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Empowering Narratives and Unveiling Realities: Breast Positivity in Cinema Through *B32 Muthal 44 Vare*

**Muneera K T
Mithula Thomas**

The female body and its performative signifiers of identity were sites of conflicts and subjects of contention throughout history. It acts as a representative surface upon which the discourses and conflicting ideologies of the social context are inscribed. Within the human body, the Breast is a part that is stigmatized and sexualized in multiple ways. Shruthi Sharanayam's *B32 Muthal 44 Vare* (2023) is an exploration of individual experiences and the diverse meanings associated with breasts and it underscores the importance of acknowledging and empathizing with the trauma and violence that individuals may have experienced. This research paper seeks to contribute to a more inclusive and empowering cultural landscape by promoting diverse representations of women's bodies and narratives, challenging societal norms and expectations, and shedding light on the harmful impact of media objectification on women's experiences and self-perceptions.

Keywords: Breasts, Media, Identity, Body positivity, inclusivity.

Introduction

Female breasts bear a multitude of symbolic meanings, encompassing motherhood, fertility, beauty, femininity, desirability, and sensuality, and these interpretations vary across different cultures and contexts. The remarkable act of nourishing and sustaining infants with essential nutrition through breastfeeding is consistently regarded with

awe. During puberty, this body part becomes the symbolic marker of a girl's transition to womanhood. For transgender individuals, the presence or absence of breasts can be a significant aspect of their gender identity. In art, literature, and media, breasts are depicted more often as the objects of desire where all the male gazes are fixed upon. In some contexts, women have embraced their breasts as symbols of empowerment and self-confidence to resist and challenge the dominant cultural meanings and expectations. Historical evidence is there to understand that, even in Kerala, women used their breasts to protest against the injustice that prevailed. In the early 19th century, an Ezhava woman named Nangeli was believed to have cut off her breasts to protest against a tax called *mulakkaram* (breast tax). In those days, lower caste women were not allowed to cover their upper body by the state law. Upon being chased by the tax collectors for covering the chest, Nangeli cut off both her breasts and presented them to the collectors on a plantain leaf (Arya, 2016). Even after the emergence of feminist politics, feminists use their breasts to establish political statements. Bra burning¹ and Free the Nipple² movement are some examples. Hence, on many levels, breasts are associated with many meanings and significances. Across cultures and periods, these meanings changed and also evolved as new conversations emerged on body and gender.

Art, fashion, and media often use the body to convey messages, sell products, and communicate societal ideals. The portrayal of bodies in these contexts is often laden with symbolism and meaning. Popular culture, especially cinema, often reflects and reinforces prevailing social norms, values, and beliefs and is capable of influencing the ideologies, perspectives, and lifestyles of the audience. Cinema has a major role in the objectification and sexualization of the female body by introducing a dehumanizing treatment of women on the screen. While discussing mainstream cinema, the term 'male gaze' is often used to refer to the way women are portrayed from a heterosexual male perspective and to identify the dynamics of power imbalances and unequal gender roles. In cinema, the female breast is depicted purely in the form of objectification. In some movies, there are female characters who use their half-revealing breasts to entice the hero

which has nothing to do with the plot. The camera never forgets to zoom in on the breasts to invite more attention from the viewers. Such movies objectify the female breasts by focusing on and exaggerating them for titillation purposes. Seldom movies explore body image issues, including how society's expectations impact women's self-esteem.

The film *B 32 Muthal 44 Vare (From B32 to 44)* received widespread acclamation for dealing with one of the most sensitive subjects of the day, breast-shaming. This debut film of Shruthi Sharanyam is produced in collaboration with the Kerala State Film Development Corporation (KSFDC) initiative to fund women filmmakers. The title implies different breast sizes, 32 being the smallest and 44 the largest. There are six poignant characters out of which five are women and a transman. Each character is introduced with a text plate where their names and bra sizes are written. The common factor among all these characters is that their body, especially their breast becomes a root cause of their daily struggles. Though all of them belong to different strata of society and age groups, they live in and around a specific geographical location and meet each other in the course of the story. Through the movie, Shruthi attempts to address how female breasts play a significant role in one's personal and professional lives adding trauma and anxiety to the bearers. The primary objective of this paper is the textual analysis of the movie *B 32 Muthal 44 Vare* in terms of its portrayal of a topic, and to understand how Shruthi makes it clear that for women the breast is not merely a body part but a site of oppression. It also investigates the need for creating a more inclusive space for breast positivity.

Breast and shame

Shweta Taneja in her 2015 published article *Three Breasts and Their Stories* writes,

I had attended a theatre workshop some years back, women only, where the lady conducting it asked all of us to hide our body part which represented the word 'shame'. All of us, Indian, speaking different languages, put hands across our breasts.

It is true that women, at some parts in their lives, become secretly ashamed of their own breasts. They desire for a more symmetric, perfectly shaped breast that is neither too large nor too small. The reasons behind it include the objectification of breasts through the media, the beauty standards, comparison with others, lack of confidence and also responses from the dear ones.

Objectification of the female body dates back from the ancient age and still remains in the form of arts and paintings. Majority of the historical places in India have millions of sexualized paintings and sculptures in the form of damsels and goddesses. Also, our patriarchal ancestors were so keen on illustrating the ideal model of feminine beauty through various art forms. This struggle of women to keep up with the so-called beauty standards of the society dates back from ancient times. In the Victorian age, adhering to the strict emphasis on modesty, women wore clothes that covered most of their body. Corsets were an important element of the era and these tight-fitting garments were designed to create an hourglass figure. This extremely restrictive and uncomfortable style was a tool for reinforcing women's role as modest and virtuous. Women's bodies were constantly subjected to surveillance and scrutiny, and any deviation from the fixed norms results in discrimination and shaming because women's bodies were always a symbol of culture and tradition. Luna Dolezal writes,

Despite the invisibility of women as social subjects, the physical aspect of female bodies has traditionally been subject to heightened scrutiny; women are expected to maintain their form, appearance, and comportment within strictly defined social parameters, or else face stigmatization and the loss of social capital. (Dolezal, 2010, p. 357)

So, women are conscious about their body on every level. In his *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger notes, "A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continuously accompanied by her own image of herself" (Berger, 1972, p. 46). Women, thus become surveyors of themselves. When they feel that their bodies do not measure up to the existing unrealistic beauty standards, it can result in self-criticism. The constant pressure to conform to certain beauty

norms can contribute to mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and eating disorders. Women may resort to extreme dieting, excessive exercise, or other harmful behaviours to try to achieve these standards. Breast is such a body part which most women are insecure about. The size, colour, and the shape of the breasts cause feelings of inadequacy for a woman. Flat or large, breasts are stigmatised and sexualised by the society. Hence, women tend to take measures such as injections or padded bras to reduce or enlarge the size of the breasts. The beauty industry often profits from these unrealistic standards by selling products and services that promise to help women meet their ideal body images. This can place financial burdens on individuals and perpetuate the cycle of unattainable beauty.

The patriarchal men see breasts as sexually stimulating and they turn their gaze towards women with larger breasts. The instance in the beginning of the movie of a school boy asking Ziya, a transman, to touch his female breasts and Rachel's experience from the director also show how men are curious about the opposite gender's breasts. They do not find it inappropriate to touch their body without consent. One of Malini's friends, in a gathering, talks about girls in the dance bar and their boobs. Men always perceive women as the other and are channelized through their body. Butler argues that masculinity

seeks to safeguard its own disembodied status through identifying women generally with the bodily sphere. Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities. If women *are* their bodies (to be distinguished from "existing" their bodies, which implies living their bodies as projects or bearers of created meanings), if women are only their bodies, if their consciousness and freedom are only so many disguised permutations of bodily need and necessity, then women have, in effect, exclusively monopolized the bodily sphere of life. By defining women as "other", men are able through the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies – a symbol potentially of human decay and transience, of limitation generally - and to make their bodies other than themselves. (Butler, 1987, p. 133)

In a relationship, sexual stimulation is always a woman's duty. In the movie, Iman remembers a past incident when she was humiliated on her first night of marriage. When she could not fulfill the needs of her partner with her small-sized breasts, she was rebuked by him and the marriage broke. A similar situation has happened with the other character Malini too. She was diagnosed with breast cancer and her breasts were removed through a surgery. Her partner could not accept her new physique and the intimacy was lost. When Vivek tries to become a supportive partner by doing household chores, he forgets to find some quality time for his wife. This takes a toll on their relationship though Malini bravely fights her mental agony. It's important to challenge these harmful attitudes and expectations. Healthy relationships should be built on mutual respect, love, and acceptance, rather than placing the burden of fulfilling specific physical ideals on one partner. Partners should support one another in their journey of self-acceptance and well-being, understanding that changes in the body over time should not impact the love and emotional bond they share.

Both Iman and Malini are dissatisfied with their bodily features. Malini and Iman standing in front of the mirror looking at their chest at the beginning of their stories show how they are dissatisfied and ashamed of their breasts. This mirror scene happens in every common man's life. Mirrors reflect reality, yet people often criticize themselves and their bodies for not meeting societal standards. It is in front of the mirror in her bathroom that she takes out her heavily padded bra after returning from the outdoors. For Iman, the mirror in the workplace shows her inability to make professional growth due to her very small breasts in spite of her hardwork and experience in the same industry. Iman chooses to take pills to enlarge her breasts, possibly driven by societal pressures or a belief that having larger breasts will improve her living situation or self-esteem. This decision can be seen as a response to external influences that have made her feel inadequate due to her natural body shape. Malini thinks of doing prosthetic surgery, which is a more invasive and permanent procedure compared to pills but she never does it. Like Iman, she may believe that altering her body will enhance her life or self-worth. Some women

would go for silicon injections and heavily padded bras also as alternatives to look bigger. Surgery is a more drastic measure and can be associated with a desire for a specific body image. Women do all these to achieve the patriarchy-constructed feminine ideal.

Ziya's approach to finding ways to reduce his breast size suggests a desire for a more comfortable and authentic relationship with his body. He seeks to align his body with his own sense of self and comfort, rather than external standards. Ziya is a trans person who was assigned female at birth but identifies as male and is in the initial stage of transformation where the breasts are a burden in the process of attaining freedom. Ziya tightly wraps the breasts to hide them though it is very much uncomfortable and suffocating for him. He is also taking hormones because his voice and facial hairs started to look like a man's. He knows that it is not his choice. Ziya is staying at a ladies hostel as no hostels for trans people exist. Ziya and Iman are two different personalities; Ziya is bold enough to deal with the consequences of her decisions whereas Iman is highly considerate and modest in her living until she witnesses a crime at her workspace. Although she was asked to ignore it by her senior colleagues, she accompanies Rachel, the victim to the police station. The male constable asks him to elaborate the whole incident. In the F.I.R, he writes, "... he touched my breast forcefully and I felt a strong pain" (01:19:46-01:19:48). Rachel furiously replies that she did not feel any pain. The very people who are supposed to safeguard the welfare of the society try to nullify the case. The female constable accuses Rachel of her profession and her dressing. This is not an isolated case. Often, the patriarchal society has a tendency to favour men and deny any respect for the victim. Rachel's friend, Sharan, also supports her abuser in spite of the violations that she has suffered.

In addition, one's employment could also be predicted on breast size. Iman is constantly denied her promotion because of her relatively smaller breasts though she has adequate experience in the hospitality sector. Leena, her lady boss, tells Iman that she does not have the bodily aesthetics which the industry requires. The importance of breast size in the hospitality sector is subjective and varies based on cultural and individual preferences. It is more important to focus on

professionalism, skills, and abilities rather than physical attributes. On the other hand, Jaya received the offer for modelling only because of her dark, large breasts. In the movie, she is introduced as the woman with the largest breast. Vivek understands that Jaya's large, dark breasts will sell in the market as it is unique idea to project natural big breasts for the lingerie shoot. It is important to understand how the corporate world sells and rejects women's bodies rather than noticing the talent these women have. A woman must look sexually appealing on the billboards and tv screens. On the contrary, if she is your mother, sister, daughter or wife, this is a complete taboo. Women in the household are supposed to cover their breasts without a slight show of their cleavage in public. Jaya's bedridden husband, Joseph, agreed on doing the photoshoot for a lingerie advertisement and happily took the money out of it because he needed money for paying his debts. But when people started questioning about her photos on the billboard, his male ego rose and could not tolerate the shame. With the help of Ziya, a professional photographer, Jaya takes up modelling as a career confidently and passionately. She finally got her liberation from the patriarchal ties and for once in her life, she started taking decisions of her own without seeking others' opinions.

Nidhi is first introduced as she runs from her class to the washroom to squeeze away the overflowing milk from her breasts. Nidhi is from a wealthy family and they moved to this place very recently. Though Nidhi's past life is not mentioned in the movie in detail, it is shown that she recently had a child. Her life was kept a secret by her parents and therefore she had to go along with the flow. The infant is introduced as Nidhi's younger sister to the visitors. While at home, her mother did not allow her to breastfeed her own kid though she really wanted to do it. She pumps her breast milk to a bottle and her mother feeds it to the infant. Though she is a minor girl, Nidhi had a mother in her. And her parents denied her motherhood and harassed her for her past doings.

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) talks about the transformation of a woman's breasts from an erotic object to a source of life after the birth of a child, from a sexual object of desire to a biologically functioning organ providing nourishment for life. In the movie, Nidhi's overflowing

breasts can be associated with motherhood and nurturing. In her case, her parents deny both the mother and the infant a basic right. Other than this, many societies have sexualized them to the point that breastfeeding in public can be met with discomfort or even condemnation. This sexualization can make it challenging for women to breastfeed openly and comfortably. *Grihalakshmi*, a Kerala magazine in its issue of March 2018, featured the picture of poet-actor Gilu Joseph breastfeeding on the cover page. The headline said, “Mums tell Kerala: don’t stare – we need to breastfeed”. Their intention was to spread awareness on breastfeeding and to tackle the stigmas associated with it when it is done in a public space. A writ petition was filed against the magazine stating that the picture was “obscene”. But the Kerala High Court refused to identify the picture as obscene and it does not see anything objectionable in the caption also. Breastfeeding stigma is a significant issue that many women face. It relates to societal discomfort and negative attitudes towards breastfeeding in public or for extended periods. This stigma can discourage women from breastfeeding, impacting their ability to provide optimal nutrition for their babies. It is important to promote understanding and support for breastfeeding mothers. In the movie, the breastfeeding scene is shot very aesthetically and no staring eyes are shown in the frame.

The final scene is pivotal as Iman is addressing a group of school students and when she enquires what they understood by gender, a boy answers that breasts are what discriminates people into different genders. This scene emphasizes the lack of sexual education and gender awareness in our society. The poignant message incurred from the movie is that body shaming or per se breast shaming is a recurrent practice even today. The movie touches different areas including male gaze, child abuse, rape, influence of media and fashion, domestic abuse and abuse at the work space. It is alarming to note that breast shaming occurs from the same gender too as in the case of Iman’s encounter with her colleague and the lady constable at the Police station. It is well understood that the movie aims to bring the reality and the severity of this issue in its utmost raw state. In the movie, different types of breasts appear with different stories. In each

story, they metaphorically and literally become sources of nourishment and of pleasure, as markers of identity, self-esteem, pain and/or loss, and variously as instruments of exploitation, control, stereotyping, assertion and agency.

Understanding the Need to Breast Normalization and Education

While translating and introducing *Breast Stories* (2018) by Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes that the writer will continue to write on the subject “for the breast is indeed a powerful part object, permitting the violent coming-into-being of the human on the uncertain cusp of nature and culture” (p. xiii). Within a human body, the breast becomes a site of struggle, violence and trauma because it is endangered by the socio-cultural hegemonic forces. Though they are just physical attributes, they leave deep psychological wounds in the minds. The commodification of breasts influences women and how they feel about their own bodies resulting in body image dissatisfaction. What is frequently overlooked is that many women find themselves preoccupied with body-related concerns, diverting their attention from pursuing their aspirations and dreams. Bordo points out that since women must spend so much time managing their bodies in order to achieve an artificial feminine ideal, they are diverted from other, more important, concerns, resulting in “bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (1993, p. 166). In order to put an end to this, a group of students in Amsterdam compiled a booklet of photographs of their naked breasts and called it ‘Boobie Bible’. Their intention was to show the world how imperfect a pair of breasts can be in spite of the perfect sized and shaped images they see on the visual media. It is important to understand that, for all genders, breast size becomes just one aspect of a person’s multifaceted identity rather than a defining factor.

Self-acceptance and support-seeking are two effective tools when you are confronted for your body image as seen in the film. Here, Iman always had Ziya to support her as a good mentor while Malini did not give in when her marital life sank. She lost her breasts

due to cancer. But more than the disease, her partner's indifference weakened her. And later both of these characters do not care about anything related to their body as they start accepting themselves. Being a financially independent woman, Malini could have easily gone for a breast surgery to regain her physique and love but she chose to leave her meaningless marriage and to be a foster parent to Nidhi and the infant. Iman is also shown throwing her pills, breast pads and cosmetics to a dustbin. They completely accepted their body and its differences. Ziya is the most self-assured person among all the characters in the movie. He accepts everything about his body and wants to change it into a male body. He tightly binds his developed chest and takes medications to reduce it. He might be having many discomforts due to all these efforts to be a man, but is not exaggerated or not shown in a sympathetic way. Ziya's story motivates the audience to help and support such marginalized people and to respect their choices. Though Ziya's space is intruded by a minor boy in the beginning, later he is shown doing his job in a comfortable place along with accepting colleagues and friends. It is Ziya that convinces Iman not to take pills to enlarge her breasts and he also gives confidence to Jaya to pursue a modelling career. Even the sexual chemistry he has with Iman is also an instance of normalisation Shruthi has brought into her frame. Often the stories of trans people are tragic in the end but Shruthi has given the character of Ziya a beautiful love life where he is happy and independent. So, this story of Ziya is a departure from the pattern set by the mainstream industry.

These scenarios highlight how different individuals may respond to body dissatisfaction or the perception that their bodies do not meet certain standards. It is important to recognize that people have agency over their bodies, and their choices regarding body modifications can be deeply personal and complex. The broader conversation about body image should encompass understanding and respecting these choices, while also addressing the societal pressures that contribute to such decisions. Ultimately, promoting self-acceptance, body positivity, and autonomy over one's body is essential for individuals to make choices that align with their own well-being and self-identity. Recognizing the impact of these standards and challenging

them is crucial for promoting healthier and more inclusive attitudes towards women's bodies. Encouraging self-acceptance and promoting a more realistic and diverse representation of beauty can contribute to improved mental and physical well-being for women and all individuals. Media literacy, critical thinking, and open dialogues about these issues can help contribute to more balanced and respectful portrayals of women in popular culture. These collective efforts can promote healthier relationships and empower individuals to embrace their bodies as they are, rather than feeling the need to conform to unrealistic and harmful standards. The push for greater diversity in fashion and advertising, as well as the promotion of body positivity and self-acceptance, is gradually making strides in redefining beauty standards. However, there is still work to be done to create a more inclusive and realistic representation of women in the media.

Women writing about women

In the world of women written by men and the normalised objectification of the female body, women need to represent themselves realistically. Because, most of the time, they are not given proper representation or not given a chance to share their own stories. They are treated as “invisible” in the patriarchal system. Their stories are considered trivial or meaningless just because of their gender and socio-economic status. Shruthi, in her movie *B 32 Muthal 44 Vare*, has beautifully and naturalistically removed the erotic aspect of the female body and there is no scope for active male gaze. She believed that it is important for a woman to talk for herself, it is important for a woman to talk about other women rather than listening and watching what men have to offer. If men naturalised and normalised the female body rather than using them as vehicles for sexual and scopophilic gratification, the world would have been a much better place for women to live in. Shruthi emphasized the fact that the body is not merely a source of pleasure for us. She gives her characters a voice of their own. Through each story, she is stating her perspectives and ideologies without preaching. If through Ziya she is representing a trans person in a very realistic way, Jaya's empowerment shows lingerie modeling is not a stigma but it is only a decent profession. Malini and Iman depict the need for body positivity. Rachel is not

shown as a weeping victim but a strong fighting survivor. Through Nidhi, she advocates for providing children a better environment in their parents' home. Sruthi does not romanticize or glorify the pain and sufferings they underwent. These are stories of resistance by each one of the women and the purpose of this movie is to change the world.

The ratio of female filmmakers to male filmmakers is very low due to the unwelcoming situation in the film industry. Promoting women filmmakers like Shruthi will help in broadening the feminist textual analysis and give an opportunity for creating more cultural and historical value for women's works. Film criticism has become an outdated one, yet when the movies are brought to theatres from a feminist perspective, it motivates the public in understanding the inequalities and marginalization faced by women in the most realistic form and at the same time it offers a political and aesthetic appeal to the visual culture. Indeed, Shruthi deconstructs the harmful narratives that are perpetuated through the media. In the movie, the breast becomes a symbol of exploitation, torture, suffering, motherhood, and identity. In the course of the movie, it transforms into a metaphor of power, freedom and resistance.

Conclusion

All breasts are different, so the stories of trauma and violence they undergo are also different. For human beings, the breast is not only a part of the body, but it is also where their identity lies. Their experiences, perceptions related to it are varied and the meaning they associate with their body also changes along with time and contexts. It is important to acknowledge these individual differences and experiences in order to understand and empathise with the victims. Offering effective support and providing resources for healing are essential. Promoting a positive body image involves fostering self-acceptance, self-compassion, and a healthy attitude towards one's own body. This can be achieved through various means, such as education, self-reflection, psychological counselling, and support from friends and family. The importance of this kind of education on gender and body is emphasized by the director throughout *B 32 Muthal 44*

Vare. Through the explicit portrayal of universal problems including breast shaming and societal taboos have conveyed the director's stance on the same. The movie seeks attention to the subject to attain a serious change towards a more body positive and inclusive society.

Notes

1. Bra burning became a mythical incident in the history of feminist liberation movement in the 1960s. To protest against the Miss America pageant, a group of women gathered in Atlantic City with a 'freedom trash can'. The objective was to throw things that oppress women in the patriarchal system into the bin and to burn it. News was spread post the event as some protesters threw their bras in the trash cans. The term 'bra-burners' was permanently associated with feminism after this protest.
2. Free the nipple movement is a campaign designed in 2012 to normalise women appearing topless in the public. The filmmaker Lina Esco initiated the campaign in the New York City as a part of the pre-production of her movie with the same name. Many protesters supported her by exposing their bare chests except for pieces of tape over their nipples.

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