

BETWEEN THE BODY AND HOUSEHOLD: FEMALE BODY IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

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Abstract: Kerala witnessed an upsurge of the oppressed classes along with the advent of Modernism in the beginning of twentieth century. Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali were the icons of this modernity. It isn't a coincidence that the first feature film in Malayalam *Vigathakumaran* (1928) got released even before the death of Sree Narayana Guru. This indicates the interlink between Kerala Modernity and Cinema. While Malayalam cinema starts with *Vigathakumaran* which portrays the story of a son who went missing from his family, it hasn't gone too far from the usual family premises and the love between the men and women in that. Men in Malayalam cinema do the multi-tasking and he brings up the household. Women on the other hand are objectified so much so that her 'protection' is considered as the responsibility of the men. She is supposed to find happiness in being 'protected' and this attained universality in Malayalam cinema. Female representation in Malayalam cinema can be categorized into three distinct phases. The first phase is the period till 1947, the second phase lasted till 1970s and the last phase from 1980s with the onset of consumerist-globalized world order. This paper investigates the female body in Malayalam cinema and how it normalizes female body into a mainstream construct. These normalizations include 1) The models of Lover, Mother, Wife and Prostitute repeated again and again in line with the male gaze where one can easily see the other in lower caste/black women body, 2) The restrictions and rules created by the Modernity which reiterates the importance of virginity and chastity. Asexualized Maternal subjectivities are idealized, 3) Liberation concepts of women faces strong contention and jibe. The paper attempts to contest the dichotomized world view wherein men controls the movements of women outside her household and put forth the argument that Malayalam cinema has easily catered to this segregation.

Keywords: Female Body, Modernity And Malayalam Cinema, Hetero-Normative Essentialization.

Introduction: It is to be noted that, the onscreen presence of a woman named Rosy (arguably the first female lead in Malayalam cinema), created huge outrage among the men of that time. This was when the presence of a woman is only ratified inside a house. Automatically, the men reacted by setting the theatre ablaze and hurling stones at the screen of Capitol theatre at Trivandrum. The partially destructed Capitol theatre thus stands as the first chapter of Female visibility in Malayalam cinema. The politics of female representation in Malayalam cinema is the sum total of this transition from the ultra-masculine boozing at the visibility of Rosy to the restless waiting for a female body on the screen. A body/body parts for the gaze and sexual pleasure for the men. Feminist film theoretician Laura Mulvey has rightly pointed out that women have just turned out to be a 'material' for gaze, while every theatre has become a place for such a male gaze. Malayalee male dominance has always kept a check on the arrival of democratic space behind the camera, so as to maintain the female body readily available for their gaze. Populist, mainstream, family, parallel, political, campus, and porn films are all but variant expressions of the coyness and submissiveness of women.

Malayalam cinema is reluctant to let the women outside her house and is still reclining on the comfort of the Modernist framework of female body and the gender roles related to it. This anachronism happens when feminist thoughts, literature and Post modernism questions the aforementioned framework and gender roles as well as the said construct of male narratives. Female roles are still restricted to the confinements of house, while the mainstream is celebrating the feudal and feudal-modernity mixture of masculinities. This restriction is visible not only inside the theatre, but even in the daily gossips, advertisements and news feeds, as pertinent and persistent attacks of masculinities, or as the voluptuousness of femininity.

Step Mother and Mother: The history of Malayalam cinema which starts at 1928 is categorically placed into three phases. The first phase is the period till 1947, the second phase lasted till 1970s and the last phase from 1980s with the onset of consumerist-globalized world order. Even when going through the complexities of these phases, the peculiarities of gender frameworks of the contemporary cinema are quite palpable. 1) The models of Lover, Mother, Wife and Prostitute repeated again and again in line with the male gaze where one can easily see the other in lower caste/black women body, 2) The restrictions and rules created by the Modernity which reiterates the importance of virginity and chastity. Asexualized Maternal subjectivities are idealized, 3) Liberation concepts of women faces strong contention and jibe.

The celebration of inside/outside dichotomy created by modernity was all the more pertinent in executing external roles, which includes the maintenance and protection of the household, by men. The gender construct that male and female bodies are two opposing biological beings and hence should have certain prescribed division of labour got wider currency. The cinemas always allowed a narrative style in this fashion.

Coy and Shy Local Girl: The politics of female representation in cinema is analyzed not just through the importance given to the female characters in a plot; the 'visibility' of female characters in a shot and her role in the narrative are also scrutinized. According to major film critics, the cinema after 1950s have always given representation and visibility to the female characters. According to them, Padmini-Sheela-Sharada trio have enjoyed stardom. The title of many films during this period had female names or female leads. *Nirmala, Chechi Prasanna, Mariyakkutti, Umminithanka, Sthreehridyam, Rebecca, Unniyarcha, Bharya, Jhnana Sundari, Tharavattama, Kudumbini, Manaswini, Shyamala Chechi, Subaida, Bhoomiyile Malakha, Chettathi, Sheelavathi, Adhyapika, Udyogastha, Manavatti, Velutha Katreena, Maya, Rosy, Kuttyedathi, Omanadevi, Chattakkaari, Collector Malathy, Ammeyanna Sthree* etc are examples of movies with female protagonists and are titled after them. There was an array of female actors like Sharada, Sheela, KR Vijaya, Jayabharathi, Kaviyoor Ponnamma, Ranichandra, Sujatha, Shobha, Ambika, Sreevidya and Seema. All these actors were really active and enjoyed a huge fan following.

The active presence of female characters and their visibility were considered as the creative phase of femininity. But this was completely played under the masculine logic prevailed at each period. The aforementioned films and characters of wife, lover, student, elder sister, mother, and prostitute were all building strong stereotypes about women in the perception of men. In the initial stages of Malayalam cinema there was a dichotomy of stepmother-mother, which got transmitted to the division of good woman-bad woman. Good woman in this concept is someone who is loyal and obedient to her male counterpart. Along with that, the perceptions about rich woman and poor woman are that the ability to control men and his deeds by the rich woman is not so feminine. This roots the notion that there is a preconceived form for femininity and women in that notion have certain roles to play. This feminine nature is the only valid character apt for a 'Kerala woman' whereas those women who imitate the 'western' life style are considered as outside the framework of a typical 'Kerala woman'. All sorts of female voices, and reformations are denigrated in this pretext. The women of those days were the type who 'never saw the city life and are the local girls who are coy and shy'.

The Malayali women who acquired modern education, who went 'out' for jobs and other career options during the 1960s-1980s were featured in the Malayalam cinema of that time. It allowed the women to hold positions like that of a bureaucrat or teacher but under the strict supervision of her husband or father. At the end of the day men should be the primary breadwinner of the household and the job or money from women are always considered lowly. *Chemmeen* is the best example for this. Karuthamma in this movie goes out to sell fishes to provide for her household. But her being "impure" prevents others from buying fishing from her. She had to stay back at home. This confirms the idea that the female body is a liability for her and it is better for her to stay inside house. The film *Thalayananamtram* shows that a woman can do jobs but only after following the instruction of her husband. Well educated and employed younger wife becomes a good woman when the less educated unemployed elder wife rules the

husband's choice and thereby destroying the peaceful family structure. Obedient women and their physical features including complexion should be understood in this respect. The cautionary titles like *Bharyamar Sookshikuka (Wives Beware)* were there in plenty during this period as if to direct them what is right and wrong.

Body and the associated by products of virginity and chastity have always turned out to be a burden for the women. Women are supposed to hide their body parts from the gaze of men in theatres and also to suffice to their wishes, both at the same time. They are overburdened to conceal their body even from their loved ones, when they arrive on screen. Most of the time they arrive from the kitchen and from an inner room. When they are 'out' they always look for a hideout to save them from the gaze. If a woman is ready to venture out with confidence and audacity she is considered as immoral or even immortal like a ghost. The 'difficulties' each and every mother faces to confine their daughters to their own bodies are shown in many films. The pertinent inner worry of the mother in *Olavum theeravum* about her daughter Nabeesu because of Nabeesu's attainment of womanhood etches this beautifully. Marriage is thus a ritual in which the ownership of woman gets transferred from father to husband which is also the reason why every girl child is considered as a burden and bane to the family.

The Bodily Prison: The only space available for a woman who considers her body as a prison, which is sanctioned by the logic of men is a brothel. A brothel 'outside' home. There are hundreds of films after the 1950s which talks about the prostitutes or their lives. Prostitutes can lead a life of their choice. But, if a woman chooses her sexual partner 'in' her house she should be killed. The film *Daaham* directed by Sethumadhavan is the story of a husband who kills his wife and her cheater lover for adultery. Malayalam cinema has always placed an uncompromising position, between that of home maker and a prostitute, for women. If she becomes a prostitute, then there is no coming back. The reason why there is a negative portrayal of a woman who protests or voices against injustices is that the cinema has no other position for women, other than that of a home maker or prostitute.

A woman's body is a burden for her public interaction, thus goes the catchword seen on every man's face. "You should remember that you are a woman/girl" has become a common parlance on a man's tongue. But it is not his tongue that utters these words continuously; rather it his penis which is all set to dissect a female body. This burdensome body foils a woman's plan to be the part of the mainstream and she realizes that she is volatile or vulnerable. *Ezhuthaappurangal* is a movie with a subtle narration of the lives of three women officers who realize their inability to change anything owing to their bodily pressure. Though, there are some attempts to break these boundaries of modernity in the movies of 1980s-90s and to place the teenage identity (*Ente Sooryaputhrikk, Summer in Bethlehem*), these women come back to the 'right path' after getting a 'slap' from the heroes. This is how Malayalam cinema translates women empowerment or liberation to the concrete set of upper caste saree clad women's identity.

Politics of Rape: Rape is a direct way to practice the men's autonomy over a female and thereby sending her to the darker side of her house and affirming the idea of the bodily burden. Rape in Malayalam cinema is portrayed in such a manner that a powerful man 'penetrates' to the woman. This would shatter a 'good' woman's body. A raped woman will never have a choice to return to her normalcy. Male gaze (even Camera's) and actions is an enforcement and that is how female body crawls back to her own self. *Admikal, Panchagni, Valarthumrigangal, Varthamanakaalam, Rugminikkoru Paavakkutti, Kadhaykku Pinnil, Oru Penninte Kadha, Namukku Parkkaan Munthirithoppukal, Avalude Ravukal, Olavum Theeravum, Bhoothakkannaadi, Videhyan, Vaasanthiyum Lakshmiyum Pinne Njanum, Karumadikkuttan* are examples of films which give us a candid view of the Malayali masculinity and the sexual orientation of the Malayali mainstream. Women are just the submissive part in the sexual act even if it turns out to be a violence. Women are under the men to give them pleasure and she is supposed to 'receive' him and the pleasures if any. If women are to protect themselves to be 'pure' from all sorts of rapes or enforcements she should stay back as much as she can. In other words, rape is the language of the masculine power that cautions women to be obedient and subservient. Women have no right to own her pleasure, let alone defining it.

The sexual agency of women is ignored through the violent rape by men. Even in a consensual love and love scenes or even in post marital love sexual agency is completely at the hold of men. Women are to silently follow the initiations from men as her shyness is the token of her 'purity'. Women are just objectified as a passive part in all the sexual pleasures and her visibility is bound in these premises.

In *Valarthu Mrigangal*, there is shot to show the cruelty of a rape. When the heroine who is a circus girl gets raped by the manager, it is filmed using the frames of a lion happily eating its daily meat. This is to imply that all types of rapes are like the sharp teeth of a lion on its prey. The reason why women are asked to preserve their virginity and save it for their marriage is because of the idea that men are waiting 'outside' with their cruel lion teeth. But when a man forcefully comes inside this cautionary frame work of woman and rapes her, she loses all her right to live. She is considered as spoiled and is now unfit to live 'inside' her house. Her choices then become flimsy to two options- either to the brother or to death. Hardly in Malayalam cinema one see a woman walking to her life after a rape.

The Masculine Ascent: There is a widely accepted observation that, it is only the mainstream Malayalam cinema's business mind that objectifies women and the parallel Malayalam cinema which got wider currency in the 1970s have tried to deconstruct this objectification. But women in parallel cinema are also 'invisible'. She is just an identity which is never visualized properly like in the film *Mathilukal*. Only exception in this field comes in the movies of TV Chandran. Other than that, even those parallel cinemas are just the obscene encroachment of the masculine politics. Films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan narrates the ideology of masculinity in all its severities. The film *Swayamvaram* which claims the 'new wave' in Malayalam cinema shows the abysmal state of a wife (Sita) after the death of her husband. The intriguing yet interesting narration of the film packs up at the moment of the wife's sad state. She is clueless at this point as her only way to the 'outside' world, i.e, her husband is no more and she gets a knock on her door from inside in a symbolic way. The film concludes by giving the message that Sitas are bound to stay inside. None from 'outside' is allowed to enter 'inside' her life. This dichotomy of inside-outside is vividly given screen space in Adoor's 2008 film *Naalu Pennungal*. The same door knock we saw in *Swayam Varam* is the ending note of the film. A door knock from the outside world of men is what decides the destiny of women in Adoor's films. Adoor films always follow the pattern of these two choices; the choices of a passive 'noble' woman or a prostitute, both giving no agency for the woman.

Men should be the one who control both the society and women. Women's duty is to sacrifice her completely for the pleasure of men. Her image should be that of someone who always wait for the man (*Mukhamukham*). If the man in a household is not ready to do his duties as prescribed by the society, it is the duty of the woman to remind him. Women in Adoor's films have always revolted against the men when men are lacking their masculine traits. That is the reason why Bhavaniyamma in *Kodiyettam* tweaks Shankarankutti with the question 'Are you a real man?' or by stating 'you should be born to a man to become a real man'. Every shots in Adoor films underlines the masculine claim that men have every rights to rule women and Adoor's characters are proud of their strength being men. The film *Kodiyettam* travels through the travails of a man who yearns to be a real man and the film concludes by making him a 'real man.' The film thus justifies its title *Kodiyettam(Ascent)* by taking the protagonist's life from a lower self to a superior masculine self. He thus maintains a modern family.

Struggle under Purdah and Chutta: Kerala is a mixture of many religious communities. This case ceases to exist in Malayalam cinema right from its onset, owing to the predominance given to the upper caste Hindu family stories. The initial stages of Malayalam cinema saw the struggle between modernity and Caste-ridden society. The period after 1990s has witnessed a huge wave against the modernist notions and safe placement of feudal casteism. The dominance in visibility of Upper caste Hindu men sandwiches and crushes the case of Christian Muslim narratives.

There are thousands of Castes and sub-castes among the Hindus but the mainstream visibility is ready to accept the homogenous Hindu looks. Same is the case with Christians in Kerala as observed by critics and scholars. Christians in Kerala are seen as a distinctive whole irrespective of their diversities. Except for Lal Jose's *Achanurangatha Veedu*, all the Malayalam movies with a Christian backdrop are about the

Catholic families. This monolithic picturisation of upper caste Catholic families as if they represent the entire Christian community of Kerala denigrates the different caste and communal groups among Christians. Those Christian priest characters enacted by Thilakan, Janardhanan, Innocent, or Gopakumar and the rituals performed by them in the church are nothing but Catholic. *Nokkethadoorathu Kannum Nattu, Minnaminung, Adya Kiranangal, Bharya, Ara Nazhika Neram, Ulkkadal, Namukku Parkkaan Munthirhoppukal, Vazhunnor, Lelam, Summer in Bathlehem, Vendor Daniel, Kottayam Kunjachan, Palayam, Kizhakkon Patrose, Kathodu Kathoram, Unnikale Oru Kadha Parayam, Sfadikam, Udayon, Dany, Manasinakkare* are some of the many movies which normalizes a Christian story to that of a Catholic narrative.

Of all the Christian narratives came up in Malayalam, there are certain commonalities ascribed to all of them namely, a strong male chauvinistic attitude, huge family property, highly devout family, family tradition, sibling rivalry, and the objectification of women. Men-women segregation is exercised with a great vigour wherein Women spaces are drawn at the maximum to the church and home.

Women have to take care of the church, worship, kitchen and other household things and men are detached from this by holding an upper hand on property and other outside decisions. The 'father' characters played by Tilakan as a Christian and Hindu show the exact condition of male dominance in Christian families. His character as a Hindu father in the film *Kireedam* is entirely different from the cruel father in *Namukku Parkkaan Munthirhoppukal*. He has got huge similarities with the Almighty God in the Old Testament in his moves, gestures, gaze and language. Wife and daughter are just slaves in front of him. Even after he rapes his step daughter, he remains unquestioned inside the family. Not only just fatherhood, but even husbands are considered as Godly in Christian families. The husband characters played by Mammooty are all those who impose their dominance. Traditional Christian men's clothes 'mundu' and 'jubba' is given to the husband characters and at the same time the submissive women wear 'chutta' and mundu'. Women in these films are invisible by getting suppressed on the basis of their sexuality and biological features. Many male characters in these films have shouted at their wives "go inside" as though they don't deserve any other words. Sexuality in many of these films are considered as an offence. The frames in these films are rich in showing the altar, the pulpit or even the cross which acts as a reminder against the sexual feelings. Nuns in the films are agents of these asexual proliferations. The hair cutting scene of the heroine in the movie *Kathodu Kathoram* is an indicator that the heroine shouldn't be gazed upon by the men because of her hair.

Supriya Agarwal has opined that Muslim women are considered as a second class individual and are thus having an enslaved identity in Hindi films. *Nikah, Bazaan, and Umrojar* are examples of movies in which religion occupies central space and women are just purdah clad. Malayalam is no exception. Women's subservient nature is picturized through the clothes she wear. Women get minimal space for their own expression and are often times placed as 'walking robot'. There is always a purdah to conceal her from the society and her inner thoughts. This is to be considered in light of the wave of marginalization happened to Muslims after the 1990s. Muslim women thus got double suppression.

As Supriya Agarwal has rightly observed, the face under the purdah has got an exotic image which in turn pushes the idea that purdah is to cover this exotic beauty. This cover nullifies the chances to communicate. This is the reason why Raziya in the movie *Classmates* says that she has got "a heart inside this purdah". This gets a different undertone in the movie *Perumazhakkalaam*, in which the heroine has always tried to show that there is something beyond her purdah. The period after Ayodhya and Gujarat incident denotes the intricacies of being a Muslim woman and wearing a purdah makes her vulnerable to the gaze of men from other communities.

Stardom and Family Dramas: The period between 1980s and 1990s saw a series of changes in the Kerala society mainly because of Globalization and resultant consumerism. This became evident in the case of Malayalam cinema too. Malayalam cinema underwent paradigm shift towards the allegiance of 'stardom'. The business value of films had to find out such an abstract version in order to stay put in the industry. This gave a different outlook to the screenplay of films where stories were written according to

the space of the hero. As a result, heroines or female characters got lesser prominence or no prominence at all. The male star's facial beauty or body muscles occupied majority of the screen. Thrilling action sequences, sensual songs, and even camera angles got the color of a male gaze.

Mohan Lal, Mammooty and Suresh Gopi were the main heroes of this period and they represented different narrations of the male dominance. Suresh Gopi characterized the macho policeman (*Commissioner.Ekalavyan*) and dominated each and everything that came his way. Mohanlal represented the feudal masculinities in movies like *Devasuram* and *Aram Thamburan*. Mammooty characters were a mixture of the feudal-modernized masculinity (*CBI series, Valyettan*) in which women have no role or minimal role to play. Majority of the films then became the plot for revenge between men. Women in these films were just objects for men to relax during their leisure time. The hero in Malayalam film *Narasimham* went on to the extent of saying "he needs a woman to deliver his children". Family dramas made by Sathyan Anthikkad-Sreenivasan duo tried to say that women are just the lesser part of the family structure. Films like *Chinthavishtatyaaya Shyamala* frames the angst of a woman only because she was deserted by her irresponsible husband.

Conclusion: The powerful question of when and how Malayali women will acquire a visibility has now become a really pertinent social quest. The advent of technologies like mobile phones has created a huge debate on digital literacy. Mobile cameras have now become a tool for the male gaze through which women are now insecure to travel alone and mingle freely with others. Here is how, we have to discuss the importance of films in formulating a sexual politics in Kerala. This reading will question and challenges the institutions of Malayali men like family, caste, social set up, religion and education. The identity frame work of men is even at stake with this revelation. The pertinent gender question related to this process is whether women can grab hold of the filmic narrations and theatrical gaze. Not just a symbolic grabbing, but the actual impetus to enter the power structure of the society.

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