

Beyond Picturesque Borders: Cultural Identity, Stereotypes, And The Politics Of Representation In Param Sundari

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Abstract

Indian cinema has increasingly embraced interregional narratives to explore questions of identity, belonging, and cultural diversity. *Param Sundari* (2026), directed by Tushar Jalota, presents a romance between protagonists from North India and Kerala, using cultural difference as both a narrative catalyst and a site of ideological negotiation. While the film celebrates India's plurality through comedy, romance, and visually rich depictions of Kerala, it simultaneously raises important questions about cultural representation, stereotyping, regional identity, and the commodification of place. This article examines how *Param Sundari* constructs Kerala not merely as a geographical setting but as a symbolic cultural landscape shaped by competing narratives of authenticity and exoticism.

Drawing upon Stuart Hall's theory of representation, Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and stereotype, Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, and Arjun Appadurai's theory of cultural flows, the study undertakes a qualitative textual analysis of the film. It investigates how cinematic language, characterization, costume, dialogue, music, and spatial imagery participate in producing cultural meanings. The article argues that although *Param Sundari* attempts to challenge simplistic regional binaries through the emotional journey of its protagonists, it also reproduces familiar cinematic stereotypes that package Kerala as an exotic and consumable cultural space.

Ultimately, the film demonstrates that contemporary Indian cinema occupies an ambivalent position: it promotes national integration while relying on recognizable cultural markers that often simplify complex regional identities. By examining this tension, the article contributes to broader discussions in cultural studies, film studies, and media representation regarding the politics of identity within contemporary Indian cinema.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Representation, Kerala, Regional Cinema, Stereotypes, Internal Orientalism, Hybridity, Indian Cinema, Cultural Studies.

Date of Submission: 01-08-2026

Date of Acceptance: 11-08-2026

I. Introduction

Cinema has long functioned as one of the most influential cultural institutions through which societies imagine themselves. Films not only entertain but also construct meanings about language, ethnicity, gender, religion, and regional belonging. In a multilingual nation such as India, cinematic representations significantly shape public perceptions of different cultures, particularly among audiences with little direct interaction with those communities.

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing number of Bollywood films featuring interregional romances that seek to celebrate India's cultural diversity. These narratives frequently position cultural differences as obstacles that must eventually be overcome through love, mutual understanding, or family reconciliation. While such films often advocate national unity, they also rely on familiar stereotypes to distinguish one region from another. Consequently, cultural diversity becomes both celebrated and simplified.

Param Sundari emerges within this cinematic tradition. The film narrates the relationship between individuals belonging to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, using Kerala's landscapes, traditions, cuisine, language, and social customs as central narrative elements. Unlike earlier Bollywood representations that frequently reduced Kerala to clichés involving coconut trees, Kathakali performers, Ayurvedic resorts, or backwaters, *Param Sundari* attempts to portray greater emotional engagement with regional identity. Nevertheless, questions remain regarding whether these representations genuinely reflect cultural complexity or merely reproduce aesthetically attractive stereotypes.

The representation of Kerala occupies a distinctive place within Indian popular cinema. Often marketed as "God's Own Country," Kerala has become associated with ecological beauty, literacy, traditional arts, and

tourism. Such representations contribute to what scholars describe as the commodification of culture, wherein cultural traditions become visual spectacles designed for consumption rather than understood as lived social practices. Cinema plays a significant role in reinforcing these images by privileging visually appealing cultural symbols over everyday realities.

This article argues that *Param Sundari* negotiates a delicate balance between celebrating regional uniqueness and reinforcing essentialized notions of cultural identity. Rather than presenting Kerala as a static cultural entity, the film reveals the tensions between authenticity and performance, tradition and modernity, local identity and national imagination. The central romance becomes a metaphor for broader negotiations occurring within contemporary India regarding belonging, diversity, and multicultural citizenship.

Using insights from cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and film analysis, this article explores how *Param Sundari* constructs cultural identity through visual representation, language, gender roles, and spatial imagination. In doing so, it demonstrates how cinema simultaneously challenges and reproduces dominant narratives about regional cultures.

The study contributes to contemporary scholarship on Indian cinema by examining how interregional romance functions as a cultural discourse through which ideas of nationhood, diversity, and identity are continuously negotiated

II. Language Politics, Gender, Landscape, And The Commodification Of Culture

Language as a Marker of Difference

Language occupies a significant role in *Param Sundari* because linguistic difference becomes one of the primary ways through which cultural boundaries are established and negotiated. The encounter between a Hindi-speaking North Indian protagonist and a Malayalam-speaking woman from Kerala reflects the multilingual reality of India, where language is deeply connected with regional identity, memory, and belonging.

In many Bollywood representations, regional languages often function as sources of humour. The unfamiliarity of the outsider with local pronunciation and vocabulary becomes a comedic device, creating a temporary hierarchy between the dominant language of Hindi cinema and regional languages. *Param Sundari* negotiates this issue by presenting linguistic difference as both a barrier and a bridge. Param's inability to understand Malayalam initially positions him as an outsider, but his gradual attempt to engage with Sundari's language suggests the possibility of cultural empathy.

However, the representation also raises questions regarding linguistic hierarchy. Since the film primarily addresses a Hindi-speaking national audience, Malayalam appears at times as a cultural flavour rather than as an equally powerful linguistic system. The use of Malayalam words, accents, and expressions contributes to the authenticity of the setting, yet the narrative remains centred on the Hindi-speaking protagonist's journey of discovery. The regional language becomes something to be experienced by the outsider rather than a medium through which the local character fully articulates her own worldview.

This reflects a broader concern in Indian popular cinema: while regional cultures are increasingly included in mainstream narratives, they are frequently translated into a dominant national cinematic language. The challenge lies in representing linguistic diversity without making regional languages decorative elements within Hindi narratives.

Gender and the Cultural Politics of Representation

The representation of Sundari is central to understanding the film's cultural politics. On one level, she challenges conventional Bollywood representations of women from traditional cultural backgrounds. She is not merely presented as an object of romance or as a symbol of Kerala's beauty; she possesses professional identity, emotional independence, and a connection with her community.

Her character represents a negotiation between tradition and contemporary aspirations. She participates in preserving cultural heritage while also engaging with modern economic practices through the homestay business. This creates a more complex portrayal of regional femininity, where cultural rootedness does not necessarily imply passivity or backwardness.

However, the film also participates in the long-standing cinematic tradition of associating women with cultural authenticity. Sundari becomes the embodiment of Kerala itself—the landscape, traditions, hospitality, and emotional warmth of the region are frequently channelled through her character. This symbolic association between woman and homeland has deep roots in nationalist and cinematic narratives, where female figures often represent cultural purity and collective identity.

Such representation can be limiting because it places the responsibility of preserving culture disproportionately on women. While Sundari's individuality is acknowledged, her identity remains closely connected with her role as a representative of Kerala's traditions. The film therefore creates a tension between empowering the female protagonist and using her as a cultural symbol.

Through Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Sundari can also be viewed as occupying a "Third Space." She is neither completely confined to tradition nor detached from it. Her identity emerges through negotiation between local belonging and wider contemporary influences. This aspect makes her character significant within discussions of changing Indian identities, where cultural authenticity is increasingly understood as dynamic rather than fixed.

Landscape, Space, and the Aesthetics of the Exotic

Space plays a crucial role in *Param Sundari*. Kerala is not merely a geographical location; it functions as a cultural text. The film constructs Kerala through images of natural beauty, heritage architecture, waterways, and traditional practices. The landscape becomes an emotional extension of Sundari's character and the romantic possibilities associated with her world.

This picturesque representation connects with what scholars identify as the cinematic production of the exotic. Landscapes are frequently transformed into spectacles for viewers unfamiliar with them. While such representations can generate appreciation for regional beauty, they can also detach places from their historical and social realities.

The Kerala depicted in *Param Sundari* is largely a harmonious cultural space. The film emphasises beauty, tradition, hospitality, and emotional warmth while giving limited attention to the complexities of contemporary Kerala, including urbanisation, migration, political consciousness, social reform movements, and changing cultural practices. The result is a selective cultural image shaped by aesthetic preferences.

Said's concept of othering becomes useful here. Kerala is not represented negatively; rather, it is represented as an attractive cultural difference that exists for the protagonist and audience to discover. This form of othering operates through admiration rather than rejection. The region becomes fascinating because it appears different from metropolitan North India. However, even positive exoticisation can simplify cultures by emphasising difference over complexity.

Cultural Commodification and the Tourist Gaze

One of the most significant cultural issues raised by *Param Sundari* is the transformation of culture into spectacle. Contemporary cinema increasingly participates in what may be called the "tourist gaze," where places, traditions, and communities become visual experiences consumed by audiences.

The film's representation of Kerala reflects this process. Cultural elements such as festivals, traditional clothing, cuisine, architecture, and landscapes become signs through which the region is marketed aesthetically. The beauty of these elements is undeniable, but their cinematic presentation often separates them from their deeper cultural meanings.

Appadurai's theory of global cultural flows helps explain this phenomenon. In contemporary media culture, local traditions circulate beyond their original contexts and become part of national and global imagination. This circulation can create visibility and appreciation, but it also creates the possibility of commodification. A cultural practice that carries historical, spiritual, or social significance may be transformed into a visual symbol designed primarily for entertainment.

Nevertheless, commodification does not necessarily eliminate cultural value. Films like *Param Sundari* can introduce audiences to unfamiliar traditions and encourage curiosity about regional cultures. The critical question is not whether culture should appear in popular cinema, but how it should be represented. The challenge is to move beyond surface-level celebration toward deeper engagement with the lived realities of communities.

III. Conclusion

Param Sundari represents the possibilities and contradictions of contemporary Indian cinema's engagement with cultural diversity. Through the story of a relationship between individuals from different linguistic and regional backgrounds, the film promotes an ideal of intercultural understanding and national unity. It suggests that cultural boundaries can be crossed through empathy, respect, and emotional connection.

However, the film also reveals the continuing challenges of representing regional cultures within mainstream Hindi cinema. Kerala frequently appears as a picturesque cultural space defined by landscape, tradition, and visual beauty. While these representations celebrate regional identity, they also risk reducing a complex society into a collection of familiar symbols. The film's treatment of language, gender, and cultural practices demonstrates the tension between authenticity and spectacle.

Viewed through the frameworks of Hall, Bhabha, Said, and Appadurai, *Param Sundari* emerges as a cultural text marked by negotiation. It neither simply reinforces stereotypes nor completely escapes them. Instead, it occupies a complicated space where celebration and commodification coexist.

The significance of the film lies precisely in this contradiction. It reflects the larger challenge faced by contemporary Indian cinema: how to represent India's extraordinary cultural plurality without transforming diversity into decoration. Moving beyond picturesque borders requires not the rejection of cultural difference but

a deeper engagement with the histories, voices, and lived experiences that create those differences. *Param Sundari* therefore becomes a valuable case study in understanding the evolving politics of representation in twenty-first-century Indian popular culture.

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