

## Masculinizing Radha: The Politics of Representation in *Chandupottu*

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Chandupottu CD Cover

### Abstract

Malayalam cinema, from its inception, was strongly rooted in the contemporary social reality. Social realism at the level of thematic and stereotyping at the level of characterization is a peculiar brew for a cinema to adopt.

Cinema has become an important tool in the study of identities and sexualities today because of its ubiquitous presence as a popular medium and a powerful ideological apparatus negotiating with subjectivities and pleasures. *Chandupottu* is a typical Malayalam cinema that apparently has everything that constitutes a typical mainstream film in the Indian context. It also openly proclaims that it is different for its characterisation of the protagonist as a transvestite.

This paper aims to analyze how such a movie failed to acknowledge the effeminateness of the male. It tries to highlight how instead the movie brought forth traditional machismo of the male hero and defined an unsophisticated masculinity.

**Keywords:** Identity, Social realism, Transvestite, Masculinity.

### Representation of an Effeminate Male

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### **A Still from the Movie *Chandupottu***

*Chandupottu* is one of the most successful Malayalam films of 2005. The film was also conspicuously different from mainstream cinema in its representation of an ‘effeminate male’ as the central character. The film tried to undermine one of the strongly established conventions of mainstream Malayalam cinema – the machismo of the male hero. This paper examines how far this is true. It analyses how *Chandupottu*, the movie, did not acknowledge the possibility of effeminate male, and how, instead, the movie complied with the crudest form of masculinity.

According to the film reviews ( Indiaglitz: “*Review of Chandupottu: Dileep essays difficult role in 'Chandupottu'*”),

“Radhakrishnan, the hero of the movie, possesses the traits of an effeminate man. Divakaran, the father of the central character, tries to bring out the pain and humiliation of having a progeny laughed at by society. The conflict in Radhakrishnan’s life arises when he falls in love with his childhood friend Malu. There is the universal villain – Komban Kumaran – the typical macho figure, who is rather proud of this machismo. Kumaran fancies the heroine and creates roadblocks for the lovers. Radhakrishnan emerges victorious over the machivillain and thereby wins his love. The movie fights the stigma and prejudices attached to such people.”

### **We beg to differ!**

And this is where we beg to differ.

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If at at the first sight, the movie seems to stand apart for the effeminate and to be completely under its sway, it is only ambiguous. The validity of the statement could be evident by analysing some of the feminine and masculine traits the director has used to prove the effemacy in Radhakrishnan.

### **So-called Feminine Traits**

There are certain elements, the so-called 'feminine traits' in Radhakrishnan that stop him from being the bold hero in the beginning. Radhakrishnan's grandmother who had strong desire for a girl grandchild was disappointed when he was born. Eventually she comes to terms with the situation and Radhakrishnan is brought up like a girl. His grandmother calls him "Radha" – a female name. To add to the situation, his father, Divakaran goes to jail leaving Radha to grow up with his femininity and transvestism. Instead of going for fishing like other men, he chooses to dance. He loves to paint his nails, uses make-up and is always found in company of girls.

### **Literal Representation and Ideological Reference – Chains?**

In '*Making Things Perfectly Queer*' Alexander Doty, the critic suggests that cultural texts offer the potential for focus on connotative rather than denotative meaning to find credible readings hidden in the text. There is also a need to differentiate between the literal representation of femininity and ideological reference. In the movie, feminine backdrop is created by various supernatural forces like 'kadalamma', various goddesses of Hindu mythology, etc. Frequent allusions to moon, moonlight, gold, the colour 'white' etc. in the movie could easily bring forth associations with peace, purity and hygiene. Such submissive traits represent the femininity. Synecdoches such as the bangles, anklets and skirts are also used as a literary tool. These feminine elements chain him down. The relationship between the anklets and the chain prove that he is trapped in the web of femininity.

### **Contrast to Bring out Femininity and Subtle and Not So Subtle Elements of Masculinity**

The director even goes to the extent of using contrasting character to bring forth the femininity in Radhakrishnan. The characters like Komban Kumaran and Freddy – the two representatives of the typical macho men are used to further certify this.

The subtle elements of his masculinity is present in his affection for Malu. His possessive and jealous feelings become dominant when Kumaran tries to woo Malu. He proves his potency by impregnating her. The phallic symbols used in the film have highlighted it further like the recurrent imagery of lamp, nilavilakku, deepam, oars and kite. Even idyllic symbols for fertilisation are used. He proves his muscle power by overpowering the villain Kumaran. Perhaps the cycle is completed when he takes oars and nets and joins the men to catch fish.

Radhakrishnan's strength, vigour, passion, love, pain and virility are communicated through the pervasiveness of the colour 'red'. The solar images figuratively suggests superiority. Names like KombanKumaran, Divakaran, Bhaskaranetc emphasize this.

### **“Real Man” – a Macho Man: Deconstruction of Masculinity**

So far we have been using the masculinity in quotes. It implies the conventional images of big guns, big hard muscles, the ability to fight and win, images of aggression, strength and power, which depicts the idea of the “real man”. This “real man” is the macho man. However the conventional ideas of this macho man have been fluctuating with time. Once it was Jayan, who undoubtedly was the hallmark for machismo and now he is being mocked at.

Today's unchallenged heroes could also meet with the same fate. Masculinity must be deconstructed if it is to change. Masculinity as it is, currently express the link between strength and aggression. But aggression is a form of weakness, not strength. It is not by resorting to aggression that we should sort things out.

### **Confinement within Genderbox**

True strength comes from perseverance, rationality and ability to deal with situation in a calm and fair manner. Scholars suggest integrity and equality as masculine values. Men must begin to learn that true masculinity may not be particularly true after all and that they too are confined within a genderbox. The masculine gender must be broadened enough to accommodate the effeminate. In the Indian context too, Lord Shiva is exemplified as the fiercest of all gods. Yet we call him “Ardhanareeshwara”. He is not complete without the feminine counterpart within himself.

Our Radhakrishnan too is thus complete. As long as masculinity and femininity are poles apart, the problems will persist. Masculinity and femininity should not be against each other but should accommodate each other.

### **Claims Not Supported by the Facts of the Movie**

Now Lal Jose, the director has stated in an interview that this movie has evoked sympathy among the masses for the transvestites. This seems to be an ambitious statement though. Had the movie sympathized with the effeminate man, the man should not have been transformed in the first place. Besides, is it sympathy that they need? It is usually the deprived who needs sympathy. What effeminate needs is acknowledgement. Transmuting the legs and hands that sway to music into instruments that can bash up bad guys does not really evoke sympathy.

### **Fight Sequence**

In the first fight sequence, he cannot fight back. But the second fight is a crucial stage of his growth. He fights dancing countering the robust men with his smooth moves and mudras. In third fight sequence, we notice that he has shed most of his effeminate traits. This represents the way he is transformed to the stereotype.

### **Sexual Prowess and Female Passivity**

The use of Malu to prove Radhakrishnan's sexual prowess is another part of his transformation to 'masculinity'. In mainstream Malayalam cinemas, the male protagonist looks at and desires women as objects, while women are to identify with female figures passively. Woman's own desire and identification with an active figure becomes effaced. The same pattern follows in *Chandupottu*. The meaning that gets across is that everyman must have a love in his life, a love that would wait for him with tearful eyes.

### **Identity Based on Society Reaction**

When Radhakrishnan identifies with the male instinct, he looks at himself differently in the mirror. The image in the mirror establishes a relation between Radha, the subject and his identity. It symbolises the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes a

different role. Lacanian theory (Barry 114) on ‘mirror stage’ could be interpreted in this context by stating that Radhakrishnan’s identity is developed from the reaction of the society. His identity is an ideal likeness reflected back from everyone else.

### **Element of Myth**

The element of myth is prevalent throughout the film which is against effeminateness. In Omanapuzha, the place where Radhakrishnan was brought up, he was identified as a eunuch and the people easily believed he was the reason why they got no catch from the sea. He was the bad omen there. But, on the other island, now he is a blessing. He is called Krishna, not Radha. At the moment he is addressed as a male; and people get lucky. When he returns to Omanapuzha, he defeats Kumaran and then the people see him as a ‘real man’. Almost immediately the sea is loaded with fish and the fishermen get a good catch for the day. Instead of going back to teach dance, he goes out into the sea, like rest of the men to catch fish. The music ‘aellello’ identifies with the folklore of the fishermen. It heightens the effect of completeness in a ‘real man’ who goes to the sea to fend for his family. When he identifies himself with the real man he cannot accept the effeminateness that might prop out from his progeny. It also appears as if effeminateness can be fixed up with a couple of blows hinting that the effeminate man is always a misfit. The movie has made mockery of effemacy. It does not answer what happens to those who cannot transform to shed their effeminateness? The issue remains unaddressed.

### **Symbol of Chandupottu**

The title *Chandupottu* is tagged onto anybody who appears out of line with the conventional macho man. It won’t take long for the word to enter the dictionary.

The internal criticism of the movie splits it apart. If we read the film obliquely and if we look beyond the apparent coherence, we find that it is ‘riddled with cracks’. The message which was supposed to carry the movie forward actually ends up in dismantling it.

According to Christian Metz (Dix 75) “the cinematic institution... is also the mental machinery – another industry – which spectators accustomed to the cinema have internalised historically”. The director of the movie *Chandupottu* who set out to be ‘revolutionary’ did not affect any radical change in the existing system. He assumed that the audience would treat the

text as natural, obvious and simply there to be enjoyed. The unconscious of the patriarchal society has structured the film form. Had the movie challenged this autonomy of the viewers, it would have been politically progressive.

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