CHAPTER 4

WOMEN AND MALAYALAM CINEMA

A review of Malayalam cinema from its inception in 1928 to the present day reveals that the portrayal of women has not undergone any serious change either in "popular" cinema or in the "parallel" or "art" cinema. In this respect, Malayalam cinema cannot claim to be an exception from the rest of the regional Indian cinemas. On the contrary, as a State which boasts of a far higher percentage in literacy, women's education and women's employment, it is surprising to note that filmmakers of Kerala have adopted a stereotyped and male chauvinistic attitude in the representation of women. In this chapter an attempt is being made to analyse the kind of anti-female attitudes and postures adopted by the Malayalam film makers and the social and political factors that have contributed to the prevalence and continuation of such attitudes even to this day.

This chapter is divided into three parts: 1) Women of cinema. 2) Representation of women in cinema. 3) Women and cinema, to cover the three types of relationships women have with cinema i.e. 1) as makers of cinema; or as artists of cinema 2) Images in cinema 3) as audience watching the cinema. All these aspects
are interlinked and resulted in having an inter-connected pattern.

1 WOMEN OF CINEMA

As one examines the various stages of film making one is struck by the glaring fact that it is a predominantly male dominated industry. Apart from the producers, distributors and exhibitors (controllers of the finance/business aspect of the film industry), a majority of those who deal with the artistic aspect of the film industry such as directors, cameramen, editors, music directors, lyricists and technicians are all men. In Kerala, the only two spheres of film industry wherein women have found a place, are acting and singing. Even in the sphere of acting they have had to put up with the whims and fancies of directors and middlemen, who subjected them to unimaginable harassments before giving them significant roles.

This practice adopted by the film directors and associates had a two fold effect on the women who came forward to act in movies. They were made use of and then branded as immoral. Women, unless they were forced by economic necessity did not take up acting. It was neither the most talented nor the most

1 Discussions with MOHANAN. N., Cultural Officer, Govt. of Kerala, BHASKARAN, P., Lyricist and VASUDEVAN. T.E., Producer.
interested who ended up as actresses. This situation
did change to a great extent and we have some fine
examples of actresses in Malayalam cinema such as
Sarada, Sheela, Seema, Lalitha, Kaviyoor Ponnamma,
Aranmula Ponnamma, Sukumari etc. But the fact remains
that even these actresses do not enjoy the glamour and
star value of their male counterparts such as Mammooty,
Mohan Lal, Satyen, Prem Nazir etc for the simple reason
that the roles they have to play are the stereotyped
ones—mother, daughter, wife, mother-in-law and harlot
of a hero.

What is the reason for the industry being so
male dominated even in a state where women have taken
up and excelled in various kinds of professions such as
medicine, engineering, law, management, sports,
policing, teaching etc. A close scrutiny reveals that
even while women took up various professions, there
were some professions from which they had been very
cleverly excluded—politics, business and media
(journalism, cinema etc). These are professions which
are associated with "Power politics". Women are, from
their birth, subjected to an indoctrination of ideas
such as, physically they are the "weaker" sex, mentally
the "lesser intelligent", and emotionally "unstable,
highly strung and volatile". Following this trend of thought, came the idea of "protection" of women by the stronger, the more intelligent, and the more stable men and that naturally eliminated them from taking up the positions of power which involved greater shrewdness, cunning, diplomacy and mental strength. This ploy, that the power game is a dangerous one and therefore highly avoidable has worked with women. They have been effectively frightened off from the power-related professions.

There have been a few exceptions in Kerala, women who dared to enter these citadels of male supremacy - K.R. Gowri (Politics), Ajita, Mandakini (Naxalites), Sarah Joseph, Meenakshi Tampan, Vatsala (women activists). etc. But these remain the exceptions. During the freedom struggle, many women took part in the Indian National Congress activities. But after India became free and the new governments

2 All the literary, religious and artistic works in India portray women as frail, emotional and sentimental. Even Shakespeare says, "Frailty, I call thee woman".

3 K.R. Gowri, a member of the CPI (M) was a Minister in the first elected Communist Ministry of Kerala. She is a Minister in the present LDF Ministry, headed by E.K. Nayanar. Ajita and Mandakini are Naxalites, involved with the movement from the very beginning. Ajita is a women activist. Sarah Joseph is a lecturer, short story writer and woman activist. Meenakshy Thampan, is a lecturer, woman activist, and political worker. Vatsala is a novelist and women acitivist.
were formed, the women also were happy to retreat to the haven of their homes, once the crisis was over.

As for cinema, with an exception or two, it remains a field where no woman has been able to make her mark in the capacity of a director, cameraman, producer, distributor or exhibitor. In cinema, women hesitated to enter the field and hold the key positions, because of the stigma attached to the form itself. Because of the financial involvement and the business-profit aspects, cinema acquired the reputation of an unscrupulous, and profiteering profession. The sexual harassment meted out to the few women who entered the field in the capacity of actresses earned it a name for indulging in immoral activities. As a result, in cinema, women have been relegated to a position of absence, silence and marginality.

The reasons for discrimination of women from all fields related to power have to be sought in the political and social environment which prevailed in Kerala. Politically, a major portion of Kerala had the tradition of patriarchal rule which was instilled in social and cultural practices too. This was probably one of the reasons why women were subjugated and dominated in personal and public lives. One of the practices which existed even up to the early years of the twentieth century was, that when the women of the
lower castes went in front of the high-caste males, especially the Nambudiris, they had to be barechested. This practice reveals the depth of insult and ignominy heaped on the women against their will. A particular section of the people, Nairs, followed the matrilineal system of property rights whereby the property passed through women. Even among the Nairs the source of power was the "Karanavar" (Head of the Household) who enjoyed the powers of controlling and disposing of property as he wished. He controlled the lives of the women of his household. So in reality, the women of Kerala did not enjoy a superior position socially or politically. This inferior position in society and politics continued and was most evident in the power related professions such as politics and cinema. Even now, the absence of women from the significant positions in cinema is patently obvious.

2. WOMEN IN CINEMA

Representation of women in cinema, or how women were portrayed in cinema not only thematically, but semiotically, as signifiers, is traced in this section. While Feminist critics of modern days have given up sociological (that which gives emphasis to content or theme) criticism of cinema and have paid more emphasis to semiological (that which gives emphasis to how film communicates, how the meaning is produced through
various signifiers) criticism, both methods are used wherever relevant, to discuss representation resulting in marginalisation, Image and role playing, stereotyping, double standards, content versus ideology, objectification and identification.

Marginalisation

In many Malayalam films, the women are portrayed as mere backdrops against which men, the adventurers perform their heroics or villainies. They are depicted not as individuals but as accessories for mens' activities - wocing, loving, dominating, procreating, raping, rejecting etc. They are there, just as stage props, filling in the gaps in the narrative. As an example, one can take G. Aravindan's Oridathu. 4

The usual women are all there, the housewife, the young, adolescent girl, who for want of anything else to do, carries on a romance with the boy next door, the voluptuous working class woman, ogled by all and sundry, seduced by her lover and the doctor who performs a crude abortion on her, a young, lower middle class girl, idle and oversexed, and therefore, a willing target for the local villain's seduction. They have set functions to perform. They do not control the

4 Oridathu. (Sometimes, Somewhere, 1986), Dir: ARAVINDAN, G., Prod: SURYAKANTI FILMS, Recipient of the National Award for the Best Director.
narrative in any way, but just fill in the gaps. They are all willing or unwilling victims of men. The only remarkable feature is, that there is a class distinction even in the passions demonstrated by the women. The young, upper middle class girl's love is chaste and sanitised. The lower middle class girl is covertly wanton while the working class woman is overtly wanton. The women, knowingly or unknowingly become signifiers of certain qualities - passive acceptance, unquestioning obedience, uncontrolled sexuality which ends in disaster, and vice versa. They have an "eternal" status as explained by Anne Kaplan in Women and Film. "In terms of dominant film narratives, of classic forms, women as they have been represented by men in these texts, take on images that have an "eternal" status and are repeated through decades in their essentials; the representation changes superficially in accord with current styles and fashions -- but scratch the surface and one finds a familiar pattern". This is also a good example of a kind of realistic portrayal where cinematic events bear some resemblance to real events and thereby give an

5 Discussions with DASGUPTA, BUDDHADEV, Bengali Film Director.

illusion that it is reality itself. This type of realistic portrayal, wherein the film-maker does not make his ideological stand clear, has a dangerous effect on the audience. They never question the implications of the portrayal and accept the very reality which is portrayed, without any criticism or comment.

**Image and Role Playing**

Women are never shown in films as just women. They invariably have a predestined role to play. The stock roles that they play are that of the daughter, the wife, the mother, the mother-in-law and the harlot. Even a warrior heroine like *Unni Archa* of Northern Ballads becomes a role playing daughter-wife-seducer when Malayalam cinema draws her into its vice like grip. In Kunchacko’s *Unni Archa* (1961) the heroine’s valour is underplayed. In fact, it becomes a mock portrayal; emphasis is given to her romance with her weak lover/husband, Kunhiraman. She is reduced to the level of a mushy, sentimental, Mills and Boon heroine.

The impression that one gets is that these film makers are afraid of portrayal of women with individuality and personality even in celluloid, for fear of indentification by women audience and domination through superior intelligence and

7 Supra, ch.1, p. 24.
excellence. As the feminists have rightly pointed out, men resort to marginalisation, vanquishing or glorification of women in cinema because of a constant castration threat.\textsuperscript{8} Malayalam cinema abounds in standard images of women - the loving woman, the seductive woman, the submissive woman, or occasionally a domineering woman, the unchanging "eternal" mother-in-law. But the most insidious and pernicious image is that of the sacrificing woman, the martyr, the victim of circumstances, who never protests. The case of the heroine of \textit{Adhyapika} (The Teacher) can be taken as an example.\textsuperscript{9} She is the eldest sister in a family of four. A teacher by profession, the only breadwinner in the family, she educates her younger brother and sister and arranges for their marriages. She looks after her elder brother, a hypochondriac, who, for fear of losing the breadwinner of the family, stalls all proposals of marriage for her. In the end, she becomes a tuberculosis patient and is forsaken by all she had helped. The theme serves only one purpose, identification and masochism, whereas Ritwick Ghatak, the celebrated Bengali film maker has dealt with a similar theme in his \textit{Meghe Dhaka Tara}.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{8} KAPLAN, ANNE, E., Op.cit, p.2.

\textsuperscript{9} Supra, ch.3, p.136.

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Meghe Dhaka Tara} (The Cloud Capped Star, 1960) Dir: GHATAK, RITWICK
difference is that the heroine realises her fault, blames herself for it and in the dying scene utters a heartrending cry "I too wanted to live", the echo of which resounds in the mountains, valleys, the sky and the river. It becomes a universal protest, transcending the individual situation. Ghatak takes a definite stand and makes his heroine protest, but in Subramanyam's case, the signifiers in the film indicate that suffering of the type portrayed is a virtue, and all women should emulate the heroine. In pretending to portray reality, without taking any ideological stand, these films merely arouse sympathy and hopelessness without criticism and protest and thereby defeat the very purpose they are supposed to serve, namely criticise the patriarchal world with its dominance and callous indifference to women. Even in parallel cinemas such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Elipathayam* (Rat Trap),¹¹ where the victim (the second sister) is depicted in a sensitive and sympathetic manner, the criticism against patriarchy and its domination of women is veiled and the protest not clear. Towards the end of the film, the victim falls ill and is carried away. She escapes the trap of a traditional, feudalistic household, literally and symbolically, not because she took any initiative and tried to escape, but because

¹¹ Supra, ch.3, p.138.
kind neighbours intervened and took an interest in her fate. We are not even assured that she has learned an object lesson from her present experience, and will protest or raise her voice against such indignities in the future. The case of the younger sister who temporarily escapes, in all probability, with a lover, from one patriarchal world into another one, cannot be considered as a protest against the patriarchal world, but only as self seeking opportunism. The oldest sister is shown as a self seeking, domineering female. So the film maker, who made a film which had excellently portrayed the break-up of the feudal system in Kerala, dampened the woman's cause in two ways - firstly, by offering a victim who suffers unprotestingly, and secondly by presenting alternative female figures who are both unacceptable, because of the signifiers in their portrayal. Such a film, without any pronounced criticism or definite stand does not serve the women's cause. Two of the patent roles that are cinematically represented are the "mother" and the "mother-in-law". The mother is an archetype in the cultural and religious forms of Kerala. Mother worship is widely prevalent in Kerala. There are more than 100 temples dedicated to the Mother Goddess. The Mother Goddess is

12 There are 108 Kali temples in Kerala and Kali worship is predominant in Kerala. Discussions with PANIKKAR, NARAYANA, KAVALAM.
given different forms, names and characteristics such as Kali, Durga, Amman, Bhagavathi. There are dance forms such as Mutiyettu, Tirayattam, Bhagavathi Pattu, which are performed in honour of the Mother Goddess. Therefore, it is not unusual to give predominance to the concept of "mother" in cinema also.

But here, one has to remember that "motherhood" in its symbolic aspect alone is permitted in the patriarchal dominant cinema. Julia Kristeva, one of the foremost French feminist critics distinguishes between the symbolic and the non-symbolic aspects of "motherhood".13 "The symbolic aspect is that which partisanship insists on, and which involves the daughter's desire to bear a child of her own father; linked in a basic way then to the father, the child simply reflects the father's function as originating and justifying reproductive desire." The non-symbolic aspect according to Kristeva has homosexual components and she notes: "The body of the Mother - is one toward which women aspire all the more passionately because it lacks a penis. By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is, her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself."14 Patriarchy represses the aspects that would

bind a woman to another woman, were they permitted release.

In most of the Malayalam films the mother is represented as having a definite attachment towards the son. Towards the daughter, the mother's attitude is always strict, controlling and domineering, for the woman was deified and made into a keeper of society's morality and as a result, her chastity had to be constantly protected. This kind of portrayal of the mother perpetuates the repression of the non-symbolic aspect of motherhood. "Mother" herself becomes a patriarchal figure, domineering and unsympathetic to other women.

The "Mother-in-law" is the extreme form of female patriarchy. The mother-in-law has become an institution for depicting suppression of a woman, by another woman. Perpetuation of female domination is done through females so that the man is excused from this form of domination and his ego and narcissistic tendencies are boosted. The "mother-in-law", as portrayed in films is not a woman, but a female representative of patriarchy. She is the creation and representation of patriarchy.

Stereotyping

Apart from the functional stereotypes such as the sacrificing mother, wife, daughter, the domineering mother-in-law and the seductress/harlot, Malayalam cinema has certain specific stereotypes based on gender traits. The gender traits normally attributed to women, if they do not fit into the sacrifice-submission syndrome, are jealousy towards other women (resulting in a competition among women), possessiveness towards the men they love, suspicion regarding their husbands'/lovers' activities, inability to keep their emotions under control, resulting in hysterical outbursts and a tendency to talk too much resulting in malicious gossip. There are two ways of portraying these women duo - the wife as the suspicious, narrowminded, bigoted puritan and the mistress as the ever loving, magananimous "other" woman.16 This is a blatant justification for a man's extra marital relationships and propagation of the idea that one woman is not multifaceted enough to merit a man's singleminded devotion or attachment.

The celebrated writer, M.T. Vasudevan Nair's scripts abound in portrayal of this kind of bad wife - good mistress syndrome. Aksharangal (Letters),

16 Supra, ch.3, p.145.
Aalkuttathil Thaniye\textsuperscript{17} (Alone in a crowd) are the notable examples. In Aksharangal\textsuperscript{18}, the hero is a poet, an artist with an "Artist's Temperament". He has to drink to be creative. He has to fraternise with seedy looking characters to tickle his unlimited, unbound imagination. His wife, (obviously a puritan) is not able to see eye to eye with her husband's peculiar artistic proclivities. The artist seeks comfort in the arms of his loving, understanding mistress and lives with her. Even when he is on his deathbed, the wife refuses to visit him. The "good" mistress persuades the "bad" wife to go and see him. But the man has the last laugh. He dies before she could reach him and thus has the privilege of leaving her bereft and guilty. This theme achieves pitting one woman against another.

Another type of man-wife-mistress syndrome is that of the all-pure, virtuous wife pitted against the seductive "other" woman. The wife is so virtuous (a modern version of the traditional Seelavathi) that she not only wins back her husband, but even manages to convert her rival, the mistress. This is the "wife" who contributes her utmost to the perpetuation of

\textsuperscript{17} Supra, ch.3, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{18} Supra, ch.3, p. 145.
patriarchy and continuance of the domination/submission pattern. The earlier Malayalam film "Bharya"19 (wife) and many such others are good examples of this kind of portrayal.

Double Standards

Here "Double Standard" is a reference to the difference in treatment meted out to the portrayal of man and woman, placed in similar situations. For instance, one can examine the portrayal of an erring woman and an erring man in two cinemas. The two cinemas which are being examined are K.R. Mohanan's Purushartham20 (1988) and G. Aravindan's Chidambaram21 (1986). Interestingly, both films are based on short stories of a well known writer, C.V. Sreeraman. Filmic portrayals have, in both cases, differed in spirit from the original work.

Purushartham is the story of a woman, who presumably had an extra-marital relationship with her husband’s assistant and was not present on the scene when her husband died in an accident. Subsequently, she

19 Bharya (Wife, 1962), Dir: KUNCHACKO, Prod: EXCEL PRODUCTIONS.
20 Purushartham (The aims of life, 1988), Dir: MOHanan, K.R.
21 Chidambaram (1985), Dir: ARAVINDAN. C. Pro: SURYAKANTI FILMS.
arrives at her husband's village with her son to perform an expiation rite in appeasement of her husband's soul. She is portrayed as a woman from the town - modern, sophisticated, educated, businessminded and not interested in her husband's village or his relatives. The hidden signifiers are, that she is what she is, because of her Western education, her life in a big metropolis, her interest in running a business independently, her sophistication in dress and talk, or in other words, her desire to be a person on her own and not a docile, role playing wife, who has no identity separate from her husband, which is pointed out as the cause of her downfall. The hint here is, that, had she remained in the village, had less education, finesse, sophistication and worldly wisdom, had she imbibed those "traditional" values of the village implicitly, she would have turned out into "an ideal woman", depersonalised, a persona non grata. This woman is also used as a representative of various other modern, sophisticated women, who try to live their own lives, thinking and acting differently. Her major fault is not her unfaithfulness to her husband, but a whole lot of other acts - her veering away from the patriarchal fold and living according to a code of her own and not those dictated by the patriarchal society. She has to be cinematically punished and brought back to the familial, patriarchal fold.
Just reverse the roles and let us assume that a man is indulging in an act of infidelity. The hero of Chidambaram is given as an example. He seduces the wife of a worker, who befriended him; as a result, the man hacks his wife with a knife and commits suicide. A comparison between the treatment meted out to the guilty man and the guilty woman is very revealing. The man, on seeing the corpse of the worker is besieged with guilt, and as though feeling guilty is atonement enough, he is led step by step to his redemption and salvation. He is not ostracised by the society. Nor do we even get a hint of criticism against him, even by the film maker. Everyone, including the film maker is anxious to help him. There is no such sympathy or understanding in the portrayal of the erring woman. But the condemnation is there, strident, unrelenting and obvious. While the erring man is treated with sympathy, understanding and even indulgence, the woman is condemned outright. In the movie, Chidambaram, the second half is devoted to the hero's bouts of escapism—drinking, hospital care and finally religion, the last resort of all believing mortals. The signifiers are all there, signifying liberation from guilt, salvation from all sins, in fact, a sublime peace. The woman in Purushartham is left bereft on the ruins in Rameswaram beach, bleak and barren, distanced from her son, lonely and beyond redemption. The camera tracks
her lonely exit - oppressive, relentless, moralistic. The double standard in cinematic treatment arises from the fact that reality, in this case, is not very different from the artistic portrayal. In a world, where the codes of conduct, the laws, the punishment for crime and the loopholes are all decided by patriarchy, one does not have to be overly surprised if the scales tilt more favourably towards men.

The Protesting Woman

There are some film makers in Malayalam, who have attempted to portray women protesting against the indignities heaped on them. Ostensibly, this is meant to be pro-woman. But in many-a-case, because of the lack of criticism on the indignities and the ambiguous ideology of the film maker, the effect of the film is quite different from what it was meant to have.

In these films, women are shown as central characters around whom the theme devolves; they defy the existing system and exercise their free will. But eventually such "protesting women" are ostracised, killed or tucked away in a mad asylum. They are seldom portrayed as succeeding in their efforts to carve out a new life or achieving a semblance of physical, emotional and intellectual freedom. In Adaminte
Variyella\textsuperscript{22} deemed to be a film on women, there are three women, from different walks of life, not conforming to the dictates of patriarchy. But all of them end up in confusion, madness and indecisiveness. In fact, one does not get the impression that they have gained any kind of meaningful freedom.

The example of depiction of a no-win situation for a woman, who sought to redress the harm done to her, is from K.S. Sethumadhavan's \textit{Oru Penninte Katha}.\textsuperscript{23} Here, the protagonist is a rape victim, bent on wreaking revenge on her rapist. In a confrontation between the rapist and the victim, the rapist reveals that his daughter is no other than the illegitimate daughter born to her, the progeny of his rape on her. Rape is casually dismissed as an act of impulsive youth. After this revelation, he goes back and conveniently kills himself. In a desire to make amends, she rushes to her daughter and offers her all her wealth. The daughter rejects her offer and smugly rebuffs her: "You killed my father. He may have been a rapist. But he is my father". The wronged woman is once again placed in a defensive position by another woman,

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Adaminte Variyella}: (Adams Rib, 1984), Dir: GEORGE, K.G.

her own daughter. Rape becomes an act of youthful impulse. Revenge by the rape victim is made out to be the wilful act of a cold, hard woman. Patriarchy makes a mockery of a serious offense such as rape, chastises the revenge motive of a victim of rape, and establishes the continuation of the concept of dominance—submission. "Woman are ultimately refused a voice, a discourse, and their desire is subjected to male desire. They live out silently frustrated lives, or if they resist their placing, sacrifice their lives for their daring".24

Objectification

Like every other form of dominant cinema, Malayalam cinema also indulges in the objectification of women. Whatever role they depict, whichever characters they represent, they are primarily treated as sex objects.25 This is very evident in the suggestive, vulgar, half nude way in which they are clothed and the inclusion of irrelevant bathing scenes and the song and dance sequences, specifically to exhibit the woman’s body in erotic postures and actions. The representation

24 KAPLAN, Anne, E. op.cit, pp.7, 8.

25 The Village girl in Iruttinde Armaavu (The Soul of Darkness) the working woman in Oridathu (Sometimes, Somewhere), the Northern Ballad heroine in Unni Archa (Little Archa), the revolutionary in Punnapra Vayalar are all examples of female objectification.
of women is also done to please the male audience. As for the female audience, they are to be appeased by films depicting "family drama" or adopt the impassive, dumb, unprotesting attitude to their objectification in films. The objectification of women, in cinema is based on what feminists such as Laura Mulvey\textsuperscript{26} defines as "Scopophilia", or sexual pleasure in looking which is activated by "the very situation in cinema, the darkened room, the way the gaze of the spectator is controlled by the aperture of, first, the camera, and second, the projector. The act of gazing is played upon in dominant cinema creating the pleasure that has ultimately erotic origins. The "gaze" is built up on culturally defined notions of sexual difference. There are three "looks"\textsuperscript{27}

a) within the film text itself, men gaze at women, who become objects of gaze

b) The spectator in turn is made to identify with this male gaze and to objectify the women on the screen.

c) The camera’s original gaze comes into play in the very act of filming.

\textsuperscript{26} KAPLAN, ANNE, E., op.cit., pp.7,8.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, p.30 and MULVEY LAURA, \textit{Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema} quoted in \textit{Film Theory and Criticism} Ed: MAST GERALD and COHEN, MARSHALL), op.cit, pp.815-816.
All these types of looks can be identified in many Malayalam films, but the example taken here for illustration is *Iruttinde Atmayu* directed by P. Bhaskaran. The narrative is based on the story of a mentally retarded man, Velayudhan. There is a scene in which he looks at his cousin, Ammukutty, the only human being who shows some understanding and kindness to him. This is the look in the text itself and it is the first time when Ammukutty is introduced even to the spectator. Now the camera's gaze comes into operation moving in an unhurried fashion, distinctly voyeuristic, resting on her uncovered legs, then on her bare waist, on to her breasts accentuated by the tight blouse she wears and finally to her neck, legs and face in that order. The woman is dressed in a provocative manner. Not only the hero, but the camera and the entire male audience become participants in this voyeuristic gaze.

3. WOMEN AND CINEMA

Women audience of Kerala has not, on the whole, raised their voices against incorrect representation in films. In fact, even when "soft porn" films flourished in Kerala and was at their peak in the eighties, it was not the women of Kerala or other enlightened persons from Kerala, who raised their voices in protest. It is

28 *Iruttinde Atmayu* (The soul of Darkness, 1967), Prod & Dir: BHASKARAN, P.
the organisations of the Keralites living outside Kerala and women's organisations all over India, who felt insulted at the reputation that Malayalam cinema gained with non-Malayali audiences. This could be partly due to the indifference and lackadaisical approach adopted by the intelligentsia and women to the medium itself, dismissing it as a cheap form of entertainment.

However, discussions with Meenakshy Thampan and Usha revealed that while the activists were successful in creating an awareness among women in the political/public spheres, they did not meet with such success in kindling an awareness to their own problems in the personal sphere. The activists as well as the common people lay emphasis on general problems such as wage increases, employment opportunities, etc.

In an interview with the well known Marxist intellectual, E.M.S. Nambudirippad, he mentioned that the Communist movement had always included women as "comrades" in all its revolutions against the bourgeoisie. However, when questioned on the relevance

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29 Both are lecturers in colleges of Kerala and are women's rights activists. Detailed discussions were held with both of them on "Women & Cinema in Kerala."

30 Interview with NAMBUDIRIPPAD, E.M.S., General Secretary of CPI (M), and former Chief Minister of Kerala.
of considering women as the exploited lot of the twentieth century and giving special importance to women's problems, he did not think that they merited this special treatment.

In talking about women's films, one of the popular film makers, Balachandra Menon, expressed his opinion that women are interested in seeing films depicting family drama. He said "...Women like family drama and that too themes which involve a great deal of tragedy and melodrama". There are similar views held by other film makers which support this theory of women's inclination towards seeing family drama.

When the International Film Festival was held in Trivandrum, Capital of Kerala in the year 1988, there were only a handful of women delegates and passholders in the International and Panorama sections. On the contrary, in the theatre where a retrospective of Malayalam films was held, one saw more women or rather family crowds. When asked about this, one film maker commented, "Our women do not like to see these Western

31 Interview with MENON, BALACHANDRA, Director of Malayalam films.

32 As a delegate for the 19th International Film Festival in India, 1988, I noticed the marked absence of women from the International sections.

33 Discussions with RAJEEV NATH, Film maker.
films where there are blatant exhibitions of nudity and explicit sex”.

However, the fact remains that women viewers, all over the world are attracted to "family themes" and melodrama. There is a psychoanalytic explanation given by Anne Kaplan. She says "Why is it that women are drawn to melodrama? Why do we find our objectification and surrender pleasurable? This is precisely an issue which psychoanalysis can help to explain..... Assigned the place of object (lack) the woman is the recipient of male desire, passively appearing rather than acting. Her sexual pleasure in this position can thus be constructed only around her own objectification. Furthermore, given the male structuring around sadism, the girl may adopt a corresponding masochism. In practice, this masochism is rarely reflected in more than a tendency for women to be passive in sexual relations, but in the realm of myth, masochism is often prominent. In locating herself in fantasy in the erotic, the woman places herself as either passive recipient of male desires or at one remove, as watching a woman, who is passive recipient of male desires and actions".34

The above discussion on Women and Malayalam cinema gives rise to three arguments which have some validity and yet can be effectively countered.

The first is, that representation of women in Malayalam cinema is in no way different or worse than those of other cinemas in general. So the contenders argue that this problem is not specific to Malayalam cinema and hence should not be treated in isolation. One has to agree that, on the whole, Malayalam cinema's treatment of women is not worse than that of other regional cinemas. But that does not, in any way minimise the seriousness of the issue. Besides, as Malayalam cinema is considered to be superior in technique and content (proven by Panorama selections, National Awards, International Awards etc.) one expects a more progressive attitude towards representation of women.

There are other positive factors regarding Kerala which support this expectation. It is only reasonable to expect a greater degree of emancipation, awareness and free thinking from women of Kerala because of the higher averages in literacy, education and employment than in the remaining states of India.

There are women activist groups at work in Kerala too. Awareness to cinematic medium has been
improved by constant exposure to international cinema exhibited by Film Societies in towns and villages. Many of the Internationally renowned film directors such as Adoor Gopalakrishnan, G. Aravindan and Shaji are from Kerala. A consistent stream of Marxist governments have been at the helm of politics in Kerala heightening the political awareness to socialist ideals such as organised and collective protest to any form of exploitation.

In spite of all these favourable indicators, if Malayalam cinema can maintain only a position not worse than the rest of the Indian cinema in anti-female attitudes in cinematic representation, there is reason for concern and frustration. The only reason for this state of affairs, that one can come up with, is the indifference of the intellectual and especially the female intellectual to the medium of cinema. Cinema is considered to be a mass-entertainment medium and not an artistic or educative medium, deserving careful scrutiny and the film producers who are businessmen with an eye on profits are exploiting the masses by providing them temporary, cheap, escapist entertainment.

The second argument generally raised by film makers and film viewers in support of the anti-female stances taken in films, is that they are following a
realistic, narrative mode and as such, they are only reflecting the reality of society, politics and culture prevalent in Kerala. This argument can be countered in two ways. First of all, it is important to remember that there is no absolute realism in any artistic portrayal. In most of the portrayals there may be a resemblance to reality, but eventually it is the artist’s subjective view of reality that is portrayed. In cinema, if what one sees bears resemblance to reality, it is only a reality which is captured by the camera’s eye. The camera is only an inanimate object which merely obeys the dictates of those who wield it, the director and the cameraman. As the perspective and ideology of the director is reflected in the kind of reality he portrays in cinema, Malayalam cinema, is bound to reflect a predominantly male oriented reality.

The second counter argument is, assuming that Malayalam cinema has captured a kind of reality, do real women of Kerala bear a resemblance to the cine version of women? Perhaps there may be a superficial resemblance. But the fact remains, that the variety, the subtlety, the pains, the pleasures, the problems, the capabilities and the achievements of Kerala Women have been ignored, and bypassed by the moviemakers.
It is worth noting that there have been some sensitive and pro-female portrayals in Malayalam such as John Abraham’s *Ammayariyan*, Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s *Swayamvaram* and *Kodiyyelam*, Aravindan’s *Kanchana Seetha*, P.A Backer’s *Chuvanna Vithukal* and Padmakumar’s *Aparna*[^35] and maybe a few more. But these are exceptions and exceptions in this case, do not prove the rule. It only confirms the fact that in general, the trend followed by moviemakers of Kerala in the depiction of women is one of relegating them to silence, marginality, absence, objectification and misrepresentation.