



FROM PHOBICS TO INCLUSIVES: REDEFINING GENDER, SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY IN SELECT MALAYALAM QUEER POSTS'

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ABSTRACT

Heteronormativity and gender stereotyping over the course of years have succeeded in its attempt to crush the existence of any alternative gender. The patriarchal hegemonic system has denied the queers of their existence and identity by projecting the distorted images in their art and literature, thereby creating homophobia and social exclusion, often reducing them as mere uncouth beings deprived of morality, culture and dignity. The need to address the actual issues of LGBTQI folks however was made possible through Facebook posts as it ensure greater social reception and visibility. Dr. Jijo Kuriakose, Vaikhari Aryat, Muhammed Zuhraabi, Sheethal Shyam and Chinju Aswathi however subvert the hegemonic power paradigm of the heteronormative society by projecting the real queer identity and hence ensures social inclusiveness. Their posts expose the double standards and hypocrisies of heterosexual community and reveal the struggles and trauma underwent by LGBTQI community in Kerala. The study focus on issues of gender, sexuality, migration, isolation and identity crisis in the Facebook posts of select queer activists across Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

Torn apart by the constant conflict between heteronormativity and hegemonic power structure, the lives of the queer beings often end up being an 'outcast' since the rigid gender structure is incapable of accommodating any alternative structure. In its attempt to mute the voice of the gender and sexual subalterns, the heteronormative society deliberately induced homophobia into the collective psyche of the society, thereby ensuring the social exclusion of queer people from the forefront of the society. The deep rooted phobia thus in the course of time took shape in the mainstream literature in the form of depicting queers either as 'unnaturals' or as anti social beings, thus securing the pseudo morality of heterosexuals intact. When the popular media turned its face from the marginalized queer folk, the digital platform came to their aid extending ample space for a healthy discussion, debate and above



all an ideal place to express the hypocrisies and double standards maintained in the patriarchal society.

Dr. Jijo Kuriakose, founder member Queerala (the first LGBTQI organization in Kerala) and an open gay often uses facebook posts as an extension of his queer activism as his posts are a critical commentary over the repressive state structure that the heteronormative society pertain to, reducing the lives of sexual and gender minorities into merely sexually starving creatures. His personal experience gains a universal appeal as he voices against the human right violation that the queer folks are subjected to from time immemorial. His own experience of difficulty to find a house for rent or a white collar job due to his identity as a queer activist points at how prejudiced the mindset of the keralite society is. He recollects the incident of revealing his sexual orientation in his family and the kind of havoc it caused due to the deep rooted 'homophobia'. But the isolation and exclusion however gave way to acceptance and inclusion once his endless struggle (for years) normalized his orientation and identity. His constant endeavor to educate the queer folk about their identity and sexuality and the need of the LGBTQI community to stand united under the common roof of Queerala, which however is a milestone in the Kerala queer history, as it has redefined the rigid gender binary and have addressed the issues of the Kerala queer community . Queerala's the constant awareness posts on the experiences of individual or community members have however helped in the coming out many LGBTQI people who lived under the veil of heterosexually, crushing and cursing ones existence and identity. The queer community driven by the scars of the childhood trauma and guilt of being 'abnormal' however understands that homosexuality is an alternate orientation and identity rather a strange state of being. Dr. Jijo Kuriakose posts' thus normalize the homosexuality, thereby inspire the queer community to come in the forefront as he teaches them that being a queer doesn't essentially mean one is less equal rather it is diversity of sexual orientation within the human race.

Muhammed Zuhrahi, M.Sc Electronic Media at Pondicherry University, the cover page designer of the much celebrated and controversial magazine Widerstand, who is an open gay seeks the aid of facebook along with literature, poetry, dance and photograph to express his opinions, and issues. His posts often celebrate his essence and identity as a gay as he posts his own portraits exploring the possibility of gay body politics to resist the heterosexual power politics. Zuhrahi narrates his childhood experience of being sexually abused by his teacher pointing at the shared experience of sexual exploitation by majority of queer people in the early childhood period. He attempts to project his gay body, through the self portraits, which is denied an acceptable position in the art. He often comes with graphic cartoons with catchy one liners which functions as a counter reading of the socio political events from a different point of view. Through his strong interference in the social issues he underlines the need to heed attention to the opinions of the society excluded as he argues that the term society itself loses its meaning if it fail to incorporate diverse population. He points at how the new subalterns possess better political standpoint than the 'accepted intellectuals' of the society.



His posts explain the struggle of rural Muslim gay man to come out and proclaim his identity and sexuality, which attaches taboo and sin along with the term homosexuality. Often his posts rail against attaching pedophilia with homosexuality as he asserts that it isn't the sexual orientation that creates anti-socials but the traits of both pedophilia and bestiality are the symptoms of mental illness and hence has to be studied as a disorder rather than projecting it as a universal trait shown by any homosexual. His posts unveil the hidden politics of the heteronormative society to perpetuate the notion of phobia and taboo along with homosexuality thereby denying them of both social and political space.

Sheethal Shyam, the noted keralite transgender, takes facebook as a platform to share the struggles of transgender community which has been labelled as the third gender. The posts of Sheethal point at the inadequacy of the language to afford the existence of another gender. The accepted language system identifies only masculine, feminine and neutral genders, hence the heterosexual community attaches the gender neutrality with transgenders. Sheethal shares the experience of hostile reception a transgender receives in keralite society and how the transgender communities are denied dignity, job and a social space since they are being treated as 'immoral beings', stereotyping the entire community. Sheethal's posts often strike up an open discussion in the facebook leading to debates and clarifications of the general queries put forward by her facebook friends. Since the interactive platform ensures a two way communication, the posts perform the function of eradication of a pseudo immoral image of the alternate gender. Sheethal addresses how the gender becomes social rather than biological, exploring the emotional turmoil that every transgender encounter in the society. The posts inspire and empower the fellow transgenders to vindicate themselves from the sense of guilt that have pertained in the mind since childhood. Sheethal speaks about everyday affair of a transgender pointing at the normalcy of their life thereby sabotaging the distorted image that has been projected and replaced the real transgender image over the years. Sheethal explores the possibility of Facebook to unite the keralite transgender community equipping them with the knowledge about their basic rights and hence making them self-sufficient.

Vaikhari Aryat, PhD research scholar in University of Hyderabad, a queer – dalit- feminist activist posts projects the triple marginalization experienced by her due to her identity as a bisexual- dalit- woman. Rather than concealing her identity, she uses her identity and sexual orientation as an efficient tool with which she wages righteous war to ensure equality. Her posts are social commentaries of on deep rooted idea of gender in the mind of public, since she recollects her experience of being judged by her identity. She shares her experience of how her assertion of her queer identity disturbs the heteronormative society's gender stereotypes and the repercussions for the disturbance as being labelled as an outspoken in the public sphere. She questions the unquestionable dominance of savarna caste and its privilege to determine the rules and regulations of dalit and crushes the dead weight of caste system with her strong political standpoints. She explains the struggle to be heard in a society which



subjects her to constant marginalization by consciously celebrating her queerness, lineage and gender. She however emerges out as a messiah of liberation irrespective of the heterosexual agenda to marginalize. She rails against the idealized figures of activism which according her blurs the actual picture of the society. Vaikhari's posts came to the public attention after her strong political standpoints during Rohit Vemula's suicide and still is followed by many because of the social significance it adorns in the realm of queer empowerment.

Chinju Aswathi, an intersex person and the board member of Queerala speaks about the gender structuring as an irrational system since for Chinju gender is fluid than the concrete structure. Chinju redefines gender, sexuality and identity in a new light pointing at how an individuals' identity stands apart from the sex in which he is born or the performative gender people adhere to. A close analysis of queer posts in keralite context underline the need to redefine our gender hegemonic power structure to include the socially excluded to render a complete sense to the term society. It is lack of open discussion and rigidity of the social systems that prevent people from gaining an actual scenario of the queer existence and identity often mistaking the distorted identity as the real thereby paving way to homophobia and social exclusion. Facebook being an interactive platform ensures an open platform for debate to clarify the 'accepted notions' about the queer lives normalizing their existence and essence ensuring social inclusion.

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