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Gender in Disguise: Ideological Containment and Representation of Femme Fatale Gaze in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract: The paper pursues a critical analysis of the stereotyping of the femme fatale trope in Malayalam cinema, particularly inspecting how their representation functions within the broader framework of cultural production in Kerala. The cinematic representation is a cultural power, asserting that the femme fatale in Malayalam cinema disciplines female identity within regional spectatorship. The transition of the archetype into regional cinema marks a shift from a figure of complex moral ambiguity to a structurally contained and morally condemned character, configured to neutralize her potential, significantly tied to the conservative values or social expectations in Kerala.

At the intersection of Gender Studies and Media Critique, the study employs a dual theoretical framework utilising Mulvey's concept of Male Gaze to analyse the visual politics of objectification and the notion of Narrative Agency to analyse the structural denial of her subjectivity. Drawing references from myth, literature and movies the paper critically traces the emergence and evolving of the archetype that directly resonates with regional spectatorship.

The core argument postulates the femme fatale serves a critical ideological function: the surveillance and containment of female autonomy thereby reinforcing conservative gender essentialism and patriarchal power. The paper analyses the marginalization that represents the femme fatale reducing to the constraints of the Madonna/Whore dichotomy. Consequently, the narrative complexity and moral ambiguity are foreclosed, denying the femme fatale any sustained narrative agency or textual subjectivity.

The analysis concludes that the predictable and recurring depiction of the femme fatale in Malayalam cinema is not merely a genre convention, instead a reflection of the patriarchal control on female independence. By repeatedly framing the femme fatale as a cautionary figure, these films diminish the potential of female autonomy and reinforce normative gender hierarchies. This patriarchal narrative that subjects this figure to moral retributions, necessitates a critical opposition to these restrictive and ideologically loaded modes of representation.

Keywords: *Ideological Containment, Gender Essentialism, Male Gaze, Narrative Agency, Femme Fatale Trope*

In the literature, media and cinematic world women are rarely the storytellers but the spectacle, motive or moral hazard. To pursue gender in cinema is to uncover cultural power that is not merely to entertain, instead to define, discipline and to develop prescribed femininity. The universal representation of women in cinema extends far beyond entertainment to the ideological functions that reflect and shape cultural norms, power structures, gender hierarchies and to the perceived ideas on acceptable gender roles, sexuality and ambition. The Femme fatale is a potential archetype driven from the broad lens of art, literature and mythology, a mysterious, seductive and intelligent woman who brings destruction to the men who get acquainted with her. The early Biblical references brought the concept of ‘woman as a tempter’ through the Eve, Lilith of the Jewish Folklore who became a demon when Adam rejected her equality and demanded submission, Delilia, Salome and other notes of women who caused the downfall of man. The postwar period as men returned from the war front discovering the social independence of women, set a common pattern in noir films as a trigger by representing an ambitious woman who manipulates men for wealth or power thus making a character of complex moral ambiguity and a threat to the patriarchal order through her autonomy. While myth and literature served the idea of transgression of women, cinema made visual language through male gaze to restrict the power within the moral boundaries of the society manipulating the tradition and culture.

Pivoting the lense towards Malayalam Cinema, which has evolved over time and provides a unique platform in building timeless characters. It is known to portray complex social issues including gender stereotypes, power relationships, representation and women empowerment. Gender in cinema has been a matter of discussion as it has a predominant role in influencing societal attitudes and social interaction since it is the centre of cultural production. Beneath the surface of strong female characters and narratives; some of these films often reinforce toxic masculinity and traditional gender roles. Spectatorship produces perspectives while the gaze either objectifies or humanises characters. Cross dressing or gender performance is another level of complexity that is evident in Malayalam cinema that is disruptive to the female agency and identity. Many of the movies have been making the concept of male- female disguise as an entertainment that reaffirms the socially constructed gender stereotypes while sexualising the content often evoking voyeurism in the spectators. As Judith Butler puts it, masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed. This construction has been fueled by the canons in art and literature where cinema takes a significant part. The femme fatale trope in western film archetype represents female transgression and power. In drama and theatre until the middle of the 17th century female roles were man-handled and often played by younger boys convincing the audience. Religious and anti-theatrical such as

Puritans were against the confusing cross-dressing and they believed it as sin and corruption of reality. Malayalam cinema has gender portrayals through transvestism and cross-dressing as in male disguises to achieve their goals and female disguise as male through the practice of dressing in a style traditionally associated and generalised with the opposite sex. The represented identity by femme fatale characters in cinema has to be taken into consideration to identify the contexts that interpret gender anxiety that perceives female independence as a source of moral panic. Women and their portrayal in cinema has typically been influenced by patriarchal ideologies. Therefore depicted in a way that emphasises on women as sexual pleasers. Similarly, challenging societal expectations, women in disguise of men are depicted as being more likely to explore a world they did not have and for having a sense of accomplishment and gratification. The phenomenon of female writers choosing male pseudonyms, to wit, Bronte sisters in the 19th century, associates as it allowed increased recognition to publish in a patriarchal society. Despite all the progress, women continue to face bias and exclusion in male-dominated domains including literature, media and academia. The tendency of objectifying women in media and popular culture reduces to nothing other than their physical appearance and sexual appeal. While some perspectives argue women should have agency to express their own sexuality and desires as a part of empowerment, the media and popular culture manipulates the notion through exaggerated mannerisms, physical humour, gait and over the top antics.

Slapstick comedy is often used and has been an entertainment for centuries which resulted both positively and negatively. It became repetitive and predictable when it comes to the portrayal of gender roles, offending and off-putting audiences. While slapstick comedy is being adapted to the expectation of the present sophisticated audience who are now more socially aware and sensitive of political correctness, movies that make use of body shaming, slut shaming and inappropriate stereotyping for comic relief become a part of Malayalam cinema even today. Political correctness might be a commercial tool nowadays to get sold, yet cinema can be socially responsible as a trend- fad setter and having a purpose of social commentary. The irony is evident when a male character disguises in a female role in contrast with a female character who plays a male role. The disguised female roles are subjected to dark comedy, rendering vulnerability and weakness, often body exposing when females disguised in male characters highlight valour and power highlighting masculinity. The transitions and switching of characters contribute to the gender stereotypes which are being reaffirmed through the practice of disguise. Apparently in Greek mythology, Achilles was disguised as a woman to escape from his predicted death in the Trojan war. He was made hidden among King Lycomedes' daughters. In order to reveal him gifts were sent and the girls chose jewellery and clothes while Achilles held a sword and shield. Disguise is a device employed in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and

Merchant of Venice. The characterisation of Viola in *Twelfth Night*, who disguises herself as man, Cesario to have protection and freedom of men. According to Philippa Gregory, *Twelfth Night*, of all the nights of the year, is one where shapes shift and identities flicker (Gregory). The typical stereotype of women in Viola's fear of violence is used to have a comic relief in the play. The classics of Shakespeare, *As You Like It* appears to be another play where the character Rosalind disguises herself as a man to escape persecution and Portia in *Merchant of Venice* disguises as a lawyer to save her husband's friend. The trend reiterates that the disguise in men equips women to save and to be saved in those days. Several discourses make use of cross-dressing for various purposes.

Often in cinema women's roles are reduced and limited to seduction and to arouse the sexual interest in men. When men are disguised as women in cinema, it turns into a seductress or a femme fatale other than representing any female traits, a complex character of male fantasy. American filmmaker Anna Biller observes that representations of the femme fatale created by men tend to focus on "how that female can destroy that male" rather than on "what's happening on the interior of that female" (Biller).

The male character disguised by female in cinema, particularly in Malayalam cinema restates the gender roles where men become saviours and providers. Such characterisation focus on the evil to destroy or compete with men.

Cross-dressing and drag characters were surging in Bollywood which potentially dates back to circa the late 20th century along with the lethal woman concepts. Though not a cross dressing Clara in the movie *Thoovanathumbikal* (1987) has a femme fatale element. A counter narrative to the conventional sex worker image, Clara is gracious, intelligent and someone who philosophies life and desire. She is a character of gray and moral ambiguity exhibiting agency and autonomy by which she refuses to be saved by the male hero. Clara, as a disruptive woman to the socially acceptable relationship of the hero, is ultimately made an ideologically contained character who is an outsider or belongs to the margins of the conservative and domestic social life of Kerala. *Vyshali* (1988) film by Bharathan is a classic expression of the femme fatale where the reference is derived from the legend of Rishyasringa. The film portrays Vyshali, a seductress woman who was later identified as the King's daughter from a relationship with a courtesan and is sent by Angharajya to seduce a hermit to end the drought. The woman is extremely sexualised and objectified, rejecting her demand over power and identity and she is reduced to the feet of crowds at the end of the movie portraying the desire and power of her as a threat to the society. *Oru Vadakkan Veeragadha* (1989) represents Unniyarcha, a deliberate blur of gender line in folksongs and historical settings who uses her social and sexual autonomy to the downfall of

Chanthu, the hero. Unniyarcha holds power against societal expectations and gender roles but is portrayed as a woman who caused the fall of a man, which adds to the moral ambiguity of the character consequently to a form of containment representing the power and autonomy she holds as a threat. A deviated version is pictured in the film *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (1999) by the character Bhadhra who is an embodiment of vengeance and power who uses her seductive dual face to plot against the two male patriarchs of the story. Her charisma creates rivalry between them eventually leading the plot to the death of the two men. Bhadhra is a powerful female character in the Malayalam cinema but reducing her to a cold- hearted who is removed from the social sphere. Instead margining like the other femme fatale, Bhadhra finds her lasting love is a subversion of the ideological containment while her journey is again validated by a heterosexual relationship that is socially acceptable. The Madonna archetype of Ganga as Nagavalli in *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) is a destructive, powerful female character who is declared as ‘mental illness’ that should be ‘cured’ or ‘exoticised’ and later ideologically contained as a ‘wife’ who is socially acceptable and received.

The first go of cross dressing featured by actors like Kalabhavan Abi in the movie *Kireedamillatha Rajakkanmar* (1996) directed by Ansar Kalabhavan and *Hitler Brothers* (1997) directed by Sandhya Mohan in which Jagathy Sreekumar was played inspired by *Avvai Shanmuki* (1996). Further, in the 2003 movie *Thillana Thillana*, actor Krishna had played the role Bobby, a youth, in disguise of a college girl impressing his love interest. Movies of this time period introduced perceived women's mannerism and behaviour which reflects the social constructed gender roles. Such representations have in turn affected the viewpoint on women.

Societal perceptions on gender roles, reinforced by cinema, have been impacted, especially the young having a sophisticated view on their potential roles in society. Cinema till 2020 have followed patterns that portray exposed and exaggerated female characters by men. The reconstructed character of Avvai Shanmugi of *Hitler Brothers* as in the Tamil movie *Avvai Shanmugi* remains constant in sexualising an elderly woman and making her subjected to erotic gaze. A prominent context among the several instances is Avvai Shanmugi revealing her identity to others, opening her blouse and exposing the bosom where he can remove the makeover to convince others. Societal expectations in a woman having bosoms perpetuates objectification and women's identity being reduced to their physical characteristics. In the remake of *Kilukkam* movie *Kilukkam Kilukilukkam* (2006) directed by Sandhya Mohan in 2006, he again depicts male in disguise of female, a three character ensemble scene where actors like Jagathy, Salim Kumar, Innocent and Kochin Haneefa gets in frame as a foreigner, a nun, a mother and a maid. Simultaneous representation of females from multiple facets showcase objectification, sexism,

showing sexual insecurity, body image issues and exaggerated mannerisms. Comedy has concocted in the interaction of these characters and narratives, resulting in this image of women being internalized by the audience. The concept of scopophilia by Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1910) is often discussed in the context of film theory in ways which gaze at others in erotic or voyeuristic, objectifying and reinforcing societal beauty standards. Freud's term *schaulust* is used to describe pleasure seekers through erotic gaze. In the words of Laura Mulvey,

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female...In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey)

Women's objectification rather than seen as agencies or subjects in discourses focused on male gaze. The use of the phrase 'looked-at-ness' conveys the idea of picturing women sexualised. Women on screen are often what patriarchy wants them to be, which is changing over time. However, conversely to this, cross-dressed actresses have exhibited how patriarchy constructs male figures highlighting heroism, boldness and valour instead of dragging the focus on to their sexuality and physical features. Like in the movie *Ammayane Sathyam* (1993) by actress Annie playing servant boy, *Daya* (1998) where Manju Warrier, *Akashaganga* (1999) in which Kalpana played a godman and in the 2006 movie *Rasathanthram*, where Meera Jasmine has the role of a carpenter boy. It is not as common as male actors cross-dressing. Representing female sexuality and body consciousness and body image embodies over the male appearance.

Furthermore, movies like *Mayamohini* (2012), *Tamar Padar* (2014), *Ulsaha Committee* (2014), *Chanakyathanthram* (2018) follow patterns that reaffirm gender stereotypes and sexualisation of women. While presenting Mohini, in the name of the mythical avatar of God Vishnu, intending to accentuate female beauty, *Mayamohini* evokes erotic pleasures in the beholder. Though the versatility of actor Dileep is evident, the recurrent stereotype representation of femme fatale in Malayalam cinema is problematic. A parallel is drawn out of this in *Chanakyathanthram*, even more complexing the scenario. Additionally two characters played by Baburaj in the movies *Tamar Padar* and *Ulsaha Committee* emphasise the same. In the movie *Naranathu Thampuran* (2001) directed by Viji Thampi, Jayaram played the role of Ananthan Varma who disguises as different persons as he undergoes dissociative disorder. The movie portrays a scene where Ananthan Varma disguised as a woman, identified with his aunt, and he

was misunderstood by his uncle. The scene is used as comic element within the movie where rape comedy is normalised. Belittling women becomes socially acceptable and the

Malayalam cinema has historically employed a specific brand of comedy that often relies on adult humor, rape jokes, body shaming, stalking, and objectification of female characters. However, a notable shift has occurred in recent times, with audiences becoming more discerning and engaged. This change in perspective has led to a reevaluation of the stereotypes used to create humor and heroism in films. The portrayal of characters in cinema can have a profound impact on audiences, particularly in a society where hero worship is prevalent. Therefore, it's crucial to critically examine the ideologies and values that these characters embody and promote.

A paradigm shift is underway in the presentation of cinema, with filmmakers increasingly adopting more nuanced approaches to storytelling. The film *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* a 2025 retelling of the myth of *Kalliyankattu Neeli* written by Santhy Balakrishnan is a complex narrative of a powerful female character driven from the folklore and blended with fantasy where a superwoman is made out of Kerala's cultural depth. While the film remains yet to be unfolded exposing the power dynamics of Moothon and other mythical characters, the primary analysis points to Chandra as a source of power neither reduced nor objectified by the male gaze. Contradictory to this narrative, a Hindi language film of the similar genre, *Thamma* (2025) portrays Tarka, who is presented in male gaze and focuses on how she is seen. The camera positions and focuses on her physicality. The dominant difference is in the costume, where Tarka's is driving attention to body objectification over power and identity. Chandra's costume is more flexible and indicative of survival and the visuals captured primarily make the spectators focus on her actions than her body. This positive evolution of Malayalam cinema reflects a growing awareness of the need to challenge stereotypes and promote more inclusive representations. By doing so, cinema can contribute to a more empathetic and understanding society.

The impact of media on audiences cannot be overstated. By representing powerful female characters influences the identity and self concept of the spectators. A sense of possibility is generated through fluid characters who do not fall into the moral boundaries or the ideological containment of the society. Moreover, such nuanced expressions create balanced views on gender equality and power. The shift in Malayalam cinema's approach to comedy and character portrayal also highlights the importance of responsible storytelling and its potential to drive positive change. As filmmakers adapt to changing audience expectations, they have the opportunity to shape cultural attitudes and promote social change. By prioritizing thoughtful storytelling,

cinema can play a significant role in facilitating a more inclusive and respectful cultural landscape- a needed structural transition that promotes a cultural and ideological inclusion.

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