezebel faces physical and mental abuse from her husband as he tries to project a masculine and aggressive persona. Traditionally, Indian society expects husbands to embody qualities of authority, responsibility, and provider roles within the family structure.

Similar to the Biblical story of Queen Jezebel, who was widely criticised as a plotting seductress and famously thrown from her palace window to her death, the opening sentence in the novel, she stood in the family court, accused of hiring a contract killer to murder her husband. Like Jezebel, she had this revelation: “To endure extreme torture, imagine yourself as Christ on the cross” (Meera 3). During the courtroom proceedings, she engages in a retrospective analysis spanning the entirety of her marital history since her initial encounter with her spouse, Jerome. Meera remarks, “As you stand in the courtroom in this unfinished building, consider the heaviness that weighs your chest down, as that of the wooden cross. As the short and stout defence lawyer begins his cross-examination, imagine you are climbing the Golgotha, bearing that cross. Count the barbs, both direct and indirect, in those questions, as lashings of the whip. Each time the soul is put to death, recognise that it will resurrect on the third day, and there will be no pain thereafter (Meera 3).

Jezebel’s mother taught her to despise her own body. since - religion. Every religion considers the female body to be a final sin, for which women must always repent and endure pain and suffering in their own lives. Every other line of the will expresses the instinctual hatred that her mother cultivated with rigour and complete blindness.

Our usual suspect in this tale is the sassy grandmother who begs the Lord to always lead her astray. She deliberately met with a series of men, and she developed a sharper understanding of how

society works. Jezebel tracked down a compatriot in Valiyammachi. Indeed, even Valiyammachi could not make all the difference. Such were Jezebel's obstacles and difficulties.

Jerome, who was gay and is now involved with his steadfast Hindu darling, goes out of control, annihilating Jezebel's excess confidence and freedom. They forced her into compliance. She could not find a rescuer—not among her family or in Lilly Mummy.

Through Sandeep, she finds Ann Mary and seeks to offer her solace and protection. One broken woman reaches out to another. When Jezebel takes care of Ann Mary in her house, Jerome, the son of Satan, commits an inexcusable crime. It was this, and now Jezebel turns out to be Jes-Rebel. George Jerome Matthews, his father, was the antithesis of goodness for both him and the world. Beneath his exterior lay a brutal and deeply entrenched cruelty that manifested as a relentless desire to persecute Jezebel.

Jerome did what he did to rebuff his darling and Jezebel. He made a damnation space with him, similar to a spreading plague, as the outward power of fiendishness and watched in sheer quietness his father, dead set on immolating Jezebel at Jerome's command. Jezebel goes through a legitimately organised character death in the court before her executioners - the appointed authority and the jury. They mentally stripped her down, ruined her self-respect. She was figuratively hung out to dry on the scaffold. Meera interweaves courtroom conflict and biblical symbolism to expose the macro- and micro-level dynamics of power.

Jezebel, caught in chaotic turmoil and nearly intertwined in a criminal case, simultaneously struggles with a moral dilemma as she attempts to uphold her professional commitment to humanity. In her vulnerability, she seeks comfort in a flawed and premature resolution with her husband, revealing herself to him despite her inner conflict. Ultimately, she bears her suffering

alone, publicly carrying her burden like a cross, enduring condemnation in the hope of emerging transformed on the other side.

About the Movie *Kaathal – The Core* directed by Jeo Baby

Jeo Baby as a Film Director

Jeo Baby, the director of *Kaathal – The Core*, is an Indian filmmaker who primarily works in the Malayalam film industry. In addition to directing, he is a screenwriter and actor. One of his most acclaimed films is *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). This film has won the 51st Kerala State Film Award for Best Film. He also received the Kerala State Film Award for Best Screenplay. In 2010, he began his career by writing for television sitcoms, marking his entry into the entertainment industry. In addition to this, he was involved in scripting the initial episodes of popular television sitcoms like “*Marimayam, Uppum Mulakum* and *M80 Moosa*”. In 2016, he made his directorial debut with *2 Penkuttikal*, a Malayalam film.

***Kaathal- The Core* (2023) directed by Jeo Baby: A Brief Summary**

Jeo Baby directed the courtroom drama *Kaathal – The Core*, which was released in 2023. Adarsh Sukumaran and Paulson Skaria wrote the screenplay, and Mammootty Kampany produced the film. The main stars of the film are Mammootty and Jyothika. Other actors in supporting roles are Sudhi Kozhikode, RS Panickar, Joji John, Muthumani, Chinnu Chandni and Kalabhavan Haneef. The makers officially announced the film in October 2022, and Mathews Pulickan composed its songs.

Mathew Devassy, the main character in this film, lives a respectable life in his village with his wife, Omana, Femy (their daughter), and his father, Devassy. One evening, he finds out that

Omana has filed for divorce, claiming that he is homosexual. When Mathew asks Omana how this could affect his election campaign, she tells him that she had filed the petition two months earlier. They decide to have a quick trial in family court, where Omana claims that although Mathew is a devoted family man, he does not fulfil his marital obligations. During the trial, the respondent's legal advisor asks Omana how many times they had sexual relations, and she replies that they did so only four times in their twenty-year marriage. During cross-examination, even when the opposing lawyer openly expresses her support for homosexuality, asserting that it is not a medical condition but a profoundly human experience deserving of full rights. Mathew denies being homosexual or having a relationship with Thankan, his alleged partner. In this scene, his refusal to disclose his sexual identity reflects the deep oppression and societal stigma he endures, powerfully highlighting the extent of his internalised fear and marginalisation.

During Mathew's interactions with his lawyer, he is unwilling to acknowledge even having a close relationship with the alleged individual, Thankan. Omana's lawyer asserts, "And Mr Thankan, who is mentioned in this, you both share quite a close bond, don't you? Mathew denies the allegation, stating, "Nothing like that. We are just acquaintances. That's all" (*Kaathal- The Core*: 43:51-44:00).

Thankan, who owns a driving school, is upset because he is being accused due to his different sexual orientation, and only women attend his school. His nephew, Kuttayi also faces bullying and harassment at school. In reality, Mathew and his father intentionally concealed his sexual orientation before the marriage, hoping that Mathew would eventually change and conform to a heterosexual lifestyle. Mathew was coerced into marriage by his father. Mathew converses with father, Shall I ask you something, Dad? You were also there when the doctor talked about this,

right? What did you say, then? Everything will be alright if I get married. Is everything alright now?. (*Kaathal- The Core*: 01:36:09-01:36:22)

Eventually, Devassy seeks forgiveness from Mathew, acknowledging all his mistakes as he comes to realise the consequences of his actions that appear as a witness against him, acknowledging that his son is gay. During the court scene, when the lawyer interrogates Mathew's father, Devassy, about how he is certain of his son's sexual orientation, Devassy responds, 'He is my son.' The cinema also depicts the helplessness of Thangan, who secretly worries about Matthew's situation.

As the case continues, Devassy is called as a witness and acknowledges that his son has been gay since childhood, and that he entered the marriage due to societal expectations and public pressure. That evening, Devassy sobs uncontrollably and admits that he is responsible for the hardships in his child's life. Mathew apologises to Omana and pleads that he was afraid to come out. According to Omana, she desired a divorce to free them both from their meaningless family life; the two of them shed tears. The following day, as they sign the legal documents, Mathew emerges as a gay man and continues to lobby for the decisions. At the end of the cinema, Mathew, the victor, is looking for a potential groom for Omana after the elections, with Thankan as his partner.

Research Question:

How does the portrayal of enforced heteronormativity in K. R. Meera's novel *Jezebel* (2022) and Jeo Baby's cinema *Kaathal- The Core* (2023) highlight its negative effects on individuals across diverse gender identities and on broader societal norms?

Research Objectives:

- a. To analyse depictions of forced heteronormativity and to explore how K. R. Meera's novel *Jezebel* (2022) and Jeo Baby's cinema *Kaadhal - The Core* (2023) portray enforced heteronormativity in the context of Kerala.
- b. To examine the impact of enforced heteronormativity on individuals across the gender spectrum, as depicted in the literary and cinematic narratives.
- c. To assess societal implications, including the reinforcement of traditional norms and the suppression of nonconforming identities.
- d. To compare and contrast literary and cinematic representations through a comparative study.

Research Methodology:

Through a thorough theoretical perspective, this study compares and contrasts Jeo Baby's cinema *Kaadhal - The Core* (2023) with K. R. Meera's novel *Jezebel* (2022). This research uses film theory frameworks to deconstruct visual storytelling elements, character interactions, and thematic representations related to heteronormativity. To study the novel, the researcher employs textual analysis. All in all, the researcher employs a comparative approach to examine the novel and the cinema, identifying similarities and differences. Key themes, characterisation, and the representation of enforced heteronormativity in both works are examined through textual and visual analysis.

The study draws on queer theory to analyse how societal norms surrounding gender and sexuality are challenged or upheld in the novel and the film. To examine how identities are socially constructed and contested within the narratives, the study applies Judith Butler's notion of gender

subjectivity. Applying social constructivism helps explain how cultural norms shape the characters' actions and the broader themes of the novel and the film.

Significance of the Study:

This study contributes to the scholarly discourse on the imposition of heteronormativity. This study also provides understandings into the socio-cultural context of Kerala. This study also offers a nuanced exploration of how heteronormative norms are continued and resisted within regional literature and cinema. Only through a comparative study can a novel and a film be examined together. Therefore, the comparative study offers a comprehensive analysis of how different narrative forms highlight societal issues, enriching interdisciplinary dialogue between literature and cinema studies. In conclusion, this study aims to elucidate the intricate dynamics of enforced heteronormativity as portrayed in literary and cinematic narratives, as well as its effects on individuals and society as a whole in Kerala's particular cultural milieu.

Queer Theories

Judith Butler's Notion of Gender Subjectivity

"Performativity and Gender", Judith Butler is a prominent philosopher, gender theorist, and cultural critic whose work has significantly influenced discussions of gender, identity, and performativity within literary and cultural scholarship. Butler's groundbreaking idea revolves around the concept of performativity. According to her, gender is not a thing we characteristically possess or express; rather, it is a social construct that is quite continuous. If one considers gender as a theatrical act, one never just plays a role; one becomes part of that role through repeated actions. These actions—such as clothing choices, gestures, and speech patterns—constitute the

script of gender performance. Unlike a traditional play, where the actor exists independently of the performance, Judith Butler argues that our very existence is shaped by ongoing acts of gender performance.

“The Illusion of Stability”: Unlike a traditional play, where the actor exists independently of the performance, Judith Butler argues that our very existence is shaped by ongoing acts of gender performance. To explain further, there is no absolute “true” self-hiding behind the curtain. In its place, our identity is the sum of our performances. For example, if one conveys, “I am a woman” or “I am a man”, they are actually not stating a fixed truth; the people are only performing that identity in a complex dance of language, gestures, and societal expectations.

“Drag, Play, and Dissolution” She used terms like “play, “drag, and “imitation” to describe this ongoing process. According to Butler, people used to play their gender roles, sometimes with flair (like a drag queen) and sometimes with refinement (like everyday clothing choices). Originally speaking, there is a twist in this as our gender subjectivity is always at risk of “dissolution”. If one avoids performing, the illusion gets shattered, and the stage goes dark. And, the audience is left wondering, “Who am I?” In Butler’s universe, there is no backstage where one can take off their costumes and reveal their “true selves”. The show is all there is, and it is both redeeming and disturbing.

“Freud, Foucault, and Gender Trouble”, Butler’s work draws on Freudian psychoanalysis and Michel Foucault’s theories of power and discourse. She analyses essentialist notions of gender and seeks to pull apart the two-fold framework.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler offers a foundational theoretical intervention that challenges the assumption that gender is a stable category grounded in biological sex.

In its place, she maintains that gender is a complex interplay of language, power, and performance.

Discussion:**K. R. Meera's Novel *Jezebel* and Jeo Baby's Film *Kaadhal-The Core* in the Social Context of Kerala: A Comparative Analysis**

Literature serves as a representation of society and truth, with both works depicting societal elements through visual language and written text. Similarly, films function as representations of society and attempt to depict social realities visually. The themes explored in both works pertain to critical issues in gender studies, including the gender binary, homophobia, feminism, heteronormativity, and the stigma faced by non-binary people in society. Both the novel and the film share several thematic resemblances, particularly in their treatment of heteronormativity, while also presenting notable contrasts.

In both narratives, there exists a parallelism of emotions, circumstances, rationales, challenges, advantages, and gender dynamics. Both narratives explore the complexities of social constructions, particularly the norms and anticipations surrounding gender and sexuality. The portrayal of characters grappling with the pressures of conforming to heteronormative standards highlights the challenges that threaten their existence and survival. Through the experiences of their protagonists, these narratives explore themes of identity, subjugation, and the struggle for self-expression within the confines of a heteronormative society.

In contrast to the novel, the film presents a more gender-neutral perspective, emphasising the impact of the enforced gender binary on people's lives. The courtroom scenes illustrate how legal and political institutions in Kerala have gradually come to recognise homosexuality as a legitimate identity with legal rights. These courtroom scenes reflect a broader shift toward the social and legal recognition of diverse sexual identities, underscoring evolving institutional attitudes and legal frameworks concerning LGBTQ+ rights.

In the courtroom scene, Omana's lawyer describes:

It is precisely the courage that Omana has gathered by moving along with time, that makes her stand here today. And, if you ask why she took this long, let me remind you it was only last year that Section 377 was decriminalised. Suppose Omana had gone ahead with such a case before that as per then existing law, Mathew would have considered engaging in a criminal offence. If not anything, She must have been well aware that her husband isn't a criminal. And this lady had to wait until 2018. Just because we had such a law in our country. Along with that verdict, which was called the verdict of the century, Justice Indu Malhotra had said, history owes an apology to the members of this community. (*Kaathal- The Core*: 01:12:08-01:12:48)

Mathew, homosexuality is not a medical condition. On the other hand, it's an extremely humane and natural thing. Am I right? Am I right? Yes. (*Kaathal- The Core*: 01:14:12-01:14:26)

Meera's literary work adopts a feminist lens to explore the life of Jezebel, a prominent female protagonist, and the individuals surrounding her. Initially, Jezebel tolerates patriarchy, but later she fights back for her freedom and comes to understand the significance of resistance in her life. While both works arise from the same socio-political and historical moment, they present notably different thematic and emotional atmospheres. To a certain extent, it can be observed that the Kerala society in both contexts demonstrates a shared adherence to conventional patriarchal and homophobic attitudes towards homosexuality. Collectively, the works offer an overview of the socio-political context of Kerala. However, in the film, Mathew Devassy assumes the roles of a social worker and politician affiliated with a regional party. Surprisingly, even after disclosing his sexual orientation, he is accepted by his peers, primarily to showcase the perceived progressiveness of the political party to the public. Fellow member says to Mathew, "It is a statement, sir. Our

ideology respects the integrity and identity of every individual. So, for the first time in Kerala, a candidate like this. Mathew asks, “A candidate like what?! Mathew sir, just sign that nomination. The party will plan the rest. Also, join us once in a while for house visit campaigns” (*Kaathal- The Core*: 32:42-33:07).

This representation subtly implies that Malayali society as a whole is progressively coming to embrace homosexuality more. Nonetheless, Thankan’s nephew Kuttayi’s contemporary experience of bullying and harassment in the school setting indicates that societal norms and practices endure. This comparison highlights the continuous conflict between contemporary inclusivity and persistent ‘cultural conservatism’ by illuminating the contrast between progressive legislative achievements and deeply ingrained societal prejudices.

In the novel, Meera primarily focuses on illustrating the impacts of enforced heteronormativity rather than exploring public attitudes, exacerbating the challenges faced by Jezebel as a woman living in a patriarchal society. Additionally, despite being subjugated as a homosexual, Jezebel’s husband still holds privileges conferred by his male gender in society. These privileges may include societal expectations of authority, decision-making power, and freedom of expression that are typically associated with masculinity.

On the other hand, the film prominently showcases societal reactions towards homosexuality. A notable example is Thankan, who, when accused of being in a relationship with Mathew, faces significantly greater social stigma. This is reflected in the fact that his driving school, largely patronised by women, becomes a site where local attitudes and suspicions are implicitly revealed. Additionally, Thankan’s nephew, Kuttayi, endures harassment and bullying at school.

Female leading characters in both the novel and cinema, Jezebel and Omana, share particular traits that are remarkably similar. It becomes obvious that both Jezebel and Omana are subjected to

societal pressures surrounding gender binary roles, compelling them to conform to heterosexual norms. Within the patriarchal framework of marriage, they conform to social constructions sustained for centuries by religious, cultural, and traditional institutions.

Judith Butler defines gender subjectivity as the process by which socially produced norms and discourses fundamentally alter an individual's understanding of their gender identity. Butler highlights that gender identity is created via repeated acts that uphold and extend established gender norms. In both media, the characters are socialised from an early age to internalise the gender binary, a system that recognises only two genders aligned with biological sex. Deeply internalised beliefs, sustained by cultural and religious institutions, make individuals resistant to reasoned critique and ideological change. Additionally, because religion is an essential component of cultural systems, many of these ancient ideas have their roots in religious principles. Therefore, upholding religious morality makes it more difficult to accept modern ethics and reason, which supports the continuation of conventional gender standards.

Both female protagonists are constructed as figures of virtue, defined by their devotion to their husbands, with Omana representing this ideal most prominently. They are both committed to leading a cooperative life, sharing all responsibilities, affection, and love. The narratives illustrate how the women's lives are tragically shaped by the actions of their respective. Family, as a fundamental unit of society, acts as both the carrier and enforcer of societal norms and practices, pressurising individuals to adhere to traditional norms. Due to enforced heteronormativity, Patriarchal structures deprive Omana and Jezebel of basic sexual fulfilment and personal freedom. Additionally, Jezebel's life further portrays interference even in her education.

Major male characters, notwithstanding their belonging to a gender minority as homosexual males, are perceived as privileged by virtue of their male identity. Nevertheless, their journeys are fraught

with complexity owing to societal expectations, necessitating a delicate navigation of their sexuality while maintaining a facade of heterosexuality within their marriages. However, within the male leading characters, Jerome is portrayed differently from Mathew Devassy. Jerome resorts to tormenting his wife as a means to conceal the complexity of his sexuality, while conversely, Mathew maintains a positive relationship with his wife. Their actions emerged as the primary cause of disrupting the lives of two women, resulting in their appearance in court despite their lack of engagement in any morally objectionable behaviours.

“Heteronormativity is more than simple ideology, or prejudice; it is the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent but privileged” (Warner xxi). “Heterosexual culture assumes that only heterosexual desire can give an appropriate direction to maturation... The first instance is in a section called ‘Reproduction as a Choice’... Thus, he only imagines ‘homosexuality’ as an additional choice, one that entails no challenge to the heterosexual order” (Warner xv-xvi)

Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker posits in his work that, “some categories really are social constructions: they exist only because people tacitly agree to act as if they exist” (Pinker 242). Ideas about male and female nature are primarily constructed through social norms and expectations rather than grounded in empirical evidence. Consequently, individuals whose traits deviate from dominant gender norms may internalise feelings of inadequacy, with reserved men perceiving themselves as insufficiently masculine and assertive women as insufficiently feminine. However, these perceptions are simply a product of societal pressures. The delineation between men and women based on gender has evolved significantly from traditional stereotypes. Contemporary theoretical perspectives offer a broader comprehension of gender and sex,

acknowledging gender as a fluid concept encompassing a diverse array of characteristics that individuals can choose from.

Compulsory heterosexuality functions as a pervasive system that not only dictates but also reinforces societal ideologies and norms regarding what are deemed "normal" in everyday life. It serves as a foundational source of human oppression, permeating various aspects of society and providing a framework for bias and acts of violence against individuals and groups who do not conform to the societal expectation of heterosexuality.

Heteronormative thinking, which stems from compulsory heterosexuality, operates under the assumption that the heterosexual experience represents the universal human experience. Consequently, it validated labels as deviant, renders incomprehensible, or erases all other forms of human sexual expression. In essence, compulsory heterosexuality and its associated heteronormative thinking reinforce a binary view of sexuality, perpetuating discrimination against those who challenge or diverge from traditional norms of sexual identity and behaviour.

In the context of major characters Jerome George Marakkaran and Mathew Devassy, their experiences illustrate the pervasive influence of heteronormativity as a social construct. Heteronormative social structures compel them to internalise rigid gender roles and conform to the gender binary. These societal norms act as formidable constraints on their autonomy, compelling them to navigate within predefined boundaries that do not fully accommodate their identities. We can observe how enforced heteronormativity profoundly impacted the psychological well-being of Mathew and Jerome, while also imposing significant mental strain on the female characters, Jezebel and Omana, concerning their lives.

Due to pervasive stigma and societal insults, individuals are often unwilling to reveal their sexual identity publicly in a society that predominantly recognises only two genders. In the movie

Kaathal-The Core, the character Mathew refrains from disclosing his identity, resisting the pressure to assimilate. In the courtroom scene, Mathew remains silent, refusing to accept assimilation. Omna reveals that her father also reprimanded her for asserting that Mathew is homosexual. Omana's lawyer asserts that eighty percent of homosexual individuals are married to heterosexual men and are compelled to live a heterosexual life. Mathew states that, intellectually, he agrees with homosexuality, acknowledging it as human nature and normal, though he admits that he lacks comprehensive knowledge about it.

In *Jezebel*, Jerome's accused lover, Avinash, vehemently denies his sexual identity when Jezebel expresses her ideological views to him, Avinash, my problem is not that you are gay. I don't consider it either a crime or a weakness. My problem with you is that because of your cowardice and Jerome's, my life got ruined as well. My problem is that you were not only able to ruin another person's life but also felt no remorse about it. How have I wronged you? How had I wronged Jerome? Was denying me the life I wanted to live the answer to society not allowing you to live the life you wanted? (Meera 309).

Avinash's response underscores the heightened intensity of marginalisation faced by non-binary genders and the societal pressures they endure: "Don't talk rubbish," he said weakly. Who made up these stories? Jerome is a brother to me. How dare you tarnish our relationship like this? I understand your hatred for Jerome. But don't make up such stories about anyone. God will punish you?" (Meera 309). Avinash's reactions towards Jezebel, in which he vehemently denies his identity, clearly illustrate the extent of his suppression within a gender binary-based society. As a result, he assumes an entirely different persona.

The pressures of conforming to heteronormative standards not only limit their individual agency but also subject them to societal stigma and ostracisation. These systemic barriers perpetuate a

cycle of marginalisation, excluding individuals like Jerome and Mathew from full participation in society because they deviate from dominant norms of gender and sexuality. Consequently, Jerome and Mathew navigate a persistent tension between their authentic identities and the normative expectations imposed by society. This conflict between identity and conformity underscores the profound impact of heteronormativity on individuals' lives, highlighting the need for societal transformation towards greater inclusivity and acceptance of diverse gender and sexual identities. Avinash justifies to Jezebel the reasons for concealing their relationship and sexual identity, citing their clear understanding of society's negative attitude toward homosexuality,

How could we have told you? How would you all have responded? Would you have accepted us? Blessed us? You would have stoned us! Killed us! We would have lost all the respect, regard and love that we had received as doctors. Knowing all this, how could we risk it? We had no option but to pretend. Even now, we have no other way. Not because we want to, but because this world is like this. He choked back tears (Meera 311).

Avinash's confession to Jezebel reveals that even one's own family, including one's mother, might not accept their children's sexual orientation, as they are products of a patriarchal society: "My mother just died. But I have wished her dead for such a long time. I was scared of how she would bear it if ever she got to know the truth about me" (Meera 311). Avinash explains the hardships, predicaments, and marginalisation he faced in life when he attempted to live with Jerome

Avinash further conveys the social surveillance and violence he encountered when he attempted to live with Jerome:

America was our dreamland. We have lived in many cities in India. We tried to rent a house as two doctors and live without bothering anyone. But it wasn't easy. There was always someone to

gate-crash into a house where two men lived together. Once, a colleague of ours came to stay with us for a week. He caught us in bed together one day. There was a great furore afterwards. He went and told everyone. People came to beat us up. We had to move to another city because we could no longer live there (Meera 311).

According to social constructivist theory, knowledge and meaning are produced through social interactions and cultural practices rather than existing independently. This perspective challenges conventional claims of objective truth, including the gender binary, which is often taken for granted. Social constructivism holds that our perceptions of “reality” are products of social construction and emphasises the role of critical thinking in shaping our understanding of knowledge and reality. Social constructivism asserts that our ideas and understandings are deeply shaped by religious and cultural contexts. Such influences frequently lack a rigorous epistemological foundation, resulting in knowledge being formed through dominant cultural norms rather than through critical, methodical inquiry.

When analysing the female characters, it becomes apparent that both are subjected to societal pressures surrounding gender binary roles, compelling them to conform to heterosexual norms. However, within the male leading characters, Jerome is portrayed differently from Mathew Devassy. Jerome resorts to tormenting his wife as a means to conceal the complexity of his sexuality, while, conversely, Mathew maintains a positive relationship with his wife.

A significant number of non-binary individuals experience marginalisation and are compelled to conform to dominant heteronormative norms across societies, including within the context of India. The characters portrayed in this film and novel serve as representations of such individuals, highlighting the struggles and challenges they encounter in navigating societal expectations and norms regarding gender and sexuality. Through their narratives, the film and novel shed light on

the pervasive nature of heteronormativity and its impact on the lived experiences of non-binary individuals, thereby contributing to a broader discourse on gender diversity and social justice. In the movie, Mathew spends a significant portion of his life conforming to the societal expectation of heterosexuality, leading to a sense of oppression. Despite this suppression, he forms familial bonds and demonstrates affection towards his wife. In contrast, Jerome in the novel does not undergo a similar sacrifice of his life as Mathew does.

In the cinema, Mathew spends a significant portion of his life conforming to the societal expectation of heterosexuality, leading to a sense of oppression. Despite this suppression, he forms familial bonds and demonstrates affection towards his wife. In contrast, Jerome in the novel does not undergo a similar sacrifice of his life as Mathew does. Jerome is portrayed as a conventional patriarchal husband who exercises control over his wife, thereby enjoying the privileges associated with his male identity.

In Meera's novel, the central character, Jezebel grapples with various forms of suppression entrenched within a hegemonic societal framework. Throughout the narrative, she confronts the pervasive constraints imposed by traditional gender roles and the rigid binary constructs prevalent in society. These systemic barriers not only hinder her autonomy but also contribute to the stigma and societal ostracisation she endures, ultimately leading her life into a state of predicament.

In addition to the prevailing patriarchal hegemony, Jezebel emerges as an indirect victim of homophobia and the enforcement of compulsory heteronormativity, a consequence of societal expectations placed upon her husband. Upon observation, Jerome George, despite being part of a gender minority as a homosexual male, is still perceived as privileged due to his male identity. However, his journey is complex due to societal expectations, as he navigates his sexuality while upholding a facade of heterosexuality within his marriage. In the context of a patriarchal marital

setting, women often face significant pressure regarding sexual relations, a reality exacerbated by the prevalence of marital rape within our society. In the novel, Jezebel refrains from coercing her husband into physical intimacy and instead expresses her dissatisfaction. However, it is worth considering that if Jezebel were homosexual, the situation would likely deteriorate further.

The primary motivation behind forcing heterosexuality on people is homophobia, which is still a widespread problem in modern culture. Even with progress made in many areas, homosexuality is still prohibited and criminalised in many nations. Even amid legal and social progress in certain regions, homosexuality continues to be criminalised in a substantial number of nations, particularly within the Commonwealth, where colonial-era laws remain in force (Arimoro 380). Characters that represent the victims of a homophobic society are Matthew, Jerome, Avinash, Omana, and Jezebel. These representations refute assertions that homosexuality endangers social structures or causes the extinction of the human race by highlighting the negative impact of such cultural ideas on social order. In summary, both Meera's novel and Jeo Baby's film engage with gender subjectivity, challenging norms and shedding light on the complexities of identity.

Similarities and Differences

K. R. Meera's *Jezebel* and Jeo Baby's *Kaadhal – The Core* offer compelling explorations of gender dynamics within Kerala society, each utilising its distinct narrative medium to interrogate entrenched norms. Both works portray strikingly similar emotions, circumstances, rationales, challenges, advantages, and gender dynamics, underscoring the universality of these themes despite their differing formats. Central characters such as Matthew in *Kaadhal – The Core* and Jezebel in *Jezebel* struggle against societal pressures to conform to heteronormative standards, revealing the hardships they endure for identity, existence, and survival.

These narratives delve deeply into the complexities of prevailing social constructions, particularly those surrounding gender and sexuality. Set within a patriarchal context, both stories prominently feature female protagonists who navigate the intricate tensions between personal desire and societal expectation, challenging long-standing norms that restrict women's autonomy and freedom of expression. Together, Meera's novel and Baby's film illuminate the nuances of gender relations while prompting reflection on broader issues of identity, power, and resilience in contemporary Kerala.

One of the primary distinctions between *Jezebel* by K. R. Meera and *Kaadhal – The Core* by Jeo Baby lies in their respective mediums—literature and cinema—which significantly influence narrative style, characterisation, and audience engagement. The novel offers a nuanced and layered narrative, delving into the inner thoughts and emotions of its protagonist, Jezebel, through rich prose and non-linear storytelling. In contrast, the film relies on visual storytelling, dialogue, cinematography, and sound to communicate its themes, presenting a linear plot structure centred around Matthew, a male character grappling with societal pressures. While *Jezebel* begins at a dramatic juncture in family court, the film unfolds chronologically, enhancing viewer empathy through real-time developments. Despite these differences, both works depict the shared struggles of individuals, heterosexual and homosexual alike, who face oppression under forced heteronormativity. The film evokes immediate emotional resonance through visual elements, whereas the novel provides a more expansive exploration of themes and subtexts, encouraging introspective engagement. Ultimately, both mediums portray the difficulties of survival and identity under patriarchal and heteronormative societal norms, each offering a distinct yet complementary lens into the lived realities of gender and sexuality in Kerala.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Jezebel* and *Kaadhal – The Core* stand as significant cultural texts that confront and critique the deeply rooted heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks of Kerala society. Through their distinct narrative approaches—one through introspective literary depth and the other through evocative visual storytelling—both works amplify marginalised voices and offer critical insights into the lived experiences of individuals navigating gendered expectations. By drawing attention to the emotional, psychological, and societal consequences of enforced conformity, they encourage dialogue on identity, resistance, and social change. Together, Meera's novel and Baby's film not only challenge normative paradigms but also inspire a reimagining of more inclusive and equitable social narratives in contemporary Kerala. *Jezebel* and *Kaadhal-The Core* offer valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of heteronormativity in Kerala. While *Jezebel* focuses on the oppression of women within heterosexual marriage, *Kaadhal-The Core* highlights the challenges faced by same-sex couples in a heteronormative society. Together, these works provide a powerful critique of the pervasive norms that privilege heterosexuality and traditional gender roles, and they underscore the urgent need for social change. They also contribute to a growing body of work that challenges dominant narratives and creates space for marginalised voices and experiences. Future research can analyse how regional cinema continues to transgress or perpetuate dominant ideologies, particularly in conservative societies. Finally, this paper adds to the discourse on gender and sexuality in Kerala, India, highlighting the need for greater acceptance, representation, and legal reform. Through such stories, media and literature can be effective advocacy tools, leading to a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Works Cited:

Arimoro, Augustine Edobor. "Interrogating the Criminalisation of Same-Sex Sexual Activity: A Study of Commonwealth Africa." *Liverpool Law Review*, vol. 42, 2021, pp. 379–99, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10991-021-09280-5>.

Baby, Jeo, director. *Kaathal – The Core*. Wayfarer Films, 2023.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed., Allen & Unwin, 2020.

Cramer, Elizabeth P. "Addressing Homophobia and Heterosexism on College Campuses." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2002.

Economic and Political Weekly. "Review of Women's Studies." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 49, no. 17, 26 Apr. 2014, pp. 70–78.

Freud, Anna. *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*. Translated by Cecil Baines, Routledge, 2018.

Gamble, Sarah. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. Routledge, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203011010>.

Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Harper, 2015.

Krishna, P. S. "United by Love, 'Divided' by Law." *The New Indian Express*, 13 Oct. 2022, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/kochi/2022/oct/13/united-by-lovedivided-by-law-2507467.html>.

McDonough, Maureen K., and Kelly Rogers. "Reaction Formation." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/science/reaction-formation>.

Meera, K. R. *Jezebel*. Penguin Hamish Hamilton, 2022.

Pillai, M. T. "Voicing Women's Silences." *The Hindu*, 14 June 2018, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/kr-meeras-sooryane-aninja-oru-sthree-turns-around-the-story-of-jezebel/article24143397.ece>.

Plumas, Camille, et al. "The Relation between Internalised Homophobia, Coping, and Psychological Distress in French Gay Men." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 2024, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2024.2386944>.

Poornima, R. "Visibility and Social Acceptability of Kerala's Transgender Population: A Comparative Study of the Periods Before and After the Transgender Policy." *Journal of Polity and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021, <https://journalspoliticalscience.com/index.php/i/article/view/84/56>.

Pinker, Steven. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*. Penguin Books, 2002.

Purdue University. "Introduction to Judith Butler." *College of Liberal Arts*, Purdue University, <https://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/genderandsex/modules/butlrgendersexmainframe.html>. Accessed 5 Sept. 2024.

Sabu, M. “Denial of Female Subjectivity in K. R. Meera’s *Meerayude Novellakal*.” *JCIRAS*, vol. 2, no. 10, 2020, pp. 6–10.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Epistemology of the Closet*. University of California Press, 1990.

Sudhi, K. S. “Happily Ever After: Celebrating Kerala’s Same-Sex Marriages.” *The Hindu*, 28 Nov. 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/getting-married-post>.

Tharayil, Muraleedharan. “Shifting Paradigms: Gender and Sexuality Debates in Kerala.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 49, no. 17, 26 Apr. 2014, pp. 70–78.

Warner, Michael. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Wikipedia contributors. “Judith Butler.” *Wikipedia*, 15 Aug. 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Butler.

Wikipedia contributors. “K. R. Meera.” *Wikipedia*, 30 June 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K._R._Meera.

Wikipedia contributors. “Kaathal – The Core.” *Wikipedia*, 8 Sept. 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaathal_%E2%80%93_The_Core.