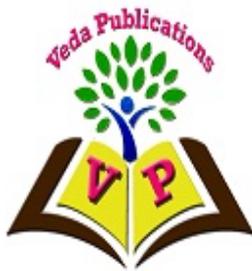




## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**REWRITING THE SCRIPT: UNVEILING THE POWER OF FEMININE  
STORYTELLING IN RECLAIMING MEDIA NARRATIVES**

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The media plays a significant role in conveying the truth and relevant information to common people. The paper explores various ways in which feminist art practices navigate and shape the digital landscape to ensure ongoing feminist dialogues and futures. The feminist art movement in the West emerged in the late 1960s amidst the fervor of American anti-war protests and growing gender, civil and queer rights movements around the world. From the utopian ideals of early-20th-century modernist movements, Feminist artists sought to rewrite a falsely male-dominated art history, change the contemporary world around them through their art, intervene in the established art world, and challenge the existing art canon. The contributions and influences of women and their works have served as a source of inspiration for Feminist artists around the world since the early twentieth century. They sought to create a dialogue between the viewer and the artwork through the inclusion of female perspectives. The representation of female sexuality continues to be politically charged and express the tension between personal and public identity. Female artists like Kara Walker and Jennifer Linton, in the contemporary society, continue to speak directly about sexism and equality. Mickalene Thomas' paintings reframe the identity of African American women while dismantling historical beauty memes. Their creations opened doors for very important dialogues, female artists continue to pinpoint the exhaustive and never-ending presence of its issues.

**Keywords:** *Revisioning, Inclusion, Identity, Utopian Ideals, Aestheticism**Author(s) retain the copyright of this article*

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## INTRODUCTION

India is experiencing a rapidly changing media environment. It has witnessed a huge surge in gender activism. Sexual violence seems to be increasing in an unpredictable way. The cultures of silence surrounding gender inequity and violence have begun to be questioned by women from everyday walks of life who refuse to put up with either the paternalism of the state. One is thus not born a woman but is configured as one in language and its representations. Post-structural feminism challenges all representations as conforming to a patriarchal paradigm built on binary oppositions that justify male supremacy. Shaheen Bagh protest started in Delhi from 15 December 2019 till 24 March 2020 and was led by women who blocked a major road at Shaheen Bagh using non-violent resistance 24x7. Breaking away from streamlined path, women have begun forging a new politics of action, breaking the myth of being passive witnesses in the grand hegemonic power that pervades every aspect of social life in India. The present study aims to explore the arena where the use of digital media platforms enables newer forms of exposure and connection previously unavailable to women, allowing them to redraw the boundaries between themselves and society, which reflects the complexity and richness of their lives.

## HER STORY THROUGH PAGES

Feminism in the virtual world initially emerged as a means of gathering support for offline movements, especially protests and activism. Feminist activism through technology has become a powerful tool of resistance across the world. Gayathri Spivak would often accuse the past of not representing the

discourses and realities of the marginalised people of their region, despite her strong advocating on women of third-world countries. She is considered to have globalised and feminised the deconstruction philosophy. Huhn and Westwell in Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies note that “gender issues have been prominent in film studies since the 1970s, when roles, image and stereotypes of women, men in films began to be seriously addressed” (2012). Judith Butler, in ‘The Psychic Life of Power’ spoke of female experience and the oppressive patterns evolving out of the female identity as conceived and operated by the patriarchy” (Butler, 1997). She added that “accepting identities is the same as accepting dominant scripts and performing roles prescribed by them. Identities cannot be an accurate representation of the real self, when interpellation happens by hegemonic structures, people respond to it, especially oppressed ones, perhaps because it recognizes them as a group” (Butler, 1997). The persistent nature of the internet has started changing the scenario in today’s world. The ever-changing nature of the internet and the ability to freely navigate among online cultures allows the fluidity of gender to be realized and experienced. Through the liberating potential view of internet, gender can be performed in new ways like a space for gender emancipation where it can be performed and conceptualized in inventive ways. In Kerala, the history of women’s dissent lies tangled with the fables, mass movements, subversions of dominant practices etc. Nangeli, born in the subaltern caste, had to pay a breast tax for the right to cover her breasts with a piece of cloth. The caste patriarchy dictated that only women from dominant castes had the right to drape



their breasts in cloth, and women from other communities were levied a tax for the 'privilege'. Nangeli's strong revolt was to cut off one of the offending parts and to offer it on a plantain leaf to the feudal lord's tax collector. She faced death and her dissent, ignited the revolt for the right to cover breasts, a mass protest. Movements that took between 1813 and 1859 in the former principality of Travancore, shook the colonial British administration and native royalty to their core. On 26 July 1859, the king of Travancore made a proclamation which helped the women legally to cover their breasts, regardless of caste. Urban folklore would claim Nangeli's gender revolution, which paved way to the early prototype of twentieth-century feminist movements.

## GENDER AND MEDIA

In the early 2000s, women had been portrayed stereotypically feminine in media, there was a shift in that representation, especially in teenage characters. Before the change, there was an unwritten rule in media that women had to be either nurturers or plainly 'evil' or 'madwomen,' and while this rule remains in horror or thriller genres. It is clearly depicted in the Bible, where Eve is blamed for telling Adam to bite the apple, even though he chose to bite the apple. In 'A Cinderella's Story', 'Ten Things I Hate About You,' and 'Twilight' are examples of films that contain similar plotlines. For instance, in 'A Cinderella Story', Sam, the female lead, is comparatively less feminine than her stepsisters. She is pictured as a good girl who cares about school, music, and chores rather than outfits, makeup etc. Her stepsisters and mother enjoy everything feminine, such as fashion, makeup,

and nail polish, and are portrayed as the evil characters or antagonists. They are described as materialistic gold diggers searching only for money and popularity. As the example shows, these girls generally care less about makeup, skincare, or doing sports and partake in hobbies considered manlier. It is good as women were not allowed to perform in manly hobbies for so long, but when it is excessive, it becomes a problem. The issue rests in that these films do not just glorify these kinds of girls but often also malign the feminine. Usually, these movies contain a feminine antagonist and will do anything to get the male lead. The Joshi Committee Report of the Working Group on Software for Doordarshan set up in 1982 and chaired by P. C. Joshi in 1985 has the following comments about Doordarshan's approach towards programming for women, which I feel is equally applicable to Malayalam cinema even after two decades.

Middle class ideologies of women's roles as wives and mothers provide the underlying basis for most programmes. In a country where 36% of the agricultural workforce is female, women continue to be projected as predominantly non producers and as playing a limited role outside the home. Women are basically seen as performing a decorative function and as being marginal to national growth and development. Their primary place is seen as being within the home and this value is reflected in the content and setting of most television programmes. The plural nature of Indian culture and the diverse roles that women play is neither acknowledged nor



communicated. This results in a reinforcing of the stereotyped images and role specification of women in a unidimensional projection of their reality. (Joshi 1985)

Women like Sor Juana Inés have been personally affected by media portrayal. Sor Juana fought for the rights of women using her poetry, calling out the hypocrisy behind the female stereotype and asking men to acknowledge that women are the way they are because men demand it. Since the creation of literature and film, the representation of women and girls has been tainted, affecting culture and women globally, but this has taken a turn in recent years. Misogyny is not as visible in media as it used to be, and each day, there are new examples of good female representation. The need for good media representation of women, that is, every kind of woman, white, black, queer, or trans, is crucial to how young girls will grow up to be women Sor Juana Inés is affected by media portrayal, she fought for the rights of women using her poetry, calling out the hypocrisy behind the female stereotype and asking men to acknowledge that women are the way they are because men demand it. Misogyny is not as visible in media as it used to be, and each day, there are new examples of good female representation. The need for good media representation of women, every kind of woman, white, black, queer, or trans, is crucial to how young girls will grow up to be women. Women on Tik Tok are referred as 'pick me girls.' A 'pick me girl' is a woman who degrades other women and engages in internalized misogyny to gain the love and adoration of a specific group or community, primarily men. The issue with these callouts is the tremendous impact they can have on

these young girls, some of whom may not even match the concept of a 'pick me'. The purpose is to highlight how social media platforms such as Tik Tok promote themes of internalized sexism and vilification of other women. In this regard, a study by A Biannual Academic Journal on Language, Literary, and Cultural Studies was able to indicate that: lack, queer, or trans, is crucial to how young girls will grow up to be women.

Historically, movies from the 1971 'Fiddler on the Roof,' till 'Miss Congeniality' (2000) seem to have a look at stereotypical manner in which women are portrayed, and attempts to open up a debate between traditions and conventions and rationality and liberalism. The 2011 documentary 'Miss Representation', by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, reveals and attacks the negative and limiting images of girls and women, particularly in media. This in particular attacks the objectification of women in ads, demonstrates the differences in the nature of comments about women vs. men news reporters and political candidates. A similar attempt focused on changing stereotypical views of women is The White House Project. It paved way television and cable networks to invite women to appear as experts on news and talk shows. "The Women's Media Center, trains women and girls to be 'media savvy,' as well as monitors 'media sexism' around 80,000 suggestions received, several new laws were passed, and fast track courts were set up to hear rape cases" (Das3).

#### DIGITALISATION IN HER SPACE



Digitization of women's movement in India acts an outlet for new opportunities for the empowerment of other marginalised and minority women, most of them became the victims of patriarchal violence and subjugations. Digital feminism responds directly to the toxic offline and online environments and offers hope for ending the cycles of violence and subjugations. It speaks "publicly about these issues offers women the benefits of catharsis, as well as a sense of solidarity" (Jain 10). 'The Pink Chaddi' in 2009, was started by a Delhi journalist named Nisha Susan, who launched a Facebook group naughtily named 'Consortium of Pub -going, Loose and Forward Women', which urged women to send pink chaddis as a gift to the leader of the Hindu organization Valentine's Day. The Sri Ram Sena office received around 2000 chaddis and the organization became an object of ridicule across the world. 'Why Loiter', strives for women's rights to occupy public spaces in 2011, Shilpa Phadke showed that the act of loitering is more prevalent among men. Women are rarely alone in public spaces like parks and beaches, because they become the victim for male gaze, sexual gestures, and mostly feels uncomfortable while they are alone. The Pinjra Tod in 2015 against curfew hours in hostels played an important part in India's feminist movement. As Azad mentions, the main goals of Pinjra Tod were to end the imposition of curfews on women, to provide affordable accommodation for women, to regularize the situation for paying guests, and to obtain the formation of elected Internal Complaint Committees for prevention, prohibition and redress of sexual harassment in universities. Another movement was the Lahukalagan happened on Twitter in 2017, which literally translates to 'blood

tax'. It concentrated on the 12% sanitary napkin tax, which was eliminated in 2018 as a result of the movement. In September 2020 a campaign was created, named "My Body My Method: Because Contraception Matters," with the tagline "So, what is the best contraceptive method? Who gets to choose it for you?" This questions about our sexual and reproductive health that need to be answered. The goal of the campaign was to raise awareness and have a conversation about contraception, a topic that is frequently shrouded in rumours, taboos, and topics that are not freely discussed. The cyber feminism is emerged with the popularity and propagation of web and digital technologies through which contemporary feminism and feminist activism are "concerned more in challenging traditional patriarchal, sexism, stereotypical gender and sexual discourse, misogyny, which fosters a collective call-out culture" (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 128). Faulkner says that "we cannot transform gender relations without engaging women in technology" (92). Breaking through the increasingly intricate relationship between gender and technology is crucial. Cyber/ Digital feminist movement has added a new dimension to women's struggle in India. The 'Slut Walk' in Toronto in 2011, "was the first time when women used Facebook and Twitter to gather support for a protest being labelled as sluts for dressing in revealing clothes" (Davis 301). Subsequently these kinds of rallies and marches have continued all over the world. In India also, a similar movement called Besharmi Morcha began in Delhi in 2011 (Mitra 257). Next comes the campaign 'MeToo by 2017', which has become a worldwide movement on sites including Facebook,



Instagram, Twitter, and others. It entered the international conversation against workplace sexual assault against women. The 'Everyday Sexism Project', launched by Laura Bates in 2012, showed the participation of women all over the world writing about sexual harassment at the workplace. It encouraged thousands of women around the world to write about the "sexual harassment, workplace discrimination and instances of body shaming they encounter in their everyday lives" (Jain 5). In India the focus on digital feminist activism was more on caste differences and social hierarchies (Menon 54).

## UNWRAPPING GENDER IN MALAYALAM

### CINEMA

Most commercial movies explicit the dominant patriarchal norms prevalent in contemporary society, which in turn lends into cementing these patriarchal states as the unbreakable laws of society. As a result, most Malayalam films reveal a high level of gender stereotyping. Meena T.Pillai in the essay 'Becoming Women' states that most of the women in movies are women who have consented to their subordination, and who have not only internalized patriarchal ideology, but have become so steeped in it that they happily indoctrinate their children with the very same values that have perpetuated their subordination. Pillai makes a symptomatic reading of the language of Malayalam cinema and seeks to unfold the problem of naturally identifying women as synonymous to the images churned out by this industry. She opines that though Malayalam cinema is never outrightly mythical in its representation of women, it does often seek to transform history into nature freezing women's oppression and propelling

the audience to real what is only a semi logical system for a factual system. Therefore, mainstream Malayalam cinemas replicate the anxieties and obsessions of Malayali men and seek to subvert and sabotage the immense artistic and productive potential of modern Malayali women. Pillai points out that women were allowed only such ornamental roles where they merely sung, danced, loved on the Indian celluloid and happily revelled by remaining within the narrow confines of the lakshmanarekha. The scholarly works in Malayalam cinema highlight the issue of gender in isolation and not in relation to the other modalities that structure identity and subjectivity. In P. K. Nair's article 'Gender Equations in Malayalam Cinema', he discusses the representation of the female lead character in the film *Nadan Pennum Nattu Pramaniyum* directed by Rajasenan. The male lead, converses to the female protagonist in a language that borders on vulgarity and reinforces his masculine supremacy by shouting at her, "making a hole with his fingers", and saying "you must remember woman is always under the man", obviously referring to the sex act" (38). The author, in this case, merely attributes to a display of hegemonic masculinity and does not adopt an intersectional approach to understand the lack of agency in the female character. Here, the rich upper middle-class male lead, Govindan, is paired opposite Gayatri, a woman from a poor and rural background and a low-wages employee in his shop. Gayatri is also a Nampoothiri woman who is historically marginalised within the patriarchal and hierarchal caste system in Kerala. Hence, it is the intersection of multiple subjectivities that marginalises Gayatri and renders her voiceless in various scenes in the film.



A paradigm shift in the social discourse to a clearer articulation of gender concerns by women themselves. There were entertainers like Hitler (1996), who rode on the image of the protective elder brother with a skilful blend of slapstick and melodrama, and seriously reflective films like Bhoothakkannadi (1997). The latter, despite its keen sensitivity to the violation of the girl child, made the issue more of a concern of the male protagonist, again enacted by Mammooty. But the macho image is softened and what emerges is a feminised maternal male. The image of the messianic hero is consciously broken down to expose the average Malayali male in all his vulnerability and pain. Both the male stars, Mohanlal and Mammooty, assume the persona of family men in the 1990s, and the image of a masterful, male family head still casts a spell over the box-office. Filippo and Caroline Osella's comments are pertinent here: Mammooty's family tragedies provoke welcome tears and endear him to those older women who are looking for a competent mature man in a hero: a good father, a fascinating husband, a masterful figure in the family. At the same time, a fear of being banished from the family portrait haunts the man; Chintavishtayaya Shyamala (1998), directed by Sreenivasan, remains emblematic of this anxiety. The family-man image, on which thrives the superstar image of Mammooty and Mohanlal, is subverted by Sreenivasan in this film, which hinges on the father figure of the house who remains on the peripheries of the house, shunning or running away from its responsibilities. Sarah Joseph describes the role of cinema in effecting the homogenisation in her autobiographical note in the journal 'Bhashaposhini': "My mother taught me the

godliness of husbands. I was to regard the dust he walked upon as sacred. Wonder how my Christian mother got such an idea. Maybe from cinema. My mother had great interest for cinema. Her favourites were Nalla Thanka and Jeevithanouka" (2005).

## CONCLUSION

The movies construct identities for women that depict them as dependent gender, sex objects by giving specific tasks for them as domestic duties to perform and a source of pleasure for men, while men as powerful, independent and strong. The 'social learning theory' describes that individuals learn the behavior through observation and when they are exposed to the movies they observe and ultimately learn the identities represented by movies. By these ways' movies come to determine the specification for both genders. Femininity was linked with the attribution of beauty to create sex appeal for men and Masculinity was specified with bravery and power to win the hearts of women to rule them. Such kind of women representation reflected the normative role of women in society and strengthening the stereotypical image of women as being inferior to men. The movies construct the images of men and women and are source of socialization of its viewers by representing and emphasizing certain specific gender related attributes. Media narratives play an important part in the image building and beliefs about the gender and gender roles. The stereotypical treatment of women constructed the images for women as to perform domestic duties, sex commodity, beauty and weight conscious, delicate, feeble and independent whereas the men have been attributed



as determined, bold, courageous, carrier oriented, independent, strong and brave. Most of the movies represent women in stereotypical role and promotes public private dichotomy of roles among gender. Therefore the co-option and commodification of feminist narratives and symbols by corporations, celebrities, and politicians, use them for their own interests and agendas. Media platforms can also be used to manipulate vulnerable or unaware women. This dynamic form of new feminist activism has gone beyond the previous feminist waves that saw women as a monolithic group whose interests could be represented by a single agenda. It welcomes more diversity, inclusivity, decentralization, and democracy which are necessary in cyberfeminism in order to prevent it from reproducing the harmful universalism of traditional feminists. To conclude with, media spaces are not end goals, but are an alternative means to further honour the agenda of making feminist reactions and resistance more individualistic, inclusive, and transparent with unanimity and solidarity.

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