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## **The Public/Private Dichotomy: The Representation of Women's Identity in Malayalam Cinema of the 1980's**

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### **Abstract:**

Modernity and Colonialism, as twins, came to Indian society thereby creating a sweeping change in the social, political and economic spheres. The new methods of colonial education and ways of life have given people, especially women, a freedom to think, work and act independently. In the history of Malayalam cinema, the late 1970's and 1980's represent a transitional period. This was the period in which Kerala society, as opposed to many other Indian states, was integrated into the international labour market, as a result of which there was a change in the economic structure of the state as well as an alteration in the social relations among its people. The purchasing power of women increased and they became avid consumers. This change in the socio-economic and political milieu invariably created new ambivalences, anxieties, confusions and contradictions in both men and women.

**Keywords: Modernity, Gender, Identity, Malayalam Cinema.**

The remarkable quotation by Simone de Beauvoir, in her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 780) has been providing the impetus to the academia since the twentieth century onwards to metamorphose their perception of women. The issues pertaining to women, like their selfhood, identity, subjectivity, and representation to name a few, are numerous. The concept of self is important to feminism because women's representation/portrayal in various fields like literature, science, law, and media has always been subordinated and subjugated to a secondary level. He is the subject, he is the absolute and she is the other observes Simone de Beauvoir which aptly summarizes the plight of women in general. The dichotomy between the self and the other has been the area of investigation and questioning for the feminists. There are two important phases in the growth of feminism as a school of thought. The first wave feminism which spans over the period 1830 to 1920 mainly dealt with the suffragette movement where feminists argued for the right to vote. The second wave, from 1930 onwards, concentrated on the liberation of women. The right for equality was also a concern of the second wave feminists and they articulated powerful slogans

like equal pay for equal work. The American feminist writer and philosopher Betty Friedan brings forth the concept of the liberal equality feminism in her work, *The Feminist Mystique*. This is a ground breaking work which exposes the sufferings, frustration, distress, and problems of American housewives in the 1950s. What Beauvoir was doing in Europe, Friedan did in America. Along with these, the emergence of French feminism, especially with the writings of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigary provided new dimensions to the various debates of second wave feminism. It was the French feminists who highlighted the role played by language in creating the self.

Fiona Tolan opines that,

Biological differences do not provide a causal explanation for women's oppression, however their reproductive function has placed women at a disadvantage by tying them to the domestic spheres and associating them with the body and thus with animals and nature. Just as man considers himself superior to nature, so he considers himself superior to women. Over the centuries, the concept of the female's passive maternal role has become so deeply entrenched in culture and society that it was presumed to be woman's natural destiny. De Beauvoir argued that there was nothing natural about the hierarchical division of men and women into a first and second sex (Tolan 321).

Greatly influenced by the philosophy of existentialism, Beauvoir mainly draws on Hegel's concept of self to explain femininity. "The man is always the subject-self, the I, whilst the woman is always the object, the other" (321). The gendered conception of the self contributing to the view that masculine is active and feminine is passive is very problematic. Tolan, influenced by the idea of Sigmund Freud, opines that, "...Sigmund Freud, who based his theory of sexuality on the possession of the phallus/penis. A man is a man because he possesses the phallus; a woman, is simply, not a man. Therefore, a woman is a lack, a negative - she lacks the phallus that confers subjectivity" (321).

Liberty, according to Beauvoir, is not merely possessing material comfort and happiness. "[T]o be free, a person must transcend the animal part of his or her life - the temporary and unthinking happiness that comes from being warm and well fed -and pursue the uniquely human desire to know more, do more, have more"(322).

We believe that we have the ability to create and recreate our self if we have the will to change ourselves, but at the same time we are presented with a narrow range of options that will allow us to fit into the society. Legal theorist and social historian Lawrence M. Friedman ... argues in *The Horizontal Society* that we live in an age "in which old forms and traditions seem to be breaking down – forms and traditions that trapped the individual in a cage of ascription;

that fixed human beings in definite social roles, pinned them to a given position in the world, no matter how they might wriggle and fight”. (qtd. in Hall 1-2)

One can even choose not to be a part of any group, which is rather difficult because the outside society may not go along with one’s choices. The many issues like freedom, restraint, self and social construction, conflict between choice and illusion, confusion between imposed definitions, and individual interrogations of them, dilemma between old formulae and new responsibilities lead us to the very subject matter of subjectivity and the theoretical discussion of identity.

Identity being one of the major problematic areas, its enquiry and analysis becomes very relevant in the contemporary society and all the more when it comes to women in particular. Identity becomes a question of contest when it moves away from the normative pattern/concept. “As the cultural critic, Kobena Mercer, observes, ‘identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displayed by the experience of doubt and uncertainty’” (qtd. in Hall 275).

Among the various visual media, cinema enjoys a superior position and it has a wide appeal among people all over the world. Film studies are also not devoid of studying gender. It is the feminist film studies research that has paved the way for studying gender in relation to films. As a result, from the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a great interest among the academicians to study the representation of women in film. The question of gender leads to the understanding of masculinity, femininity, the questions related to cross - gender and to what extent gender is culturally determined. Gender helps human beings to define themselves and to know who they are.

Kerala enjoys the privilege of being a leading state among other states in India in terms of social development indicators like birth and death rates, infant mortality, maternal mortality, sex ratio, economic growth, and literacy. These indicators have invariably led to the creation of the notion of the 'myth of Malayali women' as relishing a high status when compared to other women in general. Thanks to the improved literacy rate and availability of more and more employment opportunities including reservation in government bodies, women in general have started gaining a certain amount of recognition in the social, economic and political domains. However, the hardships which they face still remain to a great extent and these difficulties which women encounter in the public domain can be thought of as an extension of a similar treatment which they have undergone in the private domain in a male dominated society.

The conventional patriarchal society always wants to discern man as bread winner and woman as caretaker of the family. European colonialism and the development of modernity are considered to be the two great phenomena that have transformed the world in a spectacular

fashion in the last few years. Like any other comprehensive term, modernity has gradually crept into the historical thought process, having far reaching implications.

Modernity and Colonialism, as twins, came to Indian society thereby creating a sweeping change in the social, political, and economic spheres. The new methods of colonial education and ways of life have given people, especially women, a freedom to think, work and act independently. In the history of Malayalam cinema, the late 1970's and 1980's represent a transitional period. This was the period in which Kerala society, as opposed to many other Indian states, was integrated into the international labour market, as a result of which there was a change in the economic structure of the state as well as an alteration in the social relations among its people. Kerala had been a feudal political economy from time immemorial and one could see its residual traces even in the 1970's. The money repatriated by the Non Resident Indians working in the Gulf countries changed the economic scenario of the state. The foreign exchange sent back to the state by the Malayali diaspora triggered a consumer boom. A new articulate middle class emerged from the middle/lower class/caste as a direct consequence of this consumerism. The new and energetic consumerist society that came into being challenged the feudal structure. The purchasing power of women increased and they became avid consumers. New attractions caught women's attention. This resulted in a change in their psyche which in turn had a direct bearing on Kerala society at large. This change in the socio- economic and political milieu invariably created new ambivalences, anxieties, confusions, and contradictions in both men and women.

The credit of modernizing the Malayalam cinema in the 1970s goes to K. G. George. He is one of the most celebrated filmmakers of Kerala. Inspired by the post-war New Wave European Cinema, he gave a new dimension to the Malayalam cinematic narrative of the 70s and 80s. In his films, K.G George has successfully presented a panoramic view of the subtle issues like identity crisis, uncertainties of life, self-doubt, meaning, and purpose of life both in men and women. His debut movie was *Swapnadanam* (1976) which was a marital psychodrama. Maintaining its artistic quality, it proved to be a resounding commercial success and also won the Kerala State Film Award for best film. Other movies which brought George into the limelight and were very popular among the masses are *Yavanika* (1982), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983) and *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback* (1983). This paper places the question of gendered subject in the context of the advent of modernity in India and also is an attempt to delve into the question of modernity through the construction and deconstruction of masculinity and femininity in K. G. George's selected films including *Yavanika* (1982), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983), and *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback* (1983).

*Yavanika* (1982) had received a wide acclaim among film spectators and critics when it was released. "Narrated as a thriller, *Yavanika* is also a psychological exploration of character and dramatic conflict. Thematically different from his earlier works, *Yavanika* is an exploration into

the relationship between melodrama and femininity” (Menon 110). The plot revolves round Ayyappan (Bharath Gopi), a tabla player in a theatre group going missing. The case is being investigated by the police inspector Jacob Eerally (Mammooty). Nobody in the theatre group knows his whereabouts. Being a drunkard and quarrelsome in nature, he is very unpopular among his colleagues. On the day of his disappearance he quarrels with his nagging son Vishnu (Asokan) and his colleague Balagopalan (Nedumudi Venu). The initial suspects in the investigation are Vishnu and Balagopalan, but after a detailed probe, the police reach the conclusion that the culprit is Joseph Kollappilly (Venu Nagavalli), another artist in the troupe. The story takes a sudden and surprising twist when the police investigation throws up Rohini as the real murderer of Ayyappan.

A deep analysis of Rohini’s character reveals the circumstances that make her the murderer. Being born in a poor family, in order to support her ailing parents and siblings, Rohini is compelled to take up the job of acting offered by Ayyappan. It is crucial to note that Ayyappan approaches Rohini’s mother as a well wisher and persuades her to send Rohini along with him. Trusting him, her mother sends Rohini with him. The first day itself Rohini is raped by him and the life with him is full of hardships for her. He is brutal enough to steal her hard earned money. Being silent, submissive and quiet, she undergoes a lot of suffering and is even forced to suppress expressing her love for Joseph Kollappilly. On the contrary, in the drama in which Rohini is the leading character, she plays a very bold and extrovert role. Why is it that in real life Rohini is not able to be bold? What makes her conceal her love for Kollappilly? Why does she kill Ayyappan? These are some important questions to be answered when analyzing her character. *Adaminte Variellu* is considered to be one of the best social commentaries by K. G. George. It recounts the story of three women belonging to different strata of society. Alice (Srividya) represents the upper class wealthy society. In spite of being the wife of an affluent government contractor Mammachan (Bharath Gopi) and living amidst all luxuries, Alice is not a happy soul. She is bored with her life. The relationship between Mammachan and Alice is not quite a cordial one. For him, she is a tool to make his business successful. Discontented with this kind of life, having no self respect and identity, she gets attracted to a young engineer. When the affair between Alice and the engineer becomes a talk in the society, the engineer withdraws from her. Alice goes back to her parent’s home and files a divorce petition seeking divorce with Mammachan. But she is sent back to Mammachan’s house and left with no other choice and thoroughly disgusted with life, she commits suicide. What can be the reason(s) for Alice’s suicide?

Vasanthi, a representative of the upper middle class working woman is another character who is caught between her official and household works. Dominated by a harsh mother-in-law and a drunkard husband, the responsibility of looking after the family rests on her. Unable to bear the pressure from the family and work place, she becomes schizophrenic. She sits in the chair of her maternal uncle, who also happens to be her father in law and starts commanding her husband and

mother in law. During her insanity her suppressed feelings and desires come to the forefront. Finally she ends up in a mental asylum.

The lower class section is represented by Ammini. She is the servant in Mammachan's house. She has been sexually exploited by Mammachan. He sends Ammini to Kunjamma when she becomes pregnant. Ammini gives birth to a child. She abandons the child in front of a convent. Ammini is sent to a rescue shelter by the police. The film ends with Ammini and other women inmates of the rescue shelter throwing open the gate and running outside. This action initiated by Ammini shows the assertion of individuality and freedom of women in general.

*Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback* depicts the rise and fall of a film actress. In order to try the luck of their daughter Shanthamma (Nalini) in the film industry, her parents take her to Madras (Chennai). After the initial problems and turmoils, Shanthamma gradually climbs the ladder of success. She changes her name to Lekha. Her affair with the famous film director Suresh (Bharath Gopi) paves the way for her downfall. Realizing that both of them cannot lead a happy married life, Lekha commits suicide.

A close analysis of the women characters in the above mentioned films highlights the question of female subjectivity in the modern times. Rohini kills her destroyer and ends up in jail; Alice, unable to free herself from the clutches of her family, commits suicide; Vasanthi, due to overwork and strain, becomes mad; Lekha, realizing that she cannot lead a life of her own, commits suicide. All these women have consciously or unconsciously become the victims of the prevailing patriarchal ideology. Only Ammini thinks differently and takes the initiative to break the conventional system of power relations.

At this juncture, it is imperative to put forward the question, how far modernity succeeds in its goal of attaining freedom and liberty. "Despite its claims of progressive humanism and projection of emancipator credentials, modernity never was a domain of absolute freedom for all where all the forms of exploitation ceased to exist (5)", opines Sunil P Eliyadom. It is a shame to observe that even though Kerala has one hundred percent literacy, the participation of women in public sphere is comparatively less. The prevailing value system teaches women to rush back to their houses from work places to fit into their conventional roles of mothers, wives and daughters. Whatever slight freedom women enjoy, is the result of the compromise and negotiation they make in the domestic sphere. It is highly relevant to analyze this issue in the present century, are women really empowered in the fullest sense of the word paving the way to gender equality?

Meena T. Pillai in her essay, "Becoming Women Unwrapping Femininity in Malayalam Cinema" opines that,

Even as a large number of women from the middle and working classes step out of their homes to make a livelihood, there is a visible hurry to get back and re-emphasize their own roles as mothers, wives and daughters-in-law as though to gain sanction and sanctimony for their further forays into the outer world. In this context one can perceive an imperative need in Kerala's society today to look at and integrate representations of women, especially in the wake of knowledge of the problematic nature of representation itself, which can only be incomplete and partial interpretations rather than 'objective' description of 'reality'. In a world where 'femininity' is forced upon women, the least they can do is to be vigilant in their representations of themselves and how they read and decode such representations by others (Pillai 5).

This observation emphasizes the need to study the representation of women in cinema and makes this study an inevitable one.

The contemporary world is witnessing considerable socio-economic and political developments paving the way for progress and modernity. These developments have opened up many opportunities especially for women leading to a realization of new middle class sexual identity and aspirations. However, these are interwoven with powerful influences of traditional and nationalistic concepts of femininity and womanhood. There is a significant social responsibility and a perpetual demand on the middle-class woman to maintain tradition amidst an influence of modernizing processes and modern notions of appropriate female behaviour. This results in the middle class woman's identity being continuously negotiated and shaped and also raises the question of how the new expressions of female sexualities can be negotiated and realized by these emerging middle class female identities in the context of prevailing notions of femininity and womanhood.

The three films opted for the present study, *Yavanika* (1982), *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983) and *Lekhayude Maranam Oru Flashback* (1983) depict how women negotiate with the public and private life, how they try to assume their own identity apart from being a daughter, wife and mother, and how they struggle to assert their presence in the male dominated society. The cinematic representation of women characters in the above mentioned films have tried to break up the traditional and conventional norms of femininity thus threatening the normative heterosexual norms put forward by the society. It is sad to note that however hard women try to come out of the patriarchal shackles, they are not able to get complete freedom and their own identity.

By representing women's choices between public and private, work and home, these films as cultural form have shown female subjectivities under negotiation. By posing the contradictions between these choices, they have provided a structure of feeling of forbidden pleasures and impossible choices. The films

discussed explore these forbidden pleasures to delineate a different economy of desire. Quite similar to melodrama, these films are grounded in realism and everyday life, which are further explored through quite radical forms of self-referentiality, thus bringing out the contradictions by delineating women in desperate spaces of home and work and their everyday life (Menon 119).

This article strives to be an eye-opener and tries to provide an opportunity to the society to rethink its attitude towards women. Cinema, being a reflection of the society and the reality, is an ideal instrument through which life gets represented. These three films which have been chosen represent a sample of the identity crisis faced by women and are in fact a microcosm of the real world. Even the Government is making all out efforts to uplift the status of the weaker sex, to educate them and to bring them to the forefront. Various incentives like exclusive reservation for women etc are being provided in order to achieve these objectives. The time has come to rethink, reread and reanalyse as to whether there is a shift in the attitude of the patriarchal society towards women.

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