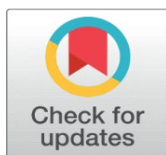
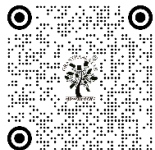


MYTH TO MARGIN: PERFORMATIVE VISUAL NARRATIVES AND THE DRAMATICS OF FEMALE CHARACTERIZATION IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Malayalam cinema occupies a unique generative position in the Indian regional film industry, specifically in its negotiation of feminist subjectivity and visual dramatics of characterizing women. The present paper analyses three recent Malayalam films, *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* (2025), *Ekō* (2025), and *Rekhachithram* (2025), as sites of particular performative discourse of womanhood being enacted, choreographed, and contested. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, the paper argues that these films do not merely reflect feminist subjectivity but actively produce it: the visual and dramatic modes of expressing femininity are not given but rather produced, contested, and reformulated through a carefully crafted visual grammar. The three films are interpreted as occupying three distinct dramaturgical spaces- the front stage of spectacular mythological reclamation (*Lokah*), the back stage of withheld domestic power (*Ekō*), and the off stage of posthumous reconstruction (*Rekhachithram*)- which together trace a trajectory from myth to margin around which contemporary Malayalam cinema choreographs its feminist visual turn. This discussion contributes to the growing body of literature on feminist film theory in regional, non-Western cinema and demonstrates the analytical utility of applying performativity theory, gaze theory, and dramaturgical analysis as a combined framework to the study of female characterization in Indian cinema. The findings indicate that the post-Hema Committee moment in Malayalam cinema has produced not only a political discourse within the film industry but a tangible and formal change in the visual grammar of female characterization—one in which performance as the dramatics of the body itself becomes the locus of feminist intervention.

Keywords: Malayalam Cinema, Feminist Subjectivity, Visual Dramatics, Gender Performativity, Male Gaze, Dramaturgical Analysis, Performance



1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a sustained feminist visual grammar in Malayalam cinema is undoubtedly one of the most significant developments in contemporary Indian regional cinema. The revelations of the Justice K. Hema Committee Report (Government of Kerala, 2024), concerning sexual exploitation and systematic gender discrimination within the Malayalam film industry, paved the way for a series of films produced in 2025 that disturb, rethink, and experiment with the dramatic frames and visual structures through which female characters are created and performed. The three films examined in this paper- *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* (Dir. Dominic Arun, 2025), *Ekō* (Dir. Dinjith Ayyathan, 2025), and *Rekhachithram* (Dir. Jofin T. Chacko, 2025) are exemplary texts in which the performative dimension of female

characterization is subjected to an unusually high degree of formal self-consciousness. These institutional circumstances enabling this feminist turn cannot be discussed in isolation from the larger social history of female subjugation in domestic and public life in Kerala, a history whose ideological contours have been traced by Devika and Ajay (2026) in their recent critique of the family as a site of female ill-being in twentieth-century Kerala.

The existing literature on gender in Malayalam cinema has largely revolved around the question of representation- what roles women play, why patriarchal archetypes persist, and how female-oriented narratives are gradually formed (Devika, 2009; Karimpaniyil & Koudur, 2025). What has not yet been theorized, however, is the performative and visual dramatics dimension: not what female characters signify, but how they enact, choreograph, and meaningfully perform their femininity using specific strategies of visual narration. In her analysis of women directors in Malayalam cinema, Pillai (2020) points to this gap when she argues that the politics of gender in Malayalam cinema must be interpreted through the apparatus of representation itself- through what she theorizes as the camera dentata, a mode of representation that disrupts the patriarchal dispositions of the film apparatus (p. 44). Mannil (2020) further contextualizes this moment by situating the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) within a broader politics of gendered labour, suggesting that feminist change in Malayalam cinema must be understood as simultaneously an on-screen and off-screen event (p. 191). The present paper fills that gap by uniting three theoretical perspectives: gender performativity as proposed by Judith Butler, the male gaze as theorized by Laura Mulvey, and the dramaturgical model proposed by Erving Goffman- into a composite analytical framework for examining female characterization in these films.

The central argument of this paper is that the female protagonists of these three films are not simply characters of feminist representation who inhabit their narratives but rather actors who enact, refuse, and restructure gendered identity through specific visual and dramatic modes. The mythological figure of the Yakshi is reclaimed by Chandra/Neeli in *Lokah* as an instrument of feminist spectacular performance; the folkloric figure of Mlaathi Chedathi in *Ekō* performs a counter-dramatic act of strategic stillness and deliberately withheld performance; and Rekha in *Rekhachithram* is a female subject constituted entirely by others through posthumous performative reconstruction. Together, these three modes trace the trajectory from myth to margin- from the spectacular front stage of mythological reclamation and the silent back stage of domestic power to the non-existent off stage of historical erasure- the trajectory along which contemporary Malayalam cinema is choreographing its most compelling feminist visual narratives.

The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 surveys the relevant literature across three streams- feminist film theory, performativity and dramaturgical theory, and Malayalam cinema studies. Section 3 operationalizes the theoretical framework. Close readings of the three films are provided in Sections 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. Section 5 presents conclusions and offers reflections on the broader implications of these findings for feminist film studies in the regional Indian cinema context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. GAZE, SPECTACLE, AND THE FEMALE SUBJECT: FEMINIST FILM THEORY

Feminist film theory continues to be grounded in Mulvey's (1975) foundational essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in which she argues that classical Hollywood cinema positions the viewer within an active, desiring male gaze directed at the passive female body, which is rendered spectacular and an object of visual pleasure. Drawing on Freudian scopophilia and Lacanian mirror theory, Mulvey's psychoanalytically inflected writing demonstrates that mainstream cinematic narrative is constructed upon an underlying asymmetry: men look, women are looked at. The female character, within this schema, functions to interrupt the flow of narrative and serve as the object of an eroticized visual interest. Although this framework was subsequently criticized for its binary inflexibility and its failure to account for female spectatorial agency, it established the foundational terms of debate regarding gender, vision, and power in cinema.

Kaplan (1983) extended Mulvey's argument by asking whether a genuinely female gaze can be attained, or whether all cinematic looking is necessarily organized around patriarchal codes. Johnston (1973) proposed the concept of women's cinema as counter-cinema- filmmaking that actively works against the dominant visual and narrative codes that produce woman as spectacle. Later feminist film theorists, such as White (1999) and Mayne (1990), developed more nuanced accounts of feminine spectatorship, agency, and identification that challenge the totalizing assumptions of early psychoanalytic feminist film theory. The work of Creed (1993) on the monstrous-feminine is particularly relevant to the

present study, as it theorizes the monstrous-feminine as a site of intense cultural anxiety concerning female power and desire- anxiety that is directly addressed and subverted by Lokah Chapter 1.

These frameworks require significant qualification when applied to non-Western and regional cinemas. Indian popular cinema operates according to a visual and narrative logic that, as Vasudevan (2000) and Prasad (1998) have argued, cannot be easily accommodated within the Hollywood paradigm that Mulvey theorized. The need for such qualification is reinforced by recent comparative feminist film and media studies in non-Western contexts: Khosroshahi and Saljoughi (2023) argue in their survey of transnational feminist approaches to film in Middle Eastern and North African cultures that even the category of feminist cinema must be denationalized and de-Westernized in order to account for the diversity of cultural logics within which women filmmakers and female characters negotiate systems of patriarchal visibility (pp. 83–85). The postcolonial feminist analysis of motherhood in recent Bollywood sports films by Routray and Gaur (2025) similarly indicates that the negotiation of feminist subjectivity in Indian popular cinema proceeds through very specific postcolonial representational frames that cannot be easily reduced to the canonical categories of Euro-American feminist film theory. Malayalam cinema has historically been a format that explicitly negotiates between a social realist tradition, which often foregrounds patriarchal family formations, and a more radical counter-cinematic tradition, and it has produced some of the most formally experimental feminist Indian films, as Pillai (2020) demonstrates.

2.2. GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND THE DRAMATURGICAL MODEL

The second major theoretical pillar of this paper is Butler's theory of gender performativity, initially formulated in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and elaborated in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). For Butler, gender is not a fixed attribute of individuals but a performative achievement: it is produced through repetitive, citational practices- gestures, movements, dress, speech, and so on- that generate the illusion of a coherent gendered identity. What is significant about this account is that gender is both fluid and open to manipulation: because it is constituted through performance, it can be performed differently. Butler's theory suggests that film's female characters can be read as sites of gender production- characters whose femininity is produced and remodelled through the specific performances that the film choreographs around them.

The second strand of this theoretical approach is Goffman's dramaturgical model, developed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman proposes that social life is best understood as theatrical performance: individuals perform for others in response to the demands of social situations and manage their own performances to produce desired impressions. Goffman distinguishes between a front stage- the social realm of public and regulated performance- and a back stage- the private realm where the performance apparatus is assembled and the social mask is removed. Scholars of cinema studies and visual culture have productively applied this distinction to analyse the multiple registers of performance that cinematic characterization involves: the performance of a character by an actor, the performance of social roles by characters within the narrative, and, most significantly, the performance of gender as a social practice within the diegetic world (Gledhill, 1987; McDonald, 2004).

The utility of Goffman's model for the present study lies in its attention to the spatial and relational dimensions of performance- where a performance is staged, before whom, and what is at stake in its success or failure. Applied to the three films under discussion, the front stage/back stage distinction illuminates the radically different theatrical spaces within which Chandra, Mlaathi, and Rekha enact their femininity, and the different forms of power and vulnerability that those theatrical spaces entail.

2.3. MALAYALAM CINEMA, GENDER, AND THE POST-HEMA MOMENT

The relationship between Malayalam cinema and gender has been extensively documented by scholars such as Devika (2009), whose analysis of the Malayali woman as an ideological construction reveals the ideological labour performed by cinematic images of femininity in Kerala society. This film history cannot be understood outside a larger social formation in which the patriarchal family has functioned, as Devika and Ajay (2026) demonstrate, as the primary institutional mechanism through which the subordination of women has been reproduced in twentieth-century Kerala, legacies that continue to shape the on-screen and off-screen gender arrangements of the film industry. In their review of contemporary women-centred Malayalam films, Karimpaniyil and Koudur (2025) identify a major generic shift in the post-2017 era, exemplified by a new generation of directors who have crafted female characters more actively resistant

to the traditional gender scripts of earlier Malayalam cinema, a shift to which the three films discussed in this paper directly contribute.

In her *BioScope* article, Pillai (2020) argues that women directors in Malayalam cinema are compelled to negotiate between two modes of representation: the camera obscura of ideological accommodation and the camera dentata of subversive counter-representation (pp. 44-60). Pillai (2022) further situates these cinematic negotiations within a broader field of digital feminist activism, in which the performative dissent of Indian women online produces what she terms affective feminisms that intersect with and amplify the feminist politics of the Malayalam screen.

The spectatorship dimensions of this feminist turn have been further developed by Parvathy and Tripathi (2025), whose intersectional feminist analysis of older female fans of select Malayalam films reveals that the feminist politics of Malayalam cinema is mediated and consumed across a wide spectrum of demographic groups, not exclusively by elite or middle-class feminist viewers.

The founding of the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in 2017, following the sexual assault of a prominent actress, and the subsequent establishment of the Hema Committee represent what Mannil (2020) has described as a structural challenge to the gendered labour arrangements of Malayalam cinema, a challenge experienced both in the institutional practices of the industry and in the visual and dramatic texture of its films (pp. 191-207). Mannil's framework of gendered film labour contextualizes the formal feminist turn that this paper examines within the conditions of production that have enabled it.

Notwithstanding this growing body of literature, the performativity of female characterization in Malayalam cinema, with particular attention to the choreography of characters as visual subjects, has been relatively undertheorized in a systematic way. Most existing analyses focus on narrative content rather than on the formal and dramatic strategies through which female characters are constructed as visual subjects. The present paper addresses this gap by applying Butlerian performativity theory and Goffman's dramaturgical model to close textual analyses of three recent Malayalam films, arguing that the feminist turn in contemporary Malayalam cinema is as much a matter of dramatic structure and visual syntax as it is of narrative content.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AS A STRATEGY OF CINEMATIC READING

Butler's central argument, that gender is produced through repetitive, citational performativity rather than reflecting a pre-existing gendered identity, gains specific analytic power when applied to the domain of cinema, where the process of character creation through embodied performance is especially legible. The Butlerian question as it applies to the filmic context is not so much what gender a character is but rather what gender is choreographed by the film: which gestures, movements, spatial positions, and relationships are assembled to produce femininity as a signifying effect. Crucially, Butler's account of performativity also incorporates the possibility of what she terms gender trouble—those moments when the citational repetition fails or misfires, when the performance exceeds the script and thereby discloses the constructed and contingent nature of gender itself.

Applied to the three films under examination, the Butlerian framework directs attention to the specific performance scripts within which each female character operates and the ways in which those scripts are subverted or exceeded. The questions posed by this analysis are as follows: Is Chandra enacting the patriarchal Yakshi script of monstrous feminine danger, or a feminist counter-script of supernatural agency? What does Mlaathi enact— the performance of the aging, passive housewife, or a counter-performance of withheld power expressed only at moments of extremity? And whose performance constitutes Rekha: the diegetic narrative of the film itself, or the partial, interested reconstructions of the men who report her disappearance?

3.2. THE GAZE AND ITS CINEMATIC REVERSALS

The gaze theory employed in this paper draws on Mulvey's (1975) framework not as a comprehensive account of cinematic looking but as a diagnostic one— a model of how and when the male gaze organizes visual pleasure, and how and when films break, bend, or subvert that organization. Three distinct gaze configurations are identifiable in the films analysed. Lokah performs what may be described as the returned gaze: Chandra is placed in scenarios of visual spectacle-gazed upon by male characters, the camera, and the audience— but the film continually choreographs her returned or

reversed gaze, transforming the object of visual pleasure into a visual and physical agent. Ekō performs the refused gaze: Mlaathi is not subjected to the aestheticizing, eroticizing visual treatment that has typically characterized the representation of women in mainstream Malayalam cinema. The camera frames her in functional, ethnographic terms, denying the viewer visual mastery over her body. Rekhachithram performs the posthumous gaze: Rekha can be seen- in photographs, testimony, and reconstructed memory- but she cannot look back, generating a systematic visual asymmetry that the film positions as its central feminist statement.

3.3. GOFFMAN'S DRAMATURGY: A FRAMEWORK FOR VISUAL NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Goffman's (1959) front stage/back stage distinction is operationalized in this paper to examine the spatial and theatrical dimensions of female performance in each film. The front stage- the public realm of regulated social performance in which identity is actively produced before an audience- corresponds in this analysis to the spectacular, action-coded visual grammar of Lokah, in which Chandra performs her feminist agency in maximally visible and publicized terms. The back stage- the private space in which the performance apparatus is assembled and the social mask is laid aside- corresponds to the domestic space of the Kaattukunnu hills in Ekō, in which Mlaathi is defined precisely by her opacity, her inaccessibility to the various male authorities who seek to interpret her. Goffman's less-discussed concept of the off stage- the space entirely outside the performance frame, occupied by neither a front-stage social persona nor a back-stage personal self- provides the conceptual key to Rekhachithram, in which Rekha exists only in the traces and reconstructions left by her absence from the stage of her own life.

The paper's central thesis- that the three films trace a trajectory from myth to margin- is thus also a Goffmanian argument about theatrical space: a front stage of spectacular public performance (Lokah), a back stage of withheld private power (Ekō), and an off stage of posthumous absence and reconstruction (Rekhachithram). This spatial-theatrical reading makes visible the feminist visual narrative of contemporary Malayalam cinema not as a unified discourse but as a field of differentiated dramaturgical positions, each with its own distinct politics of visibility and power.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1. LOKAH CHAPTER 1: CHANDRA- THE CHOREOGRAPHY OF MYTHOLOGICAL RECLAMATION

Dominic Arun's Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra (2025) announces its feminist intentions from its opening frames. The film's first words- "All legends have an element of truth"- serve as a warning that it will engage with Kerala folklore while simultaneously subjecting that folklore to a revisionary feminist reading.

Chandra, played by Kalyani Priyadarshan, is revealed to be a Yakshi, a supernatural female figure based on the traditional folk narrative of Kalliyankattu Neeli from the Kerala folk corpus. In the original myth, Neeli is the daughter of a devadasi who marries a Brahmin priest, betrays and murders him for violating caste and social codes, and becomes an evil avenging spirit who lures and kills men. The folk Yakshi, in brief, is a figure whose supernatural power is explained precisely by her nonconformity to patriarchal norms- and whose destructiveness is consequently encoded as monstrous, as the excess that must be contained or expelled. As Creed (1993) theorizes in her analysis of the monstrous-feminine, the supernatural female figure in popular narrative has long served as a site of cultural anxiety regarding female power and desire- an anxiety the text must ultimately resolve through containment or destruction (p. 78).

Lokah radically rewrites this folk script. Neeli/Chandra is not a femme fatale or an agent of undifferentiated feminine vengeance; she is a figure who deploys supernatural forces against patriarchal violence- against acid attackers, against abusers, against an organ-trade network that preys on the vulnerable in the city. This rewriting operates at both the narrative and the visual-dramatic level. Narratively, the film reinvents the origins of Neeli's transgression: the young Neeli and her people are massacred for daring to enter an upper-caste temple, and her metamorphosis into a Yakshi-vampire is precipitated by social rejection and violence rather than by transgressive sexuality. At the visual level, the choreography of Chandra's body is designed to structurally reverse the traditional pleasures of the male gaze: the action sequences that dominate the second half of the film renders Chandra a kinetic rather than erotic figure, whose body is characterized by speed, precision, and violence rather than by the spectacularity of the desirable female object. This visual strategy resonates with Li's (2022) analysis of female warriors in Asian cinema through an ecofeminist and Daoist

lens, which demonstrates that kinaesthetic and action-oriented female bodies can function as sites of genuine agential subjectivity precisely when the gaze is oriented toward dynamism rather than eroticism (pp. 3470–3471).

The Butlerian dimensions of the film's visual choreography are clearly legible. Chandra simultaneously performs multiple gender roles: the solitary urban migrant in Bengaluru, subjected to the curious gaze of her neighbour Sunny, and a supernatural figure whose gender performance is both beyond and subversive to the patriarchal scripts she inhabits. Crucially, the film does not require Chandra to abandon femininity in order to achieve agency: she is not empowered by becoming masculine. Rather, she performs what Butler (1990) might describe as a subversive re-enactment of femininity: inhabiting the Yakshi script while evacuating it of its patriarchal coding, refusing the connotations of danger, monstrosity, and punishable transgression with which folk tradition had invested the figure of the supernatural woman (p. 31). The film's costuming is significant here: Chandra's consistent blue-red color palette, associated throughout with night and supernatural power, is inscribed on her body not as erotic spectacle but as the mark of a posthuman, post-patriarchal capacity.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective illuminates a further dimension of the film's feminist politics. Chandra operates on the most exposed of all front stages: the street, the city, the parking lot, the nocturnal alleyway. Her feminist performance is maximally visible, observed by Sunny, feared by Nachiyappa, and crucially, witnessed by the film's audience. This frontal visibility constitutes the film's most explicit feminist declaration: the right to occupy public space, physical agency expressed in the most theatrical possible register, the transformation of the object of the male gaze into an agent of the gaze. The climactic confrontation in which Chandra defeats Nachiyappa- the film's most overtly patriarchal antagonist- is shot as a set-piece of feminist visual dramatics, a choreography of reversal in which masculine power is undone spectacularly. The film's achievement of the status of the highest-grossing Malayalam film in the industry's history, and of the highest-grossing female performance in the history of Indian cinema, is itself a form of performative evidence: the mass participation of audiences in this feminist front-stage spectacle constitutes a cultural event that exceeds the boundaries of the textual film. This commercial performance resonates with what Pillai (2022) describes as the capacity of digital and affective feminist interventions to produce mass publics- to transform what might otherwise remain confined to activist discourse into a shared cultural experience (p. 3).

4.2. EKŌ- THE DRAMATICS OF WITHHELD PERFORMANCE: VISUAL NARRATIVE OF SILENCE AS FEMINIST

Where Lokah occupies the front stage of spectacular feminist performance, Ekō (2025) by Dinjith Ayyathan retreats to the back stage, to the mist-covered hills of Kaattukunnu at the Kerala-Karnataka border, where the film's central female character, Mlaathi Chedathi, exercises a form of power through a visual and dramatic grammar that is precisely opposite to Chandra's. Where Lokah relocates feminist agency in kinetics, visibility, and spectacle, Ekō relocates it in stillness, opacity, and withdrawal. Mlaathi is the Malaysian-born wife of fugitive criminal Kuriachan, abandoned in his remote estate, attended by the young Peeyoos, and surrounded by packs of trained dogs whose territorial vigilance mirrors her own closely guarded interiority.

The film's feminist visual narrative operates through absence and negation. Mlaathi is shot in a non-aestheticizing, non-eroticizing register quite different from the one mainstream Malayalam cinema has traditionally applied to female bodies. Cinematographer and co-writer Bahul Ramesh frames her in functional, ethnographic terms- close to the ground, within the domestic realm she inhabits- as matter-of-factly as the mist, the dogs, and the hillside landscape are shot. This constitutes a decisive rejection of the visual pleasures of the male gaze, and this rejection generates a unique feminist visual grammar: Mlaathi is not spectacular, not eroticized, not an object of the look, and this refusal of spectacularity is itself the film's most forceful feminist statement.

This counter-representational strategy is precisely what Pillai (2020) theorizes as the camera dentata, a mode of filmmaking that refuses to position women within passive codes of femininity by denying the viewer visual mastery over the female body (p. 44). The refused gaze theorized in Section 3.2 is employed here to deprive the audience of the gratification of visual control.

Mlaathi's gender performance in Butlerian terms is equally unconventional. On the surface, she performs the role of the passive, aging domestic wife: she remains at home, maintains the domestic environment, and responds to questions with the deadpan inscrutability that critics have noted. Gradually, however, the film reveals that this apparent passivity is itself a performance- a carefully maintained back-stage, self-concealed beneath a front-stage mask of conformity and

obedience. The film's central revelation, that Mlaathi has always known the truth about Kuriachan's crimes against her first husband, and has been engineering her own justice through the very dogs that appeared to imprison her, is a shattering disclosure of the gap between the femininity enacted in her image and the female agency that has been withheld from view. The key thematic insight that critics have identified is that protection may appear as restriction and restriction may appear as protection. Mlaathi simultaneously inhabits both sides of this equation; her gender performance is a long-term practice of the strategic exploitation of apparent weakness.

Of particular interest are the ecofeminist dimensions of Mlaathi's characterization. Ekō makes an explicit, sharply pointed comment on the commodification of women and nature- each safely handed over to another's keeping under the patriarchal order- by rendering Mlaathi's situation parallel to that of the dogs who both confine and protect her. This parallel is not superficial: the relationship between Mlaathi and the dogs is the primary performative text of the film. In Goffman's theatrical schema, the dogs constitute the mechanism of her back-stage identity- the dimension of her performance that remains invisible to the male detectives who attempt to read and categorize her. When, in the film's devastating climax, Peeyoos moves to harm Mlaathi only to find herself surrounded by Mlaathi's pack of dogs, the back stage abruptly becomes front stage, and the performance of passive domesticity is exposed as the theatre within which an absolute and non-negotiable power has been accumulated over time. Mlaathi has staged the most choreographed performance of all- one that remained silent throughout the film.

4.3. REKHACHITHRAM- THE POSTHUMOUS STAGE: PERFORMING ABSENCE AND RECONSTITUTING THE FEMALE SUBJECT

The most theoretically complex female characterization among the three films, *Rekhachithram* (2025) by Jofin T. Chacko, is paradoxically the one in which characterization most visibly does not occur—a fact attributable to the absence of its protagonist, Rekha Pathrose. Rekha (played by Anaswara Rajan) is a young aspiring actress who disappears and is subsequently found murdered on the set of a real Malayalam film, *Kathodu Kathoram* by Bharathan, in 1985. The film's present-day narrative follows Circle Inspector Vivek Gopinath, who investigates Rekha's disappearance decades later following a deathbed confession. Rekha herself is constituted entirely through investigative reconstruction by others: through witness testimony, photographs, reconstructed memories, and AI-generated sequences that recreate the historical film set on which she is killed.

The film's most striking formal element is this posthumous characterization, which precisely corresponds to Goffman's category of the off stage- the space entirely outside the performance frame, occupied by neither a front-stage social persona nor a back-stage personal self. Rekha exercises no control over her self-presentation; she cannot perform, refuse, or transgress the gender scripts imposed upon her. She exists solely as the object of what others do to her- a subject brought into being by the multiple, partial, and interested narratives of the investigation. What makes *Rekhachithram* a feminist text, rather than a mere crime narrative, is its excruciating self-consciousness about this condition: the film continually frames the reconstruction of Rekha as incomplete, partial, and saturated with the interests and desires of the men who perform it.

The Mulveyan dimensions of this posthumous gaze are rendered with precision and anguish. Rekha is gazed upon-through archival photography, through the reconstructed memories of male witnesses, through AI-generated visual reconstruction of the 1985 film shoot- but she cannot gaze back. In *Rekhachithram*, the male gaze is literally constitutive of the female subject: Rekha enters the viewers' field of awareness solely through the aggregated gazes of others. The film situates this, however, not as natural order but as tragedy and injustice. Reviewers noted that the film is less concerned with identifying the perpetrator than with recovering the subjectivity of Rekha herself- her love of cinema, her devotion to Mammooty, her unfulfilled aspirations, her interior emotional life. The film's feminist act is this insistence on Rekha as an interiority despite her absence: a counter-reconstruction that restores the complexity and humanity of a female subject who was intended to be erased by patriarchal violence.

A Butlerian reading of *Rekhachithram* is, by definition, mediated: since Rekha does not perform in the present-day narrative, the question of performativity must be displaced onto the performative labour of the film itself- the work it performs to render Rekha legible, sympathetic, and irreducibly complex as a female subject in the context of her absence. The performance of Anaswara Rajan in the flashback sequences, depicting Rekha performing on the 1985 film set, is therefore critical: she plays Rekha performing aspiration, performing fandom, performing the vulnerability of a young woman in a professional environment that offers her no institutional protection. That *Rekhachithram* is set, with ironic

historical accuracy, in the very world of Malayalam cinema, the same industry whose back stage was so conspicuously unexamined through a feminist lens until the Hema Committee, forty years later- converts Rekha's loss into a metaphor for what it means never to have subjected the film industry's backstage structures to feminist scrutiny. The film's alternate history form, its reconstruction of the making of Kathodu Kathoram, positions the very practice of feminist reconstruction within its own politics: its refusal to allow the female subject to remain off stage, absent, and silent.

The logics of patriarchal violence that ensured Rekha's erasure are inseparable from the patriarchal logics of the family and social institutions that Devika and Ajay (2026) identify as the basis of female ill-being in twentieth-century Kerala, logics that the film indicts through the very process of reconstituting Rekha as a subject through filmmaking.

5. CONCLUSION

The three films examined in this paper: Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra, Ekō, and Rekhachithram, constitute a remarkable ensemble of feminist film practice in contemporary Malayalam cinema, remarkable not only for their individual achievements but for the range and variety of dramaturgical positions they collectively inhabit. The composite analytical framework: a synthesis of Butler's theory of gender performativity, Mulvey's gaze theory, and Goffman's dramaturgical approach, reveals that the feminist turn in Malayalam cinema is not a homogeneous or unified phenomenon but a differentiated field of visual and dramatic strategies, each constituting a distinct mode of feminist performance.

Lokah inhabits the front stage: it choreographs feminist agency as spectacular, public, and kinetically visible, deploying the action vocabulary of the superhero genre to produce a visual grammar of female power that overtly inverts classical cinematic structures of the gaze. Ekō inhabits the back stage: it theatricalizes feminist agency as refusal, silence, and strategic concealment, making the refusal of the gaze itself the most powerful form of feminist statement. The performative silence of Mlaathi constitutes a visual narrative, and dramatics of stillness, in which the most eloquent performance is the absence of performance. Rekhachithram inhabits the off stage: it performs the feminist work of posthumous reconstruction, calling the female subject into visibility against the forces of patriarchal violence, institutional indifference, and historical erasure that sought to render her permanently absent. Together, these three dramaturgical positions trace the trajectory between myth and margin: from the mythological front stage of spectacular reclamation, through the marginal back stage of domestic power, to the posthumous off stage of feminist reconstruction.

The findings of this paper have implications extending beyond the specific films and industry examined. They suggest, first, that the combination of performativity theory, gaze theory, and dramaturgical analysis constitutes a productive and versatile approach to feminist textual analysis in cinema- an approach that is especially fruitful in non-Western contexts where Hollywood genre conventions interact with local mythological, social realist, and melodramatic traditions in complex ways. Transnational feminist film theory, as Khosroshahi and Saljoughi (2023) observe, requires precisely this kind of methodological flexibility: the willingness to bring multiple theoretical traditions to bear on cultural objects that lie outside the explanatory range of any single tradition (pp. 84-86). Second, the findings suggest that the feminist visual turn in regional Indian cinema may be most accurately understood not as a straightforward shift from patriarchal to feminist representation but as a multiplication of different performative tactics, each with its own politics of visibility, spectacle, and power, a view corroborated by Karimpaniyil and Koudur's (2025) finding that the feminist turn in contemporary Malayalam cinema is most evident in the reconfiguration of narrative agency within the structure of the film. Third, the findings indicate that the post-Hema Committee moment in Malayalam cinema requires not only a political discourse of the film industry but a visual grammar of female characterization, one that demands the kind of sustained theoretical attention this paper has sought to provide. The gendered politics of Malayalam cinema cannot be interpreted outside the working conditions that shape women's participation in the industry, which is why the feminist visual turn examined here cannot be understood in isolation from the broader feminist transformation of the industry's institutional structures (Mannil, 2020, p. 207).

The choreography of female characterization in contemporary Malayalam cinema remains an expansive and generative field. The relationship between the off-screen feminist activism of the Women in Cinema Collective and the on-screen visual discourse examined here represents a productive direction for future scholarship; so too does the question of how women working behind the camera- as directors, cinematographers, and writers- shape the visual grammar of female characterization through what Pillai (2020) terms the camera dentata mode of feminist representation (p. 60). The broader social circumstances that enable or constrain such transformation are themselves historical, as Devika and Ajay (2026) remind us: the on-screen feminist turn must be understood through the lens of

gradual change in the patriarchal social configurations within which women have been historically disadvantaged both within the film industry and in the wider society. What this paper has demonstrated above all, is that the question of how womanhood is staged, choreographed, and rendered visually meaningful is not separable from the question of what is being said about women: it is, in the deepest sense, the same question, and one that this group of 2025 Malayalam films is answering with a formal sophistication and feminist urgency seldom seen before.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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