

## Negotiating Queer Identities through the lens of '*Naanu Avanalla, Avalu*'

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### Abstract

Spatial negotiation often leads to identity formation and queer identities are formed similarly through this process. The film '*Naanu Avanalla, Avalu*' explores this negotiation and identity formation. It uses theoretical frameworks like Foucault's, Butler's and Reed's idea of space inclusion. This paper uses an approach that would be grounded in the field of queer studies that studies such queer cultures and their everyday negotiations leading to an identity that they form. This paper studies and explores the way the film makes it queer the way it is to show us how this negotiation ends up and whether there is actually an identity formation or some contribution to our understanding of queerness and identity.

Key Words: identity formation, spatial negotiation, queer, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler.

The past decade saw a rise in LGBTQ movements bringing about concerns the queer community was fighting for. This brought about a significant movement through the art form of filmography that also saw a peak in queer films. However, it is just recent that regional Indian cinema has also taken a stand by showcasing the trans community, trying to tell artists and the audience to be inclusive of this variety because the films were based more on the gay section of the community.

The negotiation that each of the sections of the community has is different because of the experiences that is varied. Thus, it becomes essential to study how each of these sections negotiate with space and time that is pertinent to them at that moment. Therefore, this negotiation of everyday experience sets an identity formation that even though they are marginalised, they are rebelling silently through their natural ways of behaviour and interests.

The terms LGBT are related in that it has been used to correlate sexual desire and identity and that could only be possible through the spatial and temporal negotiation. This is also the reason why sexuality as a desire is looked upon as a field of resolving problems. Negotiation is grabbing that inclusivity the LGBT is fighting for.

Some of the important interrogations would be to understand the time factor the queerness of a character in any novel, film or art work is being investigated. It also accounts for whether the spatiality of the work and of the character adds to the queerness and to the documentation itself as a whole. Another one would be to explore if literatures of struggles always is in relation to the spatiality and temporality. Most significant to this paper is to examine and evaluate the localised forms of literature and observing whether there is a representation of the rural experiences and its inclusivity in queer literatures. It is also to judge the position of regional literatures in testing and investigating experiences that help one in forming an identity and in turn forming a literature that is not only regional but that which is extremely subjective just how two identities cannot be the same.

To arrive at a fundamental aim, '*Naanu Avanalla, Avalu*' (I am not He, I am She) is a Kannada film that negotiates heteronormativity spatiality and temporality that forms a queer identity which leads to self acceptance. It is to explore and evaluate this change in identity and

understanding one's sexuality and desire through negotiation which is not just an act of rebellion but in the doing that becomes real and does eventually become a part of the identity.

It is always wondered that queer films have a separate film festival for instance, The Bangalore Queer Film Festival screens hundreds of queer films from all over the world. It can be explored to see how the celluloid journey of queer films have been to see how much of this negotiation has changed that has led to not just a character's or a film's road to self acceptance and acceptance socially. We can say that this negotiation is kind of a "site of contestation with an underlying consciousness of conflicts, not as utopian loci of disconnection with reality" (Choudhuri, 2009)

This paper in exploring and evaluating the transgression of the queer community in Indian regional cinema per se can be grounded in queer studies. Queer Studies in itself is a recent phenomenon and which is why films like *Naanu Avanalla*, *Avalu* is a film that needs to be studied to see if it fits the viewership and meaning of its purpose in contemporary times. Therefore, the paper lends itself to a theoretical framework like queer theory and poststructuralism.

Past literature in the area of queer spaces exist in volumes but needs more research to develop new ideas, constructions and such negotiations which adds to any field that holds or gives significance to queer spaces. This development will help add knowledge to existing research areas and further research will help improve or build on the areas overlooked. Being a very fluid spectrum of a topic, it becomes essential to keep upgrading, improvising the ideas revolving around queer spaces as being transient and open to news trajectories which is easily retrievable from literary contexts more.

A reading of all the literatures for this paper tells us that space negotiation is integral and is connected to one's identity forming processes and other identity markers like race, gender representation of genders and how they are portrayed, how this affects a certain section of society to believe that it is the only way one has to negotiate and what gets portrayed. The literatures also show us how cultural markers have led to that space negotiation changing, where the LGBTQ community never understood their spaces but actually built boundaries and consciousness in their daily transaction with that space only to make a space of their own which they are not aware of themselves. **Butler** in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* gives us the idea that gender and queerness comes from our behaviour and what we do (performance, every day) becomes our role. Therefore, telling us space can determine one's behaviour and role and vice versa. We can also tell that certain space negotiation has undergone changes in the way negotiation has been dealt with and that negotiation of spaces in general have a cultural (experiential) implication almost as if it is a product of the culture that needs consumption. This gives us the assumption to work with the idea that identity has specific markers where their function is seen in these spaces that is imbued with power relations. The power relations tell us that these spatial positions negotiate with reality but even more so in texts and contexts as a space the negotiation is often overlooked and is studied to see if it is connected to reality or the society.

However, this queer space can be contradictory at times (Reed, 1996). Queer space with its negotiation and its spatial character itself is so fluid in nature but the entire discourse of the queer "space" itself then arrests that fluidity making no flexible negotiation possible, it becomes another space. Queer space then is just like any other space but becomes those viewpoints with

which one looks at the spaces differently. For **Reed**, it is sexuality that exceeding the spatial boundaries. To understand it better, there is no queer in the space or unqueer in the space. The space exists for the queer people but is not queer in its state. Therefore, we can clearly establish that literatures for this paper stand on both sides of the ledge but is a discourse in the sense that it explores this space but does not in the real sense of terms, creates a space.

The film under study for this paper, *Naanu Avanalla, Avalu* (Translation: I am not He, I am She) is a Kannada Indian Film directed by B.S Lingadevaru does talk about this everyday negotiation the central character faces which finally ends up with an identity the character wished to have majorly questioning whether he negotiated the space around him to give space to the queerness in that space or whether he negotiated or brought the queerness out of him. (Reed, 1996)

To process through this, we shall see some examples from the film which is the primary text and see if these questions hold some significance. The instances from the text shall be translated and paraphrased. Some would include direct references with no dialogues from the film but as scenic descriptions.

*“What is it Madhesha”?*

*“Sir, Include me also in this game.”*

*“The girls are playing here, the boys are playing in the other corner, go and play with them.”*

*“What is this Madhesha? Instead of sitting and studying, why are you wearing girl’s clothes and acting like a girl?”*

*“Father, there is a drama happening at school, I was practising for that and in that my role is of a girl’s.”*

*“What drama is this”? If you are doing a role, do a role that is suitable for you as a boy, do a brave role, instead of that like the eunuchs you are doing this role. You are a boy, study well and you should become a big officer, If I see you like this anymore, I have no other choice but to kill you.”*

This is putting together two instances that are related. This directly deals with identity formation because gender is an identity marker. The idea that shifting from a boy to girl genders is looked down upon as unnatural is negotiating that space to form an Identity that Madhesha wants to become.

The idea that one gender has the “other” as two options that male/female binary exists and nothing else. Here, the hegemonic naturalising of these genders and often mixing it up with one’s sex is seen where Biology is often relied upon to claim that beyond these two points there is no other in between- ness. (Berry, 2012)

**Butler**’s idea that “language is often used to talk about the materiality of the body and that it is fully informed by social constructions of gender.”

However, from the film, we see that the central character Madhesha is not fighting for being equal in gender or to treat gender the same, rather he is seen making humanistic remarks. A scene where after he has his sex change procedure, he wants to work because he is educated is to show that wanting to be a woman is not a gender issue, rather it is a human condition that is not ready to accept such spectral changes. This is also the reason why this negotiation and queer identity that he deals with ends in self acceptance because it is not a gender issue.

*“Tomorrow, I have to go and take my son to the hospital.”*

*“Having said that, I remembered wanting to tell you something, my wife was telling the other day that your son acts like a woman, instead of taking him to the hospital, take him to a temple, perform a curing ritual, it'll all be fine.”*

This instance deals with surrounding discourses in a heteronormative society that any LGBTQ person has to deal with. The idea that heteronormative behaviour is a necessary condition to be human but otherwise it is considered an illness that needs a tantric cure. This becomes a point of contesting against a rigid idea and therefore for any LGBTQ person this is a general negotiation of the space that naturalises and normalises certain behaviour.

It can also be seen in Michel Foucault's argument that the western understanding of sexuality that this normalcy and deviance of certain behaviour is more or less connected with an underlying power which is seen to be in a sense to them as productive rather than repressive. The idea that taking Madhesha to the temple would be productive to make the better of him and turn him back to a man.

This is also comes from a very Postcolonial understanding of the way the colonizers implemented laws for the men in India. Whoever they found to be effeminate were deemed as unfit to rule, they only saw the categories of gender in binaries and this film is seen refuting that claim. Thus, the idea that one's sexuality can be controlled (Stoler, 1997) shows how colonial and the power that is so centralised that became embedded in the colonised soil.

To point out, investigations have been done to show in various ways the manner in which the colonial power has stigmatised, marginalised trans identities and practices (Nanda 2000, Patel 2002) we can say that an understanding of these identities and the way they were perceived is one sided and is the major claim that this “construction of “normal” sexuality was extremely narrow.”

This then connects to our major point which is the LGBTQ community negotiating through such heteronormative spaces to form an identity they want to form becomes difficult when societal expectations are not met. This then reinforces the idea of the binary male/female. The expectations bind these people who struggle to form an identity that deals with their bodies and in turn in their minds their identity, it is certainly forming some kind of character formation with which one associates.

There are recurrent scenes of Madhesha dressing up with clothes that women wear which makes him feel relieved and happy being himself because he identifies himself that way and he wishes to be. The idea that we do gender and that gender is in the doing, in the act of it (Butler, 2004) is what the whole spectral idea comes from that there is nothing fixed, it is all in the air just the way Derrida says with his ideas of deconstructing the binaries, breaking it away, similarly, breaking away from this heteronormative culture and bringing in a queer culture that whatever we do, and behave becomes what we are is more poststructuralist in nature.

Another significant spatial negotiation that happens in queer identity formation is the idea of urban atmosphere that gives Madhesha what he wants to become. The urban space then becomes a meta space in this whole space negotiation multiplying in various enfoldings. It is like the gyre that endlessly goes around time and again, it is just the same way that Madhesha find

himself going from different spaces to finally reach that one point that it's no longer a space, but a scape that is of his body and his mind, "Queerness is constituted not in space, but in the body of the queer." (Reed, 1996)

This brings us to the idea of space. Identity is often connected to the space one belongs to is what is assumed and that assumption usually works in certain ways but not always. To get to that space of self acceptance, Madhesha had to go through various process, those processes are spaces that he fought through, refuted, accepted to get through the many identity complexes he has. Therefore, it becomes essential to look at how urban environment more strikingly shapes one's identity here.

There is a constant juggle between public and private spaces in the film, the idea that people are seeing and observing Madhesha's behaviour changes and the way he is himself when he is private. This is a complexity of the urban environment which he already gets and consumes even before stepping into the urban complexity reinforcing Reed's point. The public/ private then again becomes binaries, this urban complexity deals with that, therefore his going away to an urban setting had to make him deal with more spatial problems which is so "contradictory, fragmented" (Stanciu,2014). The city is seen as a varying experience of multiple meanings and factors to identity formation and performance. Therefore, the line between the binary public/ private is so thin that queer city cultures allow this intermingling to happen but because it is not fixed, it is rather a mass of unsolved problems which complicates it more.

The impact of an urban space gets reflected in the existence of whoever lives in it thus telling us or interpreting to us what it had been and what it is to become (Stanciu,2014) very parallel to Madhesha's position in the film.

The urban environment allows one to explore their individual bodies, this is also seen from the way Madhesha upon moving to Bangalore is a changed person altogether. The exploration of the unknowable that is typical of the urban setting. The idea to know happens the other way when Madhesha is so inquisitive about the transgenders and their community. When he goes to the area where they belong as a family away from the “public”, he knows some part of urban that is unknowable to this same “public” thereby winning over that space. It essentially subverts what is naturalised and normative structures of sexuality.

Identity markers that are known such as race, gender, sex, etc is reinforced time and again, but name as an identity marker attached to one’s gender is explore in this film. Names as identity marker is seen as bigger ideological ploy that comes double bind with sex and gender and race. The scene where in Madhesha now changed to Vidhya goes searching for a job is seen being rejected not being a woman, not converting to a woman as the reasons but because the name on his documents no longer matches his changed identity therefore putting him in another negotiating spot of identity. While no research has been found accessible on this idea, this clearly tell us that the identity is not related to the body but relates more to a power stricken ideology. The fact that he got his sex changed is possible but the idea that society cannot change his name is a bigger identity problem that puts his act to question whether he should have remained a man. One way of his acceptance throughout is seen when the transgender family and community is seen teaching Madhesha how to clap, when this behaviour gets appreciated, regarded and recognised, he form an identity that is positive to his identity that is in his mind. A behaviour all along that was not accepted gets finally accepted. This is also because of the

private space allowing that to happen to sink in deeper into the identity of the person wanting to be.

To conclude, the film makes basic points to understand and tell us that identity markers are beyond the body. The idea that the movie is titled 'I am not He, I am She' is that search for one label that would make the central character feel belonged to that community or the urban space they are a part of, to have a name just like anybody else.

Space negotiation may not always lead to identity formation but it does lead to self acceptance in a way that one comes to terms with one's body, mind and expression which was possible only when Madhesha moved to an urban space.

The idea that spaces make identities rather it is identities or the act of making an identity that makes the space. If the queer community never would have hosted the pride march, the urban setting or space would not have changed or would not have accommodated for it but that because people fought for their rights, for their "space" that such an urban setting was seen imbued with that identity formation.

There are other identity markers other than one's gender, race, caste and sex which Madhesha refutes when he decides not to choose slave sex and selling his body but to do a decent job in tune with his education, he is forming an identity that is not typical of the choice that a trans person would end up choosing make a choice to negotiate with a space that is often not negotiated. All of these constitute the space.

Thus, it can be said that queer identities is not just with space and time but that literary contexts and texts have moved on with other negotiations that are more humanistic, societal and cultural than individualistic.

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