Abstract: The concept of masculinity and the representation of male remains a contested terrain in the recent Malayalam cinematic realm. It’s a known fact that cinema has a persuasive impact on the public’s view on women empowerment and gender equality. There have been attempts by Malayalam cinema to challenge the traditional gender roles and cultural practices within the society. The films such as The Great Indian Kitchen (2021) and Aarkaryam (2021) approach the notion of masculinity from different perspectives. The Great Indian Kitchen gives a glimpse of the hard-hitting reality of the society and how patriarchy is deeply entrenched in our minds. On the other hand, Aarkaryam normalises the domestic space for men rather than glorifying or romanticizing men for sharing equal space in the kitchen. This research article tries to delineate the portrayal of male figures in these films from a feminist gaze. The paper also attempts to analyse and compare the portrayal of masculinity in both films in terms of their ideologies and cultural norms.

Keywords: Masculinity, Representation, Popular cinema, patriarchy

The cultural industry of Kerala played a major role in setting up the ground for constituting the patriarchal mindset of the society. Pillai argues that cinema is easily woven into this larger project of coercing into silence half the population of the state by co-opting them into a patriarchal mindset (52). To carry out an analysis of masculinity in malayalam films, it is important to mention the cinematic works of prominent filmmakers such as Balachandra Menon, Rajasenan, and Lal Jose and their contribution
in affirming the superiority of men over women. Throughout the history of Malayalam cinema, directors depicted manliness and masculinity from various vantage points, such as, men having the power to decide how a family should function, treating women as they wish, manhandling women, and subjecting women to serve men in all the potential ways. These directors firmly established patriarchy throughout the discursive space of the film. The film “Godfather” (1991) written and directed by popular malayalam film industry duo Siddique-Lal narrates the story of a family which consists of only male members and they believe any relationship with women would threaten their perception of masculinity and norms of patriarchy. The movie was a big hit in the state of kerala and the fact that it won the state award for the best popular film is evidence as to how the state and its public glorify movies that discriminate against women based on gender. Therefore one can say, cinema plays a huge role in generating ideologies that surround patriarchal norms, gender equality and empowerment of women.

Kerala’s cultural industry is very problematic as it portrays the power of masculinity and dominance of the upper class through the form of cinema and it has been reaching people over the years. The state of Kerala is considered to be a progressive state with a literary percentage of 100 but can one really call the state progressive when “Malayalee women” encounter numerous forms of misogynistic, violent and sexist discriminations in a male dominant society? There are few directors who upheld the notions of feminism and made films with strong female characters in the last decade. Notable among them being, 22 Female Kottayam (2012) by Aashiq Abu, Uyare(2019) by Manu Ashokan, Kumbalangi Nights (2018) by Madhu. C. Narayan, Zakariyayude Grabinikal (2013) by Aneesh Anwar, How old are you (2014) by Roshan Andrrews. These films echoed women empowerment and attempted to repudiate the toxic patriarchal discourse, which actually triggers the toxic mentality of the Malayalee men. In a
In a nutshell, one can say that the representation of gender roles in films has always been a concern and still continue to be a major issue in the industry.

There have been attempts made by Malayalam cinema industry to deconstruct the role of gender through the films. The movie “Mahathaaya Bharatiya Adukkala” (Great Indian Kitchen (2021)), written and directed by Joe Baby, which was released on the OTT platform in the year 2021 and the film “Aarkaryam” (Who Knows (2021)) directed by Sanu John Varghese tried to unveil the concept of men in domestic space. The Great Indian kitchen presents the unsavory portions of sexism in a household and successfully portrays the horrors of being a homemaker in everyday life. The movie Great Indian Kitchen literally unpacked the terrors of the patriarchal system that still prevail in every household of the Kerala society. There is a significant degree of criticism surrounding this film but one can’t escape the fact that this movie literally challenged the presence of men in the domestic space by questioning the fragile male ego of Indian men in general.

The film Great Indian Kitchen is a reflection of a typical Kerala household and a tight slap on the face of patriarchy. Mulvey argues that “the scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object, and in, contradistinction ego libido forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms which mould this cinema’s formal attributes. The actual image of women as (passive) raw material for the active gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order in its favourite cinematic form-illusionistic narrative film (67). The “Great Indian Kitchen” is everything that stands against the pleasurable experience of men throughout their narrative structure and striking visuals which challenges the insubstantial male ego.
A Small Peek into “THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN” and “AARKARYAM”

The Great Indian Kitchen is a small budget film released on OTT platform called Neestream on 15th of January 2021. The movie brilliantly addresses the struggles of a woman inside the four walls of the kitchen after marriage. One of the notable aspects of the movie is that none of the characters have a name throughout the course of the film because the film represents us, each of us in the male dominant society. The role of the husband was played by Suraj Venjaramoodu and the female protagonist by Nimisha Sajayan and received wide critical acclaim for their roles. The movie starts by thanking science in place of god. In the opening shot of the movie, Nimisha is enjoying her leisure time by dancing with her peers, meanwhile savouries are being prepared at home for her arranged marriage alliance which is a typical traditional practice in India. Nimisha gets married to a school teacher portrayed by Suraj Venjaramoodu who belongs to a traditional upper caste Hindu household. The character played by Suraj represents the mindset of a typical Malayalee man who wants to overpower women in all possible ways by taking control of all her spaces and believes women are there to take care of men. The important aspects of the film take place mostly in the Kitchen space.

On the other hand, the movie Arkaryam (Who Knows(2021)) directed by Sanu Varghese, conveys the story of a Mumbai-based Malayali couple, Sherly (portrayed by Parvathy Thiruvothu) and Roy (role played by Sharafudheen). Sherly’s father, Ittiyavira (Biju Menon), who is a 73-year old retired school master lives alone in their hometown, Kottayam. The couple travels back to their hometown to stay with Ittiyavira ahead of the Covid-induced lockdown. The character of Roy contradicts the role of Suraj in the Great Indian Kitchen by showing how he takes part in the Kitchen chores as if it is normal. In Butler’s notion of Gender...
Performativity, Butler argues that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time -an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts (519)”.

Sanu Varghese very subtly conveyed the role without romanticising men being in the Kitchen, taking equal role in household activities and the normalisation of Roy knowing basic life-skills in the movie is a raw impression to watch.

**Unpacking the Male Characters**

The role of Suraj in the “Great Indian Kitchen” is an archetype of men in a typical Kerala household. He acts as a torchbearer of patriarchy and expects his wife to serve him by being in the kitchen and making sure his family is fed well throughout the day. He marries Nimisha by taking a huge dowry along with a car from her family; it’s a system that was abolished in India according to the Dowry Prohibition Act enacted on May 1, 1961. When the new-bride enters the kitchen, we could see Suraj engage in leisure activity by doing yoga in the morning while his mother and wife toil by making food. It depicts a stark comparison of how men get to enjoy the privilege to engage in their daily leisure activities while women are left with no other choice other than being deployed in the kitchen. Nimisha and her mother-in-law serve food to Suraj and the father while waiting for them to finish the food. Anger, disgust and distress is reflected on the face of Nimisha when she witnesses how the men of the household left the dining table completely untidy with leftovers strewn across the table. This shot depicts how men expect women to clean the strewn food as if it is their duty and refuse to show minimum etiquette on the dining table. It can be seen that Nimisha places a bowl so that they can dump the waste in it but the male characters are shown ignoring it reflecting normalisation of sexism and misogyny against women at home.
The movie tosses light and subtly conveys the serious issue of marital rape but hasn’t fairly addressed the issue. However, film’s director, Jeo Baby didn’t fail to bring in the concept of consent in the bedroom space as the male protagonist expects his wife to indulge in sex as if it is part of her daily routine without being considerate about her physical and emotional well being. When Nimisha speaks out her displeasure to her husband, he considers it as an insult and body shames her which proves how fragile his ego can be. Other than being physical Suraj never shows any emotional bond or mental support to his wife and there are no meaningful and constructive conversations between the couple.

There is a scene where Suraj and Nimisha have food in a restaurant and Nimisha observes how carefully he keeps the waste in the plates rather than throwing it on the table. When she asks him about how he can keep the table manners here and not at home, he gets triggered and says; “What’s wrong with my manners at home? What’s wrong with that? My home, My convenience. I will do as I please. Got it?” Suraj refuses to accept the fact that he was at fault and feels offended when his wife calls him out. He later asks her to apologise to him for the way she spoke in the restaurant without any sense of guilt or remorse. He uses the very idea of gaslighting and tries to convince her that she is being unreasonable. The father-in-law is not any better than her husband as he demands the rice to be cooked in a hearth and his clothes to be washed by hand. We can’t see any casual interaction between the father and mother of suraj and the only interaction between them is how she brings his stuff to him like giving him a toothbrush with a paste, placing the chappals in front of him if he wants to go out. Anyone can easily figure out that she has been working as a slave for him and subjugated in the household. When Nimisha informs her father-in-law about the interview letter she received for the job as dance teacher he sets off saying;
 Didn’t we decide not to apply? My wife is also a postgraduate. She wished to work but I listened to my dad. Because of that all the children are in very good positions. Having a woman at home is very auspicious in the family. What you do is much greater than what bureaucrats and ministers do. You ask your mom and she will tell you the same.

These instances reflect how “The Great Indian Kitchen” showcased toxic masculinity in our very own homes that women face on a daily basis and how men have the power over women is problematic in many ways. The benefits of the patriarchal system allows men to enjoy their privilege and superiority over women but in the film “Aarkaryam”, the director Sanu Varghese shows male protagonist in a different light. Roy is seen making breakfast and serving it to Sherly while she is seated on the dining chair while both engage in a conversation. Later Roy joins the table while Sherly is talking to her daughter over video call and how Roy engages in a conversation with his step-daughter suggests how easy going he is. The director showed an extreme level of comfort between Sherly and Roy while discussing their past relationships by not making a big deal out of it, which reflects their trust and affection towards each other. It’s obvious how the character of Roy in Arkaryam is different from the character of Suraj in “Great Indian Kitchen” when it comes to sharing domiciliary care.

Although the movie is a crime thriller and slow paced, it hardly makes us feel any tension. The movie shows a lot of montages of different instances, which most of the people experienced during the lockdown. The movie was shot without any intention of showing the patriarchal norms of masculinity but it subtly places Roy’s character as someone who doesn’t make it eventful whenever he gets involved in cooking, cleaning and helping his wife in the kitchen. Unlike the character of Suraj in “The Great Indian Kitchen”, Roy doesn’t expect Sherley to serve
him or put the domain of family responsibilities on her shoulders. Roy taking equal responsibility without romanticizing leaves a good impression on the audience. Another instance shown in the film is how Sherley takes over the wheels from Roy while travelling back to Kerala from Mumbai in their car and lets Roy take rest and this is something that does not happen or seen often in the films.

Roy’s father-in-law, Ittiyavira (Biju Menon) appears to be someone irascible but he is someone who has profound fondness towards his daughter and son-in-law and it is unravelled in the rest of the movie. Ittiyavira is seen placing a jug of water in his daughter’s room, while his daughter and son-in-law are taking rest after a long drive is one of the instances that reflects how he takes care of them without expecting his daughter to do it. His family is shown relatively liberal and everyone takes equal part in family responsibilities. Most of the scenes in the kitchen involve Sherley cooking and Roy and Ittiyavira helping her by chopping vegetables or washing utensils. It was repeatedly shown in many instances and normalises the act of men occupying domestic space along with the women without romanticising or giving any special emphasis to it.

Unlike “Great Indian Kitchen”, everyone dines together in the film “Aarkaryam”, they serve food to each other and indulge in productive conversations showing how they stand against sexism at the ground level by ceding equal space to both the genders. Roy lets Sherley help in his financial issue and conveys he doesn’t feel inferior to his wife and lets his wife take care of things he can’t manage.

Conclusion

Both these films contradict each other in many ways in the way they showcase masculinity and how they treat women in their homes. Men are usually represented as someone who lacks interest...
in typical house chores such as cooking, cleaning and caring in films. They depict men as someone who is inadequate, but women as someone who are subordinate to men, passive and subjected to the will of men even from their young age. In the movie “The Great Indian Kitchen”, it is observed that, when Suraj and Nimisha go to their relative’s home after their marriage, we could see the men in their family including the boy child seated on the dining table and the woman serving the food. When Nimisha asks the girl child to join the table, the mother says: “She will eat with me. You guys eat, Please”.- is evidence to the fact that root of sexism and discrimination based on gender starts from home itself. Parents’ gender-role attitudes have a direct impact on the formation of gender ideologies in children’s minds and they grow up following that path resulting in the endless system of patriarchy. Stereotypical representation of men and women in media reinforce stereotypes and have a negative impact on the public. In a film culture that portrays man as someone who wants to subjugate women inside the four walls of the house, as someone who saves women from their incompetence and that a man has to be wealthy, successful in order to be worthy, “Aarkaryam” stands out.

References


Filmography

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