

A Battle for Survival: Analysing a Transgender's Existential Crisis in *Njan Marykutty*

Vidhya Vijayan

Guest Lecturer

Dept. of English

N S S Hindu College

Changanacherry

Kottayam

Abstract

Films which play a major role in the current scenario offer both entertainment and information to people. The following research paper tries to study how a transgender man struggles to realize his sexual orientation while dealing with the social stigma and taboo related to gender transformation in the society. It also explores the existential crisis experienced by them. Though society considers the third gender category as misfit in the world, it is true that they constantly engage in a struggle to prove their identity and to make them fit to the world. She is successful in representing the quest of transgenders for their individuality. This film revolves around the sufferings, resurrection and retaliation of a transgender named Marykutty.

Keywords: Transgender, stigma, existential crisis, resurrection, sexual orientation

Cinema, the most ubiquitous art form, is a reflection of society. It exposes before us both real and imaginary stories in a very authentic way. Cinema that always carries out some experiments is a great entertainment medium for the public. It is really an appreciable matter that it provides equal importance to both real as well as fantastical elements in it. Sometimes it wears the role of a teacher in teaching the audience about the complex realities of life. Very often it provides a picture of life with hope and exultation amidst harsh realities of life. Sometimes it carries the theme of existentialism through depicting man's striving for becoming truly human. A number of existentially-themed films come out in this field by addressing the human condition in a thoughtful way. It substantiates man's search for himself and his potentialities to create his own values in the world.

Freedom of man is considered as one of the fundamental features of existentialism. For Jean Paul Sartre it is our existence that comes first and our essence is determined by existing and acting. The film under consideration is Malayalam movie *Njan Marykutty*(2018) , written and directed by Ranjith Sankar. The film stars Jayasurya as a transgender named Marykutty. This film discusses the struggles experienced by the transgender to exist in a society where these people are treated as outcasts and it also shares with people some actual problems faced by transgender through the central character, Marykutty and how she daringly faces them. The film is trying to educate the audience on various issues commonly faced by LGBTQ community. As an addition to all these features, this film also showcases the trauma that families go through, as well as the emotional and physical ordeals that members of this community undergo, at the hands of society and governmental authorities.

In the prevailing social structure, gender is often interpreted in terms of binary structure- man and woman - to convey the ideas of masculinity and femininity. Providing a space to those people, who engage in a subversive performance, is a very complicated task. To be a part of human society, people should register themselves with either of these categories of male and female. Butler says that “gender proves to be performance-that constitutes the identity it is purported to be. In this sense gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (32). People, who do not belong to this binary structure, are often treated as liminal gender (who are on the social and cultural margins) and are forced to experience stigma, shame, social exclusion and silence. The Trans-gender’s liminal existence or in between position are analysed here with special reference to the film *Njan Marykutty*.

In earlier days Hijras or third genders were introduced just to entertain the audience or to create a comic effect. During that time they were sidelined in their representation. Not only in representation but in real life also they receive derogatory remarks and thus they get embarrassed by the people around them. For us, they are people with fake identity, masked themselves by cross-dressing. People fail to notice their dreams, aspirations and even the soul inside them. Our bi-gendered community creates an inconvenient space to them and suppresses their identity.

Njan Marykutty depicts the story of a transgender in a very positive way, out- winning their hard mission of asserting or communicating their identity. In the society they have to experience a horrible state of absently present - physically present but socially absent. Common people’s inhibition to accommodate them is because of the conventional gender performance. In the introductory scene of the film he is presented as a male figure who is shown as undergoing the contradictions within him. He finds it difficult to please the onlooker in terms of the expectations from a male psyche as he enjoys being a female. His body communicates to him the hidden female psyche that the society never wants to see from him. As the result, he is suffocating from the feminine identity that lurked within and demands a social recognition. But when the family pressurizes him for a marriage, he withdraws himself from it and reveals that he does not want to cheat his female partner. To make a change he meets the doctor and tells them that ‘my sex is male and gender is female’.

A person gains his essence through individual choices and actions. It is true that, we must either choose our own lives or have our lives chosen for us by the social forces already operating

around us. Marykutty is forced to choose the second one as the situations are adverse. She is the voice of every transgender who experiences a kind of detachment and alienation among the public who treat them as rejected figures. Though he transforms into a female identity, everyone approaches him with a very contemptuous attitude except his two or three intimate friends. Though the society sidelines them, she tries to get along with the situation and becomes proud of her transformed identity. Each day she examines her figure and expresses her satisfaction of being a female. But in society she becomes a wanton figure. By seeing them as a curse for society, young man approaches her to hassle her. It is evident in the scene when she and her friend's child go for some food at night. The suppression that they experience rightly agrees with Butler's perception that gender is being constructed through a set of acts that are said to be in compliance with dominant societal norms.

The factors like language, society, law, religion and medical science are seen to be more prominent in determining gender, regularizing the body and giving it a desired gender identity. Here the protagonist is always in search of his identity. The story takes us to the depths of human suffering and the inferno of existential woe. She feels lost, alienated wherever she goes. She becomes an estranged figure in the society. She is every time attempting to come out of the labyrinth but she goes deeper as she wants to get up.

In the words of Judith Butler: The mark of gender appears to "qualify" bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, "is it a boy or girl?" is answered. Those bodily figures that do not fit into either gender fall outside the human... (151). The society's inhibition to accept the third gender can be understandable from the actions portrayed in the film like ruffians attempt to molest her publicly and also in their humiliation against her amidst the public. Moreover the policemen also cross the boundary of dishonour by asking her to reveal whether she is a male or female by removing her dress. The most obedient sub-officers, who find happiness in harassing others, show no reluctance in obey the same and present her as a laughing stone before others.

Everyone, who belongs to the liminal gender, shares the same fate and it is conveyed through the sufferings of Marykutty in the film *Njan Marykutty*. The origin of the third gender takes us long back. In the Indian socio-cultural milieu, allotment of space to third gender can be located in the Indian scriptures like *The Mahabharata*. The Indian society always gives a meager space to the transgender or hijras. Their hybrid identity in the world of gender makes them outcasts and thereby they forced to experience shameful existence. In the ancient periods, especially in palaces, they were played the role of mere watchmen. If somebody appoints a handsome guy as a guard, it is sure that the queen gets attracted to him and in case of women, they were totally denied of that role. So they preferred to appoint eunuchs as their watchmen. These tactics was the end result of crookedness and cunningness played by the authorities over them.

When Marykutty understands evil influences of socialization, she starts to resist and transcend it. She becomes more autonomous through a long process of making free choice. It describes Marykutty's situation in its totality and cares for basic conditions of their existence. Alienation that exists in society affects her in a very bad way while pursuing her own desires. At

a very crucial moment she exhorts to the public that she has gone for a gender change and organ transplant not for just enjoyment. It is evident in the following line: "I have gone for gender change not for any emoluments but to live as a normal human being". The background music also echoes the isolation and hatred they are experiencing.

This film successfully brings out the hurdles that transgender experiences in their life. Basic essentialities especially toilet facilities are also denied to them. In this bi-gendered society needs are concerned for them only. Third one is not allowed to enter there to create a space. Even the educated people also treat them with a kind of aversion. Even the government officials like police, lawyer, and high officials also create hardships to them. It is apparent in the scene when Marykutty gets arrested by the police officer. He makes insult over her by asking her whether her breasts are sponges. The struggle faced by the transgender community is clear in the utterance made by Marykutty that 'In life we have to fight to exist'. The one and only thing that they receive from everywhere including their family is nothing other than rejection. When one is born into a world of gender which is already planned and one has to fit into the pre-existing format of that particular socio-cultural milieu and articulate oneself through the language available. According to Butler "gender is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time (33).

Third genders often fail to perform themselves in a socially acceptable manner and it may lead them to the dark dungeons of non-recognition and stigmatization. The negligence of third-gender is narrated brilliantly by Kamala das in the poem *The Dance of Eunuchs*. The poetess utilizes the symbolism of the eunuchs who are the very emblem of sterility. They turn out to be a mere spectacle to look at. Here the eunuchs are termed poor creatures. The barrenness of their life is superbly portrayed here. The image of 'sorry breast' is truly moving as it is too small and out of place according to gender.

Coming back to the film, one can form a conclusion that traumatic events that Marykutty suffers have not destroyed her spirit. Instead it helps her to rise up as a phoenix bird and decides to fight with circumstances. She never heeds attention to the derogatory remarks against her and thus transforms herself into a new being. The meeting of Marykutty with the collector results in a great changeover among the people. He himself takes initiative in helping Marykutty to get her an identity of her own by providing her an ID card which admits her as a third gender and thereby considering her as a new member of the society. Gradually everyone starts to accept her and blames society for keeping such a hostile attitude towards them. She finally fulfills her dream by making herself as the first police officer in third gender category.

She protests against all social forces that destroys her freedom. Towards the end of this film, Marykutty attains self realization along with her motives, feelings, hopes, possibilities and freedom. Marykutty admits the truth that though man strives, man is unable to attain desired completeness.

She is successful in representing the quest of transgenders for their individuality. Though at the beginning Marykutty is presented as a loner, faced with predicaments of existentialist order, her optimistic approach to life sets her apart from the rest of the crowd and helps to find

out the remedies for various troubles in her life. This film revolves around the sufferings, resurrection and retaliation of a transgender named Marykutty. It is really a movie with a positive message where the central character is someone who succeeded in life against all the odds. She proves herself as a person with sterner stuff who avoids every obstacle that comes across her path towards final destination.

References:

Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey G. Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Thomson Wordsworth, 1991. Print.

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press. 2009. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*. India: Doring Kindersely, 2010. Print.

Njan Marykutty. Dir. Ranjith Sankar, Perf. Jayasurya, Jewel Mary and Joju George. Dreams and Beyond, 2018. Film.

Sartre, Jean- Paul, and Philip Mariet. *Existentialism and Humanism*. Les Editions Nagel, Methuen& Co, 1948. Print.

Waugh, Patricia. *Literary theory and criticism*. New York: OUP, 2006. Print.