

From Subjugation to Subversion: Tracing the Trajectory of Female Resistance in selected Malayalam Cinema

Elsa Mariam Abraham

The concept and representation of female resistance in Malayalam cinema has been a subject that has been deepened over the course of time by its evolution on characters inspired by the roles and situations of real life. The change has been aided by societal change, gender dynamics, socio and political changes with time. From the early 1950's when Malayalam cinema was stepping foot in the film industry, it portrayed women as "sacrificial figures", "embodiment of tragedy" right from that time of reality as socially and ideally signified wives, daughter and sister, who are bent to follow the highly traditional and moral patriarchal society it was then. Women were portrayed as characters that endure and survive structural violence for the sake of family name and children. They didn't know how to live and resist situations that subjugated them. The characters in films like *Neelakuyil* (1954) and *Rathinirvedam* (1978) are classic examples of the oppression and helplessness women had to face by the patriarchal system of that time. During that time, women were unable to recognise the traits of female resistance in them as they are traditionally brought up and systematically trained to be a subject to the patriarchal system. Their emotions and small acts of resistance were confined to the constraints of the four walls they were in. The women in these films are put out as characters that endure hardship with patience. There was very minimal indirect and direct resistance, but there wasn't any active form of defiance from their side which allowed the society to harnish them over. This was the common theme rather manipulation that was found during that time was the dismissal of women's emotional suffering considering the fact that resistance was an individual's subjective feeling rather than an over action on that time when women were enforced with societal and familial norms. (Joseph, Bindhu. "Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies." *Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2016, pp. 145–158.) The 1980's time period started to witness the emergence of strong female characters in the Malayalam cinema. Even though their female resistance was largely controlled by the societal and cultural norms of that time, there were traces of female resistance and it was largely implicit rather than explicit. Filmmakers like G. Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan created female characters giving more power to their agency in films like *Chidambharam* (1985) and *Vidheyam* (1993) showing women as more self aware and resistant during the time of adversities inflicting complexity in the films. In 1990's there was a shift in the way filmmakers started to portray the female characters in the films. Women started to be recognised in the films, from mere supporting characters in the films to active roles coming against men through independent filmmakers such as Priyadrashan and Sathiyam Anthikad. Films such as *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) and *Kilukkam* (1996) portrayed women in depth, giving them autonomy over their female agency. More feminist tales emerged in 2000's resisting familial, societal and cultural norms of that time period implicitly and explicitly. Women were not only assertive in personal lives but actively resisted oppressive forces on the big screen. One good example that can be taken is the character of Gnaga played by Shobhana in *Manichithrathazhu*. She exemplifies a multifaceted and self reliant woman who fights back to the oppressive forces of the patriarchal society in a psychological way. In Films like *Perumazhakalam* women are represented as supporting each other as both the characters in the film face almost the same adversity in their lives. From 2010's women were portrayed as active agents in their lives, films like *Rani Padmini* (2014), *Puthiya Niyamam* (2016), *Take Off* (2017), *Uyare* (2019), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) the female characters showcased different kinds of female resistance from opposing gender based discrimination in both personal and professional lives claiming their autonomy overtly and covert forms of revolt.

Indirect and Direct Forms of Resistance

In Malayalam Cinema, female resistance has been portrayed in different ways according to each time period reflecting on the evolving roles of women and the adversities they face in their lives. Malayalam cinema has been a significant force in displaying resistance in a subtle and overt way matching the context of the realities around us. It

captures essences and depth in realities that the audience automatically connects over critiquing the patriarchal structures, gender dynamics and cultural norms. The depiction of female resistance is deeply tied to the social, political and cultural context in Kerala spreading out to issues like caste, class, religion intersecting with gender dynamics. Indirect form of female resistance in Malayalam cinema is portrayed through silence and subtle situations where in the character gradually leaving a situation denied her autonomy for a long time. The small act gives more power to action than words which gives a deep insight into the audience. Direct Resistance is an overt action where the character explicitly rises over a situation, turning their autonomy into empowerment and actively defying societal norms. The independent and New Wave Cinema has been a major influential force for the enhancement of strong female characters on screen. This led to the complex delivery portrayal of women's lives and the subtle and overt forms of resistance each context holds on. They resist oppressions, redefine the narrative and navigate the societal, familial and cultural context. From subtle acts of rebellion to overt defiance Malayalam cinema has explored the various portrayal of female resistance through multiple genres and characters.

In *Ullozhukku* (2024) directed by Christo Tomy, the plight of the female characters is put out in two different contexts. Leelamma represents the traditional patriarchal system through widowhood which automatically turns her as an enforcer and Anju who represents the modern era but is forced to abide by the societal and familial norms and give up on her desire in life. In most of the scenes her resistance is manipulated and overruled in the name of love by the families around her and her relationship with Rajeev. Anju's resistance was a liberation to set her free from the emotional baggage of life which she was living for others. *"In the collective imagination, the woman is the other; she is the one who is defined by the other's point of view"* (De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage Books, pg 40).). In the scene (32:33-32:56) when Anju returned back from hospital for Thomaskutty's funeral in the home, the first thing as she did while entering their room was removing all the things that belonged to Thomaskutty, such as his watch, medicines, photo frames and made the bed. This implies a cleansing of mind as a form of subtle resistance of Anju which was overruled by Leelamma as she entered the room the next day and kept the photo frames of his son back. This implies a motherly affection for the son after his death but the complete erasure of the character Anju. Here the perspective of Anju was tarnished and walked over by the character Leelamma making a replacement and diminishing of Anju's context. The quote by Behavior holds much in the context as women historically and in a collective imagination over the period have been treated as 'other' and defined after men diminishing their autonomy by the societal and cultural context.

In the scene (1:36:32-1:37:03) Rajeev, the lover of Anju insists her to get the property of Leelamma as she wishes to change to Anju's name after the death of his son Thomaskutty thinking that the child Anju carry is Leelamma's grandchild. Anju says to Rajeev "I am leaving this place. Do we really need it?" Here, Rajeev exerts an indirect form of structural violence through manipulating and pressuring her in the name of love. In a broader view Rajeev is portrayed as a man who wants to have a place in society and his greediness over material wealth. Rajeev manipulates Anju by saying that " If you have loved me like the way I loved you, you wouldn't have refused the property Leelamma wishes to give you." Women are considered as emotional beings rather than people who work on rational thinking. Rajeev uses the same approach towards Anju and is completely portrayed as a dismantled character. But things take a shift when Rajeev considers Anju as a commodity, putting a price for her in order to take back into his life as she slept with another man. "I am accepting you even after you slept with another man. Nothing is greater than that right?" Anju is being objectified by Rajeev, at the end it is the woman who is blamed for and the statement completely proves her situation. On the other hand Leelamma blames Anju for the relation she has with Rajeev despite Thomaskutty being alive. Leelamma states that Anju 'cheated' her son and her family. Leelamma tries to change her perspective towards Anju when she realizes that she is going to be alone in her life after Thomaskutty funeral, as her whole life has been him and her identity is unclear like a water. Her confrontation to Anju that she kept away his sickness of Thomaskutty partly from her gives an insight of truth into their relationship for the first time and over the time the female characters connect and bounce back together.

In the (scene 1:51:05-1:52:00) Anju realises the true intention of Rajeev. She gets light on her thoughts that Rajeev is manipulating her in the name of love. She also understands the true intentions of Leelamma despite her wrongs to Anju she was the only character who truly understood her and spoke truth in their relationship which was the ultimate

reason Anju chose to be with her. In the last shot of the film we can see Anju subtly walking away from Rajeev which can be seen as her walking away from the emotional baggage Rajeev imposed upon her. When Rajeev threatens her in the name of child, Anju is not even misplaced in her thoughts about staying or leaving and finally she is clear on what she wants in her life. This scene in the film regains her agency and autonomy as a woman which was lost by feeding other society, family and relationships. The fact that at the end decides to not go to her own home is that her mother filled her with lies with regard to the marriage proposal of Thomaskutty, but hiding his sickness regarding marrying her off to a good family. On the other hand Leelamma approached Anju with love and truth towards the end of the film which gave her acceptance of her character for the first time in the movie.

Both scenes have been regulated by actions over words. Acting over a situation can bring attention over the context but action leads to concrete outcomes. Christo Tomy has evidently used the same in both the female characters in regaining back their agency differently. Through the last scene in the movie, action holds more power than words wouldn't hold in that particular situation as the patriarchal norms can diminish the voice of women and make them feel ignored and silenced. Action disrupts the status quo and labels the women as rebellious and disrespectful. On the same hand, abiding by patriarchal norms takes away autonomy in ones' life. Action displays taking over power and independence over one's life, the decision to stay and leave in a place, the realization of belonging and the quest for truth doesn't need to be chased over. Taking action to resist the oppressive forces gives more power to handle life alone and not by others. Action often heals trauma, enables one to make better choices for oneself, asserts control over circumstances and reclaim strength.

In *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) an extremely overt female resistance takes place from the character Jaya. From her childhood to womanhood she has been a passive subject under patriarchy. When her husband Rajesh started abusing her without any specific reason, she reached out to her parents to help her out. But both her parents tried to find supportive statements in what Rajesh did and forced her to endure and adjust in the family relationship as a typical family household. Jaya realised that nobody was coming to save her from the situation but herself. She relied on technology and equipped her with the physical skill of resisting back. She becomes an active subject when Rajesh slaps her and she slaps back. She turned her empowerment into a refined female heroic moment for the woman out here. Through Jaya's transformative journey from passive to active autonomy, Vipin Das in a satirical way was able to instill light onto women who are directly or indirectly a part of this same situation. It was Jaya's helplessness over her situation that turned her into a being who reclaimed her agency which was dismantled by her family, relationships and her marriage in societal and cultural context.

In the *scene* (45:50-45:56) Rajesh slaps Jaya multiple times and she addresses the issue to her mother first and in return her reply is "Women should adjust. It's just a slap and that too is not publicly right. He is fine in other ways right?" This statement is a powerful reflection of Jaya's mother being an enforcer of the traditional patriarchal system in a household and familial context. Jaya's mother advises her the same context she lived with her husband, here she not only normalises domestic abuse but disconsiders the plight of Jaya while upholding the notions of societal and cultural aspects. "*The chief institution of patriarchy is the family. It is here that the socialization to accept male dominance begins, and where violence is most often used to maintain it*" (Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Columbia UP, 2016.) Through the character of Jaya's mother the societal and cultural conditioning in a patriarchal system is evident. The phrase 'just a slap' narrows down the plight of Jaya, the emotional and psychological impact a person has when they go through an abusive and oppressive force. The mindset asserts a notion of women as 'tolerators' to accept her role in a marriage and household and adapt to the partner's behaviour despite how abusive he might be. The idea of 'adjusting' suggests that women are responsible for maintaining the peace back at home and for that they have to endure and suffer all the hardships despite denying their autonomy. By focusing on the fact that Rajesh didn't slap her publicly suggests that the acceptance and normalization of domestic violence as long it is hidden. This act is being silenced and given very less concern by her to her daughter's situation. It is a clear form of abandonment that after marriage it is Jaya's sole responsibility to cope up, adjust and tolerate, hence she can survive her life. In the *scene* (47:40) Jaya addresses the issue to her father and he replies "It's part of life." Here also there is active normalization of domestic violence and a perspective that this is how a marriage

life is being carried out. He lacks the growth to perceive the plight of her own daughter as he is engrained in the patriarchal system and is a follower of the same in his life. But telling that statement he is indirectly implying to Jaya to adjust and tolerate in the context of marriage and dismantle the challenge that comes in regard with it. *"The home is the most dangerous place for a woman... because male power is most absolute there"* (Dworkin, Andrea. *Letters from a War Zone: Writings 1976–1989*. Lawrence Hill Books, 1993.) Here through Jaya's father's response a belief is being seen as men can raise their hands onto women which is being justified as the role of providers and women as to endure as they lack independence. An unavoidable and inherent gender dynamic of marriage is seen in this context. In the *scene* (48:30) Rajesh's sister tells Jaya "People will say it is your fault." Through this response women are the active recipients to create an issue in the household when they try to resist the oppressive and abusive forces put upon them. Rajesh's sister implicitly supports the patriarchal narrative here, through her own life. This kind of toxic reasoning burdens the women as their response will provoke or disrupt the familial relationship. After Jaya's multiple futile attempts to convey her situation to her family, she realises that she is her own and so is her safety. *"To transgress, to act out, to defy is a practice of freedom and a gesture of rebellion"* (hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. South End Press, 2000.) In the *scene* (51:38) when Rajesh attempts to assault her, Jaya retaliates here. This moment is symbolic, cathartic and highly an overt form of female resistance from Jaya as she slaps back Rajesh. Vipin Das has portrayed the scene in a very satirical way but also tried to imply the essence of the empowerment of the character Jaya. Here we can see Jaya shifting from a passive subject to an active subject, thus reclaiming her identity for the first time by herself. She is making a stark heroic moment for her here. By her decision to learn Karate techniques from Youtube and constantly parking it from the sources that are available for her she is able to protect her safety on her own. Here social media acts as a tool for resistance for Jaya and through this context the filmmaker throws light onto women who are indirectly and hiddenly going through a situation like this who is denied the basic rights of freedom and independence. By using social media in the right way to equip yourself with skills and redefine your talents, it gives voice and space to people who lack it due to the patriarchal controls. When Jaya resists, there is a shift of fear to Rajesh as he never expected the form of resistance from here. There is a shift of power to Jaya from here, explicitly signifying that she is not going to endure violence anymore. There is reclaiming of her identity through action as before when she used it with conveying through words, it was overruled by adjustment and tolerance. After the fight scene Jaya returns back to the kitchen to serve lunch for Rajeev. Her act of defiance was to dismantle the power Rajesh has over her body and save her from the abusive forces. Jaya here is still not resisting the oppressive forces through internalised patriarchy here. Jaya thinks to herself that it is still her duty to maintain the household, even though she had put up the act of resisting the violence.

Reclaiming the Character's Identity

"To love well, we must learn to love ourselves. To love ourselves, we must be free of the psychological oppression of patriarchal systems." (hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 3rd ed., South End Press, 2000.) In the film, *Ullozhukku* Anju's realization of self worth is sparked by the manipulation she received. It started from families, society and finally the relationship she had with Rajeev. When Rajeev manipulated her in the name of love, that is when she completely lost herself. Because all the sufferings she has endured is to have a life with him and now for Rajeev to accept her back into his life he has put a price for her. Anju's decision to leave Rajeev and not go back to her own home, thus choosing Leelamma represents her reclaiming her identity and liberating herself from the emotional baggage she had been carrying. From that decision Anju also saves Leelamma from the loneliness and the emotional baggage she was carrying. Anju decided to prioritize emotional truth and authentic connection over the manipulative relationships she had till now. Even though Leelamma has treated Anju wrong, she had the mind to accept and confront that to her which automatically led to the connection of both the female characters. Anju's decision on choosing Leelamma at the end portrays her to prioritize truth and mutual respect in a film. To an extent both the female characters have been going through a similar adversity but placed in two different contexts. Ultimately they both want to liberate themselves from the emotional control and reclaim their identities.

“No one is more arrogant toward women, more aggressive or scornful, than the man who is anxious about his virility.” (Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011 pg 201) In the scene (1:22:40) In the scene (1:22:40) Rajesh and his brother plan to make Jaya pregnant to deform the identity she has gained from resisting the abusive forces from Rajesh. “Get her pregnant” “Be a real man” dialogues convey a deeply ingrained patriarchal system in Rajesh and his brother. Getting Jaya pregnant will automatically change her focus into motherhood and household thus dismantling the current resisting power she had put forward. Being a real man conveys the patriarchal power of a man, by asserting power over Jaya, seeing her body as a reproduction vessel and stripping her identity and making her powerless with the title of motherhood. In the scene (1:44:44-1:50:55) Jaya after realising that Rajesh approached her with lies and faking love to get her pregnant, her bp shoots and loses the way through miscarriage. In this context Rajesh family and her own family corner and blame Jaya for losing the child and doesn’t consider her situation mentally or physically. When Jaya decides not to return with Rajeev to his home, Jaya’s father said “ You can’t come with us, that is my home.” explicit a deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset and lack of emotional support for his own daughter. In this context Jaya’s context is tripped away from her own family disregarding her from their home, and after marriage it is not the parents’ concern on what a woman faces in the marriage and in the household. This also reflects that the position and belonging of a woman is decided by the men in their life. First it was controlled by Jaya’s father and now by Rajesh. In the scene (1:53:38) Jaya’s father questions her after the decision that she is not willing to go back with Rajesh to his home. “Do you have money?” “Do you have a job?” This questions her financial independence which her own family took away from her and compelled her for marriage. Jaya’s parents denied her the basic rights of Freedom and the choice in education matters And when an issue came they are the first people to question and tore her identity based on the financial freedom when she is resisting and no more willing to take the oppressive forces from her marriage. In the scene (1:54:26) Rajesh questions Jaya to pay half the expense of the hospital bill saying “the baby was mine too.” In the scene (1:59:05) a conversation happens between both the families based on dowry. Jaya’s family didn’t give dowry as Rajesh family didn’t ask for one and Rajesh mother replies that giving dowry for your child is a basic decency you should have. Dowry even this time plays a deeply ingrained patriarchal tool in marriages which objectifies women and stripes their autonomy in the marriage household. The Rajesh family positioned them as progressive in the eyes of Jaya and her family when they stated that all they want is a “good girl” for Rajesh. But tables turned when real faces came out from them and all the root cause lies when Jaya made her resistance. Jaya walks out from the hospital and her brother reaches out to her and Jaya replies back “This is the first decision I have taken in my life. Please don’t ask me to undo it.” This a statement not about rejecting a violent marriage, but claiming selfhood, independence and the power to shape her own identity. “Being oppressed means the absence of choices. The moment we choose to fight back, we reclaim our agency” (hooks, bell. *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press, 1981.) Jaya moves beyond defensive resistance to assertive resistance when she decides to live on her own terms.

Emotional and Physical Liberation

“The liberation of women is the liberation of the human being as a whole.” (de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage Books, 2011.) In the film *Ullozhukku* Anju’s liberation can be seen as the ultimate form of subtle resistance. Anju decides to liberate herself mentally and physically from the tides of her family and the relationship with Rajeev. It was Rajeev’s indifference to her that made Anju realise and make a decision for herself to leave him. That was the most powerful yet subtle form of action in the form of resistance. It was implicit yet carried the depth of the context. With her decision to leave Rajeev automatically led her to choose Leelamma because at the end Leelamma has approached Anju with acceptance and truth. Anju chooses self respect and truth because she has been denied the same from everyone except Leelamma at the end. The physical act of walking away in the last scene symbolises Anju putting an end to the oppressive forces that have been controlling her.

In the film *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, scene (1:58:07-1:59:05) Jaya’s mother comes and calls her back to home. When Jaya realises it was at Rajesh’s home she denies it. Her mother says “Your father said you won’t listen. You are born to make other people say bad things about you.” Jaya’s mother, a woman herself, enforces the patriarchal belief that a woman’s ultimate purpose is to conform, sacrifice, and preserve the reputation of her family. This ultimately throws

light onto Jaya that her liberation comes with a call for her financial independence. Jaya acquiring this state of being also learned to say 'no' in situations where she doesn't pertain to be in. In the last scene we can see Jaya owning a business of her own, just with her intelligence because she has been denied to own a business over her own as she lacks basic degree education and crosses the competitor that is her husband Rajesh. Jaya's journey highlights that resistance is not just personal but also systemic *"Without the ability to generate an income, women remain economically dependent, often trapped in abusive relationships. Gaining financial power is a crucial step toward liberation"* (hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.) . By building her own space, she proves that women can exist beyond the roles society imposes on them. Her story becomes a model of resistance, showing other women that they, too, can liberate themselves from the ties of societal expectations and cultural norms.

Conclusion

Malayalam cinema is fiercely challenging patriarchal norms through strong narrative like films such as *Ullozhukku* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*. Through these films it portrays that resistance is not only about confrontation but about reclaiming identities and rewriting one's narrative. As these narratives evolve they not only display women navigating through these adversities but also for a slow change on gender dynamics, liberation and agency. Audre Lorde's perspective that *"self-care is an act of political warfare"* is deeply relevant here. Women have to continuously resist these oppressive forces in personal and professional lives. True freedom comes when women can live and stop surviving and tackling the gender dynamics. It's not safe and secure until we say it is.