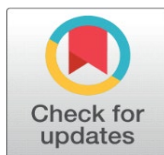
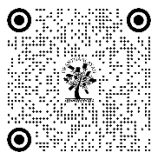


SHIFTING PARADIGMS: CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES AND ASSERTING AGENCY IN PRATHI POOVANKOZHI

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v2.i2.2021.3091](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v2.i2.2021.3091)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to examine how gender stereotypes are subverted in Roshan Andrews' film Prathi Poovankozhi. Set in the socio-cultural milieu of contemporary Kerala, the film portrays how the traditionally imposed gender norms are defied. Also, it challenges the systemic gender-based violence through a nuanced portrayal of a female protagonist. By analyzing key scenes and character arcs, this study explores how the role of women in Indian cinema is redefined. Through an intersectional lens, the paper highlights the complex relationship between class and gender and attempts to illustrate how these intersecting elements contribute to shaping the protagonist's experiences and resistance. Ultimately Prathi Poovankozhi emerges as a critical text that provokes thought and dialogue simultaneously, contributing significantly to the contemporary feminist discourse in cinema.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes, Agency, Gender Norms, Class, Intersectionality

1. INTRODUCTION

Media has been a bastion of conversation when it comes to gender hierarchies — the representation of women in films, both behind the scenes and on screen. This is the all-pervasive tendency of gender representation that privileges patriarchy in Indian films including Mollywood (as the Malayalam film industry is known). Since the 1960s feminist film viewers and scholars began to uncover this distorted liminality of women in early Malayalam cinema. India, one of the world's largest film producers, has a rich cinematic history dating back to 1896. Over long years, Indian cinema has seen substantial improvements, and Mollywood is not at all far left from this list. The critique of gender biases in Malayalam films reminds us that there is still a long way to go for fair representation and dismantling patriarchal norms, which have been symptomatic across all spheres within the industry. About the portrayal of women in cinema, it can be said that there is a strict adherence to the traditionally accepted gender stereotypes since they have been depicted, often, as passive, submissive and lacking agency. Rosshan Andrew's film Prathi Poovankozhi (2019) disrupts these conventions by presenting a resilient and empowered female character who challenges systemic gender-based violence and societal expectations. Set in the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala, the film offers a rich narrative that is capable of evidently exploring not only the intersectionality of class and gender but the multifaceted struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. The compelling narration of events and detailed development of character enables the film to provide a critical commentary on gender norms and the empowerment of women. This paper examines how the film breaks

gender stereotypes, employing an intersectional lens to analyses the protagonist's journey and the broader implications for feminist discourse in Indian cinema.

The Role of Stereotypical Gender Roles in Indian Cinema

The representation of women in cinema has often been shaped by deeply entrenched gender stereotypes, a phenomenon not exclusive to Indian cinema alone. As Anna Kaplan observes "In Hollywood films, then, women are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse, and their desire is subjected to male desire". (Kaplan,1983). Indian cinema can, undoubtedly, claim a long history of stereotypical gender roles which has long been influential in shaping the narrative and character portrayals. The roots of this convention can be traced back to the traditional societal norms and expectations aimed at reinforcing patriarchal values and limiting the scope for diverse and realistic representations of both men and women. Indian cinema has a history of depicting men as dominant, strong and authoritative figures in contrast to delineating women often as submissive, nurturing and powerless entities. Meena T Pillai argues that "From Vigathakumaran (1928) to date, on screen, Kerala women have joyfully surrendered their independence and identity too willing to be putty in the hands of male desire and male gaze" (Pillai,2010). Driving the plot forward, usually, seems to be a task only to be carried out by male characters so that they appear to be superheroes, saviors and decision-makers. Female characters, in contrast, are shown to be dependent on their male counterparts, confined to the domestic sphere, and relegated to play the roles upholding family honor and values. Films often portray men and women in gender-specific occupations and activities. Men usually appear in movies as professionals, adventurous heroes or rebels while women are shown as homemakers, caregivers, or in such traditionally feminine professions as teaching or nursing. This helps reinforce the notion that certain jobs and responsibilities are inherently suited to one gender alone.

Sexual Objectification of the female body was normal in films. The reason for the objectification and sexist representation of female characters is, that it seems that their worth is often linked to physical appearance and sexual desirability. Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* used the term male gaze where she describes women's bodies are regarded as wonderful objects. The film through this perspective draws attention to women, who are perceived as objects by the voyeuristic audience." The cinema offers several possible pleasures in scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source, just as, in the reverse formation there is pleasure in being looked at." The cinema offers several possible pleasures in scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source, just as, in the reverse formation there is pleasure in being looked at" (Mulvey,1975). Instead of being a fully developed character, the 'heroine' has always been portrayed as an object of male desire primarily only to serve a romantic/sexual interest within and outside. Songs, dance sequences, and the choice of costumes further emphasize this objectification. Indian cinema often upholds stereotypical notions of female virtue and morality. The portrayal of women as paragons of virtue, modesty, and sacrifice invariably underlines it. Also, their actions are made heavily subject to moral scrutiny than those of male characters. Characters show any lapse of morality have to pay heavily such as those who exhibit independence or sexual agency for their unacceptable misdemeanor. Gender stereotypes also extend to the roles of villains and heroes. While male antagonists show physical vigor and excessive aggression, female villainy is often restricted to scheming, manipulation, and inordinate ambition. Similarly, male heroes are portrayed as the epitome of physical strength and bravery, and emotional intelligence or nurturing qualities are attributed to females. These stereotypical representations deeply influence societal attitudes and cultural norms. They reinforce gender biases and limit the perception of what men and women can achieve or aspire to. It cannot be denied that such skewed representations may wrongly mould the perception and understanding of younger viewers about gender roles and expectations.

Gender Roles in Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam cinema, a prominent part of Indian cinema, has a rich history of storytelling that reflects the cultural and social ethos of Kerala. An examination of the trajectory of the depiction of gender roles in Malayalam cinema shows a historical evolution and mirrors the larger changes in society. However, it is necessary to add that from the very outset, there was the categorization of characters based on their gender and it affected an array of authoritarian male figures such as breadwinners, protectors professionals, and so on. At the same time, women were relegated to such subordinate roles as homemakers and caregivers. The historical outcome of this gender-based characterization is that it helped reinforce the patriarchal values and the traditional family structure. Women in early Malayalam films were frequently depicted as the epitome of virtue, patience, and self-sacrifice, embodying the roles of the dutiful wife, loving mother, and obedient daughter.

Author and director Sreebala K Menon points out the essential problem underlying the representation of women in the industry. "Markets and industries put out products with specific audiences in mind. The market has thus far been dominated by an audience that would hoot and cheer any time a female character was insulted or anything misogynistic was shown on screen," (sreebala 2019) Classic films like Neelakkuyil (1954) and Chemmeen (1965) showcased women as central to the narrative but only within the confines of traditional roles. Both Neeli and Karuthamma, the female characters from the aforementioned movies, could not go beyond the confines of societal expectations. By the 1970s a new group of film-makers came to the scene. The constitution of Chithralekha, Kerala's first film cooperative society, triggered a fresh wave of films called 'art films' by directors like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan, P. A Backer, K. G George, Pavithran and Raveendran. Despite this progress, Malayalam cinema continued to perpetuate gender stereotypes and objectification of the female body. The year 2011 is said to be a watershed in the history of Malayalam cinema. The film "Traffic," released in the same year and directed by Rajesh Pillai, brought a new sensibility and energy to an otherwise dying Malayalam film industry owing to its lack of novelty and creativity. This new spirit continued until 2019 with a number of women-oriented movies like How Old Are You (2014), Mili (2015), Udaharanam Sujatha (2017), Njan Marykkutty (2018), Koode (2018), Uyare (2019) and Kumbalangi Nights (2019). These films affected a surge of female voices as they were women-centered and addressed gender issues (including the question of LGBTIQ), liberal attitudes towards sexual freedom, financial independence, single parenting, acid attacks and even the complexities and vulnerabilities of men. Prathi Poovankozhi can be viewed as a continuation of this new trend and spirit.

Overview of the Film

Prathi Poovankozhi is a Malayalam-language film about Madhuri, a textile shop employee, played by Manju Warriar. The writer Unni R adapted his short story Sankadam for this movie. The story of the film revolves around Madhuri's quest for justice after a traumatic incident on a public bus, where she is harassed by a local thug named Antappan, portrayed by the director himself. Even though the incident gives her a temporary setback, she decides to confront her aggressor. Her fight for justice transcends a mere personal vendetta into a more symbolic struggle against the pervasive misogyny and violence prevalent in a male-dominated society. The initial shock and humiliation she felt give way to more mature action as she goes through various challenges and threats. The evolution of Madhuri's character from a scared victim to an empowered woman is one of the remarkable moments in the narrative. The film is notable for its realistic portrayal of the struggles faced by women in their everyday lives and the societal pressures that often discourage them from speaking out. Madhuri's interactions with other characters, especially Rosamma, help explore themes of friendship, solidarity, sisterhood and the need for collective strength to fight oppression. The film, in this respect, it can be said that, makes a powerful statement on the importance of resilience and courage in the face of adversity by effectively using its narrative to critique the inveterate patriarchal norms that enable and perpetuate gender prejudices.

Madhuri Breaks the Mould

The year 2019 has been a landmark in the history of Malayalam cinema because it witnessed an array of movies that broke most of the entrenched notions associated with filmmaking, ranging from plot, characterization, politics, and so on. In short, stereotypes in the movies have been deliberately broken. Prathi Poovankozhi is one such movie. This film can be analyzed through feminist theory, particularly, the concepts of agency and resistance. Madhuri, the central character, challenges the traditional gender roles that define/confine women as passive and subordinate as posited by feminist theory by seeking justice for the trauma she underwent. In doing that, she asserts her autonomy and defies the stereotype of passive victims. There's a briskness to the woman, even in her walk. She doesn't stop still for conversations. Even as she talks, she continues to do whatever she's doing. (Rangan, 2020) Her act of resistance aligns itself with the feminist notions of reclaiming identity and challenging systemic oppression. In addition, her resistance can be read using the theoretical framework of intersectionality since various forms of identity-such as gender, class and occupation-intersect to impact and codify an individual's experiences. In this respect, Madhuri's struggle will likely suffer oversimplification if the aspect of class-based discrimination is overlooked. Her resistance is, thus, a journey that influences and shapes the multiple dimensions of her identity.

Prathi Poovankozhi, moreover, provides a nuanced critique of gender norms and their intersectionality, because at the core of the film is a saleswoman who belongs to the working class. The storyline itself offers a departure from the roles traditionally reserved for women. Instead it places a woman at the center of an action-driven plot. Madhuri's character is, firstly, depicted as strong, independent, and assertive, which befits the mood of the narrative. Instead of being portrayed as a typical victim as has been customary in Indian cinema, she asserts her subjectivity by deciding to

confront her aggressor, Antappan, head-on. This depiction of a female character who does not succumb but asserts her agency challenges the stereotype of an inherently weak woman who always seeks help from or is dependent on male protectors. Secondly, the film addresses the issue of societal pressure on the victims to keep their mouths shut. Despite numerous obstacles, Madhuri's determination to seek vengeance / justice marks her resilience and courage. Her portrayal destabilizes the female stereotypes of silent sufferers who fear the social stigma. By giving Madhuri a voice and agency, the film blatantly emphasizes the importance of speaking out and the need to break the silence to claim justice. Additionally, Madhuri's profession as a saleswoman, her exploration of public places including the backyard of a market and her interaction with various individuals are all indicative of her not being confined to the domestic sphere. The supporting characters in Prathi Poovankozhi also contribute to breaking gender stereotypes. Rosamma, Madhuri's friend, exemplifies female solidarity and the strength found in women's friendships. This renders the oft-quoted trope of women being the rival of women a cliched remark. Moreover, Antappan's character is not a typical representation of a villain. His personality is flawed hence he subverts the image of a conventional hyper macho villain.

2. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Prathi Poovankozhi brings a change in the characterization and presentation of female figures in Malayalam films. By presenting a strong, independent female protagonist with a will to challenge the patriarchal norms and expectations the film breaks stereotypes of gender. That a female protagonist is hell-bent on fighting vigorously against sexual harassment is quite encouraging for those timid victims who are unable to break their silence since the model set by Madhuri is an embodiment of such themes as resilience, empowerment and female solidarity. Through its narrative and characters, Prathi Poovankozhi stands out as a progressive and empowering piece of cinema that pushes the boundaries of conventional gender portrayals.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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