

Reworking Mollywood

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Gender studies, a form of scholarship with strong connections to women's studies and LGBTQI studies primarily challenges what Gayle Rubin refers to as the "sex/gender system", which positions heterosexuality as the only normal form of sexual relations and thus bifurcates humans into "males" and "females". To better ensure the distinction of these two sexes, the sex/gender system demands that the males always behave in ways conventionally understood as "masculine" while females must behave in a traditionally "feminine" manner. By linking these sexes to these specific genders, Rubin argues, the sex/gender system works as a powerful regulator of individual behavior and social relations, particularly with regard to the subjugation of women.

With the exception of cultural feminists who understand women's femininity to be inherent, feminist and LGBTQI activists and scholars have long opposed the sex/gender system because, in addition to suggesting that masculinity and femininity are stable and universal categories, it relies on the faulty logic that "biology is destiny" and thus severely limits the unique qualities which different humans possess. Hence, as the discussion on the

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development of gender studies demonstrates, the various ways feminist and LGBTQI scholars have theorized “sex” and “gender” are the best methods to subvert the oppressive norms associated with them. This paper is such an attempt to examine the subversion of gender stereotypes through the medium of cinema. The study aims to analyze two popular Mollywood movies post-2015, namely *Mayaanadhi* and *Varathan* so as to understand how they attempt to subvert gender stereotypes and how they succeed in breaking the gender norms and initiate a fresh wave towards a social revolution.

Of the multiple eminent theorists in gender and media studies, the paper focuses on the theories of Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler to discuss the major concerns in the movies under study. Judith Butler’s theory on ‘social construction of gender’ and ‘Performativity of gender’ has been overwhelmingly influential. Laura Mulvey, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative cinema*, makes use of psychoanalysis to “discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already in work within the individual subject and the social formations that moulded him”(60). In fact Mulvey points to the idea that in spite of films with a woman as main protagonist, the strength of the female protagonist is more apparent than real. This idea can be interwoven with that of subversion of gender in popular movies which is rather an attempt in vain. This paper discusses such attempts of gender subversion in popular Malayalam movies namely *Mayaanadhi* and *Varathan*.

A quick survey of the cross section of Malayalam cinema across the different ages elucidates that the Malayalam screen has always provided stereotypical images of women who conformed to subordination. Be it *Vigathakumaran* (1928), or *Sthree* (1950), or a more recent one *Achanurangatha Veedu* (2005), there is a constant failure in films to look beyond the portrayal of women as someone who loves to cook, clean, wash, scrub, shine and polish for her man. Besides this, popular Malayalam movies like *Narasimham* construct man as the

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sovereign subject, as the one who carries the look, as the sole agent of choice. Here, the woman is the object of gaze, an object that should cater to the horizon of expectations of the male. Such films are classic examples of Mulvey's proposition of how the female spectator internalizes the 'male gaze.'

The stoning of the screen on which the movie *Vigathakumaran* was projected proves to be ample evidence to the cause. It took much time for Malayalam film industry to follow how the Kerala society began accepting changes and hence it took a while to influence the contemporary Malayalam cinema. The concern is regarding the chronological phase where the society welcomes different kinds of cinema. This has paved way for multiple attempts of subversion of gender, as seen in movies like *22 Female Kottayam* (2012) and the very recent, critically acclaimed Tamil short film, *Maa* (2018). Though such attempts have not yet changed the film language significantly, there are excellent attempts at subversion in Indian movies which is examined, while focusing on the Mollywood hits *Mayaanadhi* and *Varathan*. The Bechdel test and Barthian semiotics would prove to be two significant tools to analyze those elements of subversion in the movies under study. According to Bechdel, just because a film has many female characters with inner strength, does not mean that these representations stray away from stereotypical images. Her questions to the cause are seriously noteworthy and open to consideration in the context. On the other hand, Barthian semiotics revolves around the different meanings; the denoted and connoted.

Mayaanadhi, a Malayalam romantic thriller of 2017, centers on the troubled love between the lead characters and their struggle for survival. Directed and co-produced by Aashiq Abu, the film was written by Syam Pushkaran and Dileesh Nair. With excellent music by Rex Vijayan coupled with the brilliant cinematography of Jayesh Mohan, Dream Mill Cinemas and Entertainments Moonshoot Entertainment produced the movie which had widespread positive reviews from critics as it hit the list of "Top films of the year." Lead

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starring by Tovino Thomas as John Mathew/ Maathan and Aishwarya Lakshmi as Aparna/ Apu; was complemented greatly with the characters of Sameera and Darshana played by Leona Lishoy and Darshana Rajendran respectively. The major other roles performed cameo functions in the movie, though significant to the plot. The outset itself suggests Maathan as a character who loves to live a peaceful family life while Aparna is in deep pursuit of her dreams. Maathan, an orphan living as a thug, participates in an undercover deal for money. Once when he and the gang board a hotel room, there is a police raid; all others are killed while Maathan manages to scoot. He happens to murder a police officer by accident and hence becomes the prime suspect of the department. Also, a vivid picture of the independent lifestyle of Aparna is presented in which she stands up for the family (mother and brother), without surrendering her own wills and desires. She performs anchoring for parties, does ad films and so on for money, which is the fundamental base of her independence. Her initial anger for Maathan depicts her strength to respond to anything that is against her ethics.

Once taken back to a flashback of their love-life, unraveled in the song “Uyirin Nadhiyee...” notably for the first time in a South Indian movie, the woman enjoys the natural beauty while her man sits smoking beside her. Later, while Aparna loses confidence at an audition, she finds solace in the verbal abuse of Maathan, where every word of affection fails. The epitome of subversion is seen in the love-making sequence of the couple. Having performed well in the final round of auditions, Apu takes Maathan to her native place and to her home. There, it is under her initiative that the couple has their first sexual intercourse. Once they are home, Maathan prepares food while Apu takes a shower. There Apu hugs him from behind only to ignite a passionate lovemaking in the kitchen. All these are ample examples to point out the gender subversion, as evident from the metaphors of cooking and hugging. In stereotypes, women are found cooking while men hug from behind, whereas here it is just the opposite. In the course of the song that follows, they have sex once again, under

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the intimation of Apu. Quite contradictorily to the usual practice of women characters shying away from their counterparts playfully in popular movies, here Apu gets closer to Maathan even before he does. The peak of subversion lies in the scene that follows where Apu refuses to go to Dubai as Maathan suggests. Usually, after a sexual encounter, women crave for security, safety and settlement, but in this movie the case is just the opposite, hence subverting a major stereotype in gender portrayal. The audience seems to be taken aback when Apu exclaims to Maathan: “Sex is not a promise.” Finally towards the end, even after Maathan is shot dead for his crime, Apu moves on. At this point, there is an unexpected twist in the narrative where Apu consoles herself saying “*Maathan Thirichu Varum. Poochayude Janmaaaa...*”(Maathan will return. He is a survivor.) Here, there is a possible hint of a return to stereotypes. Though there is a continuous attempt for subverting gender stereotypes in contemporary popular South Indian movies, there still seems to be a final ‘return to stereotypes.’

Written by Sharfu and Suhas, the movie *Varathan*, directed by Amal Neerad was a box office hit in the year 2018. With Fahad Fazil and Aishwarya Lakshmi playing the lead, the movie is a thriller with drama and action. Fahad Fazil plays the role of Abin in *Varathan*, while Aishwarya Lakshmi does that of Priya Paul. After losing the job, Abin (Aby) along with his wife Priya, who has suffered a miscarriage, decide to shift from Dubai to Priya’s family estate in Kerala, where the main action takes place while the other characters join the scene. Right at the outset of the movie, Aby is seen disappointed on losing his job due to certain financial issues in the company. Once he reaches home, he brings gifts for Priya and talks calmly as he does not want to see Priya worried. Rather, he is a man who tries to see things lightly and live life at peace. The loss of job is coupled by another painful incident; Priya has suffered a miscarriage. She too tries to soothe her man as the pregnancy was unplanned. These factors serve central to their shift to Kerala, quite convincingly for a

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change. It is Priya who suggests the change- a practice that continues throughout the movie as one can notice her taking upperhand in most of the decisions. Hence there are instances of subversion of gender in plenty. Post the tragic events that they have met with in Dubai, it is Priya who insists Aby for a drive, to boost him up instead of being a stereotypical, emotional woman who succumbs to despair easily. In a song that follows, the viewers are taken to a flashback of their love life. The song too features scenes where the woman leads their interactions. Once they land in Kerala, they board a taxi to Priya's home in Kochi. En route, the driver keeps on staring at the woman, which Aby does not notice at all. The so-called 'strange' attitude of South Indians to ogle at women is completely unknown to Aby. On the contrary, Priya is well aware of the culture and the nature of the people, and she cunningly interrupts the driver's gaze by asking him about rain. She intends to imply that she is not a green girl nor submissive. The couple moves to Priya's family estate where they have decided to spend much time as Priya thinks it suitable for Aby's startup. On the way to the estate, they stop for tea where Priya notices dozens of eyes staring at her. Always, it is Priya who is aware of the surroundings and takes precautions, which Aby fails to. There is an incident where Aby gets scared of a cockroach in the estate while Priya kills it. Aby had no intention to hurt the insect and he tells Priya that it could have lived somewhere. Her reply "*anganippo enteveetikerijeevikkanda*" (The creature must not live in my house.) is a striking dialogue in the movie. Once again as a break away from stereotypes, the viewers identify a tender heart in Aby and a practical being in Priya. The next morning after the couple reaches the estate, Aby is seen waking up early in the morning while the 'woman' sleeps. There comes an excellent symbol in the scene that follows where Aby prepares tea for Priya and Benny(an acquaintance) after the couple return from a morning walk. None can leave it unnoticed that Priya drinks up from a special, large cup while the other two, from normal small cups. In due course of the movie, several instances can be spotted where Aby is not at

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all bothered of the dangers surrounding Priya, while Priya is conscious unlike stereotypical women whose men are overly cautious of such issues. Aby's nature does not let him give in to violent responses. He even tries to settle things peacefully by talking to the unruly guys. The peak of his dormancy is evident when he blocks the bathroom ventilation through which the nasty neighbors peep into Priya's privacy. Even after finding a mobile camera from there, Aby asks Priya to calm down while she bursts out crashing the phone into pieces. It is far away from a stereotypical South Indian man to respond this indifferently to such a dangerous situation his wife encounters. One day, once Aby leaves, Priya sets out for the library when she is attacked on the way, kidnapped and molested. Aby finds her at the hospital and takes her home. Having reached home, Priya shouts at Aby while he tries to talk to the silent Priya. She blames him for being inactive and calm in such a situation demanding much action. This is the point where a radical shift is seen in the movie, a reversal of roles and a return back to stereotypes. This time, Aby fights the squad diligently and the power roles are reversed. The relevant symbols in the movie are finely reversed, as now Priya brings tea for the couple while Aby drinks up from the special, large cup. Also, there comes the cockroach symbol once again towards the end of the movie, but this time, Aby sets foot on the insect, killing it while the lady sits cleaning the gun, smiling in relief.

It has been seen with substantial evidence that popular South Indian movies feature a swing back to stereotypes at some point regardless of the tremendous effort they put in to portray a subversion of stereotypes in gender. As Adorno and Horkheimer explained in the essay *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, now that cultural productions are a part of capitalist industry, such productions; including the cinema are considered as an extension of the external world. This is one significant reason that one might easily relate filmic representations to real world experiences. Just as there are tremendous attempts to subversion in real life, they are represented in realistic popular movies as well. In this

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discussion, it would be significant to mention the findings of the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel, who was attempting to identify gender bias in fiction work, creating what is known as the Bechdel Test. The test asks three questions- Does the film have at least two women? Do they talk to each other? And if so, is there conversation about something other than men? Though the films under this study satisfy a part of the Bechdel Test, there are certain loopholes not yet filled. The third question of the Bechdel Test demands further detailing. In fact, the movies portray the female protagonists speaking much about men, either of those who care for or of those who they are frightened of. In *Mayaanadhi*, Apu speaks of Maathan to her friends with a lot of concern. In *Varathan*, Priya is worried about the male neighbours and speak mostly of them as they are predators waiting for a chance to pounce on Priya. It is at this juncture that the theories of Laura Mulvey and Barthian Semiotics gain significance. Just as Mulvey comments, though the films under this study have women playing the lead, the strength of the females is more apparent than real. This concept of Mulvey can be interwoven with Judith Butler's theories of 'Social Construction of Gender' and 'Performativity of Gender.' Children learn at a very young age, what it means to be a boy or a girl in the society. This is being analyzed to point out the fact that gender is a social construction and to say that gender is performative is to argue that gender is "real only to the extent that it is performed."(Butler 525-27). Barthian Semiotics proves to be yet another important component in the analysis of films under the study. In an attempt to explore the denotative and connotative elements in each film, the clothing, physical features, facial expressions and background or props in significant scenes are analysed. The sampling is done with one scene each from both the movies under study. *Mayaanadhi*: In the movie, the scene which portrays the first meeting of Aparna and Mathew, post the issue regarding the admission is infact their first combination scene. There lies an instance of foregrounding- the woman being focused while the man is blurred with the camera being placed behind them.

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They meet strangely at night, which indicates an apparently dark phase in their relationship. The costumes of the couple indicate their modest lifestyle and background. Their facial expressions are too poignant – that of Mathew indicates a sense of guilt and that of Aparna indicates a fusion of fury and tiredness though not persistent. Both of them have healthy bodies that indicate their self-confidence. The fact that Aparna is an upcoming actress and that Mathew is a thug youth complements the comment regarding their physique(Image 1). *Varathan*: The village lifestyle and habits are revealed from the taxi-scene after the couple land in Kerala. The camera focuses on the mirror hanging in front of the driver to which the driver's eyes are fixed. Though initially one may feel that the person is just looking, he is indeed staring at the couple, particularly the woman in the backseat, a habit South Indians are notoriously known for(Image 2). While the camera shifts to the couple, Aby who is totally unaware of the villagers and their nature does not notice the driver whereas Priya responds asking a random question, hence diverting the driver. Also, the facial expressions of the woman and the driver convey that she has understood what was happening. Besides these, there is a shift in the dressing style of the couple, especially the woman to a style more befitting the South Indian culture. A single shot of the environment outside is sufficient to indicate the location to be somewhere in Kerala.

The semiotic analysis of the movies under this study, focusing on the visual mode, was quite telling of how women are represented in cinema today. Though not all contemporary films can be grouped under this category, mass acceptance of such kind of movies is gaining momentum in the present South Indian society. The empirical study proves that the female characters in the movies analyzed were not portrayed in an explicitly patriarchal manner. Nevertheless, the female figures were undisputedly images that were shaped by the expectations of a male- dominated society, which is revealed only towards the end. Today there are organizations for women solely set up to look into the welfare and needs

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of women in cinema. 'Women in Cinema Collective' (WCC) is one such organization functioning mainly in the Malayalam film industry. Though formed as a consequence of the harassment and violation an actress had to suffer in the industry, it seeks government intervention to formalize wage structure and implement welfare schemes for women working in the film industry. It performs different other activities focusing on gender equality and the welfare of women in the film industry. With Parvathy Thiruvothu, Manju Warriar, Bhavana and others forming the pillars of the organization, it is definitely an indelible step to end at least a few unholy, anti-woman practices that are rampant in the industry today. Hence, the paper calls for the essentiality of such ventures that promote women empowerment and gender equality. As it has been seen that art forms like cinema and society are mutually influential, such productions of culture need to undergo revolutionary changes with regard to the final messages they give away to the audience. For instance, alternative endings with gender balance could have been rendered to the movies analysed. It certainly takes much time for the society to adapt, but gradually it definitely gives in.



Image 1



Image 2

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