



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

## Anesthesiology

### TRENDS IN THE PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN MALAYALAM FILMS

**KEY WORDS:** Mass media, Malayalam films, Muslim women, Mis-en-scene analysis

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#### ABSTRACT

The concept of social construction of reality includes the ideas of socialization by which individuals make sense of the world through various variables, one of which is the mass media. The media scene has expanded in the recent times hence there is a lot of media choices available to the audiences. Women are increasingly coming to the forefront in all domains creating a change in the traditional role of women. Since, media fail to represent the changed role of women; the way in which women are being portrayed in mass media has become a major concern. Malayalam films have been essentially male-centric, leaving a minute space for the female counterparts to evolve and grow as performers. In Malayalam films, Muslim women are either portrayed as silenced victims or as sexually available as exotic beings. There has been an overabundance of misconceptions and misrepresentations of Muslim women in television and film, which had an enormous impact on the public mind.

The study aims to analyze the trends in the portrayal of Muslim women in Malayalam films and locate the various forms of gender violence. There is also a need to examine whether education is shown as a means to give Islamic women an identity for themselves and whether marriage in the lives of Muslim women is being portrayed in a stereotypical manner, in Malayalam films. Feminist Film theory is used by the researcher to find out various methodologies and perspectives contained in the films.

The study takes a qualitative approach to analyze the portrayal of Muslim women in Malayalam movies. The movies selected for the study are *Kilichundan Mampazham*, *Padam Onn Oru Vilapam*, *Perumazhakkalam* and *Thattathin Marayathu*. The study uses both content analysis and mis-en-scene analysis based on four elements and five parameters. Mis-en-scene analysis (scene by scene analysis) refers to everything that appears before the camera and its arrangements such as composition, sets, props, actors, costumes and lighting. The six parameters taken into consideration for mis-en-scene analysis of the selected movies are title, performance, close-up and gaze, sets and props and music and sound. The four elements taken for content analysis are education, marriage, modesty or chastity and status of Muslim women.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of communication explosion, war begins and ends with media. The media plays a significant role in the process of social construction of reality and can be used as a potent weapon to mould and sculpt people's perceptions, as the information that individuals are exposed to greatly influence their perception of the world. In fact the prime objective of media is to shape public opinion, and reshape it again if needed. It has grown into an important and immensely powerful institution, which kick starts debates, paves path for dialogue, and shapes public consciousness.

For feminism itself, the written text and social activism are no longer enough in themselves. It needs to interact with all forms of media; journalism, theatre and film. One can no longer afford to turn away from these mediums as they occupy a much larger space in our lives than they did in the past. Interpreting or reading a film is as much a discipline as any other and meanings are often rooted in perspectives and positions.

Film criticism has a value for literary studies for it allows us to view them differently, to look for the unconscious reflection of social reality, the underlying power structures, the frames which melt into each other, the repetitive narrative patterns, the dialogues which use myth and history, the juxtapositions which take place and all of which simultaneously the medium allows.

When it comes to Muslim women who are depicted as passive victims of masculine dominance, this victimization is often demonstrated in the media through images of cloaked women submissively following a dominant male figure, often for example, images of women shuffling in the background are seen. Moreover, in many movies it is not uncommon to see women covered in black from head to toe, appearing as unattractive and enslaved beings to men.

In Bollywood film and television today, Muslim women are often characterized in two extremes, either as silenced victims or as sexually available and exotic beings. Particularly more recently, exoticized, and hyper sexualized images of Muslim women are becoming increasingly popular. Bollywood has been essentially

male-centric, leaving a little space for the female counterparts to evolve and grow as performers. In earlier films, they were based on mythology or historic kind, where male were given importance and female was showcased as an beauty object, but the situation has changed significantly over the past decades. Realization of the need for educating and empowering women, has redefined the status of women and their role in the society and it seems to be reflected in the films.

The portrayal of Muslim women in Bollywood films has been seeing a positive change and they are no longer succumbed to playing shallow characters. More roles are being written that show women as independent, strong and self-reliant individuals. With the changing trends like in Vineeth Sreenivasan's film '*Thattathin Marayathu*' we can say that now women can live life with dignity. Women power is now being more noticed and acknowledged and women are celebrated in films.

#### 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

##### 2.1 FEMINIST FILM THEORY

Feminist film theory is a theoretical film criticism derived from feminist politics and feminist theory. Feminists have many approaches to cinema analysis, regarding the film elements analysed and their theoretical underpinnings. As Laura Mulvey in her work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* has analyzed, there are two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structure of "looking" in the conventional cinematic situation. In film term it implies a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen. In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female.

Feminism defined femininity through three phases to the date. First, it overturned legal obstacles for gender equality for privileges like voting rights and property rights. Then it debated on issues of sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, domestic violence, marital rape issues and other inequalities. In the third phase, the fight became abstract by trying to rubbing off the boundaries between male and female by abolishing gender role expectation and stereotypes. There have always been stereotypes or role models for how a woman should perform the act of being a woman, backed up by the established notions of culture and civilization.

In *Padam Onn Oru Vilapam* (2003), the woman projected as victim, tries to struggle but fails and thereby reinforce the inequitable gender relation which they seem to be attacking. In the film, *Kilichundan Mampazham* (2003) the female protagonist is presented more as an isolated object on display in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.

The movie that released the following year, *Perumazhakkalam* (2004), directed by Kamal focuses on the status issues of women as well as their marriage situation. Amidst all the discrimination and societal pressure that she under goes she was expected to protect her husband in all the ways she can to always be on his side.

After a decade in Mollywood, a new generation movie by Vineeth Sreenivasan, *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012), portrayed a strong woman protagonist who belongs to minority community stands for her right and made men realise that women should be respected for their choice. The stereotyping of women's image make it mandatory for her to be a perfect combination of certain typical traits used in an oft-repeated pattern of mythical iconography.

### 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- Sheriff Al Sire (2014), "*Agnee (The Fire): Portrayal of Women in Bangladeshi Cinema*" examines the images of women were portrayed as a good wife or a virtue of sacrifice. In such circumstances women's role were changing along with the social transformations. A Bangladeshi woman was shy, cultured and secretive. All of these features were properly displayed in the cinema. In *Agnee* women identity and status was totally different from other traditional Bangla cinema. The transformation of helpless woman to a brave person was displayed in this movie. But, the storyline of the film falls into the old previously used Bangla film stories.
- Kumar Parag (2013), "*Identity of Muslim Women in Hindi Movies*" said, identity is an important issue for Muslim women as they are frail in power ratio. The study was based on the analysis of four Hindi movies, *Nikkah* (Marriage) released in 1982, *Bazaar* (Market) released in 1982, *Bombay* released in 1995 and *Fiza* (Atmosphere) released in 2000. The author concluded and said, in these movies women were not treated in abstract manner. The basic projection of these female protagonists centered on the demand for space, identity and recognition.
- Arif Moin (2014), "*Portrayal of Women in Hindi Films with special reference to Muslim characters*" examines the representations of women characters in mainstream Hindi movies, with special reference to the changing image of Muslim women characters. The study revealed that in the films of the 70's and 80's, women characters were portrayed as docile and submissive, unable to articulate their needs even in the face of oppression, or as independent but cruel or hard-hearted; more specifically, women characters were portrayed as preservers of tradition.
- Jack Shaheen (2005), "*Stereotypes: United States: Arab Muslim Women as Portrayed in Film*" examines an analysis on Arab Muslim women portrayed by Hollywood movies in 1960. Hollywood's movies have humiliated, demonized, and eroticized the Muslim women. Arab women were seldom projected to look and behave like most of the viewers. Producers never showed them at home with family, or functioning in the workplace as professionals. Instead of revealing a common humanity, Hollywood movies from the beginning have fostered irrational dislike and prejudice by their assumption that women under Islam are in a pathetic state.
- Shankhamala Ray (2012), "*Islamic women in films: turning the voyeurs into spectators*" states that in mass media women are more likely to be shown performing domestic chores or as sexual objects or as victims who are the natural recipients of harassment and assault. However, a number of films on Islamic societies made by Islamic and non-Islamic filmmakers are

pivoting around strong Muslim female characters. These films have opened up new dimensions for academic inquiry regarding the depiction of women in media.

### 4. OBJECTIVE:

- To study the trends in the portrayal of the Muslim women in Malayalam cinema
- To analyze if education has given Islamic women an identity for themselves
- To study if marriage in the lives of Muslim women are being portrayed in a stereotypical way
- To locate the various forms of gender violence and to see how people are active participants, especially in Malayalam cinema

### 5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

- RQ 1: How the Muslim women are portrayed in Malayalam cinema?
- RQ 2: Whether education has given Islamic women an identity for themselves?
- RQ 3: How the Muslim women are being portrayed in a stereotypical way?
- RQ 4: How various forms of gender violence and people are active participants in Malayalam cinema?

### 6. METHOD

The study takes a qualitative approach to analyze the portrayal of Muslim women in Malayalam movies. The selected movies for the study are *Kilichundan Mampazham*, *Padam Onn Oru Vilapam*, *Perumazhakkalam* and *Thattathin Marayathu*. The study uses content analysis and mis-en-scene analysis based on four elements and six parameters. The five parameters taken into consideration for mis-en-scene analysis of the selected movies are title, performance, close-up and gaze, sets and props and music and sound. The four elements taken for content analysis are education, marriage, modesty or chastity and status of Muslim women.

### 7. ANALYSIS

The researcher has made a choice of 4 Malayalam films in order to analyse the representation of women there with respect to the actual representation.

#### 7.1 CONTENT ANALYSIS

##### 7.1.1 Polygamy/Marriage

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -The Muslims consider the idea of Polygamy not as a threat but as a method that is used only under extraordinary circumstances. In the movie, it is clearly shown that the first two wives of the man aren't very happy with his decision to marry another woman. It clearly tells that men are allowed to marry more than one woman if only he treats all of them equally. The husband needs to provide the wife/wives emotional, physical support and keep her happy at all times.
- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - For Razak, Shahina's husband, it is a marriage of convenience, another wife to slave for him and please him, and to make enough money to go to Gulf. Razak had to use some sedatives to fulfill his sexual desire on Shahina. When Shahina bite him by resisting herself it was his second wife that assists him, Razak's mother was sarcastically said this occasion as he was lucky enough because when one wife harmed him while the other one was nursing him.
- *Perumazhakkalam* - The couple had to go through a series of trauma before their parents could accept for the wedding which happened only after their consent. Even after accepting a girl whole heartedly to be a part of their family, she is the one to be blamed as a sign of bad luck for the fortune of Akbar.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - Marriage is an important factor in this movie as the plot revolves around the girl and boy of two different communities who fall in love to live together throughout their life.

##### 7.1.2 Status of Muslim women

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -The protagonist enjoyed much freedom in her house before marriage. She use to roam around with her lover and will go to buy things etc. In this film we find that the woman after married does not enjoy much

freedom in her husband's place. They don't have an opinion, where the men took all the decisions in the house and they just obey whatever they say.

- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - Shahina attends her school still she doesn't get much freedom in her community. She was pushed into marriage by her community and not by her mother. Even when she said she has to continue her studies, the local folks in her community didn't even take her words and she takes the decision by themselves.
- *Perumazhakkalam* -The movie lies in the idea of Razia, saving her husband from the rope of death for that, she requires the letter of forgiveness from the wife of the murdered. The heroine Razia takes an independent women's role and goes forward to try to make Ganga, the wife of the murdered to understand her situation and to save her husband. The opinion of Ganga is not even asked by the family and men took the decisions, here the individuality of women is denied. In spite of all, Razia never give up on the hope of bringing her husband back that is shown this movie.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - The director has beautifully portrayed the value of a girl in veil. He respects her for her veil as it is her choice and does not consider her inferior or superior to him due to it. She earns respect from her boyfriend, father and friends because of her behavior, education and whole a lot of things that make her complete but she chooses not to flaunt it, is what makes her more meaningful to their lives.

### 7.1.3 Chastity of Muslim women

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* - Amina resists in the initial stage for not getting married but later obeys her father and gets married to Moidukutty Haji (Sreenivasan) as his third wife. Her modesty is shown throughout the movie. She didn't disrespect her father's decisions but she agrees to her father's decisions.
- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - When the community takes decision about her life she didn't even said a word against as part of respect towards the elders. When others convinced her with the financial condition of her mother she didn't say anything back to her mother instead she obeyed them by marrying Razak by putting down her dreams.
- *Perumazhakkalam* - The role of Muslim man is always highlighted in a movie where he works and feeds his family with the money he earns. Razia shows that an ideal Muslim woman can also be an independent one and who tries to take care of her husband outside the four walls of the home, even if she is not the monetary earning member of the family. Towards the end, she receives the letter of forgiveness to be produced at the Court at Saudi Arabia and she saves her husband, fulfilling her duty.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - The uncle again threatened her; While Aisha comes to meet her father in the hospital by questioning her who let her to come outside the room. In this situation, she was standing without giving any answers to her uncle as part of respect.

### 7.1.4 Education

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -The second wife retaliates and explains to him that it was written so in the Holy book because of the war that occurred in that century which killed all the men and therefore in order to save their wives and not make them orphaned, the men married up to four wives.
- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - She was a bright student in her class and was keenly interested in studies. There was a scene where she chants a Malayalam poem to her friend that got already married in an early age and had a kid. Even after she got divorced by her husband she went to write her board exams. These all shows her interest in her studies.
- *Perumazhakkalam* - Education of Razia is not mentioned in the film it concentrates more on her life after marriage.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - When compared to other movies, the protagonist enjoys a kind of freedom that was more liberal and the one that comes with education. The protagonist in the film, who gives more importance to their thoughts and dreams of their lives.

## 7.2 MIS-EN-SCENE ANALYSIS

### 7.2.1 Title

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -The title is very much apt for the film because Kilichundan Mampazham means a 'ripe mango',

for the male protagonist the heroine is like a ripe mango. The girl was his childhood beloved and she was stolen by the people around him. Ironically, the fruit (mango) was stolen by the other birds around; likewise his lover was stolen by another man.

- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - The title *Padam onnu vilapam* (Lesson one: A wail), is very much apt to the story since the story ends with the moans of small babies that sitting near a river. 'Vilapam' means a deep moan, the heroine in this film weep, sob and scream throughout the film and the director shows her helpless situation and the film ends with a moan of group of babies and the first thing a baby learn is to cry from his/her birth.
- *Perumazhakkalam* -As the title suggests *Perumazhakkalam* (while it rains hard), the movie starts with a heavy rain .The director tells that the life was much harder for Razia to handle that life like a heavy rain. Rain gives silence after it showers hardly. Likewise, she continuously moans and weeps but, atlast everything coming back to normal and she will get her husband back eventhough she suffers a lot.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - The title, *Thattathin Marayathu* means 'Beneath the shadow of the veil' is very apt to the story since the film deals with the story of a Muslim girl and tells the beauty of her 'thattam' and her inner beauty.

### 7.2.2 Performance

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -The heroine in this film doesn't talk much, a submissive helpless character who marries a guy that was chosen by her parents as a third wife of her husband. Moreover, the sublime portrayal of a woman in visual culture could be a powerful way of imagining and representing selfhood but in this film it's not the case.
- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* -The heroine in this film plays the major part of the story, she has done the role of a tenth standard student, and she even won the national award for this film. She shows the emotions and expressions as an exact innocent girl in a village which shows her perfection in acting.
- *Perumazhakkalam* - The actress bring out all kinds of emotions according to the situation. She sobs in most of the scenes; hence the artist tries to reach the pain and sorrows to the audience. In the second part of the film she changes her mannerism. She starts to use her feminine strategies in order to get what she wants.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* -The hero's performance is an important in this story since he is telling about the story and the heroine who is silent, beautiful and showing as a bold character.

### 7.2.3 Close-up and gaze

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -In the scenes, the face of the female character is shed not only with daylight, but also with the lighting projectors. The lover in the film looks into heroine with love, care and respect. But the husband of the heroine who looks at her in a dominating way as if he has all his right to touch his wife without even her consent.
- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - A pan shot that is used when the boy riding a cycle to show the intensity of the subject, along a serious tone. A close up shot of the Razai's baby is shown by the cameraman in the film. The heroine always shows a fear towards her husband and she was not ready to sleep with since her husband always looks her with a lust in his mind.
- *Perumazhakkalam* - The film *Perumazhakkalam* is characterized by an intimate interplay between the actress and the camera. Whenever her eyes is filled with tears, the cameraman that focuses on her face, an extreme close-up shot that are used here to show the expressions and emotions.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - In the song, falling the water drops that are shown in close-up to indicate the romantic mood of the hero. When the heroine takes the pencil, white paper to write a letter back, an extreme close up shots are shown for her love and interest towards the hero.

### 7.2.4 Sets and props

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -The plot that happens in a small village and the market that shown have the props like pots

that made with clay, aluminum vessels ,coirs, bullock cart , cycles, pile of sacks, mats etc. In the climax scene the hero and heroine win their love is shown in front of a setting sun resembles that the problems in their life is solved where both accompany with a small boat.

- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - The props in the house are aluminum plates and pots, buckets, cycle, trees, birds, goats that shown to create a village atmosphere by the director. The textbook that shown gives a meaning that the director tries to highlight the education of the Muslim girls.
- *Perumazhakkalam* -A small village that is shown as a set in the movie. A small boat, umbrellas, goats, parrots, woods, fish net, the heavy rain, river that is used by the director frequently in the movie. When it rains, the lighting is shown as very low like darkness. That darkness creates depth or questions and the depth at the bottom of all art is something that illuminates the portrayal.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - In the beach we can see that toys, balloons, boats, icecreams etc. When the hero writes a love letter to heroine, the room is filled with colourful toys tells the audience that their love is going to be more colorful and vibrant.

### 7.2.5 Music and sound

- *Kilichundan Mampazham* -The film is surrounded by pleasant songs that show the happy moments of the hero and heroine, their dreams for the future etc. Sounds in films makes the shots more realistic, e.g. in the film ,where a picture of birds is accompanied with the sharp sound of flapping wings, making the spectator feel that he/she has the birds in front of him/her.
- *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* - The music and sound used in the movie is very fear-provoking and sad. A slow background score that is given by the director, when the divorced ladies go with their babies, along with this scene we can also see a boy who is riding a cycle, to show the intensity of the subject.
- *Perumazhakkalam* - Film dialogues, sounds or even silence also play important roles in the dialectics of the atmosphere. Razia remains silent in few situations to show the seriousness of a particular scene. The film sound usually aims at increasing the impression of reality. When it rains, the sound gives an ambience of dull and dark atmosphere that is apt to the situation.
- *Thattathin Marayathu* - The music and sound are almost romantic in this film. This plays an important role; especially this film is accompanied by melodies, fine dialogues, romantic genere of songs and background score.

### 8. FINDINGS

The movie, *Kilichundan Mampazham* focuses on the aspect of marriage and family in Islam. The movie is a clear depiction of the situation of many women who marry Muslim men who already have wives. They aren't aware of their rights into being married to a man who already have Muslim wives. It also shows clearly the situation of the wives who are not happy about their husbands marrying over and over again. In this movie men are instrumental to decide women's identity, future and the vulnerability of weaker sex is stressed.

The film, *Padam Onnu Oru Vilapam* throws light on the problems of child marriage prevailing in the Muslim community of Kerala. The film discusses the social problem of child marriage and exploitation of women in the name of religion which still persist in the Muslim community. The movie is also of a social commentary on the difficulty and complexity over divorce faced by Muslim women.

The movie, *Perumazhakkalam* focuses on the status issues of women as well as their marriage situation. The Muslim women depicted in this movie, have been a victim of harassment, disapproval of marriage by families and mostly opening up women to being free and able to take up their own decisions. However, the woman standing up for her husband's rights to bring him back to the home town and to fight for it is the highlight in the movie.

The movie, *Thattathin Marayathu* depicts the trauma of an inter-religious love of a young Hindu man and a beautiful Muslim

woman, and their ultimate triumph. The movie is unique for the first time on the silver screen where the love of a Hindu boy and a Muslim girl is shown as accepted by their family in the end of the story. The film portrayed a strong woman protagonist who belongs to minority community stands for her right and made men realize that women should be respected for their choice.

### 9. CONCLUSION

The films give a clear picture of how the representation of the Muslim women has been misinterpreted in the films taken into consideration. The idea of stereotyping appears to be contradictory in the case of cinema and religion. As far as the religion is concerned, an ideal Muslim woman is seen as someone who is capable of following her dreams yet taking care of her family, respects her parents, satisfies her husband and well-educated in the field that interests her. The research focused mainly on trying to identify this stereotyped image of women in the selected movies.

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