

Redefining Cultural Emotions through the Select Film Kaathal: The Core

Prasitha V

Sri Venkateshwara College of Engineering, India, 602117.

Abstract

The film Kaathal – the Core shows how emotions are significant in human life and how cultural norms influence human emotions. The film addresses the theme of homosexuality and portrays the cultural stigmatization of non-heteronormative sexualities as a threat and shame within Indian society. The Indian film “Kaathal the Core” (2023) directed by Jeo Baby, revolves around the lives of a middle-aged married couple, Mathew Devassy (Mammooty) and Omana (Jyotika). The couple has a daughter named Femi. Their seemingly stable life takes an unexpected turn when Omana files for divorce after twenty years of their marriage life. She files a divorce on the grounds of mental cruelty alleging that she has been denied of her physical needs as her husband is gay. The film consistently portrays a tone of anguish in every character. Using a conventional family drama setting, the film aims to depict the impact of a heteronormative society that often marginalizes alternative sexual orientations. The plot is set against the backdrop of a close-knit community and delves into the sensitive subject of homosexuality. The film also offers a beautiful climax to emphasize the importance of embracing inclusiveness. The narrative of the film transitions from depicting shame as a persistent emotion of homosexuals to emphasizing their right to happiness. The paper attempts to show how emotional constructs of culture around sexuality and gender are shaped and can be reshaped by evolving societal beliefs through the select film.

Keywords: sexuality, film, culture, emotions, gender

1. Introduction

Individuals who deviate from these norms experience discrimination and marginalization, as they challenge the established frameworks of the society. “When the dominant cultural models emphasize the importance of meeting social norms, failure to do so will most certainly elicit shame; shame in those cultural contexts may then be a common emotional experience” (Boiger & Mesquita, 2012, p. 225). Therefore, it is essential to understand that these cultural norms function not only through repetitive actions but also through their association with emotions. Culture influences our understanding of what defines an emotion. Consequently, human emotions are profoundly influenced by culture, which determines how people express emotions and communicate their perceptions in various societal contexts, resulting in both positive and negative emotions directed towards self and groups. For instance, in Indian culture, the concepts of binary gender and heterosexuality are considered normative, creating a rigid framework linked to the ideas of societal approval and happiness. Further, individuals who identify as nonconforming to these established norms are often seen as deviating from social expectations, leading to marginalization of certain groups. This deviation from the established social norms elicits negative emotions such as shame, anger, sadness, and guilt within marginalized groups. Conversely, individuals

who confirm to these norms provoke positive emotions such as happiness, love, and serenity to reinforce the established social order. These emotional reactions are often rooted in identities given by the society and as a result, individuals who defy these norms are viewed as causing discomfort and sadness within the broader society. This relationship among culture, gender, sexuality and emotions are analysed through the select film.

Omana is portrayed as a silent and strong woman who attends to the needs of her family members including her husband (Mathew Devassy), father-in-law (Devassy), and daughter (Femi). Mathew Devassy is a retired bank officer and is depicted to be on decent terms with his father, daughter, and wife, although a sense of silence is noticeable between them. One evening, Mathew learns about the divorce petition and tells Omana that it could impede his election campaign. However, Omana informs him that she had filed it two months ago. The petition claims that Omana has been denied of her conjugal rights and also alleges that Mathew is in a relationship with Thankan. Thankan is depicted as a driving instructor, who is unmarried and is also responsible for taking care of his sister's son. The first half of the film creates considerable tension within the narrative as Mathew refuses to give a divorce yet remains calm with Omana. As the film progresses, the narrative unveils the reason behind Omana's petition, two decades of her silence, and Mathew's journey toward accepting reality. The film delves into the courtroom scenes and legal aspects related to homosexuality, while also portraying a case centred around the physical needs of a woman. The visible suffering and guilt on the faces of Omana, Mathew, and Devassy, adds depth to the slow pace of the film's emotional narrative. Mathew who has been struggling to conceal his homosexual identity, reaches a breaking point when his father unveils the truth in the court that his son is gay. Throughout the film, the narrative explores the characters' shared pain. Devassy struggles with the guilt of arranging his son's marriage to a straight woman although he knows that his son is gay. Mathew hides his sexual orientation and his relationship with Thankan while grappling with the guilt of wasting twenty years of Omana's life. Moreover, Omana experiences profound suffering in her marital life. This collective anguish forms the heart of the narrative.

2. Redefining Masculinity

Masculinity is often associated with emotional suppression. "Girls are typically socialized to value empathy and are encouraged to express fear or sadness, whereas boys and men are often encouraged to display anger but restrain other emotional expressions" (Schrock & Knop, 2014, p. 414). However, the narrative subverts the stereotype by depicting male characters as emotionally vulnerable. The male characters in the film strive to empathize with other characters out of love, rather than showing anger to uphold their masculinity. Mathew Devassy is a man of few words and is a respectable person in his community. He surprisingly avoids more confrontations with Omana, maintaining a quiet demeanor as if he anticipated the outcome of a divorce petition. But Mathew tries to tackle the issue and asks Omana to empathize with him as the elections are around the corner. Omana replies that her situation is worse and more challenging than his. After a moment, both Omana and Mathew break down emotionally and move in silence. The emotions conveyed by Mathew, strongly suggest to the audience that Omana's petition holds truth. Mathew, uncertain of his course of action, seeks legal counsel to defend himself against Omana's accusation of homosexuality. He refuses to give Omana a divorce at first to uphold his reputation in the community and fears that his daughter Femi might discover the truth. Attempting to mask Femi from reality, he lies about her mother's changing perspectives, assuring Femi that things will become normal. This highlights Mathew's attempt to conceal the truth to maintain his role as a father. Yet, his

subsequent silence, when Femi responds quietly, revealing her awareness of the truth suggests a tacit acknowledgment of his sexuality. As the film unfolds, it becomes evident that their marriage has reached a stage where all arguments and tears have settled. While Omana accepts the reality, Mathew is reluctant to accept it. Mathew's internal conflict intensifies as the elections draw near and he opts for silence. Despite Omana's initiation of divorce proceedings through her open disclosure of Mathew's sexual identity, Mathew's response diverges from the expected patterns of anger. Instead, he is calm and affectionate. This is exemplified in a courtroom scenario where he kindly attends to Omana by holding her handbag. Rather than engaging in confrontation, Mathew tries to empathize with Omana's perspective. Thankan also prefers silence throughout the film. In one of the scenes, Thankan's nephew asks Thankan about his relationship with Mathew and expresses anger towards him when his friends tease him about Thankan's sexual orientation. In another scene, a bystander suggests in public that Thankan should let his sister's son ride the bike instead of him, implying that Thankan is not considered suitable as a male figure due to his sexual preferences. Despite these provocations, Thankan remains silent. His silence confirms the allegations and questions raised upon him. He cries and expresses his feelings to his friend that "Everyone fears losing their loved ones. But there are people who miss out on love because of that fear". This shows the underlying fear among homosexuals to express their love openly. The film portrays an unexpected encounter between Thankan and Mathew during an election campaign. The moment they lock eyes are filled with emotion, connecting deeply with the audience. Their silent exchange speaks volumes, conveying a range of human emotions without uttering a word. Thus, silence is not only the language of love but also the language of men in this film.

The other significant male character, Devassy, Mathew's father, also maintains silence upon learning about the situation. He is portrayed as carrying a burden throughout the film as he couldn't support his son's sexuality. From the beginning of the film, a conflict between Mathew and his father is evident, as they never exchange words. Omana, who is aware of the truth behind their conflict, also chose to remain silent. It is only as the film progresses that we discover Omana's patient observation and understanding of the truth, lead her to take action for her own needs. A powerful scene emerges when Mathew's father, who is aware of his son's sexuality two decades ago, appears as a witness in court to support Omana, as he understands that his past actions have not only affected his son but also Omana's life. Up to this point, Mathew has made an effort to maintain his heterosexual identity. When his father reveals the truth in court, Mathew tells his father that he is free from drama. This moment marks the sole instance of dialogue between father and son. Mathew is portrayed in tears as he confronts his father, questioning the decisions that led him to this point and recalling his father's belief that marriage would fix everything. The film clearly shows that "Marriage and the creation of a family do not automatically put a stop to their same-sex sexual activity" (Rao, 2017, p. 4). Mathew then apologizes to Omana and says that he was scared. "I was scared. I was scared of everything. I was even scared of myself". Mathew's internal struggles regarding his sexuality and his reluctance to accept his homosexual identity underscore the intricacies of masculinity and the societal expectations imposed on individuals to conform to societal gender norms. By showing men as vulnerable and crying, the film breaks down the stigma surrounding masculinity which is characterized by stoicism and emotional detachment. The emotions conveyed by men in the film reflect their regret, acceptance, and accountability, thus redefining masculinity in its own way. The empathetic portrayal of homosexual male characters in the film contributes to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics within the narrative.

3. Redefining Femininity

Omana emerges as an alarming character, serving as an inspiration for women who perceive discussions about sex and sexuality as taboo. She filed a divorce alleging that she has been denied of her physical needs as her husband is gay. Even during the courtroom proceedings, she discusses her dissatisfaction with her sexual life throughout her twenty years of marriage life and admits that she initiated a discussion about having a baby and engaged in a sexual relationship. When Omana is questioned about the status of their intimate relations, she answers devoid of shame or hesitation and reveals that they only had intercourse of four times during the two decades of their marriage life. Mathew does not oppose Omana's statement. He stands in dilemma, unsure of what to do, and unable to look at the face of others. This scene serves as a crucial turning point, as it indicates that Omana's petition holds truth, clearing up any ambiguity for both the spectators and the characters in the film. She is depicted not as a woman burdened by shame for addressing her needs and desires openly, but rather as a woman who breaks the stereotypes and redefines femininity.

In one scene, Omana's brother Tomy, confides in Mathew, revealing that Omana liked another man before their marriage, but her father opposed it. Even after marriage, she informs about Mathew's sexuality to her father, only to be criticized. This highlights the disregard for a woman's words and desires in her own family. The film underscores how societal norms and gender stereotypes compelled women to get into an arranged marriage and endure two decades of silent pain before revealing the truth. Even when she takes legal action, people blame Omana rather than acknowledging Mathew's sexuality. Despite these challenges, Omana takes a stand for herself, seeking neither punishment nor financial compensation but simply the freedom to live a better life. She advocates not only for herself but also for Mathew, recognizing his need to embrace his true identity. "Am I the only one to be rescued, Mathew? Don't you want to rescue yourself?". This depicts a platonic relationship between Omana and Mathew, devoid of animosity, highlighting their mutual respect and understanding instead as they both were suffering from patriarchy and societal norms. Their platonic relationship is also evident as she files for divorce only following the legalization of same-sex relationships in India. She did not want her husband to be treated as a criminal and so she has been living a fake life all these years. Even after the divorce, Omana campaigns for election to support Mathew which illustrates the love and friendship between them. The film addresses the issue of sexuality by bringing Omana as a catalyst to make both men and women realize that one should not be ashamed of being themselves. The film attempts to depict the beauty of an inclusive society in the climax. Mathew and Omana are seated together in a cafe, with Omana appearing visibly tense. When another man arrives to meet Omana, Mathew promptly stands up. This scene signals that Omana is looking for another man defying the norms of a divorced woman.

4. Subverting Homophobic Narratives: A Subtle Advocacy

The film explores the impact of societal reluctance to accept homosexuality and subtly advocates for homosexual people by avoiding negative discourse and depictions. Notably, the film refrains from depicting instances where Omana tells Mathew's sexual orientation to their child Femi. This is because the emotional scene has the potential to shatter the family unit and may evoke animosity towards homosexual individuals. Similarly, the film avoids illustrating scenes where Mathew's father rejects his sexuality and also the scenes where Thankan's nephew alludes to experiencing ridicule from his friends due to Thankan's sexual orientation. The film even refrains from portraying scenes of Mathew and Thankan together. The narrative acknowledges occurrences of these scenes without directly presenting

them, as their portrayal would introduce negative aspects to the central theme. Rather than explicitly depicting the scenes of societal resistance to homosexuality, the film seeks to shed light on the consequences of such resistance and its profound impact on individual lives. The film ends with the words “A Historic Victory” which symbolically represents not just Mathew’s victory in the elections but also a victory for his homosexual identity. This can be understood from the climax scene where Thankan is seen sitting inside a car and looking at Mathew through the mirror. This scene implies a reconciliation between them. However, the film deliberately refrains from depicting any verbal exchange between Mathew and Thankan. Their love is conveyed solely through emotional expressions.

5. CONCLUSION

The film challenges conventional gender norms while also intricately conveying the emotions of homosexuals to those who hold homophobic views. Acceptance is the central theme of this film and the narrative illustrates how acceptance is not prompt and takes time. This is evident as the film portrays how Omana takes time and files a legal case for her own needs after twenty years. Similarly, the journey of Mathew’s father to accept his son’s sexuality, and Mathew himself to come out of the closet takes time. The film clearly suggests that individual acceptance is pivotal in social liberation. Draped in poignant emotion, the film delves into the complexities of homosexual individuals trapped in heterosexual marriages and adds depth to the narrative by portraying the impact of it on straight individuals. Therefore, this film holds the power to make people think and empathize with the pain endured by homosexual individuals.

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