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## **Pain as a Queer Feeling: An Affective Analysis of the Queer Malayalam Movie *Moothon* (The Elder One)**

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### **Abstract:**

Human emotions are often perceived in opposition to intellect, as though they exist beneath the faculties of thought and reason. To be emotional is equated with being fragile and affected by others. Darwin considered emotionality as a primitive and flawed element of human existence. Among all the emotions, pain plays an integral part in human experiences and has the power to inflict an enduring mark on the self. The experience of pain affects one in ways that shape fundamental reality and alter one's world perception. People tend to consider pain as an inevitable part of one's existence, and in such a context, it is vital to ask whether some bodies endure more pain than others. Because of the existing social structures and power relations, bodies often become the site of discrimination and violence. In such a context, the movie *Moothon* emerges as one of the poignant films in Malayalam that experiments with a narrative centred around gay and non-normative lead characters whose lives are perpetually at stake. The plot deals with the narrative of a fourteen-year-old child who absconds to Mumbai in search of their lost brother, Akbar, also known as Moothon. The avant-garde nature of the movie lies in the portrayal of forbidden love, intimacy and the eventual demise of the queer couple. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the paper aims to analyse the lead queer character, Akbar, to understand what pain does to a queer body and how it shapes their relationship with the world around them.

**Keywords:** Pain, Emotion, Queer, Gay, Sara Ahmed, Malayalam Movie.

## Introduction

Malayalam Cinema has gained wide recognition for its recent phase in developing thematically rich and experimental movies. This shift results from the significant digression that happened since 2010 with the emergence of a group of young filmmakers whose primary focus was to feature movies that reflect the raw social realities. The new wave movement in Malayalam cinema has turned the general focus from stardom to the plot, to the perennial life experiences, and the everyday realities of the characters. These cinemas more often challenge and critique the societal notions of masculine ideals, gender norms, and the marginalisation of minority communities. This period also witnessed women's prominent presence in front and behind the camera in significant roles as directors, producers, and lead characters. Geetu Mohandas is a notable director and scriptwriter who has won international awards and achievements. Her directorial debut movie, *Liar's Dice*, received two National awards, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, and was also chosen as India's official entry for the 87th Academy Awards. As a global filmmaker, Sundance Film Lab mentored her movie *Moothon*, which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2019. *Moothon* is considered one of the striking movies of the new wave era in the Malayalam film industry for its content-driven narrative with gay representation. In one of her interviews, Geetu Mohandas states that it is not the gender she wants the audience to witness but rather the pure experience of love between the characters. Thus, *Moothon* becomes the first movie in Malayalam that portrays a queer love between two men and, subsequently, the trajectory of their relationship in a normalised fashion without stereotyping them.

The movie *Moothon* has explored not just a single gay character but an array of queer and marginalised identities. The central theme is the quest, a search for belonging; thus, the prominent characters use all their force to run out of a society that succumbs and chains them for their difference. Throughout the movie, the quest becomes their motive for survival. The film opens up with the character Mulla, a 14-year-old child from Lakshadweep, who appears in a boy's clothing only to shock the audience and reveal that Mulla is biologically female. The sole aim in Mulla's life is to find their lost brother, Akbar (*Moothon*). When Mulla realises that Akbar is in Bombay, he indulges in a dangerous voyage to find him. Space becomes a prominent element in the movie, with Lakshadweep and Bombay being two contrasting locations. Upon reaching Bombay, the child was caught and transported to a police station and later to a government-funded orphanage. The movie also unravels the sexual abuse that happens in the boy's orphanages. When the warden locks Mulla in a room to exploit him, Mulla

forcefully wriggles out of his grip and escapes to Kamathipura to meet Rosi, who is a sex worker.

Akbar and Mulla have their first encounter with each other in the street at night. Akbar appears as a local goon involved in the drug mafia and child trafficking. After abducting Mulla, Akbar realises that he is a native of the island and assigns him the task of delivering the drug packages. Mulla decides to escape from Akbar's gang when he loses all those drug packages. Right before the escape, Mulla attempts to contact Amina, for whom islanders think Akbar has left. During this escape, the reality unfolds before Akbar when he realises that Mulla is his biological sister.

The movie's second half deals with the flashback of Akbar and Ameer on the island of Lakshadweep. A complete contrast in Akbar's character is visible. Akbar is portrayed as a cheerful guy, a favourite of the islanders, and an expert in the traditional Islamic art form, Kuthu Ratheeb. It is a ritualistic art form that inflicts pain upon one's body by cutting the flesh with a dagger. While performing the Kuthu Ratheeb in a high euphoric state, Akbar catches a glimpse of Ameer, followed by a narrative that unfolds a beautiful progression of two men falling in love. Being a mute, Ameer finds himself being understood and heard by Akbar. Mokkil states that "A sexual relationship acquires social sanction as a legitimate couplehood only when it stakes a claim in the public sphere through an act such as marriage or living together. The publicness of sex becomes intimately tied to the spaces that a couple occupies" (Mokkil 15). However, in the case of Akbar and Ameer's relationship, their love dares not to speak, and as a result, when the family forces Ameer to marry a girl, they are left devastated in pain. Ameer's muteness resembles the silence of their relationship. Finally, Ameer gathers the courage to ask Akbar to elope with him to Bombay. Akbar, who is yet to come to peace with his sexual orientation, stumbles in fear at Ammer's intimation, and thus, he rejects Ameer's proposal. The devastated Ameer leaves home with an unbearable pain that leads to suicide.

The scene immediately shifts to the anarchic landscape of Kamathipura, where Akbar, the notorious goon of the town, has been transformed by the presence of his sibling, Mulla. The motive to protect the kid made Akbar approach Latheef, a transwoman with whom Akbar had an affair in the past. The interaction between Lateef and Mulla is significant because Latheef tells Mulla that it is safer to abide by the norms of society rather than fight against it and perish.

Salim, the most trusted help and friend of Akbar, deceives him by abducting Mulla, who escaped from Salim only to be sold to a sex trafficking network. In the end, when Akbar

struggles to find Mulla, the scene suddenly shifts to a shot of his demised body lying on the floor. The film concludes with a scene that depicts Mulla in a brothel, wearing a saree and jasmine flowers in their hair. The movie tends to end with a ray of positivity by depicting a shot of Mulla gazing at their friend with a smile. Moreover, the friend's presence brings a sense of hope for Mulla.

According to Tharayil, sexuality becomes the conveyor belt on which all kinds of social anxieties shift. (Tharayil 77) It is Akbar's queer desire for another man that creates a whirlpool of social anxiety within himself and the world around him. This tension generates a space to explore and unveil the characters' emotional terrain by emphasising the forbidden queer love. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that pain is physical discomfort and a political force that tames and shapes the individual identity and their relationship to the world. The paper intends to analyse the trajectory of Akbar through the concept of intensification of pain as proposed by Ahmed and explore how pain operates and affects the identity and broader queer individual's (Akbar) life.

### **The Intersection of Pain and Queer Identity within Akbar.**

In her work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores the relationship between the self and its intimate connection with the socio-cultural and political world. According to her, emotion, just like the self, is not an independent entity but is shaped and emerges into existence prominently by contact with the outer world. She states that "emotions shape the very surface of the bodies, which takes shape through the repetition of action over time as well as through orientation towards and away from others." (Ahmed 4) Pain is a poignant emotion of human existence, whereas Freud indicates it is crucial for forming the body as a material and living entity. "According to the International Association for the Study of Pain, the experience of pain involves an association between elements of sensory events and an aversive feeling state, where attributing meaning to unnecessary sensory events contributes to the experience of pain." (Ahmed 23)

Ahmed explains the intensification of pain, stating that pain does not merely reflect a physical state that we experience but actively constructs the perception of our bodies within social spaces. Thus, the pain creates an intense impression upon the body, and by doing so, one recognises the body and the self as distinguished from others. Furthermore, she states that through this "intensification of pain, the bodies and the world materialise, and the effect of

boundary, surface, and fixity is produced." (Ahmed 24) The individual's realisation of oneself as a being separated from others is both a source of liberation and a locus of tragedy.

The movie's title character, Moothon, also known as Akbar, explores the self and, eventually, what constitutes identity through the interactions and experiences with the outer world. Even though the movie's motive lies in the quest for a sense of belonging, the audience also witnesses the emotional terrains of these characters. Pain is the catalyst that pervades throughout the movie and exists in every aspect of Akbar. In the film, Akbar is known by three names. The first is "Moothon", a name Mulla uses to address him. Next is "Akbar", which denotes the identity of a charming young man from the island; the name indicates Akbar's pleasant past life. Lastly, "Bhai" denotes the don who left the island and shredded off his roots to his native after his lover's demise. Each name signifies different identities that reflect the various phases of Akbar's life.

Akbar is the artist of Kuthu Ratheeb, an Islamic ritual performed by inflicting cuts on the body. The devotees believe that even though the performer inflicts injury on the body, he will not be injured as he is the devotee who has received permission from the god. Akbar, being an Islamic devotee and the famous Ratheeb performer on the island, pain materialises both literally and metaphorically in his life. Akbar's friend introduces him as a great performer of this ritual, and people are awed by witnessing his performance. Ameer, who later turns out to be Akbar's romantic interest, is introduced to the movie while Akbar performs the ritual. The acute physical pain in this scene is a metaphorical indication of how the intense experience affects Akbar. The first glance they share captivates them into each other, and the experience of the intense physical pain induced by the injury forces Akbar to realise a sense of the self. At this moment, the realisation of his sexual identity happens to Akbar. The metaphorical manifestation of the pain affects Akbar, and through this sensation, he becomes aware of the self, a body that is different from the other. Ahmed states that "Through the intensification of pain, the bodies and the world materialise, and the affect of boundary, surface, and fixity is produced." (Ahmed 24) Moreover, Akbar becomes aware of the truth of his own sexual identity.

Akbar encounters the next phase of intense pain when he realises his love for Ameer is disowned by his family and the world around him. While performing the ritual, Akbar, for the first time, experiences the pain. He cuts himself severely, and he ends up in the hospital, where he reveals to Moosa, his best friend, that for the first time in his life, he happened to experience the pain of the dagger that penetrates his flesh. The pain that Akbar explains here is not a mere

physical discomfort but the turmoil that he undergoes emotionally. This pain is the ramification of the love he desires for another man and the struggle of accepting his own sexual identity as "other" from the rest of the world. In one instance, Akbar states to Moosa that being a best friend, he thought Moosa would try to understand him, unlike others. The same holds for the family where Akbar's mother, being the closest companion other than Moosa, also fails to understand her son. As Elizabeth Grosz states, "Homophobic oppression targets not what one is but what one does (as opposed to other types of oppression such as racial oppression)" (Grosz 194). Moreover, they grapple not with Akbar's identity but rather with the act of love that aligns with the wrong body. When Akbar's mother finds out Akbar and Ameer on the beach, she weeps and strikes him. Without any other choice, Akbar endures the pain of being invisible and othered by his loved ones.

Ahmed is concerned about what pain does to the bodies who experience it. The characteristic of its unrepresentability makes it one of the loneliest emotions that cannot be understood and felt by others. The pain of Akbar makes him lonely; he shuts off from the outer world and the people from it. The pain turns to its intense state when Ameer takes his own life. On his wedding night, Ameer meets Akbar to convince him to be his partner. However, Akbar refuses the proposal because of the inherent fear and the pain of homophobia directed towards him by family and friends. Nevertheless, when he reconsidered his choice, Ameer was no longer alive. The scene of Akbar discovering Ameer's demised body is not depicted in the movie as it indicates the unrepresentability of pain. As Ahmed articulates, "describing pain through medical language or metaphor that creates relations of likeness seems inadequate in the face of the feeling." (Ahmed 22) The intensification of the pain that Akbar had to endure because of his sexual identity changes him. The love plot of Akbar and Ameer is depicted as a flashback in the movie, only to reveal why Akbar turns out to be a don and a drug addict. (1)

The metamorphosis of Akbar into a criminal happened not just overnight but through his constant endurance with systematic othering and erasure of his identity. According to Ahmed, "the recognition of a sensation as being painful also involves the reconstitution of bodily space, as the reorientation of the bodily relation to that which gets attributed as the cause of the pain" (Ahmed 24). The recognition of the pain made him run away from not just society and the island but from the self.

## Conclusion

Ahmed defines pain as an unintelligible and lonely experience, and despite it being very personal, pain as an emotion and part of lived experience is continuously evoked in public discourse, demanding both collective and individual responses. The pain endured by Akbar is not just a personal experience derived from his life's circumstances but a reality forced upon a broader queer community as it is closely associated with the pre-existing power structures. Moreover, thus the pain experienced by the queer individual becomes inherently political.

As the concept of queerness is historically associated with pain and suffering, the movie, *Moothon* becomes a vivid portrayal of the world rooted in heteronormativity and systematic violence against queer bodies. The film is remarkable for its lucid representation of multiple queer lead characters who, at different trajectories of their lives, were forced to reconcile with heteronormativity and subsequently face their miserable fates. Ahmed, through her work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, tends to leave a note by stating that as a heterogeneous society, the vital task is to acknowledge that we cannot fully understand the pain we do not experience. However, it is our responsibility to strive for a different kind of cohabitation where one can co-exist with the realisation that we are not the same. This position opens up the possibility for individuals like Akbar to lead a life with dignity and freedom.

## End Note:

[1] In *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed indicates that the unhappy endings in queer literature are not just a sign of withholding moral approval for queer lives. However, instead, it allows us a space to consider how unhappiness circulates within and around queer lives and how they become a crucial aspect of queer genealogy.

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