

The Changing Role of Women in Cinema

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Abstract

The gender imbalance is evident not only on-screen but behind it also. This paper mainly focuses on the theme of the presence of women in the silver screen. The paper holds that involvement of women in the field of cinema especially in Kerala, is not negligible. In the last few years, the Malayalam film industry has seen a wave of women directors, editors, cinematographers, producers, dubbing artists, singers etc. in addition to actors. Industry associations in general do not sufficiently protect the interests of women professionals. More than 20 women, including top actors, directors, technicians and singers, have united to create the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in a bid to voice the problems faced by women in the industry and explore ways to address them. The paper further analyses the status of women in the film industry in Kerala using ethics of realism. The paper concludes that equality, if conveyed and attained in this field, would be one of the unequivocal courses to bring forth reversal in the attitude of the society towards women.

Introduction

The first film made in Malayalam was 'Vigathakumaran'(The Lost Child) written, produced and directed by J.C. Daniel. P.K.Rosy was the heroine who played the character of a Nair woman. Being a Dalit woman, she had to face many difficulties in the rest of her life

due the caste system that angered the upper class people. From the beginning stage, the film industry in Kerala is male dominated and is seldom considered as a workspace for women. Film-making for the women is one of the most strenuous decisions taken as a career choice. The reason for this is the established patriarchy in the industry. It is further complicated by the restrictions imposed by the family. The problem is not only confined to workplace sexism but begins right from the instance as and when a female student aspires to pursue a career in films. The society hardly considers as girls worthy of a movie-making career. A few of them work hard behind the camera to make good movies.

The Presence of Women in Cinema

There are women that demolish the myth that women's role in cinema is limited to the charm of pretty actors. The first woman director in Malayalam is Vijaya Nirmala. She directed 'Kavita' produced by 'Samgamam pictures' in 1973.

In the last few years, the Malayalam film industry has seen a wave of women directors. There is Prague Film School-educated Shalini Usha Nair, who worked as an assistant director in a Mumbai TV production house for many years before making Akam in 2011, a critically appreciated celluloid adaptation of Yakshi, a novel by Malayattoor Ramakrishnan. This film travelled to many international festivals and also got a commercial release.

Anjali Menon is an Indian film director and screenwriter who made her writing and directional debut with the feature film Manjadikuru (Lucky Red Seeds), for which she got the FIPRESCI award for the Best Malayalam film and Best Indian Debut. Her second feature film is Bangalore Days. Anjali Menon grew up in Dubai and learned her craft at the London Film School. She has written the critically and commercially acclaimed Ustad Hotel.

Veteran actress Revathi has directed movies in three different languages, Malayalam, English and Hindi. She has directed Makal, segment of the Malayalam anthology film Kerala cafe. Her English movie Mittr, My Friend won national film award for best feature film in English. Later she has directed a short film titled as Red Building Where the Sun Sets.

Geetu Mohandas, the director of critically acclaimed Liar's Dice, which was India's official entry for the Oscars in 2015. She has directed Moothon which got warm reception at Toronto International Film Festival.

Vidhu Vincent turned out to be an icon of woman power of Malayalam cinema. She made her feature film debut with the Malayalam film Manhole, which won her that year's Kerala State Film Award for Best Director. Manhole portrayed the sad plight of the manual scavengers in Kerala. At the 21st International Film Festival of Kerala, the film won two awards including the Best Debutant Director Award for Vincent. She became the first woman from Kerala to have a film screened in the history of the festival.

Producers are now willing to work with woman directors in mainstream cinema. Sreebala K.Menon marked her entry as director in 'Love 24*7' whereas Preethu Panikkar broke stereotypes with 'Thilothama'. It was journalist Rajasree Balram who wrote the script for V.K.Prakash's 'Rockstar'.

Leela Santhosh, a tribal woman from Wayanad is going to be the first tribal director from Kerala. She has already done two documentaries and worked as an associate director in a movie. She is now planning to make a feature film about a Paniya tribal chieftain Karinthandan, who is said to have helped an English engineer to build the Thamarassery ghat pass with Vinayakan in the lead role.

Leela is trying to ensure that while she may be the first Adivasi filmmaker from Kerala, she is definitely not the last. The Adivasis in Kerala have, for far too long, seen their history

and stories told by non-Adivasis to suit their interests. She is trying to make sure that this changes; that their struggles, stories and achievements are presented by one of their own so that they do justice to the history of Kerala Adivasis. She is sure that her determination and confidence is what will save her from being stereotyped, and believes that with her family's wholehearted support, she will go on to clear the invisible hurdles in her way due to her tribal origins.

Beena Paul is an Indian film editor who works mainly in Malayalam language films. She started her career with the editing of John Abraham's 'Amma Ariyan' in 1986. She has won National Film Award for Best Editing in *Mitr*, *My Friend* (2002) and in *Unni* (Best Non-Feature Film Editing-2003). She has also won Kerala State Film Award for Best Editor in *Daya* (1998), *Sayahnam* (2000) and *Bioscope* (2008).

Fowzia Fathima became the first ever woman cinematographer in Malayalam films, with *Gulumaal*. She is settled in Thiruvananthapuram. Her maiden film as director too is in Malayalam; *Nadiyude Moonnam Kara* was premiered at the Women's International Film Festival. Anjali Shukla received the national award for best cinematographer in 2009 for her work in Shaji N.Karun's 'Kutti Srank'.

Sameera Sanish is one of the best costume designers in Malayalam cinema. She works on almost 15 movies an year. 'Salt n Pepper', 'Thattathin Marayathu', 'How Old Are You?' and 'Charlie' are a few examples.

There are a few art directors who made wonders with their creativity. Jayasree Lakshmi Narayanan worked in Lal Jose's 'Neena' and Martin Prakkatt's 'Charlie'. Women are putting their stamp in production too. Sandra Thomas works with Vijay Babu under the production company 'Friday films'.

Bhagyalakshmi is a famous dubbing artist, writer, artist and anchor based in Kerala. With more than 2000 films to her credit, she won three Kerala State Film Awards in 1991, 1995, and 2003. 'Ulladakkam', Ente Sooryaputhrikku, 'Ormayundayirikkanam', and Yathrakkaryde Sradhakku are the pictures that brought her the State Awards. She has dubbed for almost all the leading actresses in Malayalam like 'Revathi', 'Shobana', 'Soundarya', 'Suhasini', 'Meena', and 'Amala'. Other artists include Sreeja, Anandavalli, Devi etc.

There are many playback singers who work in this field. This include veteran singers like Chithra, Sujatha etc. and new generation singers like Rimi Tomy, Mrudula Varier etc. There are a few music composers and technicians who inspires the audience and create the mood of the films effectively.

The Role of Associations in the Industry

Currently the film industry in Kerala is largely dominated by two associations - the Association of Malayalam Movie Artists (AMMA) for actors and Film Employees' Federation of Kerala (FEFKA) for technicians. Most women actors and technicians feel that their gender-specific grievances need a separate redressal forum, one that is run by women.

Industry associations in general do not sufficiently protect the interests of women professionals. In Kerala's film industry, leading women professionals have decided to not ask the question at all, working instead to usher in change. More than 20 women, including top actors, directors, technicians and singers, have united to create the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) in a bid to voice the problems faced by women in the industry and explore ways to address them.

The WCC hopes that with increased awareness and sensitization, it will be able to influence content and professional attitudes in the future. It also hopes to expand its footprint into other languages and bring female aesthetics and sensibilities to mainstream cinema by providing job stability, dignity and security to women - which would all encourage in their increased participation in the medium.

Conclusion

There is urgency that women should be accorded with the freedom to chose their career and that the film industry confirms a desirable atmosphere to satisfy the need for a women friendly workspace. Equality, if conveyed and attained in this field, would be one of the indisputable courses to bring forth reversal in the attitude of the society towards women. The associations are aimed to be more than just a watchdog and are looking at ways to carve its own path in the larger scheme of things. Change will be gradual to materialize in commercial Malayalam cinema.

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