

Visualising Resistance: Gender, Power, and the Politics of Representation in Select Malayalam Films

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Abstract—The paper titled “Visualising Resistance: Gender, Power, and the Politics of Representation in Select Malayalam Films” critically examines the representation of patriarchy and dominant ideologies in 22 *Female Kottayam* (2012), *Biriyani* (2020), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021). Based on influential paradigms of feminist film theory, the study employs Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Luce Irigaray’s deconstruction of phallogentrism to examine how women characters are objectified as “objects of desire” and denied subjectivity. The paper also draws on Helene Cixous’s ‘écriture feminine’ to examine how women’s bodies and experiences become sites of resistance, protest, and authorship. In addition, the research references Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of gender as socially constructed, John Berger’s visual representation theories, and Wollstonecraft’s female agency. Based on these films, the paper highlights the shift from female protagonists to empowered protagonists who reverse patriarchal roles allocated to them. It signifies how Malayalam new wave cinema subverts gender norms and calls for inclusive representation that authenticates women’s lived experiences, bodily control, and resistance. The paper concludes by arguing the political necessity of feminist narratives in rewriting dominant cinematic discourses.

Index Terms—Feminist Film Theory, Patriarchy in Malayalam Cinema, Male Gaze and Phallogentrism, Écriture Feminine, Gender Representation, Resistance and Empowerment

I. INTRODUCTION

The film is one of the most widely attractive forms of entertainment. Every year, a large number of films are created, as well as a large number of viewers. The films can be described as a reflection of society and a mirror of life. They help us to understand our lives from different perspectives. “Film as dream, film as music. No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls” (Bergman, 1988). It is the art of the world that one can share his/her ideas with the audience. As a result, it encourages people to take a fresh look at the world. As films have a large impact on changing society’s views and practices, as well as providing new insight into the social milieu, they help audiences in understanding what is going on in society. In all genres of literature, including cinema, the male-female relationship has been a recurring theme. Its evolution has also been represented in films and literature. When the ‘weaker sex’ was defined in accordance with patriarchal interests, however, they began to fight and have continued to redefine themselves to this day. Within the Indian setting, where women are perceived as fulfilling inferior duties to males, the films play an important role in influencing perceptions about gender roles and gender identities. Men dominated the cinema industry, which portrayed the supremacy of patriarchy by delivering narratives about men’s valour, goals, and aspirations. “Men act; women appear. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger, 1972). Here, female characters are introduced just for praising the male lead or for showcasing his talents. It’s difficult to discover stories about a single unattached woman, excluding scenes related to praising her youth and beauty. Women are often used as spectacle, as the object of gaze, which is particularly visible in the song and dance performances that are such an important component of a film’s publicity and sales. These women characters are created to meet patriarchal needs and to confirm women are considered the meek, weak, fragile, and second sex in social structures, which are actually created by manhood for their benefits. Here, the Malayalam film industry is no different. Women characters were portrayed as sly, battling, and surrendering to their husband’s wishes in the male-female relationship, which includes the most prevalent husband-wife partnership. This marital relationship has long been a topic of conversation in Kerala. It is true that changes in the real world will have an impact on the fictional universe too. Contemporary films demonstrate how this phallogentric relationship has changed and continues to change. This relationship has been altered and is currently being redefined, as can be seen.

Unlike traditional depictions of women, new wave films attempted to present them as a subject rather than an object. They began to uncover the miseries, dreams, ambitions, limitations, problems, restrictions, thoughts, and perspectives of women. As a result, women characters possessed a well-written individuality, deep psychology, strongly narrated personality, and self-respect with passions for living. Instead of being coy and submissive, they started questioning inequality. Rather than applauding the male protagonists and living as a sex toy for them, they stood for themselves. The films “22 *Female Kottayam*” (2012) directed by Ashique Abu, “*Biriyani*” (2020) directed by Sajin Baabu, and “*The Great Indian Kitchen*” (2021) directed by Geo Baby are among the women-centric Malayalam films that urged women to confront harassment, sexual aggression, fear, and

domestic abuse. It raises direct questions related to inequality and male dominance in the society. All three films discuss the stories of three bold women from three different circumstances, and they faced gender inequalities from different situations. Tessa K Abraham (Rima Kallingal), Khadeeja (Kani Kusruti) and a nameless heroine (Nimisha Sajayan) represent many women who fought against male domination. Tessa is a nurse, both Khadeeja and the nameless heroine are homemakers. All three were enslaved by toxic masculinity and male chauvinism. Instead of remaining silent, these women took a bold stand against patriarchal dominance, transforming themselves from victims to potential threats to those who abused them. They are challenging and destabilising so-called stereotypes. Also, we learn from these films that it is not required to have a solid background in order to break the chain of oppression; self-awareness is sufficient. A feminist reading of the film aids in understanding the miseries faced by women characters along with their path of empowerment. Till today, feminism has been characterised through three periods. First, it removed legal barriers to gender equality in areas such as voting and property rights. Then it focused on abolishing domestic violence, inequality in the workplace, marital rape, and other factors of inequities. Also, the second phase debated for reproductive rights. In the third phase, the conflict became more abstract, with the purpose of blurring the borders between male and female by eliminating gender norms and stereotypes. The characters such as Tessa, Khadeeja, and the nameless heroine, represent how feminist perspectives are implemented in new wave films, especially in the Malayalam film industry. So, such women-centric films represent the dreams, ambitions, and passions of women along with the struggles they faced because of the patriarchal norms.

II. REPRESENTATION OF DOMINANT–DORMANT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

Women's status has shifted dramatically, with women being more economically and educationally autonomous than in the past. This shift, however, will not provide the appearance that women are empowered, autonomous, or modern. They are still dealing with challenges, but in a different way. In an Indian setting where patriarchy prevailed, the film industry is also male-dominated which delivers the stories from the male perspective, where women characters are placed inferior to men. As men cover many roles in the filmmaking, the perspectives that are produced in the films support him. Here, female characters are usually depicted as voiceless. Their roles include praising male needs, making his path easier, and acting as a sex object to please him. So, women's characters in popular films are under-represented. They are denied individuality, stable personality, and well-written characteristics. Instead, they are depicted as voiceless, weak, dependent, and often as sexual objects. In relation to man and woman, we can use Hegel's concept of reciprocity. A man needs a woman to contrast himself to in order to gain a stronger position in their relationship, just as a master requires a slave to be called a master. As a result, women are solely depicted in relation to males as their husbands, lovers, or mothers, rather than being given their own identities. So, man became the self and subject whereas woman is tagged as the Other and object, which is controlled by the man and for the man. They started having a dominant-dormant relationship where women are oppressed, subjugated, and denied voice and authority under the control of the patriarchal society, which benefits the male majority.

In the film *Biriyani*, when Khadeeja was having her meal from a mess, she couldn't get away from the cashier's probing eyes. She tried hard to survive his stare, but it was of no use. His lusty eyes and watering mouth showcased the intensity of his male gaze to attain her body. Even though it was her choice to enter into the field of prostitution, she was denied freedom. She was unable to decide what to do and with whom to do it. Men dominated her choice of action, as they thought a prostitute is public property. There is an incident in the film where Khadeeja was asked to share her bed with more men than she agreed to. Despite the lower payment, she was forced to have sex with more men. Some men were physically violent to her. Others were repeatedly needy. Despite the reality that Khadeeja stopped doing prostitution and was anticipating a new life, with the dream of her unborn child, she is subjected to more exploitation. While being interrogated by the police over her brother, one of the police officers tries to sexually exploit her under the pretext of interrogation. That turns into a physical fight, and she loses the baby, further traumatising her. When the local police tried to seduce her, she managed to escape from it. But they ignored her refusal and didn't wait for her consent as they thought 'once a prostitute, always be a prostitute' (*Biriyani*, 2020). Also, whenever the police or authorities caught her for prostitution in the name of 'immorality,' they all used to ignore the men with whom she had shared her bed but focused more on her. Khadeeja experienced many lustful stares from authorities who caught her in the name of prostitution too. Tessa K Abraham from *22 Female Kottayam* also experienced similar lustful stares. Dinesh, who is popular as DK used to stare at her whenever she passed in front of him. He even asked for a trip with her. Her boyfriend Cyril sold her to his boss Hegde in order to make him happy and the boss raped her twice. Here, these men only saw Tessa's body instead of her personality. So, Khadeeja and Tessa were the subjects of the male gaze. Khadeeja noticed that as a single woman or a divorcee, it's hard to survive the lusty stares. In her essay "*Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*" (1975), Laura Mulvey talks about the idea of the male gaze in films. The term male gaze refers to a sexualised manner of seeing women that makes men excited and happy. Here, the woman is placed as an object of heterosexual male desire. Mulvey claimed, using psychoanalytic terminology, that traditional films are a response to a deep-seated yearning known as "scopophilia," or the sexual pleasure associated with seeing. Woman is a spectacle, according to Mulvey, and man is the bearer of the look. So, based on Mulvey's observations, one can say that both Khadeeja and Tessa were considered as objects of desire.

Biriyani opens with a darkly lit bedroom scene in which Khadeeja is shown to have emotionally disconnected sex with her husband. After he is through, he resumes his usual routine, showing the underlying criticism of the film that women are objectified and their emotional needs neglected. Khadeeja is then shown to pleasure herself, a scene in which she is in charge of her body. But the act enrages her husband, who is furious and scolds her for the incorrect circumcision of her clitoris, showing the film's criticism of body control and gendered oppression. He understands that sex with him is unnecessary for her when she can obtain pleasure on her own. So, he denied her right to have pleasure by masturbating. More than giving importance to self-feelings and explorations, Khadeeja was supposed to fulfil her husband's needs. Her desires were completely silenced and ignored. In her essay, Mulvey claimed the woman's own sexual desires, feelings, and thoughts are less essential than being framed by male desire. So, here Khadeeja was not regarded as an autonomous being. The man in her life was the subject and absolute. In *22 Female Kottayam*, there is on-screen rape in a graphic representation in which Tessa was cruelly raped by Cyril's

boss Hedge. When she returns home from work, Hegde confronts her and rapes her after asking bluntly, “Can I have sex with you?” (22 *Female Kottayam*, 2012). When she refused to have sex with him, he snatched Tessa, physically attacked her and raped her when she was half-conscious, ignoring her resistance and attempts to stop him. The camera switches in a succession of startling views during the episode, changing its emphasis from Hegde’s hands and midsection to Tessa’s rear, giving importance to her torn outfits and to her wounds, which Hegde made. Also, the camera focused on her painful expressions in the bedroom scene. In the old Malayalam movies, we can see similar scenes related to rape. In a 2006 movie named “*Chinthamani Kolacase*” (Murder Case of Chinthamani), the female lead Chinthamani (Bhavana) is raped by the villain Dr. Kim Sudarshan (Prem Prakash). The camera shows the scene in a medium shot size where Chinthamani is running away from Dr. Kim. Her running for escape is followed by the scene of Dr. Kim’s evil smile. Even though she protested against his harassment, he raped her cruelly. Through the close-up angle of her facial expressions where she is painfully moaning. Such rape scenes are created in a way that they can provide voyeuristic pleasure to the male audiences. Laura Mulvey claims it “as the scopophilia that is produced by films for the male audiences” (Mulvey, 1975). When Tessa was overcoming the mental and physical trauma of the initial rape and hardly surviving to meet the normal life, Hedge again raped her. She was physically and mentally getting destroyed again. When Tessa plans to assassinate Hegde, the authorities arrive and detain Tessa for having cocaine in her bag. As a result of the court findings, she is imprisoned. Cyril is the one who stuffed the drug into her suitcase. Again, Cyril and Hedge denied her right to live peacefully.

The concept of ‘virginity’, which is attributed to women is also a way to dominate them. Through this concept, man makes sure his woman is modest which is related to chastity. He makes a boundary in which she can’t have any sexual relationship with other men. Even though he is free to have sex with multiple partners, he won’t allow her to have the same, as he always wants his wife under his superiority. The film 22 *Female Kottayam* also explores the concept of virginity. In a patriarchal society, virginity is only assigned to women. Here, Tessa is brave enough to admit that she isn’t a virgin. This announcement is hailed as a watershed moment in Malayalam film history, as all previous films featured and continue to feature virgin female heroes. But what happens in this picture goes well beyond this assessment. Tessa is ‘confessing’ that she is not a virgin when the relationship between her and Cyril begins. Otherwise, why should she tell Cyril if she doesn’t value her virginity? She doesn’t enquire about Cyril, and he doesn’t say anything about himself either. So, it is patriarchal consciousness that causes Tessa to admit her ‘impurity,’ and it is certain that a Malayali viewer’s mass consciousness could never have digested the picture if Cyril is a ‘pure’ man throughout the film (without a hint of villainy). The film has purposefully incorporated Tessa’s Kottayam slang in various parts, ostensibly to provide the humour. But it’s important to keep track of where and when it appears. Cyril makes fun of Tessa’s ‘funny’ language by disparaging her serious conversations whenever she speaks about her life and future. This project everyone’s unconscious thought, which is formed by the widespread belief that women are not allowed to think or behave higher than males. According to the created idea, men are to decide on the future of women. Cyril ideologically dominates Tessa in all thinking aspects of her and gives no value or respect to her dreams and ambitions. He breaks the serious conversations about her passion and future using his minor jokes. He prevents her from dreaming bigger and higher, as she is a woman. Cyril’s urge to correct Tessa (despite the fact that she is correct in her own way) demonstrates this.

In *Biriyani*, Khadeeja and her mother are probed by an NIA investigation for her brother’s supposed ISIS membership. In the midst of this unrest, Khadeeja is divorced by her husband via a text message containing the word ‘Talaq’ thrice. This is driven by fear of social backlash and facilitated by a local cleric who refers to Khadeeja as an ill omen. His action shows the deeply rooted patriarchal and communal fears that control women’s lives. The director shows that it is very easy for a man to separate from his marital relationship even though the woman isn’t ready enough for it. By sending a word three times through a mobile device, he separated his relationship with Khadeeja, making her homeless. Her religion gave such authority to men to divorce their wives by using the word ‘Talaq.’ But if a woman wants to get separated from her marital relationship with her husband, it will be a big task. Khadeeja was supposed to remain modest and chaste for maintaining the dignity of her family, as the family’s dignity is secured in her ‘vagina.’ Even though the religion privileged her husband so that he could have multiple wives, it asked Khadeeja to protect her dignity through chastity. Her husband divorced her even without having face-to-face contact, just through mobile devices. As he is a man, separating a marital relationship is easy for him and he can control his wife’s destiny over a text message. The film clearly portrays the dominance of men using their privileges and how they dominate women. Khadeeja’s husband can dress however he wants, can go wherever he wishes, and can control his wife in any way he desires. It’s not just her husband, but the majority of the men in the movie enjoyed their privileges by subjugating women around them, and the majority of women were oppressed under the male dominance. As the filmmaker Sajin Babu quoted “women weren’t allowed to explore themselves. Their lack of independence and freedom is caused by the male majority which treats women as the object of their desires, nothing more than that” (Baabu, 2020).

In the film *The Great Indian Kitchen*, similar to the hero, the heroine is also well educated. But she is denied the access to go to a work where she can support herself. Instead, her father-in-law, along with her husband, asks her to do the conventional roles that are given to women. The story takes place during the days after their marriage, an arranged one between two people from very different backgrounds and environments. They had not seen each other until then, when they shared a fleeting, traditional tea-time meeting locally referred to as ‘pennu kaanal’, a traditional custom whereby the bride is seen by the prospective bridegroom prior to marriage. This fleeting and superficial meeting serves as the basis for a relationship characterised by emotional distance and social conformity. In this custom, the bridegroom can visit the bride’s house and see her before the wedding date is set. The bridegroom, his relatives (including his uncle, father, mother, and siblings), and friends will visit the bride at her home. Here the bride isn’t allowed to visit the bridegroom’s house, even though she is the one who is going to spend the rest of her life in his house. The man decides the date of marriage, and the whole marriage process is like a contract between man and man. Luce Irigaray begins her essay ‘*When the goods get together*’ (1981) by stating that women are considered a commodity by men. They are exchanged by men, among men, and to men, just like other material items. As a result, they are enslaved in the sphere of men. Males, on the other hand, are not included in this realm. If she is married, she is the one who is supposed to change her identity and house to maintain the marital relationship. There are few situations in Kerala where a man changes his house. But majorly, such practices are for women. She spends her early ages in her paternal house, then shifts to her husband’s, and again shifts to his son’s if it is needed. If a woman wished to be free from marriage, society wouldn’t easily allow

that. In the name of social security and status, they implement the idea of marriage. If a woman wants to have a divorce with her husband, her identity gets lost, as her identity is related to the man in her life. In the majority of the situations, her own parents insist her to stay with her husband in his house, as a married daughter comes back and staying in her parents's house is considered a shame and taboo for them. As the character Meenakshi in the Hindi language film '*Meenakshi Sundareswar*' says, "a daughter-in-law is the first refuge in the world" (*Meenakshi Sundareswar*, 2021). In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the patriarchal father figure embodies the contradictions of modern patriarchal households. While he is a self-proclaimed conservative figure, he spends most of his time engrossed in his mobile phone, proving the selective nature of his conservatism. Rice cooked on a wood furnace, chutney made on a grindstone, and clothes cleaned on a wash-stone are all things he is familiar with and sticks to. All these tasks are hard to do without the help of modern facilities. But the father adheres to such practices, as he is not aware of such difficulties and it's not his duty to perform. Even though his wife has a postgraduate degree, he didn't let her go for work as he wanted her to fit the tag of an 'ideal housewife' who spends her whole life in the four walls of the kitchen in order to take care of them. He proudly says "My wife is a postgraduate. She wished to work. But I listened to my dad. Because of that, all the children are in a very good position. What they do is much greater than what bureaucrats and ministers do" (*The Great Indian Kitchen*, 2021). By glorifying the sacrifices of women, he asks her daughter-in-law to follow the same traditional paths and to give up her life and higher dreams for the sake of taking care of the house and kids. Through positive words, he is directly damaging her passion and future. At the same time, the father is not able to do some little chores of his own. His wife, on the other hand, is depicted as a caregiver by complying with his orders from presenting him with his toothbrush to tying shoes on his feet before he leaves for work. While he rests after his prescribed tasks, the work required of the women in the household has no end and is mostly unspoken. The film starts with a montage of a young woman dancing in joy, cut short by a close-up of food sizzling in oil. The shot visually encapsulates the sacrifice of individual freedom and selfhood that marriage can involve for women. The heroine inherits the mother-in-law's domesticity role, who has lived her life locked up in the kitchen, serving the needs of her household. When the heroine mentions that she would love to resume her love for teaching dance, her father puts down her ambition with a throwaway comment about her cooking, encapsulating how women's ambitions are undervalued in the domestic sphere. Above all, the film avoids crude depictions of physical and verbal abuse. Rather, it demonstrates how patriarchal domination operates through affection, routine, and normalised expectations. They wanted to craft her with complete dependence, feeble mental elegance, delicate sensibility, and lovely docile manners instead of making her an independent human being. There is an incident in the film in which one of the relatives of the hero (elder uncle's son) comes to visit the daughter-in-law and mocks her for making 'an average quality' black tea for him. The same relative proves his cooking skills at cooking in the same night itself, and it makes a great mess in the kitchen. She lost her nerve by seeing the mess he made in the kitchen, and with more patience, she tries to clean it. But the relative replied to her to spend her time in the kitchen by saying "What work is there in the kitchen now? Didn't we do all the work?" (*The Great Indian Kitchen*, 2021). His reply shows he only sees the surface level, not what happened in its essence. When he acted as the main chef, she forgot the duty of an assistant to clean the surroundings. But if a woman does so, it will break the equilibrium of the house itself. It is appreciable that the mother-in-law has always supported the daughter, and this is a hint that shows that the mother is indirectly protesting against the kitchen-based patriarchal system, as she is also a victim of such treatment. So, she didn't want her daughter-in-law to follow such cyclical movements and to become an unpaid maid.

The son's life is not dissimilar to that of his father, despite the lack of a strict regimen. The life of this schoolteacher is rather mechanical, beginning with yoga in the morning and finishing with sex at night. There is no impediment to his typical routine. He teaches his students, "Family is a durable association of husband and wife with or without children" (*The Great Indian Kitchen*, 2021), despite his viewpoint that the marriage system is male-dominated and entirely different. On the other side, the heroine is struggling hard in the kitchen till she painfully sleeps at night because of his hard sexual contact. The heroine's emotional and psychological asphyxiation are implied by repeated montages of repulsive kitchen rubbish and humdrum domestic routine, cut with emotionless bedroom scenes. The narrative also intersects with real controversies, such as that of women's access to the Sabarimala temple, evoking internalised misogyny and menstrual taboos imposed by women on themselves. The father and son, who are abiding by their vows and preparing to embark on a journey to Sabarimala, are worried by her 'impurity.' They are afraid to touch her and even talk to her directly, thinking the 'impurity' of her will damage their vows. Here, using menstruation as a tool to relate impurity with women, society dominates over her. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her essay '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*' (1792), discusses how men differentiate themselves from women. She says nature made both man and woman biologically different. That doesn't mean one is pure and strong and the other is impure and weak. The film shows how men construct the concept of impurity related to women even though such arguments don't have any scientific facts. Furthermore, the male ego is well portrayed in the film. Hero is a clumsy eater in his house. But he knows table manners at restaurants. When she noticed it, he replied, "It is my home, my convenience. I'll do what I like" (*The Great Indian Kitchen*, 2021). And even he demanded her to apologise, though she didn't commit anything wrong. In another incident, when she asked for a 'foreplay' as she has so much pain during sexual intercourse, he vulgarly commented and even doubted her virginity, as she knows well about sex. He didn't appreciate his wife correcting his mistakes; instead, he made her apologise, as she hurt his ego. Here the hero already developed a concept of 'Ideal I' just like in Jacques Lacan's mirror stage. According to Lacan, the experience with the image of himself or herself reflected in the mirror as a whole, stable, autonomous self in the mirror stage provides the child with an ideal image of himself or herself that does not match the infant's current experiential reality. The infant embarks on a lifelong journey to fully correlate with this 'Ideal I' after developing a 'connection' to it through identification. Here, the infant is the hero itself. He had a thought in his mind that he is ideal and perfect. Because of this concept, he didn't like his inferiors, such as, his wife who was rectifying him. He never thinks he has any shortcomings but always thinks that his wife is inferior and lacks many qualities. Moreover, he is just a replica of his father, who is also not ready to accept his mistakes in front of his wife. So, living under such toxic masculine figures is difficult for the heroine. At the times when she is working without any rest, the father-in-law and husband are having their relaxations. Even though every member in the family is living under the same roof, the director shows the kitchen space is not yet democratised. The husband of the heroine and his father tried to tie her inside the wedlock and in the kitchen by using the traditional concept of 'eternal feminine.' The concept of the 'ideal family,' which promotes the kitchen as a woman's area where she cooks food, cleans dishes, washes clothe and maintains the food habits

of the entire family. All popular 'family films' in Malayalam have propagated the same concept of women who spend their lives in their kitchens, sacrificing their time and health to be a good daughter, wife, mother, and even grandmother. This 'ideal family' concept reinforces the need for the 'eternal feminine'. The woman here is glorified as eternal. She is considered a goddess, as she sacrifices everything that belongs to her for her family. She is supposed to sacrifice her rest, time, energy, health, food, and every little to big thing for making others comfortable. Such sacrifices are her duty, and if she follows such duties, she will be regarded as eternal. Men implement this concept over women to dominate them. Through this, he can easily tie her inside the house, as it's her responsibility to look after the house and take care. It makes men free from all households and chores. He is free enough to achieve whatever he wants in his career, as he is liberated from many home chores, even from taking care of his own offspring. Simone De Beauvoir quotes "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949) in her book *'The Second Sex'*. This gave second-wave feminists the realisation that gender is a product of society; it is not natural but developed through social conditioning. It is a social construct, not a biological reproduction. It assigns inferiority, weakness, meekness, sensitivity, tenderness, and emotionality to women and assumes that these qualities are intrinsic and immutable. Man, according to de Beauvoir, claims to be universal personhood. Male philosophers have used theology, religion, biology, and other scientific discourses to explain rather than confront the assumption of women's inferiority throughout history.

In *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the cinematic visuals help the characters to fix their identity in the lock, which suits and satisfies patriarchal needs. It problematises the kitchen, which is characterised in terms of gender. As the film mainly revolves around the different scenes in the kitchen, it uncovers the hardships of women in order to take care of the rest of the house. The very first scene of the kitchen in which the heroine enters after her marriage has dark lighting in order to establish the grey shaded life of the womanhood inside the kitchen with the help of mise-en-scene. The film's rhythm is determined by the sounds in the kitchen, with no assistance from a background score. Furthermore, no name is given to any of the key characters, including the hero and heroine. The hero is one time addressed as 'Prasad,' but throughout the movie, it's clear that the director consciously ignores his name. Even without a name, characters may quickly recognise father, mother, wife, husband, brother, mother-in-law, and others by their shared patterns of reference. The audience takes on the roles of these characters. The film shows some rare men who help their partners in households. But the majority of men are like the hero. They are not aware of the leakage in the kitchen pipe, the clogged washbasin, the waste pit, or anything related to the hardships in the kitchen. They only remember the taste of food. The film shows how men subjugate women using the kitchen as a tool. It portrays the kitchen as a temporary area for establishing discipline by inflicting silent injustice on its residents. The film has the potential to profoundly disrupt the existing system, which is built on patriarchy, as well as public awareness of it. The director brilliantly shows how kitchens became the place where justice has continually been denied. Through injecting the common notion that the kitchen represents 'women's area' and the portico, which is the front room where the house is connected with the outer side of the world, usually stands for 'man's domain,' society is trying to make the concept that women always deserve the backward as they are the 'second sex'. It makes women feel inferior, as they don't have any connection with the outer world, but are congested inside the four walls of the kitchen. In all these three movies, female leads were dominated by the male leads in one way or another. They used religion, power, money, status, sexual harassment, kitchen, and traditional concepts to oppress the existence of the women. We can see similar circumstances and situations in real life. So, through *Biriyani*, *22 Female Kottayam*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen*, the directors and crew well portrayed how social conditioning and gender roles affect women's empowerment and equality.

III. TRANSFORMATION OF OPPRESSED WOMEN: FROM VICTIMS TO SURVIVORS

The woman's individuality is depicted in new wave cinema in a very different way than it is in traditional caricature. In the depiction of female debonairness, there has been a paradigm change. Women characters started having self-esteem, independence, freedom, and their own voice instead of just being sex symbols who are weak and fragile. When male characters tried to destroy the female characters in different ways, instead of asking for aid from their male friends and relatives, females started to stand up for themselves and take revenge into their own hands. Here, female leads responded to their abusers in various ways based on their circumstances. As abusers are the products of the patriarchal system, women characters not only avenged their male abusers but also challenged the toxic patriarchal structure, which created dominant ideologies and directly corrupted knowledge production. These women characters didn't want themselves to be treated like victims; instead, they wanted to overcome the obstacles and challenge the existing system. Thus, their responses became the key event in the new wave cinemas.

Tessa K Abraham, the female lead in *22 Female Kottayam*, showcased the courage needed for womanhood in order to survive physical harassment and the traumas associated with it. When Tessa was primarily raped by Hedge, she shut herself up from disclosing the incident and revealing the name of the abuser. She wanted a normal life with Cyril that was untouched by problems and further investigations. But, when Hedge again raped her, she came out of the zone of patience and silence and tried to take revenge with the assistance of Cyril. But, by the half of the film, Tessa discovered the mask of Cyril who cheated her cruelly by using her love. That knowledge was totally strange for her. Cyril not only helped his boss, Hedge, achieve sexual pleasure by using Tessa but also made her life behind the bars of jail by alleging her name in a drug case. One should need a source of energy to respond towards injustice happening to them. Likewise, Tessa received enough courage and strength from her life in jail. When she mingled with her co-prisoners, she came to know about their past, in which most of them struggled with injustice resulting from patriarchal setups. She heard different stories of different prisoners, which are filled with sexist oppressions. She says, "I saw a number of women who were wounded, who had witnessed death nearby. I got more optimistic about my chances of surviving" (*22 Female Kottayam*, 2012). The montage in which Tessa is pictured meditating under a tree and thinking carefully in front of a burning fire where some food is being prepared in a vessel demonstrates her deep thought for carrying out her revenge. This scene can also be interpreted as her evolution. After attaining enough boldness to execute her

plans, Tessa murdered Hedge with the help of some companions by poisoning him with a cobra. She couldn't take her gaze away from his eyes as she watched him slowly die. She remembered situations in which she pleaded with Hedge not to rape her while he laughed at her. Cyril had committed a worse crime against her than Hedge had. He sold her love and deceived her. So, she set up a meeting with him and sedated him later that evening. She had surgery to remove his male organ.

A psychoanalytic analysis of a film can reveal a lot about the most militant version of feminism. Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic philosophy has dominated cinema theory, particularly among film theorists like Laura. In 1927, Sigmund Freud said in his paper '*Fetishism*' that "probably no male human being is spared the frightening shock of imminent castration at the sight of female genitals" (Freud, 1927). Tessa resorts to castration as a form of vengeance. She doesn't want to murder him. She selected castration for the youthful, active individual. It is shown as a small operation. Furthermore, the guy seems strangely unaffected or surprised by the absence of a phallus, retorting that his male identity isn't dependent on it. French philosopher Luce Irigaray criticised Sigmund Freud's concept of phallocentrism through her essay "*When the goods get together*" (1977). Sigmund Freud propagates the idea that says, "Man gives and Woman takes" (Freud, 1927). In other words, it is a man's penis that enters into a woman's vagina. As a result, a man is the giver and a woman is the taker, and the former is superior to the latter. He again stated that "as females lack penises, they have penis envy" (Freud, 1927). Penis envy is a term that describes a woman's bitterness and jealousy over not having access to the advantages that men have. Irigaray questioned it here, claiming that the phallus possesses no greater power. She believed that a woman was a subject, not an object, and hence a unique individual. She went on to say that Freudian thought attempts to legitimise masculine violence and feminine submission through anatomical-physiological imperatives. In her 1975 essay, "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*," Laura Mulvey criticises the concept of phallocentrism. She states on the basis of psychoanalysis that a woman's 'actual absence of a penis' symbolises she is not valued as that of a man. Both Irigaray and Mulvey question Freud's psychoanalytic theory associated with phallocentrism, in which the phallus is considered as the symbol of dominance. In other words, the idea of phallocentrism is directly associated with the 'superiority of penis,' which results in male dominance. In order to shatter Cyril's conscious thought of male dominance, she removed his phallus. She did it in response to his dominant (Cyril) – dormant (Tessa) attitude, which was reflected from his superior 'manly' attitude. In addition, Tessa castrated Cyril for not repeating the same activity on other women. She confidently reveals to Cyril, "When you were unconscious, I surgically removed your male organ. In medical terms, it is called a penectomy" (22 *Female Kottayam*, 2012). She then questions him, "You have experienced only pleasure from there (penis). Are you able to understand pain now?" Furthermore, Tessa confirms to Cyril that "You may have emotions now. But the sex you celebrated and traded is no more for you. You won't stand before a girl confidently" (22 *Female Kottayam*, 2012). As Cyril committed a bigger mistake to her than Hedge, Tessa thought of castrating him, unlike killing Hedge. It suggests living as a phallus lacking maleness is more punishable than death for the patriarchal mentality. At the end of the movie, it gives a message through a voiceover that "This is not just the story of a girl who was repeatedly cheated. Tessa K. Abraham is a reminder. A reminder that a woman's endurance is not her weakness" (22 *Female Kottayam*, 2012).

Khadeeja from *Biriyani* boldly replied to the society that treated her just like a tasty bit of meat with her own flesh. *Biriyani* comes in a variety of flavours for the audience to enjoy. As the title suggests, it's about food, but it's also about terrorism, religion, and women. Alternatively, this film can be classified as none of the above. It is a coming-of-age film about a lady who is ignored and abused by her family and society at every step, viewed only through an individualist viewpoint. It's about a woman whose husband can't keep her satisfied in bed, whose mother-in-law despises her for straightforwardness, whose mother suffers from mental illness, and whose brother is murdered for being a terrorist. By presenting the body at its most basic, clumsiest, and violent moments, *Biriyani* prepares the audience for the inevitable climax. Through Khadeeja's life, the film portrays how women are helpless when they are smashed out of their houses, as they are illiterate and jobless. As her parents arranged her early marriage without giving her proper education for the sake of being a typical modest Muslim girl, she became the victim of patriarchy. As Mary Wollstonecraft quotes in her '*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*', "I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to persuade them that soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings are only the objects of pity, and that kind of love which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of desire" (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Khadeeja was also taught to live inside the cages of modesty. But, when the situation worsened, Khadeeja stood up for herself. She hosted an iftar for the people who disturbed and oppressed her. Also, she invited significant members from all the backgrounds of the society. She made them eat human flesh. In other words, she made them as cannibals. Their ideologies directly or indirectly oppressed her. It devoured her body and emotions on several occasions. So, she avenged them by serving biriyani mixed with the human foetus that they didn't 'allow' her to grow and nourish as her baby. She also thought of adding her excreta into the biriyani. But she stopped it because she didn't think they deserved it and instead planned to turn them into cannibals without their knowledge. She replied to them with her own body. She used her flesh as a form of retaliation.

Helene Cixous, in her essay "*The Laugh of the Medusa*" (1975) examines how the female body is intimately linked to female writing. She encourages her audience to write by utilising blunt words like "writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous, 2010). Cixous' message, in which she emphasises that women must write for themselves and claim their bodies, bridges the gap between the female body's physicality and authorship. She coined the concept 'Écriture féminine,' in which women write their stories with their bodies. In *Biriyani*, Khadeeja showcased her revenge towards the society with her body. Her stillborn foetus is nothing but a part of her body itself. Kannaki, from Ilango Adikal's "*Cilappatikaram*" (The Tale of an Anklet), cuts off one breast and throws it towards the kingdom of Madurai as a form of retaliation for the injustice done to her husband Kovalan, who was mistakenly hanged as a thief by the king. She did it because she was enraged by the injustice that had occurred. Similarly, in the village folk legend of Nangeli, a lower-caste lady who lived during the nineteenth century at

Travancore sacrificed her breasts in opposition to the caste-based “breast tax.” Nangeli protested against the harassment by slicing off her breasts and giving them to him in a plantain leaf when the officer arrived at her house to assess her breasts and collect the breast tax. Both Kannaki and Nangeli are some examples of *écriture féminine*. Like Khadeeja, they also protested with their bodies against the injustice and discrimination that happened to them. They, like Khadeeja, used their bodies to protest the unfairness and inequality they faced. Khadeeja served her stillborn child to her oppressors as a method of displaying her fury towards the system when Kannaki and Nangeli tore off their breasts. The character ‘Dopdi Mehjen’ from Mahasweta Devi’s short story ‘*Draupadi*,’ which is translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is similarly comparable to Khadeeja. When Dopdi was arrested by the police officers, they raped her repeatedly, as she was most wanted among the rebel group that protested against the government policies that marginalised her tribal community. When the police tried to cover her nakedness in order to arrange her meeting with the Senanayak (the superior officer), Dopdi proceeded to walk out of her tent without any clothes and with her head held high. Her body was covered in blood, indicating that she had been raped repeatedly. Senanayak is frightened to counter an unarmed woman because she pushes him with her bare breasts. Despite the fact that Draupadi has no weapons at the time, she uses her body as her most powerful weapon. The body that was beaten, tortured, and blamed for her demise becomes the very weapon with which she fights back. Khadeeja, like Dopdi, utilised her own body as a weapon. Her baby died because of the miscarriage that occurred when the policemen tortured her and forced her to have sex with him. They killed her baby along with her hope of having a new life. In response, she used that stillborn foetus for executing her revenge. The tormented and slaughtered foetus by the masculine gaze became the reason for the oppressors’ becoming cannibals. She served biriyani with the flavours of human flesh, as they treated her like a piece of flesh for satisfying their desires.

The nameless heroine of *The Great Indian Kitchen* showcases how kitchens became the place where justice has continually been denied, through her protest for escaping from the conventional gender roles. The film stresses the common notion about how the kitchen is represented as ‘women’s space’ and thus the ‘second space.’ Here, manhood enjoys the portico, which connects the house with the outer world, as their domain, and thus the ‘primary place.’ This concept consciously or unconsciously injects the thought that women are the second sex and women should always be in the back. In Malayalam, all popular ‘family films’ have perpetuated the idea of women who spend their lives in their kitchens and sacrifice their time and health for the sake of being a good daughter, wife, mother, and even grandmother. Shaji Jacob, an Indian cinematographer, once quoted that the “kitchen is the domestic grave of any Malayali woman, who has not yet arrived on the stage. It is a prison which is monotonous like frigid bedrooms where liberation is almost impossible.” (Jacob, 2021). So, the male-centred majority crafted the concept of the kitchen as an antidemocratic space in which women are denied their equal rights and voice for the benefits of manhood. Even though our country gained its freedom and became democratic, half the population didn’t attain their freedom, and many houses aren’t democratised. Along the way, the cheerful photographs of the kitchen gradually give way to photographs of rot and disarray, in keeping with the mental degeneration of the protagonist. One of the powerful images is the grinding of coconut by its abrasive, monotonous sound, over images of framed weddings, evoking the violence underlying domestic normality. Fed up, the heroine shows the courage to break the chain upon her and goes out of the house after having a small revenge out of her frustration by throwing the filthy water from the kitchen leakage upon the husband and father-in-law. Here, the shot is direct to the audience to emphasise that such treatment is unavoidable for the male-dominant majority who oppress women. When she walks out of his house, numerous shots of women who are involved in household chores are shown in her path to portray the fact that the heroine showed the courage to free herself from the burdens imposed by male power. The husband and father-in-law are the very example of male-dominated society that is sugar-coated with benevolent sexism. Here the filthy water, which she has thrown upon them, is taken from the kitchen. In the film, there are scenes in which she repeatedly asks her husband to fix the leakage in the pipe that she usually uses in the kitchen. As this pipe doesn’t directly bother the husband, he didn’t give much care to fix it. Just like the pipe, she became a victim to many hardships that occurred in the kitchen. Nobody cared or assisted her even though they had the physical health to do it. Through the female lead, the director portrays how women are subjugated inside the patriarchal kitchen setup. So, she used the filthy water, which was a symbol of her oppression, to execute her revenge. She replied by using the same weapon they used to oppress her.

IV. EVOLUTION OF WOMEN-CENTRIC FILMS IN THE MALAYALAM FILM INDUSTRY

If popular cinema is an indication of public consciousness, such films and their portrayals of women provide a fascinating glimpse into current Kerala society. The New Generation movement, which began around 2010, introduced new trends and themes into the film industry. It also gave focus to depicting women-centric films. In those films, women are usually depicted as valueless, whose worries extend beyond the home, hearth, and here, in a dramatic break from traditionally glamorous objects of desire. Nimisha Sajayan, the female lead from *The Great Indian Kitchen*, said, “Female leads were earlier just dolled up and made to dance around trees, but now we are seeing strong female characters. They are gritty and determined” (Sajayan, 2020). It’s not entirely a new direction. “If you map the history of Malayalam cinema, you’ll discover that between the ‘70s and early ‘80s, there were striking female characters” (Menon, 2019), says Neelima Menon, a film critic. She adds that films were written with powerful actors in mind. It was a different story fifty years ago. Initially, women were discouraged from acting in films by society. P K Rosy is the first female actress in the Malayalam film industry. Director J C Daniel had to look for a female main character to act in the movie named ‘*Vigathakumaran*,’ the first-ever Malayalam film, for around six months. P K Rosi was found at the end of the search. Despite the fact that P K Rosi’s performance and the film were both successes, the consequences she had to deal with were devastating. P K Rosi was a Dalit who claimed to be a Christian. Because a Dalit was represented as a Nair woman in the film *Vigathakumaran*, the feudal society banned the movie from the local theatres. P K Rosi and her family were the targets of this social mindset. Her father was attacked and beaten by people from the upper class. In the decades that followed, however, the script shifted.

The 1980s promised a new era. Famous directors like Padmarajan, Lenin Rajendran, and Bharathan, who are frequently credited with energising the new wave era, combined art films. They gave importance to the story rather than giving focus to the stardom of the hero. Through the film *Thoovanathumbikal*, Padmarajan directly questioned the conventional side of the concept called 'virginity,' which is attributed only to women. "If you take down most modern films, their apparently feminist female characters have affirmed every kind of patriarchal attitude," says Deedi Damodaran (Damodaran, 2019). Take, for example, the film *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019), which has been praised for its strong female presence. "It strengthens women rather than liberates them from their domestic obligations. Women who are practical and self-sufficient are turned into brides who are reliant on others." And she believes there's a good explanation behind it. Damodaran points out that "they're all designed, conceived of, and written by men" (Damodaran, 2019). The Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) is a major attempt that is inextricably linked to these films and their female protagonists. After a woman actor was kidnapped and sexually assaulted, the collective was created in 2017. Following investigations, it was discovered that Dileep, a Bollywood actor with a lot of clout, was the one who ordered the attack. The case's poor management prompted calls for improvements in the sector, including the adoption of the Vishaka principles and other workplace harassment prevention measures. WCC members have asked the government to intervene to formalise wage structures and welfare programmes for women working in the film business, such as maternity pay and tax breaks for production crews with at least 30% female representation, among other things. They also asked the Kerala government to create additional film-related technical courses, which would provide more direct job opportunities for women and allow for more women's reservations in government-owned studios. There are developments happening throughout the Malayalam film industry. Still, there are wage gaps, sexual harassment, and a lot more.

V. IMPACT OF FEMINIST FILM THEORY

Feminist film theory is popularised in the United States in the 1970s. It emphasised the fact that patriarchy and feminism do not exist in a vacuum or emptiness. As a result, it would not be incorrect to suggest that cultural politics are influenced equally by ideologies of class, caste, and gender. The goal of feminist cinema theory is to examine films from a variety of feminist theoretical views rather than from a single point of view. As viewers, image-makers, content consumers, and active members of the film business, one must be critical of the how's and when's of pictures and learn to look at images critically. Second-wave feminism had a significant impact on the manner in which gender categories may be re-thought and theorised. Feminists discovered a new place called cultural politics, where the category of 'woman' was being developed. Films, magazines, print adverts, and other media crafted the images of the 'ideal woman.' This was problematic for feminists on two levels: first, it objectified women, and second, it imposed unrealistic expectations of what it meant to be a 'perfect' woman. Capitalists and the expanding consumer market helped to exaggerate the latter issue. Feminist film theory was crucial and significant in presenting a feministic perspective on films where a domain of patriarchy existed, as Laura Mulvey believes films were for men and by men. Mulvey claimed in her essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*," published in 'Screen,' that movies should not be viewed as a harmless kind of entertainment. She advocated that instead of viewing a film as a text, we should analyse how it was made, when it was made, who made it, and how it was received, essentially taking an organic multi-dimensional approach to cinema reading. Indian films have a unique trait that is not found in other film industries around the world that, the ease with which songs and dance sequences can be inserted anywhere in the film's length. Popular Indian cinema is made up of 'item' numbers that inexorably work on the logic of monetisation and objectification of women's bodies for the sake of film publicity and sales. Mulvey says that women represent a deficit in the male's life, which produces anxiety, and that the male wants to alleviate this worry through fetishism or objectification. As a result, women are perceived as both a threat and a source of desire, and binaries in which males revere and fetishise the woman, the goddess, or mother are very important and unique to Indian culture. So, feminist film theory assists in viewing the films through a feministic perspective. It aids in understanding the participation of women in the film industry and in evaluating the impact of stereotypical films on society. In a nutshell, feminist film theory encourages the increase in women-centric films where women are depicted as reasonable human beings instead of as objects of desire.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper entitled "Visualising Resistance: Gender, Power, and the Politics of Representation in Select Malayalam Films" examined how certain recent Malayalam films critically approach the issues of patriarchy, gender roles, and representation. Films such as *22 Female Kottayam*, *Biriyani*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* present stories that make women's lives the focus of the socio-cultural structures that are patriarchal. The research has found that these types of movies do not just place women at the very centre of story; instead, they disrupt institutionalised frameworks that control their agency. Inspired by Laura Mulvey's hypothesis of the male gaze, combined with psychoanalytic frameworks and feminist theories of phallogentrism and écriture feminine, the paper has examined the way women characters are being constructed and how these constructions are being disrupted in new-wave Malayalam cinema. The chosen films subvert mainstream cinematic grammar by moving attention away from spectacle to subjectivity and objectivity to interiority. *Biriyani* and *The Great Indian Kitchen* express resistance not in open combat but in silence, withdrawal, and body language practices perennially relegated to the periphery of conventional heroism. *22 Female Kottayam* introduces retributive justice from a feminine viewpoint, disturbing the hegemonic gender dynamics in revenge stories. In addition, this study recognises the wider significance of such representations. Such films indicate a shift towards Malayalam cinema as a whole, with representation increasingly a lived experience and less of an idealised gendered performance. However, they also demonstrate the significance of the ongoing restrictions in the industry, such as the under-representation of women in front of and behind the camera and the deployment of feminist aesthetics in the absence of

political content. Lastly, the films in question here add to a growing corpus of Malayalam cinema that refuses to conform to patriarchal narrative structures and offers new representational strategies. Their value lies in the fact that they are able to critique, subvert, and reimagine the position of women in cinema and social life. Problematising power, resistance, and agency in the films calls for ongoing critical interrogation of gender and representation in regional Indian cinema.

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