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## SCREAMING VOICES ON THE SILVER SCREEN: PORTRAYAL OF SUBJUGATED WOMEN IN SELECTED MOVIES OF SHYAMA PRASAD

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### ABSTRACT

Malayalam cinema has always taken its themes from pertinent social issues and has been interwoven with raw material from literature, drama, and politics since its provenience. 'Gender' is always a very marked term which has a very consequential impact on every practice of a social being as it characterizes men and women's role profoundly. Women are generally considered as housekeeper and their identity depends on this consideration. The main objective of this paper is to study how subjugated women are portrayed in three films of Director Shyamaprasad namely *Agnisakshi*, *Akale* and *Ore Kadal*. These three films show how women are subjugated socially, physically, emotionally and sexually. *Agnisakshi* is the story of the difficulty of the antharjanam to rise above the fetters of tradition, a Nampoothiri woman's struggle to rise above the shackles of tradition and her journey towards self-realization. *Akale*, is mainly about the timid and fragile Rose, who harbors an inferiority complex because of her deformed legs. Rose's physical disability not only restrains her physical mobility but also seriously curtails her capacity for involvement in society and wipes out her confidence in her worthiness for another's love. In *Ore Kadal*, Deepthi, a village girl whose dream of studying further was not realized by her father and failed to receive the love and care from her husband. In all these films women are struggling in one way or the other and are strong and bold enough to take decisions about their life.

**Keywords:** Films, Women, Subjugation, Caste, Patriarchy

"The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, 'It's a girl'" (Chisholm 36)

Some strides have been framed in how the media portray women in films, television and magazines, and that the last few decades have been also a growth in the presence and influence of women in media behind the scenes. Nonetheless, female stereotypes continue to thrive in the media we consume every day. The ever-changing attitude of Malayalees towards womanhood is clearly reflected in the Malayalam films of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The feminine sensibility as a mirror of the times has been

explored by many writers and this exploration often shows the assumptions and sympathies about women too. The prevailing conditions in Kerala society convince that the condition of women is rooted in biological and psychological immutabilities. Vayalar Ramavarma, Sreekumaran Thambi, P. Bhasaskaran etc are the pioneers in the surfacing of female rage and sexuality. Almost all the writers are concerned with the exploration of female sexuality, vulnerability, helplessness, failure to live in an authentic life and dependency. Women are often portrayed as an object for sensuous satisfaction, an obedient life partner, and as a

perfect home maker. They can be seen as fragmented and helpless creatures still locked in dependency on men. It is interesting to note that none of these writers have strived to lift the traditional/ patriarchal norms that render women subordinate to her male counterparts. None of them tend to advocate a new self-definition of woman; instead, they all nourish the prevailing concepts of masculinity. We can assume that the consciousness of all these writers is directed by various socio-political factors.

Shyamaprasad is a well acclaimed director of Malayalam cinema. His films have been shown in numerous International film festival and his movies always win Kerala State Film Awards and National Film Awards more frequently. In the last 15 years he has done only a few movies. Yet his movies are always suggested by critics for best movie and best director category in Malayalam cinema. His movies are story centric, emotionally rich and are closely related to the realities of life. Dealing with the intricacies of human relationship has always been the successful forte of storytelling for Shyamaprasad. And while dealing these kind of themes, he has never ever disappointed us from the beginning of his career as a film maker, as he attempts a family only when a potential subject urge him to make one visual beauty on that. He knows how to craft a beautiful movie while resorting to the good story lines of established literary figures like Lalaithambika Antharjanam, Tennessee Williams, S.L.Puram, Ganga Prasad, Vimal and Albert Camus. And that is why he emerged as a master story teller in a short time, a rare breed of director who has no complaints on the lack of good story material.

The release of his '*Agnisaakshi*' in the year 1999 was a milestone in the career of Shyamaprasad. The movie was adapted from the novel *Agnisakshi* of the renowned Malayalam writer Lalithambika Antharjanam and attained fame in both the state and national level. *Agnisakshi*, set against the turbulence of the freedom struggle, depicts the conflict between tradition and progressive reforms, the caste system and the emancipation of women. Tradition makes the dwellers of Maanamball illam be tied to their beliefs and it is impossible for them to accept the thoughts

of the advancing society. *Agnisakshi* is the story of a Nampoothiri woman's struggle to rise above the shackles of tradition and her journey towards self-realization. In the *Namboothiri* home, thought and action are enslaved in age-old tradition and practices, and for Devaki, who steps into this formidable fortress as the young bride of Unni, there seems to be no escape.

Devaki was brought up with all freedom and knowledge by her brother whom she calls Oppa. She puts up with her uncaring husband but she could not stand being idle without no one to talk to and nothing to read. Reading and acquiring knowledge was considered off beam by the Namboothiris. Being kindled by her brother's thoughts she wanted to read about the society and the liberation of people. To be bound by traditions was similar to being chained by it. Apphan Namboothiri excommunicates Devaki's family as her brother gets arrested. She is even prevented from going to visit her ailing mother. Yet, she leaves and cannot go back. Devaki now becomes a progressive reformer. As a Namboothiri woman who has left her illam, she spearheads a movement for the emancipation of women. It is with vigour and verve that she speaks as the representative of women. She is not the representative of any caste or society but of women who are suffering for years. She wants to save them. She first becomes a social worker and then becomes a disciple of Gandhi. Later she is also led into the roads of spirituality.

For Thankam also the life at her *illam* was not the life she desired for. Thankam is the daughter of a sambandham (a relationship outside marriage, but one that was considered the norm among the Namboothiri of that period) between Unni's father Apphan Namboothiri and a Nair woman, She has dreams of studying and earning a job and looking after her family. Even though Thankam is Apphan Namboothiri's daughter, she is not allowed to touch her father once the rituals have been done after his death.

Devaki and Thankam come to occupy spaces they had not originally desired, and somehow raged in opposition to one another. They are isolated from each other and more or less absorbed in the pursuit of their narrow goals.

Chance events disturb the normal flow of lives. Thankam takes to life as the wife of a well-placed official and as the mother of a son.

Apart from Thankam and Devaki, there are other women characters- Thankam's mother, Unni's mother and Unni's mother's sister. They are all women bound by traditions and are victims of it. They live inside the box built by the Namboothiri traditions and are afraid to break it. It is a story about the age old struggle of old and new, the traditional and the modern, told from the twilight hour when the change is imminent but is not yet there.

*Akale* is a honest transposition Tennessee Williams play "*The Glass Menagerie*" tells the story of an Anglo-Indian family in Kerala, with four characters playing out the story. The family consists of Margaret, Neil and Rose .Margaret, the mother, has been taking care of her children's since her husband forsake her. Neil, the eldest son, works as a clerk in a warehouse and aspires to be a writer, Rose, the daughter, is a very timid and sensitive person who does not do any anything. Rose, who has a slightly deformed leg, suffers from inferiority complex.

Margaret and Rose are like two poles. Margaret is introduced as a woman who is not given in to delusions; but as one whose memories of the past, when her beauty and vivacity was appreciated by all, create a tragic illusion in her, which she gives vent by her pathetically comic display of energy to help her children. Margaret is very strong and self-reliant women and an extremely controlling mother. The challenge that a single mother faced at that time was much greater than today. However, she managed to endure the difficulties of life, taking care of her extremely shy daughter and determined son. She escapes into her illusory past. That was a defense against mental depression, a therapy that her mind has fashioned. She wants her daughter not to be dependent on anyone. Rose's handicap seems only a very slight defect to her. She takes effort to brace the times they live in and sustain her family. Margaret, the extrovert gregarious mother, who hides her anxiety of a woman deserted by her husband had brought up her children with great

difficulty by stitching and making small handicraft items.

Rose is a delicate, shy girl with one leg shorter than the other and held in a brace. She is a contrast to her mother, who is physically energetic with a will of her own. She understands her mother but is unable to live up to her dreams. She is perhaps belittled by her mother's stories of her gentleman callers. She does not escape into dreams like her mother, but lives in a dream of her own, with her glass dolls and just like them, she is fragile. Rose retreats from reality. She has no social interaction. She quits the typewriting classes and goes to the church where she spends her time alone. Neil says that the world of speed is not theirs. Her fingers could not move according to the speed of the world. Rose's physical disability not only restrains her physical mobility but also seriously curtails her capacity for involvement in society and wipes out her confidence in her worthiness for another's love. She cannot get over it and into the real world. Her frailty to prostrate this defect causes her to withdraw into her world of illusion. The limp then becomes symbolic of Rose's inner nature. She lives like a recluse, her only source of joy being the tiny, fragile, glass figures that she has collected.

The film also focuses on the helplessness of women and their extreme dependence on men. Both Margaret and Rose escape into a fantasy world when faced with the cold facts of their existence. They dream of what might have been but never really come to terms with their present situations. Margaret slips back into her youth and finds comfort in reveling in her past and re-living the popularity she enjoyed with young men who found her inordinately attractive. Both the female characters are disenchanted with life. One woman is strong and would not break under any circumstance. The other is as glass, pretty to look at, but easily broken.

The film *Ore Kadal* is based on Bengali writer Sunil Gangopadhyaya's classic *Heerak Deepti*. *Ore Kadal* is set in an India that is moving rapidly towards globalization a tale about relationships and the contours of the human mind. It puts the institution of marriage under the scanner, and talks about the emotional turmoil that a person

undergoes, that can make or break a relationship. Human fragility is the theme dealt with in this film.

Deepthi, the protagonist is portrayed as a plain and simple woman who came from a village to the city. Her dressing and gait reveals her innocence and purity of mind. She is a woman who falls into a pit from which she could not escape. She is a victim of her own desires. As a girl she was very studious and hoped to study further and wished to see the sea. Her dream was never realized by her father. The sea which she never saw became a symbol of all her unrealized dreams. Just like any other lower middle class woman, she accepted the life that was offered to her.

She dreamt of the outside world where she could receive more love and happiness. Jayan, her husband fails to please his wife's desires. She is denied of the care and love which she longs for. There is a kind of mundaneness about it which makes her crave for something else. This leads her to get attracted to Dr. Nathan, the social economist who needs women for his physical needs. But her desires turned out to be the cause of her ruin. Deepthi is not the woman looking for stimulation through a series of affairs. Rather, in a city with grey, colourless lives and where she can't communicate with any other adult except her frequently absent husband, she is forced to look for companionship with a man whom she initially admires. She was elated when Nathan showed interest in her. She is a woman who wished to be noticed and praised by someone. The woman in her, just like any other woman, longs to love and be loved by a man. Unfortunately it is not her husband but a stranger who satisfies her. For Deepthi love is primary and sex is secondary. She offered herself to the man who, she thought, loved her. Her craving for pure love and care made her surrender to Dr. Nathan. Unfortunately she realized that it was not love but lust for her body that Dr. Nathan had for her. Being a woman with values, the thought that she cheated her husband starts troubling her mind. This leads to her mental imbalance. After coming back to her normal life, she tries to find comfort and relief in the company of Gods. It is with great difficulty that she manages to stay inside her house when Nathan comes to see her. The moments when she received

love were when she was with Nathan. She cannot forget him and this makes her go back to him leaving her husband.

Deepthi and Bela are the two contrasting characters. Bela is the practical, intelligent high class call girl, a friend and soul mate of Dr. Nathan. She tries to identify herself with some of the stark realities of life. She is a socialite modeled after many socialites we see in urban India. Bela is a result of her bitter experiences. She travelled a path full of stones. She fell many times. She got up as a new brave woman who was ready to face life as it is. Yet, she is passionate and sensitive to human suffering and pain. Bela runs a restaurant and bar. She's a survivor of incestuous abuse and poverty and now a successful business woman. Life taught her to be strong and she is strong enough mentally to handle the drunkards who make nuisance at her bar. She faces the hardships of life boldly. It is surprising that she was strong enough to be a man's companion and advisor. She had love affairs. But she never regretted loving anybody. Bela is strong and bold as opposed to the weak and innocent Deepthi.

In all the films it is seen that women are struggling in one way or the other. In *Agnisakshi*, it is struggle of Devaki to rise above the shackles of tradition and to fight for her country. In *Akale*, it is the struggle of a woman to look after her children and also the handicapped woman's struggle to find love. *Ore Kadal* shows Deepthi's struggle to realize her dreams and also Bela's resistance against the life that doomed her.

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