

***Pennu*, the Language of Representation: A Study of Women Characters in the Films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan**

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Abstract

An uncompromising film maker, Adoor Gopalakrishnan was one of the pioneers of ‘new wave’ or ‘avant-garde’ films in India. His films are always rooted on our socio-political realities. This article focuses on the treatment of women in the films of Adoor. Gender, always is a major issue in the world of art. When it comes to the matter of cinema, the mainstream art form, the portrayal of the other gender is always of prime importance. An analysis of Adoor's films shows how he is different from the majority film makers in representing women characters in his films. The depiction of femininity in films is the major concern of the research and it also try to figure out how *pennu* (woman) becomes a language of representation in the discourse of gender in films.

Keywords: Gender – Representation – Femininity – *Pennu* – Language of Representation

Cinema hesitated between the status of an art form and the compulsions of an individual product during its early years. Capital remained the determiner and creative talent played the second fiddle. Hollywood productions virtually emulated the assembly line production in the Ford factories. Griffith and Chaplin were the early artists who chose to stamp their individuality to their creation.

The French concept of the *auteur* took a step further along this line. The term means ‘author’ and the director assumed an authorial claim over the work with it. In India, film makers like Satyajith Ray, Mrinal Sen, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Aravindan etc. became part of this tradition. In big budget commercial production the director at is an organizer of resources. His role is minimal in serious decision making.

But the *auteur*’s role is similar to that of any creative artist. He makes a serious engagement with the medium in hand. The author’s relationship with the medium determines the quality of a work of art even better than its content or theme. Great writers seem to create a

language of their own and great painters a unique world of colours. A great film maker generates an individual visual language which is entirely his own.

Adoor's style of film making is as pronounced as the literary style of any great writer. His frames build up a unique syntactic coherence very similar to the way syllables generate meaning chains in every human utterance. Each of his frame is meticulously conceived and dexterously executed. His eyes go to every detail and he is as uncompromising as a master composer of music.

Commercial film making does not demand much intellectual calibre on the part of the director. But films of Adoor's kind invest heavily on the intellectual involvement of both their and their audience. In his titles Adoor uses the term 'sakshatkaram' (realization) in the place of the usual 'samvidhanam' (direction). His use of this term speaks a lot on the way he understands his role. Adoor does not make films on themes that are alien to his self. It is not precisely an attempt to pack them with social messages. However, his social consciousness naturally places him on the side of the socially responsible. By nature and by nurture he belongs to the liberal humanist tradition. Women and their predicament have always been a significant element in this way of thinking. So it is no surprise that Adoor's film analyze their lives from a sympathetic angle.

The presence of women in most of the films in India is marked by the stark exposure of the female body, a ploy to attract more people to watch the movie. Most films represent women as an object of pleasure. She is portrayed as a means to man to attain his avowedly ultimate goal of elemental physical pleasure. This article attempts to analyze the representation of women characters in the films of Dr. Adoor Gopalakrishnan with special reference to his films, *Elippathayam* (*The Rat Trap*) and *Naalu Pennungal* (*Four Women*). According to Adoor Gopalakrishnan, "Nobody makes films only for festivals; only those films that are aesthetically rich get selected. So it's nice to be appreciated on such a platform." (2019).

In analyzing the women characters in the films of Adoor Gopalakrishnan, we see a gradual, slow and steady progression in their attitude and perspectives. His films may be seen as a journey from the 'no man's land' of commercial cinema to the 'final destination' of cinema with substance. His women characters are quite different from the women in mainstream Indian cinema. The women in *Elippathayam* and *Naalu Pennungal*, are well structured and nicely woven to the script. The presence of these women in the films is so inseparable to the scheme of things that the viewers will not identify them as separate entities. *Elippathayam* depicts the plight of women in a patriarchal society whereas *Naalu Pennungal* chronicles the journey of womanhood across different backdrops. Though the four stories are not explicitly connected narratively, there emerges a connection pattern in its theme- 'Woman'. Both these movies are different in their social scenario. One depicts the lives of woman in a feudalistic patriarchal society at its twilight while the other documents women existing in different social milieus that are distanced in time and space.

Elippathayam, like *Naalu Pennungal*, presents four women characters to the viewers – the submissive woman, the revolting woman, the practical woman and the seducing woman. The

outer layer of presentation seems to focus on the male protagonist but these female characters form an undercurrent to the whole theme of the film. Rajamma suffers a lot in the clutches of patriarchy and feudalism. She is haunted by her familial responsibilities and the frustrations in being a spinster. Rajamma is suppressed by her brother and this state leads to her pathetic death. Unlike Rajamma, her younger sister Sreedevi and elder sister Janamma survived the patriarchy by making their own choices. The local female labourer also tries in her own way to seduce the landlord; she also becomes an essential part of the movie. 'Rat Trap' acts as a metaphor to help in understanding how women are placed within the feudal system of Kerala.

In the film *Elippathayam*, Adoor Gopalakrishnan portrays all the female characters brilliantly and fairly. Colours and music are strikingly significant constituents of the film's thematic development. Gopalakrishnan has used colours with symbolic and communicative import. For example, Rajamma, the most submissive character in the film wears blue, signifying her generosity and also her genuine but timid nature. The pale blue colour also suggests that she is incapable of imagining how to chart her life outside patriarchy. She is shown to be constantly working for others and faithfully looking after her brother. The eldest sister wears green and according to Gopalakrishnan, it shows earthiness, practicality and intelligence. She has survived patriarchy by means of marriage and bearing children. She worries about property and need to feed her family. Her main concern is to claim her share of the family property and income. She is portrayed as an intransigent and self-centred woman. The rebellious, vivacious and passionate Sreedevi wears red; she is the only one who opens her mind to the outside world. She escapes the bounds of patriarchy with her lover.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's philosophy of minimalism is evident in the sparse conversations and resounding silences. Silence is the major motif of the film – the characters work and walk in silence, conversations are left hanging in mid-air, supposed dialogues are reduced to monologues with Unni's refusal to respond. Scenes bereft of sound seem more eloquent during many dramatic moments in the film.

Naalu Pennungal is about four women in four different stories with nothing in common except for the theme. They are caught up in their own battle of survival, submissive and passive in the beginning, each one ultimately makes a choice irrespective of the wishes of the society or of the family. Though these stories are set in a time more than sixty years ago, the thematic conflict is still relevant, especially in the countryside and it shows how women were beginning to change their attitude, all those years ago. The women represent their time.

Naalu Pennungal is an incisively clinical look at the condition of women from different stations of life and social status. The low caste Kunjippennu in *Oru Niyamalankhanathinte Katha* despairingly asserts her marital relationship before a social system that do not accord humanness to people like her. The condition of the rest of the women in the other episodes is no different. If it is an aggressively exploitative patriarchal system that looms over Kunjippennu's life, in *Kanyaka*, it is its indifference and impotence. Here, the father is incapable of protecting or empowering her, while her husband is a moron, aroused only by food and moneymaking. Kumari is left behind, bitter and despairing but resolute in her loneliness. She asserts before her parents and neighbours that her marriage never happened.

If in Kumari's case marriage is never consummated, in the case of Chinnu Amma, it is motherhood that fatefully evades her. *Chinnu Amma* is another story of fruitless fidelity and the never ending waiting for an offspring. When an occasion presents itself to break away from it, she shrinks herself out of that temptation of flesh and progeny and decides to shut herself in the prison of being a 'virtuous' wife. The fourth episode presents an array of women in different aspects: the protective mother torn between what is rightful and proper and the exigencies of everyday life; the temptress and sensuous girl, nubile and inviting, fiercely possessive and assertive; and the eternal virgin who is fated to play the role of the sacrificing nurturer and surrogate mother to all, Kamakshi. Whatever life offers to Kamakshi are snatched away from her, and she ends up living for the sake of 'things other than herself and her body'. The film ends with Kamakshi affirming as if in response to the pleading knocks at the door and directly to the audience, the possibility of a woman living without a male companion.

Naalu Pennungal is about non consummation of love and the systematic seclusion of women from any 'transgression'. One of the recurring motifs in the film is that of closed and closing doors. Sometimes it is the woman who closes the door upon the world, more often it is the other way round. In the film all the acts of rebellion on the part of women are acts of moving away from the clutches of the system – legal, familial, social and moral – and into a solitary world of one's own. The institution of marriage and the place of women in it are central to each narrative.

The slow digression of man from muted presence to the final exclusive absence functions as common motif which binds these four short films together. In the first episode, where the man accepts the prostitute, Kunjipennu as his wife, it is nothing but a reflection of her fate; no home, no shelter, in short, a very much muted sort of her own existence. When the story moves to *Kanyaka*, though she possesses a dominant presence through the story they remain mutually elusive to provide a source of solace and love to the woman. In the story of Chinnu Amma, the man is a neglected and impotent catalyst, the woman despite of keeping on with her virtue keeps swaying between the "other" and her "virtue". Though she maintains her virtue to the end of the film; her absence in the final shot as the camera pans in, along with the last lines of the story shows the sign of regret when she staggers with the line "I'm stressed" after she declines her classmate's offer to bear her a child.

While the woman of *Oru Niyamalanganathinte Katha* (Kunjipennu, played by Padmapriya) signifies surrender, the other three symbolize a feminine survival. Geethu Mohandas (Kumari), Manju Pillai (Chinnu Amma) and Nandita Das (Kamakshi) give life to *Naalu Pennungal*. At one level, these four different stories portray difficult situations faced by women. And at another level, it suggests that the women face similar problems – the hypocrisy of men and society. Though Thakazhi's stories refer to the period between 1930 and 1960, the film communicates with the audience in a timeless manner.

The selection of these two films – *Elippathayam* and *Naalu Pennungal* - since they deal with different social conditions and entirely different themes, we felt that they would be worth analysis. The journey of 'woman' from Rajamma, Sreedevi and Janamma to Kunjipennu, Kanyaka, Chinnu Amma and Kamakshi has been interesting and worthwhile. We can trace the

progress of woman and the development of her will power in this journey. Even though we notice pragmatic and even revolting women in Janamma and Sreedevi respectively in *Elippathayam*, the predominant trait displayed by women in the movie is submissiveness.

But, in *Naalu Pennungal*, we see the slow but steady flowing of woman's will and the strength of her sense of freedom. Though Kunjipennu in *Oru Niyamalanganthinte Katha* is silent, she rebels, protests and resists by means of it. In the case of Kumari in *Kanyaka*, submissiveness is replaced by the realization of her own strength and will power, and this inspires her to abandon silence and to arrive at a bold decision at the end of the movie. Chinnu Amma stands apart as the image of the 'virtuous' woman. She stands strong even at temptations from her childhood friend. This also shows the strength and will power of women. With the journey culminating in *Kamakshi*, we can see the progressing woman to be an independent entity. *Kamakshi* is a submissive and silent character who sacrifices her aspirations for the good of the family. She is a doll in the hands of fate and is destined to live alone. This helps her to realize her strength and the fact that she can live alone without the care and support of a man. This declaration of *Kamakshi*, in fact, comes as the declaration of the whole of the woman community. Adoor tries to say that the woman no more needs the shade of the man and she is free and capable of living alone and freely in the society. This also questions the prevalent social condition and the unwritten 'moral' rules. Adoor stirs the false morality prevailing in our country, especially in our state – Kerala.

In analyzing the women in Adoor's *Elippathayam* and *Naalu Pennungal*, we might discover in them the features of so called 'conventional women' depicted in Malayalam cinema during the time. But today, things are quite different. Malayalam cinema has seen innumerable experiments in the treatment of themes, forms and structures of films. Adoor may be the first director to introduce portmanteau films in Malayalam. *Naalu Pennungal* is the first of its kind; which is another uniqueness of the movie.

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