

Themes and Representation of Gendered Expression in Women-Centric Malayalam Cinema from 2018–2022

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ABSTRACT

The Hema Committee report released on August 19, 2024 spotlights systemic discrimination, harassment, exploitation, and the overall working conditions of women in the Malayalam film industry. The committee was formed in response to a 2017 assault case involving a well-known Malayalam actress. The findings of the committee are being referred to as the #MeToo moment of the Malayalam film industry. Popular culture and cinema are often described as a mirror to society, reflecting and influencing existing gender roles, norms, expectations, stereotypes, and the position of women. Kerala, a state otherwise known for its high literacy rate and encouraging development indicators, recognized as a progressive society on gender parameters, is not indifferent to gender inequality. In this light, the present study examines how gender issues find expression in regional cinema, i.e., Malayalam films. Five women-centric films from 2018–2022 were chosen to analyse prevalent themes and representations that the cinematic discourse brings to its audience as far as gender issues are concerned. *Aami* (2018), *Prathi Poovankozhi* (2019), *Vaanku* (2020), *Sara's* (2021), and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) were analysed employing narrative techniques, looking at 'film as narrative' (Speidel, 2012). These films, with female protagonists involved in crisis resolution without help from male characters, passed the Bechdel test (1985), a criterion designed to measure the lack of female agency and gender inequality in Hollywood films. Regional cinema offers a powerful narrative to challenge existing discourse on gender in Indian society. Malayalam cinema is popularly perceived as progressive in its depiction of women. Despite criticism in the past, recent developments such as the formation of Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in 2017 propelled more realistic, humane, and balanced portrayals of women. This study, by exploring the contemporary landscape of Malayalam films through women characters, offers a picture of themes presented, agency of women characters, voice given to women's issues, and narratives deployed to represent them. The research reflects

on whether women-centric Malayalam films challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms. This comprehensive analysis highlights a dynamic cinematic landscape that attempts to be diverse, inclusive, and further the cause of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Bechdel test, films, gender, Malayalam cinema, narrative, women

Introduction

Cinema is an instrument that mirrors societal dynamics through enthralling visuals and storytelling. Films offer a lens to inspect and grasp the intricate interplay of elements within a cultural context (Rocha & Pottlitzer, 1970). Cinema provides profound insights into the multifaceted nature of societal dynamics and the representation of themes related to various facets of human existence, including the understanding of gender roles, stereotypes, and gender empowerment. Examining the representation of gender in cinema is of great significance since cinema as a medium both reflects and shapes societal norms. Analysing how different genders are portrayed on screen offers valuable insights and contributes to identifying prevalent gender norms, stereotypes, and biases (Butalia, 1984). Such analyses form a solid foundation for advocating and nurturing more diverse, equitable, and inclusive cinematic narratives that offer a wide range of representation to lived experiences. Cinematic narratives and their influence possess the potential to either support or challenge societal expectations regarding gender roles. The relationship between films and societies is a complex one, and it is essential to understand the interplay between the two. Recognition of the fact that cinema as popular culture serves not only as a soft power tool but also shapes audiences' views and perspectives on many societal issues can guide storytellers, creators, directors, producers, and artists in directions that foster authentic representations, thereby contributing to a more diverse cultural environment, especially in the Indian milieu (Bose, 2002).

Kerala: A State of 'Paradox'

According to the *Gender Statistics (2017–18)* report, Kerala is renowned for its impressive socio-economic milestones such as the highest literacy rate (93.91%), a life expectancy of 74 years, and an admirable sex ratio of 1084 females per 1000 males. Despite maintaining a lower

per capita income, the state stands out with the highest score on the gender development index and a remarkably low maternal mortality rate of 53.59 per 100,000, significantly below the national average of 178.35. The gender gap in literacy in Kerala has been declining and the state has reached near equality in youth literacy for men and women (Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Kerala, 2019). However, the state also presents an intriguing paradox. While praised for its human development model, Kerala is not exempt from scrutiny, exposing imperfections. Despite having the highest wage rates in India, the state grapples with gender wage disparity. Sreekumar (2007) refers to this as the ‘gender paradox’, whereby positive socio-demographic indicators of women’s development exist simultaneously with their low public participation and the increasing incidences of violence upon them. His study argues about two divergent descriptions of contemporary Kerala—utopia and dystopia. Thus, despite significant progress, the state navigates several accomplishments and challenges on its journey to gender equality. It is in this context that the present study examines themes of gender in women-centric Malayalam films, since cinema emerges as a crucial public site for the expression of societal dynamics.

Malayalam Cinema and the Trajectory of Women

The fate of the industry’s very first actress was tragic and highlights the struggle of being a woman and choosing cinema and acting as a profession. P. K. Rosy, a Dalit woman, was a victim of patriarchal forces and caste discrimination. She dared to become the first actress of Malayalam cinema, playing the role of a high-caste Nair in her only film, *Vigathakumaran* (1928), which further sparked controversy as she was kissed by the male lead on the flower kept in her hair. The backlash eventually led her to flee her hometown, from Thiruvananthapuram, to seek safety in Tamil Nadu. Rosy’s life was an example of the harsh realities of moral and sexual policing, both on and off screen. It is noted that in earlier decades, women characters in Malayalam cinema were more often individualistic, powerful, and likely to be portrayed as persons with independent thoughts and actions (Usha, 2004). This has changed with contemporary cinema, as Malayalam actresses have voiced their frustration over the lack of strong roles. Opinions have been voiced that they are frequently portrayed in roles of loving mothers, dutiful wives, or obedient daughters. They are also typecast into negative portrayals of mean mothers-in-law and selfish daughters who side with mercenary husbands against their

families. This stereotyped narrative often punishes mean characters while rewarding virtuous ones, mostly through the happiness of their loved ones. Women in Malayalam cinema are rarely consulted for their opinions and are expected to agree with male-centric views over their own thoughts (Pradeep & Kumar, 2020).

Recently, the formation of Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in 2017 is believed to have brought about a transformation in the industry regarding issues such as workspace conditions, gender pay gap, and other concerns faced by women professionals. The Hema Committee report released on August 19, 2024 is further evidence of the working conditions of women in the industry. The committee was formed in response to an assault case (2017) involving a well-known Malayalam actress. The investigations have revealed the persistence of practices like sexual demands made to women seeking entry into the industry, sexual harassment, various forms of abuse and assault, discrimination in remuneration, and lack of basic safeguard mechanisms for women in the industry, highlighting an absence of safety and security (Bisht, 2024). This has brought the Malayalam cinema landscape into the limelight.

Related Literature

Several research studies on the portrayal of women in Malayalam films were reviewed for this paper. A summary of the scholarly discourse on the subject is presented in this section.

Krishna (2023), in *Representation of Women in Malayalam Cinema*, delves into the reasons behind the confinement of women in the Malayalam film industry to a specific genre, while identifying instances of nuanced female representation by analysing two films—*Rani Padmini* (2015) and *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012). The researcher concludes that while both films ostensibly aim to empower female characters, a closer examination using narrative inquiry and discourse analysis reveals a consistent fall into male-centric interpretations of feminism. Both films represent efforts to empower women on screen; however, their execution reveals significant gaps, highlighting the necessity for more complex and authentic female characters in Malayalam films.

Gopinath and Raj (2015) explore female roles in ‘new-generation’ Malayalam films. They define ‘new generation films’ as those that represent a departure from the region’s conventional style.

Their research investigates whether societal change is reflected in female representations or in the definition of ideal womanhood. Four films—*Salt N' Pepper* (2011), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), *Chaappa Kurish* (2011), and *Diamond Necklace* (2012)—were analysed. The study concludes that female characters in these films often break away from traditional archetypes and are depicted as more complex and multi-dimensional. It was observed that these films challenged the conventional concept of ideal womanhood.

A paper titled *Women Empowerment through Women-Centric Movies in Malayalam: A Critical Study 2004–2014* (Johnson & Nivedhitha, 2016) assesses whether movies which often claim to be women-centric and empowering truly empower women or not. It studies the nature of women's empowerment and the issues such films tackle. The researchers observe that some movies do stay true to their claim of being women-empowering. The female characters in select movies express their opinions, desires, and stand up for themselves, thereby being more than just 'eye-candies' on screen. Such female characters actively shape their narratives and influence the plot's direction. The researchers studied Malayalam movies released during 2004–2014. Out of the 1083 films released, only 29 films were women-centric movies and barely eight movies really depicted the theme of women's empowerment.

In another study, Padiyan (2021) analyses visual techniques and the concept of freedom portrayed in twenty-first-century women-centric Malayalam movies. She studies how the idea of women's freedom is strategically used to rush in the feeling of empowerment in women or the lead characters of the films *Rani Padmini* (2015) and *Ramante Edanthottam* (2017), both of which focus on the lives of domesticated women. In *Rani Padmini*, the protagonist is a homemaker whereas in *Ramante Edanthottam*, the female lead is in an arranged marriage. Both films employ visual narration not just for aesthetic pleasure, but also for establishing modern womanhood, wherein visual pleasure is directed towards women. They strategically frame freedom as an achievable and necessary aspect of the female experience, thereby inspiring audiences towards a redefined perception of women's roles and capabilities in society.

Pradeep and Kumar (2020) explore the importance and spatial aspects of physical settings in the narrative trajectory of women in Malayalam cinema, especially in Adoor Gopalakrishnan's movies. Their research seeks to analyse the ways in which female characters navigate and shape

social environments depicted in cinema. It is observed that Gopalakrishnan uses spatial settings to challenge traditional narratives of female passivity. His female characters often engage with their environments in ways that assert their autonomy and resilience. This spatial storytelling creates a layered understanding of women's lived experiences, emphasising both their struggles and strengths within the confines of their social and physical worlds. In the context of Indian cinema, specifically Malayalam films, the use of a spatial perspective is rare and complex in terms of plot development.

In her work *You Are Woman: Arguments with Normative Femininities in Recent Malayalam Cinema*, Rajendran (2014) offers insights into the portrayal of femininity in Malayalam cinema, which in turn provides intriguing perspectives on the dynamics of gender roles in modern Kerala. The researcher defines 'normative femininity' as one that normalises submission to patriarchal and heterosexual norms. The paper argues that in 'classic' Malayalam films (*Chemmeen* (1965), *Neelakkuyil* (1954), *Manichitrathazhu* (1993)), the act of violating a lower-caste woman and the subsequent display of sacrifice and devotion by an upper-caste woman to her husband were used to justify the existence of a child born from rape. A reading of three films in this research (*Trivandrum Lodge* (2012), *Gaddama* (2011), and *22 Female Kottayam* (2012)) is interpreted as addressing and challenging the exclusion of the 'woman question' by portraying female protagonists comfortably occupying roles beyond the private and domestic spheres.

An article in *The Hindu* delves into the evolving depiction of women in Malayalam films. It charts different time spans in the film industry, discussing the portrayal of women from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, with particular emphasis on a shift occurring around 2010, especially post the formation of the WCC (Mathew & Isac, 2021). The author notes that a binary framework has often been used to portray women in Malayalam cinema, where they were depicted as either virtuous caretakers or hypersexualized, uninhibited individuals attempting to seduce the hero. However, films underwent a transformation, transitioning to urban settings with regional slang, portraying characters authentically, and departing from the tradition of idealisation. Additionally, a persistent issue in the Malayalam film industry is that films in the past catered to an audience that celebrated insults to female characters. Today, there have been only subtle changes in women's portrayal, as female characters still tend to be domesticated. Even supposedly feminist characters in recent films reinforce patriarchal values (Najib, 2019).

Rationale and Methodology

The present study builds on wide-ranging academic deliberations on the roles and portrayals of women in Malayalam films by attempting to explore themes and representation of gender in select women-centric Malayalam films from the period 2018 to 2022. The key research questions guiding the study were:

- What kind of themes and representations of gender are found in women-centric Malayalam films released between 2018–2022?
- How do these cinematic narratives contribute to the portrayal and understanding of women’s experiences and identities?

A qualitative and exploratory research design was adopted to answer the above-stated research questions. Such an approach suited the researchers’ aim to uncover complex cinematic narratives underlying select films in order to provide a comprehensive take on contemporary trends in the depiction of women in Malayalam films. This study contributes to an in-depth exploration of the regional cinematic landscape in India, revealing the patterns and shifts in the portrayal of women. The analysis of films was guided by narrative research, a qualitative research methodology in the narrative inquiry tradition that elicits and analyzes stories in order to understand people, cultures, and societies. The knowledge gained through narrative inquiry about individuals and society is narratively constructed and understood through the study of the content and structure of stories (i.e., scripts, texts, visual images) using select narrative elements (Wolgemuth & Agosto, 2019).

Five films were chosen for the study on the basis of the following inclusion-exclusion criteria:

- Films released between 2018–2022
- Films with one or more female protagonists driving the narrative
- Films that successfully cleared the Bechdel test, a widely used set of parameters devised by Alison Bechdel (1985) to measure feminism in movies
- Crisis resolution in the narrative without the male character’s involvement

The films chosen for the study were:

- *Aami* (2018): A movie based on the life of poet-author Kamala Das, widely known by her one-time pen name Madhavikutty, also referred to as the Love Queen of Malabar.
- *Prathi Poovankozhi* (2019): The movie follows the life of an ordinary saleswoman living alone with her mother who seeks revenge on her sexual predator.
- *Vaanku* (2020): The movie is about Raziya, a college student who, as her wish before graduation, wants to sing aloud the *Adhan*, which is traditionally said only by men in Islam.
- *Sara's* (2021): A girl ambitious about her career as an independent filmmaker has already made up her mind not to have children, against societal norms. She finds a like-minded partner in Jeevan.
- *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022): A satire on gender stereotypes, the film follows the life of Jayabharathi, an ambitious middle-class girl who is constantly deprived of control over her own life and is subjected to abusive behaviour.

A coding sheet of the following narrative elements, derived from the literature reviewed for the study, was used to conduct a narrative analysis of the five films to discover insights into gender dynamics and thematic intricacies in Malayalam cinema. The number of films was limited to five owing to constraints of time and resources. Each thematic category in narrative analysis (see Table 1) comprises relevant codes which were well defined and applied to all the five films. A deductive approach to coding, categorization, and thematic explanation can be seen in the analysis.

Table 1: Narrative Analysis Schemata

Narrative Elements	Representation of Women	Voice and Agency
Thematic intricacies, subjects and ideas represented in select films	Ways in which women are portrayed in select films	How female characters express themselves to influence the narrative of the story
rural-urban duality	complex female protagonist	voice in decision making
generational shift	female-centric perspective	empowerment through assertion
unconventional careers	challenging stereotypes	conflict resolution initiative
intersection of love and independence	female friendships and relationships	leadership roles

Narrative Elements	Representation of Women	Voice and Agency
maternal narratives	overcoming adversity	assertiveness in relationships
narrative of self-discovery		independence and autonomy
		advocacy and activism

Conclusion and Discussion

A narrative analysis of the five women-centric films chosen for this study revealed a multifaceted landscape of gender portrayals with diverse themes and storytelling approaches. Out of five films, three (*Sara's*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, and *Vaanku*) prominently feature 'generational shift' as a central theme, showcasing the evolving roles of women and their perspectives across different time periods. This reflects an exploration of changes in society and its impact on female characters. The intersection of love and independence also emerges as a recurring theme (e.g., *Sara's*), wherein the narrative highlights a delicate balance between personal relationships and individual autonomy. Thus, women are no longer defined only through their relationship to another individual but through their identity and autonomy. A narrative of self-discovery is commonly found in these films, depicting female characters undergoing profound personal exploration, breaking away from societal norms, and fulfilling their aspirations. This is necessary as it shows the development of the woman as an individual. All the above-discussed themes bring forth the complexities in women's lives and characters.

All five movies actively challenge gender stereotypes, depicting women characters defying societal norms and expectations and standing up for their rights. In *Sara's*, the lead female character defies motherhood, a duty conventionally expected of a woman. In *Prathi Poovankozhi* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, female protagonists speak out against abuse and discrimination meted out to them. For instance, in *Aami*, the female lead chooses to stay in the new religion she has accepted even though the man for whom she did so rejects her. Kamala Das (*Aami*), Madhuri (*Prathi Poovankozhi*), Sara (*Sara's*), and Jaya (*Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*) use their voice and agency to overcome adversities, thereby challenging traditional archetypes and presenting women as individuals with flaws, growth, and agency. Narratives in these movies are positioned from a female-centric perspective, giving first-hand experience of a woman's life. These films

also actively portray female friendships and relationships in a positive light, giving depth to these relationships and friendships (e.g., in *Vaanku*, Deepa, Jyothi, and Shameena help the protagonist Raziya as true friends). The women, by the end of the narrative, have overcome hurdles by demonstrating determination and strength, which contributes to establishing their identity beyond victimhood.

The theme of voice and agency is prevalent across all films, depicting female characters who evolve from a place of silence or submissiveness to assertiveness and active participation in the decision-making process. This reflects a broader exploration of empowerment through self-expression. Though these characters are not in leadership roles, they take initiatives to solve their own conflicts and assert their position in relationships. Here, *Vaanku* is an exception among the films as the lead character has very few dialogues, as she overcomes her adversities only through actions. For most of the narrative, she is a passive character who lets things happen to her and does not fight back or express her opinions. Findings from the study suggest an evolving and vibrant landscape in women-centric Malayalam cinema from 2018–2022. Themes such as generational shifts, intersection of love and independence, self-discovery, and empowerment of women through voice and agency reflect a progressive cinematic landscape that encourages nuanced representation of women. These films contribute significantly to the broader conversation on gender representation in cinema, portraying women as individuals with agency, resilience, and the capacity for personal growth.

These films provide insights into the shifts taking place in societal expectations but also underscore the filmmakers' commitment to portraying complex and evolving female characters. The portrayal of a fragile balance of love, independence, and personal aspirations that women on screen encounter surpasses simplistic stereotypes that women often find themselves mired in. Women in these films chart their own path, assert themselves beyond social constraints, and challenge gender stereotypes ingrained deeply in women by refusing to fit into boxes set for them by society. The following narratives emerge as highlights of the select films:

- complexities of female characters
- authentic and relatable women characters
- profound understanding of female experiences

- positive portrayal of female friendships
- active participation by women in decision making
- voice and agency as a powerful undercurrent of women characters

Future Research

Future scope for research includes studying a longer time period in Malayalam cinema, such as a decade or two of cinematic representations, to understand the evolution of narratives and themes in the context of gender portrayals in a more comprehensive way. A comparative analysis of the representation of gender in women-centric films in other regional cinemas of India and Malayalam films can be attempted. Since OTT is an emerging form of popular culture, especially in the post-pandemic context, and given the popularity of regional entertainment content on streaming platforms, a study on women-centric Malayalam web series and films will add value to scholarship in this area. Research can also be conducted from an audience perspective, trying to understand the impact or influence of women-centric films, especially on young men and women in the context of relationships, personal and social identities. Interviews with artists, writers, directors, and producers will shed light on how stakeholders in Malayalam cinema view and perceive gender representation and gender dynamics and their role in shaping the future of the industry. Using an intersectional approach to understand how caste, religion, and class affect the portrayal of women characters can also be a possibility. Finally, a comparison of gender representation in different film genres vis-à-vis cinema that proclaims itself as women-centric will help cultivate a better understanding of Malayalam cinema and its journey so far.

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