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## **Redefining Love: Slap as a Tool of Gendered Power in Malayalam Cinema**

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### **Abstract:**

The portrayal of love in films are most often flawed. Malayalam cinema, a regional film industry, has in the past pioneered films that invoked critical discussions. For instance, the first Malayalam cinema, *Balan*, was a social drama which was unique to Indian Cinema at that time. However, there is another side in Malayalam cinema that displays a problematic depiction of relationships marked by love. Mainstream commercial Malayalam films very evidently portrays the role of women as secondary. The study tends to analyze the portrayal of love in those films celebrated as romantic tales. An attempt is done to re-read the concept of love from the perspective of feminist studies and to see how often women become victims of misogyny. It also uses the notion of Michel Foucault's Power to address the issue of slapping as degrading the dignity of women- and its normalization in films. Films taken for the study include *Gandharvam* (1993), *Mithunam* (1993), *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Nootandu* (1994), *Njangal Santhushtaranu* (1999), *Ishtam* (2001), *Chronic Bachelor* (2003), *Theevandi* (2018), *Sara's* (2021), *Vaashi* (2022) and *Pachuvum Athbutha Vilakkum* (2023).

**Keywords:** gender, love, misogyny, slap, masculinity, femininity, Malayalam movies.

## INTRODUCTION

According to Michel Foucault, power is something that exists everywhere. Foucault (1978) states, “Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93). Power is a mysterious entity that is “produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another” (Foucault 93). It is discursive and diffused within the societal structures and functions in every hegemonic relationship that exists in society. The Patriarchal system is one such structure where power has always functioned to subject the other- the female. Societal structures ensure that women are confined into narrow or feminine roles. The portrayal of such instances in mainstream Malayalam movies uses slap as a tool. The act of slap is a violent intrusion on the part of the perpetrator into the victim’s physical and mental spaces. However, within the dynamics of power, it gets a different meaning. The depiction of slap in Malayalam movies is seen as an act of love. Inside the power dynamics, there is a reversal of the effect of the act of the slap, as it is the victims who read the slap as an expression of love. The slap within the gendered structure conceals violence and the Malayalam movies portray it as an accepted gesture. Slap has one meaning when the perpetrator and the victim are males. The violence embodied in the act of slapping is not concealed. Nevertheless, when it comes to the perpetrator being male and the victim being female, a slap becomes an act or an expression of love.

The primary aim of discipline is to reform. To reform means to conform to the norms of the society. In his work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault puts forth the idea of how disciplinary techniques produce “docile bodies” (Gutting). Foucault argues that disciplining is always at play in the society. The process of disciplining people is to conform them into the social norms and it is done by the way of watching them. Through this the formation of a subject occurs. Slap is a

gesture that takes away so many things. A slap becomes a tool of disciplinary action that deprives a person of their individuality. Nuances of this action have greater complexities regarding the subject formation. Foucault's concept of Discipline is that which psychologically trains people and leads them to become subject to the systems of social hierarchy. The slap occurs in the minute spaces of love relationships in the family. Slap becomes a corrective measure on the part of the male lover/husband. However slap on observing closely, is a violation of a person's identity. It takes the right of the individual to "be".

### SLAP IN FILMS

Slap generates different meanings in the movie under discussion. Films chosen are on the basis of box office success or popularity among the public. Few films over the years are selected in which slap is depicted as an accepted gesture. The film *Chronic Bachelor* by Siddique, a 2003 super hit movie, and *Njangal Santhushtaranu* (1999) by Rajasenana use slaps as a means used by men to tame women. In *Chronic Bachelor*, the character Bhavani (Indraja) formerly loved Sathyapathapan (Mamooty). The protagonist Sathyapathapan abandons her and causes her to take revenge on him by robbing his happiness. The character of Bhavani cannot be placed within a conventional patriarchal setup and she is a dominating woman who controls the lives of everyone in her family. The character is portrayed as fierce and full of rage and fury, daring to go to the end to destroy Sathyapathapan's life. In the film, the character of her husband is not shown, i.e. he is insignificant when placed next to the character Bhavani. However, things change when Sathyapathapan decides to end her arrogance at the end of the film. A slap, by doing which, according to Bhavani's brother Hareendran (Biju Menon), would have changed her much earlier. The character Hareendran, comments that if Sathyapathapan had shown quite a spirit earlier in ending Bhavani's fury, she would not have turned into a selfish and revengeful woman. A slap is

then used by the male character to domesticate the female as Bhavani returns to her husband at the end of the film.

In the film *Njangal Santhushtaranu*, the character Geethu (Abhirami) is a modern woman who doesn't fit into the conventional traditional wife role for her husband Sanjeevan (Jayaram). The film shows the means to control or reduce a woman's ego is to tame her with a slap. When Sanjeevan slaps Geethu, her father resists her mother's cry for help by saying that if she had made a mistake, then she deserves punishment from her husband. Thus, slap is a tool that is used upon Geethu to domesticate her. At the end of the film she is a changed woman. Change that happens to her is such that she conforms to the gender role of a wife, in her looks- she wears a sari (traditional attire), ties her hair and wears a flower on it and starts learning the Malayalam language as opposed to English, which she uses throughout the movie to show the sign of modernity.

*Ishtam* (2001) is a movie wherein the husband takes on the task of putting an end to the dominating, all-controlling character of his wife. Unlike any traditional subservient woman, Girija (Suma), is a beautician who over powers her husband Vipin (Sreenivasan) in all matters of his life. The character Girija, is an opinionated woman who is concerned about her status and family name. The depiction of her husband is in such a manner that he does not dare to refute any of her decisions and listens to her orders. The character Vipin, at the end of the film, dares to give her a slap where the act is pictured as something that the wife deserves. From the next scene onwards, Girija becomes docile and obedient and the slap is made trivial. Thus, slap is often a tool used by the male to control and draw the lines for a female.

In Malayalam movies of the 90s like *Gandharvam* (1993), *Mithunam* (1993), and the more recent movie *Theevandi* (2018) the protagonist slaps the female character and it gives power to the male character over the female characters. According to Foucault, power is a 'pervasive aspect of social

life and is not limited to the sphere of formal politics or of open conflict” (American Bar Foundation et al.). Power defines the relationship between the characters in these films. The film *Theevandi* depicts the character Bineesh (Tolvino Thomas) who struggles with tobacco addiction, which causes havoc in his love life. Nevertheless what is noted is that when Devi (Samyuktha Menon) has had enough of his false promises of quitting smoking, she tries to break free from their relationship. The character Bineesh, who is not ready to accept her rejection slaps her. The protagonist reacts in a manner in which it never even occurs to him that Devi is not his possession and that she has her own individuality. The character of Devi’s identity revolves around her father first and later her fiancé. There exists a complete denial of respect in their relationship, which is problematic. Next scene, in which he forcefully takes her hand and tries to mend it, testifies to the unarticulated structure of power embedded in every love relation.

There is also another character who insults Devi when she is taking a strong stance against her relationship with Bineesh. Saffer, Bineesh’s friend asks Devi to let go of her ego and forgive Bineesh. When she denies accepting his suggestions and is not willing to give Bineesh a second chance, he scorns her. Foucault argues that “power operates at the most micro levels of social relations and is omnipresent at every level of social body” (‘Key Concepts’). In the film *Theevandi*, Bineesh cannot accept rejection by his girlfriend Devi. The girlfriend Devi, rejects Bineesh when he fails to keep the promise of quitting smoking habit. The lead character Bineesh, acts as having a right to exert power over Devi because she is his girlfriend. The protagonist sees her as one whom he can dominate. Slap becomes a tool that deprives Devi of her individuality.

The most disturbing depiction of the relationship of love is in Sangeeth Sivan’s *Gandharvam*. The woman lead in the film Sridevi Menon (Kanchan), is a carefree and modern woman. However, she represents a woman of no brains. The characterisation is such that she is

immature, taking revenge against Sam without giving a second thought. The depiction of her character is as if she is a spoiled child who is, never able to make serious decisions. There seems to be a change only outwardly in the portrayal; the person on the inside is someone who confine to the feminine gender role. The character has essential traits needed for a woman according to the society, i.e., “adakkam and Othukkam” (gentleness and modesty) which is opined by the mother of the leading actor Sam Alexander (Mohanlal). A very misogynist dialogue by Sam advising Sridevi is that men can boast about their manliness. In contrast, a woman cannot say her womanliness (chastity) as destroyed. Later, when Sridevi proposes to Sam and kisses him, he slaps her. The character does not budge in her position instead says she loves him. The protagonist, later looks into the mirror, drunk and talking to himself about his actions. The male lead renders the dialogue that justifies his action and questions the morality of Sridevi’s gesture, asking if it is morally right for a girl to kiss a man publicly. bell hooks (2001) adds that “when we love rightly we know that the healthy, loving response to cruelty and abuse is putting ourselves out of harm’s way” (137). The female lead’s response to the slap and her pursuit of love for the person who slapped her make us wonder about the message that the film imparts. A denigrating character, Sridevi shows no signs of dignity or self-respect. Through a slap, Sam asserts his power over Sridevi making her a docile woman. The genre of the film, a romance, yet in their relationship Sam becomes the agent of power who tries to discipline Sridevi and makes her conform to the gender role in the society.

*Mithunam* by Priyadarshan has a female character, who undergoes the process of gendering. Power works between the characters Sethu Madhavan and Sulochana in *Mithunam*. The characters, Sulochana (Urvashi) and Sethu Madhavan (Mohanlal) confine to their gender roles. The protagonist, portrays a character who has the responsibility of taking care of his joint

family. The character is the sole breadwinner who has authority over everyone else. The protagonist polices his wife's actions and does not treat her as an equal partner but one subordinate to him. The character sees her as a lesser being and as one who doesn't understand the difficulties he faces in his career. His slap, when there is a disagreement over his lack of attention to her becomes a way to conform her to the role of a wife. The protagonist asserts his power as a husband and the slap is a sign that imparts the idea that it is normal for a husband to correct his wife when it is needed. The female lead even says that as a wife, she is the one who has to take care of all his matters and that it is her right to serve him food. The characters Sulochana and Sethu Madhavan, do not have an understanding of each other and the scene where he slaps her becomes normalized. The slap here is an antidemocratic and totalitarian act that victimises Sulochana. It is a disciplinary action that compels the woman to reform, that is, to conform to the patriarchy. The message the film imparts is that as his wife, she has to understand him and not necessarily vice versa. The female character takes all the blame for a crack in their relationship and even the slap as an accepted gesture at the end.

*Pidakkozhi Koovunna Noottandu* directed by Viji Thampi is another movie where characters fall in love with men for the reasons like being saved from goons. The character, Bhagyarekha (Urvashi) is stalked by another character Sachidanandan (Manoj K Jayan) who gives no respect to her and does not take Bhagyarekha's words into consideration. The character, Sachidanandan pursues her even after she says that his actions are becoming a nuisance for her. The character irritates her and makes fun of her. The male lead goes to the place where she works and he argues with her boss, saying that nature has given women some rules and regulations that deny them some freedom. The character delivers the dialogue when she asks him to leave the gym meant for women. The character comments that Bhagyarekha is tougher than others and that she

cannot be left alone. The character even gives reference to the story of the creation of Eve, making it clear that women are lesser beings. However, Bhagyarekha in the film starts falling for this man when he saves her from a man trying to attack her. All his actions and words of misogyny, completely ignored and they end up together. The character of Sachidanandan is such that his actions cause irritation to others but Urvashi's character does not give a second thought about him. The male lead's complete lack of treating her as an individual does not bring any rational thinking on the part of Bhagyarekha.

Things change when it comes to the films like *Sara's*, *Vaashi*, and *Pachuvum Athbutha Vilakum*. *Sara's* by Jude Anthany Joseph, has tried to bring a balance in the relationship between the main characters Sara Vincent (Anna Ben) and Jeevan Philip (Sunny Wayne) where the gender roles break. The relationship of the two characters is such that they have a mutual agreement over their life decisions. The portrayal of their relationship sets an example of how both individuals play an equal role in a love relationship rather than one dominating the other. The main characters, Jeevan and Sara, divide the domestic chores between them. The male lead stands with Sara's decision to pursue her first movie rather than having a child as their family wanted. The protagonist recognises Sara's dream, and he takes into consideration her decision to not having a child when there is a turning point in her career. Even the film mocks the usual argument of men who say that they "give enough freedom to their wives".

In *Vaashi* (2022) directed by Vishnu G. Raghav the relationship between Madhavi Mohan (Keerthy Suresh) and Ebin Mathew (Tolvino Thomas) is of equal partnership. Both of the characters give space to each other; they work together for their advancement of career as well as their relationship. The character Madhavi, can choose her life partner and chooses Ebin who respects her. The protagonist, Ebin cares for her, and there is warmth in their love. When they have

a small misunderstanding, Ebin takes the initiative to talk to her and handle the matter without being egotistic. The commitment of the characters depicts a positive picture and is appreciable. They do not take part in playing out gender roles, as the film normalizes Ebin taking care of the domestic sphere like cooking and washing dishes. Representations like these will open the doors of gender democracy. Healthy love relationships must be discussed in films for achieving gender justice.

*Pachuvum Athbutha Vilakkum* by Akhil Sathyan also tries to present characters who give value to who they are. The characterisation of Prasanth (Fahadh Faasil) and Hamsadhwani (Anjana Jayaprakash) is an attempt to depict a healthy partnership. The character Hamsadhwani, rejects her boyfriend's proposal as he tries to control her decisions and her life. She does that with the help of Prasanth. The film places Hamsadhwani as an empowered woman, daring to say no to her toxic partner. The protagonist Prasanth's relationship with Dhvani is an antithesis to that of her relationship with her boyfriend Vivek (Sanju Sivaram). The characters Prasanth and Dhvani respect each other and do not interfere in each other's space. They have a mutual understanding by the end of the movie.

## CONCLUSION

It is important to scrutinize films that takes a light hand in portraying love relationships. To view it from a critical lens becomes a need of the hour when there is an increase in the incidents of death of young women in the name of love. Films, if they do not attempt to redefine the way love is delineated, no campaigns or outbursts on empowerment can bring changes. bell hooks (2002) in her work *Communion: The Female Search for Love* defines love as a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust, where each of these attributes is

seminal for a healthy relationship (88). *Chronic Bachelor*, *Njangal Santhustharaanu* and *Ishtam* are films that portray the use of a slap as a tool to control women. Films like *Theevandi* and *Gandharvam* have leading characters who are toxic and portray relationships with women being undermined. These films have love stories, but underneath lurk, subtly, the enfolding of misogynist attitudes against women. *Mithunam* narrates the story in such a way that it is the slap given by the male that reminds the woman of her place. *Pidakkozhi Koovunna Nootandu* includes sexist dialogues that demean women. However, these are movies that celebrates love stories where women easily fall for men who demean them. In films, misogyny is something that is tolerated. When films continue to portray acts of misogyny, it leads to normalizing such harmful behaviours against women. Many such instances occur in films where love hides or undermines the toxicity. bell hooks (2001) writes in her work *All About Love: New Visions* that “all too often women believe it is a sign of commitment, an expression of love, to endure unkindness or cruelty, to forgive and forget” (248). It is also because of the process of gendering that women endure cruelty, be it a slap. A Slap is dictatorial that victimizes and subjects women. It is that which leads to the denial of authority over oneself. More and more depictions of healthy love relationships as in *Sara's*, *Vaashi* and *Pachuvum Athbuthavilakum* have to come forth for a better world where women are equal partners.

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