

# The Role of Stardom in the Reception and Acceptance of Queer Cinema in Mollywood

Project Report

Submitted by

Niranjana K.A (SB22CE022)

Under the guidance of

Ms. Ansu Joseph

*In partial fulfillment of requirements for award of the degree Of Bachelor of Arts*

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for Excellence Accredited by NAAC with 'A++' Grade

Affiliated to Mahatma Gandhi University

Kottayam-686560

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## Declaration

I do affirm that the project “The Role of Stardom in the Reception and Acceptance of Queer Cinema in Mollywood” submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

20/03/2025



Niranjana K.A

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## Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled "The Role of Stardom in the Reception and Acceptance of Queer Cinema in Mollywood" by Niranjana K A is a record of bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ernakulam

20/03/2025

  
Ms. Ansu Joseph

Department of Communicative English

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## Abstract

This study examines how stardom affects a movie's reception and acceptance, with a particular focus on the Malayalam film *Kaathal: The Core*. This study also examines how various audience groups understand the movie in light of their cultural background, ideological stance, and views of stardom using the theories of audience reception theory and star theory. Using the viewpoints of various audience demographics, social media reactions, and discourse analysis of reviews, the study takes a qualitative research approach. In order to ascertain if Mammooty's, who is one among the pivotal actors in Malayalam Cinema, presence normalizes or overshadows queer tales. The study looks at how his superstar status affects viewers' interactions with the movie. The results indicate that media discourses about fame and queerness, cultural standards, and individual experiences all have a significant impact on audience response. The movie is praised for breaking new ground in Malayalam Cinema. This study adds to the larger conversations about how star power might influence social narratives in movies and affect how people watch and understand them.

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## CHAPTER 1-INTRODUCTION

Stardom plays a very important role in the cine world, creating an identity for the individuals and increasing the development of film industries worldwide. In India, stardom is much greater than just mere popularity and it often transforms into a cultural phenomenon. Stars are viewed as icons who can shape fan communities, audience behavior and societal norms rather than being seen as just actors. The actors are given a special status, stardom, which in-term gives them a larger-than-life persona and pushes them beyond the boundaries of their craft. This persona comprises a combination of on-screen talent, off-screen personality and an emotional bond with the audience. Stars like them have the ability to pull the audience to theatres regardless of the plot, direction or genre. Consistent performance, media representation, and fan loyalty have all contributed to this image of them.

### 1.1. Stardom and Indian Cinema

Stardom in Indian Cinema has always been tied to the audience's cultural and emotional needs. From the beginning, actors were viewed as aspirational figures, embodying qualities of heroism, morality, and charisma. This phenomenon is even evident now-a-days with stars like Rajinikanth, Vijay, Mahesh Babu, Prabhas and Big M's of Bollywood as they still ascend the thrones for decades and more. South Indian cinema, including Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu industries, are known for how they cherish their actors. Stars here are often seen as Godlike beings who are adored and worshipped by their followers' aka fans. This adoration is deeply intertwined with

regional pride and a strong portrayal of the characters they play on screen. Celebrations that take place during the release of the star's movies are examples of how stardom in South India goes beyond professional boundaries, making them household names and cultural icons.

### 1.2. Stardom and Malayalam Cinema

The Malayalam film industry has a distinct path when it comes to stardom. Mollywood, a film industry which is known for its realism and unique narrative style, the industry has always managed to balance star-centric movies with content-oriented cinema. However, this has not lessened the influence of stars like Mammooty and Mohanlal. Mammooty, titled as the "Megastar," is a true example of the idea of stardom in Malayalam cinema. His decade-long career, he was able to successfully balance commercially successful and critically acclaimed films. His ability to effortlessly embody diverse roles, from a conservative hero characters to vulnerable protagonists, we can clearly call him a versatile actor and a star. Similarly, Mohanlal, with his seamless performances and mass aura, has assembled a loyal fan base that celebrates his films, irrespective of their critical reception.

### 1.3. Queer Movies

Cinema being the greatest tool for revolution, representation of LGBTQ+ in movies has been the best decision ever. Over time, from representing them as side characters to showcasing their lives, struggles and triumphs by portraying them as main characters the evaluation of queer character representation have changed so beautifully. Globally queer representation took a turn as streaming platforms came into play by

offering more inclusive stories and amplifying voices of this marginalized community.

However, in India, queer representation was often linked with complexity, cultural taboos and legal frameworks. Early depiction was either as comic relief or villainous roles. Even though there are changes, movies are actually showing their lives but censorship and conservative minds of people do accept these narratives. Despite this, Indian Queer movies are gaining recognition through independent movies and streaming platforms. Malayalam Cinema was relatively slow in embracing queer narrative but has also represented them most beautifully in the recent years. With the cultural stigmas existing, malayalam movies often avoided discussing their lives, but with the change in the social perspectives have encouraged filmmakers to take a bold step in representing queer community.

From *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (1986), which subtly discussed this to *Njan Marykutty* (2018) brought transgender representation to the mainstream in Mollywood. With recent movies like *Moothon* (2019) and *Kaathal - The Core* (2023) showcased the queer relationships, gaining critical acclamation for the bold narratives. Despite the developments queer community is still in struggle for their actual representation, however the recent shift if used properly can gain a lot more acceptance for them.

#### 1.4. Stardom in reception and acceptance of queer movies

Stardom is one major factor which plays a crucial role in the reception of every movie. Audience are often interested in watching their favourite actor's movies which makes the star power a significant thing which can actually determine a movie's success.

With well-established or actors with greater fanbase takes up movies representing queer community can help increase visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ narratives among much wider Box-office wise too these movies have struggle over a long time, but with the entry of big stars it's easier. Their involvement has also played a role in shaping the public perception.

### 1.5. Scope of the Study

The study explores two different segments together, stardom and queer cinema, in the Malayalam film industry (Mollywood). The study spotlights how a superstar's involvement can influence audience reception, acceptance, and mainstream recognition for LGBTQ+ themes in cinema. The study also examines the impact of casting stars in LGBTQ+ films to increase its audience and popularity.

### 1.6. Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze the role of stardom in influencing audience perception of queer narratives.
2. To study the critical and public reception of Kaathal – The Core.
3. To analyze the extent to which a superstar's presence can overshadow or enhance the narrative and artistic merit of a film.
4. To examine the correlation between audience demographics and their perception of star-driven films.
5. To evaluate whether stardom influences both critical acclaim and box-office success.

## CHAPTER 2- LITERATURE REVIEW

Cinema has always been a reflection of society, evolving to mirror cultural and ideological shifts. While Malayalam cinema has undergone significant transformations over the years, one aspect that remains largely unexplored is the representation of queer identities.

Relating to the study, *On the Margins of Heterosexuality!* (2018) by Dr. Sony Jalarajan Raj, Dr. Rohini Sreekumar, and Dr. Swapna Gopinath. The study analyzes how Malayalam cinema has historically reinforced heteronormative narratives while placing queer subtexts on the periphery. The study critically examines how social structures, censorship, and audience reception have influenced the portrayal of queerness in Malayalam films. The study employs Queer Theory as its primary analytical framework. The study follows a qualitative and descriptive-analytical approach, primarily using textual analysis of Malayalam films that contain queer subtexts. The research concludes that Malayalam films normalize heterosexual practice as social order and marginalize queer subtext. (Raj, Sreekumar and Gopinath, 2018)

Media plays a crucial role in shaping societal perspectives, particularly in terms of representation, inclusivity, and awareness. "A Study About the Positive Portrayal of LGBTQ in Media" examines how media contributes to changing perceptions and reducing biases against LGBTQ individuals. The study is framed within queer theory and the ecological model. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, primarily using content analysis to examine films, advertisements, and TV programs that depict LGBTQ narratives. The study analyzes films such as *Moothon* (2019), *Njan Marykutty*

(2018), Mumbai Police (2013), and Ardhanari (2012), which showcase LGBTQ characters and themes. The study also examines advertisements from brands like Bhima Jewellers and Red Label Tea, which have made efforts to bring LGBTQ stories into mainstream media.. The research gathers insights from films, articles, and reviews to understand the impact of LGBTQ representation in Indian media. The study concludes that the media plays a transformative role in shaping public perceptions of LGBTQ individuals. The findings highlight the need for more nuanced and inclusive storytelling to ensure a truly diverse and accepting society. (Udayan et al, 2021)

Films are a powerful medium that not only reflect societal norms but also challenge them. The study "Representation of Homosexuality on Screen: A Comparative Study of the Malayalam Films Moothon and Kaathal-The Core as Representatives of Cultural Transition" explores how Malayalam cinema has evolved in depicting homosexuality. Traditional Malayalam films have often reinforced the alpha male stereotype, portraying men as strong, assertive, and emotionally resilient. The study draws from Queer Theory. The study employs a qualitative research approach, using a comparative analysis of the two films to explore the narrative, character development, and audience reception of LGBTQ portrayals in Malayalam cinema. The methodology is centered around textual analysis, drawing from film studies, queer theory, and cultural studies to interpret how these representations contribute to shifting societal attitudes towards homosexuality. The findings suggest that queer visibility in cinema not only reflects cultural shifts but also plays a role in shaping public discourse on gender and sexuality. (Prajoth and Priya, 2024)

## CHAPTER 3- THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

### 3.1- Introduction to methodology

A research paper's methodology section is where you explain the steps and methods you took to carry out your investigation. It acts as a roadmap for how you conducted your study and how you collected, examined, and interpreted information to find answers to your research questions or validate your theories. It describes "how" you conducted your investigation.

### 3.2. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative method to understand the impact of stardom in reception and acceptance of queer movies, with a specific focus on Kaathal – The Core and Mammooty's stardom. This qualitative study helps in giving a deeper understanding of media discourse and audience reception beyond just numerical calculations. This also explores nuanced audience perspectives that quantitative methods may overlook. This research uses a descriptive and analytical approach to understand the audience perspective. Data collection is primarily through film analysis, review analysis, media coverage and interviews, Social media discourse and other online discussions. By relying on these methods this study aims to give a deeper look into the role of stardom when it comes to queer narratives. This study does not rely on any numerical data instead it employs textual and thematic analysis on various sources.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

A close examination and reading of Kaathal - The Core to understand its narrative, themes involved, and Mammooty's queer character's portrayal in it.

The study critically examined audience reviews from platforms such as IMDb, Letterboxd, and newspaper/magazine critics. The study analyzed how Mammooty's stardom had a presence in the film's overall journey, how it was discussed in media interviews, promotional campaigns and articles. The study also focuses on audience perspectives on platforms like X, YouTube, and Instagram to understand general public opinion. The study Compares Kaathal - The Core with other queer films in Mollywood (Moothon, 2019) to assess how star power affects reception differently.

### 3.4 Data Analyze Methods

#### 1. Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is used to closely watch how Kaathal - The Core and its themes of queerness are represented in various forms of media and public discussion. This method is useful in identifying in-depth ideologies, star power and cultural narratives around and within the film. This includes examining dialogues, cinematography, character portrayal, and narrative structure to understand how queerness is constructed within the film, identifying key themes in discussions among public discussions which includes praise, resistance, controversy or shifts in perception regarding queer representation in Malayalam cinema.

#### 2. Reception analysis

Reception analysis focuses on how various audiences perceive and react to Kaathal - The Core, specifically in relation to Mammooty's stardom and the film's queer narrative. This method helps in understanding the diversity of audience responses based

on their social, cultural, and ideological positions. Audience Reviews and Social Media Discussions were primarily used from platforms like IMDb, Letterboxd and social media. Analyzing the comment sections on reviews also was included.

### 3.5 Theoretical Framework

#### 1. Star Theory

Star theory refers to the idea of understanding film stars as viewed as cultural texts. Dyer argues that stars are constructed through films, publicity, and audience perception which comes out from their social values and ideologies, not just their performances. Mammooty's stardom and his transition from hegemonic masculinity to nuanced roles can be analyzed using this framework. This can explain how Mammooty's stardom influences the reception of *Kaathal - The Core*, affecting audience expectations and acceptance of its queer themes. (Richard Dyer, 1979)

#### 2. Audience Reception Theory

The theory was developed by Stuart Hall in 1980. This theory helps us understand how various audiences interpret something. It suggests that audiences decode media texts differently based on their backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. This can help us examine how different segments of the audience (fans, general viewers, critics) perceive Mammooty's role and the film's queer themes. (Stuart Hall, 1980)

### 3.6 Limitations of the study

The study primarily focuses on Kaathal - The Core, limiting this study to be generalized about queer acceptance in Bollywood. The study does not include quantitative audience surveys, and solely rely on textual and thematic analysis. The study mostly analyzes reviews, media coverage, and audience reactions, its interpretations can be biased. The reception of films can evolve over time and this study takes the immediate responses to the movie Kaathal – The Core. The study relies only on limited media articles, social media discussions, and reviews without direct interviews or interactions with audiences or industry professionals.

## CHAPTER 4- ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Kaathal - The Core

Stardom has been at the center of reception and acceptance of films, creating audience expectations, helping gain box office returns, and critical acclaim. For the Malayalam film industry, Mammooty is among the most iconic and respected actors with a career spanning more than four decades. His ability to select different scripts and reinvent himself have made him remain in the run through various generations. The 2023 movie Kaathal – The Core is a unique case study to analyze the reception and how Mammooty's stardom impacted it. Kaathal is distinct from his typical mass-entertainer characters, which showcases the vulnerable side of a person, unconventional role opposite to expectations with his star image.



Mammooty has used his stardom fundamentally in bridging commercial and artistic cinema. His imposing screen presence, captivating performances, and profound harmony with audiences have earned him a devoted fan following. His star image has developed over the years, he has played diverse roles—action heroes, historical characters and what not. The audience's readiness to accept any film featuring

Mammootty is so real with the release of Kannur squad, Bramayugam and Kaathal – The Core.



Kaathal went against all those expectations. Starring Mammootty in the lead role, directed by Jeo Baby and written by Adarsh Sukumaran and Paulson Skaria, the movie is about the topic of LGBTQ+ relationships, which is often seen by people as something unusual in cinema. The movie's reception, thus, offers a valuable perspective on how stardom can assist or test audience acceptance when a superstar acts in an unusual role. When this movie was initially announced, it created a great deal of interest among the audience as Mammootty was part of it. The teaser and the poster of the announcement raised expectations further, with cinema lovers and the actor's fans all wanting to know what made the megastar choose this script, yes this was widely discussed in social media. With the subject being a very sensitive topic, there was gossip on how the movie would be received, will the reaction be opposite of what a Mammootty film got, particularly within a society where mainstream representation of LGBTQ+ is still seen as an issue.

As the movie got released, Kaathal was well-received with critical appreciation for its bold storytelling and Mammooty's shaded character performance. As anticipated his presence did give the film a larger audience, it also did satisfy the viewers who were used to seeing him in conventional hero-centric roles. As opposed to a mass entertainer that shows him as a larger-than-life image, Kaathal needed an alternate shift when it comes to engagement of audience, one which needed viewers to pay keen attention to the emotional depth or experience of the film instead of merely focusing on his star power.



Talking about the critical side, Kaathal was appreciated for the delicate treatment of the sensitive topic. Mammooty's willingness to play a role like that was also widely appreciated by all, including his fans who loved him in hero-centric films. Critics pointed out the way in which his acting raised the graph of the movie's storyline, demonstrating how celebrity could be employed to bring about socially sensitive topics.

Commercially, the film did reasonably well at the box office but did not make the huge figures, as of a Mammooty-film. This difference in box office success implies that even though his popularity created initial interest, the orthodox nature of the subject discussed in the film was not well-received by the general audience. The success of the

film was hence qualitative, reshaping discourses in Malayalam cinema and not doing wonders in box-office. On the other hand similar movies like Moothon (2019), does not receive wider acceptance or a commercial hit as compared to Kathal: The core even though it was critically acclaimed for its storyline and performance.

However, social media had a significant impact on how the film was received. People on social media platforms such as X, Instagram, and YouTube shared comments both in praise and with mixed views. It was also seen that Mammooty's fans were divided, some commended him on his bold decision in taking this sensitive subject at the peak of his career, while others found it quite difficult to blend his star image with a flawed character. Yet, people in the industry and film critics widely praised his risk-taking ability, with many stating Kaathal as a milestone in Malayalam cinema.

The movie also brought about a huge amount of debate regarding how a superstar-starrer can be able to approach social issues. Some remarked that this movie being picked up by an actor like Mammooty, with his stardom made many discussions regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion in mainstream Indian cinema. As opposed to other indie movies that do not always make their way to larger audiences, Kaathal gained that popularity because of his stardom, making the issue be heard on a greater level.



The Kaathal example shows the merits and also demerits of stardom in cinema reception. On the one hand, Mammooty's inclusion ensured visibility and credibility for the movie, which became a topic of discussion in the mainstream cinema section. Without his star status, Kaathal would have found it very difficult to reach this large audience or attract enough media attention to this movie. At the same time, stardom was also given some challenges. Small segments of the audience found it hard to believe that a superstar is doing a role that was opposite of the conceived traditional masculinity. In contrast to mass cinema where heroism is shown by physical strength, Kaathal offered the audience to relate to a character in an emotional and vulnerable manner. This change in expectation gave a mixed result, while critics and film enthusiasts welcomed the film, another section of traditional audiences remained detached.

Mammooty's decision to act in Kaathal speaks a lot about the way stardom has been conceived by him and his enthusiasm in giving visibility to unconventional stories. Although the film was not a commercial super-hit, the influence it had on the representation and inclusivity in Malayalam films has been considerable. It proved that the presence of a superstar can make socially conscious films big, despite going against the expectations of viewers.

#### 4.1 Findings of the study

The findings of this study spotlighted the importance of stardom in acceptance and reception of queer movies in mollywood. The study also finds out that stardom

influences both appreciation and box-office success. As we analyzed Kaathal – The Core, it's evident that Mammooty's star power did have a major role in its overall reception and a superstar's presence can overshadow or enhance the narrative and artistic merit of a film. Even though the movie receive a wide public reception the variation of audience demographics, background and values give a restriction to its success when compared to other conventional star movies.

## CHAPTER 5-CONCLUSION

The study examines the undeniable influence of stardom in shaping the reception and acceptance of films. Mammooty's role in Kaathal is an example of how an actor's established reputation and stardom can significantly influence audience engagement, acceptance of unconventional narratives, and overall film success. Even though the artistic merit of a film remains crucial, this research ensures that the cultural and economic power of stardom plays an equally significant role in determining the reach and impact of a film. If the industry continues to evolve, understanding the dynamics of stardom, Mollywood can provide valuable insights for other filmmakers and audiences regarding LGBTQ+ community.

The Kaathal case is an interesting illustration of how stardom affects the reception and acceptance of a film. Even though it may generate initial popularity and credibility, the eventual acceptability of a film continues to rely on whether the audience's perception of how a star's image is intertwined with the thematic depth of a film. The fact that Mammooty was open to playing different kinds of roles clearly indicates the fact that Malayalam cinema is constantly changing and evolving, with this stardom is increasingly being reimagined beyond the box office returns. The study gives an insight that established stars can influence the audience's receptiveness to experimental cinema.

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