

## **Representing the Misrepresented: Body as a Tool of Resistance in *Sara's***

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### **Abstract:**

Cinema is one of the most influential medium which fuels and adds dimension to the existing socio-cultural and political environment. Despite being on the cusp of a paradigm change in terms of filmmaking there is a constant failure across films in portraying women characters. Right from the early days, there were only meager attempts in the Malayalam movie industry to represent, portray, and communicate the rights and choices of women. The Malayalam movie industry which is predominantly patriarchal always portrayed the stereotypical images of women conforming to subordination. An unbalanced positioning can be seen in most of the movies, where men are depicted as the ultimate decision makers and protectors of women while women are portrayed as physically weak, emotionally vulnerable beings. The movie industry has always been silent to the fact that gendering of sexuality and body does great violence to women. However the 2021 Malayalam movie *Sara's* directed by Jude Anthany Joseph is the first endeavor in Malayalam movie industry to render the concept of bodily autonomy of women. This paper titled "Representing the Misrepresented: Body as a Tool of Resistance in *Sara's*" seeks to analyse how this movie propagates the freedom of women over her body and the choice of women over her passion by using the concept of body politics.

**Keywords:** Body politics, women representation, sexuality, bodily autonomy, women's choice.

### **Representing the Misrepresented: Body as a Tool of Resistance in *Sara's***

Female Identity is bound with age-old social norms, conventions and structures. Women in India are conditioned to accept the status of an inferior being and are reduced to mere second-class citizen whose primary role is that of a home-maker, ideal wife and

selfless mother. Visual media particularly the movie industry has a great role in propagating the patriarchal agenda. The conservative social milieu of the Malayalam movie industry always portrayed the stereotypical images of women conforming to subordination and represented women as submissive, passive and chaste. Malayalam movie industry is predominantly patriarchal. There are only a few movies which uphold the feminist thoughts. The 2021 Malayalam movie *Sara's* directed by Jude Anthany Joseph however made a gamble attempt to question all the preconceived notions prevailing in a patriarchal society.

Jude Anthany Joseph through his movie *Sara's* talks about the chronicles of several households in India discussed seldom in the mainstream cinema, and is narrated from the perspective of a woman. Rather than displaying motherhood like a burden, the movie helps one in introspecting the sacrifices of women in raising kids. It emphasizes on Sara, the lead character of the movie played by Anna Ben, and how she has almost been persuaded to choose her pregnancy over her goals and career. Later, her realization of her rights over her body paved the path to fight strongly for her voice or dreams in a patriarchal society that always viewed women as inferior even without rights over her own body. The movie reflects on how family and society interfere as well as pressurize the couples to follow their opinions, interests or decisions in the matters of relationship, marriage and pregnancy.

Sara Vincent, a mid 20's girl decided to exclude motherhood in her life right from the school days itself for which she was abandoned by her first boyfriend saying "he didn't want egg pups without egg in it" (*Sara's*). Later, she began working as an assistant director in the film industry but she always aspired to be a freelance director. Even though she was stern in dropping motherhood, everyone responded "You will change your mind" (Soman). While she was rushing to achieve her dreams, her father ('a cool dad'), who always supported his daughter at every situation along with her dream to be a director, do not stand by her in case of marriage and gave six months duration to find out a boy for her otherwise he would be forced to pick one after the deadline because he feared that her scope in the marriage market might decline as she grows older. His progressive outlook falls here. Her father, the screenwriter Benny and Anna Ben's own father who also plays the character of her father in the movie, is not the only male character in the movie to think that they grant ample freedom to women in their lives. The film producer in the movie who self-declare as a 'nonsexist' try to convince Sara to retract from handling or directing such a huge film project only because of her femininity, saying "You are a girl, you will find it very difficult"

(R Kumar). The movie calls attention to the misogyny that the women face in the movie industry. The film *Sara's* also acquaints the audience with a numerous people like Benny and the film producer who are 'progressive, non-sexist men'.

Later, she comes across Jeevan, another title character played by Sunny Wayne, who shares the same perspective as Sara and does not entertain fatherhood. They fell in love with each other and get married. Even though Jeevan share the same interests as Sara, the film clearly hints about his character as a person who is afraid to stick to his word in front of the society and family, and lightly indicates his passivity in the future that he might not stand by her in the future through the scene soon after their marriage itself as he was hardly able to express his viewpoint about parenthood even to his family. While she was stubborn enough to clearly put her thought in front of both his and her family, the first reaction of Jeevan's mother towards Sara was whether she was infertile and blames her parents thinking that they intentionally get her married to Jeevan by covering up her reproductive issues. Extending her concern to Sara she asks whether she consulted a doctor and whether the problem is with the uterus or anything else. After knowing her disinterest to motherhood, Jeevan's mother asks for his opinion about Sara's decision, for which he replies "raising children is a big responsibility but we have many more important things to do other than it" (*Sara's*). Suddenly, Jeevan's mother responds to it as "Oh responsibility! She is the one who delivers and take care of the children. What responsibility do you have? You can come in the evening, play and smile with the children. What other than that" (*Sara's*). Thus, it portrays how patriarchy has inflicted raising children completely as a women's duty whereas men perform as the bread winners. But here Jeevan supports Sara by countering that since these responsibilities are Sara's, its final decision is hers which is contradicted by his actions in the future while she became pregnant accidentally due to contraceptive failure. Later, realizing that both of them prefer the same, one of the family members concludes that it's the aftermath of feminism and both the families try to convince her, which eventually fails and they leave unhappily.

*Sara's* is also important in narrating the story of Jeevan as much as it is concerned with narrating Sara's story. The story exposes the theme or outline in its entirety when Sara accidentally gets pregnant with a baby as a result of contraceptive failure. Here Jeevan starts to contradict his words expressed to his mother about parenthood and Sara's right to accept or reject motherhood in the scene soon after the marriage. Till then, both of them were very supportive and encouraging to each other in case of career problems, household

responsibilities as well as every issue they faced. Every time she failed to convince producers for her film, Jeevan supported and encouraged her with a new hope. But, her news of pregnancy just altered everything. Jeevan who was already affected slightly by questions upon his ability to give birth to a child as one of his colleagues in the work place came with a news of his wife's pregnancy after his six months of marriage, has put a base to develop a small interest in his mind for children which can be recognized from his expressions even when he reveals their disinterest to parenthood. As a result, when they came to know about the pregnancy, Jeevan was tensed about the last night party where Sara drunk a lot and states "pregnant women are not supposed to drink and smoke" (*Sara's*) as if he was not the one who declared his impassivity to parenthood. His change of thought is exhibited clearly when he did not supported Sara for abortion after the pregnancy was confirmed indicating his interest in keeping the baby. The situation becomes even more worse when his colleague informs his family even before affirming the pregnancy after seeing them coming out of the gynecologist cabin. His developing interest for children is also expressed through his building attachment to his sister's children after knowing Sara's pregnancy, who at once felt him as irritating, torturing, and so on. Furthermore, his dropping of smoking when his colleague in the office points out its bad impact on baby also underlines his interest to continue the pregnancy. Meanwhile, in order to make her convince the pregnancy he informs her parents about it. They also come and never initiate to support her decision against pregnancy. This affects her a lot. She became lonely and began to stay silent as no one was there to express or share her problems. It's a clear example of how patriarchal society become deaf themselves when it comes to a woman's desire to work for her dreams other than socially constructed notions of motherhood and ideal wife.

Even when she was confident about her decisions and dreams, those around her struggle with it. She kept working hard to achieve her goal, keeping aside her pregnancy issues while Jeevan's mother was unable to accept this and asked her to stay home during pregnancy fearing its impact on the baby. This made Sara to come up with her decision about abortion in front of his mother. His mother asks him whether he is supporting her in this decision and questions his masculinity. Here, he stands against Sara stating his interest in keeping the baby. His mother begins to blame her father saying "it's not your problem. It's your father's. They should know how to raise a girl child" (*Sara's*). Here the typical societal outlooks are expressed. If a woman or a girl sticks to her decision, interests or her dreams against the society or family, none other than the parents are accused and if a boy or

a man supports a woman in her decisions, his masculinity is questioned. Later, Jeevan's mother tries to convince her by pointing out the importance to raise a child. According to her, children are raised in order to look after their parents when they become old and sick in the same way parents look after their children at their young age. This is scattered by Sara by asking her some truths.

“What you had done in your life other than raising the two children. It may be a great thing to you Amma, which may be your happiness. But, you should not be persistent that my happiness also should be that. You spend half of your life raising these children Amma and now where are you, alone in a big house. No one is there to come even when something happens to you. Both of your children has been settled in Kochi for years, but whether any of them asked you to come and stay with them.” (*Sara's*)

This actually provoked Jeevan, but helped his mother realize the truth. Jeevan shouts at Sara saying that he has changed over two years and it may be because he became mature, moreover, he knew he did not entertain children but his thoughts have changed. This unravels how men look out the things only through their interests and presence of mind ignoring the interests of women. Sara clearly points out this thought through her words.

“You have got promotion and became settled. Now you feel you became matured and old enough to be a father. Then, what about me, my career and dreams? I have just started the film. If I continue with this I would be in the same stage where I stood two years ago. You encourage me to fly with my wings open and then, you yourself bind some stones around my waist. Isn't it?” (*Sara's*)

This helps the audience to understand how women are refused the right even over their own body. “It's a woman's body, and so, her choice” (Soman) is an inevitable thought that many fail to understand, when talks about motherhood.

Later, she stands strong by her decision for which ultimately, her father supports her and they decide to attend the counseling session by doctor Hafees. Doctor Hafees (Siddique) is almost portrayed as the voice of the filmmaker in the stereotypical society whose counseling session towards the end of the movie underlines the perspective of the film about parenthood and abortion. Doctor Hafees plays as an important part in the film showing as a male gynecologist who has a better understanding of motherhood than most of the women and men. His description of parenthood is really thought provoking. He put in front the fact

that many become parents without being prepared for it only as a result of social pressure. He also adds that parenting is a 'divine talent' which everyone cannot handle and those who are unable to do it should not try to bear a child so that it avoids the responsibility of the child's 'troublesome childhood'. According to him, those who are willing to sacrifice, possess the 'divine talent', require abilities for parenting and are prepared physically and mentally for a child are eligible to become parents. If they lack these qualities, then don't do it, he says. He also acquaints the audience with the provision in the law that allows woman to abort, if they suffer any mental or physical issues with it.

“According to the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act in 1971, if a woman suffers from any mental or physical issues as a result of her pregnancy, she has the right to discontinue her pregnancy. For this, not even the consent of the husband is needed.” (*Sara's*)

He also supports Sara in her decision by saying “It's your body. So, the decision also should be yours” (*Sara's*). At the end of a session, he quotes “Better not be a parent than be a bad parent” (*Sara's*), which makes the audience to think and enable to understand the impact of being a bad parent over the child's mental, physical and intellectual life citing the example of criminals who became one as an aftermath of bad parenting.

*Sara's* also openly cites the discrimination of women as well as how they are treated in the film industry. Dreaming to be a director of her own script, she was ignored by most of the producers, even the family members didn't support only because of her gender as her duty is to give birth and raise children like most of the women. Srinda in the movie also plays an important role in the film, who is portrayed as living a life as prescribed by the conventional patriarchal society hesitating to stop her pregnancy even after having fourth child in her womb at her age of forty two due to the fear to stand against her husband's will. The movie does not hang back to put forward uncomfortable questions commonly seen in the society. It clearly displays how women are treated by most of the men in the film industry, for instance, the producer who indirectly tries to convince Sara to please him as an exchange he would produce and allow her to direct the film. Parallel to Sara's story there is another powerful sub-plot about the popular actress Anjali who has quit the cinema in order to address her duties of motherhood as well as a wife, also tries to find her happiness in the everyday errands at home and choose to be with the family over a character offer in the movie that could earn her a National Award. She also denies the offer in Sara's film which

helps her to gain a perfect comeback only to look after her family. Her husband is one of those 'progressive, nonsexist men' who says,

“I had already permitted her to do some television ads or become judge in reality TV show, so that it would earn money. Thus, it would also help to shut those people's mouth who says that I have been making a well-known and efficient actress to sit at home.” (*Sara's*)

He took it granted that it's his responsibility to decide for his wife, favourably forgetting that she is free and has the right to choose her own will. All these evolve around the idea that it prescribes a set of terms and conditions when women are supported by men to chase their dreams. It is thought that men have the right to choose and knew well what is best for women and children.

Sara's perfectly handled the sensitive issue of parenthood and abortion in it. It scatters round the pre-conceived ideas of parenthood and stereotypes those who do not prefer to have children. As per the viewpoint of the society, it is considered that those who are disinterested in having children are selfish and do not wish to take the responsibilities. Here in the movie Sara clearly states her reason for avoiding children, as she says “It's not that I don't like kids. I just don't have the knack of handling them, and it hasn't seemed essential to me” (Vetticad). Further, she explains, “For me, a person's ultimate aim should be to contribute something by which the world can remember you after you die, not just to have kids and be remembered by them” (Vetticad). As far as Jeevan is concerned, for him too, does not prefer children though for a different reason. For him, the reason is, as he says “Career, hanging out with friends, travel – to sacrifice all this and be selfless for your kids, I don't think I can do that like my mother's and father's generation” (Vetticad). The script also over-stresses Jeevan's mother played by Mallika Sukumaran as an unfunny satire of a pushy woman who at first meeting with Sara, till a stranger to her, made Sara to clean the baby's urine in the floor and believes women are raised for the sole purpose of marriage and delivering children. Most of the characters mainly Jeevan's mother supports that women's body autonomy rests in the hands of men rather than women themselves and opposes women's right to choose for herself.

The movie *Sara's* put forwards a strong politics by celebrating and empowering women by giving them an identity beyond someone's wife or mother. *Sara's* is the first movie of its kind in the Malayalam movie canon to skillfully address the pro-choice

decisions of women. The apostrophe 's' after her name in the title itself conveys the politics of the movie. The 's' stands as the way of giving her agency in choices concerning her body. The movie is an eye-opener as it underlines the need to restructure the tyrannical gender binaries to emerge out as an inclusive system thereby bringing about a radical shift. The director Jude Anthany Joseph ruthlessly bashes the gender policies sculpted by the patron aura of the society and challenges the norms and stereotypes pertaining in our society regarding pregnancy and parenthood. Pre-marital sex, the concept of consent, choices of women over her body is discussed rather well in the movie. *Sara's* is a powerful story of a woman's right over her body.

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