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The Sartorial Moral Compass: Gendered Fashioning and the Representations of Femininity in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of costume and embodied performance in constructing gendered morality in Malayalam cinema through the concept of the Sartorial Moral Compass. It argues that female characters are consistently subjected to visual moral regulation, wherein clothing, physical demeanor, and mannerisms function as indicators of virtue, cultural legitimacy, and social value. In contrast, male characters are largely exempt from such visual scrutiny, with their identities shaped through narrative action rather than appearance. The paper attempts to analyse how women's clothing functions as a moral compass by tracing the evolution of sartorial choices in Malayalam cinema from the 1990s to the 2020s. Through a comparative analysis across three cinematic phases—reinforcement, negotiation, and contemporary resistance, this study analyses films such as *Nandanam*, *Aniyathipravu*, *Achivinte Amma*, *Ustad Hotel*, *Charlie*, *The Great Indian Kitchen* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*. The paper demonstrates how costume operates as a mechanism of visual regulation and moral encoding using the theoretical frameworks of Stuart Hall's "The Work of Representation" and Roland Barthes' "Myth Today". It concludes that while contemporary cinema begins to expose and destabilize this system, the sartorial moralization of women has not disappeared but undergone a process of reconfiguration. The paper argues that Malayalam cinema continues to recalibrate the relationship between costume and morality reflecting the changes in understanding femininity.

Keywords: *Reinforcement, Resistance, Negotiation, Sartorial Moralization, Representation, Malayalam Cinema*

Introduction

Cinema serves as a powerful cultural medium that shapes and reflects societal norms and values. In cinematic visual storytelling, costume is not merely an embellishment. Costumes operate as a critical semiotic device through which identity, morality, and cultural meaning are constructed, communicated and challenged. Clothing, along with bodily comportment and gesture, functions as a visual language that precedes dialogue, shaping audience perception even before narrative unfolds. In this context, Malayalam cinema emerges as a revealing example, where the relationship between costume and meaning is profoundly gendered.

While male characters generally inhabit a space of sartorial neutrality, where clothing reflects profession, class, or situational context, female characters are positioned within a regime of aesthetic visibility. The practice of attaching appearance with morality is mainly applied to women and men remain largely outside this moral framework. A hero's worth is usually determined by his actions, bravery and achievements and not by his clothing. Whereas the attire of the heroines is not incidental, it becomes a coded system through which virtue, respectability, modesty and cultural belonging are visually articulated. Simplicity, restraint, family values and conformity are repeatedly inscribed through culturally sanctioned forms of dress such as the saree or churidar, transforming clothing into a moral signifier rather than a mere aesthetic element.

This gendered coding of clothing and appearance is closely tied to the broader narrative traditions of Malayalam cinema, which has historically been rooted in social realism, familial structures, and moral conflict. From the 1980s and 1990s, films frequently centred on domestic spaces, intergenerational relationships, and ethical dilemmas. Within these narratives, female characters were often positioned as emotional anchors of the family, embodying stability, sacrifice, and continuity. Costume played a crucial role in reinforcing this positioning, with traditional attire visually aligning women with cultural authenticity and moral integrity.

As Malayalam cinema transitioned into the "New Generation" phase of the 2010s, storytelling began to incorporate themes of mobility, globalization, and individual aspiration. However, female characters often remained tied to visual codes of respectability. Their sartorial presentation continued to function as a stabilizing force within narratives that otherwise embraced change. In recent years, particularly in post-2019 and contemporary cinema, there has been a noticeable shift toward questioning and exposing these gendered structures. Films have begun to foreground the tensions between appearance and agency, revealing the constructed nature of cultural expectations placed on women.

This paper introduces the concept of the Sartorial Moral Compass, defined as the cinematic practice through which female morality, cultural legitimacy, and social value are encoded through clothing and embodied behaviour. The term emphasizes how costume operates not simply as representation, but as a regulatory mechanism that directs audience interpretation and reinforces gendered expectations.

Over the years Malayalam film industry has witnessed significant changes in the portrayal of women. Earlier films often associated ideal femininity with sacrifice, virtue, domesticity and modesty, later films incorporated aspirations for education, mobility and independence and most recent films have questioned and challenged these traditional notions regarding female behaviour and gender roles. Despite these transformations, cinema continues to employ visual representations to express notions about femininity. This suggests the presence of sartorial moral compass that guides the viewer's perception of female characters. This paper seeks to address the gap existing in the existing scholarship by exploring the ideological significance of dress and appearance. It studies how costumes serve as a moral signifier across different periods of Malayalam cinema. By tracing the developments of the three phases, the study understands the evolution of femininity and explains how visual representations continue to construct and redefine gendered moral values. The study evaluates the representation of women in Malayalam cinema through the lens of costume and its relationship to morality. Clothing is a powerful visual sign which necessitates the application of theoretical approaches that explain how meanings are communicated and naturalized.

Critical Frameworks of Stuart Hall and Roland Barthes provide an effective understanding in this direction. The analyses progress employing Hall's notion from his most influential work of representation that meaning is produced through systems of representation and it is an active process through which reality is interpreted. In films, costume, appearance and visual imagery function as representational systems that shape audience perceptions of gender and identity. Along with Hall's ideas, Roland Barthes' concept of myth provides a deeper explanation of ideological aspects of representation from the essay "Myth Today". Barthes argues that through repetitions cultural signs acquire meanings and becomes myths that appear natural and universal (128-130). Consequently, female representations get associated with particular forms of dress and appearance that are perceived as natural expressions of womanhood than socially constructed ideals. Hence this notion is an essential tool for understanding how cinematic costume gets linked to morality and femininity. By applying these theories to the selected films, the paper traces the movement from reinforcement of traditional ideals of womanhood to their negotiation and eventual resistance and evaluates the continuing role of costume as a marker of moral and ideological meanings.

Reinforcement Era: Sartorial Stasis and Moral Fixity

The reinforcement phase is characterized by the stabilization of femininity through fixed sartorial codes, where clothing functions as a visual marker of moral identity. The earlier phase of Malayalam cinema, particularly from the 1980s through the early 2000s, is often characterized by its deep engagement with social realism, familial structures, and moral dilemmas. Narratives during this period were frequently rooted in domestic spaces and community life, where cultural continuity and ethical order were central concerns. Gender roles were clearly delineated, with women positioned as stabilizing figures responsible for preserving emotional and moral balance within the family.

In this context, visual representation played a crucial role in reinforcing these roles. Costume functioned as a key narrative device through which femininity was aligned with tradition, restraint, and moral integrity. Clothing remained consistent, reflecting an ideal of continuity rather than change. The female body was thus visually stabilized, and deviation from sartorial norms was rarely permitted within narrative structures.

The movies in this era present innocence and virtue through conservative styling and it is visually reinforced through modest sartorial choices. Here traditional attire strongly signifies moral purity and devotion. Costume here operates as a stabilizing force, aligning femininity with continuity and restraint, while male characters undergo visible transformation through action and conflict. As a result, the sartorial moral compass in this phase operates as a fixed and unquestioned system, where clothing directly corresponds to virtue, and femininity is defined through visual consistency. It is within this framework of sartorial stasis that films of this era and those that reproduce its values must be analysed.

In *Nandanam*, Balamani's modest dress, traditional presentation and simple hairstyles are closely tied to her moral virtue. The film aligns goodness with sartorial conservatism. "Representation is the production of meaning through language" (Hall 16). In the movie, the heroine is repeatedly shown in traditional dress and in minimal adornment. The camera frequently frames her in prayer, acts of service and household chores. "This repetition of the concept through different forms is precious...it allows to decipher the myth" (Barthes 119). These visual signs establish her as morally trustworthy, humble and pure. Throughout the narrative, simplicity in attire and behaviour is depicted as visible marker of goodness. "Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things" (Hall 15). Balamani's devotion to her God becomes the central factor driving the narrative and her appearance remains consistent in spite of emotional struggles. Her sartorial simplicity is a visual marker that proves her inner virtue. And towards the climax, the film

rewards her faith and purity. Virtue is represented as residing in devotional simplicity and traditional femininity. Meaning is produced through representation rather than existing naturally within objects or images (Hall 16-17).

“Myth is a type of speech” (Barthes 107) In *Nandanam*, modest dress becomes a speech communicating virtue and purity. Here the sartorial choices become moral statements. “Speech of this kind is a message...It can consist of modes of writing or representations; not only written discourse but also photography, cinema...all these can serve as support to mythical speech”(Barthes 108).

The film transforms cultural ideas of ideal womanhood as natural and universal. “Mythical speech is made ...for communication...picture, to be sure, are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke” (Barthes 108) Traditional femininity is presented as a self-evident virtue. The film states that goodness, purity and femininity coexist together and the audience is left without a choice than to accept this myth without questioning its cultural construction. “Myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification”(Barthes 142). In the film, traditional femininity is presented as naturally moral. These movies present modest femininity as natural virtues rather than cultural expectations. Thereby Traditional femininity is naturalized.

Similarly, in *Aniyathipravu*, the heroine’s clothing functions as a visual marker of good character. Mini’s styling reinforces ideals of innocence, family honour and romantic purity. Here traditional femininity communicates moral respectability and she is positioned within community structures that define appropriate womanhood. Her elopement and rebellion are motivated by love and is soon reabsorbed into the social order. The temporary act of resistance strengthens the film’s ideology in traditional femininity. Reading through the frameworks of Hall and Barthes, the film naturalizes the myth that ideal woman remains connected to family, respectability and familial happiness and social harmony. “The naturalization of the concept” is identified as the “essential function of the myth” (Barthes 130).

Another very pertinent example can be seen in *Achuvinte Amma*, where maternal appearance communicates sacrifice. Vanaja is represented in simple sarees and domestic and work spaces as a tailor and LIC agent. Her clothing is modest emphasizing care and motherhood. The camera reinforces her as a nurturing and responsible character who lives for her daughter. During the emotional turmoil towards the climax, her appearance remains unchanged. In the film, Virtue is associated with consistency and her simple sartorial presentation becomes a marker of maternal sacrifice. The film validates her caring nature and celebrates maternal sacrifice as morally significant. “The very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature...in the eyes of the myth- consumer, the intention... it is immediately frozen into something natural, it is not read as a motive, but as a reason”(Barthes 128).

The expectation that women should be self-sacrificing care providers is culturally and historically produced and the film reinforces this myth as natural (Barthes 142). This film naturalizes maternal sacrifice than questions it. “Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us”(Barthes 115).The sartorial signs act as cultural messages in the movies of this era. The good woman of 1990s Malayalam cinema is a cultural construction. The aforesaid movies stand as perfect examples to show clothes like sarees, churidars, domestic attire communicate ideology regarding modesty. “As a total of linguistic signs, the meaning of the myth has its own value...it postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions” (Barthes 116).

The movies emphasize the ideals of femininity that are produced and circulated since ages which are not innate and establish these as natural truths ,as myths to be imbibed and followed “it is determined, it is at once historical and intentional; it is the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered”(Barthes 117).So Myth is a type of speech chosen by history and These films obscure the social and cultural processes through which these expectations are produced and such representations transform historically constructed gender roles into natural truths. “The myth consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system” (Barthes 130).

In these films, the heroes wear clothing that reflect their social position, profession or age but their moral worth is not determined by their appearance. Sudhi in *Aniyathipravu* is seen as a virtuous hero because of his sincerity to love than because of what he wears. Similarly, Manu in *Nandanam* is judged primarily through his actions and relationships and not through his sartorial choices. Advocate Immanuel John (Ijo’s) ethical value is measured through his supportive nature and respectful behavior not through his costumes in *Achuvinte Amma*. Male characters experience sartorial fluidity, reflecting mobility and engagement with the external world. This contrast highlights how morality is visually fixed for women while remaining narratively constructed for men.

“Myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification” (Barthes 142) here in these films traditional femininity is presented as naturally moral. These movies present modest femininity as natural virtues rather than cultural expectations. The political and historical causes behind the idea become invisible. And myth removes these questions and causes and presents them as common sense. “ A myth is at the same time imperfectible and unquestionable” (Barthes 130). Traditional femininity is naturalized so the films in this era participate in the depoliticized speech.

Devasuram, *Sallapam*, *Aaram Thampuran*, *Chandranudhikunna Dikhil* and *Balettan* are other comparable films that serve as further examples of reinforcement of moral stasis by reaffirming

established patriarchal and social norms. Here, costume and embodied performances promote dominant moral ideologies.

Negotiation Era: Dual Performance and Aesthetic Flexibility

The transition into the 2010s marks a significant shift in Malayalam cinema, often associated with the emergence of new generation filmmaking. This phase reflects broader socio-cultural transformations, including globalization, urbanization, and increased mobility. Stories increasingly move beyond the confines of the traditional household, exploring individual aspiration, travel, and self-discovery. However, this narrative expansion produces a more complex space in which traditional expectations coexist with emerging forms of modernity. Female characters, in particular, are positioned at the intersection of these forces, required to navigate between cultural continuity and individual expression. Within this context, costume becomes a site of negotiation rather than stability. Clothing begins to reflect multiple identities, shifting across spaces such as home, workplace, and public life. Yet, this flexibility remains conditional, as female appearance continues to be closely monitored and evaluated.

It is within this framework of aesthetic negotiation that films of this period articulate the tensions between tradition and transformation. Films such as *Ustad Hotel* and *Charlie* represent a transitional phase in which the sartorial moral compass becomes less rigid but remains structurally intact. In this phase, femininity is no longer fixed but is instead negotiated across shifting social contexts, producing a form of conditional visibility.

In *Ustad Hotel*, this negotiation is most clearly articulated through Shahana's dual sartorial identity. Within the domestic space, her modest attire often accompanied by restrained posture and limited speech aligns her with expectations of cultural propriety. However, outside this space, her adoption of Western clothing coincides with a marked shift in voice, mobility, and expressiveness. This contrast reveals that morality is not intrinsic but contextually produced. This transformation is not emancipatory but conditional. Shahana must continually recalibrate her appearance depending on spatial and social expectations, suggesting that femininity operates within a framework of regulated flexibility rather than genuine freedom. In contrast, the male protagonist Faizi's attire remains largely functional, tied to profession and personal growth, and does not bear the burden of moral evaluation.

Shahana's appearance communicates a new message about womanhood (Barthes 113-115). Unlike the heroines of the yester years she is not defined by just domestic roles or romantic aspirations. Her sartorial choices signal mobility and independence yet the film does not depict her as disconnected from family and cultural values. Here the myth shifts to mean good woman can be modern, educated and independent, the myth is modified to accommodate changing social realities. Here in this era

independence and respectability coexist. The film broadens the boundaries of acceptable femininity without completely rejecting traditional ideals. “the relation between things, concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning in language...which is what we call representation” (Hall 19). These repeated representations instill in the audience the notion that acceptable femininity accommodates daringness and independence.

A similar dynamic is evident in *Charlie*, where Tessa’s bohemian aesthetic appears to signal autonomy and mobility. The visual freedom, her clothing, accessories, and overall styling require sustained aesthetic labour to communicate individuality in a way that remains legible to the audience. The supposed spontaneity of her appearance is, in fact, a carefully constructed visual identity. Her clothing is practical and expressive of individuality as an explorer but the film does not portray her as morally questionable. But she is also not defined by domestic roles assigned to earlier heroines. Charlie’s own dishevelled and unstructured appearance is accepted without the need for aesthetic justification. His natural look carries no moral implications, reinforcing the asymmetry between male sartorial freedom and female aesthetic accountability. Faizi’s contemporary clothing in *Ustad Hotel* signifies his youthful nature. Here, their sartorial choices are not taken as markers of morality. They are rarely labeled as good or bad based on their attires. Unlike the female characters whose dressing carries moral significance, male worth is evaluated through their actions and decisions.

Thus, within the negotiation phase, the sartorial moral compass becomes more complex, requiring women to perform multiple versions of acceptable femininity across contexts. Femininity here emerges as a dual performance, continually adjusted yet persistently regulated. The film too broadens acceptable femininity without entirely rejecting cultural ideas of goodness. The myth here shifts from obedience and domesticity to emotionally authentic and independent. Here traditional respectability coexists with freedom and self-expression. “The reader ...sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes a natural relationship” (Barthes 130). In these films, modern clothing acquires positive meanings such as mobility and individuality. Meaning depends on the relationship between things, concepts and signs (Hall 19). Myth is a system of communication (Barthes 108-110). The myth changes from good women equated to traditional women to good women which come to mean modern but respectable women.

The following films such as *Ohm Shanthi Oshaana*, *Bangalore Days*, *How Old Are You*, *Salt and Pepper*, *Mayaanadhi* collectively demonstrate how Mollywood Cinema negotiates traditional gender norms and embodied performances that reflect the transition from reinforcement and act as a bridge towards resistance phase. Here conventional sartorial moral codes are renegotiated in accordance to the changing socio-cultural realities.

Contemporary Era: Exposure, Control and Resistance

The contemporary phase of Malayalam cinema, particularly in the post-pandemic period, marks a significant shift in narrative focus and aesthetic style. With the rapid rise of OTT platforms, filmmaking has increasingly moved away from spectacular storytelling toward intimate, character-centered narratives that foreground everyday life. This shift has enabled a closer examination of domestic spaces, interpersonal dynamics, and embodied experiences, allowing previously normalized structures of gender and power to be rendered visible. Unlike earlier phases, where cultural norms were either reinforced or subtly negotiated, contemporary cinema actively interrogates these norms. The domestic sphere now emerges as a contested space where gender roles, labour, and identity are critically examined. As a result, visual codes particularly those governing clothing, posture, and behaviour are no longer treated as natural or unquestioned, but as constructed mechanisms that regulate femininity. Within this transformed cinematic landscape, the sartorial moral compass becomes increasingly visible as a system of control rather than a neutral cultural marker.

The Great Indian Kitchen critiques systems that discipline women's bodies and presentation. The film challenges prescribed performances of wifehood and femininity. The newly married woman's life within the traditional household is shown performing endless household chores. The camera repeatedly focuses on the mundane activities presented as routine expectations imposed upon women. Her attire is ordinary domestic attire. Here the clothing no longer signifies fulfillment or virtue but becomes associated with exhaustion and unequal labour. The film challenges the myth of the idealized dutiful wife and exposes the burden hidden behind. The film rewards self respect and autonomy not patience and sacrifice. The film exposes traditional femininity as a historical construction (Barthes 142). Unlike earlier films that treated household service as natural expressions of female virtue. *The Great Indian Kitchen* reveal the inequality and labour. The film repoliticises domestic labour by showing what appears natural is actually constructed culturally (Barthes 142).

In *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, the protagonist's transformation into the "ideal" wife is marked through sartorial conformity-modest clothing, neatly arranged appearance, and restrained bodily conduct. This is particularly evident in domestic settings such as the dining table, where clothing, posture, and silence converge to produce a visual image of compliance. Here, femininity is not simply performed but visually disciplined, with every gesture reinforcing social expectations. However, the film destabilizes this alignment by juxtaposing visual compliance with underlying violence and control. The protagonist's adherence to sartorial norms does not grant her safety or respect instead, it exposes the hollowness of the moral framework that equates appearance with virtue. The sartorial moral compass thus masks structural inequalities rather than resolving them.

As the marriage deteriorates Jaya's bodily presence changes. The transformation is about posture, movement and confidence not about fashionable clothing. Her body ceases to be site of obedience when she learns self-defense. The climax completely reverses power structures. The viewers celebrate Jaya's refusal to be submissive. The narrative rewards self-respect and resistance to abuse. Barthes argument that myth is depoliticized speech (Barthes 142-143) is significant in this context. In the third phase, the cultural expectation that females should be obedient is challenged. The movie shows that these expectations are political than natural. The myth is questioned and the film constructs a new myth that is centred on agency

The turning point in this phase lies in the emergence of resistance not always through immediate sartorial transformation, but through a disruption of embodied behaviour. In *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, the protagonist's resistance begins within the same visual framework that once constrained her, demonstrating that the system of regulation can be challenged from within. Over time, this resistance destabilizes the assumed coherence between appearance and morality, breaking the link between looking right and being good. Representation connects meaning and language to culture (Hall 15). These films reconstruct cultural meanings attached to femininity. Thus, in the contemporary era, costume shifts from being a stable marker of virtue to a site of tension and critique, where compliance and resistance coexist. The sartorial moral compass is no longer invisible it becomes an object of interrogation.

In these films, the male characters wear ordinary clothing and the films examine their behavior not their appearances. The husbands' patriarchal notions are communicated through actions and behaviors not through costumes while women's clothing mostly becomes a site for moral evaluation. This contrast highlights the gendered nature of cinematic representation. Myth is depoliticized speech, one must naturally understand political in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" (Barthes142). These films expose natural gender roles as cultural constructions. These movies expose what earlier films treated as natural and unproblematic gender roles. "Myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society"(Barthes 142). Traditional myths are exposed and challenged in these contemporary movies. "The political insignificance of the myth comes from its situation. Myth, as we know, is a value: it is enough to modify its circumstances, the general(and precarious)system in which it occurs, in order to regulate its scope with greater accuracy" (Barthes144).These films bring politics and power back to discussion and reveals that these roles are socially constructed and thereby challenge the existing myth. Such films challenge the process by exposing the power relations underlying these assumptions and repoliticizes femininity. "Myth can always, as a last resort, signify

the resistance which is brought to bear against it... and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology” (Barthes 134).

Films like *Aattam*, *Ullozhuku*, *Neru*, *Kaathal -The Core* function as representative texts of resistance, as established patriarchal structures and sartorial moral codes are questioned through embodied performance and transformed into sites of agency and self expression. These films challenge the behavioural and sartorial codes historically connected to social acceptance, gender and beauty.

Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that costume serves as an important representational tool through which ideas of morality and femininity are constructed and communicated to the society. The study shows that clothing does not possess fixed meanings in itself rather produced through cultural codes and cinematic representations. For establishing or reversing an ideology, the mode of signification and its representation is significant. “There is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, and disappear completely” (Barthes119). This accounts why same garments have different meaning in different films. The saree in *Achuvinte Amma* that signified maternal virtue becomes a sign of gendered labour in *The Great Indian Kitchen*.

Earlier narratives moralized women through appearance, recent films relocated virtue in resistance, agency and self-respect. It separates appearances from behavioural expectations. Hence the sartorial moral undergoes a redefinition. Thus, the sartorial moral compass is not a static feature of cinematic representation but an evolving mechanism of visual regulation one that adapts to changing narrative forms while maintaining a consistent gendered asymmetry. Its persistence underscores the need to critically examine how visual culture continues to shape and constrain the representation of femininity. The evolution of women’s sartorial representation in Malayalam cinema is not a movement from moralization to freedom but from one regime of moralization to another. Sartorial meaning remains embedded in cinematic representation across all the three phases even though the values being moralized undergo transformation. Hence sartorial moral compass has not vanished instead it changes form. These female protagonists illustrate how the cultural myth linking dress and morality evolves from affirmation then transition to questioning and to resistance. The moral meanings attached to women’s clothing continue to exist though it reflects changing social values. Thus, the study concludes that the representation of women in Malayalam cinema has evolved from reinforcing traditional ideals to negotiating and challenging them and Malayalam cinema continues to negotiate the relationship between costume and morality reflecting the changes in understanding womanhood.

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