

TRACING THE RECAST OF FEMALE IDENTITY IN VISUAL MEDIA

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Abstract:

Visual Media is the greatest tool of modern technology which not only provides knowledge and entertainment, but also plays a major role in the cultural transmission of the modern social system. This article explores how film as a modern visual platform enhances the chance towards the representation of women in the present world. How film surfaces to the portrayal of the harsh realities of the time? The article explores the trauma and empowerment traced in the visual media by deeply analysing certain selected movies from Mollywood.

Keywords: *Media, Culture, Trauma, Acid victim.*

A film is a multi-dimensional art form which originated after being influenced by our culture and it in turn also influences the culture. Indian society was divided on the basis of the occupation that various groups of the society did. The social order always had a hierarchy which is long preserved in the minds of the people. Even in the modern day films, we see such portrayals where society being perceived through the construct created by the dominant sections. History always conveys the story of the dominant section, it is those sections that creates subaltern sections in the society. The denied, the deprived and the excluded also have played a major role in the creation of history, but their contributions are over shadowed by the conventional practice of portraying the minority in the shade of incompleteness and imperfection, which often include women, and gender minorities. At times, the minority is portrayed as propagators of violence even though they are the victims. Therefore a new style is required for the minority to achieve their pedestal, to rise voice against the dominance and for that they must fight to express themselves and thereby attaining Self-acceptance. Many writers have represented and voiced the feelings of women, yet the patriarchal and caste driven society of ours, deny their rightful claims to dignity. In the recent years, the Malayalam Film industry has brought out notable movies which provide multiple perspectives on the issues faced by women such as *22 Female Kottayam*, *How Old Are You*, *Bangalore Days*, *Udaharanam Sujatha*, and *Uyare* have tried to represent the issues such as denial of citizenship rights, dignity to life, claims to equality and exploitation. This article opens up the various insights that are hidden in the story lines of certain selected Malayalam movies. In the current scenario where we find society moving towards a kind of equalisation, mollywood movies act as a welcome step in highlighting the serious forms of violence against women on various grounds of society.

This study is based on breaking gender stereotypes, overcoming trauma and establishing one's own voice. A discussion on feminism is appropriate at this juncture. Feminism is a concern with Women's role in society as portrayed through different media and woman as a construct through literature. However in the post-modernist society, the role of literature has been shared by modern forms of media especially television series and movies. Therefore, a reading of feminism along the lines of literature would be helpful in understanding the role played by movies because a movie script is after all a text, which qualifies

as literature. Feminist authorities try to place women equally with men. As said in Peter Barry's *Beginning Theory*, feminist literary criticism of today is the direct product of the women's movement of the 1960s. The movement is considered to be literary because this movement understood the importance of women portrayal in literary texts. Women used it as a tool to question the patriarchal norms of society. Barry shows the different ways in which women were portrayed in literature during each ages. In nineteenth century fiction, very few women go to work. Only those who are forced by necessity go for work. The women of that time were mainly concerned in finding out a good partner in life. It is so because they are concerned of their future life and their social position. During the 1960s the socialisation aspect in literary works were given importance. However, the scene changed in 1970s. Now efforts were undertaken to expose the mechanisms of patriarchy. More attention was given by critics to expose the mind-set of men and women and they found out that it was the mind-set that resulted in the inequalities.

Film industry had been male centred and had projected this patriarchal dominance by telling male centred stories; their heroism, their dreams and their aspirations. Films and literature have explored the different dimensions of the relationship between a man and a woman, and has more often come out favouring the menfolk who are deemed the stronger of the two. A woman also called the "weak sex" is always being defined in accordance with the patriarchal interest, and is treated as the "other". The treatment keeps them away from exploring their lives as a woman's life is controlled by the patriarchal norms. She has been defined only in terms of her relationship with the male characters and also in relation to the male dominant audience. However, the aspect of femininity that has been structured in films has witnessed changes over the years and various directors and film theorists tried to define the feminine in different ways.

There have always been stereotypes or role models for how a woman should perform the act of being a woman, backed up by the established notions of culture and civilization. Men were in control of sexual relationship, while females were endowed with concepts of chastity which is not applicable to men. Men have always been at the leisure of pursuing what they like without any inhibition and restriction. Sex has been one of the chief weapons by which the male reaffirmed his superiority. A traditional role has been set for the women that fail to transcend the periphery of freedom. These roles confine them to established rigid state as they have to perform the role of a sacrificial mother, a duteous wife and a faithful daughter.

Cinema is one of the languages through which the word communicates itself to itself. Cinema propagates and popularises the prevalent notions of the society and has since its inception betrayed the freedom of women. Ideologies disseminated through movies have rigidified the prison like social structures created by the patriarchal society for women. Ideologies are perceived-accepted suffered cultural objects, which work fundamentally on men by process they do not understand. What men express in their ideologies is not their conditions of existence which pre-supposes areal relationship and an imaginary relationship. So when we set out to make a film, from the very first shot, we are burdened by the necessity of reproducing things not as they really are but as they appear when refracted through ideology.

Film, as perhaps the most important medium of popular culture, has taken over the novel's function in shaping the social and cultural values of its audience. It is precisely through such popular texts, which "embody and enact and perform certain meanings and values," that our perception of the world is formed. This point owes much to Derrida's "view that we can have no access to reality that is not mediated by language, no glimpse of history that is not refracted through representation".

Realistic representation, however, is not to be taken for granted, because it is only an aesthetic tool that tries to make a narrative more real to the viewer and attempts to hide its mode of production. The fact that it is based on a true story or true incidents, it only serves to naturalize the ideological foundation of the film, to make us believe that, in this particular instance, reel is indeed real. We as audience, therefore, more easily identify not only with specific characters but more importantly with the film's overall ideology.

Since its invention, the camera has been perceived as a scientific tool for registering reality, so it is not surprising that film, as a popular narrative form, has been appropriated by the dominant culture for the purpose of social and cultural incorporation. Rather than simply portraying reality, images interpolate or hail us as viewers, and in doing so designate the kind of viewer they intend us to be.

The story of *22 Female Kottayam* tells the story of vengeance exacted to menfolk who deliberately perceive women as objects to satisfy his lust. Even though the story appears to be that of quite an ordinary theme of revenge, it can have multiple readings. The protagonist is the heroine and the hero, an embodiment of male chauvinism and narcissism, is given the ultimate punishment by getting rid of the “weapon” he uses to wreck havoc on women by satisfying his lust. Castration shown in the move may be an ideal solution to deal with such real life perverts. She doesn't want to kill him, which she did to the older man for the 'two dog bites'. For the young, dynamic person she chose castration. It is presented as a minor operation similar to that of circumcision which can be easily done by a female and which doesn't have any further complication on the body. The man being denied of his phallus which is a symbol of his authority doesn't cry over it as he accepts that he doesn't need it to ascertain that he is a male.

How Old Are You (2014), a movie by Roshan Andrews shows a quite disruption of the discovery of the identity of the self of the female which usually and always is subjugated in the patriarchal society. Here, the woman voices, questions and takes a decision which was not quite a common phenomenon in the usual nuptial relationship. The 36 year old Nirupama Rajeev (Manju Warier), in her prenuptial life was a free-spirited character who worked for her dreams and aspirations as evidenced by the words of her classmate. However, the Nirupama we know since the beginning of the movie is a government employee who has to balance her life by taking care of the needs of her husband, his family and their daughter. Somewhere along the way she forgets her dreams and aspirations and is seen as a failure by all. After she becomes a wife and a mother, she takes a place which makes her a shadow of herself under the pressure and responsibility of the family. She looks older than what really she is which is contrasted to her much young looking husband Rajeev (Kunchako Boban). Women used to sacrifice their dreams and aspirations unlike men for the sake of the family. Even though accidentally, she finds her identity, cherishes and work for it against her husband's dream to go to Ireland. The most important fact is that she takes a firm decision against her husband's in order to pursue her own dreams and becomes quite successful in it. The most powerful question here is “Who decides the expiry date of the female dreams?” It is a question that opens up the closed mindset of the patriarchal world around us. The dreams of women are given an expiry date which is decided by the menfolk who don't bother to let go off their dreams and aspirations. Here, the female is not ready to get go with the traditional well understood answer. Rather, she finds that it is determined by her irrespective of age and gender. The movie sets in a change by showing that the husband is finally able to let go of his male ego and accepts his wife's success at the luncheon hosted by the Indian President in honour of his wife.

The new wave films portray the personality of the woman quite differently from the traditional caricature form of women being mild, calm, coy and chaste. With the advent of new wave film makers in Malayalam, there has been a radical change in the portrayal of women. Anjali Menon's “Bangalore Days” released in 2014 presents a series of women characters who don't fear to break the conventional shell that women are required to be residing in. The female characters are shown as free, natural to their characters that do not show any signs of being treated as girlish or as the other. Though the role played by veteran and late actress Kalpana may seem to be victimised in the initial sequences, she doesn't think twice to live her life freely when her husband abandons her. She quickly overcomes her rural shell and takes up a kind of urban life style that she has always dreamt off. Nazriya Nazim plays the role of a free-spirited youth who loves to spend time with her male cousins, Fahadh Faasil who dons the character of Shivadas is remorseful and lost in the memories of his lover who died due to his fault. The director doesn't want him to be a

worthless selfish person immediately forgetting his lover as soon as she dies. It is notable that she doesn't portray females as coy, protection seeking and weak. Also, the males are not dominating, but gentle, caring and passionate toward their females. Arjun (Dulquer Salmaan) loves Sarah (Parvathy Menon) despite her handicap. She is physically challenged yet she offers positive messages through her radio programmes which take Aju closer to her. She is not afraid to follow her life. Such strong portrayal of independent women can be seen as something Derrida referred to as the "event". This would have signalled the breaking up of the conventional portrayal of women.

Manu Ashokan's *Uyare* made a landmark in the portrayal of an acid victim in the movie, where the character was essayed by Ms Parvathi Thiruvoth. The movie is notable for many aspects as it challenged the typical portrayal of men and women in movies. The movie focussed on the binary of both men and women. Women as independent yet fantasising male domination, and women as fighters, who strive to establish their identity. Men as oppressors, and egoistic, and men as supportive of women's initiatives without ego are clearly assayed in the movie. These trends are welcome with regard to film making as these changes help us see a transformed society that would in the coming years, be a place of equal dignity for men and women. *Uyare's* narrative jumps from various timelines but the movie traces the journey of a woman Pallavi Raveendran who fights all odds to be that independent woman who she is by the end of the movie. Throughout the movie, we see how she evolves and changes with each lesson she gets in the form of her experiences. Pallavi's journey of her character formation begins as she is attacked by her lover. The story is about how one dreams, scales the path of success, faces a setback in the form of tragedy, the self-imposed exiles, the desire to fight back, and finally standing on one's own feet.

The most modern form of attack against women is acid attack and is the most heinous form of gender-based violence against women. The perpetrator's aim is not to kill the victim but to leave her in a pathetic condition. Injuries on the body heal and leave scars not only on the body but also physically and psychologically the whole personality of the survivor affected. Acid Attack victims are often looked with sympathy by the society but it is not sympathy that they need. They need support from others. A person with a disfigured face is often seen as demon or a cursed person. This adds to their trauma and some can even turn hostile who may even try to instil the same pain in others. Pallavi shows the pain and agony suffered by an acid attack victim. India is now home to severe acid attack cases. Most of these attacks are done by men folk who feel betrayed by their lovers. However, it is not a parameter to justify their vile act of destroying a person's life.

The theory of male gaze began to be popular in 1975 when Feminist academic Laura Mulvey, who wrote through a period of women's liberation movement of the early 70s, used Freudian principles to analyse film. Male gaze exclusively suggests the focus if camera which serves as the eyes of men on women and how it captures the woman as a sexual object that has to gratify the needs of men folk. According to Mulvey, men feel that they create meaning for women by looking at them and the sole purpose of women is to be looked at by men. Men objectify, and women are objectified. Importance was given to male perspective than a female perspective. Laura Mulvey stresses her points on male gaze theory through her essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Female body is often seen as a property under the possession of a male for quite a long time and had been enjoyed the pleasure of its gaze. The cinema has made such a wonderful opportunity for the males to experience over and again quite comfortably in the darkness of the cinema hall, getting adequate privacy, to explore his eyes on her body. An activity in the open light might be irritating for the males and they may avoid it. The darkness in the hall helped to hide this hypocrisy, and at the same time justified being part of the group in the hall, the unidentified but unified male partners with the same purpose.

Gender equality was the norm of Indian culture before Manusmriti, the law book of Hindus which relegated the position of women. Otherwise the Ardhanareeshwara concept would have been solidified

and would have been accepted as the norm. To conclude, one can see quite clearly a progressive tone of female narration in accordance with the mainstream feminist movements. Globalization and Information Technology have made cultural exchange and communication quite fast. Philosophers and thinkers have subverted the binaries and broke any distinction or superior inferior dilemma by abolishing centrality. The concept of God and morality which was narrated favouring male is questioned thoroughly. However one can hope for the best in which both the gender find equal space and clearly defined roles. In the Indian mythology, we have the concept of goddess Kali and Durga or in its abstract form the Maya. It is the ultimate source of power and creation. For example, one such very powerful symbol is that of Kali with the god of destruction, Lord Shiva under her foot. Indian perception of female as expressed through myths and literatures give a prominent place for femininity which is very much esteemed and in dispensed with. Here there is no masculinity devoid of femininity which has equal status like that of our concept of Ardhanareeshwara. Thus there would be a time in the future that man discover this secret of nature and come up with a better defined relationship between the male and the female.

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