



## The Shaping of New Wave Feminities in Mollywod Films

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The male female relationship has been a perennial issue in all genres of literature, including films. The changes in it have been reflected in films and literature too. A relationship which is defined and redefined as though finding no transcendental definition, the debate and discussion is going on. However, when the 'weak' sex being defined in accordance with the patriarchal interest, began their protest and constantly has redefined them till the date. It had been a relationship of a struggle on the part of women, the 'othering' of their experiences as the exotic other, as fragile, as beautiful and an object of voyeuristic pleasure that is denied freedom in the power relationship. The saying "one is not born, but becomes a woman" (Simon de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex*: 1949) is applicable in films as well. She has been defined only in terms of her relationship with the male characters and also in relation to the male dominant audience. However, the aspect of femininity that has been structured in films has witnessed changes over the years and various directors and film theorists tried to define the 'feminine' in different ways. The present article tries to unravel such a change in the depiction of femininity in Malayalam films and how the woman as an *object of gaze* is presented and underwent changes in the patriarchal mindset of the audience in the backdrop of new wave feminism and cinema.

Feminism defined feminity through three phases to the date. First, it overturned legal obstacles for gender equality for privileges like voting rights and property rights. Then it debated on issues of sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, domestic violence, marital rape issues and other de facto inequalities and took the advantage. In the third phase, the fight became abstract by trying to rubbing off the boundaries between male and female by abolishing gender role expectation and stereotypes. There have always been stereotypes or role models for how a woman should 'perform' the act of being a woman, backed up by the established notions of culture and civilization. Men were in control of sexual relationship, while females were endowed with concepts of chastity which is not applicable to men. Woman doesn't have an identity other than being the binary opposite of man; a formula of exchange in the world and a type of location for relation between men. This idea of women as sites of relation between men was considered by Levi Strauss in his study of Structural Anthropology, which was in turn criticized by the queer theoretician, Judith Butler in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*. Women in the form of brides and gifts, as a symbol of reconciliation, friendship and communion between men, according to Butler, denigrates the weaker sex as possessing no identity by themselves. Man has the luxury of enjoying sex with more than one partner; for women it is considered as prostitution and ill-reputation. Sex positivity abandons this. Sex has been one of the chief weapons by which the male reaffirmed his superiority. The journey is quite progressive for which the films stand testimony, within the limited scope of this article, it is attempted to show how she is changing by evaluating her relationship with the male in wedlock, how her personality is portrayed, how her body is displayed and how she reacts to the male dominancy, in the backdrop of Malayalam movies.

Film industry had been male centered and had projected this patriarchal dominance by telling male centered stories; their heroism, their dreams and their aspirations. As John Berger says in his *Ways of Seeing*, "Men act, women appear. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at." (Berger, 47) Behind this also is the male centered belief of finding identity through the juxtaposition with the un-manly figure of the woman. Hegel's concept of Reciprocity can be traced here in relation to man and woman. Like a master who needs a slave to be said to be a master, a man needs a woman, to contrast himself to, so that in their relation, he can acquire a better position. Thus women are portrayed only in relation to men as their wives, their lovers or their mothers. Mollywood is not an exception. Cinema being the most effective medium represented this *phallogocentrism* in the society in the celluloid also. The male female relationship which includes the most

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42 |

Page

Research Scholar Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar Chidambaram.

common husband-wife relationship, presented her as coy, struggling and more or less yielding to her Husband's will. This husband - wife relationship has been a perennial source of story and is of much interest among the mass audience in Kerala. It's quite true that the changes in the real life will reflect in the reel life as well. The contemporary movies show us that this *phallocentric* relationship underwent and is still undergoing changes. This relationship has been modified and is being redefined which can be exemplified.

The recent movie *Angry Babies* (2014) by Saji Surendran shows a couple's life, Sarah Thomas (Bhavana) and Jeevan Paul (Anoop Menon). They run away from their parents and hometown and settle in the faraway Mumbai where they begin life anew. The novelty like bubbles vanishes and tension creeps in, in the form of financial crisis and disagreement. The wife boldly takes the responsibility of running the family against her more or less wayward husband. She doesn't seem to agree with him and makes her stand point clear and precise till the finale. They couldn't evolve a life together, which has equal space for both and she dares to live alone in the unknown city and becomes successful.

It is his discovery, not as a male crushing his female's opinions and tastes as it was used to be, but as a partner of equal importance that he discovers his space in the conjugal relationship at the end. This is very opposite to the attitude of the past. 'I am Husband (to make it clearer, 'I am a man') and you are my wife (a woman), so you have to yield. At the climax, she is happily surprised to see him in her restaurant in the uniform of a supplier. This is the point when the male puts off his traditional ego of superiority. The female welcomes this with a slap on his cheek (which could have been a terrible activity). The slap can be considered as a mild and loving blow on the patriarchal ego of the so called husbands. However, here the husband accepted it whole heartedly and tells to the audience "This happens only in Kerala." This shows the drastic change in the male attitude towards women.

Another incident can also be chosen from the same movie in which we can see how the patriarchal domineering ego of the husband undergo changes and begin to accept and understand the dignity of the femininity. For example, Jeevan Paul the hero when trying to overhear her proposed divorcee wife Sarah Thomas talking to her newly found male acquaintance Alex Maliyekkal (Joju George), behind the closed room of the flat, accidentally falls in. Then, in front of the bewildered friends Sarah and Alex, Jeevan's facial expression was that of apology for intervening in the privacy of others. This was unimaginable in the past. A similar situation would have shivered the male out of anger with an immediate response of physical attack.

*How Old Are You* (2014) by Roshan Andrews shows a quite upheaval of the discovery of the identity of the self of the female which usually always is subjugated in the patriarchal set up of a family. Here, the woman voices, questions and takes a decision which was not quite a common phenomenon in the usual nuptial relationship. The 36 year old Nirupama Rajeev (Manju Warier), in her prenuptial life was a bold character and was natural to her character. This naturality is lost when she gets married. The 'wifing' takes place which makes her a shadow of herself under the pressure and responsibility of the family. She looks older than what really she is which is contrasted to her much young looking husband Rajeev (Kunchako Boban). Women used to sacrifice her dreams and aspirations unlike men for the sake of the family. Even though accidentally, she finds her identity, cherishes and work for it against her husband's dream to go to Ireland. The most important fact is that she takes a firm decision against her husband's in order to pursue her own dreams and becomes quite successful in it. The most powerful question here is "Who decides the expiry date of the female dreams?" A question which need not be answered, but is quite clear. It is the male, the husband, brother or father. Here, the female is not ready to get go with the traditional well understood answer. Rather, she finds that it is determined by her irrespective of age and gender. When she does, she receives the much awaited gratification of being recognized by her husband in the dinner party of the president. It is when the husband holds his wife's hand under the table that the male ego is completely vanished.

The new wave films portray the personality of the woman quite differently from the traditional caricature form (mild, calm, coy and chaste). There is a paradigm shift in the presentation of female debonaire. *Bangalore Days* (2014) directed by Anjali Menon shows passion and commitment to their female characters. The female characters are shown as free, natural to their characters who do not show any signs of 'girling' (othering). Divya Prakash (Nazriya Nazim) is a free bird, enjoying with her male cousins, doing small mischievous activities like smoking and sleeping with her grown up male cousins and in return they treat her with adequate love and care. They don't try to make 'a good girl child' out of her. Shivadas (Fahadh Faasil) is fully immersed in the memory of his deceased lover even though he marries again. The director doesn't want him to be a worthless selfish person immediately forgetting his lover as soon as she dies. It is notable that she doesn't portray females as coy, protection seeking and weak. Also, the males are not dominating, but gentle,

caring and passionate toward their females. Arjun (Dulquer Salmaan) loves Sarah (Parvathy Menon) despite her handicap. Her crippledness is never a matter of shame for herself and for the person whom she loves. It can be contrasted with the sad plight of Rose D'Costa (Geetu Mohandas) in Shyama Prasad's *Akale*.

In the same way, there are very many female oriented films such as *Trivandrum Lodge*, *Beautiful, Cocktail*, and *22 Female Kottayam* where the female characters flirt openly, drink in public and make lewd comments. They are marked for their explicit use of language and 'provocative' themes where women appear breaking the chains of morality which is applied to her alone. Dhvani Nambiar (Honey Rose) in *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012) shows aspects of sexual positivism and presents a challenging debonair against the female stereotypes. The movie brims with lewd dialogues with sexual overtones reflect the changing sexual mores even though it invited much criticism from the cultural and literary circles of Kerala.

Female body, a 'property' of which the ownership had been possessed by male for quite a long time and had been enjoyed the pleasure of its gaze. The cinema has made such a wonderful opportunity for the males to experience over and over again quite comfortably in the darkness of the cinema hall, getting adequate privacy, to explore his eyes on her body. An activity in the open light might be irritating for the males and they may avoid it. The darkness in the hall helped to hide this hypocrisy, and at the same time justified being part of the group in the hall, the unidentified but unified male partners with the same purpose. According to Laura Mulvey the cinematic apparatus of Classical Hollywood inevitably put the spectator in a masculine subject position, with the figure of the women on screen as the object of desire and *the male gaze*. This is a common phenomenon throughout the world cinema. Mollywood is not an exception. Woman body was an object of gaze, not the beauty of the body but the nakedness of the body. The old cabaret dances, part and parcel of the yester year movies, the rape scenes of which Jose Prakash, Balan. K. Nair and Janardhanan thrived (quite essential for the success of the movie) shows this aspect of the male gaze. Such scenes do not play a major role in the denouement of the plot but catered just for the pleasure of the male audience. A torn up blouse or a displaced sari had satisfied this male gaze. A very adequate example would be the gaze by Vasu Menon (Bharat Gopy) on Usha (Zarina Wahab) in the movie *Palangal* (1981) by Bharathan. Here, the carnal appetite of the male is imposed on the female body without her permission or emotional reciprocation or joy but with fear of being attacked and molested.

Thus woman used to be objectified for mere pleasure of looking at her body. When it is not any expertise in the creative art of film making, but the nakedness or plumpness of her body talks to the audience, that's where a woman is ridiculed, and considered exotic, the other. This has stopped in making any major impact upon the audience and is not essential anymore for the success of a movie. The first point is that the domineering 'look' disappeared by the male characters in the film or men in the hall. Secondly, it is not the nakedness of the body but the beauty of the body that is being displayed (hard earned by tiresome dieting and continuous workouts). In the same way, the expertise in the performance is very important. Another point is that, most often the heroines themselves perform this. To put in a nut shell, men had to dispense with his look and the control on the women body. Here, what Mulvey said might underwent a slight change, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." Here, the female is not at all passive but active to the passive male who becomes a slave for her kindness. In *Trivandrum Lodge*, the sex starved Shibu Vellayini (Saiju Kurup), makes this passive look and makes a begging request (no rape here) to Dhvani Nambiar (Honey Rose) which is clearly denied. Thus, one can see that, even though there is pleasure in look, there is no dominancy and the associated narcissism of the heroines in showing and the pride in one's own body also should be taken into account. Furthermore, the males are becoming more conscious of their body and the trend in the *six packs* is a reflection of this.

A psychoanalytic evaluation of a movie can render much insight in the most aggressive form of feminism. Psycho analytic theory of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan has dominated film theory especially among the film theorists like Laura Mulvey. Freud wrote in his paper, 'Fetishism' in 1927 that, "Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals." (354) Similarly Joseph Campbell, in his book, *Primitive Mythology*, observes: "...there is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies, as well as in modern surrealist painting and neurotic dream, which is known to folklore as 'the toothed vagina'-the vagina that castrates." (73) The story of *22 Female Kottayam* tells the story of retribution. Even though the story appears to be that of quite an ordinary theme of revenge, it can have multiple readings. The protagonist is the heroine and the hero shows male chauvinism to which he is treated with emasculation. There are quite strange, queer opinions that castration can be a solution for all atrocities against women. The heroine in this movie Tessa (Rima Kallingal) resort to castration as a solution for her revenge. She doesn't want to kill him, which she did to the older man for the two 'dog bites' (her figurative usage for the two rapes she

suffered). For the young, dynamic person she chose castration. It is presented as a minor operation similar to that of circumcision which can be easily done by a female and which doesn't have any further complication on the body. Also, strangely the male is not alarmed or shocked by realizing the loss of phallus and retorts that masculinity doesn't depend on it. After this, she invites him to Canada (without a phallus). To put in the Freudian way, she overcomes the lack of phallus by castrating the male and he is devoid of the fear of castration any more by losing the phallus.

It would also be interesting to see, why there are very few Malayalam films in which the main character is a woman, or why doesn't the plot revolve around her? Why the story of women is not told? Why there are less women directors or script writers? The answer may not be that easy and its feasibility depends on very many issues. The film industry is still ruled by men, and the lion share of the audience are constituted by men (here males most often 'take' women to films not even accompany, or 'allow' them to go for films) Films have to be financially viable and they cannot afford every subjects to be incorporated. Quite interestingly, and contrastingly one can see that, the household in which the females constitute the major share of the audience, serials thrive. There, the plot revolves around the females. Again in almost all serials the males, the husbands are subjugated to their domineering wives. It tells the story of strong, bold, efficient or cruel story of the mother in laws or ever sacrificing, talented, ideal or capable daughters in law.

To conclude, one can see quite clearly a progressive tone of female narration in accordance with the mainstream feminist movements. Globalization and Information Technology have made cultural exchange and communication quite fast. Philosophers and thinkers have subverted the binaries and broke any distinction or superior inferior dilemma by abolishing centrality. The concept of God and morality which was narrated favoring male is questioned thoroughly. However one can hope for the best in which both the gender find equal space and clearly defined roles. In the Indian mythology, we have the concept of goddess *Kali* and *Durga* or in its abstract form the *Maya*. It is the ultimate source of power and creation. For example, one such very powerful symbol is that of *Kali* with the god of destruction, Lord *Shiva* under her foot. Indian perception of female as expressed through myths and literatures give a prominent place for femininity which is very much esteemed and in dispensed with. Here there is no masculinity devoid of femininity which has equal status like that of our concept of *Ardhanareeshwara*. Thus there would be a time in the future that man discover this secret of nature and come up with a better defined relationship between the male and the female.

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