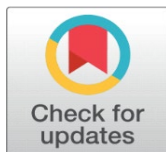
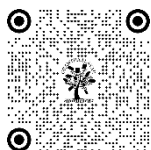


# BREAKING STEREOTYPES: PORTRAYAL OF MOTHERHOOD IN NEW-AGE MALAYALAM CINEMA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO KUMBALANGI NIGHTS AND UYARE

Dr. Anu Paul  

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Research and PG Department of English, St. Thomas College (Autonomous), Thrissur, Kerala, India



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## Corresponding Author

Dr. Anu Paul, [anumgirish@gmail.com](mailto:anumgirish@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Motherhood has been an idealized stereotype in literary works and movies. The burden of the duties entitled to a mother in a patriarchal society often detracts the growth of the woman beyond the identity of motherhood. Motherhood theory puts forth the argument that motherhood is not a universal experience but is shaped by social and cultural factors. Motherhood is perceived differently across different cultures and is influenced by cultural norms, gender roles, class, race, and ethnicity. The experience of motherhood is often associated with sacrifice and selflessness, but it is also marked by guilt, ambivalence, and stress. Motherhood theory seeks to understand the multiple dimensions of motherhood and the various ways in which women navigate the challenges of raising children. The 2019 Malayalam movie “Kumbalangi Nights” was helmed by director Madhu C. Narayanan and produced by Fahadh Faasil. The mother in the movie, though absent in person, is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who has her own desires and ambitions. The movie uniquely deals with the absence of a mother yet how she is omnipresent in the lives of her children, a much more realistic motherhood, breaking away from the traditional stereotype of a self-sacrificing mother who puts her family before everything else. “Uyare” (2019), follows the story of a young woman, played by Parvathy Thiruvothu, who dreams of becoming a pilot but is attacked by her ex-boyfriend and left disfigured. The father in the movie, played by Siddhique is shown as a supportive and empowering figure who helps his daughter to overcome her trauma and achieve her dreams. These two movies portray how regardless of the presence of a glorified mother, self-reliant, strong individuals can be raised rather than upholding the stereotypical image of a selfless, sacrificing mother.

**Keywords:** Motherhood, *Uyare*, *Kumbalangi Nights*, Malayalam Cinema, Family

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Adrienne Rich eloquently captures the essence of motherhood in the introduction from *Of Woman Born* as:

All human life on the planet is born of woman. The one unifying, incontrovertible experience shared by all women and men is that months-long period we spent unfolding inside a woman’s body. Because young humans remain dependent upon nurture for a much longer period than other mammals, and because of the division of labor long established in human groups, where women not only bear and suckle but are assigned almost total responsibility for

children, most of us first know both love and disappointment, power, and tenderness, in the person of a woman [Rich \(2007\)](#).

Rich argued that motherhood was a powerful institution that had been used by patriarchy to control women. She believed that the expectations placed on women to be perfect mothers were part of a larger system of social control, designed to keep women in their place and prevent them from pursuing their own goals and aspirations. According to her motherhood was not a natural or innate role for women, but rather a social and cultural construct that had been imposed upon women. She pointed out that the expectations placed upon mothers were often impossible to meet, and that mothers were judged harshly if they failed to live up to these expectations. Rich also criticized the way in which motherhood had been romanticized and idealized in literature and popular culture, arguing that this had created a false and damaging image of motherhood that was at odds with the reality of women's experiences [Rich \(2007\)](#). Adrienne Rich acknowledges her withdrawal from her identity as a mother at particular times. To quote her, "For me, poetry was where I lived as no one's mother, where I existed for myself" [Rich \(1976\)](#), p.31. Developing an alternative identity is what enabled Rich to break free from the societal burdens associated with motherhood.

In the selected movies motherhood is presented in a divergent light, where a self-reliant, strong people regardless of gender aid in the all-round development of the individuals without sacrificing their identity. Madhu C. Narayanan directed the Indian Malayalam-language film "Kumbalangi Nights" released in 2019, that explores the lives of four brothers who live in a fishing village named Kumbalangi near Kochi in Kerala, India. While motherhood is not the central theme of the film, it holds considerable importance in shaping the lives of the characters [Vetticad \(2019\)](#). The film depicts the story of a dysfunctional family, where the father is abusive towards his wife and children. After the death of the father the mother abandons the four boys to join a religious mission. The character of the mother in "Kumbalangi Nights" challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes. She is portrayed as a woman who escapes the system of family to pursue her own path and this in turn results in the shift of responsibilities. The four sons visit their mother, urging her to join them at home temporarily to boost their morale and liberate themselves from societal ridicule as perceived abandoned children. However, she vehemently declines, asserting that she has embarked on a new journey in her life and has no intentions of reverting to the role of their mother. The elder son Saji, assumes the role of the guardian for his younger brothers. The film also explores the impact of the absence of mother on the lives of the sons in the family. Saji, the elder brother provides support for his younger brother when he falls in love with a girl and despite the absence of the mother, they bloom into an affectionate group providing for each other [Narayanan \(2019\)](#). The film highlights the important role that a mother figure plays in shaping the lives of the children, and how they can serve as a source of strength and resilience in the face of adversity. It also stresses the fact that the mother need not be your biological mother or a female even. It is rewarding to observe how a family deviating from the stereotypical structure, fights and wins their cause. They as a unit stands against the abusive guardian of the girl with whom Bobby falls in love.

Through intricate relationships, the narrative delves into the societal challenges and biases faced by single mothers. It emphasizes the crucial role of community support for mothers navigating the complexities of raising children on their own. In the storyline, the character portraying the mother of Baby conforms to the stereotypical image of a maternal figure. In the absence of her husband, she

earnestly tries to adhere to the expectations set by her eldest daughter's husband, Shammi, who assumes the role of the family's head. However, as the plot unfolds, she comes to a realization when Shammi starts subjecting her and her two daughters to both physical and emotional abuse. This revelation sheds light on the intricate dynamics of motherhood, challenging conventional stereotypes and highlighting the resilience needed in the face of adversity. To quote Samira Kawash, "motherhood studies needs the perspective and...feminism cannot possibly hope to remain relevant without acknowledging motherhood in all its contradictions and complexities" [Kawash \(2011\)](#). The film challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes, and highlights the importance of support and community in overcoming the challenges that come with motherhood. Baby is portrayed as a strong independent woman even initiating her relationship with Bobby. She is never intimidated by Shammi, who adorns the role of a patriarch in the family. She openly challenges her brother in law while her mother and sister lacks courage to confront him. Till the end she holds her place and refuses him outrightly when he demands her to end her relationship with Bobby [Narayanan \(2019\)](#). Likewise, in Bobby's family, despite being predominantly male, Saji willingly assumes the role of the "matriarch" or, in a more positive light, a nurturing figure in the lives of his brothers. While Saji assumes the role of guardian for his brothers, he turns to his youngest brother Franky, seeking his company, to consult a psychologist when he experiences emotional instability. Even within the unconventional dynamics of their family, there is a cultivation of independent personalities and a remarkably open-minded and inclusive atmosphere.

The focal point of the narrative is a quartet of siblings —Saji, Bonny, Bobby, and Franky—residing in a run-down residence in Kumbalangi. Following their father's demise, their mother departs to join a religious mission, entrusting Saji with the responsibility of caring for the family. However, Saji grapples with anger management issues, frequently engaging in conflicts with the unemployed Bobby. Bobby, smitten with a local girl named Baby, proposes to her. Regrettably, Shammi, Baby's brother-in-law, rejects the proposal, citing the poor reputation of Bobby's family in the village [Vetticad \(2019\)](#). Saji encourages Bobby to secure employment, and although Bobby does so, a quarrel between Saji and Franky compels Saji to leave home, seeking solace in alcohol. In his intoxicated state, Saji tries to commit suicide, and his friend Vijay loses his life in the process of saving him. Consumed by remorse, Saji makes a visit to Vijay's house to offer his apologies, only to discover that Vijay's wife, Sathi, is in the midst of labor. Taking it upon himself, Saji escorts Sathi and her newborn daughter to his own home, where they find refuge with the brothers. In the meantime, Bonny brings an American tourist, Nylah, home after she's been ousted from her homestay by Shammi. Franky finds delight in the companionship of the two women, while Bobby, seeking to inject some romance into their lives, suggests activities like witnessing sea sparkles at night with Nylah. Despite Saji's attempts to convince Shammi to reconsider Bobby's proposal, he adamantly refuses and turns abusive and violent, assaulting Baby, her sister, and their mother. Faced with adversity, Bobby decides to elope with Baby, only to be met with aggression from Shammi. In a courageous act, Bobby and his brothers intervene, ensnaring Shammi in a fishing net and liberating the women. This ordeal ultimately paves the way for Bobby and Baby to finally tie the knot [Narayanan \(2019\)](#).

Marking his directorial debut, Manu Ashokan helmed the Malayalam-language drama film "Uyare", unveiled in 2019. Penned by Bobby and Sanjay, backed by the three sisters Shenuga, Sheena, and produced by Sherpa, movie highlights the performances of Parvathy Thiruvothu, Asif Ali, and Tovino Thomas in key parts [Pillai \(2019\)](#). The narrative orbits around Pallavi Raveendran (Pravathy), a student

pursuing studies in aviation, who faces the harrowing aftermath of an acid attack, leading to permanent facial alterations and endangering her professional aspirations. Shot between November 2018 and January 2019, "Uyare" earned acclaim from critics and hit Indian theaters on April 26, 2019 Pillai (2019). During that year, "Uyare" emerged as a significant financial success for the Malayalam cinema industry. The movie received a nomination for Best Debut Feature Film at the 50th International Film Festival of India, conducted between November 20 to 28, 2019, narrates the journey of Pallavi Raveendran (portrayed by Parvathy Thiruvothu), a young aspiring pilot Pillai (2019). Her love for Govind Balakrishnan (played by Asif Ali) takes a dark turn as Govind exhibits possessive behavior. Pallavi, determined to pursue her dreams, secures admission to a pilot training center in Mumbai, setting the stage for the unfolding events in the film. After summoning the courage to break free from Govind's abusive and authoritarian grip, Pallavi directs him to leave her life, particularly after he insists, she quit her course and embarrasses her before her classmates. The following day brings in a tragic news when Govind seeks vengeance by carrying out a brutal acid attack on Pallavi, leaving her disfigured and impairing her eyesight. As a result, her aspiration to become a pilot shatter, and she loses her pilot's license. Undeterred, Pallavi approaches the court, yet the absence of concrete evidence linking Govind to the attack results in the dismissal of her case Ashokan (2019).

Defeated and disheartened, Pallavi returns home, where a compassionate friend from the aviation academy offers to join her during a flight to bolster her spirits. In the course of the journey, Pallavi encounters Vishal Rajashekharan (portrayed by Tovino Thomas) and confides in him about the traumatic incident. However, even during the flight, Pallavi confronts discrimination when a mother voices her worry that her scarred face is disturbing for her child prompting Pallavi to relocate to another seat. Vishal, attempting to provide solace, reassures Pallavi that she can achieve anything she desires Ashokan (2019). However, Pallavi, embittered and disillusioned, dismisses his encouragement, expressing the belief that such opportunities are only accessible to those who conform to conventional beauty standards, highlighting the societal bias and discrimination against those who deviate from these norms. He suggests the groundbreaking concept of employing her as cabin crew based on her competence and abilities rather than her physical appearance. Unfortunately, Vishal's father rejects the proposition and insults him. Unfazed, Vishal takes matters into his own hands, organizing a press release and live stream in which he publicly declares that Pallavi possesses the intelligence and attitude necessary to be an air hostess, emphasizing that these qualities surpass the importance of physical appearance. This bold move results in Vishal successfully convincing his superiors to meet with Pallavi Ashokan (2019).

Despite Vishal's attempt to reach out, Pallavi initially rebuffs him, expressing anger at the publicizing of her story without her consent and promptly hanging up. Encouraged by her father, Pallavi decides to give Vishal a chance. Eventually, she meets with him and commences her air hostess training under his guidance. During her first flight, a supportive gesture from a fellow crew member provides solace amid the scrutinizing gazes of other passengers. As Pallavi navigates her new role, Vishal's feelings for her intensify, leading him to confess his emotions. However, she gently declines, emphasizing the value she places on their friendship and her reluctance to jeopardize it by introducing romantic elements. On a subsequent flight, Pallavi encounters Govind as a passenger, attempting to engage her in conversation and persuade her to withdraw the case against him, citing potential repercussions for his future. Enraged by his boldness, Pallavi responds by hurling a glass of water towards him. Subsequent to this event, Govind takes his leave, yet not before filing

a grievance about her actions. Vishal approaches Pallavi with the video sequence, which had gone viral, capturing the incident of hurling water and updates her about the complaints made by others. When asked to issue a public apology, Pallavi staunchly refuses, asserting her willingness to react similarly if faced with a comparable situation in the future. Subsequently, she resigns from her position [Ashokan \(2019\)](#).

In the narrative, Pallavi's father consistently stands by her, stepping into the role usually occupied by her absent mother. He harbours guilt over his daughter's experience of abuse at boarding school, as she was hesitant to confide in him. He laments the fact that Pallavi, emotionally vulnerable, found support in the possessive Vishal. Pallavi proves her mettle when the captain of her flight loses consciousness and she takes charge of the cockpit. A dispute ensues between Vishal and another official regarding Pallavi's ability to fly. When Vishal is asked to remove Pallavi from the cockpit, he instead contacts her, expressing trust in her capabilities to pilot the flight. Pallavi successfully executes an emergency landing, relieving everyone on board. Meanwhile, Govind, realizing the impending legal consequences, voluntarily closes his eyes while riding a motorcycle and suffers an accident. Finally, it is the day of her final flight and Pallavi says goodbye to Vishal, expressing gratitude for the opportunity her gave her, to access the cockpit and pilot an aircraft at least for a single time in her life period. On her final flight, a young boy offers Pallavi a flower as a gesture of gratitude for rescuing his father during a perilous flight. She observes that some passengers from the earlier flight are also aboard this one. The film concludes when the pilot appreciates Pallavi, strengthening her resolve and providing her with renewed vigor to pursue her life goals [Ashokan \(2019\)](#). The resilience she displays throughout these challenges ensures a promising future for Pallavi.

In her work *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich draws attention to an important but previously unrecognized differentiation between the dual meanings of motherhood. The first meaning relates to the everyday act of caring for and nurturing children, which Rich defines as “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction - and to children.” [Rich \(1976\)](#). However, the second interpretation characterizes motherhood as a structure of patriarchal oppression, designed to maintain male dominance over women and to keep their reproductive abilities in check [Rich \(1976\)](#). As movies being the representation of the society, it is indeed challenging to present motherhood in a deviant mode. As the plot of these movies unravel one finds the role of a nurturing parent played by different people in the society and never the stereotypical mother. It is evident from the portrayal of the dysfunctional family in “Kumbalangi Nights”, that even without the conventional set up of a structured family, socially responsible individuals can be formed. Though the dilapidated house and waste land like environment makes one skeptical of the brothers, they unite together to question the well-disciplined, proper patriarch character, Shammi portrayed by Fahadh Fazil. The overtly well-defined family headed by the patriarch breaks down once the younger sister Baby expresses herself and protests against the subtle abuse meted out to her mother and sister in guise of protection and care. Similarly in the movie “Uyare”, the central character an acid attack victim, is supported throughout her journey by her father and another trusted male friend. In this movie too one senses the absence of the conventional mother figure and once again proves that glorified motherhood is a niche that any progressive woman has to reject. [O'Reilly \(2004\)](#)

Current studies on the brain of the parents vehemently disputes the notion of maternal instinct as an inherent, instinctive trait and exclusively associated with females [Conaboy \(2022\)](#). Despite ongoing efforts by feminists to debunk this notion

from its inception in public discourse, the myth endures. To grasp the critical need to rewrite the narrative of motherhood urgently, to comprehend the fundamental and vital nature of this research, it's essential to explore how we became entrenched in the outdated portrayal of it. To quote Chelsea Conaboy, "Modern Christian archetypes of motherhood were shaped by two women. There was Eve, who ate the forbidden fruit and in doing so caused the suffering of every human to come. And there was the Virgin Mary, the vessel for a great miracle, who became the most virtue-laden symbol of motherhood there is, her identity entirely eclipsed by the glory of her maternal love. Mary's story, combined with Eve's — unattainable goodness, perpetual servitude — created a moral model for motherhood that has proved, for many, stifling and unforgiving" [Conaboy \(2022\)](#). In most of the cultures and religious texts motherhood is glorified and presented as a sole responsibility vested on the shoulders of the biological mother. It is the representation of such deviant families and different patterns of growing up in the absence of a biological mother that leads society to rethink its perception of motherhood. This will also free the new age women from the guilt they process to be a professionally successful individual and also a responsible parent. As Andrea O'Reilly suggests, "Most women mother in the patriarchal institution of motherhood and, in contemporary times, according to the patriarchal ideology of natural-intensive mothering. Women's mothering, in other words, is defined and controlled by the larger patriarchal society in which they live" [Rich \(2007\)](#), p.7. Once a woman becomes a mother, contemplating a life beyond the societal constraints, disguised as the standard for the perfect mother, becomes practically impossible. In this scenario, her own dreams and aspirations are often relegated to a secondary position, as her paramount priority shifts to fulfilling the demanding role of a mother.

Rich expressed that, "The quality of the mother's life —however embattled and unprotected—is her primary bequest to her daughter, because a woman who can believe in herself, who is a fighter, and who continues to struggle to create lovable space around her, is demonstrating to her daughter that these possibilities exist" [Rich \(1976\)](#), p.247. The strength of the guardian irrespective of gender contributes positively towards the development of the ward. Challenging the preconceived notions of motherhood is essential in a world where we find unconventional families and children who starves for emotional stability in the absence of their biological parents. As Takseva states in her article, "The growing body of work in motherhood studies has long since rejected this form of essentialism. Claims for and about mothers have been replaced with pluralist perspectives regarding maternal subject positions and mothering practices, continuing to foreground inclusive and intersectional methodologies aimed at allowing women as mothers the opportunity to describe and theorize their own experiences" [Takseva \(2018\)](#). Every mother possesses her unique qualities, making her approach to motherhood distinct and defying any preconceived notions. As a society, it is crucial to avoid rigidly adhering to a single, idealized concept of motherhood. The selected movies demonstrate that the nurturing and supportive figure for a child during challenging times need not be limited to the biological mother. Single fathers, loyal friends, elder siblings, or brothers can effectively take on the role of a mother. These diverse personalities offer hope for women to lead lives beyond the confines of motherhood, liberating them from the burdensome expectations imposed by a patriarchal society.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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