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**(Un)Making the Domestic Heroine: Reading Women's
Cinema in Malayalam**

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Abstract: This paper analyses the figure of domestic women by problematizing the boundary between public and private spaces in understanding the category of desire. Using domestic women as a point of contention, this paper explores how women's cinema complicates rigid divisions between domestic and public spaces in shaping the becoming of the female subject in Kerala. Emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s, women's cinema refers to a set of films that drew inspiration from the literary tradition of *Painkili sahithyam* (Pulp fiction). Considered to address women as the target audience, women's cinema is marked as an inferior aesthetic trend in the dominant historiography of Malayalam cinema, despite its immense popularity. Attempting an analysis of the film *Sthanarthi Saramma* (Saramma, the Candidate) (K. S. Sethumadhavan 1966, I argue that women's cinema contains layered histories since it connects two integral aspects of the Malayalee public sphere - the democratisation of reading and popular cinema, while bringing the question of women's experiences, space, and aspirations back to/ within the institution of family. The film offers a distinct scenario where the realm of the domestic (or the private) suddenly gets interrupted by the state, here through electoral politics, redefining the existing relationships between people and spaces. Moving away from the dominant notions of 'oppression' and 'victimhood', this study focuses on the genre's investment in women's desires, mobility, and experiences. Women's cinema complicates how Malayalee women are imagined within the developmental paradigm, where the markers of the 'domestic woman' remain intact even when she transitions into the role of the 'working woman'. These films place home as a contesting space for gendered subjectivities.

Keywords: *Women's Cinema, Malayalam Cinema, Gender, Domesticity, Subjectivity*

Emergence of Women's Cinema

Emerged in the late 1950s and 1960s, women's cinema refers to a set of films that drew inspiration from the stories and themes of the literary tradition of *Painkili sahithyam* (Pulp fiction). Published mostly as *thudar/ neenda kadha* (serialised fiction/ long story) in the low-priced weeklies and fortnightlies, *painkili* novels are known for telling familiar plots structured in a prolonged, convoluted, but exciting episode. There were several film adaptations of these extremely popular novels, mostly written by writers like Muttathu Varkey, E. J. Kanam, Mathew Mattom, Batten Bose, Vallachira Madhavan, Ettumanoor Sivakumar, Mallika Yunis, M.D. Rathnamma, Kamala Govind, P. V. Thampi, Kottayam Pushpanath and Sudhakar Mangalodayam. The name *Painkili sahithyam* is derived from the renowned novel *Paadatha Painkili* (*The Beautiful Muted Bird*), published in May 1955, written by Muttathu Varkey. The novel later got adapted into a film in 1957 with the same title starring Prem Nazir and Miss Kumari. Translated as 'beautiful bird', the word *Painkili* becomes synonymous with anything that is non-serious, trivial, excessively sentimental and mostly denotes "allegedly 'low brow' or 'superfluous' literary tastes and artefacts" (Bay 98). Believed to be a genre catering to women as a separate audience group, the *painkili* novels "enthralled their readers with intimate stories about extra-marital affairs, adultery, romance, inter-caste/religion marriages, and a range of other sexual "transgressions" (Arafath 144). As a style of writing that is immensely *janapriyam* (popular), *painkili* writings are marked in the dominant historiography in oppositional terms, categorised as 'non-ideal', compared to the *Janakeeya* (people's interest) literature of the Progressive writers and assumed to be of 'low quality'.

A clear hierarchy is established through a conscious process of canon-making between *painkili* novels and progressive literature, directly shaping how the cinematic genres of women's cinema and social realism have been understood in Kerala. Within this hierarchy, *painkili* cinema is often regarded as an inferior aesthetic project. Earlier, realism was the only aesthetic form considered worthy of serious engagement until scholars like Peter Brook started studying melodrama. Madhava Prasad notes that the 'feminisation' of mass culture has been central to cultural theory in the modern West. "Thus, the gendered polarisation of culture into a masculine sphere of autonomous modernist works of art, and a feminine sphere of heteronomous and formally diffuse mass culture, has led to an affirmation of melodrama as a feminine form and its pleasures as the denigrated but real and valued pleasures of female audiences" (*Ideology* 56).

The practice and culture of reading are undoubtedly fundamental to the everyday life of people in Kerala. This everyday reading culture of Kerala has greatly contributed to the tremendous success of the genre of women's cinema since it is seen as an extension of the already popular *painkili* literature

serialised/ published through various periodicals and weeklies. We cannot help seeing a close-knit bond between the networks of stardom (or cinema in general) and the then-thriving print culture in Kerala. One of the most common and exceptional features of public life in Kerala is its widespread consumption of magazines and newspapers, which can be considered a crucial mode through which cinema circulated. In Kerala, education has always been the signpost for modernity mainly because of missionary interventions, and later it was used even in the mission to eradicate poverty. This emphasis on educating people can be seen as one of the core formulations of the Left interventions, which evidently got reflected in the political and cultural movements. In India, Kerala secures the largest per capita consumption of newspapers, magazines, and books (Parayil 943). As the “most committed consumer of the newspaper” (Jeffrey 30), Kerala is described as “India’s most newspaper-hungry state” (86).

The female characters in women's cinema mostly deal with two distinct forms of representation: women who are at home as wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, etc., and working women, who often belong to middle-class households and work as doctors, teachers, stenographers, etc. Women's cinema complicates the ways Malayalee women are imagined within the developmental paradigm, in which the markers of the ‘domestic woman’ remain intact even as she transitions into the role of the ‘working woman’. These films place home as a contested space for gendered subjectivities. By closely analysing the film *Sthanarthi Saramma* (Saramma, the Candidate), this study reads the ways in which women's cinema negotiated the dyad of public and private. The aim here is to take this representation as a point of departure for understanding the varied onscreen explorations of domestic heroine characters, and, in turn, to consider how these representations might contribute to mapping a feminist film history.

Tracing the Ideal Domestic Heroine

The image of the ‘free woman’ in Malayali society comes with the configuration of new forms of patriarchy. Feminist historians and social scientists note that women's access to resources is organised around the “demands for domesticity” and “there seems to be a generalised social commitment to female domesticity in Kerala” (Kodoth and Eapen 3285). The figure of the domestic woman and the controlling of female sexuality are pivotal problematics in the history of gender and sexuality in Kerala. Within the construct of the domestic heroine, my analysis takes into consideration two major kinds of heroine images: i) the suffering/dutiful (working) woman and ii) the ‘deviating’ (from the dominant representations, mostly the suffering/ tragic and enduring ones) domestic heroines who exercise their (sexual) agency and autonomy. “Feminism, in particular, given melodrama's long relegation as a women's cultural domain, claims a stake in the critical reappropriation of the form and

introduces the problem of the ‘woman's film’ which, it has been assumed, represents a sub-set of melodrama...It refers not only to a type of aesthetic practice but also to a way of viewing the world (Gledhill 01).

Released in 1966, *Sthanarthi Saramma*, directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan, is one of the earliest political satires in Indian cinema. Produced by T. E. Vasudevan for the banner Jayamaruthi Productions, the film is an adaptation of Muttathu Varkey's famous novel *Panchayathu Vilakku* (Panchayat Lamp), published in 1965. The film *Sthanarthi Saramma* tells the love story of Saramma (played by Sheela) and Johnny (played by Prem Nazir) which is set against the backdrop of a panchayat election. When the film opens, the viewers are introduced to the upper-caste Christian household of Johnny (also called Johnny Kunju) on a Sunday morning when his mother Mariyamma (played by Pankajavalli) and his sister are getting ready for the church visit. A group of local leaders comes to his house to persuade Johnny Kunju to be a candidate in the upcoming panchayat election for the position of president in the seventh ward since he is quite popular among the people. Initially, Johnny's father, Chandi Mappila, refused the proposal, thinking that he would have to spend a lot of money and do a lot of work for the campaign. However, he later gets convinced, and Johnny decides to run in the election. Johnny's supporters have no second thoughts about his win in the election because there are no potential opponents to pose any challenge. The story takes an unexpected turn when Saramma, Johnny's lover, decides to run in the election, a move marked as the epicentre of the crisis in the film, leading to several tensions. Saramma's decision to run against her lover in the election formulates the narrative conflict in the film, hence the title of the film, *Sthanarthi Saramma* (Saramma the Candidate). Working as a teacher, Saramma's character is shown as a polite, obedient woman who is not interested in getting involved in the affairs of the ‘outer world’ like electoral politics. Despite being a teacher, she also provides music lessons for children in the neighbourhood in her spare time. Saramma's father, Mathayi (played by Nellikodu Bhaskaran), is a converted Christian, and people in the village call him Velan Mathayi (denoting his lower-caste Hindu background). Knowing about Saramma's and Johnny's relationship, Mathayi went to Chandi Mappila's house to discuss the marriage proposal. Mariyamma strongly rejects the proposal and humiliates Mathayi and Saramma because they belong to a lower caste. When Mathayi asks “After converting to this religion, aren't we also Christians like you?” (35:25-35:28), Mariyamma says: “How come? Conversion to a religion does not bring you dignity. We belong to a family founded by the Thomasleeha. I will not let *velathi* Saramma pollute my kitchen” (35:29-35:37).

Extremely mortified by this incident, Mathayi decides to make his daughter Saramma a candidate for the coming election. He believes winning the election will bring dignity to his family (community). He says, “They [the upper castes] are not accepting us as Christians. We have no place in

the community either. This is to try and see whether we will get a place in this village” (36:38-36:47). Even though Saramma, at first, refuses to compete against her lover Johnny, her father forces her to do it. They take help from Thonnyadan Thomachan (G. K. Pillai), who has been ruling the panchayat for a long time. Because he has continuously misused his position, the villagers have turned against him, and he has decided not to run for this election. He takes advantage of the situation and plans to continue to be in power using Saramma. As the story progresses, she wins the election with the help of Thomachan. Later, he tries to make sexual advances to Saramma, and seeing this, Mathayi murders Thomachan in a fight. The police arrest Johnny. They believe that he is seeking revenge for his failure in the election by murdering Thomachan. Later, Mathayi surrenders to the police and Jonny gets released. The film ends with a scene where Jonny’s mother accepts Saramma as her daughter-in-law and promises Mathayi that she will take care of her as her daughter from then on.

The film offers a distinct scenario where the realm of the domestic (or the private) suddenly gets interrupted by the state, here through electoral politics, redefining the existing relationships between people and spaces. A close look at the film text will show that the narrative is mainly carried forward by the two female characters deciding whether to get involved in the election or not. Saramma and Mariyamma, two women from different caste/class backgrounds, emerge here as the key characters of the story, representing the ‘ideal Kerala model woman’ and a matriarch figure, respectively. Centered around two different households, the story sets the hierarchy between the two right from the beginning of the film. In Johnny’s house, every decision has to be approved by Mariamma, who is presented as a dominating, powerful woman in the family. Her husband worries about his image among the villagers as a henpecked husband because of his inability to make decisions alone. I will quote an interesting conversation between the local leaders, Mariyamma and Chandi Mappila here:

Local leader: “We must form a *mahila sankhadana* (an organisation for women). Otherwise, we will lose quite a lot of votes from female voters because the opposite candidate is a woman” (45:33-45:37).

Anthoni: “Correct, we can start one under the leadership of Mariyamma” (45:38-45:43)

Mariyamma: “No, no, make him (pointing to her husband) the leader” (45:43-45:46)

(All laughing)

Gopala Pilla: “But isn’t Chandi Mappila a man?” (45:46-45:48)

Chandi Mappila: “Even if I am (a man), she thinks I am a woman” (45:48-45:51)

This scene, in its attempt to evoke comic effect, directly comments on the characterisation of both Mariyamma and Chandi Mappila, where the husband figure is seen as a 'submissive' one incapable of asserting his masculinity both inside and outside of his home. This inversion of the commonly accepted hierarchy in marital life is a familiar narrative trope in Malayalam films either to show the arrogant/ villainous female characters or to create comic situations. It is evident that because of this reversal, the family is seen as 'different' from Saramma's, where her father is the head of the family. Saramma's household is completely controlled by her father, whose decisions are obeyed by her without fail. In Saramma's case, she is shown as an example of an ideal woman who, at the end of the film, successfully conquers everyone's hearts with her 'good qualities'. Placed opposite to each other, these two female characters form a crisis in the film that leads to Saramma's participation in the election as a candidate. On one level, the heroine in this film caters to the 'good woman' image who does not intentionally challenge any patriarchal notions and on the other hand, she gets involved in something like electoral politics because of her father and completely shifts the narrative by bringing in the questions of women's representation and decision-making process. One of the interesting aspects of Saramma's characterisation is that she does not willingly participate in 'public' affairs outside the home and is presented as helpless in front of her father's decision. This gives an intriguing scenario where the heroine has no choice but to follow her father's wish, which seems to be an act of patriarchal dominance. However, eventually, it opens up new perspectives to think about how women negotiate domesticity and the dyad of public and private.



Figure 1. Screengrab from *Sthanarthi Saramma*. Saramma (Sheela) in an election campaign rally with (women) supporters.

In the scene where all the other women are shouting slogans during a campaign march, Saramma walks silently in the middle, clad in a white sari (Figure 1). It is evident from the scene's composition that Sheela's character is presented as completely different from the rest of the women. She is placed between the public and the domestic and almost seems to be a 'misfit' in the scene. It can be observed that all the other women workers in the party are shouting slogans and actively participating in the campaign. Saramma walks as if it is not a place meant to be hers, a place that can sabotage her private life and personal relations. The character of Saramma is an educated, working woman who does not intend to disturb the family's patriarchal order. The film puts her in a situation that directly challenges the nature of Saramma. This crisis points to i) the much-discussed question of women's status in Kerala society, especially their participation in the public sphere and ii) how her engagement in the public sphere destabilises the realm of the private which is presented through her helplessness and suffering. Another interesting factor that gives a cue to Saramma's mediation of the question of public and private is her choice of dressing in this film. She uses sarees outside of the home, especially when she goes to work and wears only *chattayum mundum*, the traditional Christian

dress at home. This switching of traditional and modern styles of dressing in and outside the home may signal the carrying of womanliness as the core quality of the character. It shows how the heroine preserves herself from modernisation being an ideal domestic woman while making her image admirable because of her education and job. Even though *Sthanarthi Saramma* places the discourse of caste at the centre of the narrative, I argue that the character of Saramma achieves a certain level of distance from engaging with any of its elaborations. As a Dalit Christian, Saramma's character is presented as aspirational rather than victimised. Sheela's performance enhances the experiences of the character's suffering with her stylised acting and expressive, nuanced dialogue delivery. The film's climactic sequence shows Saramma's entry into the upper-caste household of Johnny. This complicates the notion of a 'candidate' as suggested in the film's title, wherein Saramma, embodying traits of femininity, modesty, and submissiveness, is deemed a more suitable 'candidate' for the role of a domestic woman but is considered unsuitable for politics.

Conclusion

The image of the suffering domestic heroine, who is caught up between tradition and modernity, is one of the recurring themes of women's cinema. The intersection of caste and gender is concealed in the melodramatic plot that emphasises the suffering of the heroine. On the one hand, this caters to the "picture of a 'pure' and dutiful woman, whose total identity is structured by a hierarchical, authoritarian patriarchal culture" (Gandhy and Thomas 113). One cannot deny that this opens up a possibility to indulge in the world-making process of otherwise muted subjectivities. The viewers get to sympathise with the state of the heroine, often presented as helpless despite being an educated, employed woman and the misery she endures in her personal life is intensified because of her good intentions and nature. It is important to note that these family melodramas generate "a field of narrative force that scatters families and individuals only to bring them back together again in a differently cadenced public format" (Vasudevan 48). The crisis in the personal relationships in *Sthanarthi Saramma* occurs through an intermingling of the institution of family, caste, and the authority of the state (the election and Malathy's job as civil servant) since it "place the home...a zone of primary affective attachment, at the critical intersection of the narrative relationship between community, public life, and political structures" (Vasudevan 58). Looking into these representations of female subjectivities as a potential field of investigation enables us to see feminist histories beyond the paradigms set by mainstream historiography. Tracing the inextricable connection between the literary tradition and cinema during the 1960s and 1970s by mapping the cultural circuits and nonlinear trajectories of (women's) cinema in Kerala will unravel new ways of thinking about gender discourses in the region.

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