

## Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly  
Journal of Literature and Cultural  
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614  
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 2  
March 2026

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**Citation:** Indu, P. "The Absent Mother: Narrativising Disabled Motherhood in Malayalam Films." *Literariness Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Mar. 2026, pp. 790–801.



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## The Absent Mother: Narrativising Disabled Motherhood in Malayalam Films

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to unveil the cultural and societal stigma around motherhood and disability. The idea of mothering upholds the image of an able-bodied, healthy, selfless, nurturing mother. Disability challenges this stereotype. The idea of a mother with disability jeopardizes societal expectations since disabled women may be seen as demanding care rather than providing care. This led to disabled mothers being largely unrepresented in films and literature. The study analyzes select Malayalam films to unravel the reasons behind the sparse portrayals of disabled mothers. While Malayalam cinema has addressed motherhood and disability separately, the representation of disabled mothers is comparatively absent. Even when they are presented, they are often desexualised and are the recipients of pity and compassion. The reasons for the lack of disabled mothers on-screen is rooted in cultural stigma and anxiety. The paper employs critical content analysis and close reading of Malayalam films to argue that disabled motherhood is often viewed as problematic based on the conviction that disabled bodies do not embody the all sacrificing, selfless, yet powerful image of a mother.

**Keywords:** *Motherhood, Malayalam Cinema, Disability Studies*

For a long period, women have been understood only as wives and mothers. Patriarchy has normalized the unequal division of roles in the institution of family. The image of the harmonious family/household represents a subservient woman, engaged in domestic chores, obedient to husband, taking care of the children and the elderly members of the family. The concept of the ideal mother is pivotal to the idea of a harmonious household. Motherhood is considered to be the defining point in the life of a woman. Her life is deemed complete only when she becomes a mother. A woman who cannot be a mother is often abused, mocked, attacked, ignored, and even murdered. The prevalent gender expectations demand that women should reproduce and the purpose of a woman's life is to ensure procreation and the well being of children. It is generally assumed that “ a good mother promotes the well-being and development of her children and is almost always patient, protective, nurturing, and generous” (Barlow and Chapin 326). Though women were confined to the domestic sphere earlier, the modern conceptualization of women demands women to excel both in public and domestic spheres. “ This forces mothers to appear perfect in various ways in carrying out their duties in the public and domestic spheres. In the public sphere, for example, a mother is expected to have a job that allows her to divide her time so that she can still educate and her children (Pangestuti et. al. 17). Women who do not meet these standards set up by the society are often subjected to mom shaming.

Malayalam film industry and Kerala society has celebrated the image of the ideal mother since its inception. We are part of a society where women are burdened with the expectation of being deities who are sentenced to protect and nurture. For a long period, the image of the all-sacrificing mother, played by the renowned actress Kaviyoor Ponnamma was equated to the idea of motherhood in Malayalam film industry. Neelima Menon comments, “This smiling saint wrapped in ‘mundum neriyathum’ ( a traditional Kerala wear) was an image perfected by Kaviyoor Ponnamma. During the 80s and 90s, when families remained the cornerstone of every narrative, she was an indispensable emblem of maternity”(Menon, “In Malayalam Cinema”). During the same period, Mollywood started to discuss motherhood in binaries. “Either she (mother) has a saintly disposition – negotiating between her children and spouse or relegated to flipping dosas on a tawa – or she is a schemer out to wreak her family” ( Menon, “In Malayalam Cinema”). This can be observed as an extension of the patriarchal propaganda to create binary oppositions like goddess/witch. Malayalam cinema continued the portrayal of the sacrificing mother with rare, occasional deviations for a long time. However, with the change in the narratives in the 2010s, these representations were replaced by flawed, realistic, unapologetic mothers who had an existence beyond their roles as mothers. The character of the mother, Leelamma, played by Lali PM in *Kumbalangi Nights* and Vanaja, Kuttan's mother played by Kalpana in *Bangalore Days* are examples for this. Leelamma in *Kumbalangi Nights* is presented as a woman who prioritizes herself. The film neither does portray her negatively, nor does it justify her actions. Such depiction is a deviation from the hitherto existing trope. Similarly, Vanaja is someone who does not

succumb to despair after her husband deserts her. She moves to Bangalore with her son and celebrates her new found freedom.

Since the concept of an ideal mother in Kerala society largely revolves around an able-bodied, unambitious, selfless multi-tasker, they are often depicted the same way on screen. This paper attempts to analyze the under- representation of disabled mothers on screen. The idea of a mother with disability jeopardizes societal expectations since disabled women may be seen as demanding care rather than providing care. This led to disabled mothers being largely under-represented in films and literature. The study analyzes select Malayalam films to unravel the reasons behind the sparse portrayals of disabled mothers. While Malayalam cinema has addressed motherhood and disability separately, the representation of disabled mothers is comparatively absent. Even when they are presented, they are often desexualised and are the recipients of pity and compassion. The reasons for the lack of disabled mothers on-screen is rooted in cultural stigma and anxiety. The paper employs critical content analysis and close reading of Malayalam films to argue that disabled motherhood is often viewed as problematic based on the conviction that disabled bodies do not embody the all sacrificing, selfless, yet powerful image of a mother.

In a society, where non-disabled bodies are the norm, people with disabilities are rendered invisible. Filax and Taylor opines thus: “Who is disabled and the meaning of disability are much different when disability is regarded as a problem to be solved rather than as a condition that has been produced by social organizations, or when it is understood as an embodied revelation from which, among other things, it is possible to critique the imperative of normalcy” (144-145). The ableist society views disability as a problem to be tackled with.

Disability and Persons with disabilities have found their way to the screen multiple times. However, it is obvious that most of these films failed to capture the real problems faced by this community and most of them failed to create awareness among the audience. Malayalam cinema is not different from such depictions. In Malayalam cinema, “ Disability depictions often vacillate between a comic interlude, underplayed heroism, liability and burden” (Menon, “ Pitied and desexualised”). The idea of disability being a punishment to past sins or sins committed by the characters themselves or their parents is a recurrent theme in cinema across India. Mangalasseri Neelakandan (played by Mohan Lal) in *Devaasuram* being beaten up by goons soon after he was cursed by Bhanumathi ( played by Revathi) is an example for this. Similarly there are multiple films which use disability as a comic interlude. The character Suhasini played by Guinness Pakru in *Kunjikoonan* is a vertically challenged person and whose disability is used in that film as a comic interlude. Though films like *Pachakuthira*, *Sound Thoma* or *Kunjikoonan* depict disabled characters, they do not portray them realistically and often convey wrong messages such as disabled persons are grotesque and that only a person with disability is fit to marry another person with disability.

However, it is interesting to observe that the number of female disabled characters on screen are lesser in number compared to the number of male disabled characters. The harshness of the social norms becomes apparent when gender and disability intersect. Disability is a gendered phenomenon which affects men and women differently. Helen Meekosha observes that in the private and familial arena, disabled women are less likely to get married than men with disabilities. She also points out that women are more likely to be subjected to medical interventions to control their fertility ( Meekosha 5).

Films like *Mazhayethum Munpe* (1995), *Sneham* (1998), *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* (2003), and *Kunjikoonan* (2002) are examples of films which depicted disabled female characters.

*Sneham* directed by Jayaraj is a family drama which revolves around the struggles of the protagonist Padmanabhan (played by Jayaram). Manikkutty (played by Jomol) is a paraplegic who lives with her widowed mother. When her mother dies, Padmanabhan takes her under his wings and decides to marry her in order to redeem himself from the humiliations he had to undergo. Manikkutty is a deliberately desexualised character to establish the characters' moral purity.

Meera (played by Ambili Devi) in *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum*, directed by Vinayan, considers herself a burden for her family. She is capable of cooking for herself and her brother, and she is seen crawling around the house cleaning it. Most of the scenes where she appears are accompanied by sad background music in order to invoke pity among the audience. In the film, Muthu dreams of Meera's marriage and works hard to make it possible. *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* also discusses the " recurrent theme of the difficulty of finding a spouse for a disabled woman and the burden this poses to her male relatives. Such narratives often feature men taking unusual risks to rectify the situation, like committing crime for a larger dowry, leaving a traditional home to move to urban locations for jobs and so forth." (Pal 116-117). The film ends with the death of Meera, giving every opportunity not to discuss the marital life and probable motherhood of Meera.

Uma (played by Sobhana) in *Mazhayethum Munpe*, directed by Kamal, is a paraplegic who considers herself a burden and resists her marriage to her able-bodied lover. Sruthi(played by Annie), another female character in the film tells Uma that Uma is doing an injustice to her lover by wanting to marry him as she is incapable of making him happy. Sruthi is the typical representative of this ableist society who do not consider a disabled person to be capable of leading a happy marital life. "Uma (also) believes that her body is not sufficient to please her non-disabled partner's eyes and hence withdraws from the love relationship thinking that he is already doing too much by loving her. This points to her inferiority complex and submissive behaviour, as well as the misconception that disabled

women are not fit to lead a family life because they do not possess the qualities of a ‘good wife’ (Jacob and Varghese 19).

*Kunjikoonan* (2002) directed by Sasi Shankar features a visually challenged girl, Chembakam who performs alongside her father in street circus shows. Though she is portrayed as someone who earns for her livelihood, she is often depicted as vulnerable and as someone who needs protection. Chembakam has not shifted further from the existing paradigm of disabled characters.

*Bangalore Days* (2014), directed by Anjali Menon is one of the films that shifted the way disabled people are portrayed on screen. Sarah (played by Parvathy Thiruvothu) is a radio jockey and paraplegic. Sarah is presented as an opinionated, educated, independent woman who is proud of her identity as a disabled person. Though paraplegia is part of her life, it does not define her identity. She is confident, capable of expressing her desire and making her choices. She demands companionship and love from her partner. The film tries to critically engage with the lack of amenities in India which will make the lives of disabled people better.

Sexuality and reproduction are never discussed in connection with these disabled characters as it is considered irrelevant. The idea of a normal body is based upon Enlightenment ideals of an autonomous, rational, productive individual (Wilson and Cellio 52). Only such a body deemed fit and normal has the right to reproduce another individual resembling it. The construction of normality is relative and subject to interpretation. For an ableist society, motherhood and disability cannot coexist. The list of multiple female disabled characters without progeny exemplifies this ableist perspective.

While procreation is deemed to be the responsibility of women, disabled women are considered unfit for reproduction and incompetent for bringing up healthy children. There is a widespread assumption that disabled mothers are incapable of procreation and they pose serious threats to the growth and survival of the foetus. The idea of mothering upholds the image of an able-bodied, healthy, selfless, nurturing mother. Disability challenges this stereotype. The idea of a mother with disability jeopardizes societal expectations since disabled women are portrayed as demanding care rather than providing care. “Having a visible disability makes these (disabled) mothers vulnerable to increased social surveillance and scrutiny with the concomitant moralizing about the capacity and quality of their mothering” (Filax and Taylor 144).

A disabled body as a social burden is based on the concept that it drains the resources of a society. Based on this, the policies both medical and cultural concentrate on restricting the reproduction of disabled bodies. In an infamous U.S. Supreme Court Verdict, it stated that disabled women are a burden to society and it is better for the world to prevent them from continuing their kind (Miller 52). Such ideas positively endorse selective abortion and forced sterilization. The process of stigmatization doubles when a disabled body is birthed by another disabled individual. Practices of

selective abortion and prenatal screening are to identify and terminate undesirable human conditions. If an able-bodied person chooses to be a mother, it is usually considered a joyous occasion. However, the decision of a disabled woman to be a mother is often met with confusion and discouragement. Whereas, an able-bodied woman's inability to conceive is considered a treatable condition, infertility of a disabled person is viewed as a blessing. A disabled woman is not even considered as a valid candidate for motherhood in an ableist society. "Motherhood is understood as a hallmark of being a woman. For the disabled woman to be excluded from this hallmark of womanhood brings into question her social location as a woman (Walsh 85).

Similar to the limited number of disabled female characters on screen, the number of films portraying disabled mothers are too small in number. It is important to examine the absence or underrepresentation of disabled motherhood on screen in a social context. The rationale behind this analysis is of utmost importance in portraying the huge population of disabled women in India. Since there are a large number of women with disabilities in India and their problems are many, there should be proper representation on screen.

*Oru Nokku Kanan* (1985) directed by Sajan depicts the story of an estranged couple, Jayadevan and Maya. Soon after their separation, Jayadevan marries and fathers a daughter. After the death of his wife, his daughter was brought by himself and his wheelchair bound sister. Though his sister, Sandhya is not the biological mother of the child, she dons the role of a mother. For a society, which perceives only able-bodied women as mothers and capable of bringing up children, this is a remarkable progress. However, the film never discusses the challenges faced by Sandhya in fulfilling the expectations of the society.

The 2005 Malayalam film *Makalkku* (To My Daughter) directed by Jayaraj centres around a mentally deranged woman who gives birth to a girl child. The woman nicknamed 'Killeri', as it is the only word that she utters, does not seem to realize the fact that she has birthed a child. The ableist society around her is surprised by this fact owing to the general assumption that motherhood is intrinsic to women. An individual with similar intellectual problems as that of Killeri may not perform the role of a parent. However, it is obvious that *Makalkku* only reinforces the prevalent ableist assumption that women with disabilities are incapable of raising kids and are unfit for motherhood.

*Athmakadha* (2010) directed by Premlal is the life story of Kochubaby (played by Sreenivasan), a visually challenged person who works as a candle maker. Kochubaby leads an independent, happy life in contrast to the previous disabled characters portrayed in the Malayalam film industry for a long time. *Athmakadha* never resorts to pathos to present Kochubaby's disability. The narrative grants him agency and dignity. Kochubaby marries another visually challenged character, Mary (played by Sharbani Mukherjee) and they give birth to a girl, Lillykutty (played by Shafna). The

film had the potential to portray a powerful disabled mother character, but the filmmakers did not take up the challenge. Mary met with a road accident and died without contributing much to the story. However, the film depicted the happy mother and how she enjoyed her motherhood. The film also reveals how disabled characters navigate through life without batting their eyes.

*Kattappanayile Rithwik Roshan* (2016) is a romantic comedy drama directed by Nadirshah revolves around the life and aspirations of Krishnan Nair alias Kichu (played by Vishnu Unnikrishnan). The film features a minor character, Kichu's mother (played by Seema G. Nair), who is a person with a disability. She is hearing impaired and leads a conventional family life. The film never discusses her disability as a problem, though the silly fights between her and her non-disabled husband are used to evoke humour.

The 2016 film *Guppy* directed by Johnpaul George revolves around the life of a teenage boy Mikhael, better known as Guppy (played by Chethan Jayalal) who breeds and sells ornamental fish to take care of his disabled mother (played by Rohini). His dream is to buy a motorized wheelchair for his disabled mother. He works hard to provide mobility to his disabled mother. *Guppy* is yet another film that caters to the ableist assumptions of the society. Mikhael's father passed away when he was only a toddler and the unexpected death was a shock to his mother, which resulted in her being paralyzed and wheelchair bound. Since then it is Mikhael's duty to take care of his mother, financially and emotionally. The film shows us how Mikhael dons the role of a parent to his disabled mother. He is the breadwinner of their small family. Instead of going to school, he breeds ornamental fish and sells it. He also works as an employee in a tea shop. It is Mikhael who bathes and dresses up his mother. Though wheelchair bound, it is obvious that his mother is capable of doing her daily chores. Mikhael's affection for his mother and their bond is revealed to the audience by the way he supports and takes care of her. Guppy prioritizes his mother's comfort and happiness over his needs. Though all these are presented as natural expressions of his love, they are capable of asserting the ableist assumptions prevalent in our society. The film reinforces the ableist idea that disabled people are helpless and burdensome. The film also unintentionally suggests that disabled people demand sacrifices from others. This reinforces the idea that disabled people create hardship for others.

*Vikruthi* (2019) directed by Emcy Joseph is another Malayalam film that discussed true events that took place in Kochi Metro rail, where the image of a hearing impaired person was taken and shared online assuming that he is drunk. The protagonist of the film, Eldho, played by Suraj Venjaramoodu and Elsy, played by Surabhi Lakshmi are a hearing impaired couple. They were leading a happy and independent life when the fortune took an unexpected turn. Though *Vikurthi* does not conform to ableist representations, the film does not politicize the disabled motherhood.

Malayalam cinema has always conformed to the ableist conventions of our society which glorify able bodied, non-disabled, heterosexual bodies. It is that drenched in ableist norms that films have resorted to mocking and ridiculing disabled bodies. The first Malayalam film, *Vigathakumaran*, was released in 1928. Since then, Kerala has witnessed the making of thousands of films. However, it is unfortunate that Malayalam films have not explored the concept of disabled motherhood in detail. An in-depth analysis of the limited films that have captured disabled mothers, it is obvious that Malayalam cinema is hesitant in challenging ableist cultural assumptions. Even when disabled women/mothers are included in the story line, the casting ensures that these women conform to the aesthetic standards of the society. Persons with self evident disabilities- disabilities which are obvious to the observers, are underrepresented in media because of ableism and narrow beauty standards. In connection with the concept of motherhood, mothers with self evident disabilities are considered incapable of bringing up children.

Motherhood or maternity is generally associated with positivity and happiness. However, these generally happy, positive cultural associations are cancelled in the case of a disabled mother. It is observed that, “. . . when disability and maternity register visibly in the same body, they create a visual and cognitive dissonance , as if one can be either a mother or a disabled person-not both at one” ( Lindgren 90). Even when films choose to portray female disabled characters and venture forward to showcase their romance and their marriage, most of these narratives come to an end before the discussion of an offspring comes up.

Hearing impaired mothers are often represented in films and mainstream media since their disability is often invisible to the public eye and they do not challenge the dominant image of a capable mother. Hearing impairment does not challenge the able-bodied, competent, multi tasker image of an ideal mother in our society. Elsy in *Vikruthi* and Kani’s mother in *Kattappanayile Rithwik Roshan* are examples for this. They are portrayed as perfectly capable of doing all the household chores and taking care of their children.

Researchers opine that disability is viewed as a homogenous category which centres around visible disabilities. The image of a person in a wheelchair has become synonymous with the concept of disability. According to them, this perspective leads to the lack of understanding of the unique challenges faced by individuals with invisible disabilities (Granjon et al 1). However, this does not seem to be the reality with Malayalam cinema. Malayalam cinema is more comfortable with the representation of persons with invisible disabilities, often ignoring persons with visible disabilities as they do not appeal to the ableist beauty standards. Similarly, the maternal bodies on screen represent the shared cultural ideologies about the kind of maternal bodies accepted and valued in our society.

Killeri in *Makalkku* is an intellectually disabled person. Whether she is disabled at birth or not is not clear to the audience. Mainstream media often frames intellectually disabled persons as innocent, emotionally pure and non sexual. In the film, it is vaguely hinted that Killeri could have been raped, which helps to desexualize her pregnancy and makes her motherhood appear morally acceptable. With Killeri indifferent to the new born baby, her co-prisons don the role of mothers to the baby. “Nurturing another human being can construct a woman as a mother, and the ability to nurture can construct a “good” or capable mother in the eyes of society as much as the perceived inability to nurture because of disability can steal the role of mother from a woman” (Franits 138). While the ability to nurture the baby grants motherhood to the fellow prisoners, Killeri’s perceived inability to nurture results in her child being taken away from her.

Mary in *Athmakadha*, a visually challenged mother is given only a limited screen time. The idea of a visually challenged couple taking care of their child can be a little daunting for the audience. However, the film easily dismantles the ableist assumptions of the society. In a sequence, the couple lose their toddler for a few minutes and they are left bewildered, unable to comprehend where she went. However, they are soon found formulating a creative solution to this problem they may encounter again. Lindgren observes that, “disabled mothers are endlessly inventive about accomplishing these tasks, alone or in partnership with another caregiver. Disability highlights the physical demands of motherhood, but it also engenders creative solutions” (93). In an age where maternity is constantly redefined, disabled and non-disabled mothers are expected to raise up to the cultural expectations of motherhood. This sequence in *Athmakadha* is a reminder to the society that disabled mothers are not unlike others in fulfilling the responsibilities of a parent.

Mary in *Athmakadha* is not a very powerful character. With her death, the custody of the child is left with the father figure, who has been attributed with extraordinary skills from the beginning. The replacement of the not-so-able disabled mother with an ‘extraordinary’ disabled father reflects a convergence of ableism and sexism. A disabled father is considered less disruptive to the functioning of a family, whereas disability in mothers is interpreted as a failure in child caring responsibilities.

Kochubaby efficiently brings up his daughter Lillykkutty. However, Lillykkutty is also afflicted with a neurological disorder which affects her eyesight. The film is about Kochubaby’s efforts to convince Lillykkutty that being disabled is not the end of her life and he succeeds in it. Kochubaby is one of few disabled characters on screen who challenge “hegemonic perception that the life enjoyed by disabled people is inherently not as good, not as (normatively) productive, or not as worthy of life enjoyed by non-disabled people” (Daniels 118). The depiction of Kochubaby as a guide and mentor to both Mary and Lillykkutty is a normalized image, reflecting the sexist assumptions which associate wisdom, authority and leadership with masculinity.

Sandhya in *Oru Nokku Kanan*, who has donned the role of mother to Chinnumol is a visibly disabled person. The film ensures that she is not the biological mother as a person with a visible disability cannot be imagined as being pregnant and giving birth to a child. Guppy's mother in the film *Guppy* was not a person with disability at birth. She conceived Mikhael and gave birth to him with a non-disabled body. In popular imagination, a pregnant wheelchair user is never granted legitimacy. Even when it is obvious that the inclusion and presence of disabled mothers in media can challenge the preconceived notions of motherhood, Malayalam cinema has frequently failed to present disabled mothers effectively. Every image that supports the ableist perspective suppresses the visibility and representation of disabled persons and the unique challenges faced by them in the mainstream media.

Motherhood is often perceived as an integral part of female identity. However, the majority of the disabled women are denied their rights to sexuality and motherhood and furthermore, they are considered incapable of handling their role as mothers. "Most people in developing countries tend to believe that disabled women cannot be involved in relationships and have children. Women with disabilities in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to socially constructed misconceptions regarding the impossibility and/or inability of being involved in relationships and experiencing pregnancy and motherhood" (Tefera et al 2). In a society which has not yet incorporated its citizens with disabilities as equal participants in its civic life, consideration for disabled mothers is a far-fetched dream.

The World Health Organization observes that there are an estimated 1.3 billion disabled people around the world which constitutes 16% of the world's population (WHO). Even then, it is striking that they are not represented anywhere, when the discussions come to pregnancy and motherhood (Los Angeles Times). The stigma associated with disability results in it being not represented anywhere. Films and multimedia never represent disabled mothers and even when disabled persons are represented, they are depicted as asexual beings. The accurate representation of disabled women and disabled mothers are important as human beings as a whole are a diverse group. Proper representation of disabled mothers in media, visual and literary narratives and policy discourses will help in creating an inclusive environment. Accurate portrayals will help challenge the prevalent stereotypes based on the concepts of ideal mother and parental incapacity. These depictions will help to change the attention from personal shortcomings to systemic failures such as social and cultural stigma, lack of infrastructure and inadequate healthcare.

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