

THE JOURNEY OF THE “VICTIM” FROM PADMARAJAN TO AMAL NEERAD: A STUDY THROUGH MALAYALAM FILM INDUSTRY

¹VEENA A., ²RINCY SAJI, ³MALAVIKA J., ⁴DR. SOUMY SYAMCHAND

²PhD. Research Scholar, St. Joseph’s College (Autonomous), Devagiri, Calicut Kerala, India

veenaajayan96@gmail.com

²PhD. Research Scholar Maharaja’s College, Ernakulam Kerala, India

rin4.rins@gmail.com

³PhD. Research Scholar St. Joseph’s College (Autonomous), Devagiri, Calicut Kerala, India

mailto:Jkatholi@gmail.com

Corresponding Author:

⁴Assistant Professor St. Gregorios College Kottarakara, Kerala, India.
drsoumysyamchand@gmail.com

Abstract:

Victim-assailant or the prey-predator relationship persists throughout the history of man and is in turn reflected in various forms of literature and arts. There is an array of films that discusses this perennial theme overtly or covertly. Malayalam film industry has set its benchmark of new wave movements and themes. Analyzing the journey of ‘victim’ from Padmarajan (*Namukku Paarkkan Munthirithoppual*), the pioneer of first new-wave, till Aashiq Abu (*22 Female Kottayam*) and Amal Neerad (*Varathan*) who hold the baton of second new-wave it is understood that it is also a journey of a feeble woman who falls short to protest to the one who backlashes at the assailant and overpower the male counterpart. This paper is set in the light of the theory of Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” and how it is represented with ascending intensity over time. Not only the female characters but also a gender relation, that is the representation of man-woman relationships, also changed a lot. From the aggressive and authoritative man and feeble dependent woman, the time has changed to women who shows the two extremities of a protector and destroyer, even overpowers the man and the man who accept her with equal importance to that of him.

Key Words: victim, gender relation, masculine insecurity, Lura Mulvey, male gaze, new wave movement, Malayalam film industry

Malayalam film industry has always set a benchmark of its own according to the changing trends and demanding movements. It has always been acclaimed for its groundbreaking products that go hand in hand with the popular Marathi, Bengali and other regional cinema that are serving similar concerns and attitudes. The “New Wave” movement in the Mollywood first hits its shore during the 1970s till the end of ’80s under the command of full-grown directors like Aravindan, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Bharathan and Padmarajan. By 2000, the Malayalam movie industry stepped into another genre of familial themes and plots with added flavours of songs and dances targeting family audience. The movies of Sathyan Anthikkadu, Sreenivasan and Priyadarshan are notable examples. The political satires of Sreenivasan like *Sandesham* stood solitary. Another set of multi-facet directors like Aashiq Abu, Anwar Rasheed, Amal Neerad and Sameer Thahil became harbingers for another rebirth of or the second “New Wave” movement through their *Salt ‘N’ Pepper*, *Ustad Hotel*, *Chappa Kurishu* and so on. At this stage, the industry started producing films with commendable technical quality, a novelty in story-telling and exploring socially relevant issues. The new movement put an end to the era of superstars and fan-made films. They reworked on the grass-root themes by projecting the life of common man as if a mirror is held against his life. Deviating from the pioneer works the new movement comrades started questioning the stereotypes and traditional norms hitherto

unquestioned, whether in art or literature or films, other than a few exceptions like Padmarajan and Madhavikutti. They started considering the prejudiced themes and redrafted gender roles with utmost importance and potential. Irrespective of time, man-woman, more explicitly the 'prey-predator or 'victim-assailant, relationship serves as a perennial theme in films throughout. There was and is a predilection of blaming the victims of rape - whether acquaintance or strange rape - univocally. This research is intended to analyze the evolution undergone by the victim-assailant relationship and their roles in particular by taking three films from different periods of Malayalam film –*Namukku Parkkan Munthirithoppukal* of Padmarajan, Aashiq Abu's *22 Female Kottayam* and *Varathan* by Amal Neerad. This paper will be critically examining the female lead roles in these movies, the reactions they faced and give after they faced sexual molestation and also the changes in their relationship with the male counterpart.

Namukku Parkkan Munthirithoppukal- (trans. The Vineyards for Us to Dwell in) by Padmarajan is a 1986 movie that revolves around a Syrian-Christian background. The plot evolved amid of a romantic relationship between Solomon, a planter who owns a vineyard in the outskirts of Mysore and visits his mother once in a while, and his neighbour Sophia, who is born to her mother out of wedlock. Sophia is being convulsed immensely from her stepfather Paul Pailokkaran. Though Solomon's mother first rebuffs at Solomon for his love for Sophia later he convinces her. Paul Pailokkaran, who always seeks a chance to molest Sophia, irked by Solomon's decision raped her the day she was alone. When her mother tried to console her she said that she is trying to make her convince that nothing has happened to her, but by now she is no more her mother's daughter or sister to her half-sister Elizabeth who is Paul's daughter. Solomon decided to accept her forgetting all that happened to her turning down his mother's condemn. Next day Solomon went to Sophia's house and it was Paul who opened the door. He devilishly said to Solomon, "now you can take her", denoting he has used her for meeting his lust and Solomon encountered him by hitting black and blue. To the end, we see Solomon takes Sophia onto his shoulders and starts new and happy beginning.

Hitherto in Malayalam cinema, no "victim" was daring to face the community after she has been raped. She, as a rule, is left to get drench in shame and self-reproach. The only solution yet depicted was either she committed suicide or a massive suicide of the entire family. Or even the assailant might be killing the prey. Whatever the way is, the victim was never given a chance to lead a normal, especially happy, life thereafter. In exceptional cases, if she survives the before-mentioned way of putting an end to life, she is treated as the fallen one and her only way to live becomes prostitution. The character Usha in I. V. Sasi's *Neelagiri* is one such example. Usha was molested by a local goon at the night of her marriage and then onwards she was doomed to be a whore in her locality. In that sense, Padmarajan made a detonation upon the traditional thoughts and norms through his *Namukku Parkkan Munthirithoppukal*- by giving his 'victim' a new life of hopes and survival. Here he tries to attribute an aura to his Solomon as he shows courage to invite a girl who lost her virginity to her life and decided to stay in the same society where the loss of virginity is treated as the loss of life. By the end, most of the readers are made to give their sympathy to Sophia for her fate and hails Solomon for his benevolence.

In the present scenario of re-reading the same work, I feel nothing feminist or female-oriented in the movie. Though the director hit the nucleus, he failed not to down the hood of patriarchal dominance. Here Padmarajan glorifies his Solomon by giving life to Sophia. The character of Sophia remains the same from or only a bit deviated from the molested ones until that time. Paul Pailokkaran in the movie is the embodiment of all violent and negative characteristics of masculinity – powerful, aggressive, lustful, competitive and authoritative. At the same time, Solomon is placed upon the other panel of the diptych with all the soft traits of masculinity mixed-up with certain feminine traits- love, compassion, sympathy, gentleness and succouring. Here the only thing that makes a difference in the character of Sophia is her attempt to make herself believe that nothing has happened to her. But Padmarajan hesitates to make his heroine bold and to set her against the patriarchal norms. And she is made helpless and yearning for her saviour for help.

22 Female Kottayam, an Aashiq Abu film, released in 2012 is a 'second new-wave' film in its appearance and treatment. Tessa is a nursing student, who is planning to pursue a career in Canada, falls in love with Cyril an employee at a travel consultancy and they started living together. As he met with a dual in a pub and the opposite team declared for a vengeance, Cyril decided to go doggo with the help of his boos Hegde. Hegde visits Tessa to update about the situation. Knowing she being alone there, capitalizing on the situation, he explicitly asked her "Can I have sex with you?" and raped her brutally. Knowing the incident, though the furious Cyril decided to avenge Hegde, Tessa calms him down as she doesn't want to worsen the situation. Once again Hegde reappears in front of Tessa disguised as a repentant sinner asking forgiveness but raped her once again. Tessa decided to revenge for it. But before she could do anything Cyril deceived her by setting a mousetrap for her in a drug case. While in Prison she befriends Zubaida. Being aware of Cyril to be a known pimp and it was he who set upped Tessa for Hegde, Zubaida moulds Tessa to be strong with a criminal boldness, and through her criminal connections outside Tessa

was given bail. Tessa pins down Cyril who is now relocated to Cochin from Bangalore and visits him as a *femme fatale* in the form of a model. But Cyril unravels Tessa's disguised identity of the model and strokes her brutally and abuses her calling her a slut who is ready to do anything for her career and says "you are JUST a woman". Tessa seduced him as he wishes to enjoy her company once again and by sedating him she penectomises him. Incensed Cyril unlocks his past that led him to choose the role of a pimp and accepts Tessa's challenge to confront her to set the scores when he gets recovered. Before going to Canada she enunciates to Cyril that she loses someone who cheated her but what he lost is someone who loved him truly. Also, she reminds him that by some corner she is still there in his heart.

Aashiq Abu, one among the pioneers of second new-wave in Bollywood, springs up with the same theme of victim-assailant relationship. But what made a bang is his extraordinary fortitude to provide his heroine with the power to castrate the man who cheated her. The director launched the story with the traditional feeble-minded heroine coming from a remote village in Kottayam and surrenders everything she had including her chastity to a man she loved. Until she met Zubaida at her prison-cell there is nothing much we expect from Tessa. But after she realized the deception she is placed on a different realm of vengeance upon the entire norms of patriarchy for that, to make her capable for her revolutionary and rebellious mission accomplish, the director entrusted another woman, Zubaida. Here Zubaida is a criminal who is sentenced to death for killing the mayor and his men who murdered her husband. At the same time, she represents the tender and worshipped face of woman motherhood. She is a character who portrays the two extremities in a woman – a creator as well as a destroyer. At the same time, Hegde and Cyril are the epitomai of patriarchal superiority. It is this dominance that Tessa questions. She poisoned Hegde who molested her. But her verdict for Cyril was much beyond acceptable for manhood who possess an utmost penis pride.

Varathan (trans. The Outsider) by Amal Neerad is a very recent movie released in 2018 that shook the audience with its extremely grave theme and bold representation. The movie recounts the inhospitable experiences faced by the couples Priya and Aby who come from Dubai to Priya's ancestral farmhouse in a remote village. Priya is mentally upset with the ogling of the villagers and constantly being under surveillance. Though she constantly warns Aby about the surroundings and her insecurities, he dismisses all those recklessly. While taking a bath she feels someone looking through the large-hole ventilator. Though Aby covers it with cardboard, in no time Priya find it in the torn state. Also, she was furious about finding a mobile camera placed on there. She understood it was the play of Joshy, the main villain, her neighbour and schoolmate. But all Aby did was just to make a formal enquiry, not even a warning. One day Aby has to go for a meeting and Priya was left alone. Feeling it is not safe to be at the house alone she decided to go to a nearby convent library. On the way, her scooter was purposefully hit by Joshy's jeep. Unconscious Priya was molested by Joshy, his brother Johny and their man Jithin. Later they dumped her at a hospital. When Aby came back he failed to find her at the house and finally spotted Priya at the hospital. Furious Priya without saying anything fumed into the house and started packing her things. Perturbed with Aby's questions, Priya frantically says that she was molested and she doesn't feel safe and secured at Aby. Then the movie is elevated to an action-thriller level where Aby encounters the villains and pays brutally for his wife's abusers. The movie ends when Priya serenely cleans her father's gun and Aby hanging the board saying "Trespassers will be shot".

Varathan veers from the path not in its theme, but the attitude provided by the characters. Priya overpowers the major part of the story. Aby has taken charge only in the end, in the late hour. Till then, we can see how Priya manages each situation with appreciable courage and sheer perseverance. Also, it is she who senses the adverse situations and possesses a piece of in-depth knowledge about the characters of her neighbours to what extent they could act and so on when Aby stays still without taking all these into accounts. There are several instances throughout the movie stating these traits. At the beginning itself, when Aby returns from the office desperately since he has lost the job, and he came to know that Priya has got a miscarriage due to the poor growth of the foetus. Here Priya handled the situation well. It was she who consoled Aby and suggested to take a break. Again when Priya identified her inner garments are being stolen, she adamantly and gravely warns Aby about the insecurity she feels. If Aby had have taken a firm step then, Priya could have been saved from her fate. When she became agitated due to the purposeful noises made by Joshy and his men, Aby dealt with them in a moderate, better to say, in a polite manner. What made Priya extremely fraught was Aby accepted the drink they offered. Once Priya spotted the mobile phone at their ventilator the immediate thing she did was to make a ring to the phone number Joshy had given to her that morning. Though she had thrown it to the bin, she recovered it and found that it was his phone. She asked Aby to make arrangements to cancel all the lease agreements they had with Joshy's family since they were the undertakers of Priya's farmland in lease. As usual, Aby returned with the cold response he received from there and tried to pacify Priya, but in vain.

Though these movies are part of the Malayalam film industry, it is of different periods and varying themes at a superficial level, and also journey of the 'prey' through these time. This ride of prey-predator combination not only discusses the range of suffering undergone by women but also how they reacted to those persecutions in respective periods. Moreover, all these specimens deal with the theory of 'male-gaze' proposed by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey's male gaze is a feminist theory that depicting women as a sexual object who are represented in visual arts and literature. It states that women are represented as mere tools or sexual gratification and are always being represented under male surveillance, from the vision of the cameraman to the spectator. In Padmarajan's *Namukku Parkkan Munthirithoppukal*, Sophia is continuously being watched by her step-father Paul. He is introduced in the movie when Sophia and Elizabeth were playing shuttle with Solomon and his cousin, and on seeing this Paul shouts at Sophia. The director gives the first hint of Paul's character when he shouts only at Sophia, not Elizabeth, and his look penetrates Sophia's body which is explicit to the views. Paul's arrogant behaviour and his animalistic sexual instinct toward Sophia are shown in another frame. When Sophia was hammering a nail at the wall Paul came near her as if holding the chair upon she was and stares at her navel. Later though he tried to take advantage of the presence of his wife saved Sophia from the attempt. But at last, he succeeded in his attempt to molesting her. Considering *22 Female Kottayam* by Aashiq Abu, the male gaze is represented through the eyes of the characters DK and Hegde. While DK's gaze is explicit and he waits for the girl's permission and a known womanizer, Hegde is a hypocrite who is in the mask of a saviour. He never waited for the other's permission. At the same time, Cyril uses his handsome face and polite behaviour as a tool to trap the girls for his clients. In this movie, we need to look in between the frames to distil Mulvey's concept of the male gaze from the film. At the same time, Amal Neerad's *Varathan* can be a reference specimen for the perfect study of the theory of the male gaze. From the moment Priya and Aby landed in the village she is being watched. Each shot stimulates and uneasiness and grave atmosphere inside every spectator – a feeling of watching and being watched. It's Joshy, Johnny and Nithin who are spectating Priya but are not shown physically on screen at the beginning. Instead, the director's brilliance transforms the camera as their eyes and the audience experiences a thought that it is they who watch and being watched. We feel a shudder of this camera gaze that implicitly denoting the peeping Toms when she notices someone is watching them the night of their wedding anniversary celebration. Later she feels the same instinct while taking a bath. She becomes more vigilant and found the closed ventilator to be torn. Here Nithin shows strong fetishistic behaviour than the other villains who are extremely arrogant and show grave sexual instincts. He steals Priya's undergarments and tries to find sexual gratification from it. On another day while Priya was baking a cake, he pores over Priya as if he is making sexual intercourse which is connoted through the movements of his eyelids and irregular breathing. In that frame, Priya licks her hand when the chocolate slides through. Normally it's a simple and usual activity. But when it is coloured with male gaze even this simple act becomes an act of sexual instinct.

Male insecurity is the spine of all these abuses depicted in the above movies which are in turn the representation of harsh reality. The thought that they should be aggressive and overpower the female companion in order to secure their position lies deep-rooted in all those men. Paul in Padmarajan's work is an aggressive alcoholic. He suppresses all the meagre steps taken by his wife and Sophia to escape from his brutal force to find solace. He burns Sophia's interview letter and never informs her about it. He knew that a job is her only way to escape. When she inquires about it he mutes her through his haughty voice. Cyril of Aashiq Abu's *22FK* nullifies his female companion by insulting her "a mere woman". At the same time, he needs her body. When he was castrated at the end, he feels all he lost is his masculinity. At the same time, Amal Neerad deals with this pride in another term. Though the villains – Joshy, Johnny and Nithin – appear strong and brutally representing sexual instincts, they all possess a deep-rooted fear and insecurity. Joshy and Priya were classmates. And he shares an incident happened when they went for a study tour where he touched Priya's navel when she was sleeping. Voyeurism and fetishism are the two paraphilic activities traced in this movie. When Joshy finds sexual gratification through sharing these types of incidents mixed with his imagination, Nithin found it through her clothes. Both show varying psychological levels of sexual need. Though a minor character that is weaker than Joshy, Nithin expresses more grave and sombre instincts. He is a peeping tom throughout. It is this paraphilia rushed them to molest Priya. Other than this the commanding power that Priya possessed which insulted the masculine pride in them led then to this viciousness.

Though the deep-rooted carnal pleasure and masculine pride over their penis persisted the same, a significant change has taken place in the gender roles. When Padmarajan, the pioneer of first new wave, portrays the man more powerful and unregretful, Amal Neerad the proponent of second new wave depict 'him' as more insecure who tries to hide his fear under the mask of a stereotypical man who shows sexual instincts, dominating (at least in their psyche) and arrogant. But the latter is punished for his deed. The same can be seen in Aashiq Abu's too. There Tessa made her vengeance in two ways. Hegde, the one who raped her was killed by a snake bite. But she made it clear that, for Cyril, death is only an escape. The act of penectomy was more brutal than death for one who sees the

woman as nothing. Symbolically she cracks the dome of masculine pride through that. According to Tessa, Cyril deserves more because he made his business in cost of her trust. And she paid for it with a life- long instalment of stigma and shame. When Padmarajan glorifies Solomon through the acts of inviting Sophia, a victim, to his life, Aashiq Abu made his Tessa bold and pragmatic. She flew to Canada to pursue her studies. At the same time, Amal Neerad's Priya stood a step ahead who overpowers her male counterpart. The first two directors have shown a note of sympathy upon their victims. But Amal Neerad doesn't give any emphasis on the act of rape performed by the villains. Instead, Priya was made more furious and bold than earlier. It is not sympathy that one will feel toward her, but become a part of her emotions as if we are in that place. What made her down is her loss of trust and the sense of security in Aby's hand and agitated towards his cold and helpless attitude. At the same, a rage of fire is put on in the spectator toward the villains. It is the sum of all these emotions made the final fight where Aby take in charge of the action and the vice got punished more thrilling and appealing. When Priya was molested and the later moments, the spectators were 'catharsis' or purged. Though she was furious, she never showed a note of defeat. In a line, we can say, when Padmarajan gives an idea of hope of a new life holding the acquiesce thoughts of the time, Aashiq Abu portrays the present time and situation. But Amal Neerad sys being a victim is not the end of anything and he represented his philosophy perfectly through Priya.

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