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Gender and Identity of Sound in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract: Sound in cinema is not merely a sensory experience; it is a complex signifying system that communicates identity, emotion, and ideology. This paper approaches sound not as a secondary or supporting element, but as a central mode of meaning-making in Malayalam cinema. It focuses on how sound functions ideologically: how it establishes character identities, reinforces or subverts gender norms, marks caste and religious boundaries. The analysis begins with the premise that sound in film is a semiotic system, influenced by cultural codes, technological mediation, and audience expectations.

The study explores how Malayalam cinema constructed and conceived sound in relationship with images. The study uses the framework of the concepts of visual contract Chion (1994)- the contract between the image on the screen and the sound that embody the image. By analysing the films, the study argues that, earlier Malayalam cinema denied the chance for female artists to voice for their characters by denying a chance to dub for their own performances.

Keywords: *Sound in Cinema, Aural Identity, Inter-Aurality, Gendered Sound, Malayalam Cinema*

Introduction

In a May 1929 interview with Gladys Hall for *Motion Picture Magazine*, Charlie Chaplin expressed profound reservations about the advent of sound in cinema. He viewed the introduction of spoken dialogue as a threat to the essence of filmmaking, particularly to the pantomimic mode of acting that relied on gesture and movement to convey meaning. Chaplin valued the silence of early cinema, arguing that it preserved its distinctive artistry and fostered a particular mode of spectatorship that had contributed to the elevation of actors to stardom and the development of devoted fan cultures. Notably, however, his criticism was directed primarily at spoken dialogue rather than at musical accompaniment, which he considered compatible with, and even capable of enhancing, silent cinema (Hall 29). Nearly a decade after the transition to synchronized sound had begun, Chaplin revisited the relationship between silence and sound in *Modern Times* (1936), which incorporates limited synchronized speech while retaining an essentially silent-film aesthetic. His full engagement with spoken dialogue came with *The Great Dictator* (1940), marking a significant departure from his earlier resistance to the talkies.

The emergence of synchronized sound also transformed Indian cinema by enabling films to incorporate spoken language as a central component of cinematic expression. *Alam Ara*, directed by Ardeshir Irani and released in 1931, is widely recognized as the first Indian talkie. Malayalam cinema entered the era of sound with *Balan* (1938), directed by S. Nottani, generally regarded as the first Malayalam talkie. The transition to sound consequently made possible the development of what may be understood as language-based regional cinemas, in which spoken language, dialect, accent, song, and culturally specific soundscapes became integral to cinematic identity. Contrary to the anxieties expressed by Chaplin, the incorporation of sound did not simply diminish the visual possibilities of cinema; it generated another form of cinematic expression by transforming the medium into an audiovisual art. Roy M. Prendergast's *Film Music: A Neglected Art: A Critical Study of Music in Films* represents an early significant attempt to approach film music as an object of systematic scholarly inquiry (David 12). Subsequent scholars increasingly treated sound as a culturally, aesthetically, technologically, and politically significant dimension of cinema rather than as a merely supplementary component.

Until relatively recently, scholarship on sound in Indian cinema was heavily concentrated on the musical dimensions of film, particularly songs, playback singing, and film music. More recent scholarship, however, has broadened the field by examining sound as a complex cultural and social phenomenon. Budhaditya Chattopadhyay's *Sound in Indian Film and Audiovisual Media* and the edited volume *Indian Sound Cultures, Indian Sound Citizenship*, edited by Praseeda Gopinath, Monika Mehta, et al., represent important developments in this direction. Pavitra

Sundar's *Listening with a Feminist Ear: Soundwork in Bombay Cinema* (2023) further expands this body of scholarship by bringing feminist theory and sound studies into sustained dialogue with Indian cinema and by providing a more conceptually developed framework for understanding listening, soundwork, and cinematic representation.

A particularly significant contribution of Sundar's work is her concept of interaurality, which describes the ways in which sonic experiences beyond an individual film or genre shape how audiences hear, interpret, and respond to cinematic sound. Her framework challenges the assumption that a film's soundtrack should be examined exclusively in relation to its accompanying images. Instead, listeners bring an extensive repertoire of previous sonic experiences to any encounter with a film. This repertoire may include radio broadcasts, other films, music in different languages and genres, devotional practices, regional soundscapes, popular music, and everyday auditory experiences. Consequently, the meaning of a cinematic sound cannot be understood solely through its immediate presence within a particular film. It is also shaped by the listener's accumulated sonic memory and cultural experience. Listening, therefore, becomes a social and historically situated practice rather than a purely sensory or perceptual process.

Sound in cinema consequently transcends mere sensory input; it functions as a complex signifying system through which identity, emotion, social relations, and ideology are constructed and communicated. Malayalam cinema, deeply embedded in Kerala's linguistic, regional, religious, and cultural diversity, offers particularly fertile ground for such sonic analysis. Its development—from the relatively restrained soundscapes of early cinema to the complex, digitally mediated, and technologically elaborate sound design of contemporary films—reflects not only technological transformation but also changing cultural sensibilities and modes of spectatorship. Yet, while the visual semiotics of Malayalam cinema have received considerable scholarly attention, its auditory dimensions—particularly gendered sound practices, aural identities, religious sonics, and sonic markers of social hierarchy—remain comparatively underexplored.

Against this background, the present study examines how presumptions and meanings associated with sound are produced through interaurality and the extent to which these pre-existing sonic associations determine, define, and shape perceptions of sound in Malayalam cinema. The study pays particular attention to the ways in which audiences interpret recurring sonic conventions and connect them with gender, caste, religion, social identity, emotional states, and narrative roles. To explore these processes of interpretation, the study also considers discussions and responses on social media platforms, particularly YouTube and Instagram. Such audience

responses provide insight into how viewers articulate their perceptions of cinematic sound and how accumulated sonic experiences influence the meanings they attribute to particular voices, musical motifs, sound effects, and broader soundscapes.

Sound as Social Formation

Pavithra Sunder's *Listening with a Feminist Ear* makes a significant contribution to understanding sound as a social formation. Sunder argues that sound is not merely an auditory phenomenon but a constitutive element of social structures and relations. Far beyond functioning as an object of aesthetic pleasure or perceptual experience, sound mediates interpersonal interactions, embodied experiences, and performative practices. She further demonstrates that cinematic sound is shaped by the conditions of production, technological apparatuses, and historically established conventions of listening. Sunder's analysis consequently illuminates how sound emerges through the interaction of filmmakers, recording technologies, performers, and audiences, making listening itself a culturally and socially situated practice.

Building on this perspective, this paper examines sound in Malayalam cinema as an integral component of narrative signification rather than as a supplementary element of filmmaking. It investigates how sound contributes to the construction of character identities, particularly those of male and female protagonists, either reinforcing or challenging established gender norms. Sound also participates in the representation of social affiliations, including caste and religion, while generating and intensifying affective states such as fear, grief, desire, spirituality, and anxiety. Grounded in the premise that cinematic sound operates as a culturally inflected semiotic system, this study considers how production technologies, representational conventions, and audience expectations collectively shape the meanings attached to sound. It therefore foregrounds the role of sound not simply as accompaniment to the image but as an active agent in the production of meaning within Malayalam cinema.

Michel Chion's concept of *audio-vision* (1994) provides a foundational framework for analysing the reciprocal relationship between sound and image and, more specifically, the ways in which sound influences the spectator's perception of the visual field. Sound does not simply accompany an already meaningful image; it can modify its temporal, emotional, spatial, and narrative interpretation. Laura Mulvey's seminal 1975 analysis of visual pleasure and narrative cinema can similarly be extended, with appropriate qualification, to questions of auditory representation. Alongside examining how female characters are positioned within systems of visual spectatorship, it is important to consider how they are sonically constructed and "heard." Female voices in cinema can be shaped by prevailing gender ideologies, while choices concerning vocal timbre, pitch, accent, dubbing, musical accompaniment, and vocal placement may reproduce

culturally prescribed expectations of femininity. These choices are particularly significant when considered within film industries whose production structures have historically been shaped by gendered divisions of creative and technical labour.

Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957; English translation 1972) further contributes to an understanding of how sound can acquire meanings that extend beyond its immediate material form. Background music, vocal styles, and recurring sonic motifs can accumulate connotative associations through repetition, allowing particular sounds to signify concepts such as heroism, nationalism, spirituality, masculinity, femininity, or cultural belonging. These associations operate at the level of cultural signification: the musical sound itself may have no inherent connection to a particular ideological concept, yet repeated cinematic and cultural usage can make that connection appear natural or self-evident. Sound can therefore participate in the production of myth by transforming culturally constructed associations into seemingly obvious emotional and ideological meanings. Such semiotic excess enables cinematic sound to function as an ideological resource, while the precise meanings produced by these sounds may vary according to cultural context, individual experience, and audience interpretation.

Gendered Power, Dubbing, and Sonic Hierarchies in Malayalam Cinema

Sound is inextricably linked to gender and power dynamics in Malayalam cinema. A deep, authoritative male voice can connote dominance, agency, and narrative authority, while a soft or higher-pitched female voice may evoke delicacy, intimacy, or vulnerability. Such associations are not inherent to vocal qualities themselves but are culturally produced through gender norms and repeated representational practices. In the sociocultural context of Kerala, these conventions often intersect with established expectations concerning masculinity and femininity. Dubbing practices provide a particularly revealing example. Actors' original voices are sometimes replaced by "idealized" vocal substitutes that conform to normative expectations, especially in the representation of women. Such practices can diminish the individuality of a performer's natural timbre and replace it with a culturally sanctioned form of sonic femininity. The female voice, therefore, becomes not merely a means of dialogue but a site where gendered expectations concerning beauty, refinement, emotionality, and respectability are reproduced.

Malayalam cinema's soundscapes are equally revealing in their representation of religious and social identities. Hindu temple sequences frequently employ the resonant *chenda* and other percussion instruments; Christian narratives may incorporate violins, organ music, and choral arrangements; and Muslim representations may draw upon the *duff* and other traditional instruments. These sonic markers function beyond simple religious signification. Through their repetition, they participate in the construction of recognizable cultural identities and may also

indicate distinctions of social status, belonging, respectability, and symbolic authority. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction is useful in understanding how cultural practices acquire social value and contribute to the differentiation of groups. Within Malayalam cinema, particular sonic elements can consequently become associated with notions of purity, tradition, marginality, or social prestige, positioning characters within broader structures of cultural and symbolic power. Sound thus participates in the production of social identity rather than merely accompanying the visual representation of religious or cultural communities.

Silence, moreover, becomes a significant narrative device within Malayalam cinema. In psychological horror films such as *Bhoothakaalam* and *Bramayugam*, as well as in grief-centred dramas such as *Kumbalangi Nights* and *Ee.Ma.Yau*, the absence or withdrawal of sound can acquire the weight of unspeakable trauma, social isolation, grief, or existential dread. Silence in these films should not be understood simply as the absence of sound; rather, it operates as a charged form of cinematic expression. It can create anticipation, intensify psychological unease, foreground emotional states that remain verbally unarticulated, and draw attention to what cannot or will not be spoken. In this sense, silence possesses an affective and narrative density of its own.

The theoretical significance of such silence can be further explored through psychoanalytic theories of the uncanny and Michel Chion's concept of the *acousmêtre*, which refers to a voice whose source remains unseen or visually indeterminate. Although the *acousmêtre* concerns an unseen or disembodied voice rather than silence itself, the concept is useful for examining how the relationship between the visible and the audible can produce uncertainty and psychological tension. Silence similarly disrupts the expected relationship between image and sound by withholding auditory information from the spectator. It can therefore function as a form of charged absence, transforming what is not heard into a significant component of what is experienced. Malayalam cinema's use of silence demonstrates that sound studies must attend not only to audible voices, music, and effects but also to the expressive possibilities created by their withdrawal.

Establishment of Hero and Heroine through Sound in Malayalam Cinema

One of the most recognizable patterns in Malayalam cinema's soundscape is the gendered auditory strategy used to introduce and establish central characters. The use of sound, particularly background music (BGM), is not merely stylistic; it functions as a semiotic code that immediately signals to the audience the social role, emotional disposition, and narrative importance of a character. In many films, the hero's entry is accompanied by a dominant, rhythmic, and expansive musical theme that announces power and centrality. In contrast, the

heroine's introduction is often supported by softer, melodious, and delicate soundscapes that align her with beauty, grace, and emotional depth.

This pattern reflects patriarchal narrative structures in which men are coded as active agents of change and control, while women are frequently presented as emotional anchors or objects of visual and affective pleasure. The use of sound in these introductions thus functions as a cinematic shorthand for identity, drawing upon Kerala's cultural imagination and established gender norms to guide the audience's emotional and ideological alignment with characters.

In *Bheeshma Parvam* (2022), Mammooty's character is introduced with a commanding BGM that combines heavy percussion, orchestral grandeur, and Eastern ethnic motifs. The score, layered with tension-building rhythms and symbolic instrumentation, communicates authority, respect, and even danger before the character speaks a word. This auditory construction aligns with the archetype of the "macho patriarch," a central figure in Malayalam cinema's tradition of heroic masculinity. The sound not only marks his dominance but also encodes his historical and emotional gravitas. The viewer is prompted to anticipate reverence, fear, or admiration based on the sound profile alone.

Similarly, in *Pulimurugan* (2016), Mohanlal's entry as the titular character is dramatized through jungle beats, tribal drums, and rising crescendos that create an atmosphere of mythical power. The tempo accelerates as the character is revealed, and the music becomes an extension of his physical and symbolic prowess. The aural environment constructs heroism not through exposition but through sonic performance, producing what Michel Chion describes as a "rendered sound world," in which the character becomes inseparable from his auditory framing.

In contrast, consider the introduction of Malar in *Premam* (2015). The scene is accompanied by soft strings, ambient acoustic guitar, and a lilting flute motif, creating an ethereal and intimate mood that frames her as gentle, nurturing, and emotionally resonant. The soundscape operates affectively: it does not merely describe her character but invites the audience to develop an emotional attachment to her. In the same film, Nivin Pauly's character is frequently accompanied by mass-oriented background music that establishes his presence through energy and heroic affect. Drawing on feminist film theory, particularly Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness," this dynamic can be extended to the realm of auditory pleasure. Malar is constructed as a figure to be affectively "heard," functioning more as a sonic muse than as an agent of action. Her auditory framing encourages emotional identification and romantic attachment, whereas the male character's sonic treatment more directly emphasizes agency, movement, and narrative centrality.

A contrasting yet relevant example can be found in *Uyare* (2019), where Parvathy's character Pallavi is introduced with a restrained yet purposeful piano-led score. Although the initial musical treatment may appear to align with the conventional "soft-feminine" mode of introduction, the score gradually shifts as the narrative unfolds. As Pallavi's strength, determination, and autonomy become increasingly apparent, the BGM becomes more layered and assertive, mirroring her psychological and narrative transformation. The evolution of the soundscape therefore challenges a rigid opposition between the soft-feminine and the strong-masculine and introduces greater fluidity into the gendered construction of cinematic sound.

The consistent distinction between the sonic treatment of male and female leads can also be interpreted through affect theory, which emphasizes the body's pre-cognitive and embodied responses to sensory stimuli. Audiences may become accustomed to associating bass-heavy, loud, and rhythmically forceful BGMs with authority and dominance, while high-pitched, melodic, and slower musical patterns may become associated with vulnerability, romance, intimacy, or purity. These auditory tropes are not inherently neutral; they acquire cultural meanings through repetition and convention. In Malayalam cinema, therefore, sound can function as an affective mechanism through which established gender scripts and social roles are reproduced and normalized.

Kaja Silverman's discussion of cinematic voice in *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988) provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding this hierarchy of sonic presence. Silverman examines how cinematic sound and voice participate in the construction of gendered subjectivity and how the female voice is frequently positioned within structures that privilege masculine authority. Within this framework, the hero's voice often functions as an anchoring element of the narrative: it communicates information, establishes authority, and reinforces his position as an active subject within the story and its surrounding world. The musical treatment accompanying the hero's presence can further intensify this centrality by sonically emphasizing his power and narrative importance. By contrast, the sounds associated with the heroine may function primarily as affective or atmospheric elements, contributing to the emotional texture of a scene without necessarily granting her equivalent narrative authority. Silverman's work consequently helps illuminate how voice and music participate in constructing a gendered hierarchy of cinematic presence, in which the masculine voice is more readily associated with agency and narrative control.

These auditory patterns have also been reinforced through decades of repetition within Malayalam cinema. As particular musical structures become associated with particular kinds of characters, audiences learn to recognize and anticipate their meanings. The opening notes of a

hero's theme may generate excitement, anticipation, or a sense of grandeur even before the character appears on screen, while softer musical motifs associated with heroines may immediately evoke romance, intimacy, tenderness, or emotional vulnerability. Such responses are not produced by music in isolation but by accumulated cultural familiarity. Roland Barthes's discussion of myth is useful here: repeated cultural signs can become so familiar that their constructed meanings appear natural or self-evident. Malayalam cinema's recurring sonic conventions similarly transform historically and culturally produced associations into seemingly natural emotional responses. The repeated pairing of particular musical forms with masculine authority or feminine emotionality consequently contributes to the normalization of gendered expectations.

It is important, however, to recognize that these sound patterns are evolving. Contemporary directors and composers have increasingly begun to challenge conventional gender binaries through alternative uses of cinematic sound. Films such as *Uyare*, *22 Female Kottayam*, and *The Great Indian Kitchen* employ silence, restrained scoring, dissonance, disruptive sound, and shifts in musical intensity to complicate conventional representations of femininity and female agency. In such instances, sound does not simply reinforce established gender roles but can become a means of questioning or subverting them. Nevertheless, the dominant conventions of mainstream Malayalam cinema continue to draw upon recognizable forms of sonic coding in which masculinity is frequently associated with volume, rhythm, bass, and musical grandeur, while femininity is more often associated with melody, softness, intimacy, and emotionality. The persistence of these conventions demonstrates how deeply gender ideology can become embedded within the seemingly aesthetic and affective dimensions of cinematic sound.

Aural Identity in Malayalam Cinema: The Role of Voice Artists and Singers in Shaping Character Presence

The voice of a character, whether spoken or sung, constitutes an important part of the character's identity. This is because the voice heard on screen does not necessarily belong to the actor who performs the character. At times, the voice is supplied by a dubbing artist, while songs may be performed by a playback singer. Thus, a character in a Malayalam film can be understood as the product of the combined contributions of the actor, the dubbing artist, and the playback singer. These layers of vocal and visual performance collectively construct the character's identity. Such collaboration produces a powerful yet often invisible dynamic: the aural embodiment of characters through voice, tone, and musical interpretation.

The relationship between Sreeja Ravi and Kavya Madhavan provides an illustrative example. Sreeja Ravi's voice has become closely associated with Kavya Madhavan's screen presence. Her

voice is soft, pleasant, and emotionally expressive, complementing the visual representation of Kavya Madhavan, who is frequently portrayed as an emotionally expressive and recognisably Malayali woman. This vocal association is not simply a technical matter of synchronising sound with lip movements; it also involves cultural expectations concerning femininity, emotion, and regional identity. The dubbing voice therefore participates in constructing the character's overall identity and in producing a particular affective response in the audience. Sreeja Ravi's voice and Kavya Madhavan's on-screen presence function together, with the former becoming an important element in making the latter's characters appear familiar and authentic to viewers.

This relationship can be examined through Kaja Silverman's theorisation of the cinematic voice in *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988). Silverman argues that the voice is a site through which social and gendered meanings are constructed. Her discussion of the female voice in cinema draws attention to the ways in which women's voices can be positioned within patriarchal structures of representation and made to serve dominant narrative and visual perspectives. From this perspective, the dubbing artist occupies an important position in determining how female characters are heard and, consequently, how they are represented. The dubbing voice can negotiate the relationship between the female body visible on screen and the voice that emanates from it, making the apparent unity between image and sound seem natural. Silverman's theoretical framework is therefore particularly useful for examining the relationship between female bodies, dubbing voices, and cinematic representation in Malayalam cinema.

The relationship between Shobana and Bhagyalakshmi offers another significant example. Shobana's characters have frequently been voiced by Bhagyalakshmi, whose voice is characterised by a calm, mature, elegant, and confident quality. Through the repeated association between Bhagyalakshmi's voice and Shobana's screen performances, the voice has become closely identified with Shobana in the perception of audiences. Since viewers rarely hear Shobana's own voice in many of these performances, Bhagyalakshmi's voice can become more recognisable in association with the actress's screen identity than Shobana's own speaking voice. The dubbing voice consequently functions almost as a vocal signature, contributing significantly to the audience's perception and recognition of Shobana's characters.

Masculinised Femininity at Work: Vaani Viswanath and Aural Masculinity

Vani Vishwanath is one of the actresses who lends her own voice to her characters in films. She is known for portraying women with a strong presence on screen. Her voice is deep and distinctive, conveying a strong sense of confidence. This sets her apart from the high-pitched voices often associated with female characters in cinema. Vani Vishwanath does not want someone else to speak for her; she wants to be heard in her own voice. This is a deal because

most movies make women sound soft and quiet but Vani Vishwanath is saying no to that Vani Vishwanath is being herself and that is really something. The way she sounds is really bold in the *Rifle Club* scene. Her real voice makes her seem more in charge and aggressive when she is talking to the men. In these scenes her voice is just as powerful as her body. It shows that her voice can be very important like what Michel Chion said in 1994 that sometimes the sound is more important, than what you see and this is what he calls a "moment, where the sound is the main thing.

The difference between men and women in Malayalam cinema is particularly significant. Men are generally allowed to use their own voices in films, whereas women often have to rely on other voices. This practice is influenced by conventional expectations about how women should sound. It also limits women's agency by preventing them from fully controlling the voices of the characters they portray. The voice artist who provides the voice for a female character performs significant creative work in making the character sound convincing and emotionally authentic. The voice artist must convey different emotions, such as happiness, sadness, anger, and vulnerability, through vocal expression. However, this contribution often goes unacknowledged and receives little or no recognition. This lack of recognition is problematic because voice artists play an important role in shaping the identity and emotional expression of female characters. The marginalisation of their work reflects broader gendered structures and attitudes within Malayalam cinema.

Roma is an actress known for portraying modern women in Malayalam cinema, and her characters are often voiced by Sreeja Ravi. When female characters are portrayed as unconventional, assertive, or bold, dubbing can nevertheless make them sound smoother and more conventionally feminine. Through their vocal choices, dubbing artists contribute to constructing the perceived femininity of these characters. Thus, dubbing is not merely a technical process of providing a voice; it also plays a significant role in shaping how female characters are heard and understood on screen. In the case of Roma and other actresses, the voices provided by dubbing artists influence the way their characters are represented, thereby giving voice artists an important role in constructing the sonic identity of women in Malayalam cinema.

When we think about men in movies the way they sound is really important. Sometimes singers help bring these characters to life by singing for them. A singer like M.G. Sreekumar is very good at this. He sings for actors like Mohanlal. Helps us understand what they are feeling inside. For instance, in the movies *Chithram* and *Thenmavin Kombath* M.G. Sreekumar's voice is not just singing. It is a part of who the character is and how they feel. M.G. Sreekumar's voice and the characters he sings for, like Mohanlal become one thing. K.J. Yesudas has a special voice that

touches our hearts. He is like the voice of our conscience in Malayalam movies. When characters in these movies talk about things, like what is right and wrong K.J. Yesudas is the one who sings for them. His voice makes us think about what's good and what is bad. K.J. Yesudas and his songs are a part of Malayalam cinema.

When you hear someone speaking and then singing it is like you see a side of them. The voice they use to talk and the voice they use to sing can be really different. When you put them together you get a better sense of who that person really is. This is something that Chion calls the "added value" of sound in film. This added value is not about how things sound it is about how they make you feel and what they mean to you. The voice and the song come together to create a character and that is what makes it so interesting. The added value of sound in film is emotional and ideological it is not, about the technical part of it.

The female playback singers like K.S. Chithra and Sujatha Mohan show something. Sujatha Mohan is often picked for women or modern female characters. She sings in a romantic way. On the hand K.S. Chithra has a mature and deep voice. Her voice shows depth and inner strength. Even though K.S. Chithra and Sujatha Mohan are both good singers their voices are used for specific types of female characters. This helps create ideas about women in movies through music. Female playback singers, like K.S. Chithra and Sujatha Mohan are a part of this.

Sometimes, however, the established pattern is disrupted. Manju Warriar provides an important example of this shift. In the later phase of her career, she began lending her own voice to her characters in films. Her voice is distinctive, with a strong and recognisably regional quality that sets it apart from the more standardised voices often associated with female characters in Malayalam cinema. Her decision to voice her characters in films such as *How Old Are You* and *Udahanam Sujatha* marked a significant departure from the conventional practice of female dubbing. By using her own voice, Manju Warriar gave her characters a greater sense of authenticity and embodied presence. Her vocal performance also complemented the characters' journeys of self-discovery, agency, and independence. Her decision to provide her own voice can therefore be understood as an important assertion of vocal and representational agency.

The layering of voices in Malayalam cinema is particularly significant, as it reveals the multiplicity of styles and modes of performance within the industry. A single character may be associated with multiple voices: the voice of the actor seen on screen, the voice supplied by a dubbing artist, and the voice of a playback singer. These voices are produced through the collaborative contributions of different individuals, complicating conventional notions of performance and authorship. Such vocal layering suggests that cinematic identity is shaped not only by the individual performer but also by the contributions of others involved in constructing

that identity. Malayalam cinema, therefore, emerges as a collaborative medium in which multiple voices come together to produce and represent the identities of its characters. This complex interplay of voices constitutes one of the distinctive features of Malayalam cinema.

When examined from a regional perspective, voices in Malayalam cinema also reveal the cultural and linguistic diversity of the regions from which they emerge. Some dubbing artists possess distinctive speech patterns and accents associated with particular regions, allowing characters to be identified with specific linguistic communities. Regional variations, such as the Kozhikode accent, the pronunciation associated with Thiruvananthapuram, and the dialect of Thrissur, contribute significantly to the richness and diversity of Malayalam cinema. These variations demonstrate that voice is not merely a means of delivering dialogue but also an important marker of regional identity and cultural belonging. The diversity of voices and accents is therefore an essential element of Malayalam cinema's distinctive sonic character.

Sound plays a crucial role in Malayalam cinema, contributing not only to the creation of mood and atmosphere but also to the expression of cultural identity. The voices we hear in films influence how audiences experience emotions, perceive characters, and remember particular cinematic moments. Voice artists, dubbing artists, and playback singers all contribute to the distinctive sonic character of a film. The soundscape of Malayalam cinema is therefore not merely something that audiences hear; it is something they experience and feel deeply. Certain voices, particularly those of playback singers, can remain in the audience's memory long after a film has ended. Malayalam cinema thus uses sound, and especially the human voice, as a powerful means of creating an enduring emotional and cultural connection with its audiences.

Conclusion

The Dalit soundscape disrupts the established auditory hierarchies of Malayalam cinema. Films such as *Celluloid*, *Kammatipaadam*, *Papilio Buddha*, and *Kaala Pani* foreground marginalised voices through the use of folk instruments and musical traditions. Raw thudi beats, chenda rhythms, and chants assert Dalit identity against dominant upper-caste aesthetic conventions, thereby challenging the symbolic hierarchies embedded in cinematic sound design. This sonic intervention preserves communal memories of oppression and pain while creating a space for cultural assertion and resistance.

Folk sonorities also subvert conventional cinematic norms in these narratives. Directors employ less polished and more traditional forms of musical expression to evoke historical trauma, collective memory, and resistance within Dalit narratives. Power is thus negotiated through sound itself. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides a useful framework for

understanding how instruments such as the thudi, para, and urumi can elevate subaltern sonic traditions and challenge the dominance of classical forms historically associated with elite cultural practices. These sonic strategies can encourage audiences to engage with experiences of caste oppression and injustice. The Dalit soundscape therefore functions as a persistent and defiant presence within Malayalam cinema. This demonstrates that sound and dialogue are not merely technical components of filmmaking but important elements of meaning-making, stereotyping, identity formation, and representational practices in cinema.

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