

Portrayals of Women in Patriarchal Society: An Analysis of Contemporary Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

This research article examines the portrayal of women in patriarchal society in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Malayalam cinema has been stained by the weird Indian tradition of women being beneath men. Strong women characters are only visible in female-centered films.

Two films such as *Jaya JayaJayaJaya Hey* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* are under study. The methodology involves a qualitative approach using content analysis and analyses of the portrayal of women in patriarchal society in contemporary Malayalam movies. Through this, the influence of feminism and the responsibility of personals behind cinema in reshaping the picture of women is also studied. This study integrates Laura Mulvey's feminist film theory to analyze how the Malayalam industry has changed the portrayal of women in contemporary cinemas over time. These films have a remarkable role in portraying women as more than just a damsel in distress. Strong female characters and the environment which led to their evolution is clearly depicted.

Keywords: Oppression, Feminist Film Theory, Patriarchal Society, Gender In Cinema, Malayalam Cinema.

Introduction

The Malayalam film industry, established in 1928, is India's fourth largest and is renowned for its strong storytelling and realistic portrayals. However, old Malayalam films often depicted women as helpless and weak, relegated to secondary roles. Although female representation has improved over time, strong female characters are mostly limited to female-centric movies. This perpetuates a disturbing norm, reinforcing women's oppression and secondary status. It's essential to feature capable, independent women in mainstream films, reaching a broader audience and promoting a more inclusive societal mindset.

Historically, women's "social dependency" was accepted, implying they needed help. Films sexualize and objectify women through the "male gaze" and disturbingly, physical, sexual, and emotional abuses are romanticized, alongside offensive jokes against women. In Indian culture, women are often seen as subordinate to their husbands, rather than as equal partners. The mistreatment women face in society has been normalized. This mindset is reflected in movies, where independent women are portrayed as 'ego-centric', 'selfish', and 'Westernized', threatening

traditional Indian values. Women who conform to patriarchal norms are glorified, while those who defy them are punished.

This paper examines two contemporary Malayalam films: *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (directed by Vipin Das, 2022) and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (directed by Jeo Baby, 2021), both of which critically explore patriarchal dynamics and female resistance. The first movie is *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* central characters are Basil Joseph (Rajesh) and Darshana Rajendran (Jayabharathi) with side characters of Jaya Bharathi's family and Rajesh's family.

Jaya was raised in a patriarchal household and had her life controlled by her family and uncle. She was forced to attend a local college where she fell for a professor who proved to be controlling and abusive. Her family then forced her to marry Rajesh, who had anger issues and was physically abusive. Jaya tried to escape the abuse by studying self-defense and fighting back, but Rajesh plotted against her. Rajesh fakes affection to get Jaya pregnant, hoping to control her, but she discovers his plan and faints which leads to abortion. The relationship ended, and the case went to court. As the divorce was about to be finalized, a video of Jaya beating Rajesh went viral, causing a media storm. In court, Jaya confronted Rajesh,

who realized she was his business rival. The dynamics of their relationship had shifted, and Jaya had finally taken control of her life. With the truth out, Jaya was determined to move forward, free from the abuse and control that had dominated her life for so long.

The other movie is *The Great Indian Kitchen*. The central characters in the movie are Nimisha Sajayan and Suraj Venjarmood. The character in the movie is intentionally unnamed by the director. The wife refers husband as ‘cheta’ “to show respect” and the husband calls the wife ‘edi’ which is a bit disrespectful way to address someone.

This movie sharply portrays the struggles of many Indian women forced to conform to societal norms. After marriage, the female lead is expected to prioritize domestic work, cater to her husband's needs, and suppress her desires. Her husband’s behavior is telling he snaps at her for suggesting cleanliness and treats her as an object for his sexual gratification, disregarding her desires.

When her mother-in-law visits things take a dark turn. The wife is burdened with caring for her husband and father-in-law, who is babied by his mother. She’s restricted from working, forced to follow depressing menstrual customs, and isolated from her

family. Her only relief is a young neighbor girl. After a series of humiliating incidents, including her husband's anger at her touching him during her periods, she rebels by sharing a video supporting women's temple entry during menstruation. Her final fight is released when she is asked to make tea for devotees, she fills glasses with dirty water. Which leads her husband and father to attack her. She fights back splashing drainage water, leaves the house and walks to her home where she faces her mother's disapproval. She scolds with anger when her brother requests water instead of getting it himself is the ultimate point of the scene.

The scene cuts to the female lead's newfound independence and self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, her ex-husband remarries and promises to correct past mistakes, but a subtle scene of his new wife washing his teacup hints at the repeating pattern.

Both films point towards how frustrating gender roles are normalized. These customs act as a cage to female characters. They find their value and try to break free from the traditional misogynistic loop and struggle to have a voice of their own.

Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory emerged during the 1970s influenced

by second-wave feminism. It was introduced by Laura Mulvey. It is a form of film criticism that analyzes films through views of gender, feminism, and the politics of spectatorship. This theory examines the portrayal of women in film and analyses the identity, desire, and sexual representation of women. It studies how women are presented sexually and for the 'male gaze'. It prevents sexist jokes, roles, and stereotypes. This theory aims to understand cinema as a cultural practice that represents and reproduces myths about women and femininity.

Methodology

The primary text for this analysis was *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). The selection of film was based on its dual representation of conventional societal expectation and contemporary independent female identities. The films were viewed separately, from beginning to end noting elements of traditional expectations, engraved gender roles which have been normalized without being questioned and how the characters realize their worth and take a different path. This paper employs a qualitative textual analysis approach. The details of gender role depiction were thoroughly considered, and the pattern

and the break of loop were viewed very critically. The feminist film theory by Laura Mulvey introduced in 1970's, it paved way to analyzes films through views of gender, feminism, and the politics of spectatorship.

Analysis

When we analyze these two films we can spot some interesting facts on female representation in a patriarchal group of men.

The film *Jaya JayaJayaJaya Hey* critically examines patriarchal structures in society, particularly focusing on the struggles of Jaya who faces domestic violence and societal pressures. Nobody has Jaya's back in the movie. Her parents control her life and gaslight her every single time she questions their decisions or even voices her opinion. Her brother, who grew up in the same abusive home, ends up being a silent observer most of the time. Her mother-in-law also doesn't have her back. But when she decides to divorce, her family confronts her about what they have done for her to behave like that. The men in this film are all either misogynist, dumb, or patriarchal and the women in the film are also not any less. They are used to being under men and

never try to fight against it. They believe men are like that and women must tolerate everything and have patience.

Until a few years back, the slap was the most common weapon of choice for good-natured men in Malayalam cinema to put women who cross the 'limits' in their place. Most often, movies used to portray the men who slap women as doing the right thing. Times have changed, and the slaps have almost disappeared from our cinema.

The Great Indian Kitchen questions the deep rootedness of patriarchy in our society as realistically as possible without any gimmicks. Without picking sides, the film quietly, in the most harrowing fashion, gives us a glimpse into the life of a married woman in India and her role in the kitchen. With each shot, the film makes one squirm in his seat while asking questions such as how we treat women in our homes. A lot of scenes take place in the kitchen. This is just to drive home the point that we have normalized women being in the kitchen like it's no big deal. Scenes are cut back and forth from the kitchen to the bedroom. This indicates how the struggles of an average women have been neglected or often time taken as 'what they are ought to do'. In The

great Indian kitchen, the minute detail where she cleans the food waste from table to washing underpants is very intriguing. The portrayal of how women in every house irrespective of age are doing domestic chores is very accurate. In one beautiful scene, Nimisha tells her husband that she'd really appreciate some foreplay when they get intimate. The husband mocks at her knowledge about foreplay and behaves as though it's a crime for women to seek all that. There's a hard-hitting subplot about menstruation and we see how the family treats Nimisha during this phase. While the men in the house prepare themselves for a trip to Sabarimala and talk about purity; nobody is bothered about the women who slog to keep everything clean.

In another powerful scene, the father-in-law tells Nimisha to drop her idea of applying for a job because he feels the job women do in the house is far more superior to what bureaucrats and ministers do. Even if it is superior or equivalent to other jobs, if a woman chooses to have a job or not to it should be at her control. The father indirectly says women is entitled to domestic work. How every woman was in the kitchen and denied eating sitting at the table with guests even though the men in the house were sitting

during newlywed's visits shows the untold rule we have been unknowingly following to date. Often times women themselves have to take a step ahead to find themselves and break the tie of patriarchy and stereotypes.

A gender stereotype is an oversimplified belief or view about the characteristics, abilities, or roles that men and women should or should not possess or do. When a gender stereotype prevents men and women from pursuing their professional goals, growing as individuals, or making life decisions, it is damaging. Gender stereotyping is the practice of appointing specific characteristics or duties to a man or woman just because they are members of the same social group. These two Malayalam movies humorously capture the various patriarchal stereotypes/mindsets that a girl usually encounters from her childhood till her adulthood and during marriage. It also makes us realize how we keep following the damaging traditional rules for the sake of keeping up with peace which is nonexistent in the first place. Even if the customs and traditions are senseless, we keep following it to hide away from uneasiness of confrontation and another stigma of 'what will other people think' which has been clearly used in both films.

In these times the collectivistic nature of Eastern countries becomes threat to mental and social wellbeing of individuals of both genders.

Conclusion

While looking at both films we can see the transformation of women who are under patriarchy rising to their best selves. They both had horrible married life. They gradually understand their value and fight against gender norms. The portrayal of women in patriarchal society in contemporary Malayalam cinema has changed a lot. Even though powerful females are only present in a few movies, movies focusing on women's rights and their capabilities have increased. Albert Bandura (1997) in social learning theory stated power of media in influencing people's behavior; it is evident how media can mold – make or break - one's behavior based on the outcome; maybe such representation in film can help people to be more mindful about their behavior and understand the serious consequences of situations by looking at the issue outside the lens of what have been followed throughout these years. Contemporary portrayal sheds light on issues which have been gone unnoticed and how it has influenced both genders to withhold the dominant and submissive characteristics automatically as they've become norms.

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