EXPLORING THE UNFEMININITY IN NEW WAVE MALAYALAM MOVIES

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Abstract : Films play an important role in influencing the lives of ordinary man in the present scenario. The audience interpret movies from their own perspectives. There are realistic and fictional narratives. Malayalam movies make intense portrayal of themes and characters from time immemorial. We have male centric movies, which portray the charisma of male protagonists, who entertain the audience with their dialogues and masculine body. Female actors play passive roles in these kinds of movies.They are expected to perform duties assigned to them by the patriarchal society.

The coming of age movies or 'the New Generation Malayalam Movies' try to move away from the conventional themes and deal with complex real life incidents and human behaviour. Even the iconic actors who have portrayed the superhuman characters shift to play the roles of ordinary men. But the question is whether these changes in Malayalam movies matter in the portrayal of women characters. There are many female oriented movies which present the patriarchal domination in disguise. We have strong female characters who have to succumb to the misogyny at the end. The stereotypical women characters still exist. The female characters are being pushed into toxic relationships due to the insecurities of their male counterparts. Malayalam movies celebrate both femininity and unfemininity. My paper is an attempt to analyse how far both these are accepted in society through movies. My study is based on the movies *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum* (*2017)* by Dileesh Pothan, *Maayanadhi* (2017) by Aashiq Abu and *Love Action Drama* (2019) by Dhyan Sreenivasan.

Index Terms: Macho hero; Patriarchy; cultural constructs

INTRODUCTION

Films play a significant role in the lives of people. They are so closely connected to human culture from time immemorial. But in the present era, films shift from their usual role of entertainment to a more realistic role. People get attached to the realistic portrayal of themes and characters. They get a chance to interpret whatever get presented in movies and develop a perspective of their own.

Apart from mere visual stimulation and entertainment, movies offer chance to interpret the complex human behavior in a wide angle. Films turn to a reflection of society itself, with its realistic narrative methods and character presentation. Stories turn to be real and they become the voice of society. However, the role of women characters in movies is uncertain. In the patriarchal society, the roles are cultural constructs. Specific roles are assigned to both men and women. Women have should be subordinate to their men. They perform passive duties. The same happens in the case of male oriented movies. The women should be a match to the macho characters. They should be the damsels in distress with attractive looks while remain like a shadow to their men. They are the care givers. Hyperactive or hypersexual women must be tamed by men. The aggressive women are not accepted by the conservative society. The movies labeled as 'female oriented' substance also present women as those who depend their men, at the end.

Malayalam movies occupy a unique position in film industry. Malayalam industry produced numerous characters and themes, which influenced people in many ways. The male centric movies offer a visual treat to the audience with mass dialogues and actions. The one-man-show movies portray superstars with stylized themes and offer a visual treat. The male characters offer their own perspective with their masculine bodies. They sing and dance with their female counterparts. The directors have to present the super human images of characters and to appease the needs of a conservative society. The macho hero thrills the audience .Here; the question is about the performance of female characters in those movies.

Malayalam cinema has made a clear shift to substance oriented movies over the stylized ones. Real life stories and characters are getting presented on screen. Even the iconic actors who have done superhuman roles now shift to subject oriented characters. A radical change was witnessed by the Malayalam film industry with the movie *Traffic*, directed by Rajesh Pillai, in the year 2011.Other young film makers like Aashiq Abu, Dileesh Pothan, Lijo Jose Pellissery etc. have many new wave films to their credit. We have movies which speak about sexuality, gender, complex human relationships etc. The plot is not centered on one person, instead, multiple characters with complex behavioural patterns are presented in those movies.

But the question is what happens to the female characters in these so called 'new generation movies'. The women characters are portrayed differently from the traditional method. There are women characters who fight for their own rights and follow their passion, as opposed to the conventional roles assigned to them. My paper is an attempt to analyze how far the female characters in New Wave Malayalam Movies succeed in breaking the stereotypes. My focus is on four Malaylam movies *Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum*, *Maayanadhi*, *Varathan* and *Love Action Drama.*

Thondimuthalum Driksakshiyum is the second directorial work of Dileesh Pothan, released in the year 2017. The film revolves around a couple, Sreeja (Nimisha Sajayan) and Prasad (Suraj Venjarammod). They married with the opposition from their families due to caste issues and came to Kasarkode to begin a new life.Sreeja's gold chain attached with the nuptial not is stolen by a thief (Fahad Fazil) on a bus journey. The story follows how the couple retrieves the chain with a police station as a background.

Nimisha Sajayan made her debutant role as Sreeja. Sreeja is an ordinary girl who belongs to a Nair family and she works in a supermarket. Though the financial background is poor, her family enjoyed a high status accorded to an affluent caste in society. Prasad belongs to the SNDP community. Sreeja met him when he perfectly done the role of moral policing as he accused her for pregnancy when she bought a pregnancy test kit for her sister. She scorns Prasad for his 'sadacharam' duty but later falls for him because of his innocence. Though she loves him, she is not ready to tolerate the intrusion made by Prasad in her personal life. Here, Sreeja questions the hypocrisy of a conservative society, which is relevant in the present era of moral policing.

Sreeja is even bold to tell a lie to her family when they oppose her relation with Prasad. In a conservative society, a woman is never expected to talk about sex aloud. But Sreeja is ready to disclose her relation with Prasad in a brave manner."We had sex. Nobody could separate us" (*TMDS,* 2017). In a society, it is a taboo to speak about sexual life in a public platform, even to the family. But Sreeja breaks all the cultural conventions, while is expected to obey them. Sreeja belongs to the domestic sphere. She is not that ambiguous or passionate girl as seen in the movies which are screened with the label of 'women oriented'. But she is bold enough to raise her voice. She is an ordinary woman who does her best to retrieve her gold chain at any cost. She lashes out at the thief when he denies the theft, even at the police station. She is not ready to conceal her emotions and frustrations. The police officials try their best to suppress the case, as there are no eye witnesses for the theft. The fact that Sreeja was sleeping while the theft takes place is another point which they bring to sabotage the case.

She stands strong in her words when she says that she has seen the thief taking out her chain. Even when Prasad accuses her for her carelessness, she sticks to her words. Sreeja wants to live a happy life with her husband and she is not that ambitious passionate girl. But she shows how an ordinary woman like her can take a decision for herself without the support of her husband. Though she loves Prasad, she is highly frustrated with his actions and even questions his attitude. She is not ready to succumb to the rules of a male dominated society, which can be seen in her perseverance to gain justice. She is determined to make the thief pay for his crime, though she is not ready to touch the chain which was swallowed by the thief. She even extends her support to her husband when she says "our love is more important than anything else*" (TMDS,* 2017).

Sreeja proves that an ordinary house wife can take decisions of her own as opposed to the societal conventions. She is a spirited girl who removes the insecurities of her husband, while standing for herself. Though a debutant role, Nimisha Sajayan has wonderfully presented Sreeja with such a talent, as her facial expressions also match the determination shown by Sreeja.

A female character with a different perspective can be seen in *Maayanadhi* by Aashiq Abu, released in the year 2017. The film stars Tovino Thomas, Aishwarya Lakshmi, Leona Leshoy etc. in the lead roles. The story revolves around Mathan (Tovino), a person who dreams about his future with his passionate and ambitious girlfriend Aparna aka Appu. Mathan gets trapped in a crime after killing a police official by mistake. He flees to Kochi and invites his ex girlfriend Appu back to his life. Appu is a struggling model who is determined to be an actor. She was betrayed by Mathan during her college time and not ready to reciprocate her feelings. Finally she has to betray Mathan and he is killed during an encounter by the police.

Aparna is an engineering dropout and she attends auditions for films. She is not ready to accept sidelined characters. She is confident enough to say that she is far better than her model friend Sameera (Leona Leshoy) as she says "I deserve a better life" (*Maayanadhi*, 2017). Aparna is a character who tries to follow her passion. But

she has her own insecurities, which makes her fall for the emotional blackmailing from her loved ones, like her mother. She is pestered by her mother to attend a wedding and do the anchoring. She does not even get a chance to eat her dinner. When she picks up her food on the way, Mathan appears before her. She slaps him and walks away. She tries to avoid him, but she still has feelings for him, which is shown when she allowed him to accompany her.

Though the women characters in the movie are labeled as 'bold', when the story develops, the insecurities they have to suffer is understood. When society speaks for women empowerment, the cultural constructs imposed upon women still exist. For instance, Sameera is afraid of her brother who is living abroad. She is not permitted to expose her body in her films. When such an instance occurred, she is forced to edit a video. Indeed the editor of the video is not ready to cut the naval part shown in the video. He says "mood will go off Sameera" (*Maayanadhi*). Here, he tries to use a woman's private part for commercial success without her permission. The leakage of that video through social media destroys her acting career. She is beaten by her furious brother and she has to go with him abroad. Aparna is a woman of low esteem, who repeatedly goes back to Mathan, as he makes things simpler for her. In her own words, Mathan is described as a boy and she can't trust him. She makes love with him in a celebratory mood and says "sex is not a promise". But the traditionally thinking Mathan is not ready to accept it and calls her a 'prostitute'. Even after that incident, she relies on Mathan for an emotional support, when she has to face an emotional trauma. Appu wears a mask of disapproval to Mathan, but at the same time she needs him for a reassurance. She seems to be herself only with him.

Aparna is a lover, a struggling actor, a duty bound daughter. But she needs the support of her ex boyfriend. Unlike Sreeja, Appu pretends to be a bold woman who follows her passion. But she is a woman of low self-esteem who cannot survive without the emotional support of Mathan. Though the movie tries to project the new generation female characters who follow their instincts, it ended up finally as the presentation of women with the insecurities and complexities, who seek their male counterparts for love and care. They fail to love themselves. "I remember Mathan, whenever I am happy" (*Maayanadhi*, 2017). Appu pines for Mathan, even after rejecting him.

In *Varathan,* the normal patriarchal clichés are exposed, though it tries to portray bold women characters. The movie is directed by Amal Neerad, in the year 2018. The plot revolves around Aby (Fahad Fazil) and Priya (Aishwarya Lekshmi), who come from Dubai after Aby loses his job. They decide to settle in Priya's ancestral home for a while to figure things out.

From the moment the couple lands the village, they are treated with an animosity by the people. They are cast as outsiders. Priya has to witness the roving looks of men, who see her as a delicious thing, which starts from her schooling. This includes her lusty class mates and an aged man. Even in the vicinity of her home, Priya has to live in a state of alert and she tolerates the stalking of her lusty class mates. Her private space is even intruded.

Aby is not used to these kinds of traumatic experiences that a woman has to face. When Priya sees a cockroach in the house, she kills it. When Abin opposes this, she says, it shouldn't live in her house. The cockroach is a symbol of all the men who attack the personal space of the couple. The woman who is not ready to tolerate the intrusion of her space has to face the horrifying aspects of typical male gaze. Priya is unable to share her fears and insecurities with Aby. She is not strong enough stand against the trauma, which results in her molestation. "If my father was there, nothing would have happened" (*Varathan*, 2018). After the incident, the calm and harmless Aby turns into a macho hero who goes far beyond the extent to save his wife and a mother and son, who takes refuge in the house. His stylish vengeance promotes the role of 'a man', who has the duty to save his woman counterpart.

Priya, however, becomes the subject of male gaze. Here she is reduced to a desirable unattainable woman, who has to endure the voyeurism and needs the support of her partner to react. She embodies the body language and intelligence of a strong girl, who just tries to escape from the trauma she has to face from the intruders and her husband. She no longer feels safe with Aby, as she does not get the protection from him. She is disturbed by the typical male gaze, which every woman has to suffer. In India, a woman who lives abroad possesses a mindset of her own. But the typical rural folk who construct a particular code of conduct for women, cannot accept Priya.

According to the patriarchal norms, a woman is expected to be protected by her male counter parts, i.e. her father, her brother, husband and son. Priya pines for her dead father, whom she thought might have saved her. She is not expected to save herself Even Priya's trauma is used as an excuse to promote Aby's transformation from passive to a terror figure. The male gaze is fixed on even Priya's attire. "What was she wearing? Morality is at risk in this village now" (*Varathan*, 2018).Priya is presented as a sensitive woman who is unable to do anything against the voyeurism.

The movie turns itself into an action packed thriller when Aby transforms to the usual macho charisma, which can be seen in all male oriented movies. The role of Priya is pushed to the periphery to show case the stylized male, as expected from the stereotypical male protagonists. Priya is reduced to the state of a normal woman who pines for the care and support of her husband.

Dhyan Sreenivasan made his directorial debut with *Love, Action, Drama* in 2019.The film portrays the complex love relationship between Dineshan and Shobha, done by Nivin Pauly and the 'Lady Super Star' Nayanthara.

Dineshan is an alcoholic, chain smoker who tries to win Shobha. Though he is willing to change for her, he finally ended up as a complete loafer.

The movie portrays a female character, who tries to be strong, bold and ambitious. The character of Shobha is given a grant entry, as she lashes out to a man who misbehaves with her at the air port. Here, Nayanthara is introduced as a super lady who represents the bold woman who has the power to react and voice up her opinions. But when the plot develops, we can see that she shrinks to the normal girl who falls for a loafer, despite his complex behavior, fumed with alcoholism and smoking. Though Nyanthara looks stunning, there is no detailed writing of her character. She is being presented as a Chennai based Malayali woman, who runs a business.

Shobha's father is worried about her relation with Dineshan, as he says "Just name one quality of Dinesh that caused you to like him" (*Love, Action, Drama*, 2019). In this movie, Shobha's character is being reduced to reform Dineshan's character. Though she pretends to be strong, she is indeed ready to accept the boyish attitude of Dineshan. The bold and strong image of Shobha turns into accepting the immature character of Dineshan, and the reason she states gives the evidence of her own immature character. For Shobha, Dineshan is innocent.

Though Shobha tries to break the stereotypical role of an ordinary woman, she finally ended up as the epitome of the ever loving, care giving, typical woman, who forgives her boyfriend, who accuses her for infidelity. She is not ready to break up her relation with Dineshan, despite his complex behavioural pattern.

New wave Malayalam movies try to present strong, ambitious women characters. But the films with strong substance and characterization try to subside women characters. When the plot develops, the females are 'refined' by gathering support and care from their male counter parts. The strong women get transformed to the cultural constructs established by the conventional patriarchal society. They become either 'care givers' or 'insecure', as expected from the traditional conduct prescribed for them.

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