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From Docility to Defiance: Femininity and Gender Images in Select Malayalam Movie Songs

Dr. Vidya Rajagopal

Malayalam film songs have always exercised a perennial influence on our aesthetic sensibilities and they have played a significant role in our lives. The creation and moulding of gender images in our film songs change considerably over a period of time. Film industry has been male-centred and has projected this patriarchal dominance in several Malayalam film songs. Some of these songs represent the sensibility of the Malayali audience. The image of women's body portrayed on screen has undergone transition as well as transformation over a period of time. Women in Kerala belong to a heterogenous group and as such their sensibilities, emotions and desires are diverse. This is why the depiction of women on the silver screen has not always been in the self-same manner. The representation of women in Malayalam movies, thus depends to a large extent on the context in which these women characters are located and presented. It is desirable that cinema should reconceive and redefine women as objects of male gaze. Consequently, films should come up with more progressive and positive representation of women. The article explores the portrayal of gender stereotypes in select Malayalam film songs with special emphasis on the portrayal of femininity and how the women characters are objectified and stereotyped.

Keywords: gender stereotypes, femininity, patriarchal dominance, objectify, male gaze

Introduction

Women's position within media power structures and the way women are represented in the media are constant concerns particularly in male dominated societies. Wider gender inequalities are reinforced as a result of the negative stereotyping and lack of female participation in our societal structure. Films are cultural artefacts which reflect and represent our social life which is basically patriarchal. Film industry has been male centric and it projects patriarchal supremacy by narrating stories that glorify men, their valour, adventure, triumphs and heroism. Behind such a concept is the male-centered belief of finding identity through the prism of a juxtaposition with a weak and fragile figure of the woman.

This phallogocentrism prevalent in society gets reflected in the celluloid also and Mollywood is not an exception. Marital relationship in many Malayalam movies often centres round a woman who is presented as weakheaded, coy and submissive, abiding by her husband's whims and fantasies. This husband-wife relationship has been a predominant area of interest for the theatre-going masses in Kerala. It's quiet true that the changes in real life will find an echo in reel life as well. However many contemporary movies portray this phallogocentric relationship as being modified and redefined and this marks a change in the right direction.

The erotic picturization of women is a frequent feature in Malayalam movies. Recurrence of erotic imagery within popular culture, chiefly in our cinema can be ascribed to the disposition of the heterosexual personages, who hold the reins of corporations and production companies. One must also remind oneself of the fact that spectatorship is both a mental and physical activity.

Theoretical Framework

John Berger (1973) in his *Ways of Seeing* observes, "A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you... By contrast, a woman's presence expresses her own attitude to herself and defines what can or cannot be done to her. Everything she does, contributes to her presence. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes

to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman... Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object, and most particularly an object of vision- a sight” (p. 47). The very same attitude is quite conspicuous in the way in which female images are depicted in Malayalam film songs. It is taken for granted that the ‘ideal’ spectator is always the male and the image of the woman is so created as to cater to his tastes and desires. Evergreen Malayalam romantic songs like “Venchandralekha Oru apsara Sthree...” penned by Vayalar (Movie: Chukku), Swarnagopura narthaki shilpam by Sreekumaran Thampi (Movie: Divyadarshanam), Ravivarma chithrathin rathi bhavame by R. K Damodaran (Movie: Raju Rahim) with their subtle nuances and sexual undertones give tantalizing moments to the listener where the feminine figure becomes ‘the surveyed female’.

Female body, considered a ‘property’, possessed and enjoyed by man, had often been an object of male gaze. As Laura Mulvey (1975) in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* observes, “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual objects is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle... she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (p. 838). Generally, the Malayalam movies display a sort of ‘Malayaliness’, and the way in which they mould objects and subjects in the contemporary socio-cultural life of Kerala deserves special mention. The objectification of the female body manifests itself in ‘item dances’, as well as in the erotic movements of the female characters. Here the woman is being called an ‘item’ – an object where she dances in sexually provocative moves to fulfil the voyeuristic pleasures of men. The ever-changing attitude of Malayalam film lovers towards womanhood has its clear reflection in the Malayalam film songs of the past five decades. The feminine sensibility has been dexterously explored by many Malayalam lyricists

and this exploration reflects the assumptions and attitudes towards women engendered in hegemonic social structures. The director, in accordance with his idea of womanhood, re-creates a new form of feminine figure, that appeals powerfully to the viewers. One of the enchanting Malayalam songs of the early 1970's by Sreekumaran Thampi in the movie *Sasthram Jayichu Manushyan Thottu* is "Chandanathil kandanjeduthoru sundari silpam..." – a song celebrating the physical beauty of a woman. The song underscores the traditional attitude to femininity, advocated by the male dominated society: her physical figure like a statue chiselled out of sandalwood, her smile has the solacing effect of moonlight and her glowing crimson cheeks as beautiful as the blooming petals at dusk and so on. Certain evocative lines in the song are noted for their lascivious appeal and erotic images which accentuate the fact that a woman's body has to fit into the patriarchal framework of beauty. Malayalam movies are replete with such songs that adore and objectify the female bodies and offer sensual gratification.

Meena T Pillai (2010) in her essay, "Women in Malayalam Cinema; Naturalising Gender Hierarchies" observes,

Cinema has become extremely important in any serious study of the woman's question today because it is an art and a medium that is essentially 'allegorical' and that the woman on screen comes to represent not an individual but a type. With its capacity to create and then celebrate or berate types, cinema can exploit woman to conform to certain types while rejecting others, allowing them to be moulded and defined by hegemonic social structures and in the process unconsciously assisting in the reproduction of these hegemonies. (p. 7)

Analysis of Songs

Highly acclaimed lyricists like Valayar Rama Varma, P. Bhaskaran, Sreekumaran Thampi and a host of other great masters extol, glorify and eulogize female sexuality, sensuality and vulnerability without deviating from traditional patriarchal norms that consider women as helpless creatures of dependence and passivity - pieces of submissive flesh created for male pleasure. All these erudite

practitioners of music have unfurled before us, varied and colourful tapestries of songs with almost all the major voices doing playback singing in those golden years. The much celebrated Malayalam movie song by S. Ramesan Nair, “Poomukha vathilkkal sneham vidarthunna poonthinkal aakunnu bhaarya” from the film *Rakkuyilin Raagasadassil*, well explains what a man expects of a wife. It lays bare the cultural scenario of Kerala, where woman is a typical stereotype - an embodiment of self-effacement and self-sacrifice. She is expected to play myriad roles – a wife, mother, mistress, colleague and friend; servile in her duties, goddess in demeanour and gifted with a talent to scorn delights and live laborious days.

Malayalam film songs of the early 1960s have a nostalgic appeal to our sensibilities. The irresistible charm of these golden songs of yesteryears depends, to a large extent, on the representation of femininity and related gender images adopted by the lyricists. For instance, the deliberate silence of his sweetheart moves the lover profoundly and his passionate enquiries to her about her silence are vividly portrayed in the song, “Mindathathu enthe thathe”, written by Abhaya Dev in the movie *Jnanasundari*. The song “Panineer ithal” from the same movie is a charming delineation of the celestial beauty of the hero’s beloved which remains unchanged forever and his deep ‘love does not alter when alteration finds’. In the movie *Randidangazhi* (1958), there is a beautiful song written by Thirunainarkurichi Madhavan Nair - “Thumbappoo peyana poonilaave”, sung by P. Leela and Kamukara Purushothaman in the form of a dialogue between the lovelorn heroine and hero, spiced with a longing for each other and reiterating the fact that they are inseparable. Most of these songs explore how the male lyricists utilise the semiotic codes of power to create structures that find a resonance with male characters and viewers.

The aftermath of the I and II World Wars necessitated a social condition which made it mandatory for all members of the family including women to contribute to the overall income of the family. Such changes in our social setup, made it compulsory for women to have a fertile, physically strong body, able to perform the tasks they are entrusted with. This favoured the image of many a woman with

broad hips and voluptuous figure as this would enable her to be more enticing and hence desirable. Vijayasree, one of the popular heroines of the Malayalam movies of the early sixties and seventies was one such actress who had to suit herself to the above standards of feminine beauty.

The heroes lavishing praises and going into raptures about their love form the leitmotifs in several Malayalam songs. Most of these songs pander to the patriarchal expectations and substantiate the deeply ingrained ideologies that underpin the dominant social order.

Vayalar Rama Varma's philosophical song which compares woman to a tear-drop, "Kannuneer thulliyee sthreeyodupamicha kaavya bhaavane..." (Movie: *Panitheeratha Veedu*, 1973) emphasizes the delicate and gentle demeanour of women and exemplifies the need for sufficient protection and care to be accorded to them. Here Vayalar departs from the usual patriarchal notions of portraying woman as a sexist object. Rather, he acknowledges her as a hapless victim of male machinations and exhorts us to handle her with loving kindness, as she is fragile and precious. But a different tone and tenor is discernible in several other songs penned by Vayalar himself – "Thaazhampoo manamulla thanuppulla raathriyil..." (Movie: *Adimakal*), "Thanka bhasmakuriyitta thampuratti..." (Movie: *Koottukudumbam*), "Sangamam Sangamam..." (Movie: *Thriveni*), "Venna tholkkumudalode..." are a few instances where we witness the delineation of sex-roles being attributed to women. Several lyrics written by the renowned Malayalam lyricist, P. Bhaskaran are an eloquent glorification of the enduring beauty of the heroine through the eyes of an adoring lover. The song "Thaamasamenthe varuvan..." (Movie: *Bhargavinilayam*) invested with an unearthly halo, illustrates the pangs of grief experienced by the lover, his loss and longing for his sweetheart. Here the poet does not objectify woman rather projects her as an integral part of his existence. P. Bhaskaran describes the metamorphosis that a girl child undergoes to a full blown adolescent, in the coming-of-age song "Annu ninte nunakkuzhi thelinjittilla..." (Movie: *Pareeksha*). Sreekumaran Thampi, is known for his captivating songs that abound in exquisite similes as well as alluring imagery, that extol feminine beauty. His enchanting lyrics, "Malayali

penne ninte manassu” (Movie: *Bandhukkal Shathrukka*) “Hridaya sarassile pranayapushpamee...” (Movie: *Paadunna Puzha*), “Utthara swayamvaram...” (Movie: *Danger Biscuit*), “Aval chirichal muthu chitharum...” (Movie: *Vilakku Vaangiya Veena*), Nin maniyarayile (Movie: *CID Nazir*) are expressive of the resplendent beauty of the heroine, transforming her from the mundane to the spiritual, elevating her to a highly glorified state.

Some of the early Malayalam movies like “Chattakkari”, carried with them the colonial remnants and the Anglo-Indian heroine, clad in western outfits bears testimony to the fact that “the male Indian spectator could possess the ‘English’ beauty and in doing so enact a reversal of the power relation that prevailed in British dominated colonial society.” (Hansen, 1998.)

A trail of luminaries such as O. N. V. Kurup, Yousuf Ali Kecheri, Bichu Thirumala, Girish Puthencheri, Kaithapram Damodaran Namboothiri and Poovachal Khader can be blazed out in the annals of Malayalam film songs, whose exhilarating lyrics express the feminine mystique and the erotics of female sexuality in a manner, truly alluring. A few striking examples such as O. N. V. Kurup’s “Poykayil Kulirpoykayil...” (Movie: *Rajashilpi*) and “Areyum bhava gayakanakkum...” (Movie: *Nakhakshathangal*) expound on the entrancing physical beauty and exquisite grace of the heroines. Bichu Thirumala’s romantic songs “Penninte chenchundil punchiri poothu...” (Movie: *Guruji Oru Vaakku*), “Vaaka poo maram...” (Movie: *Anubhavam*), Girish Puthencheri’s evergreen songs, “Nilavinte neelabhasma kuri aninjavale...” (Movie: *Agnideavan*), “Vaidoorya kammalaninju...” (Movie: *Ee Puzhayum Kadannu*), Kaithapram’s passionate songs “Vannathi puzhayude theerathu...” (Movie: *Kaliyattam*), “Enikkoru pennundu...” (Movie: *Thilakkam*), Poovachal Khader’s captivating songs, “Ithiri naanam pennin kavilil...” (Movie: *Thammil Thammil*), “Neela vana cholayil...” (Movie: *Premabhishekam*) are a few songs which express femininity in its different manifestations. Special mention has to be made about Yousuf Ali Kecheri’s unique song, “Saamaja Sancharini...” (Movie: *Parinayam*), written in Sanskrit and noted for its bewitching imagery and description of entrancing female beauty. His enchanting creations

of breathtaking beauties in “Suruma ezhuthiya mizhikale...” (*Khadija*) and “Anuragalola gaathri...” (Movie: *Dhwani*) endear themselves to us by virtue of their rare felicity of expression.

Religion and mythology have inspired many women characters in Malayalam cinema whereby women are portrayed as the embodiment of chastity, virtue and values. The image of women as Sita or Savitri is repeatedly evoked in many films like ‘Vatsalyam’ (directed by Cochin Haneefa) especially in the post- independence period . Many songs falling under ‘vadakkan pattukal’ (ballads of the north), present a number of brave and valorous women, who put up strong resistance against opposing forces. Even though they are a class apart, the songs are affluent in sensual imagery, voicing forth their femininity and essential womanhood. K. Jayakumar in his immortal song “Chandanalepa sugandham...” (Movie: *Oru Vadakkan Veeraghaadha*), presents the hero, baffled by the ethereal beauty of Unniarcha, his ‘goddess of idolatry’ and dwells upon her radiating elegance and unparalleled feminine beauty.

The mesmerizing femme fatale, is integral to certain Malayalam movies in which the male protagonist is often caught in the web woven by such attractive, deadly women. Through the femme fatale, the ambition, vengefulness and inherent sexuality are well brought out and the eerie atmosphere that she creates holds the audience spellbound. The trope is intended as a cautionary tale, making her powerful, seductive and dangerous spinning her male victims into fatal ruin. In consequence of the changes taking place in cinema and society at large, a radical change came over in the representation of the femme fatale, with the result that the archetype is recast in much more exciting ways. “Nizhalaayi...” by Bichu Thirumla (Movie: *Kalliyankaattu Neeli*), “Chandrodayathile...” by Vayalar (Movie: *Yakshi*), “Nisheedhini...” by Vayalar (Movie: *Yakshaganam*), “Puthumazhayaayi” by S. Ramesan Nair (Movie: *Aakaashaganga*) are a few songs that bring out the various manifestations of the femme fatale and a few of them even provide scope for female -centric stories that are not based on misogynistic stereotypes.

A remarkable transition is visible in the lyrics of the modern commercial movies, where lyricists are often constrained to compare women to random objects of everyday life. Some of these songs depict the Malayalam movie industry's growing fetishization of women's bodies, making ludicrous comparisons that are often irrational and illogical. This fact is quite evident in songs like "Pineapple penne chocolate piece..." (Movie: *Vellinakshathram*), "Paalilitta panchasara chaya neeye..." (Movie: *Maniyarayile Ashokan*), "Oru vandu thinna poovoruthi..." (Movie: *Super Saranya*) and so on.

From Submissiveness to Resistance

The new generation films in Malayalam industry no longer portray woman as a caged bird, no longer shy and timid, but formidable, valorous and ready to brave hardships. Contrary to the earlier songs that contain images and metaphors that describe women as fragile beings, there are a few songs which portray them as embodiments of vengeance and fury. *22 Female Kottayam* presents a heroine who is strong, capable of resistance, no longer gentle and passive. She is a new woman, who has the mettle to ruin her oppressors – no longer a caged bird but a liberated self, coming out of her cocoon, with a strong will and determination. Swapna Gopinath and Sony Jalarajan (2015) in their essay, *Gender Construct as a Narrative and Text: The Female Protagonist in New Generation Malayalam Cinema* say:

22 Female Kottayam has an unconventional protagonist who doesn't regret the loss of virginity. She seems confident and comfortable with her sexuality, freely discussing sexual encounters. Notions of morality are dismissed, but when she is raped and confronted with sexual trauma, she takes the route that patriarchy expects of a woman: she objectifies her body, exploiting men's sexual interest in order to take revenge on her abusers. She becomes a willing victim in order to reach her goal. (p. 3)

The song "Melle kollum manjum pollum penne..." (Lyricist: R. Venugopal) shows a vindictive heroine who becomes the killer. The use of words like 'kanal', 'paka', 'krodham', etc. exemplifies the fact that she is not just the creator but the destroyer. In this song, the lyricist also uses words like 'chiraku' and 'thelivaanam' to show the

freedom and the spirit of independence that she has acquired. She is no more fettered by the forces that imperil her freedom and she has liberated herself emotionally, physically and sentimentally. The song “Mekhathirumakalude paka...” (Lyricist: B.K.Harinarayanan) from the movie *Puthiya Niyamam* illustrates the fury of an avenging woman, physically and mentally wounded, who is bent upon retaliating the perpetrators who have eroded her self-respect and brought an affront to her integrity.

Conclusion

The movie songs in Malayalam are so diverse and numerous that it will be a hard task to explore all the myriad aspects and nuances that go into the making of them, especially those related to femininity and womanhood. In most of the songs, the heroines are moulded in such a way as to conform to the standards of beauty and behaviour, prescribed by patriarchal hegemonic structures. As such the heroines comply with the romantic ideal of beauty - with fluttering eyelids and timid gait, giving shape to the myth of the Malayali women. The creation of the feminine myths in the cinema camouflages the sexism latent in them and an invisible web is woven around the women restricting and limiting them. Despite the fact that feminists all over the world disapprove of the prescriptions and prohibitions for femininity, promoted by the phallocratic culture which insists that women should be petite, demure, receptive and above all attractive, Malayalam cinema operates on the language of a patriarchal capitalist economy. Even though a large number of popular Malayalam songs reveal a high level of gender role stereotyping, there are a few others which mark a turning point. “She flouts tradition, seeks to imitate western women... drinks, smokes, visits night club, is quick to fall out of love.... portrayed as a morally degraded person... unacceptable for her behaviour.... punished for it” (Gokul Singh and Dissanayake, 1998, p. 79). By means of economic independence and academic excellence, women are capable of self assertion and defiance of male domination. They stand steadfastly for what they think right, without being obsessed by patriarchal demands. It is a welcome change that many directors and lyricists of Malayalam film industry do away with the pleasures of the

male gaze and take a strong stand against the growing fetishization of entertainment, in an attempt to overthrow patriarchal ideologies.

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Dr. Vidya Rajagopal

Associate Professor

PG Department of English

NSS College, Pandalam

Pathanamthitta District, Kerala

Pin : 689501

Ph: +91 9745605589

Email: vidyarajagopal40@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0002-9630-8159