The Prevalence and Portrayal of Women Protagonists: A Study on 'Best Film National Award' Winning Malayalam Films

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Abstract

This study takes a look at the portrayal of females in National award winning cinemas of India. Taking three best film award winners of the decade (2001-2010) made in Malayalam languages spoken by people of one of the most progressive state of India, Kerala, the researcher finds out that though the women movements fought hard for female representations , there is definite lack of strong compassionate female characterization in their narratives. They also lack proper screen timing for their representations on screen.

Keywords

Indian film, representation, feminist cinema

Introduction

The commanding position of cinema in the public sphere has been already recognized through years of research and investigation. They are proved to manipulate the ways, the audience begins to think about the reality around them. And when cinema becomes the most beloved entertainment medium in any community where it is often misunderstood to portray reality, it is natural that the equations that it present appear realistic and as ones that is to be followed and generalised.

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In a world that speaks of gender inequality in the highest levels, it offers an enthusiastic study when one attempts to check how the human stories when translated into screens present the women folk. Women in the real world themselves are schooled and groomed gradually to give sanctimony to the 'Packaging' of women in a certain way befitting the dominant culture and its ideologies. A woman is thus said to be born 'within an allotted and confined space into the keeping of men.

According to the studies by Ann Oakley(1972), the representation of traditional female traits and values include them as ones who believes personal relationships as more important than work, and who deals with problems by negotiating and compromising, believing a male partner's opinions as more important that her own. She is shown as comfortable with showing emotions even when she accept and acknowledges complexity, and believes that a male role is to initiate, and female role to respond. Women are also represented as those who feels it is acceptable to show vulnerability – both physically and emotionally and is comfortable with articulating emotions (especially to other women), enjoying solitude as opportunity for 'self-care' (though feels she has no entitlement to this) and feels comfortable with not being important (especially compared to males).

No one can argue that viewing repeatedly an imbalanced fictional world where females are often underrepresented and shown unmotivated can be good for young females and males. But it may be also noted that under no conditions this research suggests that all female portrayals be uplifting or inspirational nor that 'pretty' females not be depicted. But creating females as adornment, enticement, or with inclination to romance as the main or exclusive personal trait or motivation is definitely unwanted for.

It may be also noted that instead of a pluralist idea where diversity of society is portrayed for societal members to have choice on their understanding about women, the film industry largely is a system of hegemony where one group is dominated by another. The dominating group achieves its domination by 'winning' popular consent through everyday cultural life. In media studies terms, this model works by achieving dominance through media representations of the world. The media 'tell us' what to think, what to believe and how our world 'should be'. The patriarchy of the society work through a hegemony dominated by men in creative and commercial sides, thereby only a partial or selective view of reality is given.

In the 1970s, Laura Mulvey began some very interesting research on the way in which women are represented in film. Mulvey (1975) theorised that the cinema is largely 'masculine' and that women are controlled by the male 'gaze'. The idea is that a woman's body displayed on screen makes the (male) viewer a kind of **voyeur**, who experiences intense erotic pleasure from looking at her. This 'controls' the woman and makes her an 'object' of the gaze (the man). Traditionally men were always in control of the making of the cinematic texts, which helped them to create and device the media targeted for men!

The aim of the present study was to make a comprehensive examination of female portrayals and their representation in 'best film' award winning Malayalam films of the decade. It is to be noted that since they are adjudged as the best, they also carry with them an unwarranted responsibility to try to present a balanced view of world, gender and family. This research tends to open the area of female character development to an important possible antidote to female under- representation as well as overemphasis on physical appearance: the creation of diverse, complicated females who initiate or actively participate in their destinies.

The three films that won the same coveted award in the last decade that is between 2001 and 2010 were selected for the study. And thus the researcher moves on to 'Pulijanmam', 'Kutty Srank' and 'Adaminte Makan Abu' , which won the best film award of the nation in the years 2006, 2009, and 2010.s

Pulijanmam, a Malayalam feature is based on the famous play with the same title by N Prabhakaran. Directed by Priyanandhanan, the movie uses the myth of Master Kari, who goes to the hindmost world of tigers (Tiger world) to get tiger nail and tail as a cure for the ruler's mental trauma. This theme is used as a metaphor to explore the current political and social life in Kerala.

Kutty Srank (translated as junior boat captain in Malayalam) is a film about a mariner who operates a cargo vessel near the sea port of Kodungallore. The story is woven around three women and their relationships with the protagonist, KuttiSrank, played by Mammootty. The instances are set in three different moods and seasons. So each one had an individualistic treatment; at the same time, it didn't stand out from the total cohesive structure of the film.

Adaminte Makan Abu tells the story of a poor attar (a kind of perfume) seller Abu (Salim Kumar) whose only lingering wish in life is the Hajj pilgrimage, which he strives hard to fulfil, and at the verge of the fulfilment, he opts out when he fears that the means is not fully legitimate.

Observations

The movie 'Pulijanmam' has the female role of Shahnaaz as a lady who comes up to play the role of Vellachi, the female lead in the drama, Prakashan, the protagonist is rehearsing for the club anniversary. A Muslim girl, she appears a bold face in the beginning, but falls for the hero of the drama within days into the rehearsal. The rehearsals go on, but due to the outbreak of communal riots in the area, the drama remains cancelled. At the crucial point of the narrative when Prakashan goes to meet Shehnazat her house and invite her to his life. But of the fear of Prakashan getting killed by her community men, she asks Prakashan to go back. She thus succumbs to pressures of her community and fails to stand by her beliefs and aspirations.

Name of Character	Total No of scenes	Total Screen time
Kutty Srank	57	74 minutes, 15 seconds
Revamma	22	27 minutes, 2 seconds
Penmena	23	20 minutes, 7 seconds
Kali	19	15 minutes, 22 seconds

In Pulijanmam', the fate of Shenzaz is supported by the mythical character of Vellachy in the dance drama, who fails to beat her husband who has taken the life of a tiger, to bring him back to human life. Thus the director maintains the point that females of our tradition fails to act at the crucial junctures and to follow their aspirations. The indecisiveness is placed as the specific nature of the womenfolk, as per the narratives. The three women in 'Kutty Srank' are constructed across multiple differences-of class, ethnicity, marriage and motherhood. In foregrounding women as active decision makers and uncovers truth, the movie makes the voices of women as bearers of discursive authority. Revamma who has taken to Buddhism, hardly has got the guts to save her young male friend, the Buddhist monk, who gets killed by his father later. She, as depicted as an anomaly by his society, is not ready to take a family life and has then got the strength to run out of her father's hold and proceed to Gaya with the other ladies in the climax.

Prevalence- 56 scenes -1.27.28 hours

Film	Character	No of Scenes	Total Screen Time
Pulijanmam	Thondachan/Prakashan	47	72 minutes 24 sec
	Shahnaaz	13	19 minutes 55 seconds
	No of male characters	19	
	No of female characters	5	

Interestingly the women also turn subjects, not objects of gaze, except for Penmena who at point use her physical beauty and total nudity to entice 'Kutty Srank' after whom she has been ever since she had seen her . Even here the sequences are used to furnish the magnanimity and character of the male protagonist who turns down the offer without a second thought.

And interestingly each of the women characters'sencounter with Kutty Srank is all set in different mood of emotions and depth. But neither of them seems to accomplish their mission in life. Ann Kaplan has argued that when women steps into male narrative roles in this way, they nearly always loose traditional feminine characteristics in so doing—not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness and motherliness. These women become cold, driving, ambitious and manipulating just like man whose position usurped. (Kaplan, 1983)

In 'Adaminte Makan Abu' the only female lead is Aishu, the wife of aged central character Abu. Interestingly the movie which sticks to the tales of the lead couple never ever deviates from the central plotline. And hence apart from Aishu who plays the wife of Abu, no other female figures take the screen for more than a couple of minutes. Aishu is traditional loving, humble life who reciprocates wisely to the life and ideals of the central character Abu. She is clad in the traditional Muslim attire and is seen in a Purdha whenever she is out to public places with her husband. She shares every dreams of his and takes to household duties when he is away for business. She is never ever shown expressing any slightest dislike to his tastes, even while he talks dishonouring their only son, Sathar or when he rejects the multitude of offers that comes their way from men like Johnson, Govindan Master or Asharaf, each of which can singlehandedly aid them in completing their much cherished dream of completing a Hajj. And thus she plays the traditional Sati-savithri role, though in a Muslim backdrop.

Adaminte Makan Abu- (2. 15. 02 hours, 98 scenes)

Name of Character	Total scenes	Total screen time
Abu	56	77 minutes 37 seconds
Aisumma	35	42 minutes 46 seconds

Findings

Our coding instrument and approach allows for cross platform comparisons against various genres of films listed in the flicks. A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods was employed. The major unit of analysis were independent speaking characters. We capture every character that speaks one or more words discernibly on screen or is referred by name. The key findings from this study included that only 19out of 71speaking characters were female in these three films.

Prevalence

Female characters in feature films populated less than 30 percent of all speaking roles.

Moreover, from that on screen females are presented less frequently than onscreen males, they are often sexualised, domesticated and sometimes lack gainful employment.

Number of characters

Name of film	Pulijanmam	Kutty Srank	Adaminte Makan Abu
No of Male characters	19	25	27
No of female characters	5	9	5

Another way to examine gender balance is to assess the number of films featuring 'balanced cast. A balanced cast is present when a screenplay depicts girls and women in roughly half of all speaking roles. To assess this, we calculate the percentage of female per story and then group the movies into categories based on the percentage of women on screen. Films with females occupying 25 or less of all roles are extremely male centric, moderate male centric depict female in 25.1 to 35% of all roles, while slightly male centric films show them in 35.1% to 45% of all roles. Balanced films show females in 45.1% to 55% of all speaking characters… (Smith, 2012) taking this method, it could be seen that all the films in the list were extremely or moderately male centric, even as Kutty Srank was even narrated through the accounts of its three female leads.

Valued for their appearance

Almost all the females in this sample were praised for their appearance or physical beauty. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) suggests that reinforcement delivered to media characters can function as vicarious incentives to viewers. As such positive corroborations can increase the likelihood of learning whereas negative reinforcements can decrease such effects. Therefore, a child viewer watching these films may vicariously earn that beauty is essential part of being female.

In and of itself, appearance praise may not be problematic until when it is given only to characters that adhere to narrow ideal of physical attractiveness which is the formula of many of these female. Thus this beauty ideal reinforced in many of the films is an unattainable standard of sexiness and perfection.

Although a few characters in the sample are appraised for their physical abilities, others are evaluated solely for their appearance and demure behaviour. If a protagonist is introduced to the audience as less than ideal, then she may need to undergo a metamorphosis prior to her introduction to the society, as you witness in the case of 'Kali' in 'Kutty Srank'. A social presentation, particularly after an extreme makeover, encourages the gaze of other characters and viewers get the idea that females are most important in their function as adornments.

Female aspirations are short lived

Assessing the goals and inspirations of the female protagonists across three films, our analysis show that female has a distinct set of desires, mostly surrounded around family, adventure and self discovery. According to Dr Tracy L smith and Crystal Allene Cook, of Geena Davis institute of gender in media (2008), the females can be listed into three. The first type is daydreamers who don't have any particular goal or dream, other than romantic love and passionate life. Here she is a more passive female, who never take active action to seek their goals. As an alternative they may respond to changes in her environment while other characters decide their fate. A few females were shown with no explicit aspirations, simply reactive to the external forces coming up in the course of their life.

The derailed type of females expresses a desire for one thing and is broadsided by romantic love. They are derailed from their initial ambition. They are the one show make unimaginable sacrifices for love, letting of their desire to explore or express (Shahnaz in Pulijanmam).

The daredevil protagonist expresses a goal and makes choices that will move them toward their ambition, who are not willing to relinquish their initial pursuit or accept romances only prize (as Revamma in Kutty Srank).

The researcher also wanted to see if other stereotypes dominate motion picture content. In particular we were interested in the traditionality surrounding males and females. Though it's been more than thirty years since feminists first drew attention to the stereotyped gender messages delivered through mainstream movies, many still show women vacuuming, cleaning and cooking. Examining over nine characters over three films of the decade, the data shown that two types of females frequent film –the traditional and the hyper sexual. Females are more likely to be depicted as parents and in committed relationships. They are more depicted as caregivers, legal guardians or step/biological parents. In 'Kutty Srank', one of the female characters was shown in sexually revealing clothes.

Character occupation by lead females in films

Name of the character	Job on screens
Shahnaaz	Part time actor
Revamma	Buddhist monk
Penmena	No job
Kali	No job
Aishu	House wife

A great deal of stereotyping was present on screen in work force hierarchies. While the entire female characters on the sample films were unemployed, the research shows that a higher percentage of males versus females are depicted with a job. Females are more likely than their male counterparts in the professional sphere or involved in administration. The trend that was noticed is that females are noticeably absent from the upper echelons of power across multiple industries.

Taken together, the labour market in family films is filled with traditional roles and stereotyping. Very few females are shown in high ranking leadership positions, which severely limit the range and complexity of inspirational role models for young female viewers who frequent movies.

Longing for one dimensional love

Almost all the females in the sample had romance/ homely life as their primary focus where as others appeared secondary. Some fell at the first sight (Penmena in 'Kutty Srank'), some after a courtship period and then journeys for undying love (Kali). Many fell for illusory and unreliable love foundations where their partner was seen dishonest by way of out-and-out deceitfulness or strategic omission of important information. Remarkably the duplicitous actions of one character were forgiven or remain completely unacknowledged by the other female partner as you witness in 'Kutty Srank'.

From the above observations, it seems that it is pretty late to correct gender imbalances in films. This could be achieved by including more females as main characters, secondary characters, in crowds and narrators. The script writers and filmmakers must take special care to provide female characters with aspirations beyond romance, and develop the inner character of female characters in realistic mirroring of society.

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