

From Celluloid to Society: Gender Traps in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

Cinema is a reflection of society. It portrays the roles of men and women based on stereotypes and societal expectations. If cinema reflects society, does society also imitate cinema? Gender is a social construct. And cinema functions as a medium to mirror it. Women are often portrayed as caregivers, homemakers, or objects of desire. Men were depicted as stoic and authoritative figures. The gender construct primarily discusses masculinity and femininity. As Laura Mulvey says, the concept of the male gaze dominated the media. “The man is always the subject self- ‘I’, while the woman is always the object- ‘other’”-Beauvoir Rightly.

Keywords: gender, cinema, masculinity, femininity, male gaze, film studies

Introduction

The Malayalam film industry is one of the most diverse film industries in the world. More than just a film industry, it is a reflection of the state's culture and society. Gender burden in Malayalam cinema refers to the weight of societal expectations and stereotypes placed on individuals based on their gender. Society has already constructed a norm for functioning by gender, where women are expected to conform to traditional roles and behaviors. While men being pressured to embody traditional masculine traits. Cinema, as a mirror of society, portrayed the roles of men and women in the cinematic narrations according to the gender-role construction of society. Malayalam cinema often has limited representation and agency for non-binary or transgender individuals. Moreover, the gender burden constructed by society can influence character development, plotlines, and overall storytelling in Malayalam films.

Gender Trap in Malayalam Cinema

How did the gender construct evolve? Traditionally, the term ‘sex’ has referred to the sex-centered distinction between male and female and sexual activity related to reproduction... As a result, the role of culture in producing various sexual interests and related sexual activities is obscured. The term ‘gender’ is used in cultural studies and critical theories to overcome the biological view of masculinity and femininity and to emphasize socio-political dimensions. In simpler words, Gender is a social construct. Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men. This includes norms, behaviors, and roles associated with being a woman, a man, a girl, or a boy, as well as relationships between them. “As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time”, says the World

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Health Organization. Gender creates hierarchies, deepening social and economic inequality. Gender bias intersects with race, class, disability, age, location, identity, sexuality. This is referred to as intersectionality.

Basically, gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes, which are cultural and social constructs. It is shaped by societal norms, expectations and practices. In a nutshell, gender history is a field of historical inquiry that focuses on the ways in which gender roles, identities, and power dynamics have shaped and been shaped by societies throughout history. It seeks to understand how concepts of femininity, masculinity and non-binary genders have influenced various aspects of human experience, including social, political, economic and cultural dimensions. Gender construction often prioritize attitudes and attributes of femininity and masculinity.

Lately, criticism focuses on gender in media. Broader access has put theory in simple terms. They often cite the male gaze: objectifying shots. Historically, the male gaze dominated media. Film theorist Laura Mulvey introduced the idea. A male lens, with women cast as objects. Women aren't full characters with agency, but it points out how women are shown as objects for men's pleasure. Seen this way, media don't just mirror power; they entrench it, shaping how we see gender roles and relationships.

Malayalam cinema, like other film industries, reflects and reinforces societal gender constructs, though there's a growing trend of challenging these narratives. Early films often depicted women as subordinate, either as victims of the male gaze or confined to traditional roles like wife and mother, whereas men were depicted as strong, household and breadwinners. Women are often portrayed as caregivers, homemakers or objects of desire. Men were depicted as stoic and authoritative figures.

So, gender identity becomes a tool of power. Patriarchy shapes womanhood, silences women, keeps the status quo. In such a setup, women become willing victims [Roesch]. In India, norms and customs justify this suppression, even as global trends sweep through. Looking at women on screen shows how films bolster the gender hierarchy and sideline them. Myths are spun, stereotypes recycled, and this powerful medium serves the dominant group. Here, the default viewer is male; cinema is made for his visual pleasure. By recirculating set images of gender and sexuality, patriarchy keeps its hold. As the camera crafts the story, the woman's image is reduced to a trope. It flatters the male ego, makes the image a fetish—a voyeur lure, says Mulvey. So cinema spreads—and cements—the rules patriarchy sets, everywhere. Gender construct mainly discuss about:

- 1) Masculinity
- 2) Femininity

Gender socialisation is how we learn male and female traits. Looking at gender roles shows what's expected of men and women. Men are nudged to be active and to hide weakness. Men are expected to be independent, in control, and strong. Women are allowed to emote, watch their moods, and seek help. Men are pushed to be independent; women, to be more interdependent. The term interdependence refers to the ability to express interpersonal needs,

particularly in emotional relationships, and to relate meaningfully to others in relationships (Greenglass 1982).

Masculinity in Malayalam Cinema

Since the publication of R. W. Connell's gender order theory in 'Gender and Power', the concept of masculinity, like feminisms, has been seen as a set of performances deemed appropriate for a male subject. The patterns of masculinity are not unitary or fixed, but vary with age, class, ethnicity and period, and masculinities are multiple, contested, fractured, fluid, and always in the process of being made. While many kinds of masculinities are produced and consumed – hegemonic, complicit, marginalized, subordinated, protest – there is one form that becomes normative or 'hegemonic'. However, hegemonic norms are historically, socially, and culturally situated, always in formative and, like the concept of masculinities itself, is provisional and plural. Traditional hegemonic masculine practices included dominance, aggression, competitiveness, pragmatism, rationality, objectivity, athletic and sexual prowess, stoicism, self-control, capacity for physical violence, etc. Traditional form of hegemonic masculinities also associated virility with certain physical characteristics and postures – muscularity, height, rugged features, hirsuteness – as well as specific occupations – the military, law enforcement, construction and labor were masculine occupations, but teaching, nursing, and secretarial posts were construed as feminine. When, in the postmodern period, domination by physical strength is deemed old-fashioned, managerial ability and technical competence is seen as a form of masculine ascendance. However, the alpha male or the sensitive, caring new-age man still retained dominance over women and other men. These socially constructed behaviors of hegemonic masculinities were embodied in cultural texts, like popular films, as desirable and powerful.

RW Connell in his 'Masculinities' examined, how masculinity is constructed and maintained in society. It emphasizes that masculinity is not a fixed, natural entity, but rather a social construct that is shaped by power relations and cultural norms. The theory identifies different types of masculinity, including hegemonic masculinity, subordinate masculinity, and complicit masculinity, and examines how these interact to produce gender inequality. Like gender, masculinity is also a social construct.

Malayalam cinema has undergone a significant transformation in its portrayal of masculinity, moving from traditional hyper-masculine heroes to more nuanced and diverse representations. Unpacking the male characters in the movie- The Great Indian Kitchen. The role of Suraj in this movie is an archetype of men in a typical Kerala household. He acts as a torchbearer of patriarchy and expects his wife to serve by being in the kitchen and making sure his family is fed well throughout the day. He marries Nimisha by taking a huge dowry along with a car from her family, it is a system that was abolished in India according to the Dowry Prohibition Act enacted on May 1 1961. When the new bride enters the kitchen, we could see Suraj engage in leisure activity by doing Yoga in the morning while his mother and wife toil by making food. It depicts a stark comparison of how men get to enjoy the privilege to engage in their daily leisure activities while women are left with no other choice other than being deployed in the kitchen. Nimisha and her mother-in-law serves food to Suraj and the father while waiting for them to finish the food. Anger, disgust and distress are reflected on the face of Nimisha when

she witnesses how the men of the household left the dining table completely untidy with leftovers strewn across the table. This shot depicts how men expect women to clean the strewn food as if it is their duty and refuse to show minimum etiquette on the dining table. It can be seen that Nimisha places a bowl so that they can dump the waste in it but the male characters are shown ignoring it reflecting normalization of sexism and misogyny against women at home. The movie tosses light and subtly conveys the serious issue of marital rape but hasn't fairly addressed the issue. However, film's director, Jeo Baby didn't fail to bring in the concept of consent in the bedroom space as the male protagonist expects his wife to indulge in sex as if it is part of her daily routine without being considerate about her physical and emotional wellbeing. When Nimisha speaks out her displeasure to her husband, he considers it as an insult and body shames her which proves how fragile his ego can be. Other than being physical Suraj never shows any emotional bond or mental support to his wife and there are no meaningful and constructive conversations between the couple. The father-in-law is not any better than her husband as he demands the rice to be cooked in a hearth and his clothes to be washed by hand. We can't see any casual interaction between the father and the mother of Suraj and the only interaction between them is how she brings his stuff to him like giving him a toothbrush with a paste, placing the sandals in front of him if he wants to go out. The whole movie in fact reflect how "The Great Indian Kitchen" showcases toxic masculinity in our very own homes that women face on a daily basis and how men have the power over women in many ways.

Maheshinte Prathikaram is directed by Dilesh Pothan. It stars Fahadh Faasil as Mahesh, a small-time photographer who lives with his father. Mahesh gets his world turned upside down after a local bully, Jimson, beats him up. Vowing revenge, Mahesh refuses to wear shoes until he gets even. Life gets tough without proper footwear, but his resolve strengthens. Just as he is about to strike back, Mahesh sees his girlfriend and realizes revenge isn't the answer. Shamefaced, he apologizes, discards the revenge sandals, and chooses forgiveness. Life returns to normal, the bizarre shoeless revenge a reminder of the power of letting go. The film depicts traditional expectations placed upon men to uphold notions of honour and machismo, as evidenced by Mahesh's journey to restore his pride after being humiliated. The act itself, refusing footwear, becomes a performative display of defiance, albeit an impractical one. However, as the narrative unfolds, Mahesh's character undergoes a transformation, challenging traditional notions of masculinity. Through moments of vulnerability and self-reflection, Mahesh learns to prioritize empathy, forgiveness, and non-violence over retribution, ultimately redefining his understanding of masculinity. Patriarchy keeps power through family, society, and the state. Such institutions work to keep this set-up intact. It starts at home—gender rules set in; women consent to marginalization. The state pushes it through education and other controlled systems.

Femininity in Malayalam Cinema

Beauvoir Rightly notes that, "The man is always the subject-self, the 'I', while the woman is always the object, the other". So what we call 'womanhood' is actually shaped by a patriarchal setup — through rules, customs, restrictions, and social norms — all designed to keep women in a subordinate position and make that control seem permanent through social conditioning.

In her book 'The Psychic Life of Power', Judith Butler explains how women's experiences get defined within a male-dominated framework, and how this very idea of 'womanhood' ends up producing its own forms of oppression. When we accept an identity, we're also, in a way, accepting the dominant script that comes with it. No identity can fully capture or represent a person's true self. And when power structures label and define people, especially as part of a group, those who are marginalized often find themselves responding to that very label. Butler's 'performativity' shows how society shapes identity. What we call gender traits are actually social constructs that, over time, have been made to look natural. Our so-called 'natural' ideas about gender come from cultural beliefs that we absorb through the process of socialization. Women are seen as part of religious, caste, linguistic, or regional communities, and that word 'part' itself is double-edged — it means they belong, but also that they are treated as someone's possession. A woman's social position is shaped by how she is placed within family and society, and it gets challenged whenever she pushes for more equality, autonomy, or freedom.

In Kerala, unlike in many other states, there has been a gradual yet noticeable shift toward gender equality. As the social fabric of the state embraces more progressive ideals, the idea of feminism has become a part of everyday discourse. This change is also evident in Malayalam Cinema. Films like 22 Female Kottayam and Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey have explored themes of gender inequality, portraying strong female characters and tackling issues related to women's autonomy and justice. These films can be easily analyzed through feminist film theory, which critiques movies from a feminist perspective – focusing on how women are represented and treated on screen.

But there are several criticisms within the 'popular feminism' in the industry, too. Some prominent figures have capitalized on the rise of feminist discourse to enhance their own popularity or solidify their positions in the industry. By aligning themselves with feminist ideals, they create an image of being progressive, when in reality, their actions may not align with their words. The Hema committee Reports highlighted issues like the gender pay gap, exploitation, and harassment, but the real problem lies in the fact that certain individuals in power within the industry have manipulated these issues for personal gain, rather than advocating for genuine systemic change.

A case in point is Geetu Mohandas, a well-known actress-turned-director who has voiced her support for feminist causes in the past. Yet, the recent teaser for her film 'Toxic', which stars Yash, has raised serious concerns. In the teaser, the portrayal of female characters is in stark contrast to the feminist principles she has advocated for. The depiction of women in the teaser undermines the very ideas she has championed in her previous work, leading to allegations of hypocrisy. This contradiction between her statements and actions raises the question: can we trust these so-called feminist figures, or are they merely using the label to gain leverage in a competitive industry?

While the rise of feminist discourse in the Malayalam film industry is undoubtedly a step forward, we must be cautious in how we interpret the actions of certain figures. Feminism is not a popularity tool; it is a serious movement aimed at dismantling deeply entrenched power structures. If the figures promoting feminism are not practicing what they preach, then their advocacy becomes little more than a trend, or worse, an opportunistic maneuver to gain power

and control in the industry. True feminism is not just about representation on screen, or the occasional supportive statement. It requires a holistic approach that addresses power dynamics, challenges exploitation, and strives for long-term structural change. Until then, we must remain critical and discerning about who we choose to support as genuine advocates for gender equality in the Malayalam film industry.

The idea of women's resistance in Malayalam cinema has gradually taken shape over the years, evolving from real-life roles and situations into layered, powerful characters on screen. This shift was driven by social change, changing gender dynamics, and the political and cultural transformations happening over time. In the early 1950s, when Malayalam cinema was just finding its footing, women were mostly shown as "sacrificial figures", "embodiment of tragedy". They were typically portrayed as the ideal wife, dutiful daughter, or caring sister, reflecting society's expectations of that era. These characters largely upheld the deeply traditional and patriarchal values that dominated society at the time. Women are shown as silently enduring systemic violence, all for the sake of their families and children. They were never taught how to deal with or stand up against the situations that kept them oppressed. The characters in films like *Neelakuyil* (1954) and *Rathinirvedam* (1978) are classic examples of the oppression and helplessness women had to face in the patriarchal system of that time. In those days, women didn't even realise their own strength to resist, because they were brought up in a very traditional way and slowly conditioned to accept a male-dominated system. Their feelings and small acts of protest never went beyond the four walls of their homes. In these films, women are shown as figures who quietly endure every hardship with patience. There was hardly any resistance, direct or indirect, and they were never shown openly challenging a society that continued to oppress them.

In Malayalam cinema, women were often written in ways that clearly upheld strong patriarchal stereotypes. In the early films, women were shown as soft-spoken, morally upright, almost saint-like figures who quietly accepted society's expectations and willingly sacrificed themselves in a male-dominated world. The industry grew by adopting new technologies and smart marketing strategies. Even then, women were pushed to the margins. The so-called golden era of Malayalam cinema in the 1970s once again reinforced the same gender roles and stereotypes that Malayali society was already holding on to. Even in films that claim to have strong female characters, the roles are still shaped by what the dominant sections of society expect. They keep pushing that typical 'ideal woman' image and all those stereotypes, so in the end, cinema becomes part of a bigger political agenda. When a woman is kept in a lower position, it basically shuts her up. And it encourages a mindset of obedience and submission that resists any real political change.

There are some characters in very few Malayalam movies that represent independent women and also very natural and egalitarian domestic environments, which do not subordinate women characters. The character of Parvathi Thiruvoth in the movie 'Aarkariyam'(2021) directed by Sanu John Varghese seems to be one of the recent aforementioned portrayals. There's a scene from the kitchen in this movie, where, without any political or feminist comments, the male co-actor prepares food and gives it to her. But in some movies, we can see political or female-oriented dialogues in these kinds of scenes, which is a kind of exposure and also showcasing

of some ‘politics’ which can also be artificial. Another movie called ‘Nandanam’(2002) by Renjith portrays two characters- one is of the role played by ‘Kaviyoor Ponnamma’ and the other by Revathi. Both of them are widows who lead a very independent life of their own. Kaviyoor Ponnamma has always been depicted as a representative of perfect motherhood in most of the movies. But, in this movie, we can see a little bold and independent character of Kaviyoor Ponnamma, who seems to be efficient in making decisions with no reference to any of the males in their family.

Honestly, in today’s world, women juggle so many roles — from earning for the family to managing the entire home. But even now, like in a typical conservative setup, they still face abuse, violence, and deep emotional hurt. This confusion about a woman’s place in society often makes Kerala filmmakers take a rather backward step when showing women on screen. Dominant ideologies slowly make social hierarchies look normal and completely justified. And through institutions that shape how we grow up and think, cinema ends up reinforcing these social structures in people’s minds. In the 1950s and 60s, women were limited to certain social roles — the patient wife, the loving mother — like in films such as *Bharya* (1962) and *Irutintte Athmavu* (1966), where women were shown as endlessly compassionate, respectable, self-sacrificing victims. In the 1970s, even the new wave films were still stuck in patriarchy and gender bias. By the 1990s, cinema showed a modern society, linking female sexuality to changing social norms and consumer culture. Now women are shown as students or professionals, but still trapped in stereotypes, sidelined before the superhero hero.

“Down with sexism, up with women’, although evaluations of masculinity have always been crucial to cinema-witness audience response from the early 20 Century onwards to a succession of male screen icons- approaches to gender in film studies itself initially centered upon images of women”. For decades, “strong female characters” was often interpreted as “women who fights like a man”. For the longest time, strength just meant physical fighting, and women were boxed into tight-suit action roles to show that. But now, films are slowly rethinking what real strength actually means. Strength can be emotional, intellectual, even moral — and women are being shown in all these dimensions. These portrayals make it clear that women can be powerful in so many different ways. Qualities like empathy, resilience, leadership, and intelligence — once ignored by the ‘tough’ stereotype — are now being celebrated as true strengths. It encourages a broader idea of what it means to be strong, for both women and men. For example, the movie, *How old are you*, ends with Nirupama’s journey [played by Manju Warriar], from a depressed woman to someone strong and courageous.

For a long time, female characters were one-dimensional. They were either “good girls” or “bad girls”, with no room for moral ambiguity or complexity. Today, we are seeing the rise of flawed, morally grey female leads- the same complexity that male characters have enjoyed for decades. Layered female characters break this myth that a woman has to be “perfect” to lead a story. When you let women be flawed, messy, even morally conflicted, it makes them feel real and relatable. It also reminds us that you don’t have to be perfect to deserve love, success, or even a second chance.

In Malayalam cinema, there is a notable lack of independent women characters in the majority of its films. This is despite the fact that some of the films are female-centric, featuring female

protagonists and focusing on women's stories. This can be attributed to the fact that Malayalam cinema is still largely patriarchal in nature and has a narrow focus on traditional gender roles. The typical female characters in Malayalam cinema are usually portrayed as submissive, dependent, and traditional. They are often depicted as wives, mothers, or daughters, and expected to adhere to their assigned roles. These characters are rarely shown to be independent or assertive, let alone shown challenging the status quo. Even when they do, they are usually portrayed as going against the wishes of their family and society, which often results in them being punished or shamed.

Female characters are still evolving; they're constantly going through change. As long as films are made with deep-rooted gender bias, we'll keep seeing stories that are unfair to women. That said, there are women directors—and even some men—who are creating strong female roles and characters that reflect real change. Even in the Malayalam film industry, things began to shift when a group of women came together to form WCC. After the shocking attack on an actress that shook Kerala, women from the Malayalam film industry—singers, actors, directors—joined hands and formed the Women in Cinema Collective, or WCC, in November 2017. This collective was formed as a response to the anti-women stand taken by AMMA, the male-dominated body set up in Malayalam cinema back in 1985. When it comes to Malayalam cinema, the challenges are of a very different kind. In Rani Padmini, Manju Warrier beautifully says, "It's not achieving something that's hard for a woman, it's the hurdles she has to cross," and that line truly reflects the reality of so many women's lives- ' If someone told you to be docile and submissive, then it's a trap to be caged bird by holding your wings, How can one fly higher if wings are not set free ?'.

Motherhood in Malayalam Cinema

“Feminist scholars in the West condemn the prevalent tendency to privilege the term ‘motherhood’, and all that it stands for. They also warn of the hazards of succumbing to prototypical tendencies that place motherhood at the centre when discussing gender roles or feminine sexuality. Ashapurna Debi's ‘Pratham Pratishruti’ demonstrates how a woman writer focuses on the ground between the two groups of women patriarchal society separated the fallen woman and the chaste woman, and arrives at a different understanding of motherhood. Ashapurna concentrates on the exile from the mother, which the structure of the patriarchal family forced on women. At the same time, she takes pains to point out that education, despite its emancipatory promise, did not actually offer an escape route from this exile. Rather, secular modernity, far from abolishing patriarchy, only succeeded in restructuring it. The challenge for a twentieth-century writer like Ashapurna was to find a space for a different kind of motherhood which would not reproduce the state of motherlessness that tradition condemned the girl child to suffer”.

Malayalam cinema often portrays motherhood as a central theme, with mothers frequently depicted as pillars of the family, sacrificing and nurturing, often with a strong emphasis on traditional values and emotional vulnerability. While some portrayals lean towards the traditional "sacrificial mom," recent films explore more nuanced and complex maternal figures, acknowledging the realities of motherhood and its impact on women. Motherhood is closely linked with stories that use a mother's body to highlight family values rooted in care and

sacrifice. Here, the mother is shown as the carrier of these values, and her emotional outbursts stress how strongly she protects and nurtures them. The Malayali mother, often portrayed as emotional and overreacting, becomes a supportive figure at home who adds dramatic intensity to the story. So when things fall apart, it's no surprise that the mother is the first one to feel disturbed. For instance, if a woman suddenly loses her child or her husband, what we usually imagine is her breaking down completely—crying uncontrollably, screaming in grief, losing all sense of order. That kind of emotional collapse is seen as the most natural reaction for a mother in such tragic moments. This shift—from a cheerful, loving mother to one weighed down by illness, despair, and depression—forms the core of how motherhood was portrayed in early Malayalam cinema.

In books and films, motherhood is often shown as this perfect, ideal image. In a male-dominated society, the responsibilities placed on a mother can become so heavy that they affect her growth as a woman beyond just being a mother. Motherhood theory says that being a mother isn't some universal experience; it's shaped by social and cultural influences. Across cultures, motherhood is understood differently, shaped by social norms, gender roles, class, race, and ethnicity. Motherhood is usually linked with sacrifice and selflessness, but it also comes with guilt, confusion, and a lot of pressure. Motherhood theory looks at the many sides of being a mother and the challenges women face while raising children. In fact, mothers represented in Malayalam cinema are another perspective on how the audience views gender roles.

In our society, motherhood is often seen as the ultimate purpose in a woman's life. And once she becomes a mother, she's expected to be this perfect, all-giving figure of love and care. Cinema keeps reinforcing these ideas, setting up a fixed image of what a 'good mother' should be like. Films need to be questioned for showing mothers as endlessly sacrificing and flawless, with no boundaries or personal dreams—we need to see them as real people with real emotions. After the OTT surge during the pandemic, Malayalam cinema has started getting national attention, largely because of the strong content it's putting out.

In Malayalam cinema, the idea of a poor village woman is almost a stock character — usually shown as the ever-sacrificing mother. No matter what her husband or children put her through, she keeps loving them unconditionally. Take the 2005 Malayalam film *Naran*, starring superstar Mohanlal in the lead. Set in a village backdrop, the story revolves around a soft-hearted local tough guy. As the plot follows his personal struggles and his need to prove his masculinity through bursts of violence, it quietly reinforces the image of the patient, virtuous mother through Janaki, who is in love with Velayudhan. The story keeps saying she's "pure and well-behaved." Her husband is a drunk who beats her, but still she stays with him, standing by him and taking full responsibility for bringing up their daughter on her own. They end up glorifying her silence and helplessness, as if suffering through an abusive marriage for her child somehow makes her a 'good mother.

In films like *Meesha Madhavan* and *Runway*, the mothers of the main characters are shown in a way that reduces a woman's whole identity to being a mother. In both these movies, we mostly see only that one side of their life – their role as a mother – and nothing much beyond that. And they're respected or valued only because they are mothers, not really for their thinking, their

clarity in expressing themselves, or the depth of what they've experienced in life. When a character is portrayed in such a one-dimensional way, we lose the chance to understand motherhood in different, more layered ways.

We easily accept mothers who are shown as perfect and full of endless love and care. But when it comes to moms like Shobhana in *Varaney Aavashyamund* or Kalpana in *Bangalore Days*, we hesitate a bit to accept them. That's because these characters move away from the usual mother image — they don't exist only as mothers, they have a strong identity of their own. Shobhana's role in *Varaney Aavashyamund* is actually a big step forward in how Malayalam cinema portrays mothers. She's a divorcee who openly admits that she had multiple relationships before marriage. She's independent, financially secure, and while she's a committed mother, she also has her own hobbies, dreams, and personal goals. They begin new romances. The film questions reducing a mother's life to just one identity. It criticizes how women's emotional and social layers are ignored, shrinking their whole being to motherhood.

In *Bangalore Days*, Kalpana plays a mother who really surprises you — even when her husband walks away, she somehow gathers herself and holds on tight to the little dreams she's never voiced out loud. The film beautifully shows her inner conflict — a woman trying to balance what society expects from a 'good mother' and what she secretly wants for herself, all shown with a light touch of humour. In many moments, her reactions hit you hard, especially the way she keeps up a brave face in the marriage until she finally gets the chance to go to Bangalore with her son — it clearly shows the tight limits society puts on mothers.

The mother in the movie *Kumabalangi Nights*, directed by Madu C Narayanan, is a peculiar one. Even though she isn't shown on screen, the film presents her as a strong, independent woman with her own dreams and desires. It beautifully explores the mother's absence, yet shows how she remains present in her children's lives, offering a more real take on motherhood and moving away from the usual self-sacrificing, family-above-all stereotype. She's the kind of woman who lets her grown-up sons find their own path. When she came back home and asked to stay with these older men, she said, 'I raised them when they needed me. Now I want to live my own life.' Like it or not, mothers aren't just black or white—they have shades of grey too. But we hardly see that in mainstream cinema.

If that's what the mother wants, someone might ask, what's the issue then? The only answer is this: you can't reduce a person to just one identity or put them in a single box. It's simply not fair to see someone as having only one fixed role in life. Especially mothers, they're constantly trying to live up to society's idea of a 'good mom', knowing exactly where their child's socks are, handling a moody teenager's anger with patience, and being the emotional anchor of the house. It's high time we stop glorifying our mothers' sacrifices and expecting them to be perfect all the time. Cinema plays a huge role in breaking these age-old stereotypes. There's a fresh wave of progressive storytelling in Malayalam cinema, and it really feels like it could bring in the change we've been waiting for. Here's hoping the new writers and filmmakers take it even further.

Fatherhood in Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam cinema often explores complex and nuanced portrayals of fatherhood, moving beyond traditional, strict-disciplinarian or sacrificial father figures. Recent trends in the industry have seen a move towards exploring the emotional and psychological impact of fatherhood, including its various forms, such as single fathers and fathers who are not biologically related. These portrayals delve into generational conflicts, patriarchal influence, family dynamics, and the lasting impact of father-child relationships.

Uyare shows the unbreakable spirit of a young, ambitious woman who refuses to give up on life. In a time like that, what anyone truly needs is their parents' support and some real emotional strength. For Pallavi, her father, played by Parvathy Thiruvoth, is her biggest hero and her strongest pillar of support. Ravindran, played by Siddique, stands by his daughter through every tough phase and keeps pushing her to move ahead with confidence. Even in a situation no father would ever want to face, he never loses hope or faith. Siddique's subtle and layered performance makes this character unforgettable. Ravindran is a perfect example of how a father should stand by his daughter in tough times. He inspires her to face every challenge and live with confidence. No matter what, all daughters and sons deserve a father like him.

A lot of dads these days are quite comfortable with technology. But still, some of them haven't fully figured it all out, so for anything technical, they end up depending on their kids. It just shows us that the generation gap is very much real. Oliver Twist from the film Home, played by Indrans, is a perfect example of this. He's easily one of the most innocent and genuine characters we've ever seen in Malayalam cinema. When we see how hard he's trying to stay connected with his kids who've grown distant, it really hits us — you can't help but feel for the man. His innocent smile is a noteworthy one that the audience could connect with.

We often know fathers who have gone to any extent to save their family, like Georgekutty in Drishyam [played by Mohanlal]. Cinema also portrayed negative shades of fathers like Kuttan from Puzhu, [played by Mammooty]. Fatherhood in Malayalam cinema has undergone a profound transformation over the decades, evolving from the rigid, authoritarian patriarch to a more nuanced, emotionally expressive, and empathetic figure. Early portrayals often reflected the sociocultural realities of a conservative Kerala, where fathers symbolized discipline and duty. However, contemporary films increasingly depict fathers as companions, caregivers, and even vulnerable individuals grappling with their own emotional and moral dilemmas. In essence, Malayalam cinema has evolved in its portrayal of fatherhood, moving beyond traditional tropes to explore the complexities and nuances of these relationships, highlighting the diverse ways in which fatherhood manifests in different contexts.

Gendered Spectatorship – Seeing and being seen

Gendered spectatorship in Malayalam cinema is a complex and nuanced topic that involves examining how Malayalam films are shaped by, and the viewing experiences of audiences along gendered lines. It mainly focuses on “male gaze theory” by Laura Mulvey. It refers to the way “films often depict women from a heterosexual male perspective, objectifying them as passive objects of desire”. This theory posits that mainstream media frequently presents women as being looked at, rather than as active participants in the narrative, reinforcing patriarchal power dynamics and gender stereotypes. It was British filmmaker and scholar Laura Mulvey

who first introduced the concept of the male gaze in her 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." She argued that cinema reflects a male-dominated society, continually reinforcing the notion that women exist primarily as objects of male control and desire. Her focus was on how films and the camera, in both sexual and everyday contexts, tend to present women as objects rather than individuals. In simple terms, Mulvey said men are positioned as the ones who look, while women are positioned as the ones to be looked at. There's a theory that female characters are written and shown on screen keeping men in mind.

Seeing – how the audience views the characters and narratives

Being seen- how characters are portrayed and framed within the story, and

visually on screen

Male Gaze theory refers to a way of portraying women as objects of heterosexual male desire. Female characters were often depicted in terms of their physical beauty, emotional fragility, or roles in relation to male protagonists—mother, lover, or victim. In classic and even some modern Malayalam films, camera angles frequently linger on the female body, reinforcing the objectification of women. Moreover, romantic and song sequences have historically catered to the male gaze, with the "heroine introduction" often shot in slow motion, emphasizing sensuality rather than individuality or agency.

Mulvey says most popular films in India are built around the many pleasures cinema promises, especially something called 'scopophilia'. Scopophilia is basically the pleasure of watching, like voyeurism, where people on screen are treated as objects, and the viewer gets a sense of control or enjoyment from that. It's a gendered process, where women are ultimately positioned as the objects of this gaze, turned into something to be looked at by the male viewer. So in this setup, the man becomes the one who looks, the carrier of the gaze. The objectification of women mainly comes from how films are controlled and who they target. The way they use camera angles and those tight close-ups on actresses often pushes the audience to look at them through the hero's sexual, voyeuristic lens. Because of that, a clear power imbalance gets created, where women end up being objectified even in scenes that aren't sexual at all. In male-dominated cinema, men are shown as the active, powerful ones. And women are mostly there to please the male gaze, almost as if their job is just to satisfy that viewpoint. It refers to the pleasure derived from looking, especially in a context where the observer gains control or gratification by observing the subject.

Malayalam cinema often blurs the line between the star and the character, explaining the performative nature of identity, collectively known as 'performativity'. The term Performativity was introduced by JL Austin and expanded by Judith Butler. It refers to the idea that identity – especially gender – is not something innate but something enacted or performed through repeated actions, gestures, and language within specific social and cultural contexts. It refers to the idea that gender is not a fixed identity but is instead a performance, a repeated and stylized act of behavior that creates the illusion of a stable and natural gender. In Malayalam cinema, this concept can be explored in various ways, including how characters embody and challenge traditional gender roles, how actors perform gender through their on-screen portrayals, and how films themselves can act as performative spaces, shaping audience

perceptions of gender. Malayalam cinema has seen a gradual shift towards challenging traditional gender roles, particularly in recent years. Films are increasingly depicting women in more powerful and assertive roles, and exploring alternative gender identities and expressions. This challenge to norms is a form of performativity, as it breaks down the established ways of enacting gender on screen and in society.

Actors in Malayalam cinema are not simply portraying characters; they are also engaging in a performance of gender, often influenced by the cultural context and expectations around masculinity and femininity. For instance, the way actors embody traditional male characters, with their dominant power and control, or the way they challenge those stereotypes through more nuanced portrayals, can be seen as a performative act. Malayalam films themselves can be seen as performative spaces, where gender is not only portrayed but also enacted and negotiated. Films can create a specific atmosphere that influences how characters and the audience perceive gender, shaping their own understanding and behavior. Malayalam cinema is also grappling with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, which can be understood through the lens of performativity. Films that depict LGBTQ+ characters and stories, or that challenge heteronormative assumptions, are engaging in a performative act of reimagining gender and sexuality.

When applied to Malayalam cinema, performativity allows us to analyze how films both reflect and shape identities- be it gender, class, or caste of regional identity- through the performances of actors, characters, and cinematic language. It is more of putting out the theory of realism, which we have already discussed in our previous chapter. Mammooty and Mohanlal have cultivated distinct public personas, with each film reinforcing or occasionally subverting these performances. Their dual legacy often constructs two competing masculinities: the stoic and the spontaneous. The newer stars like Fahadh Fasil, Parvathi Thiruvethu, Nimisha Sajayan, etc., challenge traditional star performativity by blending into roles rather than standing out as larger-than-life figures. Therefore, performativity is not just about acting. It is about how cinema enacts and constructs identities, ideologies, and realities through repetition, citation, and embodiment. It offers a powerful lens to critique the norms upheld or subverted by Malayalam films over there.

In film theory, fetishism refers to a process by which certain objects, people, or symbols are imbued with exaggerated value or meaning. Laura Mulvey's seminal work on the "male gaze" argued that mainstream cinema often objectifies women, turning them into visual fetishes for male pleasure. Despite Malayalam cinema's often progressive veneer, many films, especially in the commercial mainstream, have treated the female body as an object of erotic fascination. From the hypersexualized song sequences to lingering camera gazes, the visual representation of women often caters to a heterosexual male audience. Fetishism, in psychoanalytic and cultural theory, often refers to the act of objectifying or obsessively idealizing a body part or persona, displacing desire from the whole to a symbolic representation. While male fetishism—where women are reduced to objects of the male gaze—is widely discussed in film studies, female fetishism is more nuanced and less explored, especially in regional cinema like Malayalam.

In the context of Malayalam cinema, female fetishism operates both ways: women are fetishized through narrative and visual aesthetics, and at times, female characters themselves exhibit fetishistic tendencies—towards ideals, bodies, relationships, or even traditional gender roles.

Films from the 1980s and 1990s often reduced female characters to objects of male desire. The camera would linger on specific body parts—lips, waist, feet—detached from narrative context, reinforcing a voyeuristic gaze. The 'ideal Malayali woman'—clad in a white saree, soft-spoken, sexually passive yet emotionally intense—has become a fetishized archetype. Films like *Manichitrathazhu* (1993) or *Thoovanathumbikal* (1987) simultaneously romanticize and confine femininity within cultural boundaries. In recent years, films like *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014) or *Mayaanadhi* (2017) display women in more liberated roles, yet their freedom is often framed erotically, making modern femininity a fresh object of desire.

The "male scopic thesis" posits that cinematic techniques—framing, camera angles, narrative structure—often cater to a heterosexual male viewer. This gaze objectifies female characters, reducing them to visual spectacle rather than narrative agents. Women are "looked at" and rarely given autonomous subjectivity within the diegesis. From the golden age of Malayalam cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, male heroes like Mammooty and Mohanlal were at the narrative center. Female characters frequently existed in roles that reinforced their secondary status—mothers, wives, lovers—rarely the focus of the plot unless their actions were in relation to the male lead. However, the emergence of new-generation Malayalam cinema has challenged the male scopic thesis. Directors like Anjali Menon (*Bangalore Days*, *Koode*), Geetu Mohandas (*Moothon*), and others have presented narratives from more diverse perspectives. Films like *Uyare* (2019), starring Parvathy as an acid attack survivor, resist objectification and focus on female agency. The camera, in such cases, aligns with the protagonist's subjectivity rather than rendering her as a passive object. Even in male-directed films like *Maheshinte Prathikaram* (2016), women are portrayed with more depth and less visual commodification. While not entirely free of the male gaze, these films begin to show cracks in the dominance of the male scopic structure.

Male-sopic thesis is particularly seen in queer cinemas. In Queer cinema, it subverts the male gaze by emphasizing mutual looking and desire between men, removing the voyeuristic power dynamics. For example, in the movie *Moothon*, portraying the eyes and smile of Nivin Pauly, the protagonist. It is worth noting that the film walks a line between objectification and empowerment, and the context of the female spectatorship within the film and in the audience shifts the dynamics like in the movie 'Njan Marikutty'. It also invites the viewer to contemplate the beauty of male and emotional vulnerability, but through a more lyrical, introspective gaze—far from exploitative.

Conclusion

Cinema, as a powerful cultural medium, reflects society as it is and reinforces dominant ideologies, particularly regarding gender. From the sacrificial mother and stoic patriarch to the emergence of vulnerable men and self-assertive women, the cinematic journey reflects Kerala's shifting social fabric. Yet, even as the industry moves from hegemonic masculinity to nuanced

male subjectivities and from ornamental femininity to resistant female agency, the residues of patriarchy continue to linger, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly.

Cinema is never neutral. It teaches us how to look, who to admire, who to pity, and who to silence. When fathers cry, when mothers choose themselves, when men seek therapy, when women resist marital oppression- cinema becomes a site of disruption. It becomes political. Malayalam cinema is evolving. But the crucial question remains- are we ready to evolve with it?

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