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Freedom and Female Identities: Critiquing the Agential Reclamation in Women-Centric Films

Resmi Balakrishnan Padiyan

Research Fellow,
The English and Foreign Languages University,
Hyderabad.

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Abstract:

Visual media worldwide provide shreds of evidence to demonstrate how the patriarchic subconscious shapes our film-watching experience and cinema itself. This paper aims to analyse the women-centric movies of the twenty-first century in Malayalam on freedom and visual techniques. I situate my argument in the larger concept that films are determined and reinforced by pre-existing social patterns that have shaped the fascinated subject, woman. In doing so, I argue that the notion of freedom remains artificial and essentially patriarchic even in women-centric films and deceives the spectators by wonderment through enthralling visuals.

Keywords: Visual media, Malayalam films, femininity, wonderment, Rani Padmini, Ramante Ethanthottam

The visual narrative mode, like cinema, has a comparatively higher level in constructing social discourses. Malayalam cinema has a pattern of development in structuring the cultural and social outlook towards womanhood and is believed to be going through a series of radical changes by portraying and empowering woman characters. This media discourse in the twenty-first century alleges to represent unconventional portrayal of women. However, the conventions of femininity are disguised by the wonderment of freedom and visual effects with a plot constrained in the realms of patriarchy. In recent movies, women are conceptualised as a part of a globalised culture in which 'she' has an identity. Nevertheless, they are subject to the familiar gender hierarchy and marginalised identity. These concealed effects of patriarchy could result from early conditioning of gender initiated within the family and continues in other institutions like schools and the workplace. Media, old or new, equally plays a decisive role in constructing and maintaining gender through traditions, taboos, codes, and norms framed by a society that intends to keep women insubordination. These oppressive patterns, as conceived, strengthen the female experiences and the notion of gender thus devised are mere constructs

internalised over time. This internalised understanding of gender is an assimilation of cultural interferences that are ought to change with the changes in the consciousness of the gender.

Gender identity is one of the practical tools of hegemonic social mode to reinforce the existing power structure, to ensure the silencing of the marginalised and reinforcing power on female identity, designing the status quo. Thus, visual media perpetuate and reinforce the identity of the feminine and become a medium for the hegemonic group, unaffecteding the existing practices. With its series of criticism for the typecasting of women characters, the film industry addresses the need for women's emancipation and announces how femininity can break the shackles of society. In the new millennium, women-centric cinema offers wonderment for women spectators employing exoticism and visual delights; in turn, they retain the conventions of femininity and the paradoxical position occupied by women. This paper locates the concept of freedom and strategic empowerment in Malayalam women-centric movies, focusing majorly on Ashiq Abu's 'Rani Padmini' and Ranjith Shankar's 'Ramante Ethanthottam' which identifies with the life of domesticated women. The movies advertised as 'women-centric seem to propagate the hegemony maintained by the patriarchy in gender relations and relies on the circumference of gender identity and sexuality. The existing cinematic narrative canon satisfied the male ego, whereas the new cinemas concurrently address the freedom-seeking female ego and the counter male ego. Through the act, the parameters set by patriarchal authority are ubiquitously disseminated and perpetuated by cinema.

In Kerala, the trend was (and is) not different: soap operas are named either in the synonyms of 'woman' or in the name of the female protagonist, all of them voyaging through the trials and tribulations of a domesticated woman, tormented by their husband, their in-laws, or by their children. As this trend continued to dominate TV stations, the ideal woman was portrayed as a martyr to self-sacrifice and tolerance, thus shaping the audience's preferred narrative as one in which 'women protect and nurture the interests of the family rather than equality and social justice'. (Swapna Gopinath & Sony Jalarajan Raj, 68).

The female protagonists in early movies were represented as self-sacrificing, morally pure, chaste women who meekly accepted the existing social patterns of society and gladly succumbed to the agony of existence in a world of male power and often became the victim of pleasurable visual experience for men. According to Laura Mulvey, the representation of female bodies are a "socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle." (1973, 14). In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative*

Cinema, Mulvey demonstrates how the patriarchic subconscious of society shapes our film-watching experience and cinema itself. Even with visual culture and newer strategies, the position of women remained reinstated as stereotypes. The female prototypes are squeezed into male-centric movies, and in effect, they often become characters playing subordinates to the masochistic hero. Even the strongest female protagonist becomes a mere caricature of the social groups. The roles of women in such films are confirmed to specific social roles like a tolerant wife, mother, and self-sacrificing and victimised woman. In comparison, the portrayal of women in movies of an emerging modern consumerist society is linked to changing social circumstances where female characters are defined by attire and practices.

In these new Malayalam films, the portrayal of women is such that the modern woman would connect. 'Rani Padmini' and 'Ramante Ethanthottam', 2015 and 2017 released respectively, revolves around the notion of this 'todayness' and the freedom of the female characters. Rani Padmini, directed by the new generation director Aashiq Abu was appreciated immensely for telling the tale of "a flight to spread wings" (The Hindu 23/10/2015). The plot is a physiotherapist turned home-maker Padmini on a mission to find her racing-aficionado husband in the Himalayas, participating in a car rally. In the quest, Padmini's path crosses with that of Rani, a tomboy who is escaping from a pack of goons. Despite the dissemblance in personalities, they develop an interesting bond on the road. In Ramante Ethanthottam, Malini, the female protagonist, becomes the looking glass in the film. Trapped in the walls of an arranged marriage, Malini is struggling to cope with her haughty, self-centred husband and realises her worth and identity through the presence of Raman, an environmentalist-cum-resort owner she meets during a vacation. Both films center on the framework of shattering of societal shackles and focus on transforming women from the ignorant and indignant to abled and decision making. Interestingly it is not the storyline of the empowering of the main female characters that connect both these movies but the delightful and stunningly smoky visuals and elements of artistry. The grimness of women life is all way told story in Malayalam films.

In 'Rani Padmini', the director Ashiq Abu calls for the attention of women folks not to fall for the trap of the society by catering to the 'wants' of it. As binaries, the two main female characters warn Malayali women against the 'docile personalities' they are expected to live up to since childhood. With the treatment of mesmerising greenery, Ranjith Shankar captivates the mind of the spectators to the tensions and the issues in a husband-and-wife relationship. With a divorce, he elevates the protagonist's character by letting her enjoy single motherhood and offering the flight to limitless dreams. From quintessential ignored woman to the one who is sexually bold and free, the new women-centric movies offer the effect of freedom and its

multitudes. This way, media retains the disposition of the dominant hegemonic patriarchy and development coupled with the complex attitude towards womanhood. However, the impact of these films confirms the potential of hegemonic society to conveniently cast and design the nature of the woman to confine within the system regulated by it. Reviews like “Still, Ashiq deserves a cheer for making them fly” (The Hindu, 25/10/2015), “Director Ashiq Abu takes up the gamble of making a film with no male superstar” (Rediff) serves as an example.

Gender identity thus becomes an effective tool in the hands of hegemonic social modes that use identity to reinforce the existing power structure. Female identity is shaped by patriarchy to ensure the marginalisation and silencing of the female voice, thus reinforcing its power over the female population and perpetuating the status quo with the help of dominant ideologies. In such a bind, women are inevitably willing victims to their oppression. (“Turning Back the Clock? Women, Work and Family Today”).

With the identities of the female self in films like these, it becomes evident that the gender hierarchy and the marginalised position of women that society hopes to perpetuate are reinforced through cinema. Thus, the image of women in films serves as a trope and the parameters set by the patriarchal authority are ubiquitously disseminated through the evolution of characters. The new wave in films addressed the indifferent patterns of the superstar movies, and these films, with their unusual treatment, deserve appreciation and obligation from the spectators. Even when a woman carves her identity among the people she knows, she becomes nothing but a character within the constraints of marital institution. The ‘quest’ Padmini indulges in is not primarily to understand herself but to bring back her husband, who left her for a Himalayan rally. Here, the character’s act of ‘leaving home’ to find her husband leaves an impression of self-assertion and identity enforcement. The story does not allow the wife to confront her husband for his unjust act. Instead, she is convinced that these senseless acts are ‘normal’ in any marriage. The ‘quest’ the wife takes could have been a journey to find truth and know herself. But in turn womanhood is silenced in the end, where the character gets bound within the freedom directed by the patriarchy.

The counterpart of Padmini, Rani, is portrayed as daredevil, independent and a woman escaping from the pack of goons. These traits enable the character to be significantly different from Padmini, a ‘certified’ good girl. However, Padmini’s journey with Rani fails to enlighten Padmini about the ‘modernity and ‘independence’ a woman ought to experience. The director uses a pack of goons to portray an independent, self-sufficient woman and makes the confrontation easy for his female characters. In such films, the pack of goons unconvincingly shifts from being menace and caricaturish. The absence of the macho male as a saviour in these

movies are balanced by making the events and confrontations easy for the female protagonist. The story thus satisfies the momentous urge for women-centric movies but does not address the essence of the ideologies behind the actual need. This method of making action sequences less challenging can be traced even in women-centric Bollywood cinemas. The well-celebrated Bollywood film, *Queen* (2014), serves as an example for such a category of women-centric stories. Most women-centric films function in the binaries of tragedy and comedy. Tragedy depicts their struggle and sufferings and comedy, the elements of empowerment by favourable scenarios. However, for a man, irrespective of the category, the struggle of a male hero is either instigating or levitating to the trajectory of a hero. This heroic transformation of character remains challenged in women-centric movies.

In Malini's story, the plot's rising action occurs when Malini associates her self-transformation with the beauty of Edanthottam through the 'angel like' character Raman. Edanthottam is represented as a place that is not tormented by the shadows of urbanisation, and so is Raman. A soft-spoken, sober environmentalist, one who cares about nature and respect woman, a person brimming with the warmth and the serenity the place offers and a widower who still mourns and lives in the memory of his wife. Having all features as good behaviour, good resources, the saviour hero, the benefits of a cad, and a dad or husband, all wrapped up in a handsome man, leaves a 'good man/ a godly man' impact on the audience. Elvis, Malini's husband, as any other 'modern' man, preaches gender equality and self-proclaims as a husband who offers freedom to his wife is counterfeited.

The directors of the women-centric movies seemingly let their female protagonists free, restricting their actions and life they want and managing to limit them in the confinements of a good daughter or at least in motherhood to allure the audience's interests. Thus, a woman protagonist either suffers her life or empowers with the help of the 'god-like' male character. Here, the female characters are nothing but dutiful daughters, wife and mothers. The main characters of these films are set in binaries. Female as self-assertive or a sacrificing mother, and male as ignorant male chauvinistic or godly-like. A woman is asked to choose between being a single mother or second marriage, where a woman inevitably chooses child over marriage. The freedom of womanhood if offered within the constraints of social concepts of womanhood. Thus, the concept of freedom ends where it begins. When a woman tries herself to free from the bonds of patriarchy, the intensity of freedom is communicated to the audience through visualised on her attires and gestures.

The roles of female characters in these movies are typecasted apparent from the movies like *Charlie* and *Neelakasham Pachakadal*. These movies with hegemonic liberation of

femininity with stunning visuals and nature scenes seem to adopt new forms of cinematography, retaining the older cinema's content. By refusing the questions of patriarchy, these films reinforce double standards by perpetuating women as independent but continue to be victims of patriarchy. The unsullied beauty of pastoral scenes and landscapes makes the plot secondary, and the greenery and scenic beauty jelled with the cosmopolitan life offers the audience a steady rejuvenation. The picturesque cinematography evokes exotic wonderment to visual delights and subjugates the question of freedom and identity of the women characters confining to new norms of femininity. Through smoky visuals and vibrant primary colours dumbing the colours, the film transcends the notion of freedom. The notion of freedom thus simultaneously stands for and against the issue the film addresses. Crushed dreams, victims, forceful marriage, and women who sweep the infidelity of their husband, unequal marriages, left behind talents, and forgotten self, these traits of women rule over in the movies along time. When the camera is the focaliser in the visual media, freedom for a woman becomes an assigned one. In a film, the director becomes the provider of newly constructed femininity. This ascribed femininity is to satisfy the concerned changing society.

In these movies, the concept of freedom is developed and exhibited with enchanting visuals of nature, from the familiar terrain to the snow-draped mountains; the immense sense of freshness and newness combined leaves an enchanting and feel-good experience for the audience. The visual impact thus ultimately is nothing but mesmerizing and painting-like. These visual reminiscences become the cinematic remedy for the immediate question of 'what do women want?'. It is noteworthy that the primary scribe of 'what women want' was herself a woman. It is also beyond dispute that women typically read books on relationships while men choose stories of adventure. By contrast to accounts of female choice, modern cinemas cater to male sensibilities and become more directly violent and explicitly sex-laden. In the world of women empowering movies, the typical climax involves a satisfying and presumably monogamous union between heroine and hero. In "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*", Mulvey argues that the use of women in narrative cinema is captured in such a way to provide a pleasurable visual experience for men. However, in the new women-centric movies, visual pleasure is directed towards women. The awareness of the need for freedom is satisfied with the wonderment of the extraordinary background and vibrant colours. The two methods of experiencing pleasure, according to Mulvey, arises from the mental mechanism of the viewer; the first method involves the objectification of the image, and the second is by identifying with it. Here the cinemas represent the mental desires of the female subject, gratifying male thought. In these modern women-centric movies, the active gazing side becomes women where the

camera focuses on the dynamic cinematography of nature and channels the viewer's gaze subdues the plot.

In old cinemas, the distinction between the passive woman and active man manifested the cinematic narrative structure. Whereas, in the modern movies that offer female protagonists hegemonic freedom, the distinction is between passive woman's transformation and active mystifying visual effects. The visual element becomes paradoxical in these cinemas. It combines the element of wonder with deceptive liberation and maintains social structure in position. However, the treatment of the movie allures the audience to bypass the storyline. The sense of self-identity and self-respect kindled in the female protagonist becomes influential and shuts the life imposed on her. Women-centric cinemas have to accentuate that women lives lie further beyond the restrictive realms of a hegemonic liberation. The twenty-first century modern womanhood is satisfied by deceiving through exotic freedom and charismatic visuals, and it is probably this vibrant combination that would make us overlook all detracting blotches that had marked her long journey.

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