



The Representation of Women in Film Sequels: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Cinema continues to be one of the most popular mass media forms of the time with India being the industry bringing out the most number of films every year. Cinema also got its industry standards by giving homes to multiple film labourers. Film sequels have been a major money-spinning practice in contemporary film markets all across the globe. Every major production house belonging to industries like Hollywood comes up with a sequel of a successful film eyeing the financial benefits. Very few sequels have lived up to the expectations that the viewers had, in comparison to the first film of the series.

In the Indian regional film scenario, we can see that there are many industries like Malayalam which have seen a significant number of film sequels being made and generating huge financial as well as critical success. Though there have been studies on the impact, relevance and financial gain of these films and their sequel, one of the areas which hasn't been explored is how women are represented in these films. One major aspect of many of these films and their sequels is that they mostly ignore the female characters (including the female lead in many cases) which had importance in the first film, but not in the sequel. In this paper titled 'The Representation of Women in Film Sequels: A Comparative Analysis', we will be looking at selected movies and their sequels (2013 – 2023) which belong to the past decade in Malayalam. Through content analysis and critical discourse analysis, the research investigates the relevance of the role played by the female lead or other female characters in comparison to the first film. By comparing the representation of women in original films with their depiction in subsequent sequels, this research aims to bring to light the patterns of continuity, progression or regression of female characters.

Keywords: Gender, Film studies, Female portrayal, Sequel, Malayalam cinema.



Introduction

The Film Industry of Kerala (Malayalam Cinema) is known for its approach towards content as well as artistry. Pioneered by J.C. Daniel, the maker of *Vigathakumaran* (1930), Malayalam cinema has witnessed several film movements spearheaded by stalwarts like G. Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, K.G. George and many others. The cultural and political backdrop of many of these films has been studied extensively by many researchers all across the globe. From its inception, the Industry was dominated by male filmmakers and actors and the story of the first actress of the Industry (P.K.Rosy who played the role of Sarojini in *Vigathakumaran*) is a testament to the social and political scenario of then Kerala. P.K.Rosy (aka Rosamma), who was a Pulaya Christian, was forced to flee from Capitol Theatre (the venue of the premiere of *Vigathakumaran*) due to the reactions of viewers belonging to the upper caste who couldn't accept her playing the role of Sarojini, who according to the screenplay, was a nair upper cast lady. The plight of women in industry continues to fall in line with this history of injustice.

Kerala is a state in India which is known for its high literacy rate and also the intellect of the common people. From the 1950s till now the state has undergone several stages of cultural and social transformation. The Malayalam Cinema has been a mirror reflection of these stages which can be observed in films belonging to different periods. From the struggling phase of the 1940s to the period of consolidation and expansion in the late 1950s, the film industry of Kerala developed into an International platform which produced several critically acclaimed and commercially successful films. The first female actor to enjoy significant stardom was Ms. Kumari, who paired up with actors like Satyan in several films including *Neelakkuyil* (1954) which was the first South Indian film to win the All India Certificate of Merit for Best Feature Film at the 2nd National Film Awards of India. In an industry which still is backward in terms of workplace rights, an internal complaints committee for redress of grievances, or even proper workplace conditions, it is interesting to note that Miss Kumari happened to be one of the first women to sign a written contract for the films she did during her times.



Stereotypes in the portrayal of female characters in the 1960s and early 70s are another important aspect of Malayalam Cinema. Commercial cinema always had formulas which were rarely broken by actors like Sheela, who enjoyed a very successful combination with Prem Nazir. Female lead characters were often shown as the love interest of the protagonist with a template appearance according to the story. The costumes and make-up for these characters would change according to the role and how they are presented to the audience. Sheela acted in several films as the protagonist and some of those films had the lead male characters played by actors like Sathyan, Prem Nazir and Madhu. *Ashwamedham* (1967) directed by A. Vincent is among those very few films which had a sequel even after dealing with a female-centric story. *Sarasayya* (1971) directed this time by the writer himself (Thoppil Bhasi) won the Kerala State Award for best feature film that year.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan introduced the concept of parallel cinema in Malayalam. Most of their films had significant female characters. Films like *Swayamvaram* (1972) featuring Sharada and Madhu, were recognised by audiences across the country. The film was also screened in several International film festivals like the Moscow International Film Festival and also secured the National Award for best feature film that year.

Even when Malayalam cinema was finding its heights within and across borders, what remained an unspoken episode in the history of Malayalam cinema was its approach towards women on and off screen. Women continued to face the sequel of atrocity which PK Rosy, the first female actor on stage underwent. Like how PK Rosy had to flee for her life, not even getting a chance to see her on-screen at least once, to a far-off distant alien land, by leaving her name and identity behind, the women in Malayalam continue to make a wander in an attempt to reclaim their name and identity.

This study titled, “The Representation of Women in Film Sequels: A Comparative Analysis” aims to study how women are represented in film sequels. There has been immense scholarly research on the portrayal of women on screen and the stereotypes attached to them. However, not much emphasis has been given to the depiction of these women across sequels. Though Malayalam cinema has witnessed multiple sequels over the years, there



haven't been enough studies on the female leads in such cinema. The study also roughly looks at the women who have worked off-screen in the selected films to draw a correlation. In an industry which is older than a century, the definition of cinema as a workplace continues to be a blurred concept. There have hardly been any studies about the workplace conditions of cinema, the labour laws pertaining to the cinema or the gender injustices including the casting couch, #metoo allegations, wage disparity remains an unspoken practice in the industry. Though the general idea of workplace harassment is skewed to sexual harassment, the Vishaka guidelines clearly state other forms of harassment including the pay policies and denial of work. In an industry that has blinded itself from the law of the land including the constitution of an IC at the workplace to address the concerns of the workers on set, this study aims to look at how such forms of injustice or workplace harassment is translated on-screen across film sequels.

For the study, the period in Malayalam cinema post-2010, popularly known as the New Age in Malayalam cinema which commenced with the film Traffic is considered. The period is otherwise known as 'new generation cinema' considering the thematic changes that appeared in the content of cinema. The period is also significant for the crisis that happened within the Malayalam film industry concerning the abduction and alleged rape of a female actor which in turn led to the formation of the first all-women film collective in Malayalam cinema, the Women in Cinema Collective made for the rights of women working in cinema.

Review of Literature

Feminism and Representation of Women in Contemporary Malayalam Cinema by Stenza Augustine under the supervision of Kailash C Baral. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/350631>

The study correlates the social conditions prevalent in the state with the representation of women in contemporary Malayalam cinema. However, it fails to compare or address the comparison between films with the sequels

Cast as the female lead counter discourses in imaging women in Kerala films by Jumana P under the supervision of Sudha KP <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/242405>



Methodology

The paper attempts to bridge the gap between the depiction of women in individual films as opposed to their importance and portrayal in sequels. The study involves the textual analysis of Malayalam films which were released post-2010 and which have at least one subsequent sequence. However, the study is not looked at in terms of cinematic techniques like cinematography, editing, sound design and so on, but in terms of the narrative structure and screen space given to the female characters. The films are observed with the backing of feminist film theories, the male gaze and the Bechdel test. The Bechdel test, otherwise known as the Bechdel-Wallace test was introduced in 1985 to measure the representation of women in fiction. Three criteria are looked at in this realm:

1. The work must at least feature two female characters
2. The two female characters must at least have dialogues or must be engaged in a conversation
3. The conversation between the two female characters must be about something other than a man or men.

The idea of using the Bechdel test for the study is to study the gender imbalance on screen and to draw a comparative analysis between the film and its sequel. This looks at the female characters in the first film which were carried over to its sequel, the screen space and importance given to these characters, the introduction of other female characters and lead in the sequel and so on.

Findings Analysis

Sequels in Malayalam Cinema

Malayalam Cinema has had many successful series and sequels in the past. The first film which had a sequel was *Aana Valarthiya Vanampadi* (1959). The sequel of the film was released after 12 years in 1971. Sequel-making started becoming popular in the Industry in the 60s. Many films like *Thacholi Othenan* (1964), *Kayamkulam Kochunni* (1966) and *Ashwamedham* (1967) had sequels which also introduced the possibility of establishing a movie franchise in Malayalam. Malayalam cinema also has the credit for producing one of the most Iconic movie franchises of the country, The CBI film series which has 5 films with



the same protagonist and repeated characters. Another significant series is the *Nadodikattu* trilogy (popularly known as the Dasan and Vijayan series) which is among those Malayalam films which enjoy the maximum repeat value.

From the beginning of sequels in Malayalam, the Industry has been sticking to the template also with the protagonists being men. This has been broken very rarely by a few films like *Ashwamedham* (1967) and *Achanurangatha Veedu* (2006) which had female protagonists in the sequel.

In this paper, we are looking at the last 10 years of Malayalam Cinema (2013-2023). Below mentioned are the films and their sequels that were released during this period.

Drishyam (2013)

Drishyam 2 (2021)

Honey Bee: Its Tripping (2013)

Honey Bee 2 : Celebrations (2017)

Punyalan Agarbattis (2013)

Punyalan Private Ltd. (2017)

Pretham (2016)

Pretham 2 (2018)

Aadu oru Bheekara Jeeviyanu (2015)

Aadu 2 (2017)

Drishyam (2013) directed by Jeethu Joseph was the first Malayalam film to gross over 50 crores. The film became a huge success and it was remade in several languages like Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Hindi. Mohan Lal played the role of George Kutty who is forced to cover up a crime committed by his family unintentionally. The screenplay of the film had strong female representation with four female characters enjoying significant screen time and dialogues. The characters were

- a) Rani - George Kutty's wife
- b) Anju - George Kutty's elder daughter
- c) Anu - George Kutty's younger daughter

- d) IG Geetha Prabhakar - Mother of Varun who is accidentally killed by Rani and Anju during an attempt of blackmailing and molestation.

The film was watched to collect the below-mentioned data which explains the screen time and dialogue time (time for completing a dialogue) of each of these characters in Drishyam.

Rani		Anju		Anu		Geetha prabhakar	
Screen time	Dialogue	Screen time	Dialogue	Screen time	Dialogue	Screen time	Dialogue
51.7	10.37	40.18	5.58	27.88	2.17	23.42	9.67

The total running time of the film was 164 minutes. The character Rani had 51.7 minutes of screen time which is 31.52% of the total film screen time. The character Anju had 40.18 minutes of screen time which is 24.5% of the total film screen time. The characters Anu and Geetha Prabhakar had 17% and 14.2% respectively.

Even though these numbers are impressive an argument is about the dialogue time which is comparatively less. A justification for this is that there are several scenes in the film where there are events like the characters murdering with the following act of burial of the dead body. Most of these scenes had very few dialogues being exchanged between the characters. In Drishyam 2 (2021) the director and writer Jeethu Joseph introduced a few more female characters to the story. It was a continuation of the police investigation of Varun's murder, which was unsuccessful in Drishyam. The character Saritha played by Anjali Nair had a significant role in the story. Jeethu Joseph continued with all the female characters from Drishyam and we analyzed these characters with the same scale of screen time and dialogue time.

Rani		Anju		Anu		Geetha Prabhakar	
Screen time	Dialogue	Screen time	Dialogue	Screen time	Dialogue	Screen time	Dialogue
36	11.9	14.8	1.5	11.8	3.6	11.1	3.3



The total running time of Drishyam 2 was 153 minutes. The character Rani had 36 minutes of screen time which is 23.52% of the total screen time of the film. The character Anju had 14.8 minutes which is 9.6% of the screen time. The character Anu had 7.7% and Geetha Prabhakar had 7.2 % of the total screen time respectively.

A quantitative comparison of the screen time and dialogue time of the characters belonging to Drishyam and Drishyam 2 indicates that there is a significant drop. Even though the inclusion of a few other characters (both male and female) can be mentioned as one reason, these numbers still hint towards the characters losing the space that was given to them in Drishyam.

We have not looked at the screen time and dialogue time of the character Saritha as she was not a part of Drishyam. Most of her scenes with dialogues were with Rani played by Meena which also contributed to the screen time of Rani, which is another reason for not considering this new character as a major reason for the drop in screen time for other female characters.

Two other female characters added to Drishyam 2 were Mary and her Mother-in-law (mother of Jose). Both are connected with the story through a character Jose, who accidentally witnesses Georgekutty burying Varun's dead body in the Police Station. These characters are not seen throughout the film and have very little screen time and dialogue time hence they were also not considered for the comparative analysis.

Another character is the lawyer of George Kutty (played by Santhi Mayadevi) who is again having very little screen time and dialogue time in Drishyam 2. Since this character was not a part of Drishyam we excluded her from the analysis.

Even though we cannot conclude that the characters with less screen time always are less impactful, we can still consider screen time as a major element while comparing the importance given to each character in a film. The situations and scenes these characters were a part of are also decisive in the analysis. Let us look at the presence of these characters in the most important scenes of Drishyam.

Scene	Rani	Anju	Anu	Geetha
Murder of Varun	yes	yes	no	no
Police Interrogation	yes	yes	yes	yes
Climax sequence	yes	yes	yes	yes

You can observe that the female characters were present in the most important scenes of Drishyam. Now let us look at Drishyam 2

Scene	Rani	Anju	Anu	Geetha
Police recovering the body of Varun	no	no	no	no
Police Interrogation	yes	yes	yes	yes
Courtroom sequence	no	no	no	no
conclusion	no	no	no	yes

You can observe that the same female characters were absent in the most important scenes and sequences of Drishyam 2.

Honeybee: Its Tripping was released in the year 2013 and, was written and directed by Jean Paul Lal (otherwise known as Lal Jr). The film features the then ‘new generation’ actors including Asif Ali, Bhavana, Sreenath Bhasi, Archana Kavi, Balu Varghese and so on. This romantic thriller revolves around the discovery of love and the struggle for their survival depicted using elements of comedy. The sequel to this titled Honeybee 2: Celebrations was released in the year 2017. Compared to the first part, Honeybee 2 was not received well at the box office. The two films were analyzed on the basis of the Bechdel test to understand the ‘women-friendly’ nature of the film.



The film Honeybee - Its Tripping, opens with a dance/choreography sequence where the lead actress Bhavana who plays Angel is being ill-treated and abused by her character actor during a dance rehearsal. The scene shows no element of 'legal' action taken against this. Application of the Bechdel test for the film indicated the importance given to female characters in Malayalam cinema. There were only two instances in the film where there were conversations between any two women characters on screen, both being about another man. However, it is important to note that the character Angel played by Bhavana appears throughout the film with almost equal space and screen time as her male counterparts, and Sara played by Archana Kavi appears at multiple crucial moments in the film.

The content of the film is filled with patriarchal ideas of women, virginity and jokes with distinct sexual connotations. One major conversation between Angel and SI George (Angel's fiance) is about her virginity. When he clearly reveals that he is not a 'virgin' the film makes sure to assert the virginity of the heroine. The film also has a muted portion with a 45-second scene where the characters discuss the bra size of a Tamil heroine with graphic details. Another instance of a conversation between two women is between Sara and Ferno's brother about Ambrose. There are also significant body-shaming remarks made against Ferno's mother played by Ponnamma Babu. With regards opening credits of the film, it is important to note that the only women in the entire crew were for Lyrics and Assistant Direction. Though not explicitly, this shows the 'male-ness' of the film.

The second part of this film was released in the year 2017. One of the major shifts that was found in the film was the replacement of three significant female characters with new cast members. With absolutely no mention in the title cards, three significant roles - Ancy, Lissa and Sara which were played by Melba Babu, Praveena and Archana Kavi were replaced by Krishnaprabha, Kavitha Nair and Arya Babu respectively. Though the characters continue the director or the members of the crew found no need to mention the change of cast. However, the open credits had the involvement of two women, one as the assistant cinematographer and the other as the production manager.



The sequel of the film was no less male. It continued to have explicit dialogues with sexual connotation. There were several statements degrading women as mere tools for gossip by belittling them. There were also extremely objective shots of women in the film purely adding to the male gaze even in the current age. One of these shots became controversial when the woman who played the character filed a complaint against the director and producer of the film for using a body double without her permission to shoot such scenes. In comparison to the first film a major addition is the role played by Lena. However, in terms of screen space and time, Bhavana shared much less screen time in comparison to the first.

Conclusion

The Malayalam film industry is known for its depiction of social realities and for being a mirror to the evil practices happening around. From its inception, the industry has had both commercial and critical acclaim. It has also been successful in rendering the changing socio-political scenarios of the state. However, a study of the representation of women in film sequels: a comparative analysis, done of films and their sequels which appeared post-2010 in the so-called age of 'new generation' cinema reveals the primitiveness adopted by the industry in terms of its representation of women on and off screen. The context of the release of these films adds constructively to the gap between representation and social reality in cinema. Even when women were achieving tremendously within but outside the film industry by even giving rise to a women-led social movement like Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) this wasn't being reflected on screen. This can also be interpreted along with the reception received by such a collective in the age-old 'man's' business called cinema. Taking the base of feminist theory, the women represented in these films continue to be depicted as weak, innocent, seductive or irrationally sentimental with absolutely no rights over self or the system. In the film studied, though the first film of the series had much more screen space and importance to the character, it was found that the sequels revealed a significant decline in this.



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