

The Mirage of Women Empowerment: Disguised Misogyny in *Kanmadam and 22 Female Kottayam*

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Abstract:

Malayalam cinema especially the domain of parallel film has been evidently realistic and true to life in discussing the social injustices, imbalances and multifarious activities. Apart from this entire recognition, Malayalam cinemas both offbeat and commercial rarely produced women characters with significance. There are certain woman characters in Malayalam cinema which are held in esteem for being the epitome of empowered females like Clara, a prostitute with a great sense of dignity in *Thoovanathumbikal* and Bhadra, a vengeful peasant woman in *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu*. Even though these female characters have managed to maintain cult followers and admirers in Kerala, Malayalam films still remain as the biggest purveyors of misogyny. But things appear to change after the outbreak of the maverick set of film technicians and actors came to be known as the “new generation” movement in Malayalam Cinema. Films like *22 Female Kottayam*, *Salt and pepper*, *Amen* and *5 Sundarikal* are lauded with applause for its undismayed rendition of intrepid, persuasive, and empowered female characters. In this, paper two films from two millennia are taken to analyse the concept of patriarchal supremacy in disguise of women empowerment. The two films in this paper, i.e. *Kanmadam* written and directed by Lohitadas and *22 Female Kottayam* directed by Ashiq Abu have been analysed as making arduous attempts to prove themselves as films centred on women of strength but in reality upheld the ultimate victory of patriarchal consciousness.

Keywords: women centric movies, women empowerment, new generation wave, sexuality, patriarchy

Cinema is a potential medium which can influence the multitudes and their consciousness both culturally and socially as any other forms of art. Furthermore, it changes the way we look relationships, society, and people. A films' advantage of having a movable visual component rather makes its attempts more admissible. These aspects of the plausibility of films risk its ideological orientation of what it possibly accords to the collective consciousness of the masses. In feminist theories also the representation of the female is the pivotal issue. Feminist film critics like Laura Mulvey further problematises this issue of representation by pointing out the objectified female figure as a source of patriarchal visual pleasure.

In Malayalam films also the chronological history of the evolution of the industry marks the history of anti feminist, voyeurised, infantilized and marginalized females. The plight of the first heroine in the history of Malayalam cinema symbolically anticipates the unorganized and imbalanced position of the many who came and gone by. Throughout the time of the 80s and 90s, Malayalam cinema was almost on the verge of degradation because of the diminishing value of the screenplays. Moreover, the female characters were portrayed as meek, vulnerable and an object of sexual gratification. In addition to this the films constructed either glorified or vulnerable females, thus effectively created the binaries of femininity.

In 1993, with the release of *Manichithrathazhu*, there emerged a set of new women oriented films where the transformation from an object of gaze to the speaking subject was undeniably manifested. After Shobhana, who played the role of schizophrenic Ganga in *Manichithrathazhu*, Malayalam Cinema was gifted with the versatile actress Manju Warriar. She was distinguishable and unique in her method of acting, her own voice, screen presence and her selection of films. Nearly all of her films evince dynamic female personas amongst which the ferocious ironsmith woman in the film *Kanmadam*, Bhanu stands out prominently. The film recounts the journey of Viswanathan, a thug, and his friend Johny, a pimp. They accidentally kill a man, Divakaran. Viswanathan goes to Damodaran's village where his family is led by Bhanu, his sister. Viswanathan at first unnerved by her eventually falls in love with her. Bhanu is showed as an emotionally troubled yet unflinching woman who is able to withstand the local bully Kumaran, who makes spiteful remarks about Bhanu and her sisters. Her family members,

chiefly her grandmother insists her to adapt herself as a female with those proclaimed characteristics of patience, humility, and compassion.

The film is an exemplification of the Patriarchal normalization of an abhorred female who is courageous enough to be on her own by disregarding all the strenuousness. Viswanathan holds the cultural authority of patriarchy that is masculine enough to normalize the ferocious Bhanu to a female figure who the society approves of. The existence of traditional gender roles in a society is likely to contribute to attitudes and behaviours that allow for and normalize the women. Bhanu appears to Viswanathan as a troubled female, both socially and sexually. That is the reason he intrudes into her personal space and hugs her forcefully without her consent. A ferocious Bhanu tries to resist this act of violation but ultimately yields to his masculine arrogance. She starts to perform her femininity soon after this incident by falling in love with him. At the beginning of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler states that ‘within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be’ (Butler 24). In short, the very presence of a masculine figure is enough and more to organize things back in order and also to methodize the twisted or weird femininity. As John Berger says in his *Ways of Seeing*,

“A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. His presence may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not. But the pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others” (Berger 47)

In the absence of the pre-eminent male member in her family, Bhanu espouses that position which she effectuates to a great extent. But when Viswanathan turns up, he intrudes into the familial space and replaces himself with the absent male authority. Thus the film deviously validates the cultural notion of a familial male supremacy. Gradually, Bhanu’s role shrinks from a subject to an object of Viswanathan’s male gaze:

“How she appears to men, thus become a crucial component of her identity as women. One might simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object- and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”
(Berger 48)

Another conspicuous element in the film is the characterization of Johnny. Johnny is seen as an inhuman pimp who traps and sells innocent women. He follows Viswanathan to Kerala and appears to Viswanathan as a disturbing presence. The discourses between these two shows clearly the way men speak among each other about women. Even though the film boasts Johnny’s ultimate transformation as a man who protects Bhanus elder sister Suma who is depicted as a social outcast with an illegitimate child, He disposes of Radha, a woman from his workplace in Kerala, to a Sex trafficker in Mumbai just before his so called transformation. The film vindicates Johnny’s all past transgression with this final transformation as a man virtuous enough to offer his life for Suma, the social outcast or flawed woman in a patriarchal point of view.

Malayalam cinema went through a qualitative deterioration from 2000 onwards. The slapstick comedy films of Dileep with extremely lewd dialogues and films of Shaji Kailas and Ranjith with Mohanlal as a masculine figure in an overly assertive or aggressive way as in *Narasimham* literally made Malayalam films a cobbled passage for the female artists. But with the release of *Traffic* in 2001, Malayalam Cinema began to show a shift in the production as well as in the sensibilities. A new category of mainstream film emerged during this period and this trend was led by a generation of young filmmakers. In the media discourse, this trend was called by different terms like New Wave and New Generation. New Generation films were mostly urbane, conspicuously centred on a troubled metrosexual. The films by Ashiq Abu, Anwar Rasheed, Amal Neerad, Sameer Thahir, Arun Kumar Aravind captured the true spirit of New Generation movies. However, as the noted film critic Dr C.S Venkiteswaran points out, “while

their formats and styles are deeply influenced by global and national trends, their thematics are firmly rooted in Malayali life and mindscapes”.

Ashiq Abu's filmography shows versatility and is noted for unconventional females who constantly problematize the stereotypical females from the masculine point of view. Maya in *Salt and Pepper* and Rani and Padmini in *Rani Padmini* celebrate their respective lives and by doing so uphold the notion of freedom in a more relatable way. Apart from all these female characters, Tessa in *22 Female Kottayam* enjoys a substantial place in Ashiq Abu's filmography. The film is celebrated as the exemplification of women empowerment and critics also held the film in high regard. It recounts the transformation of Tessa K Abraham, a 22-year-old Malayali nurse in Bangalore whose sole aspiration is to achieve a nursing job in Canada. When the film takes up, Tessa appears as a gullible, tender girl who smiles with real warmth. In the time of her Visa clearance procedure, she gets to know Cyril Mathew and eventually loses her heart to him. The two succumb into a passionate love affair and premarital relationship. But things turn topsy-turvy when Tessa is raped brutally by Cyril's boss Hegde. Tessa is later imprisoned for keeping narcotics, a crime which she doesn't commit. In the prison, the truth about Cyril's viciousness stumbles upon her. From this epiphanic moment onwards Tessa transfigures herself from the gullible girl to the revenge seeking bold woman. On the strength of promiscuous and unprincipled DK, she accomplishes to kill Hegde and castrates Cyril.

22 Female Kottayam is often described as the outcome of sexual freedom enjoyed by Tessa. Some religious figures used this film as a reminder of the pitfalls and dangers of violation of norms and freedom of women. Tessa's pre marital companionship and sexual relationships are exploited by the central male character to trap her and silence her. Though she acquires the strength to strike back brutally and castrate the phallic patriarchy, the reception of film went through the lens of patriarchy. Also, the film can be viewed as a peculiar case, due to its marketing strategy of positioning itself as a Feminist film. Probably, it was for the first time, a mainstream film was marketed commercially using the slogans of Feminism. Even with such a feminist tag, the camera follows the classic male gaze as defined by Laura Mulvey in her essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*". To make this point it is worthwhile to analyse the rape

scene in *22 Female Kottayam*. B. Aboobaker refers to this male gaze where the camera becomes just another eye of the rapist by penetrating into the victim. Here the camera takes the side of the violent perpetrator or in other words, it offers the voyeuristic pleasure to the audience. If it is truly a feminist film, it should have adopted the techniques of Indian Feminist Theatre while depicting sexual violence. This device of the cinema itself becomes another patriarchal instrument to instill the threat of violence to the women breaking the normative frameworks. Laura Mulvey opines:

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle” (Mulvey 14)

Cyril is portrayed as a metrosexual with no inhibitions at being slighted by voyeuristic comments of girls and one who is open with sexual relationships. But these are only a prelude to revealing his true identity as a glorified pimp who preys upon vulnerable women. The final scene of castration as the revenge of Tessa raises several questions about the concept of masculinity and its channelization. Cyril is castrated clinically when his phallus is removed surgically. Another reason to glorify the film was the ultimate punishment of castration given by Tessa to Cyril. At that point, Cyril arrogantly shuns Tessa by saying that his masculinity does not depend upon the six- inch removed from him. He threatens Tessa even after her revenge explicitly shows that Tessa’s attempt to normalize him is nothing but a failure. When Tessa is in the prison, her co prisoner alerts her that the greatest weapon of a woman is her sexuality, but Cyril boasts of taking revenge upon her even after the castration. The presence of a woman’s sexuality is reduced in front of a man’s absence of masculinity. In that sense, the eventual outcome of Tessa's revenge is the inculcation of his patriarchal consciousness, even without the absence of a penis.

In *Kanmadam*, a thug's attempts to normalize the girl is fruitful one where as in *22 Female Kottayam*, a girl's attempts to foster humanity in a man is an utter failure. *Kanmadam* and *22 Female Kottayam* are purely anti-Feminist in essence. But the majority audience considers the female protagonists in both the movies as courageous with a considerable amount of strength and determination. But a thoroughly critical approach of the films eventually unveils the concept of pseudo feminism in these films and resulting in the unrivalled victory of the patriarchal consciousness.

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