



Women in Malayalam Horror Movies: Representation and Roles

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ABSTRACT:

Gender hierarchies in the media have been a topic of discussion since the inception of the industry. The issues concerning women in film, both behind the scenes and on screen, have sparked considerable debate among scholars. Like other film industries in India, the Malayalam film industry often represents gender in a way that privileges patriarchy. The distorted representation of women, evident in movies since the 1960s, has been brought to light by feminist film critics who have urged audiences to recognize and critique such depictions. The critics also have given importance to the women representation in horror movies particularly, due to the nature of such genre. This paper examines representation of women and their roles in selected Malayalam horror movies.

Keywords: Gender, Horror, Representation, Feminism

The gender hierarchies in the media have been discussed since its origin. Especially the issues of women in film both outside the industry and inside the film have been a topic of debates among the scholars. Like all other film industries in India, Malayalam film industry also seems to represent gender in a way that gives more privilege to patriarchy. The distorted representation of women in early movies since 1960s comes to the forefront of the society and the feminist film critics invited the attention of the audience to figure out such depiction. India is one of the biggest film production countries in the world. Since 1896, Indian cinema has amassed over a century of history, achieving more than many other countries in the realm of film. The Malayalam film industry, often referred to as Mollywood, has played a significant role in these achievements. Mollywood has contributed to various genres, including action, adventure, comedy, science fiction, and horror. To date, around fifty Malayalam horror movies have been released. Some of these films evoke intense horror, while others explore the psychological aspects of fear. This discussion focuses on Malayalam horror movies “Vayanadan Thamban” (1978). 1960s witnessed high growth of film production in Malayalam film industry. The Malayalam movies showed the difference from all other Indian movies produced that time by presenting the social issues in movies instead of making stories from the mythologies. There was lot of film societies formed for the development of movies in this period which shaped the Malayalam movies giving a new direction. As a result Malayalam movies were acclaimed at national level and got more attention of the film viewers, which bagged the national awards to the Malayalam films. Hence, 1970s was the golden age of Malayalam films as there took place an extreme change in films. Bichu Khan says The Film Society Movement, which started in 1960s and gained momentum during the 1970s, brought in a new consciousness about cinema as an art form and stood for a different kind of cinema, which was termed as ‘parallel’, ‘new wave’ or ‘art’ cinema. Contrary to other parts of India, this movement was never an urban phenomenon, but something that cut across all terrains and sections of society. At a point of time, the great classics of World Cinema reached even the rural Kerala and discussions on them were held at the layman’s level (Khan, N.p.). The widespread formation of the film societies in Kerala spread awareness on the films even among the common people of that time. The coming of new young directors in production area turned the movies in a new direction where they applied the new way of language and method that made an exposure in Kerala especially among the youth to understand the scene behind the curtain. In such a stage, Malayalam film industry had produced all types’ movies which intended the legacy of Malayalam films.

Disparities in representation of male and female :

Most horror movies portray women as victims, the weaker sex, and brutally murdered by males. A common trope in horror films is the depiction of a half-naked woman running through dilapidated buildings to escape a killer, only to be caught and killed. The continuous violence and sexual content in these films provide clear evidence of the stereotypical representation of women. Often, the murderer in horror movies is male. Even when women are depicted as murderers, it is often in the form of ghosts or supernatural beings, highlighting the perceived inability of female characters in these narratives. These trends of negative portrayal of women warrant further exploration. Additionally, when women are depicted in more active roles, their portrayal is still influenced by patriarchal norms.

This study delves into the passive and active representation of women, as well as the distorted portrayal of women in active roles. From the inception of movie production, the representation of women has remained largely unchanged, persisting across all film genres. To counteract such misrepresentation, feminists have produced critical works that analyze texts and visual narratives from a feminist perspective. Nelmes says “Many feminists felt that the realist tradition perpetuated a way of seeing, of understanding the world that belonged to dominant patriarchal society and that feminists should break with this tradition” (Nelmes 252). There are many sensational works related to this topic in which they focus on this genre’s

inclination to terrify its female characters and to display the violence in an extremely sexualized manner. Almost all the film industries produce horror movies abundantly in a year which indicates the acceptance of the genre particularly horror films. The widespread production of such movies and the entertainment through the fear distinguish the horror movies from others. From the birth of the gothic genre itself the scholars started to analyze horror and women in relation to it. The unchanging trend in the horror movies opened the eyes of the feminist scholars to study such ways. Even though the movie stories change from one to another the representation of women remains unchanged. Feminist film theory emerged to find out the place for women within the frame work of film theory and feminist critics understood the need of exploring the images and depiction of women in movies. The role of women in larger context is depicted by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) by telling that

She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with references to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other (16).

Indian cinema generally projects male character as superior to female character. Male character does all the heroic acts on the screen whereas female character is a mere spectacle. Besides, they have to sacrifice all the needs in their life for the hero. Vrinda Mathur states that "the male characters of Indian cinema, i.e. the heroes (those knights in shining armour) and the villains (those over-energetic sharks) move around the space of the movie like players in a deadly choreographed game of chess - with the women characters as sacrificial pawns." (2009: 66).

These situations can be seen in Malayalam film industries also. The director's intentions towards the new actress and the qualification of the actress make us wonder as the words of Malayalam film photographer P. David. He says in his book *Fraimukalkkapuram* (Beyond the Frame) that Even though Sujatha was an outstanding actress in Malayalam cinema the directors did not give the opportunities to Sujatha because she does not allow the intention of the directors..... When a new actress comes the directors will expect many things. But Sujatha was totally against that. (48).

It is mere one example of the inside play of film industries. The same things happened within the narrative also. He continues that "the sexy actresses are the inevitable factor of the eighteenth century Malayalam films. It was a formula to attract the youth to film....the youth of the Kerala took the tickets only to see the dance of such actresses where they display their parts of the body (21). Urvashi Butalia's narraton on portrayal of women in general evinces the same case as "However a starting point may be that in spite of increased visibility, Indian women are not in general autonomous and self-defined in the films. This is not surprising given that 90 percent of the directors and producers are men. It is not an oversimplification to say that in popular Indian cinema women are seen very much in bad or good roles. (109). It is just an example how women are generally stereotyped in the entire genre of films.

The misogynic representation of mainstream media, and particularly movies, which often depicts women as objects, continued to be discussed in details. As a result the horror role also noted this way of depiction of women. Some scholars even noted displaying of rape scenes throughout the mainstream media, and particularly films with distorted portrayal of women in public. Hollywood has produced notable horror movies in early years which showed the real one-sided domination in industry. The influence of the western movies is obvious in Indian movies as they follow the same pattern or adaptation of the movies. The Malayalam film industry, particularly in its early movies, perpetuated misogynistic representations. In Malayalam horror movies, women are often depicted as traditional vengeful ghosts clad in white saris with long hair, a portrayal that distorts women's identities and reinforces perceptions of them as the weaker sex. Male characters frequently dominate over female characters, evident in the conversations within the narratives of Malayalam films where actors typically exert dominance over actresses. P. K. Nair says in his article "Gender Equations in Malayalam Cinema" that

Just look at a routine conversation between a husband and wife of a middle class family in a Malayalam film. The worried husband with a problem in his head walks impatiently to and fro in his bedroom. The wife, eager to help, wants to know what is bothering him, and with all sincerity enquiries, 'What's the problem?' He curtly replies, 'You won't understand. It's beyond your comprehension. Go to sleep' (Nair 37).

In horror movies, control of the scene often lies predominantly with male actors. This is particularly true for Malayalam horror films, which present a host of issues worthy of exploration. Horror movies have broken certain taboos and norms, introducing explicit sexual acts, violence, and nude scenes as integral elements. A major trend in Malayalam horror films is the depiction of women as ghosts. The physical appearance of female ghosts in these movies differs significantly from that of male ghosts. Unlike Hollywood horror films, which often portray women in a terrifying manner, Malayalam horror movies tend to depict female ghosts as sexually active. While these women-centered ghost movies effectively horrify audiences, they do so by emphasizing sexuality, whereas male ghosts are portrayed with more physically horrifying attributes.

Gender equation in the selected movie :

"Vayanadan Thamban" (1978), directed by A. Vincent and starring Kamal Hassan and Latha, features Kamal Hassan as a vampire who sucks the blood of virgins as part of an evil ritual. His character kills five virgins to retain his youth but is unable to kill the girl with whom he has had a sexual relationship. The movie partially aligns with the "final girl" theory, providing a basis for various explanations and criticisms of the theory. The presence of conflicting elements in the film highlights the influence of patriarchal norms in filmmaking. The "final girl" theory, developed by Carol J. Clover, analyzes the roles of women in horror movies, focusing on their active participation in the narrative. Therefore, Clover's theory of final girl has been questioned by the critics like Tony Williams. He says in his 1996 article, "Trying to Survive on the Darker Side," that "clover's supposedly final girls are never entirely victorious at the end of certain films nor are they devoid of the recuperation into a male order of things that they are supposedly free of it. Her argument needs to consider more detailed readings of individuals' scenes and other examples that contradict her thesis". (198) The *VayanadanThamban* movie is a fine example of what Tony Williams talks about. To prove his criticism on Clover's final girl theory he brings evidence from the movies like Lila Crane in *Psycho* and Laurie Strode in *Halloween*; who is both rescued by the male characters in the movie. Tony Williams continues that "although eighties heroines may appear more masculinized than their predecessors, the conservative ideological dimensions of this gender change needs thorough investigation before we may safely regard it as a progressive" (198). He accounts the real part of the final girl through this statement. Even though the horror movie represents the final girl in the end of the movie, it is not much victorious. Instead, that is a mere escape from the death besides throughout the movie the final girl suffers all kind of torture from the male characters. He condemns the final girl theory that

“Clover’s analysis elevates the final girl into a rigid model. Her work does not closely examine relevant specific instances within each particular film that often question the validity of her thesis”. (199). The movie portrays extensive violence against female characters, with Thamban killing virgins to sustain his life. The victims are all virgins, while the Final Girl, who has had a relationship with Thamban, ultimately escapes from his clutches. This scenario contradicts the traditional “final girl” theory, as she survives due to her prior relationship with him. In this context, the character of Annamma fits this revised interpretation of the final girl. Shyla Fairfax explains in her research that

However, the Final Girl is sadly not always so victorious. Many times she is unable to successfully defeat the killer, and even if she does it does not make up for all he has taken from her, including her sanity and sense of safety. This is why I am offering a third point of view within which the Final Girl is neither an incarnation for the teenage boy, nor simply a heroine, but rather a survivor, specifically of male violence (02).

Thamban kills female characters in the movie who have not engaged in any illicit relationships. The first victim, Kochammini, falls prey to Thamban despite her innocence. Interestingly, Thamban spares male characters even during confrontations with Kochammini’s family. Kochammini, who does not partake in illegal activities like drinking or drug use, still meets her demise at the hands of the vampire. This fate befalls all of Thamban’s victims in the film. According to Carol J. Clover, the “final girl” is characterized by a blend of masculine and feminine traits, enabling her to evade the killer. However, Kochammini, the final girl in “Vayanadan Thamban,” embodies a more traditional female character archetype. Besides the movie is the epitome of the Male Gaze. Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” written in 1973 and published in 1975, is one of the important women writings in film and male gaze theory. She explains that “the cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia (pleasure in looking). There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure” (16). In “Vayanadan Thamban,” the male character intensifies visual pleasure through the “male gaze,” demonstrated in various scenes throughout the film. Kochammini, the first victim of the vampire Thamban, becomes the focal point of his gaze. In the opening scene, Thamban arrives in a palanquin and observes girls bathing in a pool. He halts his palanquin and fixes his gaze on them, particularly singling out Kochammini. The camera distinctly captures Thamban’s focused attention on her, even as he follows her to a temple where they first encounter each other. Throughout this sequence, Thamban exerts control, peering at Kochammini through narrow pathways, with the director portraying her primarily as an object of his desire.

Conclusion :

As time has progressed and new generations continue to produce films, industries have remained steadfast in their portrayal of female characters across all genres. Even in horror movies, women are often depicted in stereotypical ways. This study serves as an example of such representation, despite the gothic genre being traditionally known for its focus on female dominance.

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