

**THE KALEIDOSCOPIC ‘TRANSGRESSSIONS’ OF
‘NOUVEAU FEMME’ IN THE CONTEMPORARY MALAYALAM CINEMA**

Christina Mary Georgy

MA English Language and Literature(2017-2019),

Institute of English, University of Kerala, Trivandrum, Kerala, India.

Abstract:

In the present-daysituation, motion pictures, being one of the most resourcefulmass mediaexpressions,perform not only as a powerfulpodium for amusement but also as aproficient site of substantial ideological negotiation and contestation. The politics of representation of women on the silver screen has always been a problematic discourse, owing to the phallogocentric, hegemonic constructs of the society worldwide.This research paper makes use of insights provided by popular gender, media and cultural studies theorists to map out the distinctive features of the ‘nouveau femme’ by tracing out the history and politics of representation of women in Malayalam cinemaover the decades. This paper also attempts to read against the grain of female transgressions in Mollywood with special reference to select critically acclaimed Malayalam films of post 2015 era.

Keywords: Cinema, Gender, Media, Modernity, Representation, Woman

Representation of Women in Malayali Public and Private Sphere

The position of women in Malayali public and private sphere has always been a stimulating discourse in the academic milieu. Kerala has had an age old history of a

matrilineal system of inheritance which used to function as a "surrogate patriarchy" of sorts with actual power being vested on the *ammavan* or the maternal uncle, functioning as the *kaaranavar* of the *tharavad*. This system which ingeniously tied female sexuality to succession of property gradually gave way to a patrilineal, patrifocal system. Factors such as globalisation and the mass entry of women into the work force has somewhat emancipated the Malayali woman but she continues to struggle, juggling her new found role as a strong career woman with her expectation of a home maker, due to the deeply ingrained feminine mystique, and trying to reconcile the two. Naturally, the medium of cinema reflects this change.

The Stereotyped Heroine and Malayalam Cinema

It cannot be contested that film representations of women even in a supposedly progressive state like Kerala initially pandered to male scopophilic pleasures and was an instrument to perpetuate the madonna/whore dichotomy and to keep "female transgression" in check. Even the advent of modernity has rarely made a dent in this predominantly patriarchal film space. However, of late there emerged a novel trend of subversion of this masculine space in Malayalam films of post 2015 era. These films attempt to reclaim the right of representation of women and with it, a sense of agency and autonomy over female sexuality. This research paper, among other things, attempts to analyse said trend of subversion using select critically acclaimed films like *Om Shaanthi Osaana*, *Anuraaga Karikkin Vellam* and *Mayanadhi*, among others; to map out the distinctive features of the 'Nouveau Femme' or the New Woman as portrayed in said films; and to a lesser degree, to trace the historical representation of Malayali women in Mollywood with particular emphasis on the *kuleena/kulada* dichotomy, the localised version of the madonna/whore dichotomy. The films were chosen because of their enduring critical and

commercial popularity. This research article is precisely, a comprehensive attempt at writing back to the phallogocentric, patriarchal Malayalam film canon.

The History of Representation of Women in Mollywood

Virginia Woolf's analogy of women as "looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size"(36), proves relevant in Indian cinema and especially Malayalam cinema. Till the 1950s there were no major female stars in the Malayalam film industry. J.C. Daniel had to search long and wide to find a woman to star in *Vigathakumaran* (1928), the first Malayalam movie. The Malayali audience could not accept a woman 'acting'. The movie met with intense protests especially aimed at the love scenes. With the advent of modernity in Kerala and the destruction of the matrilineal and joint family system, early Malayalam films undertook the agenda of stabilizing the institution of marriage, thereby promoting a conjugal ideal and a normative femininity based on 'high-caste' ideals of domesticity and subservience. The resolution brought about at the end of most of these movies is the restoration of order in the family. Such films typically treated women as 'secondary subjects' without any sort of political power or agency- to be loved and cajoled within the walls of the household.

The Madonna/whore dichotomy in the early years of Malayalam cinema is extremely obvious. Women were treated as either paragons of virtue or vice incarnate, with female chastity being treated as the natural correlative of male valour. Films were replete with stock characters like loving mothers, dutiful daughters and chaste wives, with their hallmark being sacrifice. Sarada in *IruttinteAathmavu* (1967) and *Thulabharam* (1968), Sheela in *Aswamedham* (1967), Ragini in *Adhyapika* (1968) are all strong yet suffering women. There is a clear demarcation between the gentle but sensual romantic heroine in the 1960s and the trope of the 'vamp' - a stereotyped and hyper sexualised female in tight fitting western

clothes engaging in sexy song and dance numbers. Countless films like *Kudumbapuram*(1988), *Kuruppinte Kanakkupusthakam*(1990), *Nayam Vyakthamakkuka*(1991), *MelaeparambilAanveedu*(1993), *Mayamayooram*(1993), have created the image of the woman who ‘loves’ to cook and clean, wash and scrub, shine and polish for her man.

There is a blatant lack of female subjectivity in Malayalam cinema which often masquerades as a patriarchal ruse to construct the ‘myth of the Malayali woman’ and then naturalise it. By the 1980s, the combined forces of liberalisation and the influx of ‘Gulf’ money saw Malayalam cinema becoming increasingly capitalistic, patriarchal and neo-conservative. A trend of creating a pan-Malayali identity revolving around a machoistic, ‘tradition bound’ modern hero (as played by Mohanlal in *Devasuram*(1993), *AaramThampuram*(1997), and *Narasimham* (2000), and by Mammooty in *Valyettan* (2000) and *Rakshasarajavu*(2001) was started. This wave resulted in an increasingly ‘feminised’ and ‘conforming heroine’ and it lasted well into the early 21st century. It is in this context that the new trend of representation of women in post 2015 movies become relevant.

Sketching the ‘New wave’ in Malayalam Cinema.

Before discussing the new trend of representation of women, it is imperative that the ‘new wave’ or ‘New Generation’ movement in Malayalam film be mentioned. The supposed new wave is said to have begun in the early 2010s. Although difficult to trace its origin to a particular movie, the Jayasoorya starrer *Cocktail*(2012), and its critical and commercial success, can be said to mark a distinct shift in the tastes of the auteur and the audience. Films like *Traffic, Salt N’ Pepper*(2011) and *22 Female Kottayam*(2012) solidified the trend. New generation films are notable for dismantling or deconstructing the stardom trope and hero worship that used to prevail in the previous two centuries in Mollywood. Malayalam films

started embracing realism and experimentation in style, theme, and subject matter. Young directors like Aashiq Abu started making a name for themselves in stark contrast to the ‘old Mollywood’ where an oligarchy of senior directors used to control the industry. Use of profanity, influence of Hollywood, and portrayal of intimacy onscreen are other hallmarks of this movement which predictably met with mixed/polarised reactions from critics and moviegoers alike.

Recent hits like *Kumbalangi Nights*(2019) and *Uyare*(2019) have come to characterize the new generation movement owing respectively to their hyper-local narratives featuring an ensemble cast, and exquisite portrayal of female characters- stronger, louder and bolder- quite alien to traditional Malayali movie goers. Mollywood has broken into fertile ground with films like *NjanMarykutty*(2019), portraying the plight of the marginalised transgender community with fidelity. Even with Malayalam cinema approaching the turn of the decade, “new generation” films continue to stay new and relevant owing to constant reinvention and exploration of domains and themes hitherto uncharted in Mollywood.

Tracing the ‘Nouveau Femme’ in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema.

The post liberalization era witnessed the evolution of the empowered woman in Malayalam Cinema. A plethora of movies based on female oriented subjects came into vogue. *Kalimannu*(2013), *Zachariyayude Garbhinikal*(2013), *How Old Are You* (2014), *Rani Padmini*(2015), *Puthiya Niyamam*(2016), *Udhaharanam Sujatha*(2017) and *Take off*(2017) are all examples for the same. Mainstream artists including Manju Warrier and Parvathy Thiruvoth carved out a niche for themselves, playing strong, determined heroines in heroine oriented movies well supported by a talented crop of new generation actresses like Aishwarya Lekshmi, Nimisha Sajayan etc. Apart from the Association of Malayalam Movie Actors (AMMA), Women in Cinema Collective got formulated (WCC) of late.

Women began to be spotted in front of, and behind the camera, marking a spectacular shift in the history of the male dominated Malayalam Movie Industry. Cinemas directed by female directors such as Anjali Menon (*Manjadiuru*, *Banglore Days* and *Koode*) Geethu Mohandas (*Moothon*), among others, have been well acclaimed. In this scenario, it is imperative to discuss some of the most peculiar heroines in those movies that stood out in the post 2015 era.

Pooja: The Quintessential ‘Female Gaze’ in *Om Shaanthi Osaana*

Om Shaanthi Osaana (2014), is a bildungsroman that chronicles the love saga of Pooja, a teenage medical student chasing after her crush Giri, a farmer, in a humorous vein. The first person narration of the major events of Pooja’s love life was indeed a novel version of storytelling that gained much attention and acceptance. Of particular importance is the fact that this film is the first in memorable Mollywood history to break the stereotypes (of a man falling in love with a woman on the first sight) through its portrayal of a female in romantic pursuit of a male that too as a protagonist and not as some plot or narrative device. As such, in many ways it can be said to be the harbinger of the new trend this paper is concerned with.

Om Shaanthi Osaana is a remarkable case of reversal of the ‘male gaze’ and forms one of the best instances of the ‘female gaze’ in Malayalam cinema. The movie effectively addresses the issues of hegemonic female fantasy which is rarely mentioned in the traditional discourse of Malayalam cinema. It also has to be noted that the film is without any hyperbole vis-à-vis the portrayal of love, and has neither gaudy nor melodramatic song sequences that mar the narrative. Stephen Heath raises the question whether it is at all “possible for a woman to take place in a film without representing a male desire”, since “any image of a woman in a film, by the fact of its engagement in a process of representation... inevitably re-encloses woman in a structure of cultural oppression that functions precisely by the currency

of ‘images of woman’” (Freedman 69). *Om Shaanthy Osaana* answers Stephen’s paradox at least in the context of Malayalam cinema. Pooja refuses to be a mere currency. She is not a hyper fetishized two dimensional image. She is the protagonist single handedly carrying the movie on her shoulders, engaging in a realistic pursuit of love. As opposed to earlier films, she represents an ‘individual’ and not a ‘type.’

Elizabeth: The Liberated Woman in *Anuraaga Karikkin Vellam*

Anuraaga Karikkin Vellam (2016) epitomizes the relationship troubles of two generations. The main characters are Elizabeth or ‘Eli’, her lover Abhilash, and his father Raghu. At first glance it might seem like the movie is a kaleidoscopic mix giving enough narrative significance to all three characters but a close scrutiny will reveal that the bubbly, animated Eli is the real protagonist. The story progresses through her life, experiences and actions. Unlike the conventional Malayali heroines who were stock characters (like loving mothers, dutiful daughters and chaste wives) with their hallmark being sacrifice, Eli has a much more complex narrative arc, a product of the new wave in Malayalam cinema. Nevertheless she is not the stereotyped and hyper sexualised modern girl in tight fitting western clothes engaging in sexy song and dance numbers but a smart, sensible and self-aided woman who faces the escapades of life with confidence and fortitude. She has the intellect and practical sense to take control of her life while asserting an individuality of her own. She has much influence over most other characters in the movie. When she offers relationship advice to Raghu she acts as a bridge, connecting the seemingly disparate plot threads of Raghu and Abhilash.

As a millennial Malayali woman, she goes through her share of relationship troubles and breakups but learns to accept them with grace and moves on. The slap she gives Abhilash at the end of the movie when he tries to desperately woo her back- that too on the day of her

wedding- is indicative of how she has attained closure and in a sense, is also a sign of her reclaiming her agency from the man. As far as its impact on the portrayal of women in Malayalam cinema goes, the “slap” can be said to occupy a similar exalted position as Nora’s slamming of the door against the patriarchal ethos of 19th century Europe. Actress Rajisha Vijayan’s performance as Eli is singular in the sense that it is a strict deviance from a history of portraying Malayali women in romantic relationships as mewling and helpless before male authority. She epitomises the liberated woman free from the clutches of hegemonic social structures of patriarchy thereby sabotaging the institutionalized phallogocentric frames propagated through the medium of cinema. For that matter, Eli becomes a foil to Suma, Raghu’s wife, a silenced subject who sticks on to the traditional perception of an archetypal Malayali housewife- loyal, loving and devoted-restricting herself to the ‘angel in the house’ image.

Aparna- The Sexually Independent Heroine in *Mayaanadhi*

Mayaanadhi(2017) is the story of struggling model and aspiring actress Aparna and her lover Maathan the free spirited guy who inevitably gets drawn to a life of crime. Although both of them are protagonists, the audience connects with Aparna more compared with the obscure life and past of Maathan. Aparna’s trials and tribulations as the major breadwinner of her family, and her persistent efforts to make it big in an extremely competitive field make up the bulk of the narrative. She contradicts the ideal moral heroine who remains chaste and goes to any lengths to preserve her supreme virtue- virginity.

Where *Mayaanadhi* proves remarkable is in the infamous sex scene in which the most innate sexual frustrations, erotic fantasies and bodily desires of the couple get consummated on the big screen. It is highly doubtful whether any mainstream Mollywood movie has depicted the act of lovemaking with all its explicit passion and sensual beauty before

Mayaanadhi, which also toppled the phallogocentric impression of the male experiencing the maximum pleasure in the act of lovemaking. Hence, it can be considered quite revolutionary that the movie presents a heroine who not only enjoys sex but even asks for more which was highly taboo as far as Malayalam films were concerned. Aparna fearlessly declares that “Sex is not a promise” (1:25:50). Such women characters were historically slotted into the category of nymphomaniacs and were ultimately punished for their ‘transgression.’ Maathan’s misogynist response “Why are you talking like a prostitute, Appu?” (1:26:01) reveals the patriarchal sexual economics which insists that sex provides only diminishing returns for women. The way the hero equates a sexually independent female partner to a prostitute is instrumental in revealing the negative perceptions of a liberated woman by the society.

The representative of the young, educated Malayali middle class, the audacious and spirited heroine in *Mayaanadhi* breaks the question of silence that prevails in the socio cultural milieu of Malayalam cinema. The movie can hence be considered as a milestone in the sense that it shows the woman reclaiming her sexual and bodily autonomy where there is an entire history of representation relegating female desire to the lowest rung. The trend was favourably taken up by the movies that followed in the consecutive years. Certain critically acclaimed performances include: Niharika in *Luca* (2017) by actress Aahana Krishna, Aihwarya in *Eeda*(2018) by NimishaSajayanand Pallavi in *Uyare*(2019) by ParvathyThiruvoth, Baby Mol in *Kumbalangi Nights*(2019) by Anna Ben and Rajisha Vijayan’s *June*(2019).

Conclusion:

From the above mentioned movies, it is quite evident that there is a conspicuous trend of portraying women in a new light as far as post 2015 Malayalam movies are concerned. The following features of the new woman or ‘Nouveau Femme’ were isolated: She is millennial and typically from the middle class. She is also ambitious and goal oriented and is

the protagonist or one of the protagonists of her movie. She reclaims autonomy, especially sexual and bodily autonomy from masculine forces and her transgression is not punished. The most important delineating feature seems to be reclamation of the right of representation, with a particular emphasis on breaking the *kuleena/kulada* dichotomy. In a time of casting couch controversies, #metoo allegations, and fractured film fraternities and associations, such a trend is the need of the hour.

WORKS CITED:

AaramThampuran Directed by Shaji Kailas. Performed by Mohanlal, Revathy Kalamandir, 1997.

Adhyapika. Directed by P. Subramanyam. Performed by Ragini, P. Subramaniam, 1968.

Anuraaga Karikkin Vellam. Directed by Khalid Rahman, performed by Rejisha Vijayan, August Cinema, 2016.

Aswamedham Directed by A. Vincent. Performed by Sheela, Hari Pothen, 1967.

Butler Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1999.

Chakraborty, Abin. *Popular Culture*. Edited by, Krishna Sen. Orient BlackSwan, 2019.

Cocktail. Directed by Arunkumar Aravind. Performed by Anoop Menon, Galaxy Films, 2012.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Random House, 1997.

Devasuram. Directed by I.V. Sasi. Performed by Mohanlal, Aashirvad Cinemas, 1993.

Eeda. Directed by B Ajithumar. Performed by Nimisha Sajayan, Collective Phase one, 2018

Freedman, Barbara. "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre". *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, edited by Sue-Ellen Case, John Hopkins UP. 1990.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Norton, 2001.

Hall, Stuart, editor .*Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage, 1997.

Hall, Stuart. *Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse*. University of Bermingham, 1973.

IruttinteAathmavu. Directed by P.Bhasaran. Performed by Sarada, Sony Pictures, 1967.

June. Directed by AhammedKhabeer. Performed by Rajisha Vijayan, Friday Film House, 2019

Kudumbapuranam. Directed by SathyanAnthikad. Performed by Ambika, Mathew George, 1988.

Kumbalangi Nights. Directed by ShyamPuharan. Performed by Anna Ben, Working Class Hero, 2019

Kuruppinte Kanakkupusthakam. Directed by Balachandra Menon. Performed by Parvathy, VaradaBalachandra Menon, 1990.

Luca. Directed by Arun Bose, Performed by Aahana Krishna, Stories and Thoughts production, 2017.

Mayaanadhi. Directed by Aashiq Abu. Performed by AishwaryaLekshmi, Dream Mill Cinemas, 2017.

Mayamayooram. Directed by SibiMalayil. Performed by Mohanlal, R. Mohan, 1993.

Melaeparambil Aanveedu. Directed by Rajasenana. Performed by Shobhana, Mani.C, 1993.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Reading*, edited by Leo and Marshall Cohem. Oxford UP. 1999.

Narasimham. Directed by Shai kailas. Performed by Mohanlal, Aashirvad Cinemas, 2000.

Nayam Vyakthamakkuka. Directed by Performed by 1991.

Njan Marykutty. Directed by Renjith Sankar. Performed by Jayasoorya, 2018.

Om Shaanthi Osaana .Directed by Jude Anthony Joseph. Performed by Nazriya Nazim,
Ananya Films, 2014.

Rakshasarajavu. Directed by Vinayan. Performed by Mammooty, Sargamkabeer, 2001.

Salt N' Pepper Directed by Aashiq Abu. Performed by Film Brewery, 2011.

Thulabharam. Directed by Hari Pothen. Performed by Sarada, Hari Pothen, 1968.

Traffic. Directed by Raesh Pillai. Performed by Asif Ali, Magic Frames, 2011.

Uyare. Directed by Manu Ashoan. Performed by Parvathy Thiruvoth, S Cube Films, 2019

Valyettan. Directed by Shai kailas. Performed by Mammooty, Ambalakkara Films, 2000.

Vigathakumaran. Directed by Daniel Nadar. Performed by Daniel Nadar, Daniel Nadar. 1928.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt, Brace and Company 1929.