

# Moving Toward Empowerment: A Horneyan Analysis of Female Agency in the Malayalam Film *Uyare*

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**Abstract:** In this paper, the 2019 Malayalam film *Uyare* is going to be analysed with the help of psychoanalytic theories of Karen Horney, especially the concepts like real self and ideal self, neurotic needs and the role of final self-realization in personality development. In this paper, a qualitative content analysis is used to examine how the protagonist Pallavi Raveendran of the film moves from being a victim of patriarchal control and physical and emotional abuse to finding herself and gaining power. Change is Pallavi's strength of character and the desire to become a better person while struggling with the prejudice of society and her own ordeals. The new insights into the representation of women's empowerment in contemporary Indian cinema are therefore added to the existing literature on psychological film analysis.

**Keywords:** Karen Horney, Psychoanalytic Theory, Female Empowerment, Malayalam film, Self-Actualization, Neurotic Needs, Resilience, Identity Formation

## INTRODUCTION

*Uyare* is a captivating Malayalam film as it narrates the life of Pallavi Raveendran, a young girl with a big brain and even bigger dreams of becoming a pilot. Although she has a good family, Pallavi's life changes when she develops feelings for Govind, a man who is the embodiment of the worst traits a man can have. The possessive nature and the coiled superiority complex that Govind portrays are in contrast with Pallavi's drive. His actions are inspired by the wrong idea that women are supposed to be submissive to men, a concept that becomes more and more oppressive as the relationship progresses. The story takes a tragic turn when Pallavi is brutally attacked with acid by Govind. This horrific act leaves her severely disfigured and emotionally shattered, threatening to destroy her career and future. But this is where the story becomes interesting, as the traumatic event becomes the incident that changes

Pallavi. Pallavi may be beaten physically and mentally, but she is not going to allow Govind to kill her spirit and she finally escapes his clutches and finds herself. Director Manu Ashokan has directed this story of inner strength and personal growth in a compelling manner. We see it happen – Pallavi, the character who has been internally and externally damaged, not letting her dreams die. Instead, she uses her pain as a reason to do what society and even she doesn't want to do – to fly. This film is not just another movie, it is a testimony of the human spirit. The audience is taken through Pallavi's eyes as she fights gender bias and with determination soars above them to achieve her dreams.

In this paper, Horney's psychoanalytic theory is applied to the film *Uyare*, and the protagonist Pallavi's transformation from an idealized self to her real self is explored. Horney's concepts of neurotic trends and self-realization are used as a framework to analyze Pallavi's change as she works through significant issues. The paper discusses how Pallavi's neurotic tendencies, which are first observable in her toxic relationship with Govind, become the very forces that propel her character's growth and learning. Pallavi survives an acid attack and her inner battles, and thus begins her journey of becoming who she really is. Using Horney's theories, this analysis seeks to show how Pallavi's story represents the process of moving away from the 'tyranny of the shoulds' and instead towards the realization of one's potential. How Pallavi's resilience and determination let her break free from the societal norms and for the first time in her life, pursue a career and have complete freedom in her life, i.e., what Horney called the 'real self' is explored in this study.

## Theoretical framework

Horney's primary contributions are her theory of neurosis, which she believed that childhood and

family experiences are the primary cause of neurosis. Horney also came up with ten neurotic needs and three neurotic solutions: Moving towards, against and away from people. She also focused on the cultural and social factors that shape the behavior and psychological characteristics of an individual. Furthermore, Horney criticized Freud for his concept of penis envy and suggested womb envy in its place. She also made a distinction between the ideal self and the real self, explained the “tyranny of the should” and how it affects individuals negatively, and also explained how individuals can recognize their own strengths through self actualization. From a psychological viewpoint, Horney’s theories will provide a better understanding of Pallavi’s story and the social issues she faced. This paper will analyze the film *Uyare* and how Horney’s theoretical frameworks on neurosis, the ‘tyranny of the shoulds’ and the three neurotic trends can be applied to Pallavi’s life.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many studies focusing on the psychoanalytic features in the films. Fidha Naslin in her 2020 study titled *Studying Freud’s Notion of Repressed Mind and It’s Portrayal in Fazil’s Manichitrathazhu*, analyzed the film ‘Manichitrathazhu’ through the lens of Sigmund Freud’s concept of repression. Through the study, she explores how the childhood trauma and painful memories of the individuals are pushed into the unconscious mind of the people which can develop into the neurotic symptoms later in their lives.

In a detailed 2015 study on the Malayalam films released between 1968 and 2015, titled *Psychiatric Disorders in Malayalam Cinema*, Badr Ratnakaran and his colleagues examines the portrayal of mental conditions such as psychotic, mood, and anxiety disorders in the Malayalam films as there are a lot which deal with such topics. But the authors warn about the critical scrutiny of the films as it can be misleading sometimes in his exact portrayal of mental health.

In their study, Sharifi et al. (2021) apply Karen Horney’s psychoanalytic theory to examine Humbert’s character in Vladimir Nabokov’s “*Lolita*.” The authors explore how Humbert’s upbringing and societal influences shaped his identity, revealing his aggressive and aloof nature.

The psychoanalytic theory of Karen Horney is used in this paper to examine themes of female

empowerment and agency in the Malayalam film *Uyare*. This study demonstrates how cultural influences and personal trauma mould the protagonist’s identity and propel her toward self-realization by examining her path via Horney’s perspective. This study explores how female empowerment is portrayed in movies, which advances our knowledge of psychological topics in Malayalam cinema.

#### Analysis of *Uyare* through Horney’s lens

Pallavi has always been fascinated by flying and decides to pursue a career as a pilot. Her passion is evident from her childhood, where she expresses her desire to see the cockpit during her first flight. This ambition drives her to secure admission at a pilot training center in Mumbai. Pallavi is in a relationship with Govind Balakrishnan, who is portrayed as possessive and controlling. Initially, Pallavi justifies his behavior as a sign of love and security, recalling how he supported her during difficult times in school. However, Govind’s possessiveness escalates into emotional and verbal abuse, causing Pallavi to feel suffocated. When Pallavi completes her pilot training and prepares to start her career, Govind becomes increasingly jealous and resentful. After Pallavi ends their relationship, Govind exacts revenge by throwing acid on her face, disfiguring her and damaging her eyesight. This act not only jeopardizes her career as a pilot but also leaves her emotionally shattered. Pallavi takes Govind to court, but the case is dismissed due to lack of evidence. Despite this setback, she finds support from her father and friends. She meets Vishal Rajashekharan, who offers her a job as an air hostess, challenging societal norms about beauty and ability. In a pivotal scene, Pallavi proves her courage and skill by safely landing a plane when the pilot becomes unconscious. This moment marks her triumph over adversity and her determination to pursue her dreams despite the challenges she faces. The film concludes with Pallavi having found a new sense of purpose and independence, refusing to let her past define her.

#### "Real Self" vs. the "Ideal Self"

Self-idealization is a significant shift in personality development. It is acquired in early childhood and leads to the development of a new strategy. Subject idealizes himself/herself and thus does not attempt to reveal his/her real personality but strives to become the ideal version of himself/herself. That is why it influences the person and his or her development in

general. "The energies driving toward self-realization are shifted to the aim of actualizing the idealized self" (Horney 13-14). Horney's theory of neurosis is evident in Pallavi's relationship with Govind. The neurotic conflict is caused by the conflict between Pallavi's "real self" (her desire to become a pilot and to achieve her dreams) and the "ideal self" which Pallavi is supposed to be according to Govind and societal norms. Pallavi, a very ambitious and energetic girl who wants to be acknowledged by everyone around her, who wants to prove her ability and enthusiasm by involving in all the academic and extracurricular activities, who wants to spend time with her friends is being forced to suppress all her feelings just for the happiness of one person, Govind which makes her hide her real self. On the other hand, Govind treats her as very inferior, shouts at her for even minute mistakes like not informing him in advance about her dance costume change and who is also not happy with her decision to go to a different state to pursue her education for he is scared that he will lose her or she will reach higher levels than him. Pallavi always defends Govind and his actions in front of her friends and relatives and believes blindly in that ideal self for a very long time.

#### Tyranny of the Shoulds

Pallavi's initial attempts to calm Govind and justify his behavior reflect what Horney calls the "tyranny of the shoulds." Pallavi is compelled to meet Govind's expectations, believing it is her responsibility to maintain the relationship at all costs. After learning about Govind's behaviour and after a meetup with him, Pallavi's dad asked her, "Are you sure he is the one for you?" She remembered an incident that made them friends, and that support given by Govind when she needed it the most still holds her deep into him irrespective of the flaws he has. "Whatever faults he may have now, he was the only one for me at that time". Her gratitude for his good act turned to submission gradually or unknowingly. "Now it's my turn to stand by him; I want to do it," submitting fully to one without knowing that she is losing herself in that act.

#### Three Neurotic Trends

1. **Moving Toward People:** At the beginning of the story, Pallavi is shown to be representing this trend by submitting to Govind's demands and looking for his approval. This statement, 'It's sometimes a nice feeling to ask for permission', manifests this neurotic craving for love and

acceptance. She defends her lover in front of her father and friends and says that whatever he does it is because of his love for her. She always apologizes for the mistakes that he has made and always tries to go to him and give him support so that she does not lose him. She submits herself to him physically, emotionally and mentally, fulfilling all his demands and proving that she is a good and devoted lover.

2. **Moving Against People:** As Pallavi grows and asserts herself, she begins to move against Govind's control. Govind got really mad at her when he came to see her as a surprise and saw her returning with her friends. She told him then for the first time, "I am scared of you", "I need to breathe, I need to breathe without fear", and she told him for the first time that he is the only obstacle for that. She confronts him, saying, "I want to be me, not the me that you want me to be, but the me I want myself to be." He wanted her to go with him abroad before completing the course and accused her with immoral statements when she didn't agree with it. That was the moment she responded fiercely and asked him to get lost from her life. When the court did not give him a deserved punishment, she went to the prosecutor and told him, "If an enemy had done this, I may not have pursued him". She expresses her agony of getting abused by her most loved person. "I want to win this"-her statement after he got the bail and she is ready to go to any extent for that.

3. **Moving Away from People:** Pallavi, after the acid attack, first wants to 'find a reason to live'. This shows a short term avoidance of people as she tries to deal with her loss. At first she did not even want to meet her friend Saria. She had a withdrawal strategy. This withdrawal is used to make the person feel safe because he or she does not want to get hurt or disappointed in interpersonal relationships. The acid attack is the betrayal and the trauma for Pallavi, and so her basic anxiety should be through the roof. Withdrawal is a very natural response to this kind of extreme emotional and physical trauma that Pallavi has suffered. In this way, Pallavi creates a psychological space for herself to work through her trauma and find herself again through temporary isolation.

#### Growth and Self-Realization

Pallavi's process of changing towards the realization of self is in line with Horney's concept of the "real self." With the help of her father, friends Saria and Vishal, Pallavi moves out of neurotic tendencies and begins to actualize her real self. Pallavi's father had

always been there for her since childhood to support her dreams and fight against Govind, and had provided her with all the emotional and financial support that she needed. Saria is a friend who anyone longs for, as she is the one who brings her back to life after her acid attack by making her wake up and take her to 'Sheroes', a restaurant owned by acid survivors. It is a change of perspective of Pallavi and she decides to follow her dreams. Even though she failed the eye test for the pilot, she wanted to try other careers, and it was Vishal who gave her the first chance in his airline to begin her career as an air hostess even when everyone in the company was against his decision of doing so. When the media asked him about it, especially as it's a field that requires beauty, his response was incredible. "She has brains and a heart; can't we start defining beauty in that way?" He wants to define beauty in a different way. Later, Govind again came to see her in the flight and asked her to drop the case as he has no future left and threatened again to commit suicide if the law takes its course. He provoked her a lot, and as a result, she poured a cup of water on him, which made him and a lot of other travelers to accuse her. When she was asked to apologize for the incident, she said proudly, "I'm sorry, I can't betray myself," showing her development in terms of moving beyond the neurotic desire to be accepted. The climax, Pallavi's success in landing the plane shows the perfect expression of her real self, a childhood dream of flying an aircraft. Here, Pallavi's childhood dream of flying an aircraft is fulfilled and her natural self emerges showing her true aptitude and the manifestation of her inner self. Despite the acid attack and loss of her pilot's license, Pallavi proves that she can fly well in a pressure filled environment. This reveals her strong will and dedication to her goals. In taking control of the aircraft, Pallavi is acting in accordance with her true self, without regard to the expectations of others or society. Pallavi's action of seizing control of the aircraft with her partially blurred vision is a clear manifestation of confidence in her abilities and decision making skills. Pallavi proves the identity of the attacker and the trauma she suffered through successfully landing the plane and thus, moves beyond the victim role.

### CONCLUSION

*Uyare* is a realistic film which, in a very convincing way, illustrates Pallavi's change in lifestyle that is consistent with the psychological theories of Pallavi

Horney. It demonstrates the process of growth which is the process of moving away from neurotic patterns and societal constraints to the real self. The film also shows how Pallavi fights with the social norms and toxic relationships which are in sync with Horney's basic anxiety and neurotic tendencies. In the process of solving these issues, we can see how she is capable of learning to love herself, which is one of Horney's concepts of self-actualization. Moreover, the supporting cast of the movie also serves to build the idea of the role of good relationships in the healing process from trauma and becoming a better person. This is done through Pallavi's strong will and the help of her friends and other characters in the film who assist her to overcome her challenges and become the person she is supposed to be. In the long run, *Uyare* is an inspiring story of how people are capable of changing and discovering themselves, while at the same time illustrating Horney's psychological theories in real life.

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