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Sexual Desire and the Public Self: Masculinity, Sexuality, and Female Agency in the Malayalam Film Spa

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Abstract

The 2026 Malayalam film Spa, directed by Abrid Shine, brings into view a largely hidden aspect of urban life in Kerala. Set in a city spa over the course of a single day, the film follows several visitors whose conversations and encounters reveal their desires, anxieties, vulnerabilities, and carefully maintained public identities. Using a thematic reading of the film, this paper examines four major concerns: masculinity and sexuality, non-normative sexual interests, women's agency, and the tension between private sexual needs and public respectability. The paper explores how the male characters seek intimacy and sexual fulfilment while attempting to protect their family roles, professional status, and social reputation. It also considers how the film portrays desires that fall outside socially accepted ideas of sexuality, without automatically treating them as abnormal or immoral. The women working in the spa are not represented only as victims or sexual objects; they are also shown as individuals who negotiate power, work, money, personal boundaries, and difficult clients. The paper argues that Spa reflects a central contradiction in contemporary Kerala society: sexuality is actively pursued in private but often denied, judged, or silenced in public.

Introduction

Sexuality is not simply a private or biological matter. It is shaped by social institutions, cultural meanings, religious beliefs, legal frameworks and historically changing ideas about morality. Societies classify certain desires and relationships as legitimate while treating others as improper, deviant or dangerous. These classifications are neither universal nor permanent; they change across time and differ according to gender, caste, class, religion, age and marital status. Sexuality is therefore also a field of power in which bodies, desires and intimate relationships are observed, regulated and disciplined (Foucault, 1978). The regulation of sexuality is particularly gendered. Women's sexuality has historically been linked to reproduction, kinship, inheritance and family honour. Consequently, women's bodies are subjected to different forms of control across puberty, menstruation, marriage, motherhood and menopause. Female sexual respectability is commonly constructed through ideals of chastity, marital fidelity, motherhood and caregiving, whereas male sexual desire is often treated as more natural, urgent or socially excusable. Such a distinction produces a sexual double standard: men may privately pursue pleasure while continuing to occupy respectable public positions, but women associated with sexual labour or non-marital sexual expression are more readily stigmatized.

These contradictions have a distinctive history in Kerala, India. The state is widely celebrated for its achievements in literacy, health and social development, yet these achievements have not automatically produced gender equality in intimate and domestic life. Lekha and Palackal (2022) describe this tension as part of Kerala's gender paradox: women possess important educational and social resources but continue to encounter patriarchal control over sexuality, marriage, property and family decision-making. Devika (2009) similarly argues that sexuality and sexual rights remain largely excluded from Kerala's dominant development discourse, even when gender inequality is acknowledged. Kerala's matrilineal past complicates any simple account of unchanging patriarchy. Among sections of the Nayar

community, matrilineal kinship and historically specific marital arrangements provided some women with forms of sexual, residential and property-related autonomy that differed from those available within patrilineal families. However, this past should not be romanticized as a uniformly egalitarian sexual order. Women's experiences varied according to caste, class, locality and historical period. Colonial legislation, social reform, Victorian morality, nationalist respectability and the increasing dominance of the patrilineal nuclear family gradually reorganized gender relations. These processes helped recast the respectable woman as a monogamous wife, devoted mother and moral guardian of the family (Lekha & Palackal, 2022). Colonial and nationalist discourses also converted sexuality into a marker of community honour, using women's bodies to draw boundaries between the civilized and the immoral, the respectable and the obscene, and one religious community and another (Gupta, 2002). Religion remains an important influence on sexual attitudes, although no religious community should be treated as internally uniform. Institutional interpretations of Christianity and Islam generally locate legitimate sexual relations within marriage and connect sexuality with fidelity, family life, companionship and reproduction. Religious teachings also regulate modesty, premarital and extramarital relationships, gender roles and reproductive conduct. The everyday interpretation of these teachings, however, differs across denominations, generations, families and individuals. Religion must therefore be understood not as a fixed set of prohibitions but as a social framework through which people negotiate desire, morality and respectability (Mahajan et al., 2013).

Within this postcolonial context, sexuality in Kerala is marked by a striking tension between private practice and public silence. Sexual desire is present in everyday life, digital spaces, commercial services and popular culture, yet open discussion of pleasure, consent, sexual dissatisfaction and non-normative desire remains uncomfortable. High literacy should not be confused with sexual literacy. Educational achievement does not necessarily provide people with the language or emotional capacity required to understand consent, communicate sexual needs or distinguish intimacy from entitlement. Public morality may consequently coexist with private experimentation, misinformation and frustration.

Cinema is an important site through which these contradictions become visible. Films do not merely reproduce social reality; they select, organize and interpret it. Through characters, dialogue, narrative and visual representation, cinema constructs particular meanings around masculinity, femininity, desire, morality and social difference. At the same time, audiences are not passive recipients who automatically imitate everything shown on screen. The relationship between cinema and society is reciprocal and contested: films emerge from existing cultural conditions while also providing audiences with new ways of naming, imagining and debating social issues. Research nevertheless shows that popular films can influence attitudes, particularly when social or political messages are embedded within entertainment and viewers do not approach them as explicit persuasion (Adkins & Castle, 2014). Indian cinema has similarly contributed to changing public perceptions of relationships, marriage, family, consumption and modernity (Balabantaray, 2022).

It is within this social and cinematic context that Abrid Shine's Malayalam film *Spa* assumes significance. Released in February 2026, it is set largely inside a massage centre and follows workers

and customers over a single day. Although the establishment offers massage, many male clients seek sexual stimulation, fantasy, companionship or emotional attention; the phrase “happy ending” operates as a coded reference to gratification (Shine, 2026). The film uses these encounters to examine sexual illiteracy, moral hypocrisy, precarious work and the pressure to suppress emotion. Rather than treating these episodes as transparent evidence of Kerala society, this paper reads them as a cultural narrative about “sexual poverty”—sexual ignorance, emotional deprivation and restricted access to meaningful intimacy.

This study undertakes a qualitative thematic analysis of *Spa*, focusing on its narrative, characters, dialogue and selected interactions. It examines four interconnected themes: masculinity and sexuality, non-normative sexual interests, women’s agency, and the separation between private sexual needs and public identities. “Sexual poverty” denotes the film’s representation of sexual ignorance, emotional deprivation, limited communication and restricted intimacy; it is not treated as a statistically established condition among Kerala’s men. *Spa* is analysed as a cultural text, not as evidence that all spas provide sexual services or that its characters represent Kerala as a whole. This approach foregrounds the relationship among desire, consent, commercial intimacy and moral respectability.

Plot of Spa

Abrid Shine’s *Spa* unfolds mainly inside La Paradise, a massage centre in Kochi, over the course of a single day. The film does not follow a conventional storyline with one central conflict. Instead, it brings together the experiences of the women working at the spa and the different men who visit them. The customers come from varied social backgrounds, including a labourer, a doctor, an artist, a businessman and a film personality. Although they enter the spa under the pretext of getting a massage, many are seeking sexual pleasure, emotional comfort or an escape from their everyday lives. Their conversations and behaviour reveal loneliness, sexual curiosity, fantasies, insecurities and, in some cases, a sense of entitlement. While a few clients respect the women’s boundaries, others attempt to cross them. Mathan, a middle-aged sawmill worker with little experience of interacting with women, becomes the film’s most prominent character. During his visit, he develops an emotional attachment to Riya, the therapist attending to him. He mistakes her professional warmth for genuine romantic interest and begins to imagine that he can rescue her from her work. Riya, however, understands that Mathan’s feelings come from loneliness and an unrealistic idea of love rather than from a mutual relationship. The women working at the spa are portrayed as confident and practical. They understand their clients, negotiate personal boundaries and manage difficult situations in their own ways. The film ends with an unexpected outbreak of violence inside the spa. While chaos unfolds around him, Mathan is forced to confront the collapse of his imagined romance. Through these interconnected encounters, *Spa* explores hidden desire, emotional isolation, consent and the difference between people’s private needs and their respectable public identities. (Shine, 2026)

Masculinity and Sexuality

Traditionally, Keralite society conceptualizes masculinity in contrast to femininity, characterizing men as emotionally resilient, protective, physically robust, and capable of emotional restraint. However, by depicting the anxiety, insecurity, and emotional vulnerability of the male clients at the massage centre, the film demonstrates how these traditional gender norms are destabilized when intersecting with sexuality. The film *Spa* is a visual presentation that rewrites the traditional notions of masculinity in Kerala.

Spa complicates the assumption that masculinity is defined by constant sexual knowledge or confidence. Mathan is physically strong, loyal to his friends, and employed in demanding manual work, yet he reaches middle age with little experience of intimacy. His first visit to the spa brings pleasure, guilt, tenderness, and confusion into conflict. Because he understands sexuality almost entirely through marriage and moral prohibition, he interprets Riya's professional warmth as a permanent personal bond. He imagines that she now belongs with him, should enter his household, and should cease contact with other men. His offer of financial security appears protective, but it also converts care into possession and disregards Riya's wishes. Mathan therefore embodies both the vulnerability and the authority embedded in conventional masculinity. He wants affection and emotional recognition, needs commonly coded as feminine, but lacks the language to express them without claiming control over a woman. His confrontation with the staff shows how quickly loneliness and shame can be reorganized as moral judgment. The film does not present sexual fulfilment as a force that erases ethics; instead, it shows how an unfamiliar intimate experience unsettles inherited beliefs. Mathan's feelings are genuine, but they do not create a reciprocal relationship or an entitlement to Riya's labour, body, or future. His arc distinguishes emotional need from consent and protection from possession. The scene also complicates any celebration of Mathan as merely innocent. His limited sexual experience explains his confusion but does not excuse the pressure he places on Riya. Nor does the film treat rural background or manual labour as causes of ignorance; educated and affluent clients display their own forms of secrecy and control. What connects them is a social order that gives men little practice in discussing vulnerability while granting them disproportionate authority in intimate life. Mathan's imagined rescue preserves that order because it would move Riya from paid work into unpaid domestic care under his supervision. Her refusal exposes the gendered bargain beneath his romantic language.

Scholarship on the “male sexual deficit” argues that men’s greater reported demand for sex helps sustain commercial sexual markets and, in some accounts, patriarchal institutions (Vohs & Baumeister, 2012; Hakim, 2011, 2015). Men may therefore hold ambivalent views of women in sexual entertainment, simultaneously desiring and resenting those whom they perceive as benefiting from male vulnerability (Egan, 2006; Frank, 2002). This explanation, however, should not reduce masculinity to an invariant drive. Relationship studies show that sexual satisfaction is entangled with communication, conflict and emotional intimacy (Fincham & Beach, 2006; Gottman, 2007; Metz & Epstein, 2002; McCabe, 1999). *Spa* uses this tension—between learned entitlement and unmet emotional needs—to frame its male clients’ conduct.

Perera presents himself as socially committed and publicly argues that powerful women should not be treated as objects of display. Yet he privately offers spa staff large sums to fulfil his desires. When his wife arrives, his confidence collapses: he begs forgiveness and follows her into the street. Her response exposes the domestic asymmetry beneath his rhetoric. Perera travels freely and indulges himself while repeatedly refusing her wish to travel or receive spa treatments. His professed respect for women is therefore performative, masking self-indulgence and unequal freedom. Research on men who purchase sex links commercial sexual services to difficulties in forming satisfying relationships and, in some cases, to dissatisfaction within marriage (Huysamen & Boonzaier, 2015; Huschke & Schubotz, 2016). Such findings can contextualize Perera's conduct, but they cannot excuse it or reduce male behaviour to an irresistible drive. The film makes this distinction clear through another client who enters the spa aggressively, demands sexual gratification and tries to overpower a therapist after she refuses him. His question, *"Won't you also get satisfaction when I get it?"*, converts his desire into a claim over her body and erases her consent. The scene exposes patriarchal entitlement rather than proving that sexual frustration mechanically produces violence. Sexual satisfaction may include desire, arousal, pleasure and positive emotion without requiring a partner (Pascoal et al., 2014). The client's aggression emerges when he treats access to a woman's body as a right and refusal as an obstacle. By placing Perera's respectable hypocrisy beside the assailant's overt coercion, *Spa* presents two forms of patriarchal privilege: one conceals unequal sexual freedom behind progressive language, while the other attempts to override a woman's refusal. The contrast also prevents the article from interpreting all male desire as violent. It is entitlement—not desire alone—that transforms a private need into coercive conduct.

Sexual motivation develops through the interaction of physiological response, attention, emotion, learning, and experience. Stimuli become meaningful partly because they are associated with previous pleasure, while guilt, anxiety, stress, and distraction can inhibit arousal. A person must interpret a cue as sexual before it functions as one; the same body, garment, sound, or setting will therefore not affect everyone identically. This cognitive account challenges the idea of male desire as an automatic biological reflex and supports the film's portrayal of varied responses among clients (Everaerd, 1993).

A belief persists within Kerala society that modern dressing styles trigger sexual desires in men, thereby leading to sexual assaults. This notion has sparked numerous debates and controversies. The societal mindset is epitomized by an educated woman who makes derogatory remarks about a girl participating in a modern-attire photoshoot. She can also be heard telling her husband that such outfits are what arouse sexual interest in men.

However, this narrative is completely dismantled through an exploration of the sexual preferences of the men who visit the spa. One such representative character is Sugunan. Based on his attire and behaviour, Sugunan is depicted as a villager who lacks a progressive outlook on clothing. Interestingly, prior to visiting the spa, he purchases a saree, a blouse, traditional Keralite attire and conventional anklets. His sexual preference clearly leans toward women in traditional clothing. This is evident when he requests the spa staff to massage him while wearing these specific garments. Furthermore, his dialogue explicitly

reveals that the mere sound of the anklets during the massage provides him with a sense of sexual thrill and gratification.

Information-processing models assume that cognitive capacity is limited: people select only some of the competing stimuli in an environment for further processing. This principle helps explain why the spa does not affect every client in the same way. Experimental research found that male sexual arousal declined as a distracting task became more complex (Geer & Fuhr, 1976).

Furthermore, when an artist who visits a spa for a massage realizes that the staff member attending to him is an art lover, he paints a portrait of her in the nude. Despite being in a setting typically associated with sexual gratification, he does not experience sexual arousal while looking at the naked woman. Instead, his entire focus remains on the act of painting. Here, he perceives the girl’s beauty through an inner, aesthetic vision. The same pattern can be observed in the film director who visits the spa. He does not utilize any of the sexually stimulating facilities around him; instead, as part of his profession, he seeks information from the staff to produce a film set against the backdrop of a spa. This supports the finding that regardless of how tempting or intense the surrounding stimuli may be, the brain processes only those stimuli that align with our specific interests

Other clients further separate sexual response from simple visual provocation. One man asks for a therapist with enough general knowledge to sustain an intellectual conversation. Even while seeking gratification, he retains the measured speech and manner of a lecturer, suggesting that arousal is filtered through personality and preferred forms of interaction. The aggressive client, by contrast, mocks a therapist's cropped hair and then dismisses its relevance before attempting to overpower her. The sequence contradicts the claim that a woman's hairstyle or clothing causes assault: his conduct follows from entitlement and his refusal to accept a boundary. Tony, a contract killer, offers another contrast. He speaks amiably with the staff but limits the conversation to his work, without sexual undertones. Together, these encounters show that the same environment does not produce a uniform male response; attention, learned expectations, power, and intention shape what each client notices and how he acts.

Through these contrasting men, *Spa* challenges a single, inherited model of Malayali masculinity. Its clients seek not only sexual release but also conversation, reassurance, recognition, aesthetic pleasure, and care. Some suppress these needs to protect a masculine image; others express them through fantasy, payment, or control. The film also refuses the myth that women's bodies mechanically cause men's conduct. Sugunan's preference for traditional dress, the artist's absorbed attention to painting, and the assailant's disregard for a therapist's appearance demonstrate that clothing and proximity do not determine violence. Social learning, personal history, selective attention, and power shape desire, while coercion occurs when a person treats another's consent as irrelevant. Masculinity in the film is therefore plural and unstable: it includes tenderness and loneliness as well as hypocrisy and domination. This distinction allows the analysis to criticize patriarchal entitlement without portraying male sexuality itself as inherently dangerous.

Non-Normative Sexual Interests (Paraphilia)

Spa also depicts sexual interests outside conventional expectations. Contemporary diagnostic systems distinguish an atypical sexual interest, often called a paraphilia, from a paraphilic disorder. An interest is not automatically a mental disorder; clinical concern arises when it causes significant distress or impairment, involves a non-consenting person, or creates harm or a substantial risk of harm (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022; Sahoo et al., 2023). Population research also indicates that atypical fantasies and interests are not confined to criminal or clinical groups and are reported more often by men in several samples (Bártová et al., 2021; Joyal, 2017). This distinction is essential for reading the film. It prevents moral disapproval from being treated as diagnosis while preserving consent, safety, and the protection of vulnerable people as non-negotiable boundaries.

The film develops this distinction through Dr. Harshanandan and Rakesh. Harshanandan, an anaesthetist whose profession is devoted to reducing pain, seeks arousal by receiving physical pain. The irony gives the episode comic force, but it also introduces masochistic desire to an audience more accustomed to screen depictions of people who enjoy inflicting harm. His requested acts include slapping and hot wax. Because he consents, the scenario differs ethically from assault; nevertheless, consent alone does not eliminate physical risk, and the therapist must still negotiate safety. Rakesh seeks verbal humiliation rather than injury. In public he performs the roles of attentive husband, father, and employee. At home he appears indifferent when his wife claims that women's modern clothing provokes men. Privately, however, he visits the spa and asks a therapist to insult him so that he can become aroused. His urgency and fear of discovery reveal the pressure involved in maintaining a respectable identity while suppressing a stigmatized desire. The two characters show why social status and education do not determine whether a person has an atypical interest. They also show that such interests cannot be evaluated through a single label. The relevant questions are whether everyone involved can consent, whether boundaries are respected, whether the conduct causes impairment, and whether it creates unacceptable risk. Under current diagnostic frameworks, consensual atypical interests are not disorders merely because they depart from convention (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). *Spa* therefore uses comedy to make unfamiliar desires visible, but its strongest implication is ethical rather than sensational: difference should not be stigmatized, while consent and safety must remain decisive (Shine, 2026). The scenes also connect private desire to the wider theme of respectability. Harshanandan can describe what he wants with relative calm, whereas Rakesh requires speed, anonymity, and reassurance that his family will not know. His wife's conversation about women's clothing sharpens the irony: the household repeats a public explanation of male sexuality while remaining unable to name the desire within it. The film thus contrasts sexual literacy with social prestige. Professional success may provide privacy and purchasing power, but it does not necessarily provide a language for discussing fantasy with a partner or therapist. Secrecy, rather than the interest itself, becomes the source of anxiety.

Harshanandan and Rakesh are educated, employed, and socially respected, so their portrayal challenges the stereotype that atypical desire signals antisocial character. The film's comic treatment occasionally

risks turning difference into spectacle, yet it also opens a space for viewers to separate consensual practices from conduct that harms others. Contemporary scholarship similarly argues against unnecessary stigma while recognizing that some atypical interests may involve distress, impairment, non-consent, or danger (Bailey et al., 2025). A rights-based interpretation therefore requires two commitments at once: adults should not be pathologized solely for harmless, consensual interests, and vulnerable people must be protected from exploitation and injury. The film's spa setting makes that balance visible because therapists must negotiate requests as workers, define the services they will provide, and refuse acts that cross personal or professional boundaries.

Women’s Agency

Women's empowerment is best understood not as a fixed status but as the capacity to make meaningful choices and act on them across social, economic, and psychological domains (Sharaunga et al., 2019). This perspective is especially important for workers whom respectable society labels immoral or assumes to be helpless. *Spa* avoids providing a single tragic origin story for its therapists. Instead, it presents the receptionist, therapists, and cleaning staff as workers with different personalities, skills, and limits. Their occupation remains precarious and stigmatized, but the film does not reduce them to victims or sexual objects. When a client asks for a knowledgeable therapist, the receptionist first replies that all employees are trained, certified, and experienced; after understanding that he wants intellectual conversation, she selects someone who has attended public-service examination coaching. The exchange establishes professional competence while locating the women within familiar middle-class aspirations. Director Gabriel Gabri attempts to extract dramatic stories about family hardship, but Riya refuses to supply a marketable confession. Her refusal protects her privacy and rejects the expectation that a marginalized woman must explain herself through suffering before she can be taken seriously. This representation matters because agency is often denied to women whose labour is sexualized. Public narratives tend to cast them either as morally suspect or as people with no meaningful choice, leaving little room for ordinary professionalism. The film offers a more complicated picture: certification, work routines, humour, ambition, and collegial relations coexist with stigma and danger. Agency here does not mean that every condition of employment is freely chosen or just. It means that the women remain interpreters of their own circumstances. They decide what information to disclose, how to read a client's request, and when sympathy, humour, refusal, or force is necessary.

Agency becomes clearest when the women make decisions under pressure. It involves more than formal freedom: it is the practical power to define one's priorities, set boundaries, and convert choices into action (O'Neil & Domingo, 2015). Mathan offers Riya marriage, property, and financial security, but she rejects him immediately because his proposal is based on fantasy rather than mutual knowledge. When he calls her work sinful and invokes society's judgment, she answers that society also includes clients, those who want to visit but fear the police, and people who cause far greater harm. For her, the more serious wrong is intruding into another person's life. The response reverses the moral gaze: Mathan is not entitled to police her because he has paid for intimacy or imagined himself as her rescuer. The staff's agency is also practical and collective. They recognize signs that a client may be a police officer in

disguise, restrict personal disclosure, share information, and respond quickly to conflict. A therapist escapes when a man attempts to overpower her; another slaps Rakesh when his demand for verbal abuse crosses the interaction's agreed boundary. These scenes should not romanticize an unsafe workplace or imply that workers can always protect themselves. Rather, they show women exercising judgment within limited conditions and relying on situational knowledge when institutional protection is uncertain. Their decisions about marriage, privacy, services, and personal safety are not granted by benevolent clients. They are asserted through refusal, negotiation, observation, and mutual support (Shine, 2026). Their knowledge of clients is itself a workplace resource. Speech, clothing, posture, and repeated patterns help them distinguish an uncertain visitor from a possible police decoy or an immediate threat. Such judgments are fallible, but they show expertise produced through experience rather than the instinctive femininity often assigned to service workers. The women also disagree with one another about acceptable tasks, which prevents the group from being portrayed as a single empowered type. Agency is individual and relational: each therapist maintains her own limits while depending on colleagues and the receptionist to coordinate bookings, warnings, payment, and intervention when an encounter changes.

Economic empowerment refers to women's control over financial and material resources, including ownership of property, housing, income, and involvement in economic decisions within the family. Financial independence is crucial to women's empowerment. The movie ‘Spa’ establishes a well-developed financial autonomy in which the therapists themselves determine the remuneration for the special services provided to customers and receive the payment directly. The decision rests with the therapist. The freedom to choose whether or not to provide customer-requested services—such as a "happy ending"—reflects both personal autonomy and the strength of an empowered woman.

Psychological agency includes confidence, emotional regulation, resilience, and the ability to use experience in difficult situations. Spa work brings the therapists into contact with labourers, professionals, celebrities, and people involved in crime. Serving such a varied clientele requires judgment and interpersonal skill, but the film also shows that these capacities are unevenly distributed and shaped by personal history. Sara, described as the spa's most requested therapist, is trusted with Harshanandan's unusual request because she can remain composed during an intense encounter. Another therapist is uncomfortable delivering verbal humiliation, demonstrating that empowerment does not require every worker to accept every task. Sara's earlier proximity to the underworld has given her experience with danger; the film turns that past into a resource without claiming that trauma is inherently empowering. The women also use quiet periods productively, support one another, and coordinate responses to risk. Such competence complicates the familiar image of women in sexualized service work as either passive victims or endlessly available providers. At the same time, individual resilience cannot substitute for labour rights, legal protection, or social support. The therapists' capacity to manage harassment illustrates agency under constraint, not the absence of vulnerability. *Spa* is most persuasive when it holds these two realities together: the women exercise meaningful control over their conduct, yet they do so in a stigmatized workplace where clients, police scrutiny, and moral judgment can limit their options (Sharaunga et al., 2019). This qualification is crucial because empowerment

language can otherwise shift responsibility from institutions to individuals. Praising a worker's courage may conceal the absence of safe reporting channels, enforceable contracts, health protections, or freedom from stigma. *Spa* does not examine these structures in depth, but the violence near its conclusion makes their absence visible. The women can respond effectively in many moments, yet a commercial setting organized around client privacy also exposes them to unpredictable demands. Their psychological strength should therefore be read alongside, not instead of, the need for collective and institutional safeguards. Personal resourcefulness is real, but it should not become an excuse for social abandonment.

The Tension Between Private Sexual Needs and Public Respectability

Historically, in Malayalee society, sexuality has been relegated to the periphery of what is considered respectable and morally acceptable. The developmental pathways of Kerala are deeply intertwined with the construction of modern gender roles. By examining this connection, it exposes how mainstream development discourses consistently suppress discussions about sexuality. Therefore, a fear and rejection (*abjection*) of sexuality proves that anxiety surrounding sexuality has always been present in Kerala's public sphere (Devika, 2009).

The clients' behaviour reveals how respectability depends on concealment. Research on men who pay for sex shows that identity is shaped by local legal and moral contexts and that stigma can encourage secrecy, compartmentalization, and self-justification (Peled, 2021). In *Spa*, several men withhold their names or invent stories because they fear that association with the establishment will damage their families or careers. A minor actor protects the public image on which he hopes to build future success. Rakesh conceals a desire that does not fit his identity as a conventional husband and employee. The aggressive client also avoids identification, though secrecy in his case accompanies coercive conduct rather than harmless difference. Sugunan initially appears open and modest, telling the staff that he seeks comfort because his wife has died. The story later proves false: she is alive, and he fears both her response and the shame of admitting that he sought gratification outside marriage. Perera's public composure similarly disappears when his wife finds him at the spa. He runs after her, pleading in the street, because exposure threatens his domestic authority and social standing. These episodes do not show that all private desire is hypocritical. They show that a culture which recognizes sexuality mainly within marriage encourages people to divide the self into respectable public roles and disavowed private needs (Shine, 2026).

Social status intensifies this division because reputation is both a resource and an obligation. People evaluate their own position partly through the respect they believe others grant them, and threats to that position can provoke defensive emotion and impression management (Anderson et al., 2012). Social identities are therefore performed strategically: individuals disclose or conceal aspects of themselves according to their goals and their audience (Klein et al., 2007; Deaux, 2015). In *Spa*, the aspiring actor refuses identifying details because scandal could close future opportunities. Gabriel Gabri visits for

research rather than gratification, yet he still fears that a photograph or rumour connecting him to the spa could injure his career. The institution's stigma is powerful enough to contaminate even a professional explanation. Other characters occupy different positions on this continuum. Mathan worries less about anonymity than about restoring his experience to a moral framework; he attempts to make Riya a wife and thereby convert a private encounter into a socially intelligible relationship. The artist moves through the spa with little concern for judgment because he interprets the encounter through artistic freedom. Harshanandan openly states his preferences and gives personal information to the therapist. His confidence reflects knowledge and status, but it should not be read as proof that education eliminates risk or shame. Together, these men demonstrate that identity management depends on profession, family role, personal security, and the kind of desire being concealed. The spa becomes a temporary backstage where public selves loosen, but they never disappear. Clients carry the anticipated gaze of spouses, employers, audiences, and communities into the room, shaping what they request, reveal, deny, and fear (Shine, 2026). These contrasts prevent a simple equation between status and concealment. Anticipated consequences, rather than prestige alone, determine disclosure: respectability works through what clients imagine spouses, employers, audiences, and neighbours would conclude if private desire became visible.

CONCLUSION

Sexuality in *Spa* is not a narrow question of physical satisfaction. It is shaped by bodies, emotions, relationships, work, religion, social status, and cultural ideas about morality. Reading the film as a cultural text reveals a central contradiction in contemporary Kerala: desire is pursued in private while public respectability often depends on denying, judging, or silencing it. Cinema cannot establish how all Malayalis live, but it can organize recognizable tensions into stories that make them available for public debate. *Spa* does this by placing clients and workers in a confined setting where carefully maintained identities become difficult to sustain.

The film represents masculinity as learned, unstable, and emotionally complex rather than as an unchanging biological drive. Mathan's loneliness, Perera's hypocrisy, Sugunan's fantasy, the artist's concentration, and the assailant's entitlement produce sharply different relations to desire. Their contrast undermines explanations that blame women's clothing or appearance for male conduct. Desire is shaped by attention, experience, intimacy, and cultural expectation; coercion begins when a man treats his desire as a right over another person. By separating sexuality from entitlement, the film can acknowledge men's vulnerability without using frustration to excuse violence.

The episodes involving Harshanandan and Rakesh extend the argument to atypical sexual interests. Their social standing challenges the belief that such interests belong only to criminals or antisocial outsiders. Contemporary diagnostic frameworks likewise distinguish consensual difference from disorder: atypical desire alone is not pathology, although distress, impairment, non-consent, and significant risk require clinical or ethical concern. *Spa* invites a less stigmatizing discussion of sexual diversity, even as its comic mode sometimes risks making unfamiliar practices appear exotic. A

defensible reading must therefore protect adults from needless moral judgment while keeping consent and safety at the centre.

The women working at La Paradise are neither idealized heroines nor passive victims. They set prices, decide which services they will provide, refuse marriage and moral policing, protect personal information, and cooperate when clients become difficult. Their competence demonstrates social, economic, and psychological agency within a stigmatized form of labour. Yet the film also shows the limits of individual resilience: the therapists face harassment, possible police scrutiny, and unequal power without reliable institutional support. Their empowerment lies in meaningful choice and collective skill under constraint, not in an imagined freedom from vulnerability.

The spa finally functions as a boundary between private desire and public identity. Inside it, clients seek pleasure, fantasy, conversation, punishment, care, or escape; outside it, they return to the roles of spouse, professional, celebrity, labourer, or respectable citizen. The film's achievement is to show that these selves are connected rather than separate. Greater sexual literacy would require language for desire, consent, boundaries, and emotional need, together with social conditions in which difference can be discussed without either stigma or harm. In that sense, *Spa* exposes not sexuality itself as the problem, but the silence, inequality, and moral performance through which sexuality is managed.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Author Contribution

A.S.K. and L.N.B. jointly conceptualised the study, conducted the thematic analysis, and wrote and revised the manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and confidentiality restrictions.

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