



Understanding the Feminine Voices: A Study of Women in Selected Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract— *The journey position of women portrayed in Malayalam cinema varies from victims to survivors angels to monsters fidels to infidels and much more which made Malayali audiences frown as well as clap. Our audience appreciated women's stereotypical roles more than women who are raising their voices against society. Cinema has always influenced people to commit heinous crimes because the impact of cinema on the mind of people is so profound as said by Georgekutty in the movie Drishyam where he has created the image (drishyam) of A fake incident in the mind of people thereby befooling police. The discussion in the paper highlights the sexuality of women pictured in selected Malayalam films by closely examining the incidents of films. The paper enables the readers to recall some of the incidents in the movies from the past that women have encountered and understand how they overcome abuse and social disadvantages to become symbols of courage, strength and resistance. The role of female characters in Malayalam cinema has been a subject of discussion. In this context, a few issues need to be taken into account. In Malayalam cinema near the end of the 20th century, what kinds of roles were given to female artists? Can these characters be classified as gender stereotypes in general? Were the roles that were assigned expressly treated gender-biased? Are there any modifications to the positions given to women so far?*



Keywords— *Abuse, Male Gaze, Patriarchy, Stereotypes, Suffering, Violence*

I. INTRODUCTION

The sexuality of women has been conceived on the silver screen in various perspectives. Kerala has got rich cultural background so films are also unique in various aspects displaying various themes. The First film in Malayalam, *Vigathakumaran*, directed by JC Daniel triggered the minds of the audience when it was released as the role played by a female protagonist was a Dalit Christian named Rosi featuring as Nair woman. The feudal Nair community was outraged by a Dalit actress portraying a Nair lady because she is socially outcast and is considered to be spiritually filthy to touch. Her home was set on fire, and she was subjected to abuse and assault. The first female protagonist in Malayalam cinema had to escape for her life, living a life that was hidden from the public in Tamil Nadu. Malayalam movies have advanced vividly

exploring relevant themes and innovative ideas. Malayalam films have also developed a new wave in their genre in the early 2010s named New Generation movies characterized by unusual themes and new narrative techniques. *Trivandrum Lodge*, *Chappa Kurush*, *22 Female Kottayam* re-define the wave with explicit themes of sex, violence and lust. Many critics suggested that these movies are reminiscent of the 1980s era of Padmarajan and Bharathan who made breakthrough usual conventional themes.

II. BEAUTY OF WOMEN: OBJECTIFIED OR GLORIFIED?

The mesmerizing beauty of heroines was painted through the films of Padmarajan in the 1980s. In the movie *Nammaku Parkam Munthirithoppokal*, Solomon 's instant

admiration towards Sophia is outlined. Through his most celebrated movie *Thoovanthumbikal* he visualized a beautiful hooker as a mooned fantasy named Clara who appears and disappears in Jayakrishnan's life. Her beauty is more embellished with the occurrence of rain whenever she appears and a soothing melodious background. Her lips and eyes are depicted more sharply in the film to allure Jayakrishnan and the audience too. She breaks all the imageries of a sex worker manifested in the Malayali audience, she is refined, bold, soft-spoken and never consider herself a victim. In Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* she conveys about the 'male gaze' which states that women in cinema are constructed in an objectifying and limiting manner to satisfy the psychological desires of men and more broadly, of patriarchal society. Another of his heroine is Bhama in the movie *Njn Ghandharvan*, a teenager and her passion for celestial lover, who appeared from the wooden statue. The statue turns out to be Gandhrvan and is attracted by the beauty of Bhama. She then learns from her grandmother that Gandhrvans are known to woo beautiful women and steal their virginity.

Adding item songs to the movies also has the same motif to attract a male audience. The word item very clearly means 'an object'. Further, the definition of an 'item song' is a song where a female dances in sexually suggestive moves to fulfil the voyeuristic pleasures of men. Hence, it is the woman who is being called an 'item', an 'object'. "There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at" (Mulvey, 1975, p.16) Scopophilia was also explained as "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey, 1975, p.16).

The idea of the song intermixed with its sensual costume, the cinematic male gaze, and suggestive choreography, contributes to propagating the concept of the 'male gaze.' Unfortunately, these songs frequently bear no relevance to the narrative and serve primarily as a means to draw large crowds to cinema halls. Mulvey argued that. The song *Rafthara* in *Lucifer* hits millions of audiences irrespective of the relevance of the song in the movie. Stephen's (Mohanlal) stunt sequence with the villain and sequence of the song is shown simultaneously thereby making the audience clap and dance. The song *Mohamunthiri* from *Maduraja* offered an edge-of-the-seat experience to the audience. Starring Sunny Leone in the item song made the audience blush. On the contrary, the song *Rathipushpam* from *Bheeshma Parvam* reverses the visual gaze from the female to the male, different from ordinary item songs. It, therefore, objectifies the male body as the site of gaze that can be enjoyed in the same way as the female body. The

song lyrics are another significant part to be considered with the usual sexual overtones. The lyrics describe the function of nature to bring together the ones who love and the different parts of the body are described to accentuate the feel of the song.

In comparison to these movies, Malayalam movies have also appreciated the natural look of heroines without makeup where in the hero falls in love with her imperfections. In the movie *Premam*, when George (Nivin Pauly) falls in love with Malar (Sai Pallavi) his lecturer, when one of his friends points out that her face has a lot of pimples, he affirms them by saying that it that all of us used to have pimples.

III. WOMEN: ANGEL OR MONSTER IN THE HOUSE

'Angel in the House' is one of the essays of Virginia Woolf where she discusses the metaphor of an angel in the house for women's purity and wholesomeness. Women during this period were expected to be modest and pure. In the essay, Woolf describes how she fought hard to kill the Angel in the House. This represents the author's struggle to break free of society's expectations of women. She doesn't want to play the role of the pure, angelic, innocent woman anymore. By 'Angel in the House', Woolf refers to the guiding consciousness within women that prevents them from possessing a mind of their own; a mind that lets them be unfettered from human relations, morality and sex. Unfortunately, these Angels become as victims of rape and marriage as the second chance to live for victims with the rapists.

In the movie *Hitler*, the hero Madhavankutty arranges the marriage to her younger sister with the Professor who is twice her age. His sister doesn't have a voice in her own marriage. The professor is beaten up with just one or two blows by the hero when he learns that her sister was raped by the professor. Instead of filing a complaint against the culprit, the hero arranges the marriage of his sister in her early twenties with a middle-aged Professor. The scene becomes more offensive when the Professor defends himself that the girl doesn't react nor cry louder when the act was performed which implies her sign of consent. The wife is portrayed as a modern woman who is egoistic and disrespectful to Kerala culture in the 1999 movie *Njangal Santhushtharaanu*, which is about a married couple. The movie is the best illustration of the "kulapurushan" (perfect guy) changing his wife into a "kulastree" (ideal woman). But in reality, the movie shows a number of instances where the husband mistreats the wife and claims that this is his way of "curing her mindset." The husband who humiliates and abuses his wife in the movie seems to be

justified; he even criticizes her gender by declaring, "women should be quiet and disciplined." This is a recurrent theme in Malayalam films made before the year 2000. Women who speak English, dress formally, and express their opinions in public without fear are presented as arrogant and self-centered and will be redeemed by the hero. Finally, she will change into the 'kulastree' avatar, where she will wear a traditional saree and apologize for her 'sins'. The same pattern can be seen in the movie *Kaliveedu*, where the husband demands his choice of arranging the house and also reminds his wife about the stereotypical roles of being a good cook and taking care of the husband's needs. Interestingly, here too the director portrayed a group of 'feminist ladies' with stylish looks and advised her to join the club. This group of ladies interferes in her personal matter of divorce and is represented as a faulty group of people misleading the audience of the character of feminists. In the movie *Kochu Kochu Santhoshangal*, Asha (heroine) elopes with the photographer (Jayaram) to lead a happy life despite of their financial background. But she gives up her dancing career after marriage. Later upon the family's acceptance of their love, she re-started her dancing career which led to tensions in Gopan's mind (Jayaram) resulting in Gopan leaving with his son, thinking that it would benefit her life and career. In the movie *Drishyam*, Georgekutty points to his wife that a woman's life after marriage is limited to the kitchen citing the examples of many Malayalam film actresses. In the movie *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the woman tries to cope with the customs and traditions of the family she gets married into. However, her mother-in-law's absence for a few months makes her life miserable with endless household chores. It's a film that subtly exposes patriarchal men in every single household. It takes us into the world of many women who do household chores every single day to satisfy the alpha males. In another powerful scene, the father-in-law tells Nimisha to drop her idea of applying for a job because he feels the job women do in the house is far more superior to what bureaucrats and ministers do. The traumatic experiences faced by women in the traditional patriarchal society are poignantly highlighted. The orthodox ideology adds fuel to the fire.

IV. QUESTION OF VIRGINITY

The question of virginity has become a controversial topic in Malayalam Cinema. While some tried to take a progressive path, most ended up displaying virginity as an essential requisite of a woman.

1998 movie *Ayal Kadhazethukua Aanu* revolves around the hero's hunt to determine the virginity of the heroine. The movie *Chandrostavam*, battles the love for Meena, by

3 men and Mohanlal. When her husband dies her childhood crush marries her at the end before losing her virginity with the villain. *Killichundan Mambazham* plays around the hero's struggle to preserve the virginity of heroine until she unites with her love. Such movies generally adhere to the basic guideline that the heroine should only lose her virginity with the hero. Therefore, the heroine does not always consummate, even if she is already married or widowed. Thus, holy enough to merge with the champion. In all these films, one dialogue is spoken to stress the fact that the heroine, though married hasn't consummated. Sometimes it is mentioned as her eligibility to marry again. But interestingly, if it is the hero who is married, mostly he is shown as having a child and the heroine will have no signs of objection. Like in the movie *Chitram*, Renjini promises to take care of Mohanlal's child from his previous marriage before he goes to prison for punishment. The virgin heroine reunites with her lover Nedumudi Venu, who is the father of two sons in the movie *Estam*. *Bodyguard* showed Nayanthara reuniting with Dileep who is a widower living with his son. One striking difference between *Namukku Parkkan and Oppol* with 1996 movie *Azhakiya Ravanan* is that in the former two, the hero accepts the female lead without uttering philosophical dialogues on love beyond virginity. In *Azhakiya Ravanan*, the male lead utters philosophical thoughts to convince his love and accept her.

Films normalizing virginity have also entered the era but received much criticism from the public stating the fact that it distorts the audience the concept of ideal women. In the movie *22 Female Kottayam*, the female protagonist confesses to her lover that she is not a virgin. When in *Mayanadhi*, Appu said 'Sex is not a promise', this was a statement uttered not just to Mathan but to whole male lovers who considered that once they were intimidated, she was all his property. In contrast in the movie *Honey Bee* when Vijay Babu asks "Are you a virgin" to Bhavana she gets shocked but in turn when he confesses that he is not a virgin she just normalizes with a smile. In the climax scene of *Ishq*, Shane only wants to know whether his lover has lost her virginity after undergoing many traumatic abuses from the villain. Only after that assurance did he give her a ring which she reacted powerfully by showing her middle finger. This scene received a huge amount of clap and appreciation. Considering the fact that there are only a few movies which normalize virginity for the reason of looking at it as a taboo or maybe fear of conservative reactions.

V. MOVIES THAT BREAK THE CLICHÉ STEREOTYPICAL ROLE OF WOMEN

A few movies released today deal a severe blow to misogyny, which was once been unabashedly embraced in

Malayalam cinema for many years. These kinds of interventions are upending the underpinnings of patriarchal morality in order to establish a different set of values. By challenging the roots of patriarchal morality, these initiatives are laying the groundwork for a different set of values. Films tried to focus more on things that happen in everyday life, through which they narrowed down the wall between the lives on and off the screen. In the 2018 Amal Neerad movie *Varathan*, when the character played by the protagonist Fahad Fasil made and served tea to his wife and the guest, it was a deviation from the gender roles usually portrayed in movies. 'Ordering' his wife to make tea upon the arrival of a guest was part of in number of films as in *CBI Diarykurup* when Capt Raju gives a statement 'My wife isn't here, so there is no one to serve tea or coffee', or else if the hero cooks it will be shown as a farce as in *Mr Butler*. *Aarkariyam*, a recent Malayalam film directed by Sanu John Varghese, was also captivated by its portrayal of gender roles. The plot, which is set against the backdrop of COVID, centers on a husband and wife who link up with the wife's father at his house after a national lockdown is announced. The creators have not only created a captivating narrative that gradually transforms into a thriller, but they have also taken care to liberate their characters from preconceived notions about their gender. It is evident throughout the film that the three main characters divide the household responsibilities without hesitation. The character portrayed by Sharafuddin is even open to giving his father-in-law a bath.

When the hero sees the naked body of the heroine after showering, where he hides under the bed, there is no doubt that the woman is his. This pattern was seen in many movies like *Usthad*, *Pattabishekam*, *Vandanam*, *Kerala House Udan Vilpanaku* and so on. While a part of the society still considers sex as a sacred means of bondage, *Mayandhi* was willing to break this shackle and talked, that sex is not a promise of any kind. With Appu teaching Maathan an important lesson, the film intends to teach the same to its audience. This statement is also a goodbye to Hitler Madhavankutties and Professors where even a single touch or kiss resulted in marriage, but when she clarifies to Mathan that sex is in no way a contract of any sort, this is something that echoed with the Malayali audience. Something that needed to be discussed out loud and also needed to be understood and passed along, at least with the latest generation. Malayalam cinema has also seen violence against women and she has been a docile wife accepting all abuses and verbal attacks but *Jaya Jaya Jaya hey* made women's audience powerful. The tit-for-tact scene where Jaya slaps back Rajesh made a complete distortion to cliché scenes in movies. *Uyare* has broken the stereotypical Mollywood formula of putting the superstar

hero at the center of a tale and making him find a way out of some trouble or the other. As an acid attack victim, she survives all the obstacles in her life to achieve her dream. A brief scene in the courtroom shows how unfair the legal process is to survivors of gender-based violence. Govind shamelessly denies attacking her and offers to marry her. This scene might have shown some amount of mercy to Govind by the male public yet the action of Pallavi satisfies the female audience of not accepting him.

VI. CONCLUSION

Women's characters are still ongoing and undergoing the process of change and evolution. As long as the film-makers create films with their deep-rooted gender prejudice, there will be movies with anti-woman scripts. But there are female directors and also male directors who create a powerfully and strong female protagonists or characters indicating a change. Changed happened even within the Malayalam Film industry when a group of women formed a collective apart from AMMA called WCC. The Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) was established as a collective for female artists working in the Malayalam film industry, including singers, actors, and directors, following the vicious attack on the actress, which shocked the sensibilities of the people of Kerala, the collective took shape on November 2017. The decision to make a collective of this type was a response to the misogynous position adopted by a male-dominated organisation (AMMA) of Malayalam cinema that was established within the year 1985. When it comes to Malayalam cinema, the battles are different. For a woman to achieve something is not tough but obstacles that she faces are tougher, in *Rani Padmini* when Manju Warrior made a valid statement representing all women's life she said 'If someone told you to be docile and submissive, then it's a trap to be caged bird by holding your wings, How can one fly higher if wings are not set free?'

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