



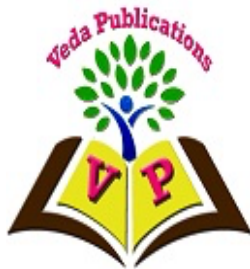
RESEARCH ARTICLE

**GENDER, CASTE, AND CLASS: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF MALAYALAM CINEMA**

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This paper investigates how Malayalam cinema depicts the overlapping dynamics of gender, caste, and class through the lens of Intersectionality. Developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, this framework clarifies how diverse layers of social inequity converge to define individual lived realities. As a cultural medium, film does more than entertain; it mirrors and interrogates social hierarchies, providing a fertile ground for intersectional study. By analyzing specific films—*Kammatipaadam*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, and *Kumbalangi Nights*—this study highlights the representation of marginalized identities within contemporary narratives. I argue that these cinematic works expose the intricate ways gender-based oppression is inseparable from caste structures and class-driven inequality.

Keywords: *Intersectionality, Gender, Caste, Class, Marginalized Identities.*



INTRODUCTION

Cinema serves as a potent mirror for the power dynamics and social realities inherent in any society. Malayalam cinema, in particular, is noted for its willingness to tackle social issues, often centering characters whose existences are dictated by gender, caste, and class divisions. However, these social markers do not function in vacuums. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of Intersectionality offers a vital lens for understanding how these distinct threads of inequality entwine to shape human experience. This paper delves into how Malayalam films capture these overlapping structures and how such intersections influence the portrayal of those on the fringes.

Intersectionality posits that systems like patriarchy, casteism, and classism are fundamentally interconnected. Crenshaw notes that people do not encounter discrimination through a solitary identity, but through a multifaceted, overlapping selfhood. This was expanded by feminist thinkers like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, who illustrated how gendered struggles are often bound to race and class. In India, caste adds a mandatory layer to this analysis. The daily reality for a woman from a marginalized caste is worlds away from that of an upper-caste woman. Consequently, an intersectional view uncovers the hidden tiers of privilege and hardship within cultural media like film. By moving past a "single-axis" focus on gender, critics can interrogate the broader social architecture influencing representation. Such a perspective is indispensable in the Indian context, where caste and class are the silent architects of cultural storytelling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic discourse regarding gender and caste in film has gravitated toward Crenshaw's Intersectionality to explain how power structures collide. Scholars like hooks and Collins paved the way by showing that gender oppression is never truly isolated from other social hierarchies. Within the Indian academic sphere, researchers stress the necessity of viewing caste and class as integral to any analysis of gender. While Rachel Dwyer and Madhava Prasad have mapped the ideological landscapes of Indian cinema, recent work in Kerala focuses on how Malayalam films engage with social marginalization and the grit of everyday life. Building upon this scholarship, my study uses an intersectional lens to decode how modern Malayalam narratives represent the tangled realities of contemporary Kerala.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes qualitative textual analysis to inspect the depictions of gender, class, and caste through the intersectional framework pioneered by Crenshaw. The analysis centers on three pivotal films: *Kammatipaadam*, *The Great Indian Kitchen*, and *Kumbalangi Nights*. These were selected for their profound engagement with identity and social exclusion. By performing a close reading of their narrative arcs, character growth, and specific scenes, the study evaluates how cinematic craft reflects the collision of gender roles, caste status, and economic standing. Ultimately, this approach aims to capture the complex portrayal of marginalized groups and how Malayalam cinema responds to the shifting social tides of Kerala.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION****GENDER, CASTE, AND CLASS: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF MALAYALAM CINEMA**

While Malayalam films have long touched on social issues, the treatment of caste and class has frequently been more symbolic than direct. Female characters are often shoehorned into patriarchal templates, their agency limited by familial or communal dictates. However, when we overlay caste and class, this marginalization becomes far more stark. For instance, *Kammatipaadam* illustrates the collision of caste and class through the survival struggles of a community squeezed by urban sprawl. Similarly, *Kumbalangi Nights* offers a subtle look at how class disparities and gender expectations play out in a neglected social pocket.

Women from lower economic or caste tiers often navigate multiple strata of oppression. Their journey is defined not just by male dominance, but by the weight of financial exploitation and social bias. An intersectional critique reveals that while some Malayalam films reinforce these hierarchies, others provide a much-needed challenge. Though characters from marginalized backgrounds are frequently cast as victims of the system, some modern films are beginning to emphasize their resilience and agency. It is becoming increasingly clear in recent cinema that gender inequality cannot be fully parsed without acknowledging the shadow of caste and class. These films show how structural forces seep into personal bonds, labor, and basic opportunities.

KAMMATIPAADAM: CASTE AND CLASS**MARGINALIZATION**

Rajeev Ravi's *Kammatipaadam* is a visceral exploration of how caste and class intersect during

Kerala's rush toward urbanization. Set in the titular region of Kochi, it documents a marginalized settlement's erasure by modern development, showing how Dalit lives are upended by "progress". The film effectively strips back the layers of caste prejudice and economic greed. Through Krishna (Dulquer Salmaan), we see the history of Balan and Ganga, members of a Dalit community whose ancestral land becomes a target for the powerful. As property values climb, upper-caste interests seize the ground beneath the feet of those who lack legal or social protection.

The movie highlights how caste hierarchies and class gaps work in tandem to push the marginalized further into the periphery. A key takeaway is how urban growth enriches the dominant classes while systematically dispossessing the poor. The transformation of these spaces reflects a pattern where development effectively bleaches the history of marginalized communities. Forced into cycles of poverty and crime, the Dalit characters show how structural walls block any hope of upward mobility. By refusing to separate caste from class, Ravi portrays them as a single, suffocating force. *Kammatipaadam* disrupts the "social development" myths of Kerala by exposing the grit and inequality that fuel urban expansion.

THE GREAT INDIAN KITCHEN: GENDER AND CASTE PRACTICES

Directed by Jeo Baby, *The Great Indian Kitchen* is a scathing critique of the patriarchal domesticity and the rituals that keep it alive. The story follows a newlywed woman's entry into a traditionalist household. Through the numbing repetition of chores, the film demonstrates how gender roles are



strictly enforced. The protagonist, left unnamed to signify her loss of self, performs a mountain of invisible labor while the men remain blissfully detached.

Crucially, this gendered oppression is tied to ritualistic purity norms that have deep roots in caste traditions. The household's obsession with "pollution" during her menstruation—forcing her into isolation—mirrors ancient caste-based concepts of bodily sanctity. These customs show how patriarchal control is often bolstered by religious or cultural "tradition". The kitchen itself serves as a prison where her labor is consumed but never acknowledged. The film uses the monotony of cooking and cleaning to emphasize how unpaid domestic work is normalized. From an intersectional view, the movie proves that gender inequality is inseparable from the caste-inflected cultural practices that justify it. By exposing these "ordinary" traditions, *Jeo Baby* invites the audience to see them as tools of social control.

KUMBALANGI NIGHTS: GENDER ROLES AND CLASS IDENTITY

Madhu C. Narayanan's *Kumbalangi Nights* offers a more hopeful, yet nuanced, look at gender and class. Set in a coastal village, it follows four brothers living in a crumbling home on the outskirts of social respectability. Their lack of money and "proper" background places them squarely outside middle-class norms. The film explores how this class identity impacts their self-worth and their relationships. While the community views them as social failures, the narrative slowly uncovers their capacity for deep empathy and care.

The brothers eventually reject the rigid, authoritarian masculinity typical of mainstream cinema in favor of a more supportive, compassionate brotherhood. This is sharply contrasted with the character of Shammi (Fahadh Faasil), who embodies a "toxic" and controlling patriarchal ideal. Shammi hides his insecurity behind a mask of middle-class respectability and dominance over women. Meanwhile, Babymol represents a shift toward female agency, openly defying Shammi's control. Her relationship with the brothers suggests a path toward more egalitarian gender dynamics. *Kumbalangi Nights* shows that being on the economic margins can actually allow for a rejection of the stifling gender roles associated with "respectable" society.

CONCLUSION

An intersectional reading of these films reveals the complex interplay between gender, caste, and class in Kerala's cinematic landscape. By examining how these power structures overlap, we gain a clearer understanding of how movies both reflect and challenge social hierarchies. Intersectionality remains a vital tool for academic analysis, helping to center the voices of those who have historically been pushed to the margins of our stories.

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