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**EXPLORING THE PREDICAMENT OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONIST OF THE  
HOMOSEXUAL HUSBAND IN THE MOVIE *KATHAL- THE CORE***

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**Abstract**

Diverse stories that cross boundaries and question social norms have always found a home in Malayalam cinema. Among the many films that have made a lasting impression, the 2023 movie *Kathal- the Core* directed by Jeo Baby stands out as a unique one, weaving a tale that transcends the conventional norms of storytelling in the Malayalam film industry. *Kathal* not only captivates its audience with its compelling narrative but also explores themes that delve into the realm of queer identities and their spouses provoking deeper readings and conversations that go beyond the surface. Foucault's implicit concept of queer theory and Judith Butler's theory of Gender Trouble is made use of in this article. This paper seeks to unravel the distinctive elements that set *Kathal* apart from its contemporaries in Malayalam cinema with a specific focus on analysing the dilemma of a wife whose husband is homosexual in contrast to a wife who could get out of the meaningless married life much early in her life.

Malayalam cinema, known for its rich story telling strategies and diverse cultural narratives has begun to explore unconventional themes reflecting societal dynamics. One such exploration revolves around the challenges faced by individuals identified as gays and their spouses in the film *Kathal*. In the film industry where discussions about LGBTQ+ themes were once considered as a taboo, *Kathal* emerges as a trailblazer daring to embrace the complexities of identity and relationships. Although Michel Foucault did not explicitly formulate a queer theory as we know it today, his theories have greatly influenced its development. Many of the key ideas and arguments in queer theory have their roots in Foucault's work, especially in his theories on power, sexuality, and the body.

Queer theory emphasizes on the significance of true representation for societal acceptance and understanding, where gender-based normativity is undermined. Society has stigmatised homosexuality which makes life uneasy for them. The movie takes a commendable step in this direction by bringing the struggles of gay individuals and their spouses to the forefront. *Kathal* marks a significant departure from the conventional themes prevalent in Malayalam cinema, as it delves into the complexities of human relationships, by addressing the challenges faced by individuals navigating the intersection of sexual identity and societal expectations. In an industry where traditional narratives have often occupied the centre, *Kathal* stands out as a relevant and timely exploration of the struggles faced by individuals grappling with their sexual identity, and the impact of societal norms on personal relationships.

The movie opens a dialogue on a subject that has historically been prohibited, paving the way for increased awareness and understanding within the vibrant landscape of Malayalam cinema. This daring attempt helped to make the dilemma of the wives of homosexuals into the limelight. Omana, the protagonist of the movie is able to get out of the meaningless marital life only after twenty years. The internal conflicts and the external pressures faced by the husband and wife while navigating through the complexities are being accounted here. In contrast to this, the movie also portrays the life of Thankan, Mathew's gay partner's wife who got out of the tangled relationship much early in her life.

When the film specifically deals with the problems encountered by a gay husband and his heterosexual spouse, it is also an exploration of how two human beings are navigating their way through societal expectations and personal identity. Omana was able to take the hard decision to get out of the trauma bonding after two decades, meanwhile Mathews was still reluctant and was stuck with the societal norms and stigmatization of homosexuality. Societal pressure to conform to tradition and expectations are diligently dealt here. Mathews becomes the representative of gays who grapples with the fear of societal judgment and ostracization. The conservative nature of society in the movie

reflects the real-life struggles that many individuals in the LGBTQ+ community face in traditional and culturally bound environments.

As far as the heterosexual man's wife, Omana is concerned her predicament revolves around the societal expectations of marriage and family. Initially unaware of her husband's sexual orientation, she faces the emotional turmoil of an unfulfilled marriage. The narrative highlights the importance of open communication and acceptance within relationships, emphasizing the detrimental effects of societal norms that suppress individual identities and distort the individuals involved. Foucault's argument in his *The History of Sexuality* that sexual behaviour is continually analysed, and regulated by the knowledge systems that modern civilisation has developed is justified here.

Here the emotional stress on both parties involved is also skilfully explored. The gay individual, Mathew faces internal conflict and the constant fear of rejection, while the heterosexual spouse experiences the pain of betrayal and the shattering of marital expectations and her daughter's future. The film skilfully portrays the emotional complexities and turmoil that arise when personal identities clash with societal norms. Whenever Omana wanted to speak openly to her husband he walked away. Conversations made Mathew uncomfortable, which was likely a reflection of the stress of having an underlying secret. Despite speaking very little throughout the movie, Mathew masterfully conveys his feelings of pain, suffering, and powerlessness through his body language and facial expressions. This may also help to explain why the movie doesn't feature any significant speeches for him to express his feelings.

The movie also addresses the lack of awareness and understanding about homosexuality in traditional communities, which forms the central issue for Omana. The film serves as a platform to initiate conversations around LGBTQ+ issues, fostering empathy and awareness among viewers. It encourages society to move beyond stereotypes and prejudices, promoting acceptance and inclusivity by deconstructing the notion of considering only heterogenous sexual orientation as straight.

The characters navigate their identities amidst a societal landscape that rigidly enforces binary norms, particularly concerning sexuality. The film portrays the complexities of their journeys with a nuanced lens, shedding light on the challenges individuals face when their identities deviate from the expected norms. In an effort to break free from the limitations of conventional sexual identities, behaviours, and expectations, homosexuality can be a form of resistance to normative desires also. Success of the character Omana is that she was able to understand sexuality as fluid.

As Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* stated that the notion of a fixed, pre-existing sexual identity is a myth. Butler contends that, like gender, this dichotomy is a social construct, despite the claims of many feminists that sex is determined by nature and gender by culture. She argued that the standards of heteronormativity influence people's understanding and expression of their desires in addition to how they act gender. Butler's concept of gender trouble, which refers to the disturbances and instability of conventional gender performances, is a call to action. Omana grapples with the social stigma attached to non-heteronormative identities and she was having inhibition to expose the matter that her husband was a homosexual individual. Her suffering becomes more intense when we learn from the court proceedings that, the child born out of the marital relationship, Femi was demanded by her.

The societal pressure to conform to heteronormativity leads Mathew and Thankan to conceal their true sexual identities. This involves leading double lives and maintaining a facade to meet societal expectations, creating a constant internal struggle. Binary norms affect the characters' romantic and familial relationships and the most affected ones are their spouses. The fear of societal backlash leads to strained relationships, as Mathew attempts to navigate the complexities of his identity while maintaining a semblance of conformity.

After two decades when Omana was able to take the firm decision, Mathew was contesting in the byelection in his local Gramapanchayat, driven by the directives of his Leftist party. When he dives headfirst into the political arena as the election fervour intensifies, he was shattered due to the divorce petition. When the soft-spoken Mathew, expresses displeasure at not being informed about the legal suit earlier, Omana brushes it away by saying that she didn't have a choice.

Mathew's carefully constructed world includes his wife, Omana who has initiated divorce proceedings, alleging in her filings that her husband is a homosexual. This setups for Matthew opening

himself up to the world he had left behind, embracing the complexities of his identity and leading him to confront the societal prejudices that have long confined him. The fear of judgment becomes a significant factor influencing his actions and decisions. Binary norms contribute to the characters' mental health struggles. The constant pressure to conform and the fear of rejection leads to anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation that triggers Omana's internal struggles.

She wanted to leave not as a storm but as a breeze, holding no desire for revenge. She asks for nothing from her husband but the liberty to leave. Her petition cites marital cruelty, alleging denial of her conjugal rights by her husband. Women's sexual desires are viewed as something that can be compromised.

It was Omana who made self-discovery and acceptance possible for him also. She makes him realise that he need not be shameful for having unconventional sexual desire. Eventhough Omana is not a very powerful iron lady, her decisive power made him understanding his identity, which was conflicted due to societal expectations.

On the contrary Thankan's wife actively resist the binary constraints imposed by society. This resistance manifests in her choices, relationships, and expressions of identity, challenging the established norms and advocating for a more inclusive perspective. That is how she was able to leave her homosexual husband and marry a person of her choice and lead a successful married life. They remained good friends even after separation. Thankan even consoled her when their son was not able to accept her. She comforts herself saying that on day their son could understand her.

Omana, who has endured enough suffering, is unconditionally followed throughout the movie. Her calm demeanour and unwavering gaze give the impression that she has solved the scenario's intricate moral conundrum. By voting for Mathews in the by-election, the community demonstrates their solidarity by reassuring him. He is protected from the pathetic insults and hatred aimed at him by the family and the communist political party.

The sole hint of sensuality is given to us when Mathew's alleged partner, Thankan, softly runs his fingers over a bright red election billboard announcing Mathew's candidacy while inside his ancient car in the rain. The poster becomes into a container for repressed feelings, much like Omana's handbag, which she hands to Mathew before entering the witness box in court.

During the two decades Omana spent in the Devassy household, he has meticulously arranged his world in perfect grids, concealing his true self beneath this facade of order. It is from this grid that she seeks liberation. They filled the void left by the cruel absence of love in the early days of their marriage with routine. She becomes a dear daughter to her father-in-law and the keeper of Mathew's domestic life which also shapes his public image as a reliable man. His compassion towards her can also be taken as a mask to cover his son's sexual identity about which he was aware in his boyhood life itself. Eventhough he knew Mathew's sexual preferences Mathew's father forced him to marry Omana. He actually appears in court as a witness and testifies in her favour when Omana denies his request to withdraw the divorce case. This connection sustains her even when her daughter moves out to live in a hostel.

If not for the dramatic turn of the court case drawing public attention to the underlying unhappiness, one might never have assumed any discontent within their marriage. One might never have assumed any dissatisfaction within their life if it weren't for the court case's spectacular turn that brought the underlying sadness to the public's attention.

Eventhough there was no sexual affection between the couple, they had a bond of friendship, mutual respect and trust between each other which would have tempted her to the decision after such a long time. She must have spent months or years organizing this event, based on the stoic, distant manner she keeps throughout the story. She spills ice in court, not blood and fire. She eventually exits the house without shivering or turning around for a final glance. She leaves the house behind, much like a worker leaving an office she doesn't care about.

Omana deserves to have a happy life with someone who embraces her rather than one who must make do with her. Mathew deserves to live a life free from despair, one in which he can accept himself and the person he loves without worrying about being abandoned. Thankan deserves to be cherished, valued like gold, and not marginalized. He deserves to live a life that is not repulsive. At least from now on, the father can live with a guilt-free heart. Regardless of the stranded falsehood they

claimed to believe, the father-in-law and Omana's lovely link gradually leaves their hearts since they are ultimately choosing to be loyal to themselves.

Despite their tumultuous relationship, he and Mathew share a heart-to-heart at the end of the movie. Malayalam film industry has misguided the viewers, in the portrayal of the queer community by making characters subject of mockery or even inhumane homophobic beliefs. Such narratives are nothing other than mockery of true emotions or reinforcing the conventional idea that anything other than heterosexuality is not normal. Jeo Baby has done an authentic narration by presenting the dilemma of the wife of a homosexual man and how she came of the relationship and could lead a successful life thereafter.

Omana has a few but meaningful conversations and is a woman of subtle power. Through her actions rather than her words, she conveys a lot. Her repressed emotional battles make contemporary viewers question whether or not a woman should constantly hide their qualms behind a mask of respectable decency to protect other people. It was Omana's daring attempt to file the divorce petition that ended everything. When there are no indications of physical abuse, ending a marriage can be very much challenging for a woman. The strength of the lady is displayed during the court proceedings when she presented the numerical evidence that they had only four sexual encounters during their twenty-year marriage, which was an ample proof that Mathew is not sexually interested.

*Kathal-the Core* is a reflection of the society with its traditional view on marriage. The concept of love is restricted to marriage relationships that are accepted by the family. For example, in the first scene, a party worker suggests that Mathew support a parent who opposes his daughter marrying a foreigner. The immigrant isn't a suitable fit. But Mathew performs the exact opposite of what he was instructed to do. He requests that the father accept the affection of his daughter. His stance on love is unambiguous, possibly demonstrating that what he was unable to achieve for himself shouldn't be done again.

Omana performs the conventional roles of a wife, mother, daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law, and it is clear from the start that she is a devout and religious woman. She will stop at nothing to prioritize herself, even if it took her years to gain the strength to stand up for what she is entitled to. Despite her kindness and understanding nature, she no longer tolerates being taken advantage of. It is visible that Mathew stands with Omana's side when she is shown meeting another man. There is no uneasiness or awkwardness, underlining the emotional intimacy that exists between Mathew and Omana. Women in these kinds of marriages, like Omana, need a more significant apology. The film aims to convey her suffering, she took the giant step for him just as much as she did for herself. Omana refuses to back down in the face of resistance from almost everyone, including the church father, her own brother, and Mathew himself.

She has no intention of turning back now that she has made the decision to finally liberate herself from the patriarchal bonds that have held her down for so long. Every woman who defends herself exemplifies bravery and tenacity. Her strength resonates with every woman regardless of having a homosexual self.

Mathew Devassy is realistically portrayed as a man who rejects his homosexual identity in court and never displays insecurity in his masculinity. The film's treatment of the subject is to derive a better understanding of people who are still hesitant to accept same-sex relationships. Many such women could come out of their meaningless marital lives after the release of the movie. Therefore, the film's arguments are contextual awareness, it highlights the various aspects of the issues that result from a lack of acceptance. In a culture that demands that everyone have freedom in all spheres of life, this also leads to the start of the ground-breaking discussion about homosexual relationships and the agony endured by their wives.

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