

IMAGING WOMEN IN MALAYALAM CINEMA-A COUNTER DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the imaging of women in Malayalam cinema and make an attempt to analyze the defending attitude of women in contemporary women centered Malayalam cinema *Four Women* directed by Adoor Gopala Krishnan and *22 Female Kottayam* directed by Aashiq Abu from a feministic perspective. This paper focuses on the representation of resisting image of women which is purely a counter discourses for the earlier imaging of women in Malayalam cinema. *Four Women* narrates the universal tale of women and *22 Female Kottayam* narrates the regainment of lost sense of self which is spoiled by male chauvinism. Both these movies help to empower women and to regain their real self which acts as the weapon for resisting male chauvinism by which women can create their own space.

Key words: Imaging women, women centered Malayalam cinema, defending sense of self, male chauvinism, women empowerment and space of women.

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Malayalam cinema and imaging women have become one of the hottest discussions in the present social scenario of Kerala. Malayalam Film industry has been trying to image women in their true selves. There are a few directors who uphold the feministic thoughts and values and have tried to present such thoughts through their film works. Contemporary Malayalam film industry has produced many women centered cinema and that gives way for enlightening women spectators all over Kerala. Earlier majority of Malayalam cinema have focused on representing women as submissive and weak. But there are films as counter discourses for such representations. *Four Women* directed by Adoor Gopala Krishnan and *22 Female Kottayam* directed by Aashiq Abu are some of the examples for such counter discourses. The under currents of sex and its resistance are the highlighted theme in both films. The representation of women has changed in the contemporary Malayalam cinema beyond recognition. It presents the leading female characters often flirt openly, drink in public and make lewd comments. Its screen play has rooted to reality ,closer to life and lead characters are ordinary women and men. It focuses on the issues of women and male gaze and tries its best to give solution for such issues. That will help to create awareness among women and ultimately gives a platform to empower women.

In her seminal essay ‘Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ Laura Mulvey makes use of psychoanalytic theory as a political weapon to demonstrate how the patriarchic subconscious of society shapes its audiences’ film watching experiences and cinema itself. Mulvey’s main

argument in ‘Visual pleasures and Narrative Cinema’ is that how the narrative films use the women in order to provide a pleasurable visual experience for men. The narrative film structures its gaze as masculine. The woman is always the object of gaze, not the bearer of it. But in the films ‘*Four Women*’ and ‘*22 Female Kottayam*’, it is the women who bears the meaning, it is the women who leads the film and it’s the women who functions the important role in conveying the message of rise of awareness among women. *Four Women* depicts the problems faced by women and *22 Female Kottayam* depicts the counter solution for those problems. Both films are women centered and try to belittle the power of man by questioning him on different aspects.

Four Women (2007) is a Malayalam film produced and directed by Adoor Gopala Krishnan based on four short stories written by Thakazhi sivasankara pillai. The movie has four distinct parts –each adapted from separate short stories of Thakazhi. Each of the parts narrate the stories of women from different strata of the society. Though the stories are not explicitly connected in narration, a pattern emerges in the flow of movie – both in chronological setting and the stature of women. It is the story of four women from Kuttanadu in Alappuzha district in Kerala. The four segments of this movie – ‘The Prostitute’, ‘The Virgin’, ‘The House wife’ and ‘The Spinster’ – focus on trials and tribulation that women faced and continue to face. Through this film Adoor Gopala Krishnan explores issues such as marital fidelity, morality and sexual desire through the plights of four women who belongs to different social strata. The first story ‘The Prostitute’ is the story of a street prostitute Kunjippennu (padmapriya) and Pappukutty (Sreejith Ravi). Kunjipennu wants to stop her body selling and decide to start a life with Pappukutty as his wife. They have bound themselves in Matrimony that does not have any legal sanction when the law catches up with them, they do not have anything that can be an evidence of their commitment towards each other. The story ends in the court scene where the helpless couples are punished for the crime of prostitution. The second story ‘The Virgin’ tells about the story of Kumari (Geethu Mohandas) literally a virgin girl –is a farm worker who shouldered the responsibility of running her household at a very early age. Her father (M.R Gopakumar) having realized her advancing age, accepts suitable marriage proposal for her. After the wedding, her husband behaves strangely as he evades any kind of contact with her including verbal

conversation and sexual activity. Her husband leaves Kumari in her house and never returns to take her back. As days pass, rumours spread that she has been abandoned by him because of her infidelity. Kumari, who maintained silence so far, emerges from house and declares that the marriage never happened. The third story 'The house wife' is about Chinnu Amma (Manju pillai) who is a childless housewife. She lives a fairly contented life with her husband, who works in nearby town. She spends her time alone at home. One day she is visited by Nara pillai, her former classmate. Through their conversation it is clear that they had an amorous encounter in their childhood from which Chinnu Amma escaped narrowly due to her fear of getting pregnant out of wedlock. Narapillai assumes that she is vulnerable and attempts to talk her into bed by promising her a healthy offspring. Chinnu amma's mind vacillates, but in the end, she boldly declines the offer. The last story The spinster is an upper middleclass girl Kamakshi (nanditha). She has a quiet life in her family composed of her widowed mother, an elder brother and two sisters. The story begins with a marriage proposal for her, which fails as the groom prefers her younger sister. She silently witnesses the marriage. As years pass on, her elder brother also gets married. As she walks towards middle age, her youngest sister also gets married. Once the mother passes away, she is forced to move in with her younger sisters family. Things go well initially as she gets close to her nieces. Her sister's husband apologizes to her for being the reason for her failed marriage proposal. But soon problems surface as her sister gets jealous of her and starts imagining a non-existing affair with her husband and her. She goes back home alone refusing to live with either her brother or the youngest sisters. She finally has broken the shackles of others controlling her life and has decided to live on her own

In the film *22 Female Kottayam*, the plot revolves around the character of Tessa k Abraham (Rima kallingal), a malayali nurse who hails from kottayam and aspires to go Canada to build up her career. She meets Cyril (Fahadh Fazil) from the travel consultancy agency working towards setting up of her visa. They soon fall in love and decide to live together. One day at a pub, a guy misbehaves with Tessa and Cyril beats him up badly. The guy tries to take revenge on Cyril and searches for him. Cyril goes into hiding with the help of his boss Hedge (Prathap pothan). Hedge arrives at Cyril's home to inform Tessa about the situation. Then

he asks her plainly ‘Can I have sex with you?’ A shocked Tessa is then brutally attacked and raped. When Cyril finds out what happened, he becomes violent and wants to kill Hedge. Tessa calms him down saying that she does not want to make incident worse than it is; instead she wants to go Canada at the earliest. Once Tessa recovers from injuries, Hedge visits her again to ask for forgiveness. He comes while Cyril is not around and rapes her for second time .Tessa decides not to travel abroad and plans to murder Hedge. Cyril discusses the situation with Hedge who suggests killing Tessa and appoints Cyril to do it. Cyril traps her by putting some drugs in her bag. The police arrests Tessa and she is imprisoned. While Tessa calls out for help, she finds Cyril simply walking away from her. While in prison Tessa meets Zubeida who is sentenced for murder. Through zubeida’s criminal world connections Tessa realizes that Cyril is a pimp and was cheating her long with the support of his boss Hedge. Zubeida and Tessa bond well each other and shapes a criminal mindset within her for the strength and courage needed to strike back at Cyril and Hedge. When the court sets free, Tessa with the help of DK (Sathar) kills Hedge by poisoning him with cobra. By that time Cyril relocates to Cochin and runs a modeling agency .Tessa arrives in Cochin as a femme fatale in search of Cyril pretending to be a model. She hooks up with Cyril in his studio. He recognizes her and angrily berates her but slowly his frustrations dissolve as he wants to enjoy her company. He reminds her that she is mere a woman. The same night Tessa executes a revenge plan by sedating him and sadistically penectomises him.

The leading women characters in these two movies epitomize the women who face the same troubles and tribulation .The women in these two movies try to defend male chauvinism. The pathetic state of prostitutes and raped girls are convincingly presented. Even though prostitutes want to stop selling their body, the authority never wants to rise up her social position. The common thread in these two women is the power of resistance and rising up of their voices against male atrocities and domination. All these women images have an independent personality. These two films highlight society’s attitude towards prostitutes, the institution of marriage, sufferings of a childless mother, the feelings of an over aged spinster and the emotional feelings of a raped girl. Their resistance is a counter imaging for their earlier suppressing imaging. The representation of sexuality is commentable.Women and sexuality is

one of the thematic aspects of these movies. Woman's body rarely speaks to the spectators. One of the core concepts in feminist film theory is that of body and feminist have challenged ocular centrism. As Molly Haskell points in her influential work 'From reverence to rape' three types of women characters appear in these movies i.e., the extra ordinary, the ordinary women and the ordinary who becomes the extra ordinary. The extra ordinary woman portrays herself as strong and powerful. The ordinary woman portrays herself as common, passive and often a victim. The ordinary who becomes extra ordinary woman portrays herself as the victim who rise or endure. The leading women characters in these movies can be categorized into the extra ordinary like Kumari, ordinary woman like Kunjippennu and extra ordinary woman like Tessa k Abraham. Her attempts to remove his penis is really a warning to those who believe penis makes a man superior. All the women characters have their own justification and are powerful enough to create their own space. *Four Women* begins and ends with knocking at the door by a man who wants to satisfy his desire with Kamakshi. But it is through her powerful voice she resists his approach. She resolves to face the world without a man.

Both of these films are a type of oppositional cinema even if they are produced by male directors. These films warn the male spectators and empower the woman spectators simultaneously by re-presenting women from the lowest position of prostitute to an educated nurse. The women characters in these films are subverting and challenging the so called stereotypes.

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