

Abjection and Intersecting Trans Women Identities: Examining “Doing Gender” through Malayalam¹ Movies *Ardhanaari* and *Njan Marykutty*

Examinando “hacer género” a través de
las películas en malayalam *Ardhanaari* y
Njan Marykutty

*Abjeção e Identidades de Mulheres
Trans Interseccionadas: Examinando
“Fazendo Gênero” através dos Filmes
em Malayalam *Ardhanaari* e
*Njan Marykutty**

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The non-confirmation to vexed societal gender norms places trans identities in an abjected state. Media, mainly cinema, plays an indispensable role in shaping, shunning, and promulgating such ideologies. To understand this discourse, the Malayalam films *Ardhanaari* (2015) and *Njan Marykutty* (2018) are taken to examine the question of “abjection”, a concept by Kristeva, and “doing gender”, by West and Zimmerman. The study argues that the abjection trans identities face forces them to perform their gender in accordance with cisnormative femininity. The study further argues that trans identities should embrace abjection and employ it as a political tool to disrupt the established hegemonic traditional gender structure and its definitions.

KEYWORDS: Abjection, cinema, identity, gender, trans women.

*La no confirmación de las controvertidas normas sociales de género coloca a las identidades trans en un estado de abyección. Los medios de comunicación, principalmente el cine, juegan un papel indispensable en la formación, el rechazo y la promulgación de tales ideologías. Para comprender este discurso, se toman las películas en malayalam *Ardhanaari* (2015) y *Njan Marykutty* (2018) para examinar la cuestión de la “abyección”, concepto de Kristeva, y “hacer género”, de West y Zimmerman. El estudio argumenta que la abyección que enfrentan las identidades trans las obliga a interpretar su género de acuerdo con la feminidad cisnormativa. El estudio argumenta, además, que las identidades trans deben abrazar la abyección y emplearla como una herramienta política para alterar la estructura de género tradicional hegemónica establecida y sus definiciones.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: Abyección, cine, identidad, género, mujeres trans.

*A não confirmação de normas sociais de gênero controversas coloca as identidades trans em um estado abjeto. A mídia, principalmente o cinema, desempenha um papel indispensável em moldar, evitar e promulgar tais ideologias. Para entender esse discurso, os filmes Malayalam *Ardhanaari* (2015) e *Njan Marykutty* (2018) são levados para examinar a questão da “abjeção”, um conceito de Kristeva, e “fazer gênero”, de West e Zimmerman. O estudo argumenta que a abjeção enfrentada pelas identidades trans as obriga a performar seu gênero de acordo com a feminilidade cisnormativa. O estudo argumenta ainda que as identidades trans devem abraçar a abjeção e empregá-la como uma ferramenta política para romper a estrutura de gênero tradicional hegemônica estabelecida e suas definições.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Abjeção, cinema, identidade, gênero, mulheres trans.

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INTRODUCTION

The terms “sex” and “gender”, which form the basis of understanding sexualities, are not synonymous but are often used interchangeably. As Ann Oakley notes in *Sex, Gender and Society*, one of the very first works that directly addressed the concept of gender, sex is determined by biological factors like genitalia and primary markers at birth, while gender is culturally constructed (Oakley, 1985). Butler (1990), through her work *Gender Trouble*, further explains the concepts of sex and gender. While she agrees with the idea of gender being culturally constructed, she adds that gender is a performance, an act, that is repeated to satisfy the gender norms that are established in our patriarchal society. Sex, Butler opinions, is not essential and natural but is culturally constructed like gender, and “perhaps it was always already gender with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (p.10), thereby doing away with the differences that exist within sex and gender.

Gender and sexuality “exists within the discourses of power” (Nayar, 2017, p. 255). These power structures result in ingraining the hierarchies and binaries of gender and sexuality within our society, resulting in the othering of gender variants and individuals with alternative sexualities. These gender variants and individuals with alternative sexualities form a part of a more extensive community, the LGBTQ+ community or the queer community.

The term “queer”, first proposed by Teresa de Lauretis at a conference at the University of California, refers to individuals who do not conform to the gendered norms and practices followed in our patriarchal society (Ghosh, 2020). The queer community includes a plethora of identities that exist beyond the social order of binary gendered framework -trans identities, female masculine identities, lesbians, gays, etc. Trans identities are the primary focus of this study, and it is often used as an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth and they differ from the traditional gender binary notions that exist in our patriarchal society (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). As Halberstam (2018) rightly states, transgender “names a wide array of bodies with varying relations to cross-gender identification”

(p. 27). From time immemorial, the individuals of the “transgender” community have been widely misinterpreted and discriminated against. The understanding of the transgender identity and activism associated with this gender variant identity is different and unique for South Asian countries, especially India. Therefore, as Dutta and Roy (2014) rightly state, we cannot look upon the transgender identities in South Asia as merely “local expressions of transgender identity” (p. 320). There arises a need to closely analyze the life and culture of the transgender community in India.

In an Indian context, trans identities took up the part of royal bodyguards, advisors, and messengers to kings (Penrose, 2001). Transgender people also played a significant role in the *harems*, which housed the queen and other women either belonging to or working in the royal household. The change in the position of the transgender individuals in India worsened after the colonization (Hinchy, 2014), with the coming up of the Britishers who followed a binary gender system and normalized heterosexuality. Hinchy (2019) draws in detail how colonial powers attempted to erase the existence of *hijra*⁴ identities from the socio-cultural and political spheres of Indian society through her work *Governing Gender and Sexuality in Colonial India: The Hijra, c.1850-1900*. In colonial rules, alternative sexualities and identities were considered as “criminal castes”, and implemented laws that criminalized any form of sexual and gender variations other than the accepted binaries of males and females. *Hijras* during the 1850s and 1860s were considered widely as kidnappers, and infamous for enslaving and castrating children, thereby posing a threat to the social and political order (Hinchy, 2019). Britishers outlawed any deviations from binary gender with the establishment of Section 377 of Indian Penal Code (IPC). Though the section was decriminalized in India in 2018 by the Honorable Supreme Court of India, the LGBTQ+ community, including the transgender individuals, continues to exist as a despised group in India and is a continuous target of violence.

⁴ For most part of India, “*hijras* are phenotypic men who wear female clothing and, ideally, renounce sexual desire and practice by undergoing a sacrificial emasculation—that is, an excision of the penis and testicles—dedicated to the goddess Bedhraj Mata” (Reddy, 2006, p.2).

Gender, as it is performed in the patriarchal society, is a result of the interactions. It is a “social doing” (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.129), and the meaning of gender is formed through human actions and how individuals do gender. “The only physical characteristics that can play a role in gender attribution in everyday life are those that are visible” (Kessler & McKenna, 1978, p.76). West and Zimmerman (1987) put forth a similar opinion in their work “Doing Gender”. Therefore, implicit criteria like physical appearance, behavioral patterns, interactions with people, and situations around are taken into consideration for “gender attribution” (Kessler & McKenna, p. 2) or “sex categorization” (West & Zimmerman, p. 127). In our patriarchal society, individuals are placed into the heteronormative gender binary frameworks of male and female primarily based on how they do their gender.

West and Zimmerman (1987) define “doing gender” as a complex phenomenon that involves “socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine natures” (p. 126). Individuals recurrently do gender in coherence with societal interactions and expectations, reestablishing the gender binary frameworks established within our society. If “doing gender” by any individual does not fit into the masculine and feminine frameworks, they are othered and considered an outcast. Otherness or othering is the process of creating two hierarchical groups –them and us. As Staszak (2009) rightly agrees, others are constructed due to the presence of the stereotypes that are culturally created and established in the society and also because of the power structures that are existent in our patriarchal society. It leads to the creation of the dominant group self and the dominated group, others who become the potential sites for discrimination. Abjection introduced by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* is “fears and fantasies dominating the cultural imaginary regarding anything which threatens the stability of symbolic order” (Kumar, 2021, p.4). Both the terms abjection and othering are mostly used synonymously in current academic scenarios and this study also uses these terms interchangeably.

The primary texts chosen for this study are Malayalam movies from Kerala,⁵ *Ardhanaari* (2012) and *Njan Marykutty* (2018), both featuring

⁵ A state in the South-West of the Indian subcontinent.

transwoman identities as protagonists. Both the primary movies are visual texts that were released in the 21st century and therefore provides us with a representation of trans identities in Kerala's society during the same time frame. Also, these regional cinema acts as a representative of the culture and traditions that are followed by the transgender communities and the society by large. Both movies were released after the census of 2011, conducted in India, which was the very first census to incorporate the number of transgender populations in the country. Transgender identities that were primarily employed for comic relief or as characters of less importance in Malayalam cinema underwent a paradigm shift with the release of these two movies. Therefore, a close analysis of these two contemporary movies becomes inevitable. Both the films selected for the analysis serve as social artifacts that convey to us the space and position of transgender identities in Kerala, thereby making the study relevant.

The aim of a qualitative research is to identify the underlying meanings and patterns (Babbie, 2007). As both the primary sources chosen for the study are visual texts, visual methodologies are employed to arrive at a conclusion for this study. By considering film as the text, this qualitative research conducts a textual analysis and discourse analysis of the primary texts, to understand the underlying meaning and patterns in these visual texts and to analyze how transwoman characters are represented in these texts. Textual analysis is used to identify the messages that are encoded into the text and decode their meanings (Hartley, 2002) and to deconstruct the narrative conventions employed in the text. The methodology of discourse analysis which is also employed in this study, analyses and studies these visual texts to understand how trans identities and the knowledge regarding them is shaped in this society. The analysis of the text was done by closely studying the characters, conversations, situations that occurred in the films and the study aims to explore how the values, conventions and beliefs of the patriarchal society influences the life of the transwoman identities in the chosen movies.

By employing the critical theory approach, this qualitative study examines the representation of trans identities in the primary visual texts through the theoretical frameworks of "abjection" and "doing

gender”, the concepts introduced by theorists Kristeva (1982a) in her work *Powers of Horror* and West and Zimmerman (1987) in their work “Doing Gender”, respectively. The study investigates the “abjection” that trans women protagonists face in these visual texts because of their gender identity and their method of “doing gender”. As media, especially cinematic representations reflect the functioning of society and its structures which have played an indispensable role in shaping, shunning, and promulgating either heteronormative or subversive notions among individuals, the study becomes more relevant and it aids in comprehending the masses’ pulse.

VISUAL CULTURE AND TRANS REPRESENTATION IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

Visual media such as cinema and OTT platforms reflect society and its structures. Popular media acts as a very influencing power structure that is “primarily responsible for our perceptions of day-to-day norms and reality” (Infante et al., 1997, p. 383). The way social groups are treated in cultural representations has a significant impact on the real life of people (Dyer, 2002). Media acts as a very influencing power structure that builds and shapes ideologies among the public. The media was and is responsible for ingraining stringent and conventional binary notions of gendered frameworks among the masses, thereby shunning the trans identities and targeting violence towards them due to their non-normative gender expression. Among media, cinema functions as the most influential medium that shapes individuals’ social, cultural, and political ideologies. As rightly argued in the book *Literary and Cultural Theory* by Rivkin and Ryan (2017) film genres are mental structures that integrate sensations, emotions and actions, activating the viewer’s body and mind (Ritvin and Ryan, 2017). Its effect on people and society is noticeably more than the notions proliferated through oral or written history, myths, etc. Films have a method of injecting and shaping ideologies into the mind of its viewers (Singh & Khattri, 2021), and it acts as a means of transformation of the individuals and society (Kubrak, 2020).

Often in Indian cinema, transgender individuals have been presented as sex workers, beggars, criminals, or are employed to provide comic relief in situations. They are picturized as individuals who are dressed in hyperfeminine sartorial style and boisterous body language. Such tarnished representations put the identities of trans individuals unprotected and vulnerable. Kerala is a state that 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-Maruthur, 2011, p.4); media plays an indispensable role in shaping and reshaping the mindset of individuals. Therefore, the tarnished representations of trans identities in cinema put the identities in an unprotected and vulnerable space.

The representations of trans identities in Malayalam cinema have been few, and even among them, one can trace a majority of wrongful representations of the community. In the movie *Soothradharan* (Lohitadas, 2001), actor Salim Kumar dresses up like a hijra (trans woman) and lives among them to earn a living. Through this movie, the community is represented as inauthentic, wherein an individual takes resort to demeaning jobs to acquire a livelihood. Another film, *Chanthupottu*, directed by Lal Jose (2005), has its lead protagonist as a transwoman, but the movie falsely represents a trans identity. The story is about a man who has been brought up as a woman, thereby imbibing feminine characteristics. He doesn't identify as a trans individual. Yet, the protagonist is represented as a trans identity in the movie. Movies such as *Salt and Pepper* by Abu (2011) stereotype transgender people as dance teachers or those who are employed in beauty parlors. Thus, despite the transgender community in Kerala being employed, educated, involved in respectable jobs, and striving to create a social space for them in society, the cinematic representation of this community is as often individuals who do undignified jobs, as individuals who are to be laughed and mocked at, marginalized and pathologized. A transition from such representations can be seen in the movies, *Ardhanaari*, released in 2015, and *Njan Marykutty*, released in 2018, which are the primary texts chosen for this study.

The movie *Ardhanaari*, directed by Souparnika (2012), reflects on the life of Vinayan, a transwoman. She is ridiculed and considered an

outcast by society and her family. She leaves her family and finds shelter among the people of her community who live together in a *gharana*.⁶ Along with the portrayal of the *hijra* culture and practices, the movie also rightly brings forth the pathetic condition of trans-identified individuals in our society, the violence and inhuman practices towards them due to their gender expression. The film also rightly picturizes the stigma and trauma that a trans-identified woman undergoes.

The second primary source for this study, *Njan Marykutty*, directed by Sankar (2018), is the first movie from the Malayalam film industry that treated a transgender character with dignity. Mathukutty, the protagonist, born as a male, embodies the female gender and transitions to Marykutty. The movie is primarily about Marykutty's plight as a transgender individual and her fight to earn a job in the Kerala police force. Later, she becomes the first transwoman in the Kerala police force through her hard work and perseverance -a proud moment for everyone, especially Marykutty herself. The film, through Marykutty, also portrays the other challenges that a transwoman faces in her life.

THE ABJECTED TRANS WOMEN IDENTITIES

In critical theory, abjection is perceived as a procedure of casting away individuals, identities, things, or situations that do not conform to the cultural and societal rules and regulations. Kristeva (1982) primarily deals with this critical theory in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. According to her, abjection is a defense mechanism that "ensures that what is unacceptable to the conscious mind, and would if recalled arouse anxiety, is prevented from entering into it" (Gregory, 2004, p. 803). Thereby, anything that disrupts the social order and the established boundaries in our patriarchal society is socially discriminated against and viewed with repulsion, aversion, and fear. Kumar (2021) describes abject as:

The abject does not exist as the subject but as the subjects' perpetual other; as it threatens symbolic order; it evokes a psychological disgust- a guttural

⁶ The *hijra* household.

and aversive emotion with a sickening feeling of revulsion, loathing or nausea. For those being reduced to abjection, abjection is not a psychic process but more of a social experience; the stigmatizing effect of disgust are directed toward persons or groups perceived as abject (p.4).

The abject occupies a space where “the meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982a, p.2) and does not create an equilibrium. The abjectivity is therefore welcomed with a revolt. This becomes an interactive process by which the existence of the self is protected by rejecting anything and everything that “does not respect borders, positions and rules” (Kristeva, 1982a, p.4).

In a heteronormative patriarchal society, gender is put on a pedestal that focuses on “consensus, stability and continuity” (Stacey & Thorne, 1985, p. 307). The deconstruction of this established framework is a tedious task because of “a general assumption that people choose to maintain existing customs” (Connell, 1985, p. 263). Therefore, within our society that strongly believes in the binary gender structure, any form of variation is seen as an abject, and therefore pathologized, and persecuted. As trans identities refuse to adhere to the binary gender frameworks, they are seen as something that “disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva, 1982a, p. 4) and are viewed with a phobia which “does not necessarily imply the fear of trans people, but simply any negative attitudes (hatred, loathing, rage or moral indignation) harboured toward trans people on the basis of our enactments of gender” (Bettcher, 2007, p.46). The protagonists of the movies *Ardhanaari* and *Njan Marykutty*, both of whom identify their gender to be trans women, are considered as dirt and pollutants which shakes the balance and threaten the boundaries established within our society. Therefore, they are abjected and are socially stigmatized. They are considered filthy and impure and are turned away from by their family members and society. Both characters are born and brought up in patriarchal households with a strong belief in the normative gender binary structures. When they grow up to challenge this established social stratum, they are abjected and subjected to repression.

In *Ardhanaari*, one can see that Manjula’s elder brother brutally beats her up as he believes that she brings ignominy to him and their

family (Souparnika, 2012, 13:00). His disgust towards Manjula is so intense and passionate that he even goes to the extent of arranging for a political friend of his to kill her (Souparnika, 18:00). Transwomen in real life also often encounter such violent treatment in the domestic and public spaces. In *Njan Marykutty* also, one can witness the abjection of the family towards Marykutty. Both her sister and father refuse to maintain a relationship with her and refuse to recognize her. She is identified as the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite (Kristeva, 1982a). This ambiguous nature of Marykutty results in her being secluded from her family. Both her sister and father evidently convey to her that they are ashamed of her. They both sever all their relationships with her, and her father even tells her that he wished she was dead due to the humiliation he had to face because of her from various parts of the society (Souparnika, 1:03:00). They both fail to realize the disgrace and social deprivation that Marykutty has to go through and hardly empathize with her. In fact, they themselves only add to the abjection that she faces.

The society also treats both Manjula and Marykutty as outcasts and looks at them with fear and aversion. They are “kept permanently at a distance” (Kristeva, 1982b, p. 127) so that the accepted identities in our society can live peacefully. They do not accept them and despise them due to their non-conformity to the normative gendered structure. This despise that is targeted towards the trans identities are rightly defined by Tyler as “urgent, guttural and aversive emotion, associated with sickening feelings of revulsion, loathing or nausea” (Tyler, 2013, p. 20). Various instances of abjection from society are visibly picturized through these movies. In *Ardhanaari*, we see Manjula being advised in a stern tone by her teacher in school not to dress up like a girl and be like a man. Her classmates also made her fun due to her dressing and behaviors, which were in tandem with femininity. This abjection that Manjula faced from her family and her society forced her to migrate to another place and search for people with similar gender identities.

The approach of humankind towards Marykutty was also no less different. The public demanded her to be banned from the church as they believe her to negatively influence others, especially children (Sankar, 2018, 9:00). This attitude of the people is because trans identities are

considered as something that opposes the cultural consensus, something that is treacherous, and something from which there is a need to be protected. Therefore, the so-called people whose aim in life is to ensure the welfare of the individuals in our society rejects an individual who identifies herself as a transwoman. They dismissed her existence and constantly humiliated her physically, mentally, and emotionally. In both the movies that are taken as primary sources for this research, we see the transwoman identities being called derogatory terms like “*ombathu*”⁷ and often addressed using wrong pronouns. In *Njan Marykutty*, Marykutty is even disrobed in public by these anti-social forces who consider her to be a threat and a reason for polluting the society. The brutal truth is that, when this atrocity was targeted towards her by two men, the people or the public who gathered around merely remained as mute spectators of this inhumane act and even filmed it on their mobile phones (Sankar, 54:03-55:46), thus taking part in this barbaric act.

The abjection and violence by the police force is another challenge that is faced by trans women identities. The police force, whose purpose is to maintain law and order in society, treats the transwoman identities in these movies as filth or dirt. They deeply believe that this varied gender identity disturbs the consensus that is present within our community, which underpins social order (Kristeva, 1982a). In *Ardhanaari*, one can witness Manjula being verbally, physically, and mentally tortured by the police when she returns home after years to see her dying father (Souparnika, 2012, 1:18:00). The contemptible behavior of the police force towards trans identities is more evidently seen in *Njan Marykutty*, where the antagonist in the movie is Kunjipalu, a police officer himself who is a sexist and a true representative of a patriarchal heteronormative society and its stringent notions. Kunjipalu poses many obstacles in the life of Marykutty because of her gender identity. He never let go of any opportunity to insult her and believes that it would be a disgrace to the entire police force if “someone like her” joined the police force (Sankar, 2018, 1:01:00). He sent a negative report about her to his higher officials to prevent this, which led to the PSC canceling

⁷ A derogatory term used in South India to address gender variant identities.

her eligibility to appear for the selection process. The vicious nature of Kunjipalu and other police officers in his station is again revealed when they refuse to help Marykutty when the public attacks her. They, in turn, turned the whole narrative and constructed a new one in which they stated that Marykutty was doing immoral activities and forcefully took her friend's daughter along with her for immoral activities. They forcefully undressed her and enjoyed the humiliation that Marykutty had to go through with an evil smile (Sankar, 55:46-1:02:00). Her modesty was repeatedly compromised in front of these barbarous individuals. She was deprived of her dignity and her basic human rights. She was treated as a filth -as a dirt- as an abject.

The abjected transwoman identities in these two movies are seen as a threat to the self. It is viewed as something that forces the self to be in a state of helplessness. It is seen as something that questions the existence and legitimacy of the self. The trans identities, despite being the unwelcomed entities in our society, cannot be erased completely but can only be pushed across the borders. This is because the presence of an abject is mandatory to legitimize the existence of the self. The presence of gender variants like Manjula and Marykutty legitimizes the binary gender structure that is being followed in our society. It results in the formation of a dominant ideology that is considered normative and therefore enforced in the society.

As Butler (1993) rightly conveys, the abject occupies "those "unlivable" and "uninhabitable" zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (p.3). Butler clearly conveys the interdependence of the abject and the subject, and therefore it becomes clear that the abjects cannot be completely removed from the social framework. To help the self and to give the self a better meaningful position, the transwoman identities that exist as an opposition to the self are pushed to a state of misery. They are pushed into a liminal space. The society -which includes the family, police, and other power structures-, propel the transwoman from the body and tries to deposit it somewhere across the imaginary border that exists between the "self and that which threatens the self" (Creed, 1986, p. 65). Society

ensures that there exists a gap between the subject and the abject and this gap is something that cannot be assimilated (Kristeva, 1982b). Therefore, the abject, including Manjula and Marykutty, is and will always be treated with disgust, aversion, and fear in a heteronormative society.

Abjection is immoral and devious and is like a “smiling hatred” (Kristeva, 1982b, p. 128). The physical, mental, and emotional abuse that both Manjula and Marykutty have to go through due to the terrifying experiences that they go through is far more than anyone can even imagine. They are placed at a much lower marginalized position than the ‘accepted marginals’. The dystopian narrative that is spread about the transwoman identities, of them being transgressors of the gender structure in the society, results in them being treated with fear. The helplessness, pain, and suffering that these transwomen identities have to go through are aftereffects of the inhuman abjection that they face is very intricately portrayed through these movies. Though the society justifies this abjection by stating that the uncanniness of these identities results in the abjection, the truth is that the society does not try to truly understand and alleviate this uncanniness.

“DOING GENDER” BY TRANS WOMAN PROTAGONISTS

In sociology, the self is defined as something that is formed as a result of social interactions and not a product of individuality. Similarly, through their concept of “doing gender”, West and Zimmerman (1987) conveyed that gender is done based on societal and other external factors. They try to establish that gender is a recurring phenomenon that is influenced by social interactions and expectations. Thereby, they reject the ideas put forward by biological determinists and essentialists, who believed gender to be innate and biological.

Gender has today become a social phenomenon that legitimizes “the most fundamental divisions in society” (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126), male and female. The expression of gender is unequivocally dependent on the sex of an individual. Gender, which forms the base for the identity formation of an individual is performed through “perfunctory, conventionalized acts” (Goffman, 1976,

p. 69). Individuals assigned male and female sex during birth often do gender in correlation with their sex by adhering to the cisnormative principles of the society. Transgender individuals, being a gender-variant community of individuals, are ideally “undoing gender”. They are conveying through their gender identity that gender is unstable and exists as a spectrum, which includes many other variants. But one can notice that the trans female protagonists in *Ardhanaari* and *Njan Marykutty* are not “undoing gender” but “doing gender” in such a way, to fit into the cisnormative gender structure.

Manjula and Marykutty display their gender through the conventionalized methods correlating with the cisnormative gender framework of which they aim to be a part. In *Ardhanaari*, though Manjula remains a hijra and never comes out as a woman, she and other hijras overtly try to act in accordance with stereotypical feminine behaviors. In *Njan Marykutty*, though Marykutty claims and proclaims loudly many times in the movie that she is a transsexual, it is seen that her efforts are to not appear as a trans identity but to pass as a woman. The interactions that Manjula and Marykutty have with the heteronormative society force them to reinforce their gender incoherence to the cisnormative feminine gender structure. As Goffman (1976) theorizes in “Gender Display” , humans in the patriarchal society assume that each individual has an essential nature which is expressed through “natural signs given off or expressed by them” (p. 75). The essential nature of these transwoman protagonists consciously or unconsciously establishes and sustains their gender by conforming to the socially mandated gender display practices that secure their membership in one or the other category, in this case, into the female category.

Manjula and Marykutty do their gender through various aspects –through their appearance, behavioral patterns, and much more–satisfying the cultural, social, and political perspectives regarding gender in our patriarchal society. The very fact that both these characters changed their name to a feminine noun, acts as the very first indicator of their “doing gender” in a cisnormative feminine manner. In *Ardhanaari*, the protagonist takes the name Manjula while in *Njan Marykutty* the protagonist changes her name from Mathukutty to Marykutty.

The gender transformation that these characters undergo also abides by the feminine physical appearance. Studies show that transgender beauty standards are highly influenced by the cisnormative beauty standards (Monteiro & Poulakis, 2019). Manjula and Marykutty also get regulated by these cisnormative beauty standards and try to change their physical appearances accordingly. In *Ardhanaari* we see that the character of Manjula undergoes a physical transformation to become a woman by following the traditions and customs of the hijra community. She had started to wear *kajal*⁸, nail polish and even adorned her hair with jasmine flowers following the conventionalized gender performative methods followed by the feminine gender right from a very young age (Souparnika, 2012, 4:06). Even after becoming an adult, she continues to adorn herself just like a female. Her choice of clothes is also very feminine. As a young child, she preferred to wear “petticoat” and switched to sarees and long *kurtas*⁹ as an adult. She also grows her hair, which is considered a feminine physical characteristic. To free herself from the inferiority of having a flat chest, she incorporates methods (non-medical), to forge the presence of breasts like women.

Marykutty also gives importance to her appearance and starts wearing feminine dresses and apply makeup like a female. The visible difference between Manjula and Marykutty in their “doing gender” is while Manjula expresses her gender in a boisterous manner Marykutty expresses her gender in a subtle way. This subtleness is displayed in her physical appearance and behaviors as well. To make her feel complete and to put an end to the confusion and trauma that she faces due to the incoherence between her gender identity and sex, she undergoes medical surgery for both top and bottom and becomes a transsexual. She takes up the help of the technologies and innovations in the medical field to attain her desired form. She also undergoes many cosmetic treatments and is portrayed as an individual still on her hormone treatment in the movie. She also gets her voice modulated to be in tandem with

⁸ A black powder or liquid used as a cosmetic, worn mostly around the eye in regions in South Asia

⁹ A loose long top worn by mostly women in South Asia and usually paired with pants or pyjamas.

a feminine voice. In the film, she repeatedly states that this physical transformation makes her feel complete and in the right space.

To fit into the normative feminine framework of gender and pass as a woman, both Manjula and Marykutty act as damsels in distress during atrocities targeted towards them and remain very passive. We see Manjula being the passive sufferer who takes in the physical abuse of her brother (Sankar, 2018, 13:00). She never confronts him and expresses her submissive nature throughout the movie. She takes up the role of a woman in a traditional patriarchal familial setup who is expected to take in all the acts of violence targeted towards her and behave normally without questioning anything. In *Njan Marykutty*, we also see Marykutty giving up in front of the abomination that she faces. She is seen to be performing the role of a helpless woman and begging for help from the people who had gathered around and were merely remaining as mute spectators when two men in the name of the larger good of the society attacked her for her gender variant identity (Sankar, 54:24-56:06). Marykutty is portrayed as a strong character right from the beginning of the movie who fearlessly tackles the disputes that arise due to her gender identity. One instance of the same is when she shows her defiance when Kunjipaalu tries to take bribes from her and her friend by falsely alleging them of violating traffic rules (Sankar, 27:00). But when the two men assaulted her, she was portrayed as a powerless individual. Again, when a co-passenger sexually abused Marykutty on the bus (Sankar, 18:00), the response that she gives is how a female-gendered individual usually responds. She does not call out to her abuser but very silently stamps her abuser, which makes him forcefully retreat. Thus, we see that both the transwoman characters perform their gender as docile and tender individuals imitating the stereotypical feminine characteristics.

What both Manjula and Marykutty are trying to attain through “doing gender” adhering to cisnormative femininity is to pass as a woman. When Marykutty attains feminine features with the support of medicines, Manjula in *Ardhanaari* achieves this through her efforts. Both of them also bring behavioral changes to their characters, like how they talk, walk, modulation in their tone, etc., all to match feminine characteristics. Just like the binary gendered human beings Manjula and

Marykutty also “employ the term ‘expression’, and conduct themselves to fit their own notions of expressivity” (Goffman, 1976, p.75). Now according to them, cisnormative femininity is their notion of expressing gender.

Manjula and Marykutty also get genuine happiness and a sense of fulfillment when they are addressed as women. Manjula asks the boy whom she had a crush on whether she is a boy or girl, to which he replies that she is a girl, hearing Manjula blushes and runs away happily. Also, whenever in school she is being addressed as a girl in school and called “Vineeta” instead of “Vineeth”, she feels a sense of contentment. Addressing her as a girl was never a humiliation for her but instead gave her a sense of satisfaction. Similar delight can be seen in the eyes of Marykutty also when she receives her revised Aadhaar card in which her gender is being mentioned as “F” (Sankar, 2018, 1:26:00). The card could have carried her gender as a ‘transgender’ or ‘transsexual’. But instead, her fight for receiving an Aadhaar card with her changed gender is shown to have reached a point of success when she receives the card in which gender is mentioned as female. This very evidently shows that Marykutty’s fight and efforts were to get accepted as a woman in the patriarchal society that she was a part of.

The transwoman characters in both these movies feel a need to become complete women. They themselves belittle their own existence as a transwoman and do not feel proud of their trans identity. All the efforts taken from their side to fit into the cisnormative framework clearly indicate that they themselves are not very happy to be a trans woman. In *Ardhanaari*, the Nayak (head) of the hijra household of which Manjula became a member tells her that she wishes to be a complete woman at least in her next birth. Also, when Manjula’s mother, whom she got as part of the hijra tradition, dies, an older hijra in accordance with their custom, beats up her mother’s dead body and scolds her for being born in the way she was born (Souparnika, 2012, 1:11:00). Therefore, in order to feel complete, they express femininity by adhering to cisnormative feminine characteristics.

The feminine gender expression by Manjula and Marykutty cannot be a complete forgery. Just like Agnes, who was a transwoman in the case study by Garfinkel (1967), mentioned in the work *Studies*

in *Ethnomethodology*, they are analyzing the performance of gender by a female and they are predisposed to perform the gender in a similar way to get accepted into the society and escape from abjection. As Heritage notes, our society places itself within a social framework and molds itself based on these social frameworks. A person's actions are primarily accountable to the people around them, the cultural and social standards, etc. This accountability is mostly interactional. This allows individuals to "design their performance based on their circumstances so as to permit others, by methodically taking account of circumstances, to recognize the action for what it is" (Heritage, 1984, p. 179).

The abjected bodies and the concept of abjection are the "seed of our culture" (Kristeva, 1982b, p. 126). As discussed earlier, the power elites in order to ensure that their position in the society remains unchallenged, subject the transwoman identities to abjection. The inhumane ways of violence that are targeted towards Manjula and Marykutty in these visual texts clearly position the transwoman identities in a vulnerable position. The regulations and suppressions that they are subjugated to result in the strengthening of the power dynamics in society. As "doing gender" is highly influenced by social interactions and expectations, we see that the transwoman identities in these movies perform their gender adhering to the cisnormative femininity. The society's prescription that an individual should either be masculine or feminine forces them to make a choice out of their free will, thereby making their "free choice conditioned" (Raymond 1979, p. 135). The fear, repulsion and social discrimination they face from society forces them to perform their gender according to the cisnormative gender frameworks. Doing gender adhering to the patriarchal standards might make the performance "gender appropriate" (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 135). But, these representations, especially in cinema, one of the most influential visual texts, are highly harmful.

Portraying transwomen as "doing gender" in a feminine manner strengthens and establishes the existing gender stereotypes and reinforces the idea that gender is stable and immutable and results in the marginalization of non-binary transgender individuals. As Butler (1990) opinions in *Gender Trouble*, by performing gender by adhering

to the binary gender notions in order to pass as a male or female, trans individuals performing cis femininity as their gender are normalizing the gender binaries and re-establishing that gender binaries are natural, immutable and inherent. Cinema, being a highly influential medium, conveys this idea to the public, indicating that transgender people should perform gender within the cisnormative framework. This thought affects not only the cisnormative individuals but also transgenders who slowly began to believe that a cisnormative feminine framework is the right way to do gender.

ABJECTION AS A CONSTRUCTIVE POLITICAL STRATEGY: CONCLUSION

As formulated in the previous section, transwoman identities that perform gender away from the established and accepted gender embodiments are considered abnormal and abjected. This leads transwomen identities to perform their gender standing by the cisnormative feminine gender framework like Manjula and Marykutty did in the movies *Ardhanaari* and *Njan Marykutty*. *Doing* so reinstates the inaccurate gender binary system. The best possible solution for this is, that the queer identities like Manjula and Marykutty should embrace abjection and use it as a constructive political strategy like many trans activists like Susan Stryker did.

Brooks (1993) suggests that a monster “may also be that which eludes gender definition” (p. 229), thereby equating anyone who deviates from the patriarchal gender definition to be a monster. Probably by abiding by this suggestion by Brooks, Stryker (2000) also goes to an extreme and equates her trans identity with that of Frankenstein, the monster. She states, “I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster” (p. 85). She accepts that she is a “monster” due to her gender identity. Therefore, she doesn’t feel the pain of her abjection and is able to express her gender identity in its genuine sense. As Stryker rightly conveys through her work *My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*, by “embracing and accepting” abjection or by even piling up all the abjections that one faces from various directions, an individual, in this particular case, a

trans individual would be able to dispel the ability of the abjection to harm them. This embracing of abjection is a subjective experience that will enable the trans identities to re-establish and rebuild the highly gendered regulatory system that determines the feasibility of bodies that, if not feasible, are forced to enter a “domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation” (Butler, 1990, p. 16).

The need to embrace abjection and employ it as a constructive political tool is brought forth by Halperin (2008) also, through his work *What Do Gay Men Want?* The work primarily talks about gay men. He talks about the problem with gay men who are considered socially illegible and abjected due to their choice of sexuality. What he argues about gay men hold true for all queer identities, including trans identities like Manjula and Marykutty. In this work, he mentions homosexual men trying to imitate heteronormative men to gain acceptance into society, just like how the transwoman protagonists of the movies *Ardhanaari* and *Njan Marykutty* did by “doing gender” in the cisnormative feminine way. But Halperin is of the opinion that one should feel the “pleasure in being the lowest of the low, in being bad, in being outlaws, in betraying both our own values and those of the people around us” (Halperin, p. 65). By accepting abjection, a new approach is being offered which does not neglect the “affective dimensions of gay life but represents them in an existential idiom that makes reference to the particular vicissitudes of gay men’s social being and resists being translated immediately into the language of pathology” (Halperin, p.104).

Therefore, the queer identities should realize that abjection is not a problem but is a solution. The queer identities should transform abjection into a glorious social situation that the abjected identities employ to survive and evolve gloriously out of those forces that crushes them from above due to what is considered as a deformity or an undesirable mutation. Abjection’s transformative power should be used in the right sense to overcome the intense pressure that the queer community faces from social stigma. Thereby, the queer identities including the transwoman identities like Manjula and Marykutty will be able to do their gender in a genuine way -the way they feel like expressing it- without any fear of abjection and pressure to pass as a

woman in our heteronormative society.

The abjection that they also face fundamentally tries to establish the lack of “meaning, being, language and desire,” as Kristeva (1982) opinions in “Approaching Abjection”. Abjection leads one to a place “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, p. 2). The abjected identity then exists in a liminal space. When the trans identities face abjection and reach this place where meaning collapses, they should embrace abjection and should try to reconstruct the collapsed meaning. They should establish the truth about gender -that gender is not binary and it is a spectrum. Welcoming abjection is the only way through which the right essence of gender can be conveyed to the world. Therefore, we need to employ abjection as a constructive political tool, which will enable all queer identities, including the trans identities, to perform their gender in the way they wish to without any fear of abjection and pressure to pass as a woman to get accepted into the society.

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PROFILES

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