



Exploring Gender Dynamics in Malayalam Films: An Analysis of Gender Inequity, Misogyny, and Toxic Masculinity in the Works of Mammooty and Mohanlal

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Abstract

Film is the product of patriarchal unconsciousness, says Laura Mulvey. Back in 1950's and 60's, women in Malayalam cinema had a better place in the plot of the movie compared to the ones that came in later decades. Powered by the scripts of writers of Malayalam literature, movies were more realistic. Chemmeen, Ningal Enne Communist Aakki, Neela Kuyil, Kutti Edathi, Oru Penninte Katha were some of the movies where women played major roles. Later on, by the advent of superstardom and the rise of the two unchallenged superstars, Mammooty and Mohanlal, Malayalam cinema became largely sexist and misogynic with their toxic masculine characters and male chauvinistic dialogues. Any and every reproach on their propagation of misogyny was and is aggressively condemned by their frenzied followers. Women who spoke against this had to face defamation and cyber-attacks. The awareness of the feminist concepts has made Malayalam cinema too liberated, to an extent, from the strangleholds of patriarchy. The movie, *'How old are you?'*, for example, is a realistic portrayal of the man-woman relationship in the society where a once skillful woman forgets to dream as she is clogged by the domestic needs and gender expectations. Exposure to global experiences and increase in gender awareness have made some women and enlightened men to work for a better cause. But, the super star movies still celebrate misogyny and toxic masculinity as the demi gods of Malayalam cinema find their stardom safely shielded in the veils of these anti-social aspects.

Key words: toxic masculinity, misogyny, Malayalam cinema, super stars, patriarchy

Introduction

Cinema- Cultural Expression

According to Harold Laswell, cultural transmission is the core function of communication. Cinema is a tool for communication and it has the power to influence the mass culture. Cinema reflects the values, beliefs, attitudes, religion, politics and concerns of the society. Cinema is the objectification of the society in a wider perspective. The concept of film too changes with the change in culture. Films produced in the late 1940's and early 50's reflected the conservatism that dominated the socio political arenas of the time. However, by the 1960s, a reactionary youth culture began to emerge in opposition to the dominant institutions. 1980's and 90s witnessed the birth of family oriented movies. Films play a vital role in the development of any nation. Most often, it affects the dress styles, hair styles, behavior, attitudes, beliefs, of the super heroes on the silver screen (Mintz, 2007) For example; torn T-shirts and leg warmers became hallmarks of the fashion of the 1980s after the release of the movie '*Flashdance*' in 1983 (Pemberton-Sikes, 2006).

Malayalam Cinema

'Vigathakumaran' (1928), 'Marthandavarma' (1931) were the opening movies in Malayalam. The first talkie in Malayalam 'Balan' was released in 1938. The 90 years of history of Malayalam films proved a benchmark position in Indian Cinema. Until 1950, Malayalam films gave importance for mythological, religious, historical or social themes. 1950's and 60's witnessed the 'Neo- Realism'. Themes like circus (Nayarupidicha Pulivalu), agriculture (Randidangazhi), heroism (Unniarcha, Thacholi Othenan), breakup of feudalism (Murappennu) etc. are significant. During this period the State Film Awards were established for the promotion of cinema. 1970's and 80's witnessed the technological advancement like quality of visuals, sounds and dialogues, editing and camera which were expanded. The concept of stardom also rose in this period. The commercialization and sexuality emerged and became a trend in Malayalam Cinema. (Avalude Ravukal).

1990's is the Golden age of Malayalam Cinema. While even its oldest surviving superstars, Mohanlal and Mammooty, were known for rooted and realistic cinema at the beginning of their careers—with films like Bharatham (1991), Namukku paarkkaan munthirithoppukal (1986) and Amaram (1991) standing out as examples—the period from the late 1990s to the early years of the 2000s was different for the Malayalam movie industry, and not pleasantly so. In the early 2000's Slapstick comedy was the predominant theme for Malayalam movies (CID Moosa- 2003, Kunjikkoonan- 2002). A qualitative deterioration was in Malayalam cinema at the beginning of new century. By 2010 onwards several experimental films from new directors with low budget became super hits. That trend is still continuing.

Women in Malayalam Cinema

Getting different wages for the same job is the accepted system in film industry. Heroines were always considered inferior on screen. The 'mass entry' of the hero capitalized by the direction

techniques got more applause from the audience and reproduced a kind of expected patriarchal stereotypes. Fans associations also were purely dedicated for male actors only in Malayalam film industry. Female actresses were compelled to do some glamorous roles and scenes for the commercial success of the films. But today, female oriented movies in Malayalam claim the portrayal of women in a new manner.

The new directors and writers are making a conscious effort towards creating full blooded, multi-dimensional female characters in Malayalam films. How old are you (2014); Kalimannu; 22 Female Kottayam; Traffic; Uyare; 5 Sundarikal; Prathi Poovan Kozhi; Rani Padmini; June; Aami; Udaharanam Sujatha, Helen: in all these movies women characters take the dominance and changed the notion of 'patriarchal success mantra' All kinds of viewers get satisfied with these women oriented movies. Mollywood films are indirectly popularizing the concept of budding modern female identity, while female representation is, generally, bound to old patriarchal perceptions and traditions. Nowadays, women centric movies have become commercializing subjects which immediately influence the viewers. This is the core reason why currently these types of movies are getting preference.

But, super star movies, even today, are the same with conventional patriarchal symbols and sexism. These crowd pullers who are worshipped by their fanatic fans will never allow this trend to be changed for good.

Toxic Masculinity

'Sex' refers to a person's sexual anatomy like chromosomes, hormones and internal and external sex organs. 'Gender' refers to the characteristics and behaviors that a society or culture associates with males and females. The terms '*masculine*' and '*feminine*' are usually used to describe gender. Social theorists state that it is a social construct which alters over time. The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' maintains the structure of gender based hierarchy in the society. When the attributes of masculinity exceeds the defined limits and overpower and tyrannize the so called femininity, we term it 'toxic masculinity'.

The Good Men Project defines toxic masculinity this way: "Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It's the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly "feminine" traits — which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual — are the means by which your status as "man" can be taken away". Cinema has a great role in shaping and reshaping the social and cultural identities. They, most often, induce a specific idea of 'toxic masculinity' and glorify aggression as a part of gaining power.

Misogyny in Super Stars' Films

Malayalam is the language of Kerala, a state in the southern tip of India. She has a history of foreign influence both religious and trade and invasion. Kerala's culture was ruled by casteism for long, Hinduism being the predominant religion in Kerala. Namboodiri Brhamins and Nairs formed the landed class, Ezhavas the middle class and then the tribes and Dalits being landless labourers. The Savarna caste hegemony has always influenced the shaping of masculinity in Malayalam silver screen. The new generation Malayalam cinema has tried to shed the memories of a dark past from the cultural consciousness of the mass but the gender discrimination, misogyny and toxic masculinity are celebrated in many of the crowd puller movies of the two legendary super stars of Malayalam cinema.

“In the film industry, the superstar has a key role in moulding their dialogues,” explains Harish Vasudev and audiences were not averse to these larger-than-life heroes. So we are forced to believe that the ‘big brothers’ of Malayalam cinema, Mohanlal and Mammooty, (as they are called as ‘Ettan’ and ‘Ikka’ which means big brother) propagates the message of misogyny to the viewers. In the 90s and early 2000s, the rogue characters played by Mohanlal and Mammooty assimilated into the moral masculinity in the Savarna (higher caste) culture. Tucking up the dhoti and twirling the thick moustache with a lopsided grin, their characters grew larger than the silver screen. The omnipresent and omniscient alpha-male heroes played by them are admired by even the urban educated youth.

Hundred years may have passed since the birth of Malayalam cinema and still patriarchy rules every part of it. Women in most of the movies have little or no role. Only numbered movies have female characters with identity and they are termed as ‘female-centric’ movies. Misogyny is normalized in the mainstream movies of Malayalam cinema and it is often glorified as mass entertainment.

Analysis

Portrayal of Male Characters in Super Star's Movies

Mammooty and Mohanlal, the unparalleled superstars of Malayalam Cinema for decades are admired and adulated by millions of people. Every single word, whether it be a movie dialogue or an address in a public meeting, are celebrated by their followers. The rogue characters played by them with all their attitudes and proclamations are celebrated. Malayalam cinema, since the rise of these super stars in the 90s have seen women being sidelined and derided as a part of hegemonic masculinity in their movies. At first, it was Mammooty before Mohanlal who emerged as an alpha-male in movies like *Mahayanam*, *Aavanazhi*, *Kottayam Kunjachan*, *Nair Saab*, *Sangham*, *Inspector Balram*, *The King* etc. In all these movies, women seem to tolerate the burden of his antagonism and disrespect.

Misogyny in Mammootty Films

In the movie '*Aavanazhi*', Mammootty plays the role of a police officer, impertinent, rude, short-tempered, and abusive and has oodles of misogyny. Though his name in the movie is Balram, he is called 'Karadi' (bear) by everyone because of his toxic masculine characters. He is a hard core drunkard and womanizer. The so called 'heroine' of the movie is the prostitute's character Seetha, played by Geetha who happily shares bed with him. She is grateful to him and even admires his 'masculinity' though he throws foulmouthed obloquy at her too. She is devoted to him despite the fact that he uses her only for sexual pleasure. Women, themselves, take it as a privilege to be maltreated and the fearful fact is that '*Aavanazhi*' was an ever time chartbuster and is counted as one of the best movies in the super star's career. It had a sequel named '*Inspector Balram*' which again was a super hit.

"Because you are a woman, a mere woman!" This was the much celebrated punch line of the movie, '*The King*' starring Mammootty as Thevallippambil Joseph Alex, IAS, the District Collector. After a long, insulting speech on morality and patriotism, he further humiliates a woman subordinate with this dialogue. The extremely male chauvinistic dialogues of the movie won roaring applause in theatres. Another unfortunate twist of the movie is that the same IAS trainee who confronts such humiliation falls for his heroism and chivalry. The movie smashed the box office.

Both his writers and fans seemed to have collectively shared the pleasure of his onscreen male chauvinism. His sexist dialogues in movies like '*Koodevide*' and '*Kariyilakkaattu pole*' became marks of manliness. In the movie *Koodevide*, his character takes it as his right to dominate a woman and in *Kariyilakkaattu pole*, he abuses the lady he rapes with awful dialogues.

Unniyarcha, the war heroine of *Vadakkanpaattu*, is the only female icon Kerala has ever known. She is remembered for her beauty and bravery, her flawless expertise in the art of 'Kalaripayattu', her social cognizance, steadfast pro-woman stance, her fierce individuality and her terrible vendetta. But, the movie, '*Oru Vadakkan Veeragadha*' rewrote the folk tale and carved Unniyarcha's character in Malayali minds as traitorous to suit patriarchal interests and release Chanthu of guilt. The blockbuster stresses the belief that women are always the real betrayers. Chandhu was avowed innocent because Unniyarcha lured him.

Lately, Malayalam cinema witnessed a vicious attack on actress Parvathy when she commented on the casual misogyny seen throughout the movie '*Kasaba*'. The movie portrayed a cop named Rajan Zacharia (Mammootty) who throws nasty words on women. In one of scenes, we see him holding a lady police officer by the buckle of her belt and threatening her that he will fuck her and make her walk wrong for a week. The "I wield a virile stick in my male groin...so better watch out" kind of dialogues lecherously fills the entire movie. Women, in the movie, are portrayed as someone craving for male touch. The brothel owner in the movie agrees to exchange sexual favours in return for killing her lover. Then there is a sex worker who wins the hero's heart. Women, in the whole movie, are portrayed in such ridiculous manner and the actor

Parvathy who raised voice against this was ferociously attacked by the super star fans. This movie, again, was a megahit. .

Toxic Masculinity in Mohanlal Films

Mohanlal, on the other hand, was once the boy next door who wooed with charm. Everyone loved his naughty wink and disarming smile. Movies like *Vandanam*, *Boeing Boeing*, *Aye Auto*, *Kilukkam*, *Vishnu Lokam*, *Thalavattam*, *Yodha*, *Thoovanathumbikal*, *Namukku Parkkan Munthiri Thoppukal* were the movies that proved his mastery. Solomon of *Namukku Parkkan Munthiri Thoppukal* was a path breaking hero who broke the conservative belief in the chastity of woman. Jayakrishnan of *Thoovanathumbikal* who fell in an unconventional affair with Clara made us all to wait for her to return. Clara and the rain in the movie are immortalized in Malayali viewers' hearts. Unfortunately, Mohanlal too transformed into the moustache twirling demi God alpha male in the early 2000s, though some of his early movies like *Rajavinte makan*, *Irupathaam noottaand*, *Spadikam*, *Devasuram* etc. pictured such thug characters. Then came the movies, *Narasimham*, *Praja*, *Onnaman*, *Raavanaprabhu*, *Thaandavam*, *Naatturajavu* one after the other.

In a conversation between Induchoodan (Mohanlal) and Anuradha (played by Aishwarya) in '*Narasimham*', the pro-active heroine proposes the alpha male hero saying, "Will you marry me, Mr Induchoodan?", as if a woman is someone who is desperately in need of a man. The reply that he gives is "If you can bear with my arrival at midnight drunk and when I give you a kick, spend nights making love, bear my children, and wail incessantly at my death bed, come along!" The movie was idealized by the youth for it celebrated the 'themmadi' (thug) Induchoodan as a demi-god. The name *Narasimham* (man-lion) itself is a fierce avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, one who incarnates in the form of part lion and part man to destroy evil and end religious persecution and calamity on Earth, thereby restoring Dharma. After every ill doing, the hero utters 'Chumma' (nothing) with a lopsided grin and wicked wink to trivialize what he has done. The very same word is treasured and used by all irrespective of age in Kerala, even now.

There are several other alpha male heroes in Mohanlal's career and *Spadikam* was one such kick ass movie released in 1995. It is counted as one of the finest characters in Malayalam's finest actor's career. The signature move of 'dhoti attack' in the movie made even the little children to imitate the hero with zeal. Aadu Thoma (Goat Thoma) takes his dhoti off and attacks the rival in a fistfight. He is called so as he drinks the raw blood from a goat's heart to keep himself strong. He, again, is a bruiser and a thug who became so due to his father's hostile character. He has associations with prostitutes and is despised by most of the residents of his place. He is, yet, the hero of the movie who is worshipped for his manliness and humanity. Strange is the fact that the character is adored for his punch line dialogues, aviator Ray Ban glass and dhoti fights.

Devasuram was one another movie which celebrated toxic masculinity of a feudal landlord who was a spendthrift and street fighter. The movie has a story line on the feud between Mangalassery Neelakandan (played by Mohanlal) and Shekharan (played by Napoleon). The very name Mangalassery Neelakandan is iconic in Malayalam film industry. He romances many

girls as corpses and calls the heroine a real woman. Though the female character played by Revathy turns out to be strong, she too is viewed as a 'mere woman' by the hero in the beginning. The movie, apart from the heroine, portrays women as unworthy and immoral. The alcoholic, male chauvinistic, cruel character is the ever time cult figure in Malayalam cinema. Aaram Thampuran was almost of the same line.

Recently, there was a shower of abuses on the journalist 'Shani Prabhakaran, news presenter, MMTV' in her social media pages as she, in her weekly programme on critiquing social issues 'Parayathe Vayya', criticized the blatant sexism in the movie 'Pulimurugan' which was the first in Malayalam to enter the 100 crores club. The Mohanlal starrer crowd puller reaped crores in a week or two. Pulimurugan is the legendary saviour revered in his village for hunting and killing tigers that venture into human territory and attack people. But the women characters of the movie are portrayed under the shades of either silence or sexuality. There is one character shown as the wife of Murugan's uncle, a character played by Lal. She doesn't have voice even and is shown as an object for sexual gratification and reproduction. Another woman character is portrayed as a seductress who is yearning for Murugan. Murugan's wife too has no role in the movie other than being a female for pleasure. Genuine criticism too against superstars will not be accepted by the fans, shows the attack on the journalist.

Theoretical Background

The **Male Gaze theory** by Laura Mulvey, a feminist film theorist from Britain, best known for her essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' states that women in the media are viewed from the eyes of a heterosexual man, and that these women are represented as passive objects of male desire. Mulvey states that "the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses." The Male Gaze suggests that the female viewer must experience the narrative secondarily, by identification with the male. This theory is very much applicable in all the alpha male demi-god movies of the two superstars of Malayalam cinema. The theory can be seen working out in the portrayal of characters like Seetha (*Aavanazhi*), Anuradha (*Narasimham*), the female characters in *Pulimurugan*, Anura Mukherjee (IAS trainee, *The King*) and the dancers in the 'N' number of items dances in the super star movies.

Mulvey's analysis of **Fetishism** may refer to film narrative and the way we can now disassemble it as we watch, but it can also be applied to contemporary culture generally, the way it is given over to endlessly multiplying and dividing visual pleasures. We value the clip over the film, the aesthetic fragment over the whole. You can see this in contemporary art where the object of desire is systematically broken up and mutated. Fetishism was a key concept in the 1970s, for the political aesthetics of modernist influenced anti-Hollywood cinema and psychoanalytically influenced feminist theory. The agenda included a defense against a male misperception of the female body as castrated; the image of femininity as fragmented and reconstructed into a defensive surface of perfect sheen.

Findings

- The super star movies of the past three decades in Malayalam show that the underlining patriarchal attitude of the society clearly supports misogyny and toxic masculinity. The verbal attacks on the women who criticize misogynic movies are an evidence for this. Facing organized cyber-attacks is a terrible experience for them.
- The women actors who voice against misogyny and sexism are isolated and are denied chances further.
- All the journalists who share genuine criticism on superstar movies are also attacked fiercely. Women journalists, in general, are always attacked by trolls and vulgar language which proves that sexism prevails even in educated urban menfolk.
- A 'fan' comes from the word 'fanatic', quotes the actor and director Murali Gopi. Seeing the fights between the fans of superstars, we have to accept that this is true.
- There have been notable changes in the patriarchal attitudes of the society and many of the new actors' movies released in 2019 showed this transformation. The Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), a body of female actors formed in Malayalam cinema as a part of the rise in awareness of the gender consciousness is also an example of a positive transformation.

Conclusion

The unparalleled actors of Malayalam film industry, two among the finest actors of Indian cinema, Mammooty and Mohanlal had risen into this stardom a few decades back. Sooner they metamorphosed into demi-gods of Malayalam cinema and came to be called as Ikka and Ettan (big brothers) respectively. They have such influence among the audience of Kerala and the characters they play are the role models for the people of Kerala. Deliberately or not, they are often carriers of sexism and misogyny in their movies and these drips into the mindsets of the people easily. Their fans fight on streets to defend their heroes and any and every criticism against them or their movies are confronted ferociously. This is an alarming situation where blind admiration defeats discretion.

People, especially women, who fight against such misconducts, have to face cyber-attacks which are terrible. Though, there have been changes in this trend lately, there is a long way to go.

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