

Womanhood Portrayal in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema: A Study Based on the Film, 'Mayaanadhi'

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Abstract

Malayalam film industry is known for its artistic value emerged from the realistic portrayal of lives. Even while being praised for its innovative storytelling tradition, the industry widely used to be criticized for misrepresenting, underrepresenting and stereotyping women and other sexual minorities (Guy, 2009). This tendency was observed to be the byproduct of commercialization and the rise of star culture in the industry. But much research point out to a tendency in Malayalam cinema making up for their mistakes for the past few decades (Johnson, 2016). These studies observe that the Malayalam cinema industry is transforming its narrative styles to get more inclusive of the question of gender in the narration. In the light of these observations, this research paper intends to conduct a narrative analysis of the 2017 Malayalam movie 'Mayaanadhi' for its creation and execution of gender and gender roles.

Keywords

Character Positioning, Male Gaze, Narrative, Patriarchy, Womanhood

Introduction

“Our society like any other society must pass on its social heritage from one generation to the next. The societal need for continuity and transmission of dominant values may be particularly acute in times of rapid social change, such as our own. Then, individuals need some familiarity with the past, if the society is to survive, but they must also be prepared to meet changing conditions. Nowhere is that need as readily identifiable as in the area of sex roles.”

(Tuchman, 1978)

Womanhood is considered as the state of being a woman or the adult life of a woman. The concept of womanhood changes from place to place and is embedded within the culture of a particular country or community. It takes the social, personal, psychological, and cultural aspects of gender in a broader sense into consideration. The history of underrepresentation of woman goes back to the earliest years of film.

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The underlying male domination in multiples segments of society has influenced the molding of gender roles in film (Sarkar, 2012)

The theories of ‘Social Dependency’ and ‘Framing’ indicates the extend of reliance the society has on media-constructed images. The image of masculinity and femininity built by media are perceived by the society as real, even though these images are the selective construction of a patriarchal industry dominated by men. The term patriarchy does not confine to the biological sex and studies shows that many films directed by woman also consists elements of ‘Male Gaze’ proposed by Laura Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975)

Being the fourth largest film industry in India, Malayalam film industry is not free from the influences of patriarchy of societal structure, right from the caste system and Brahmanical male-dominated family structures. The origin of glorified images of woman as mothers and sisters has emerged from the conception of ‘obedient women’ within the family structure (Cooke, 2018)

The fluctuating position of Malayalee women within the families and the anxieties they are facing has become a subject of reference in a few Malayalam films. The social and economic changes of the Keralite women were better demonstrated in the soft porn boom in 1980’s, marked by movies like *Avalude Ravukal*. Although the film acclaimed critical success throughout the country, the initial response from Kerala was negative because of its portrayal of sexuality (Jasbir Jain, 2015). The film is now considered as feministic in nature because of its attempt to narrate politics of body and the alignment towards the post-feminist approach of choice and authority over one’s own body. The virtuous, restricted and submissive imagery of Malayalee woman was broken though during the soft porn boom.

The characterization of women in Malayalam cinema has always been subordinate to men. The physical and emotional torchers over women are also romanticized at many instances. The upper class, financially sound hero with superpowers is made the centers of attraction in the films. Movements like ‘Me Too’ and Women’s Cinema Collective have created a platform for the industry to examine and comprehend the dimensions of damages created by the toxic masculinity in the industry nourished by them. As a result of this open debate, a swing of movies exposes a new kind of masculinity considering post-feminist receptivity (Sonali Srivastav, 2018)

Malayalam movies in the last few years is observed to be trying hard to respond to societal changes but are confused on how to accommodate a fame voice into the conventional male-centric narrative. The problems rise with the inorganic incorporation of feministic ideology or dialogue into the scripts. Most of the films endorse women empowerment as a ‘trend’ and not something that is organically

generated with the storyline. Here, respecting women and ‘giving’ space and freedom to female characters are the selling elements of heroism (Tere, 2012). The status of women as sister, daughter, and wife of the hero has never changed. The idea of making women secure and the act of rescuing them from threatening situations appears in different forms within the storyline.

New Wave Malayalam cinema has built a platform from which the female characters can explore the possibilities of their womanhood. Toxic masculinity and sexual perverseness of men in Kerala came under open discussion in movies like *Trivandrum Lodge*, *Varathan* etc. Women characters came into mainstream and unraveled their sexual, psychological and social imbalances of society. The unrefined dialogues paired with life like situations have provided new opportunities for womanhood to explore their strength and weakness from a narrative constructed on behalf of them (Najib, 2019)

This study is directed towards addressing the discourse of gender, especially womanhood in contemporary Malayalam cinema, by taking the movie ‘Mayanadhi’ as a case. Not much research studies have explored the question of gender in Malayalam cinema in recent times. The study intends to analyze the macro elements of narration in the movie and tries to derive meaning from cinematic cues, by looking from a feministic perspective.

Analysis

Cinema	:	Mayaanadhi
Director	:	Aashiq Abu
Writer	:	SyamPushkaran, Dileesh Nair
Year of release	:	2017
Producer	:	Aashiq Abu
Cast	:	Aiswarya Lakshmi, Tovino Thomas, Leona Lishoy, SoubinSahir, Ilavarasu, Harish Uthaman

Storyline

Mayaanadhi is a story revolves around the love story of Appu and Mathan. Mathan is a criminal on the run while Appu aka Aparana is an aspiring actress. They have a complicated relationship while both are passionately in love with each other. The story develops through Mathan’s effort to convince Aparna to move out with him.

The struggles of an aspiring actress and the stressful life of a criminal outlines the plot.

Treatment of Womanhood

Appu aka Aparna is the lead character in the movie along with Mathan, played by Tovino Thomas. The film is based on the complicated love life of Appu and Mathan who were lovers from college. The relationship broke because of some financial fraud done by Mathan to a friend of Appu. Although Appu has feelings for Mathan, she doesn't express it openly. According to Appu, Mathan broke her trust, and he is "too young to be believed".



Figure 4.1 Mid shot of Mathan looking at Appu's picture on Instagram. Establishes Mathan's love for Appu and give an indication that they are no longer together

The introduction of lead character Appu begins from an audition scene along with a title music. Right from the beginning scene, the character of Appu is established. She is seen entering an audition room and is very tensed. She observes everyone around her, and the number of competitors seems to be making her uncomfortable. Appu reads the paper on her hand, probably the mock script provided at the audition. Though she is trying to by heart the lines, she looks around and observes the performances of others inside the audition room. When she hears claps from the room, she becomes really nervous and look eagerly at her competitor. After entering the audition room, she tries to appear very confident. She recites something that she has already prepared. She finds out that it is not enough to make an impact from the response of the crew. The casting director sneers at her and calls her "plastic". She quickly hides her resentment and tries to be herself. From the one-minute statement that she makes about herself, the audience get to know the character, Appu. She is a B-tech dropout and have tried her hand on many professions. She is doing anchoring for her living and is so passionate about acting as a career. Her former roommate Sameera is now a successful actress and Appu consider herself having more talent and beauty than Sameera.



Figure 4.2 A Medium Shot of Appu looking anxious at the women who performed well in the audition. The scene indicated how important the audition is for Appu

Right from the establishing of the character Appu, audience get to know her passion towards her career. Being a film focusing on the romantic relationship between a couple, *Mayaanadhi* breaks the stereotypes of female leads in popular narrative cinema. The common notion of women sacrificing her career and dreams to quire her love life and the ‘live happily ever after’ narrative at the cost of women’s ambition is broke in *Mayanadhi*. Appu’s emotions revolve around the ups and downs of her career no matter what happens with her love life. In the second round of audition scene, actor Aparana Balaurali comes in. The actor tries to make a small talk with Appu and she excuse herself and go to the washroom. From there Appu calls Mathan and ask him to praise her, just to make her feel better. As the verbal rampage about her beauty and intelligence go in wain, Mathan desperately shouts at her that she must prove herself to the world and otherwise she will be seeing herself as the wife of any psychopath. Appu finds herself motivated with that uncomfortable truth and says “yes, I am better now”.

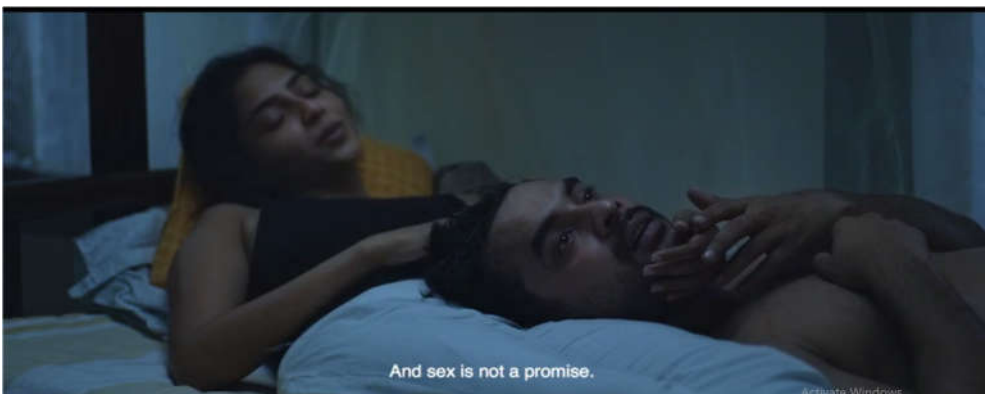


Figure 4.3 A much celebrated dialogue of the film as the reclamation of women’s right over her own body and sexuality

While coming to the relationship between Appu and Mathan, she welcomes her ex-boyfriend Mathan with a slap on his face. Mathan expresses only the physical pain of the slap, and it doesn't hurt his male ego. She walks away from Mathan and later slow down while he follows her to her home. The scene establishes her intimacy towards Mathan. While Mathan appears weak and emotional, Appu is courageous enough to say about her lost intimacy and trust towards him. For Appu trust is the most important thing in a relationship. From a teenage girl who is fascinatedly in love with Mathan, Appu has grown as an independent lady who is emotionally consistent and who have her own dos and don'ts. She doesn't refuse to count her wage in front of Mathan and counters his teasing and emotional conversations by narrating the practicalities of life. When Mathan compliments her for her sophisticated language used in anchoring, she slaps back by saying "this is how I paid back the money you have cheated". She never refuses to express her anger towards Mathan for spoiling the relationship. The consistency of Appu's character is maintained throughout the film.

Socio-economic Positioning of Female Characters

Feminist economic proposes the economic independence of women as a tool from their liberation from patriarchy. Narrative Malayalam films normalize the joblessness of women while unemployment of men is presented as a big issue. When a hero is unemployed, it can be the biggest barrier for his love life to be succeeded and the dignity or happiness of men is presented directly in relation with his employment state. The unemployment of women is presented as a conflict only when she is not under the protection of anyone.

While coming to Mayaanadhi, Appu is a financially independent woman who is struggling to enter into the profession which she is passionate about. She describes herself as a b-tech dropout and currently doing anchoring in events. From her conversation with Mathan, we get to know that she is looking after her family by her own. She bears the expenses of her brother's studies and take care of her mother. In the film we see Appu scolding her brother to share some post on Facebook associated with the 'Kiss of Love' protest. Her brother behaves to her politely and respectfully. Though having the privilege of being an elder sister, the power position occurred by Appu in her family is also associated with the financial independence and responsibility she bears.

For Appu money is an important matter in her life and she do not refuse to admit it openly. she could not trust Mathan in their relationship because of the financial fraud that he has done with her friend. She associates money with trust. At the same time, she is not ok with money earned from wicked ways. Mathan tries to convince Appu to come with him to settle somewhere abroad. When he talks about the money that

incidentally came into his hands, she refuses to take the offer and shuts the door in front of him.



Figure 5 Appu staring at Mathan while counting her payment of the day. Indicates the importance of money in her life

In the audition scene, Appu describes herself and say, “more than anything, I deserve a better life”. Better life is a promise she has done to herself. She wants to live a life in which she doesn’t need to wear used clothe of her friends. When Sameera offers her food, Appu feels uncomfortable. She makes excuses to prevent her from buying expensive food for her. Beyond the envy towards Sameera’s celebrity life, it is the dependence that make Appu uncomfortable. While Sameera offers an advertisement for Appu, it hurts her ego because it is a project refused by Sameera. But she gets forced to accept it because of the payment they offer. The film doesn’t incorporate any scene which directly show Appu’s economic problems. But throughout the film, the narrative incorporates elements which explains Appu’s approach towards matters of finance. She understands and accepts the realities concerning financial matters. While her mother is being degraded by relatives in a function, she remains her mother that “we are not rich enough for our opinion to get accepted”

Appu is a woman who buy things for her own and pay her own bills. she does not refuse to count money in front of Mathan, neglecting his romantic gaze. She buys food for herself and do not refuse to ask the price and quantity of the food that she buys. For Appu Mathan is “too young to be believed”. Her maturity and practical approach towards life is a result of her financial independence. She associates the ability to manage the finances in one’s life as an important aspect of an individual’s personality to be trusted or depended upon.

Depiction of Occurrences within Family Relationships

The term patriarchy come from a Greek term means “the rule of the father’. According to sociologist Sylvia Walby, “patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women”. Historically, the term has been used to refer to the automatic rule by the male head of a family. The structure and functioning of family structure in society is seemed as an important element in building and maintaining patriarchal structure in society.

In the film *Mayaanadhi*, the lead character Appu is an independent woman who lives out of her family despite of having emotional and structural connections with her family members. Appu’s father is no more, and she look after her family by her own. Despite of the absence of her father, Appu is not free from the restrictions of patriarchy. While analyzing patriarchy as the rule of dominant male in the family, elements of patriarchy inside women is also not negligible. Appu is restricted from engaging in a romantic relationship or physical intimacy with someone. Her mother calls her a prostitute after she finds out Appu and Mathan together in their house. Appu is a woman who have deep emotional connections with her mother. In that scene, the mien scene incorporates a chair, traditionally portrayed in films as the one used by the dominant male in a family. As her mother sit on the couch, crying we see Appu sitting at the hand of the chair. After that is becomes her responsibility to prove herself in front of her mother that she is not doing anything immoral to earn.



Figure 6 Long Shot of Appu sitting on the arm of a chair traditionally used by the dominant male in the society. Indicates the existence of patriarchy in family structures even in the absence of dominant male characters.

The film explores how women are deeply bounded by the elements of misogyny despite of the independence they acquire. She is forced again and again to prove her morality and personal life in front of the family and society. The society’s

conservative mentality towards a women's body and sexuality is also portrayed in the film. As Mathan engages in a sexual intercourse with Appu, he considers it as a promise to move out with her. When she explains it as an act of celebration, he calls her a prostitute. Mathan is a representative of the society who is not ready to acknowledge the sexual liberty of a women. He considers sex as a commitment to live happily ever after.

Sameera, friend of Appu is another major female character in the movie. Despite of being an actress who lives alone, she is always under the monitoring of her brother. The role of Sameera's brother, played by SoubinSahir, is an ultimate version of patriarchy. He claims right over her life and career and want her to like according to her will. The character Sameera is molded as someone who loves the limelight and to be admired. Sameera is one among the several women who do not exercise any rights over their own body. The conversation between Sameera and Appu in the airport also reveals society's mentality towards the women who are in acting profession. Although presented as humorous, the dialogues of Sameera are worth thinking about.

Relationship between Women

The relationship between Appu, Sameera and Darshana shows the different shades of relationships between women. Appu and Darshana are people aspiring to mark their place in the film industry while Darshana is a professional councilor. Darshana and Sameera are a part of Appu's life right from the beginning of the film. After the audition scene, Sameera call Darshana and ask her to come to her flat and says she has brought some surprise gift for her. Appu meets Darshana for the first time at Sameera's flat. Appu introduces herself as an actor 'struggling to be an actor'. Darshana respond to her opening up by recalling some funny dialogue from a film and comforts her.

When Sameera encounters into another issue and her brother inform her that he is coming to take her abroad, Appu and Darshana console her by saying that they'll try to explain things to her brother. They somehow succeed in consoling her. They spend the whole night sharing stories, drinking wine and singing songs. This is perhaps the most realistic and romanticized scene of women's sleep overs in Malayalam cinema. The color tone and the physical and emotional connection they express each other is somehow a novel experience to Malayali audience. When Sameera leaves with her brother, both Appu and Darshana weeps by hugging her. Although Appu knows the fact that the withdrawal of Sameera from the industry can provide a slot for her, Appu cry by grief when she leaves. All these scenes combined together narrates the deep-rooted relationship that exist between these women.



Figure 7 Long Shot of the women sitting on the roof top consoling each other over a glass of wine

The relationship of Appu with the lady near her house is also a notable one in the movie. She awaits Appu to share her problems. Although Appu is tired of the tiring routine, she empathies with the women and sit down to hear her problems. The relationship between Appu and her neighbor is a realistic one which every woman can relate to. Here, she advice Appu in her love life and seek solutions from Appu in her personal life. The female characters in the film are well developed and their relationship is portrayed with beauty and intensity. The stereotypes of envious women fighting with each other is broke through the mutually understanding and supporting women characters in the film. The women in *Mayaandhi* stand up for each other during hardships despite of the conflicts they have in their life. The trio Appu, Darshana and Sameera are women who live outside of their family. They share their hopes and concerns with each other and give a shoulder to cry on during difficult times.

Directorial Treatment of Women in Critical Situations

The female characters in the film *Mayanadhi* are diverse by their nature. There are women from all age groups who suffer from multitudes of issues in their lives. While the young women like Appu and Darshana live independently out of the family structure and earns for their own living, Appu's mother is a woman who is someone who limits oneself through her own patriarchal mindset. Characters like Sameera represent the struggling women inside the family structure who have to drop her dreams because of the patriarchal setup inside families.

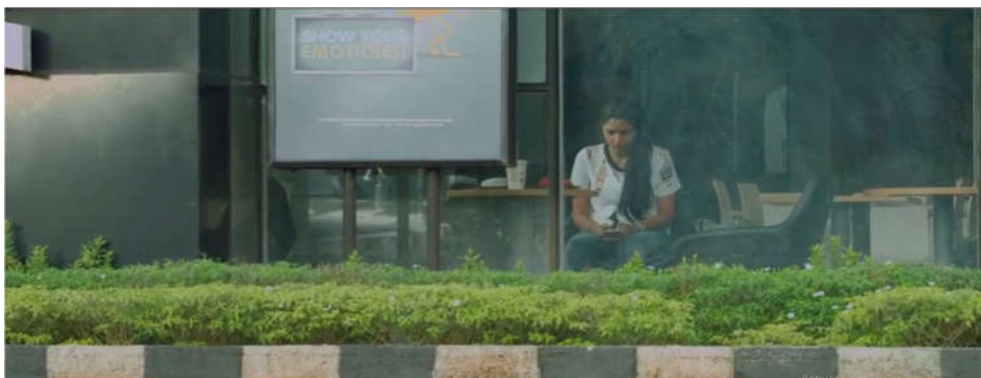


Figure 8 A long shot of Appu holding her tears when Mathan is being arrested by the cops. There is a board which reads 'Express your emotions'

Appu is a woman who passes through extreme amount of trauma in her life. Mathan breaks her trust, and she becomes responsible for the money that he cheated. She somehow gets dropped out from college. Appu introduces herself as an “actor, struggling, but an actor”. This indicates that he struggles that she mentions when talking about herself is part of her existence. She is a woman desperately trying to get a space of her own in the industry. The struggle that Appu faces has different dimensions. Her prime concern is the issue that she faces in her career and her second most important problem is her love relationship with Mathan. She also absorbs many parallel issues such as pressure from family and relatives. Appu is a woman who manages each stressful situation with courage and grace. When Appu is caught by her mother with Mathan, from their house Mathan gets panicked. Appu console him and courageously opens the door, introducing Mathan to her mother.

In all these conflicting situations, Appu acts bravely and balance the events happening in their life. She takes the responsibility of the financial fraud done by Mathan to her friend. By doing anchoring and another jobs, she manages to pay the money back. Even when Mathan gets arrested by the cops, she sits at the restaurant, gazing at the scene. On the mirror there is a board which reads “express your emotions”. Even after the disappearance of Mathan from her life, Appu continues to fight and manage to achieve success in acting.

Conclusion

The world is changing, and women are claiming their own spaces in all areas of the society. It is high time that the Malayalam film industry need to accept these changes happening in the society. The authority of a women over her own body and women’s denial of the authority of men over it should be included as part of the narrative. These films have played an important role in bringing these changes into discussion and it

challenges the glorification of masculinity through the patriarchal positioning of men in the storyline. The films have also shown the courage to question the construction of patriarchy inside family structure. These realities need to be addressed by the filmmakers and they should come up with films that narrow down the gender gap by making an influence in the receiver's mind.

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