

The Representation of Women in 'New Generation' Malayalam Films

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Abstract

The paper explores various socio-cultural underpinnings in the Malayalam film industry during the advent of a new wave film culture post 2010. These movies were labeled as 'New generation' movies by media and critics and also raised eyebrows with the offbeat narrative techniques and bold themes on sexuality and gender politics. They brought in a fresh take on contemporary socio-cultural issues and how the identities of individuals are caught up in a continuous conflict within an urban space (as most of these films dealt with urban themes). These 'New Generation' movies distanced themselves from the then existing conventional narrative style and opened up a liberal space with arguments on gender and the politics of representation. These films had heavy influence of Korean style of filmmaking that relied on raw and explicit narrations. Three movies are analysed in this paper; *Chaapa Kurisu* (2011), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012) and *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012). The analysis would concentrate on the representation of female characters in these three movies and the visual culture and politics of these 'new generation' films. Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic theories and Susan Bordo's Philosophy of mind/body binaries have been used to interpret the observations.

Keywords

New Wave, Gender Politics, Visual Culture, Psychoanalysis.

Introduction: A Brief History of Malayalam Cinema

During the early 70's, the new wave movement had taken its roots in Malayalam film industry when directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan, etc began making movies which were defined as 'parallel', 'offbeat', 'new wave', 'art' etc. These movies had a very distinct mode of film making when compared to the other main stream or commercial films at that point and some of the main characteristics of these movies were lengthy shots, sparse dialogues, long silences, absence of songs, dance, stunts, sidekicks and humor. Later, during the 80's came the 'middle brow' cinema; which was a mixture of mainstream and parallel cinema. Padmarajan, Bharathan, K.G. George, etc were some of the pioneers in this

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new category and with this a whole new line of productions flooded the Malayalam film industry and some of these movies later acquired cult status among viewers.

The interpretation of a female self in the political and artistic fields of films was a challenging job for film makers mainly belonging to the middle brow cinema post 1970's but they were successful in experimenting with bold themes like *Avalude Ravukal* (1978: I.V. Sasi), *Thoovanathumbikal* (1987: Padmarajan), *Deshadanakilikal karayarilla* (1986: Padmarajan), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983: K G George) etc. These movies were very efficiently constructed within its narratives over some of the tabooed topics existing in the cultural realm. During the 80's and 90's, the industry took a shift with the advent of superstars like Mammotty and Mohanlal. Once again, the female narrative space was brushed aside by the presence of strong male characters and this led to more male dominated themes in the creative space of Malayalam film industry.

This trend continued till the beginning of 21st century, then post 2005, directors like Ranjith, Samir Thahir, Aashique Abu, M. Padmakumar, Anwar Rasheed etc came up with movies that somehow associated themselves with a new era, a 'New Generation' in the Malayalam industry. These movies were labeled as 'New generation' movies by media and critics and also raised eyebrows with the offbeat narrative techniques and bold themes on sexuality and gender politics. They brought in a fresh take on contemporary socio-cultural issues and how the identities of individuals are caught up in a continuous conflict within an urban space (as most of these films dealt with urban themes). These 'New Generation' movies distanced themselves from the then existing conventional narrative style and opened up a liberal space with arguments on gender and the politics of representation.

This paper tries to discuss how the 'female body and mind' as a tool of male gaze is constructed within a film space and how it is appropriated through certain stereotypical symbols of attire, body language, character references etc. The space of the female characters in three films will be analyzed and this further will be used to reinstate the stereotyping done on female body both on physical and cultural level. The 'personal' of a female is deconstructed for the male audience and thus it tears up her individuality which needs to be validated by a male viewer within the space of a cinema hall and again that which resonates in the outside world too. The naturalizing of gender hierarchies are reconceived through a post modernist approach in these new generation movies where economic and personal freedom is mooted as one of the key agents that make the female characters progressive. Yet the narratives fail to identify how the patriarchal structures slowly control the freedom that a female exercises in the modern world even in the personal spaces of a woman. The limit is always decided by the male psyche and the superiority complex of the oppressor.

World Around Us: A Look at Oppression and Female Body

The strong expression of sexuality by a female is always seen as a phenomenon that can only exist in a male fantasy. It can't get serious beyond that. That is why, when the female lead is a sexually open person, there is a male (possibly the alpha male) who openly denies the pleasure of her company and reiterates the fact that he is a 'one woman man' and the pleasure that he gets from denying her sexual offer is more than the actual act of sex itself (From the film *Trivandrum Lodge*). Imagine the same dialogue delivered by a female character, that would simply be unthinkable because female characters have always been the tool for sexual submission. This can be brilliantly observed in *Kanmadam* (1998: Lohitadas) where there is a strong willed female lead played by Manju Warriar being forcefully kissed by the male lead played by Mohanlal. There, she has no right to refuse or resist or even slap the person simply because the male character is the 'Hero', or the Spine of the narrative.

The anxiety of the 90's was all about preserving the structure of family through film narratives. This was broken and restructured in the 'new generation' films by creating narratives with central female characters who are Divorcees, Women who have pre-marital sex, who are in live-in relationships etc. The placement of the characters is in an urban space mostly because modernity was always argued to exist in the liberal urban spaces than the traditional rural space. The issue of sexuality and gender had to be discussed in these spaces according to the new generation filmmakers of malayalam industry. The issue of female chastity was the central question in most of the film narratives in the 90's or even before that (except some bold attempts by directors like Padmarajan, K G George, Bharathan etc) and this shell of chastity was explicitly broken in *22 Female Kottayam* (2012: Aashique Abu) when Tessa (Rima Kallingal) confesses to Cyril (Fahd Fazil) that she is not a virgin and she tells this as a bold statement rather than a product of guilt. Moreover, 'Female Spaces' are more prominent and creased out into the mainstream narrative through new generation malayalam movies. In *Trivandrum lodge* (2012: V K Prakash), the friendship between the central female character and her friend is shown through their chats about sex and their personal fantasies. These spaces were only accessible to male characters before and they always liked to normalize such space through a male psyche.

The question of how these new generation movies create a progressive narrative for women to express their sexuality and individuality is something that wanders on a thin thread of neoliberal modernity and the need to associate with a moralistic society. This can be observed in the movie *Diamond Necklace* (2012: Lal Jose), where the male lead played by Fahd Fazil is shown as a flamboyant doctor who works in Dubai and spends all his income through partying and other materialistic extravaganzas that Dubai has to offer. He gets into relationship with three different women throughout the movie and in the end, one of the female characters played by Samvritha Sunil is seen apologising to him for having consensual sex without knowing the fact that he was married! The irony is that why the woman had to apologise because he himself was aware of his marital status and it was as much as his 'fault' as it's hers. Here the woman takes up the classic role of the seductress, who seduced a married man to have sex with her while the man is allowed to 'derail' onto such slippery grounds of post marital affairs, the woman is expected to be sorry for 'distracting' or 'provoking' the male.

The very advertisements whose copy speaks of choice and self-determination visually legislate the effacement of individual and cultural difference and circumscribe our choices. That we are surrounded by homogenizing and normalizing images-images whose content is far from arbitrary, but is instead suffused with the dominance of gendered, racial, class, and other cultural iconography... (Bordo, 1993).

Susan Bordo talks about this phenomenon of naturalizing the gender hierarchies through culture and everyday life. She tries to point out that power has a definitive way of seeping into the lives of people and establishing an oppressive order that normalizes itself through cultural practices and even makes the oppressed practice it through their daily lives. Films are one such cultural medium through which these kind of hegemonic structures are reinforced and normalized. Some argue that movies are a passive form of entertainment but its unbecoming of any intellectually motivated endeavor to dismiss the metaphysical nature of films and the narrative discourses it put forward before us. It need not be defined through a materialistic philosophy of the world but rather as through a visual discourse of moving images that is far removed from reality but yet so near to it through its symbolic and literal representations. There is a strong assertion from the cultural domain to encapsulate the body and mind of the woman into a mold that fits into the patriarchal structure of the society. This structure does not work on the basis of binaries but through a group of oppressive networks, institutions and even technology. These 'Plastic Bodies' as Bordo puts it, is about how the

physical body of women is expected to satisfy certain norms created by the power structures inside the society. These are not necessarily male controlled but they are a manipulated product of social control and familial legitimacy. Here, the woman has to play the role of the 'universal scapegoat' entitled to her through the famous ideal of 'motherhood' and such definitive and norm based social performances. She has to always live for the other rather than for herself, this could be treated as a virtuous trait if this was the universal philosophy applied to every gender across the world but sadly the male body and identity enjoys a far more luxurious and individualistic social performance which is not always obligated to the whims and fantasies of the social/political realm of culture.

In these three movies, the visual politics is designed and framed in ways that see certain appropriations to female sexuality within certain cultural contexts. The female lead of *Trivandrum Lodge* is a sexually open and metro-bred character, so in order to communicate that sexual openness the character is made to look like a seductress who flaunts her body and other non-physical traits like her constant mood for flirting and open statements about sex. Such characterizations are deliberate efforts of filmmakers to fix certain inherent cultural markers to 'Identify' and in the process to measure the character of women in real life. They are not ready to accept the fact that such appropriations of female body and feminine character can only lead to further bias and sexual subversion of a female identity.

Analysis: Seeing Through the Movies

In *Chappa Kurishu* (2011: Samir Tahir), we can see an example of such appropriation through the contradictions created through two female characters, Sonia (Remya Nambeesan) & Nafiza (Niveda Thomas). Sonia is more of an urban-based middle class working woman whereas; Nafiza is a lower middle class woman who works as a service employee in a super market based in Cochin. Here, the comparisons of these two characters are very implied and connoted rather than explicitly stated. Nafiza is shown as a 'good' and 'decent' Muslim woman who dresses up within her religious and cultural restrictions and works hard to take care of her poor family. She instills virtuous values of truth and honesty to one of the male lead Ansari (Vineeth Sreenivasan), when he is faced with mental conflict. Whereas, Sonia is more of a 'physically charged' character, her dressing style and her demeanor with her boss Arjun (Fahd Fazil), makes her the seductress. This easy availability of 'urban female body' is one of the classic stereotypes in the film. The narrative of the movie, takes a karmic course where Sonia and Arjun's Sex video is leaked and their lives become hellish. Here, it's more like a punishment that is bestowed upon Sonia for being the 'seductress' and being a more independent woman than Nafiza. Nafiza knows her limits inside the patriarchal society (even in the narrative of the film) but Sonia derails from that and hence she has to be punished through the 'cause and effect' method of the script.

Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Mulvey, 1989) tries to deconstruct the idea of sexual gratification in males and how the identity of a female is constructed for the sake of a 'Male Gaze' which was crucial to the narrative of the movie and also to the subjectivity of the male viewer.

The gaze is male whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects. (Mulvey, 1989).

All that was left for the female was a psychological feeling of 'Castration' or an absence of the 'phallus'. This psychological interpretation was actually introduced by Sigmund Freud who calls it by the condition of 'Penis envy'. A certain kind of creative distance is maintained by the narrative to experience the life of a female through her mind

and body while the male body and mind transcends even the narrative to become one with the audience. That is where Laura Mulvey talks about the 'male gaze', its not simply a gaze reflecting the male psyche rather its a kind of transmigration of the 'maleness' from the big screen to the viewers. The viewers become a sort of uniform cultural consumers who reify the visual components dominating the film and its male power.

The whole idea of rape and revenge is perceived in a different way inside a Malayalam Film narrative where the earlier tendencies were that the rape victims committed suicide or else she was 'genuinely' accepted by the 'merciful and ideal' hero forgiving her 'sin', but then, a movie like *22 Female Kottayam* tries to break away from some conventions and stereotypes of storytelling. One, it is told entirely in a female perspective and two, it breaks up and dissects the main characters as plain human beings who are controlled and dominated by the situations around them. The male voice over in the climax sequence conveys to us the 'true' message or moral of the story, which is supposedly that, one shouldn't (the male) misunderstand/misinterpret/misuse the patience and tolerance of a woman. So, the argument goes onto a further dilemma in the narrative whether a woman should be tolerant and patient towards the patriarchal structures controlling her or stand up boldly for her rights, freedom and self-expression. The construction of rape as a normal/desensitized occurrence in the movies of the late 1970's, 80's etc structured the perspective of the Malayali viewers in a manner which enjoyed rape as a sexual act rather than a violent one. In *22 Female Kottayam*, rape is the main tool to carry forward the narrative and also to establish the political/social purpose of the movie. The radical feminist tendency of punishing the villain by Penectomy is in itself a new experimentation done in Malayalam movies (but not the first of its kind, as the movie is heavily inspired from *I spit on your grave* (1978: Meir Zarchi), *Ek Haseena Thi* (2004: Sriram Raghavan), *Kill Bill* (2003: Quentin Tarantino), *Hard Candy* (2005: David Slade) etc).

A sense of inherent and normalised domesticity is ascertained throughout the narrative, this is evident from the climax scene where Cyril (Fahad Fazil) says to reinstate to Tessa (Rima Kallingal) that, *this 6-inch penis is not real masculinity* (*22 Female Kottayam*). At this very instance the echoing of strong masculine (patriarchal) resistance is heard all over the narrative where the filmmakers consciously or unconsciously celebrated the masculine self.

One of the recent movies churned out from the neo liberal brain factories in Malayalam film industry, the movie questions/ridicules/interprets/satirises the issues of morality, marriage, sexual desires etc. Anoop Menon has crafted the script in his usual 'friendly neighborhood intellectual' ways where he incorporates witty one liner, 'cool' sexual interactions/conversations between prostitute and customer, father and son etc. The openness of the movie towards sexuality can be appreciated, as this is something that we seldom see or hear in Malayalam movies. The film, in its heart questions the social institution of marriage and pseudo moralities. In her essay *Marriage and Family in Malayalam Cinema*, Janaky Sreedharan remarks,

Marriage and family were twin institutions that came under considerable surveillance, moral disciplining and internal reforms during the nineteenth and twentieth century in Kerala as they were in the larger Indian society. (Sreedharan, 2010).

The mainstream Malayalam movies also never dealt or entertained any such themes which tend to question this institution and the ideal family structure. All the films in one way or the other tried to reinforce the structure as an ideal and that one should be preserved at any cost. In *Trivandrum lodge*, the female character Dhvani (Honey Rose) is a divorcee and she comes to Cochin seeking freedom and individuality, which for her is basically

having casual sex, one night stands and other such metro sexual desires. She is also a writer who wants to write a story on the life and people of Cochin. She chooses Trivandrum Lodge as her topic and its inhabitants as the subjects.

Trivandrum lodge can be, in a satirical sense, viewed as the Kerala society which is full of sexually frustrated men and their yearning to get closer to woman in a conservative society. The confusions and mental dilemma faced by Abdu (Jayasurya) is a clear example of a Teenage Keralite's mind (even though the character has little shades of dumbness!). The old Kora Sir (P. Balachandran), who is an advocate by profession, is a man living in his 'glorious' past where, in one instance he narrates the tale of his sexual exploits to another inhabitant in the lodge. It's never clarified in the film whether the tale that he so convincingly tells the young gentleman is true or just an unfulfilled fantasy. Kora is a sublime character who exists in that sexual vacuum between the generation of the 60'-70's and the new generation.

Observations

When we analyse the three films, there are some interesting observations that can be made regarding the Malayalam Film industry and also the cultural aspects of Kerala. These 'new generation' movies are trying to focus more on the deconstruction of the morality and gender discourses lurking in the Malayali psyche. When *22 Female Kottayam* focuses on the complex narrative of rape and its consequential aftermaths in a 'feminist' perspective, *Trivandrum Lodge* focuses on the ironical and interwoven themes of liberty and sexual desires. *Chappa Kurish* is more about the fears of an urban centric culture and how the dichotomy between the economical class and personal self merge into one single whole.

The representation of women in these films had its own varied concerns as a new shift in the industry is taking place, this should obviously be in balance with the cultural setting of Kerala. Kerala was slowly transforming into an economy which relished on the monstrous number of IT professionals it produced every year and its youth migrating to other metro's like Bangalore where the metrosexual aspirations were defined by neo-liberalistic attitudes. This borrowing of cultures also affected the identity of Kerala women. A Malayali woman, young professional, employed as an IT professional in Bangalore sometimes found it hard to get marriage proposals from "good" families and they were looked down as 'sluts' just for the mere reason that they worked in a metro like Bangalore. The exclusivity of Kerala society filled with such moralistic inhibitions and judgments suffocated the very existence of a free thinking independent woman. Social out-casting is one of the major tactics that a society applies to a 'deviant' who wanders away from its moralistic constructions, one who strays away from the morals and values of it. The 'black sheep' was to be taught a lesson at any cost by abandoning and alienating her from the entire community built on pseudo morality and suppressed sexual frustrations.

The intricacies involved in deconstructing the existing patriarchal constructions of women in the paradigm of films and artistic expressions involve portrayal of strong semiotics and visual narrative. In these three movies analysed, this tendency is found in traces but not at an active level where it can engage the viewers (male and female) to produce a popular and progressive ideology in itself keeping in mind the subtle borders of sexuality and gender. The problematization, and at the same time, the construction of a new feminist argument inside Malayalam films was bound to be a real challenge as there are uncompromising cultural and religious structures (inside and outside the world of films). When analyzing Malayalam Films parallel to the existing cultural norms and resistance, it can be noticed that some sort of a rebellious tendency is working at some point were questions of marriage and sexuality are pondered.

Conclusion: What is and What Ought to be

As to conclude, the 'New Generation' Malayalam movies that we had analyzed in this paper, in actuality, has failed to bring out more suggestive and prudent arguments in the field of feminist theory or in the cultural field of Kerala society where it can become an active area of discourse and discussion on the exclusive conservative morality and sexual repressions in the Kerala Psyche.

The space that should be created in the popular culture of any society should be encompassed with all kinds of criticisms and perspectives which democratizes the issues and communicates them effectively to a mass culture which is fed with the minimum intelligentsia of interpreting and perceiving the symbols and visuals articulated through movies and any other artistic medium. The very core of any public medium for that matter should be to inform and create an ideological structure wherein the tolerance and disagreement to any concepts and ideas should be balanced with the very fabric of the society and the culture, which is very relative in different contexts.

The movies, however takes the narrative to some experimental realm, where there is further scope of dialogue and where more bold stories surrounding gender politics and resistance are possible. In fact, these films can provide a foundation and a fresh perspective for more 'new wave' or 'new generation' themes to storm the Malayalam film industry in the coming years.

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