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Screaming Mothers in Malayalam Cinema: Motherhood as a Genre-defying Identity in Malayalam Cinema

by *Café Dissensus* on May 30, 2022



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By **Raj Sony Jalarajan** and
Adith K. Suresh

The image of the mother is perhaps one of the most recurring identities in

cinema. Even if we do not count those films where a mother is the main protagonist, there are countless films in which the presence of mothers cannot be overlooked. This familiarity with which mothers get over-identified in films makes their representations stereotypical and strictly adhering to the cultural and political mores of the society. Traditionally considered as the most powerful version of femininity, motherhood is often overtly romanticized as the symbolization of ideal female expression. The visual language of Indian cinema has been contributing greatly to the construction of the ideal mother image for a long time, and it chiefly consists of a semiotics full of signifiers that glorify the emotional vulnerability, sacrifice, courage, and suffering associated with motherhood. The performative aspects of motherhood can easily be observed as important in the context of the melodramatic and sentimentalist tradition of Bollywood cinema.

Cinematic representations of the Indian mother are modelled on the cultural archetype of the domesticated Devi (goddess) figure. Florence Pasche Guignard observes that religion and spirituality have significantly contributed to the “diversity of motherhood as a social and cultural construction, beyond biologically determined processes of sexual reproduction” (157). The mediated mother constructs have had a strong impact on the audience as they captivate the public sphere through spectacles of the powerful mother. Examples of “political mothers” include Indira Gandhi and Jayalalitha who were often literally worshipped as gods in India when disciples and followers religiously approach the mother’s public appearance, media representation, and utterances as sources of divine power. By overcoming their traditional submissive motherhood, these politicians attain exceptional power, celebrity status, and public authenticity when compared to their contemporary male opposites. Indian cinema places the dutiful, caring, and complaining mother within the boundaries of the home where she becomes a subject of exploitation and violence. Since it rationalizes the underlying patriarchal hegemony by using imaginations taken from the religious and mythological background of the land where women are worshipped as God-figures, such romanticization becomes problematic when discussed against the existing realities of motherhood.

The portrayal of the self-sacrificing mother with a strong ability to protect her kin dominated the early Indian screens (Srivastava). The symbolic representation of motherhood often incorporates emotional and political connotations to the point of generating a mass appeal. For instance, *Mother India* (1957) – considered as one of the best Indian films – metaphorically represents the nationalized “mother” identity (*Bharat Mata*) of post-independence India. The posters of this film were so popular that the picture of the protagonist Radha (played by Nargis) carrying a heavy bull-plough resembles the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, an iconic image that incorporated divine suffering into the symbolism of self-

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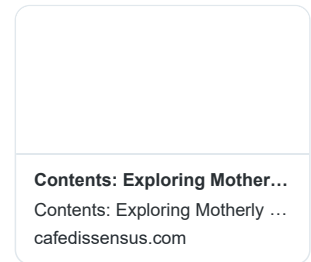
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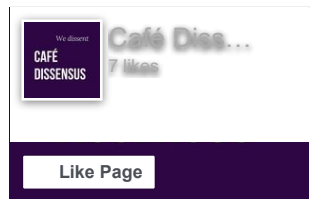


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sacrificing motherhood. Ramita Jhamtani claims that the self-sacrificing mothers in Indian cinema are embodiments of patriarchal discourse:

Shackled by patriarchal ideals, the mother figure in Indian cinema has endured a long history of self-sacrifice. The constant images of glorified motherhood normalize selflessness as an inseparable characteristic of a good mother, and, subsequently, actual mothers in the audience begin to internalize self-sacrifice as an integral part of motherhood. Mother figures in Indian cinema are carriers of patriarchal ideals. (353)

Filmic images of the mother carry existing cultural ideals; they are manifestations of the popular desire that appropriates notions of love, care, and service to the highest degree. Archaic perceptions of the mother reflect compassion and feminine authenticity, and the visual representations assist the conceptualization that mothers are the medium through which a form of emotional catharsis is possible. This is partly because the mother is almost always imagined as a positive image and universally accepted as the most natural and affective form of relationship. Films help to reinforce the archetypal identity of the mother in its morally essentialized form, and motherhood is a discourse that seldom challenges this established dimensionality of the mother.

Moorings outside the symbolic self-sacrificing national ideal of motherhood are characterized by the domestic space inserting much pressure on the existence of mothers. Domestic space is argued as a spot through which femininity and motherhood are produced (Brown). It practically defines the material reality of motherhood in its extreme sense of subjugation and confinement. This is more pronounced in regional cinemas where the mother is an inevitable presence in the household and fundamental reality that shapes the structure of the Indian home. For example, in Malayalam cinema – the film industry of the southern-Indian state, Kerala – it can be observed that motherhood is inextricably

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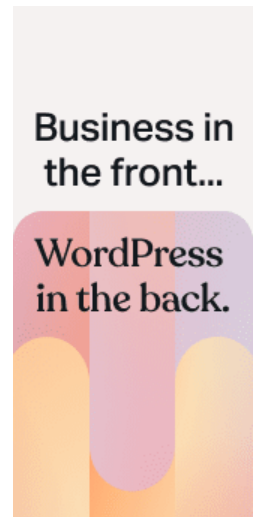
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integrated with the narratives where the body of the mother is used as a template to reiterate the significance of family values based on maternalism. Here, the mother is represented as a vessel that transports such values and occasional emotional outbursts of the mother emphasize the way they are nurtured to protect these values. Portrayed as emotionally fragile and overreactive, the cultural identity of the Malayali mother is pictured in homes as a supportive character that helps to intensify the narrative through dramatic effects. It is not surprising to note that the mother is the first person that gets agitated when things go haywire. When situations of tragedy occur, such as the sudden death of their children or husband, for instance, the uncontrollable and erratic behaviours of the mother, often through violent screams and emotional breakdowns, is the only natural response imagined. The transformation from a happy and caring mother to the psychological disillusionment and melancholia of the ailing mother is central to the characterization of motherhood in early Malayalam films. However, such films rarely further extend their focus to the identity of the mother instead they shift the attention to the adventures of the hero protagonist.

Since the trope of the tragic mother is a ubiquitous presence in Malayalam cinema, the actresses that play the mother roles are known for their typecast roles. Whether it is family dramas, action thrillers, comedies, or horror flicks, mothers reprise their conventional roles. Actresses like Kaviyoor Ponnamma, KPAC Lalitha, and Sukumari are known for their celebrated maternal figures as screaming mothers. The screaming mothers are crying bodies whose authentic being is structured around the emotional conflicts and interactions with their surroundings. The mother image of Kaviyoor Ponnamma, who is known as the “mother of all actors” in Malayalam cinema as she has acted the role for decades, conceptualizes the *Amma* figure, the trope of the “comforting mother”. She appears mostly in a white-clad to show simplicity and peacefulness as synonyms of motherly love. Similarly, Sheela in *Manassinakkare* (2003) and *Snehavedu* (2011), Urvashi in *Achuvinte*



Amma (2005), Sangitha in *Chinthavishtayaya Shyamala* (1998), Jyothirmayi in *Ente Veedu Appoontem* (2003), and Reavathy in *Nandanam* (2002), and Manju Pillai in *Home* (2021) are mothers that show more of the same degrees of enacting motherhood as a source of emotional negotiation. These mothers act as mediators and controllers of the conflict as they are chosen to contain the pain that defines their motherhood in the first place. There is a domesticated mother figure that complains about how things are out of place in her home and there is the mother who silently suffers everything without making verbal responses out of fear. The mother's subjugation under a powerful patriarchal father or irresponsible children is evidently visible, but they are strategically contradicted with the portrayal of scenes that show the happy mother who is content with what has been provided to her. The struggles of the mother are part of the glamorization of motherhood, and a mother who falls in love with her suffering must rationalize it through the rhetoric of motherly duties and compassion for others who depend on her unconditional love.

The screams of the mother reverberate in different ways as maternal instincts show differences when motherhood undergoes its natural metamorphosis. When the stereotypical all-suffering sacrificial image of the mother aligns herself with the domestic space of the kitchen, there is the powerful matriarch who has the agential power to influence the male characters. The cries of such mothers are loud and they are "orders" for others to follow. She rules the household with an iron fist as her commanding power can disarm opposite views. Philomena's character "Achamma" in *Godfather* (1991) is a perfect example as she is presented as the matriarch godmother who is respected and feared by everyone in the family. KPAC Lalitha in *Adyathe Kanmani* (1995) and *Madambi* (2008), and Rajini Chandi in *Oru Muthassi Gadha* (2016) are other notable examples. In addition to this, the trope of the "evil mother" has also been frequently used in Malayalam cinema to bring an antagonistic aspect to motherhood. This is often achieved through the character trope of *Ammayi Amma* (mother-in-law)

which is always imagined as a character with mean reactions to her daughter-in-law or comically imagined in the figure of the “feminist mom” or “society lady” who is depicted as a man-hating, gossiping woman who wears make-up and fashionable dress. Such portrayals provide an antithesis to traditional motherhood through the denigration of the female identity. The antagonization of women in this context becomes the negation of her selfhood and denial of motherhood.

The negation of motherhood can also happen in realistic ways. Recent Malayalam films have shown a tendency to depart from the traditionality of motherhood which has long been established itself like a genre in cinema. Mothers with realistic motivations that defy conventional norms must be identified for their iconoclastic power. Ambitious mothers with an instinct to pursue their own self-oriented goals as one sees in the characters played by Manju Warriar (who is popularly called the lady superstar in Malayalam cinema) in *How Old Are You?* (2014), *Udhaharanam Sujatha* (2017), and *C/O Saira Banu* (2017), Kalpana in *Bangalore Days* (2014), and Sobhana in *Varane Avashyamundu* (2020) exemplify a different mode of motherhood. In these films, the mother has to keep herself out of trouble to prove her love to the family and save them from public scrutiny. Even though they succumb to the patriarchal notions, their agency as a woman rather than an over-glorified mother needs to be considered as something remarkable in the thus-far onscreen portrayal of motherhood in Malayalam cinema. Mothers in agential roles often deny the claim that motherhood is a vessel of tradition and culture. They initiate new negotiations that deconstruct motherhood as an institution with no divinity given to it. In such exceptional portrayals, womanhood is more emphasized than motherhood. This can be found in the films of KG George – notably *Adaminte Variyellu* (1983), *Irakal* (1985), and *Mattoral* (1988) – where the women lack motherly instincts the way they are described in traditional sociocultural discourses. For instance, in *Irakal*, the mother/woman engages in an illicit relationship outside the moral restrictions of family values.

Discursive mother identities such as the kitchen mother, single mother, surrogate mother, working mother, weeping mother, crazy mother, male-mother, prostitute-mother, vengeful mother, etc. are forcing to restructure the realm of motherhood by expanding it into accounting the multiple perspectives and experiences of the individual who enacts the role of the mother. Contemporary films like *Sara's* (2021) have desensitized the concept of motherhood and sparked debates about the practicalities of abortion and parenting. Films in which the sanctity of the mother is questioned against problematic realities that corrupt the positive image of motherhood gained more visibility in recent times. In the film *Bhoothakaalam* (2022), the mother (played by Revathy) is depicted in a state of extreme mental suffering and depression. Films like *Bro Daddy* (2022) and *Hridayam* (2022) have portrayed young mothers caught in the realities of motherhood with their partners contributing significantly to the process of parenting.

The Malayali mother is a genre-defying character whose utterances in cinema evoke concerns/questions about their different roles in a generally patrifocal land and its history(ies). When we look at the history of mothers in Malayalam cinema to outline the metamorphosis of motherhood and its role reversals in the contemporary cinematic discourse, it becomes evident that mothers have come a long way from the position of the self-sacrificing crying mother as the cultural ideal. The act of “screaming” is submissive when silent cries of the mother are unheard, however, it can also be subversive when its many repercussions amplify the mother’s voice to new realms of communication in which the mother becomes the medium. This encourages us to consider that motherhood is not a monolithic institution but a discursive category that defies categorization.

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Bio:

Dr. Raj Sony Jalarajan is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication, MacEwan University, Edmonton, Canada. Dr. Raj is a professional journalist turned academic who has worked in different demanding positions as a reporter, special correspondent, and producer in several news media channels like BBC, NDTV, Doordarshan, AIR, and Asianet News.

Mr. Adith K. Suresh is currently associating as a research assistant at the Department of Communication, MacEwan University. Adith holds a Master's Degree in English Language and Literature from Mahatma Gandhi University. His research interest includes Film Studies, Literary Criticism, and South Asian Cultural Studies.

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