



From Feminist to Feminichi: Malayalam cinema and the Public Sphere

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to offer empirical models of the role of women in/ out of the film industry. This article seeks to analyse representations of women's public space on screen, as well as the public space they created by defending stereotypes. They look back to the represented selves, be critical of them, and create their own political spaces, such as the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC). It delves deeper into the public persona and image of women in Malayalam cinema.*

Keywords: *Malayalam Cinema, Public Sphere, Feminism, Feminichi, WCC, Representation*

The New Wave Movement of cinema, which began in France in the 1950s, is credited with establishing *Public Sphere* in film. The New Wave is known as the revolt of a group of filmmakers, critics and technologists against the stagnation that existed in French cinema after World War II. François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Louis Malle, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda, and Jacques Demy are among the pioneers of the French New Wave. This movement brought cinema to the foreground of debate. This is what elevated cinema from a slapdash job to a work of art. This made cinema the creative and original art of the director. Before becoming pioneers of the New Wave, they were critics at the film publication, *Cahier du Cinema*, edited by André Bazin.

The concept of *Public Sphere* encapsulates the principle of public opinion formed as a result of debates between individuals in the public interest. It also embodies the history of its emergence. Cinema, like other forms of print media, is a possible cultural sphere with the potential to shape and apply public opinion. Although cinema was born as a propaganda tool for industrial feudalism, it addressed the general public. This art form was able to create cinema spaces across all caste, religion, and ethnicity disparities. Cinema has always created its own public spaces, including film theatres, film magazines, film clubs, film festivals, film societies, actors' organizations, technicians' organizations, film blogs, and pages on social sites.

Directors like Adoor, Aravindan, and John came forward with the brilliance of the New Wave in Malayalam cinema as it evolved into a popular culture. Later, K. G. George, Padmarajan, and Bharathan, as part of a parallel film, embraced this wave with art films while imagining commercial marketing logic. Even in the wake of such a transformation, as Meena.T. Pillai points out, when modernity and the patriarchal order were highlighted, only the masculinities in conflict became the topic of cinema. Let's take the narration in films like Adoor's *Swayamvaram* (1972) and *Elipathayam* (1982), for example. These films depict the struggles of a young man looking for work and his efforts to keep up with the Modernity's idea of masculine responsibilities. While popular films became a platform for male supremacy, male conflicts in the Public Sphere became the subject of art films. Women's conflicts have been largely disregarded. Habermas recounts the formation

of the private and public spheres into 'in' and 'out' of bourgeois society in the 18th century.

The paradox of Kerala's modernity, which results in certain regressive tendencies, is quite visible in cinematic discourses of the spectres of male super stardom. Cinematic female identities are being transplanted into the inside of this in/out duality. The role of film in alienating women from the socio-cultural realm through this type of cinematic feminist identity is one of the study's analytical endeavours. Malayalam cinema has been viewed as a patriarchal agent. This depicts a sociocultural, political, and economic order that is systematically dominated by men. These examples come from reinforcing the negative continuum, the gender role stereotype of women. This paper examines various films to identify gender representation.

Women's space, public space

Women were underrepresented in the global New Wave Movement stated previously. When it comes to Malayalam cinema, women are rapidly disappearing from the industry. As Malayalam Cinema is entirely male -centric, the woman within the film is also a product of the masculine imagination. Malayalam cinema has progressed by 'masculinizing' public space and 'feminizing' private space.

The concept of public space / public domain has the democratic connotation of public. They are places like parks, museums, grounds, gardens, malls, theaters, roads, railway stations, and bus stops where people gather for the common good. Such

places are open to the public. In here, working collectively, combining, expanding and making available are of prime relevance. Such areas of possibility are the public space of civil society. There are also public spaces that emerge instantly at certain times, and are spaces that become public spaces for a specific purpose. For example, venues for an event and gatherings like weddings. Such places are often the backdrop for Malayalam cinema. This article also examines the representation of women in such public spaces.

Cinema aims to convey certain ideas with special significance using visuals. The woman in Cinema is such a fictitious creation. Early films portrayed women as apostles of motherhood and tolerance, relying on myths and the like. Through exaggerated narratives, raising children and maintaining a family became the sole task and place of women, rather than a social responsibility. Cinema's contribution to the creation of a model woman characterised by hyper-emotionalism and excessive babbling is not insignificant.

The transition from matriarchy in joint families to patriarchy in nuclear families, the disintegration of the *tharavadu*, the loss of property and the absence of a father to replace the uncle figure (in the films *Nirmalyam* (1973) and *Murappennu* (1965)) led to the ideological emptiness of the youth. This sense of alienation led to new cinematic notions of masculinity. Men gained authority in the public sphere as a result of active political movements. Thus, a strong public life was opened to him. This has been greatly aided by the freedom struggles.

Men in relationships with women married and brought their wives to their homes as housewives, showering them with rice and flowers. He welcomed them to his space of authority. One of the goals of early Malayalam cinema was to strengthen the patriarchal institution of marriage. This can be seen in Malayalam films like *Prasanna* (1950), *Chandrika* (1950), *Nallathanka* (1950), *Kudumbapuram* (1988), *Vatsalyam* (1993), *Munthirivallikal Thallirkkumbol* (2017), and *Bro Daddy* (2022). Women are always submissive to their families, and patriarchy is at the forefront of this structure. According to art historian John Berger (1972), the social presence of women differs from that of men. He is interested in gender construction, location, immobility, and observation.

How she appears to men, thus become a crucial component of her identity as women. Thus, men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This ascertains not only the relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of the women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object and predominantly an object of vision: a sight.

The portrayal of her social presence turns to be an object of vision in Malayalam cinema. All the public spaces in Malayalam cinema represent the essence of femininity. The meanings conveyed on the silver screen have to be explored outside cinema. The private lives of the actresses are scrutinised at even in their public lives (see the story of the first heroine, PK Rosie). Many actresses in Kerala choose to (or are forced to) retire from the public eye after

marriage. Women, both within and beyond the screen, have less personal/public conflicts than men. Because cinema is fully male-centric, the woman in cinema may not have been able to put her private life aside to worry about public matters.

Women engage emotionally in all the public spaces in cinema. Women who have no families or who have been pampered by their families become the *chanthapennu* in public spaces within cinema. Amala in *EnteSuryaputrik* (1991), DivyaUnni in *Pranayavarnangal* (1998), and Manju Warriar in *Summer in Bethlehem* (1998) are just a few examples. If she has no strong family ties or the family does not impose restrictions on her, she becomes a “bad” woman. She is portrayed as a loose woman who lacks discipline in public spaces. Discipline becomes the hallmark of aristocracy through this paradox. Aristocracy acts as an unconsciousness, even in the newer movies where disorderliness is a trend. This is what keeps her away from public spaces. The heroines in men’s narratives are modern, outspoken, and do not understand the value of family. Her temperament changes after getting married or falling in love. They are transformed into aristocratic women who wear traditional attire, wear *bindis* on their foreheads, and speak softly in order to maintain harmony in their family. Examples include the character of Seema in *Angadi* (1980) and of Kavitha Thakur in *Avidathe Pole Ivideyum* (1985).

In the 1970s, the flow of Gulf money transformed public space into private. For women, exclusive private spaces with all modern amenities were created. That is where the ‘Kochamma’ or ‘Society Ladies’ of Malayalam cinema originated. They intervened

in the public sphere by merging public affairs and entertainment. The male protagonists were good fathers, sons and husbands who were available to women on the inside while maintaining public life outside as an independent space. Cinema gives a double life to the actor. The anti-state underworld films of the 1980s and 1990s were purely masculine declarations. The underworld made man more masculine; it gave birth to mighty rebels in cinema. Cinema developed a landscape dominated only by men by depicting stories of underworld heroes in films like *Abhimanyu* (1991), *Aryan* (1998), *Rajavinte Makan* (1986), *Aryan*, *Irupathamnootaand* (1987), *Naduvazhikal* (1989), *The Prince* (1996), *AaramThamburan* (1997) *Ravanaprabhu* (2001). Women and children were portrayed only as one of the weaknesses of men. Violent acts of masculine arrogance took place in public places. When public spaces were thus turned to forts where dangers lurked beyond sight, the women were confined to protected private spaces.

If we look at the changing female narratives in cinema, the newer emerging narratives mock the feminist movements. In films like *Thalayanamantram* (1990), *Pidakozhi Koovunna Noottandu* (1994) and *Babakalyani* (2006), the woman who denied male arrogance became a farce. Denial is represented as arrogance, disobedience, and ignorance on the part of the lady. She will face the consequences of her arrogance in the climactic scenes and will usually become a humble and obedient wife or daughter. At a time when public spaces were banned, the film labelled a woman who came from the 'in' called family to the 'out' called public places as arrogant or misguided. Time passed and as part of updating cinema with time, women balanced her family and career as a clerk and a

teacher while also being a good housewife. She became a role model. The fear that she would go outside the institution of family was reflected in such narratives. When she began taking over public spaces and demanding what she deserved, she was ridiculed on screen. Is it because today's women are beginning to discover and create their own spaces that she becomes invisible not only in the public spaces but also in the private spaces in cinema? (Watch Prithviraj's recent hits like *Mumbai Police* (2013), *Seventh Day* (2014), *Memories*, *SapthamashreeThaskaraha*(2014), a heroine is almost said to be absent or if she is present, she would be killed even before the story begins).

It is a manifestation of aggressive masculinity we see in the public spaces in Malayalam cinema. Public spaces are the scenes for toxic masculine performances, confrontations (physical and emotional) and 'dialogues'. In all the films featuring a tough hero, there are encounters in public spaces with the heroine who is fierce as well. His eloquence about what a woman is and should be transforms her into his romantic interest.

The woman, who appears in public spaces as a substitute for the man, is often there to glorify the hero. In the film, *Patram* (Joshi, 1999), Devu comes from a family with a tradition of running their own newspaper. She ridicules and taunts a police officer for his misbehavior in the middle of the road. She swears at the policeman in Suresh Gopi's famous "PhaPulle" style. This badass female protagonist meets the male protagonist for the first time outside the SP office. When she goes to lodge a complaint about the police beating up a boy named Ibnu, whom she loves like her

brother, she has an argument with the male protagonist who helps the boy with a compromise out from police in the same case. The hero puts on a speech on how the brave heroine must be as intelligent as she is brave. Suresh Gopi's introduction scene begins with him saying explaining how her (Devu's) misogynistic behaviour is due to her lack of intimate knowledge of a man. If she gets to know a man intimately, the hatred will fade away, and if it does not, he says, "We can fix it." Ibnu tells Dev in the next shot, "It seems that you liked him, sister."

In the film, *My Boss* (Jeethu Joseph, 2012), the heroine plays the skilful and strict boss. The hero rectifies the heroine's harsh behaviour by tricking her into coming to his house. Where society needs the harshness of a man, the harshness of a woman must be snuffed out at home.

In the film, *Superman* (Rafi Mekartin, 1997), Shobhana plays a police officer to emphasise the importance of the hero, Jayaram, who plays a thief. If a male had played the police officer, instead of Shobhana, it would have been like the movie *Twenty-Twenty*. In another film, *Praja* (Joshi, 2001), the hero gives a monologue to a lady police officer who arrives to arrest him in the middle of the road about his heroic deeds and criticism of the state. He twists the heroine's hand, which she raises furiously and mocks her by saying that she has not zipped her pants. She walks away without arresting him, emotionally shouting "Get Lost." Masculinity is demonstrated in public spaces by such assaults on female sexuality.

Drishyam (Jeethu Joseph, 2014), a film that defied contemporary movie aesthetics by following the narrative style of earlier movies, broke box office records. The film features Georgekutty, the male protagonist, who buries murder charges in front of the justice system and even the entire world to save his family including his two daughters and wife. Asha Sharath, a serial actress, plays the police officer opposing Mohanlal. It was because she arrived in the role of IG that the protagonist succeeded in covering up a crime. The film won over the public conception that no matter how talented the heroine is, she must submit in front of the star that is Mohanlal.

In Malayalam cinema, toddy shops, tea shops, and lodges were exclusive gathering spots for men. In one of the recent films, *Trivandrum Lodge* (V K Prakash, 2012), the heroine visits the Trivandrum Lodge in Kochi to write a novel. The heroine enters a certain place that is off-limits to women. Only bad women (sex workers) visit such places. The heroine enters this backdrop. Men's thoughts about lodges surround her there. She is portrayed in the film as a beautiful woman and her body is objectified using specific camera angles, soft lighting, and close-up shots. This representation, too, fails to grow out of the body of the woman in the public space.

Malayalam cinema is frequently a denial of women's public spheres. This is accomplished by clinging to traditional proverbs, popular notions, or exaggerating crimes against women. Cinema is unable to see this as 'social health' issue, instead proposing 'solutions' such as going out in public with an escort or not provoking men. Public spaces or gatherings exclusive for women

are uncommon in cinema. In the movies that address them, women's groups are reduced to *ayalkoottam*, *kudumbashree* and beauty parlours. The success the women's group in *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (Sreenivasan, 1998) comes from within the private space of a home. In the movie *How Old Are You* (Roshan Andrews, 2014) the terrace of several houses helped lead women to success. Like in *Sakudumbam Shyamala* (Radhakrishnan Mangalath, 2010), women who enter politics are portrayed as either naive, vengeful, irresponsible, or unethical.

Penpattanam (V M Vinu, 2010) is a film about women who work at municipal waste disposal in the city. They clean the trash there, as though it were an extension of the home. The film does not focus on the workplace of women who collect trash. Though their workplace serves as the backdrop for the story, family is the ultimate focus of the film. The workplace, in the Habermasian concept, is a marker of the "out." When problems or conflicts women face in the workplace are made into a film, they become involved in public affairs. Perhaps this is why the filmmaker attempted to bind the woman to the family structure. Women in Malayalam cinema are unable to worry about the public sphere outside of the institutional value of family because cinema is solely the public domain for men.

Thus, despite being a male-dominated market-oriented film, the politics of cultural democracy is gaining momentum, undermining market elitism in many ways. As a result, the public sphere embodies a politics of stigmatisation that goes beyond market logic. The prospect is fairly positive. It is possible that in

Malayalam cinema, vulnerable, weeping, submissive men with features deemed feminine by the society are beginning to emerge. *Amen* (2013), *AnnayumRasoolum* (2013), among other films by FahadhFaasil, include a man who is submissive to a woman and a woman who mutilates a man's genitals. Gender is a social construct. Beyond physical differences, this social moulding takes place in public spaces. It is this socially constructed gender consciousness that Tessa K Abraham castrated. She slammed the knife against the base of the tower of masculinity that cinema had constructed through various narratives. She did not forget to look at the castrated hero with tenderness, a quality bestowed upon women in movies. In the film, *Thira* (2013) directed by Vineeth, Shobhana plays the role of a super woman who saves a group of girls from a sex racket. Shobhana stepped into a role that was usually retained for Mammooty, Mohanlal or maybe, Suresh Gopi in Malayalam cinema.

As Shaima observed in the context of the film, *Munnariyippu* (Venu, 2014), 'The film makes it clear that there is no punishment lesser than death for a woman who dared to take the risk of writing the biography of Raghavan, a criminal in the eyes of law, without the permission of men.' But the heroine here is someone who rose above her fears of public space without fear of death until just before her death.

Even when she surrenders to death in the film, her life promises hope. She is the one who shaves the dreadful black hair of the conventional heroines, who fear being raped, kidnapped, and expelled if they opposed, and who believe that the night is

more terrifying than the devil and sees the man as their protector. The film conveys that every failure is a prologue to the future.

Despite dwindling and disappearing female spaces, the emergence of weeping, non-hero male protagonists is proof that women have begun to occupy public spaces. The popularity of directors like Anjali Menon, Shalini Menon and Revathi Varma is hopeful. Thus, cinema is becoming a creative force that embraces both the individual and the market. The cinema of the times is laying the foundations for fresh possibilities with no megastars.

Two hashtags in history

The female space within the visual design of the film should be interpreted in conjunction with the female public space in the film industry. We need to understand how the plot makes man the hero and how the visuals objectify woman along with the female professional space within the film industry. It should also be read in light of the context in which the WCC for the women in cinema was formed. It can be seen as an attempt by women to find their place in the art of cinema beyond the second-best citizenship offered to them in patriarchal films. The fact that they are starting to openly discuss misogyny in cinema should be interpreted as a fight against the representation of women in films. #MeToo and #Avalkoppam are a few of the many hashtags of socio-political importance that have been making waves on Facebook in recent years. These movements should also be considered in the context of changing female spaces in Malayalam cinema. #MeToo is a social media movement started by women who have been sexually abused all around the world. The WCC was founded in Kerala as a response

to #MeToo, and a group of people created a #Avalkkoppam for a young woman who had been sexually assaulted.

#MeToo is something that can make a difference in the history of women and in the thought process of many. Many men find solace in the fact that the #MeToo movement is confined to the film industry. The majority of women in our society are not on Facebook. This campaign is widely interpreted as a protest against sexual harassment within the film industry. There are numerous spaces where #MeToo should/could extend beyond the realms of cinema and media. The distance to these spaces is decreasing day by day. In the past, we were taught at our homes not to protest atrocities in public places, but rather to remain silent. They scared us, claiming that if we were alone, men would avenge us. The opposition's voice was reduced to small gestures like the pin prick. Women have come a long way since then. A lot of women are also capable of resisting any sexual intrusions that may occur against them. Gone are the days when women were mere exhibits for men. Today we live in a time when girls are fearlessly calling out his awful behaviour. WCC is such a place of resistance, of avowals in cinema.

These changes created different women inside of cinema. Sreeja from *ThondimuthalumDriksakshiyum* (2017) who asks, "Aren't you the one who stole my necklace?" Aparna from *Mayanadi*(2017), who says, "Sex is not a promise," the heroine in *Ishq*(2019), who shows her middle finger to her boyfriend who suspects that someone else has touched her body. Pallavi Raveendran from *Uyare*(2019), who says, "I want to live the life I

like” ... Such women have found a place in cinema because they have found their own place outside of cinema.

Women from around the world who had been victim to abuse voluntarily created a wave on social media with the #MeToo because actor Alyssa Milano tweeted out a call to action asking women who had been sexually harassed or assaulted in the past to share this hashtag as their status. Within hours of the campaign, many people were seen posting on Facebook. It was not heartbreak or inferiority of the victim, but the courage to speak up that was seen everywhere. By doing this, they declared that they are fighters, not victims, and that the attacker, not themselves, should be ashamed. There are, of course, criticisms against #MeToo. Questions like “Why didn’t women reveal or object back then” were raised. The rationale for this question is not ignorance of the circumstances in which neither could have been done. Another fact is that consensual relationships can eventually turn into harassment. Often this consent is created by power, threats, obligations, temptations, and other circumstances. They are not real consents. Sometimes there might be a handful of incidents like that. There are some people who take advantage of any situation. If these revelations help to eliminate such experiences for generations to come, the #MeToo campaign will have earned a place in history. Malayalam cinema often romanticised heroes and heroines who, despite saying “No,” sexually approach and dangle behind the other, displaying buffoonery, until they fall in love. A woman’s “No” was interpreted as a ‘Yes’ in films. The film, *Pink*(2016), directed by Aniruddha Rai Chowdhury, is a call to people to recognise and respect a woman’s ‘No’ as ‘No.’

The WCC press meet on October 23 was viewed with great interest by the Media. The fact that this happened at a time when the second wave of #MeToo was rippling around the world also piqued people's interest. In Kerala, #Avalkkoppam, as previously mentioned, was the face of the #MeToo campaign. However, at the WCC press conference on October 22, most of the WCC members came dressed in black, resembling Hollywood celebrities at the Golden Globes awards ceremony. This sparked curiosity that the meet would be 'MeToo' revelations in Malayalam. But it was a harsh criticism against the Malayalam Film Actors Association. They wore black as the colour of protest. Their protest was the voice of the victims of sexual harassment in the film industry. The protest was against the negligence of the film industry in preventing sexual harassment. KPAC Lalitha was unable to speak out about her bad experience with AdoorBhasi at that time because the society at that time had not yet begun to think so much about women or the social conditions were not ready to listen to women's issues.

Director Jude Antony compared actress Parvathy to a circus monkey on social media after she criticised Mammootty's *Kasaba*. In response to Jude, Parvati tweeted, "OMKV' to all the circus owners,' raising the stakes of this fight to new heights. It became the motto of the unfazed attitudes of strong femininity. The term "feminichi" took on a new meaning after Parvathy Thiruvoth commented on the film *Kasaba*'s misogynistic dialogue. Fans of Mammootty trolled her mercilessly. A troll video titled 'OruFeminichi-Katha' was also released, depicting a glamorously dressed up woman attending a women empowerment programme. They distorted the meaning to try and insult feminism. No one

exactly knows the origin of the word ‘feminichi’; it was simply a result of social media squabbles. It could be a combination of the words ‘feminist’ and ‘*chechi*,’ which means “elder sister.” It could also be feminist plus ‘*kootichi*,’ which means ‘prostitute.’ Parvathy, on the other hand, has demonstrated an empowered attitude and has declared herself as a proud ‘feminichi.’

The #MeToo campaign was not just a campaign in Kerala; its growth as a movement marks the beginning of a major shift. This is an important chapter in the history of the struggle of Malayalee women. This is how the Woman in Cinema Collective was formed. It should be read alongside the numerous women’s struggles that followed. The Nurses’ Struggle and the Nuns’ Struggle should be read in conjunction with the #MeToo movement. The stand taken by the Samam Progressive Forum and others on the Sabarimala issue will go down in history as one of the women’s movements. All these struggles should be seen as women making a strong entry into the public sphere.

The term “revolution” refers to occurrences that challenge our perspective and the structure of the place we live in. If the history of global revolutions teaches us anything, it is this - not a single right was granted to women for free. We won them by fighting for them (J Devika, 95). It is not merely stated that women’s revolutions have lasted the longest. There is still a long way to go. (109).

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