

Reframing Womanhood: Malayalam Cinema as Feminist Pedagogy and Cultural Intervention

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Abstract—The article examines the evolving representation of women in Malayalam cinema, tracing its ideological shift from patriarchal reinforcement to feminist resistance and empowerment. Traditionally, Malayalam films mirrored Kerala's deeply ingrained gender hierarchies, portraying women as passive bearers of virtue, sacrifice, and domestic responsibility. Such representations normalised male authority and confined female subjectivity to silence and endurance. Drawing on feminist film theory and cultural studies, this study analyses how contemporary Malayalam cinema functions as a counter-discursive space that challenges these dominant narratives. Through a close reading of selected films—*Achuvinte Amma* (2005), *How Old Are You* (2014), *Uyare* (2019), *June* (2019), *Sara's* (2021), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021)—the article explores the articulation of female agency across domestic, professional, bodily, and emotional spaces. The analysis foregrounds key themes such as maternal authority, self-realisation, bodily autonomy, female desire, reproductive choice, and everyday resistance. It argues that empowerment in these films is not represented through spectacular rebellion but through gradual processes of self-awareness, voice, and refusal. By positioning cinema as a form of feminist pedagogy and cultural intervention, the study demonstrates how Malayalam cinema contributes to contemporary feminist discourse by destabilising patriarchal ideologies and reimagining women as active agents of social transformation.

Keywords— *Malayalam Cinema; Feminist Film Theory; Patriarchy; Female Empowerment.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Cinema operates as a significant cultural text that transcends its function as mere entertainment and emerges as a potent medium of social critique and ideological negotiation. As a visual and narrative form, cinema both reflects and reshapes societal values, often engaging with power relations embedded within everyday life. As Laura Mulvey observes, “cinema is structured by a gaze that is inherently political” (Mulvey 6), indicating its

capacity to reinforce or resist dominant ideologies. Within the Indian context, regional cinemas have played a crucial role in articulating social realities, and Malayalam cinema, in particular, has distinguished itself through its realist aesthetics, literary sensibility, and sustained engagement with social issues.

Traditionally, Malayalam cinema mirrored the patriarchal structures deeply ingrained in Kerala's social fabric, frequently portraying women in restrictive and idealised roles. Female characters were often represented as submissive daughters, self-sacrificing wives, or morally enduring mothers whose identities were shaped through silence and obedience. Such portrayals resonate with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 267), highlighting how cultural narratives actively construct femininity. Early cinematic representations thus reinforced gender hierarchies by normalising male authority and confining women to domestic and emotional spaces.

In recent decades, however, Malayalam cinema has witnessed a significant ideological shift, marked by the emergence of narratives that foreground women's lived experiences, emotional complexity, and resistance to patriarchal oppression. Contemporary filmmakers increasingly position women as central narrative agents rather than peripheral figures, allowing female characters to articulate dissent, negotiate identity, and assert autonomy. This transformation reflects bell hooks' argument that “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 1), as cinema becomes a site where entrenched gender norms are interrogated and dismantled.

The primary aim of this study is to examine how Malayalam cinema functions as a counter-discursive platform that challenges patriarchal ideology and articulates female empowerment. The article seeks to

analyse cinematic representations that question traditional gender roles, expose everyday misogyny, and reimagine women's identities within familial, professional, and social contexts. By treating films as cultural texts, the study explores how cinema enables women's voices to emerge against systems that have historically marginalised them.

The objectives of the study are threefold: first, to analyse the shifting representation of women from passive endurance to active agency in Malayalam cinema; second, to examine how domestic, professional, and bodily spaces are employed to critique patriarchal power structures; and third, to understand how these films contribute to contemporary feminist discourse. Judith Butler's insight that "gender is not a stable identity but a repeated performance" (Butler 191) is particularly relevant in reading how female characters disrupt normative gender expectations through everyday acts of resistance.

The films selected for this study include *Achuvinte Amma* (2005), which presents maternal strength and emotional autonomy within a patriarchal family structure; *How Old Are You* (2014), which foregrounds female self-realisation and professional dignity; *Uyare* (2019), which powerfully addresses bodily autonomy and resilience through the narrative of an acid attack survivor; *June* (2019), which explores female adolescence and emotional agency; *Sara's* (2021), which interrogates reproductive choice and societal expectations of womanhood; and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), which offers a scathing critique of domestic patriarchy and the invisibilisation of women's labour. Collectively, these films provide a robust framework for analysing the evolving discourse of female empowerment in Malayalam cinema.

Patriarchal Frameworks and Early Representations

Patriarchy has long functioned as a dominant ideological structure within Indian society, shaping gender relations, familial hierarchies, and cultural expectations. Despite Kerala's reputation for high literacy rates and social reform movements, gender relations within the state have remained deeply embedded in patriarchal values. These contradictions find strong expression in early Malayalam cinema, which largely reproduced social norms rather than challenging them. As Sylvia Walby defines

patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 20), early films reveal how cinema served as a cultural extension of male authority rather than a site of resistance.

In early Malayalam films, women were frequently portrayed as the moral and emotional backbone of the family, entrusted with upholding tradition, honour, and domestic stability. While these representations appeared to valorise women, they simultaneously confined them to restrictive roles within private spaces. Female characters were rarely afforded narrative autonomy; instead, their identities were mediated through fathers, husbands, or sons. This pattern aligns with Laura Mulvey's observation that classical cinema positions women as "bearers of meaning, not makers of meaning" (Mulvey 15), thereby reinforcing gendered power relations through visual and narrative control.

Narratives of suffering and endurance dominated the representation of women in early Malayalam cinema. Female virtue was often equated with patience, silence, and the capacity to absorb pain without protest. Emotional resilience, rather than self-assertion, was presented as the ideal feminine trait. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "humanity is male, and man defines woman not in herself but relatively to him" (Beauvoir 26) becomes particularly relevant here, as women's suffering was frequently used to advance male redemption or moral transformation, rather than to foreground female subjectivity.

Even when early films depicted women as strong or resilient, such strength was carefully contained within patriarchal boundaries. Female power was often romanticised through self-sacrifice, martyrdom, or moral superiority, rather than expressed through resistance or dissent. Women who challenged social norms were frequently punished within the narrative, reinforcing the dangers of transgression. As bell hooks argues, "patriarchy has no gender" but operates through cultural conditioning that teaches women to internalise subordination (hooks 17). Early Malayalam cinema thus participated in sustaining patriarchal ideology by celebrating submissive strength while silencing rebellion.

In the context of this study, these early representations form a crucial backdrop against which contemporary Malayalam films can be critically examined. Understanding how cinema once normalised gender inequality allows for a clearer recognition of the ideological shifts in recent narratives that foreground agency, choice, and resistance. The contrast between early portrayals and contemporary feminist narratives underscores the evolving role of Malayalam cinema—from a medium that reaffirmed patriarchal values to one that increasingly interrogates and destabilises them. This historical continuity and rupture form a central analytical axis of the present study.

Emergence of Female-Centric Narratives

A decisive transformation in Malayalam cinema becomes discernible from the late twentieth century onwards, marking a departure from patriarchal storytelling towards narratives centred on women's agency and subjectivity. This shift coincides with broader socio-cultural changes, including increased female literacy, workforce participation, and feminist consciousness. Filmmakers began to move away from portraying women as passive narrative supports and instead foregrounded them as autonomous individuals navigating complex social realities. As Teresa de Lauretis argues, "the construction of gender is both the product and the process of representation" (de Lauretis 5), underscoring cinema's role in reshaping gendered identities.

One of the defining features of this phase is the portrayal of women as thinking, feeling, and decision-making subjects rather than symbolic figures of virtue or sacrifice. Films such as *Achuvinte Amma* (2005) present motherhood not as passive endurance but as emotional intelligence and quiet authority. The protagonist's strength lies in her ability to negotiate familial tensions while maintaining personal dignity, thereby redefining maternal power beyond self-effacement. Such narratives challenge the long-standing cinematic tradition that equated female virtue with silent suffering.

The emergence of female-centric narratives is further evident in films that foreground women's self-realisation and professional identity. *How Old Are You* (2014) charts the journey of a middle-aged woman who reclaims confidence and purpose after years of social and domestic invisibilisation. The film

critiques ageism, gendered expectations, and the erasure of women's aspirations within marriage. bell hooks' assertion that "women's liberation requires the eradication of all systems of domination" (hooks 19) resonates strongly here, as empowerment is depicted through self-worth rather than external validation.

A more radical articulation of female agency appears in *Uyare* (2019), which confronts patriarchal violence through the narrative of an acid attack survivor aspiring to become a pilot. The film refuses to define the protagonist by victimhood, instead foregrounding resilience, ambition, and bodily autonomy. Judith Butler's observation that "the body is not a passive medium but a site of cultural struggle" (Butler 171) becomes particularly relevant in reading how the film reclaims the scarred female body as a symbol of resistance rather than shame.

Significantly, empowerment in these female-centric narratives is not portrayed as sudden rebellion or dramatic rupture but as a gradual process shaped by education, self-reflection, and emotional resilience. These films emphasise everyday acts of courage—returning to education, pursuing a career, or reclaiming self-respect—as meaningful forms of resistance against patriarchal oppression. In the context of this study, such narratives signal a paradigmatic shift in Malayalam cinema, positioning women not merely as subjects of sympathy but as agents of change who actively negotiate and transform their social realities.

Achuvinte Amma (2005): Reimagining Maternal Agency and Emotional Authority

Achuvinte Amma (2005), directed by Sathyan Anthikad, occupies a significant position in the trajectory of female-centric narratives in Malayalam cinema, particularly in its nuanced portrayal of motherhood and female autonomy. Unlike earlier cinematic representations that idealised mothers as self-effacing figures defined solely by sacrifice, the film presents the protagonist as an emotionally intelligent and morally grounded individual who exercises quiet authority within her domestic and social environment. The narrative foregrounds maternal strength not as silent endurance but as conscious decision-making, thereby redefining the contours of female empowerment within a patriarchal framework.

The protagonist's identity in *Achuvinte Amma* is shaped neither by victimhood nor by overt rebellion but through emotional resilience and ethical clarity. Her relationship with her son is central to the narrative, yet the film carefully avoids reducing her subjectivity to motherhood alone. Instead, it presents her as a woman capable of introspection, negotiation, and self-respect. This aligns with Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and motherhood as experience, wherein she argues that "the institution of motherhood is under male control, while the experience can be empowering" (Rich 13). The film privileges the latter, allowing maternal identity to become a source of agency rather than confinement.

Significantly, *Achuvinte Amma* challenges patriarchal authority through subtle narrative strategies rather than dramatic confrontation. The protagonist's resistance is embedded in everyday actions—her ability to maintain dignity, to speak when necessary, and to withdraw from situations that threaten her autonomy. Such representations resonate with Michel de Certeau's concept of "everyday resistance," where marginalised subjects negotiate power through small but meaningful acts (de Certeau 37). In this sense, the film reframes empowerment as a lived, continuous process rather than an exceptional rupture.

The visual and narrative language of the film further resists the conventional male gaze. The camera often aligns itself with the protagonist's emotional perspective, allowing viewers to engage with her interiority rather than observe her as an object of spectacle. Laura Mulvey's critique of classical cinema's objectification of women becomes relevant here, as *Achuvinte Amma* departs from portraying women as "bearers of meaning" and instead allows the female character to actively shape meaning within the narrative (Mulvey 15). This shift marks an important step towards feminist cinematic representation.

Within the broader framework of this study, *Achuvinte Amma* (2005) serves as an early marker of Malayalam cinema's transition towards female-centric storytelling. By redefining maternal strength as emotional authority and ethical agency, the film destabilises patriarchal assumptions that equate female empowerment solely with rebellion or rupture. Instead, it foregrounds a model of empowerment rooted in self-respect, relational

intelligence, and moral autonomy, thereby contributing to the evolving feminist discourse within Malayalam cinema.

How Old Are You (2014): Female Self-Realisation and the Politics of Everyday Empowerment

How Old Are You (2014), directed by Rosshan Andrews, represents a pivotal moment in Malayalam cinema's engagement with middle-aged female subjectivity and self-realisation. Departing from conventional narratives that marginalise women beyond youth, beauty, and marital desirability, the film foregrounds a female protagonist whose identity has been eroded by years of domestic invisibility and professional neglect. By situating empowerment within the everyday experiences of an ordinary woman, the film challenges patriarchal assumptions that equate female worth with age, appearance, or sacrificial endurance.

The narrative traces the protagonist's gradual awakening from emotional stagnation to self-assertion, emphasising education and self-confidence as catalysts for empowerment. Her journey is neither romanticised nor dramatised through heroic rebellion; instead, it unfolds through small, incremental acts of self-recognition and perseverance. This portrayal resonates with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "it is through work that woman has been able to close the gap separating her from man" (Beauvoir 722), highlighting economic and intellectual independence as essential to gender equality. The film thus situates empowerment within the sphere of personal growth and professional dignity.

A significant aspect of *How Old Are You* lies in its critique of marital patriarchy and societal ageism. The protagonist's husband embodies casual misogyny and emotional detachment, reflecting how patriarchy operates through indifference rather than overt violence. Her marginalisation within both domestic and professional spaces illustrates what bell hooks describes as the "normalisation of women's erasure within everyday life" (hooks 28). The film exposes how patriarchal power structures silence women not by denying them opportunities outright, but by systematically undermining their confidence and aspirations.

The visual narrative of the film also plays a crucial role in articulating female empowerment. The camera gradually shifts from depicting the protagonist in confined, repetitive spaces to framing her within expansive professional and public settings. This spatial transformation symbolises her psychological and social liberation. Judith Butler’s observation that “agency is located within the possibility of a variation on repetition” (Butler 198) becomes relevant here, as the protagonist’s empowerment emerges through redefining her daily routines rather than rejecting them entirely.

The broader scope of this study, *How Old Are You* (2014) stands as a landmark film that redefines empowerment as a process of self-realisation rather than confrontation. By centring an ageing woman’s journey towards dignity, recognition, and self-worth, the film disrupts patriarchal narratives that privilege youth and male ambition. It affirms that female empowerment in Malayalam cinema need not be rooted in spectacle or rebellion, but can emerge through resilience, education, and the reclaiming of one’s voice within everyday life.

Uyare (2019): Reclaiming the Body, Voice, and Space in Patriarchal Society

Uyare (2019), directed by Manu Ashokan, stands as one of the most powerful feminist interventions in contemporary Malayalam cinema, addressing gender-based violence while simultaneously redefining female resilience and autonomy. The film narrates the journey of an acid attack survivor who aspires to become a commercial pilot, thereby confronting both physical trauma and deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Rather than reducing the protagonist to a spectacle of suffering, *Uyare* resists victim-centric narratives and instead foregrounds agency, ambition, and dignity, positioning empowerment as an act of reclamation rather than mere survival.

Central to *Uyare* is the representation of the female body as a contested site of power, violence, and resistance. Acid attack, as a form of patriarchal punishment, seeks to discipline women who transgress male authority by destroying their physical appearance and social desirability. However, the film subverts this logic by refusing to equate bodily disfigurement with loss of identity. Judith Butler’s assertion that “the body is not a passive medium but

a site of cultural struggle” (Butler 171) is particularly relevant here, as the protagonist reclaims control over her body through professional aspiration and self-determination.

The film also offers a critical examination of coercive masculinity and emotional manipulation. The male antagonist embodies toxic patriarchy, using love, control, and violence as instruments of domination. His actions reflect what bell hooks describes as “patriarchal masculinity that thrives on possession and punishment” (hooks 82). In contrast, *Uyare* deliberately avoids framing male characters as saviours, ensuring that the protagonist’s recovery and success emerge from her own resilience and supportive female networks rather than male intervention.

A significant aspect of *Uyare* lies in its spatial politics. Aviation, a profession historically dominated by men, becomes a symbolic space of liberation where the protagonist transcends social constraints and bodily stigma. Her ascent into the skies functions as a powerful metaphor for autonomy, aspiration, and freedom. As Simone de Beauvoir observes, “freedom is not given; it is won” (Beauvoir 37), a sentiment that resonates deeply with the film’s narrative arc, where empowerment is achieved through perseverance and self-belief rather than sympathy.

The framework of this study, *Uyare* (2019) represents a culmination of Malayalam cinema’s evolving feminist consciousness. By addressing gender violence while affirming female ambition, bodily autonomy, and professional identity, the film redefines empowerment as resistance against both physical and ideological oppression. *Uyare* thus functions not merely as a story of survival, but as a cinematic assertion that women’s bodies, dreams, and futures cannot be contained or erased by patriarchal violence.

June (2019): Female Adolescence, Emotional Autonomy, and the Rejection of Moral Policing

June (2019), directed by Ahammed Khabeer, marks an important intervention in Malayalam cinema’s portrayal of female adolescence and emotional self-discovery. Departing from conventional narratives that either moralise or marginalise young women’s experiences, the film centres on a female protagonist navigating friendship, love, disappointment, and self-

realisation. By allowing a young woman's perspective to structure the narrative, *June* challenges patriarchal tendencies to regulate female emotion and desire, thereby foregrounding adolescence as a critical stage of empowerment rather than vulnerability.

The film's most significant contribution lies in its refusal to punish female desire or emotional exploration. Unlike earlier cinematic representations where women's romantic choices often resulted in shame or tragedy, *June* presents emotional failure as a formative experience rather than a moral flaw. This approach aligns with bell hooks' assertion that "patriarchy teaches women to fear their own desires" (hooks 68). By normalising emotional agency, the film resists the cultural impulse to police young women's choices and bodies, offering a more compassionate and realistic portrayal of female growth.

June also reconfigures the role of education and peer relationships in shaping female identity. The protagonist's journey is deeply embedded within supportive friendships, particularly female solidarity, which functions as a counterforce to patriarchal judgement. These relational networks affirm what Judith Butler describes as the importance of "recognition and relationality in the formation of the self" (Butler 44). Empowerment here emerges not through isolation or rebellion, but through collective affirmation and emotional support.

Visually and narratively, the film avoids the male gaze by aligning the camera with the protagonist's subjectivity rather than objectifying her body or emotions. The narrative privileges introspection over spectacle, thereby allowing the audience to engage with the protagonist's interior world. Laura Mulvey's critique of classical cinema's objectification of women becomes relevant, as *June* consciously resists portraying the female character as an object of visual pleasure and instead positions her as a narrator of her own emotional experiences (Mulvey 15).

The broader context of this study, *June* (2019) expands the discourse of female empowerment in Malayalam cinema by focusing on adolescence and emotional autonomy. It asserts that empowerment need not be rooted in confrontation or trauma but can emerge through self-awareness, emotional resilience, and the freedom to make mistakes. By legitimising

young women's voices and experiences, *June* contributes to a more inclusive feminist cinematic landscape that challenges patriarchal moral frameworks from an early stage of womanhood.

Sara's (2021): Reproductive Choice and the Politics of Female Autonomy

Sara's (2021), directed by Jude Anthany Joseph, represents a significant feminist intervention in Malayalam cinema by foregrounding women's reproductive choices and bodily autonomy—subjects traditionally silenced or moralised within patriarchal discourse. The film centres on a female protagonist who confronts societal pressure surrounding marriage and motherhood, thereby challenging the cultural assumption that a woman's fulfilment is inextricably tied to reproductive destiny. By positioning choice rather than obligation at the heart of its narrative, *Sara's* articulates empowerment as the right to decide one's own life trajectory.

The film critically exposes how patriarchal ideology exerts control over women's bodies through familial expectations, medical authority, and moral judgement. Pregnancy, rather than being represented as a purely personal experience, is shown as a socially regulated event governed by external voices. This resonates with Michel Foucault's assertion that "the body is directly involved in a political field" (Foucault 25), as the female body becomes a site where power, surveillance, and social conformity intersect. *Sara's* disrupts this power dynamic by asserting the legitimacy of women's consent and choice.

A defining strength of *Sara's* lies in its refusal to sensationalise abortion or reproductive decision-making. Instead, the film presents the protagonist's choice with emotional clarity and ethical seriousness, without framing it as transgression or moral failure. Simone de Beauvoir's observation that "it is through motherhood that woman fulfils her physiological destiny" (Beauvoir 533) is implicitly questioned here, as the film asserts that womanhood cannot be reduced to biological function. By decoupling femininity from compulsory motherhood, *Sara's* challenges deeply ingrained patriarchal myths.

The narrative also foregrounds female solidarity and supportive relationships, particularly between women, as crucial to empowerment. Unlike earlier

cinematic representations where women's choices were judged or undermined by other female characters, *Sara's* presents empathy and understanding as transformative forces. bell hooks' emphasis on feminist solidarity—"there can be no feminist revolution without the involvement of women" (hooks 65)—finds strong resonance in the film's ethical framework, where collective support enables individual autonomy.

The context of this study, *Sara's* (2021) expands the discourse of female empowerment in Malayalam cinema by confronting reproductive politics with sensitivity and courage. The film affirms that empowerment includes the right to refuse, to decide, and to redefine womanhood beyond patriarchal prescriptions. By legitimising reproductive choice as an ethical and personal decision, *Sara's* contributes to a broader feminist cinematic narrative that foregrounds bodily autonomy and self-determination.

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021): Domestic Space as a Site of Patriarchal Oppression and Feminist Resistance

The Great Indian Kitchen (2021), directed by Jeo Baby, stands as one of the most incisive feminist critiques in contemporary Malayalam cinema, exposing the deeply normalised structures of domestic patriarchy within the Indian household. The film dismantles the romanticised notion of marriage and domesticity by revealing how everyday rituals of cooking, cleaning, and serving operate as mechanisms of gendered control. Rather than depicting overt violence, the narrative foregrounds the silent, repetitive labour that systematically erodes female autonomy, making the private sphere a powerful site of oppression.

Central to the film's critique is the invisibilisation of women's unpaid domestic labour. The protagonist's existence is reduced to an endless cycle of chores, performed without recognition or reciprocity. This representation aligns with Silvia Federici's argument that "housework is a key site of women's exploitation under capitalism and patriarchy" (Federici 16). By repeatedly focusing the camera on food waste, kitchen drains, and bodily exhaustion, the film forces the audience to confront the physical and psychological toll of domestic servitude that is often dismissed as duty or tradition.

The kitchen, traditionally idealised as a woman's natural space, is reimagined as a site of surveillance and discipline. The protagonist's movements, hygiene, and even bodily functions are subject to patriarchal scrutiny, reinforcing Michel Foucault's notion that power operates through "minute techniques of control over bodies" (Foucault 138). The film's claustrophobic visual style intensifies this sense of entrapment, underscoring how patriarchy sustains itself through routine practices rather than explicit coercion. Significantly, *The Great Indian Kitchen* articulates resistance not through verbal confrontation but through withdrawal and refusal. The protagonist's decision to leave the oppressive household becomes a radical act that disrupts patriarchal continuity. Judith Butler's insight that "resistance is enabled by the very structures it seeks to oppose" (Butler 155) is reflected in this quiet yet decisive departure, which transforms silence into dissent and endurance into agency.

The broader framework of this study, *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) represents a culmination of Malayalam cinema's feminist evolution. By exposing domestic patriarchy in its most banal and intimate form, the film challenges audiences to interrogate everyday practices that sustain gender inequality. It powerfully asserts that female empowerment begins with the recognition of labour, the right to refuse exploitation, and the courage to reclaim autonomy from within the most familiar of spaces—the home.

Female Desire, Voice, and Agency

A defining aspect of female empowerment in contemporary Malayalam cinema is the reclamation of female desire as a legitimate and expressive force rather than a site of shame or moral anxiety. For decades, women's desires—emotional, sexual, professional, or intellectual—were either suppressed or framed as disruptive to social order. Recent films, however, challenge this erasure by presenting desire as integral to women's subjectivity. As bell hooks observes, "patriarchy depends on the repression of female desire in order to sustain male dominance" (hooks 72). By foregrounding women's aspirations and emotional needs, Malayalam cinema disrupts the patriarchal logic that equates female desire with transgression.

Films such as *June* (2019) and *Sara's* (2021) particularly foreground desire as a formative

dimension of identity rather than a moral liability. In *June*, the protagonist's romantic and emotional choices are not punished or sensationalised but treated as part of her growth and self-understanding. Similarly, *Sara's* legitimises reproductive choice as an expression of desire over destiny, rejecting the cultural expectation that motherhood is the ultimate fulfilment of womanhood. These narratives resonate with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "desire is the basis of freedom" (Beauvoir 54), positioning women's choices as ethical acts rather than deviations from social norms.

Equally significant is the emergence of female voice as a narrative force that resists silencing and marginalisation. In films like *How Old Are You* (2014) and *Achuvinte Amma* (2005), women articulate their dissent not through confrontation but through speech, decision-making, and moral clarity. The act of speaking—whether in professional spaces, domestic negotiations, or moments of refusal—becomes a form of agency. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 308), finds a tentative cinematic response here, as Malayalam cinema increasingly creates spaces where women are not merely spoken about, but speak for themselves.

Agency in these films is ultimately articulated through action—sometimes subtle, sometimes decisive—that transforms endurance into resistance. *Uyare* (2019) and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021) exemplify how agency need not be loud or violent to be radical. The former reclaims ambition and bodily autonomy in the aftermath of patriarchal violence, while the latter frames refusal and exit as powerful feminist gestures. Judith Butler's insight that "agency does not require sovereign power; it emerges within constraints" (Butler 139) is particularly relevant here. Together, these films affirm that female desire, voice, and agency are interconnected forces that challenge patriarchal control and reconfigure Malayalam cinema as a vital site of feminist articulation.

Cinema as Feminist Pedagogy and Cultural Intervention

Cinema functions not only as a medium of representation but also as a powerful pedagogical tool that shapes social consciousness and ethical imagination. In the context of Malayalam cinema, feminist narratives operate as forms of informal

education, enabling audiences to critically engage with patriarchal structures embedded within everyday life. By visualising women's lived experiences, emotional labour, and resistance, films such as *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), *Uyare* (2019), and *Sara's* (2021) encourage spectators to recognise gendered inequalities that often remain normalised or invisible. As Paulo Freire contends, "education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration into the logic of the present system, or it becomes the practice of freedom" (Freire 34). Feminist cinema aligns with the latter, fostering critical awareness rather than passive consumption.

As a pedagogical space, Malayalam cinema enables feminist learning through affect, identification, and reflection rather than didactic instruction. The intimate portrayal of domestic labour in *The Great Indian Kitchen* or the emotional resilience of the protagonist in *Uyare* invites audiences to empathise with women's struggles and question their own complicity in patriarchal norms. bell hooks emphasises the transformative potential of such engagement, arguing that "the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility" (hooks 12). In this sense, cinema becomes an extension of the classroom, where visual narratives facilitate feminist consciousness by bridging personal experience and political understanding.

Beyond individual enlightenment, feminist Malayalam cinema functions as a cultural intervention that disrupts dominant narratives surrounding gender, marriage, motherhood, and respectability. Films like *Sara's* and *June* contest the moral policing of female bodies and desires, offering alternative imaginaries of womanhood grounded in choice and autonomy. These cinematic interventions challenge what Antonio Gramsci describes as cultural hegemony—the process by which dominant ideologies sustain consent through repetition and normalisation (Gramsci 145). By destabilising hegemonic representations, feminist cinema opens spaces for counter-discourses that question patriarchal authority.

Importantly, cinema's pedagogical impact extends beyond the screen into public discourse, social media debates, and everyday conversations. The widespread discussions generated by films such as *The Great Indian Kitchen* demonstrate how cinema can catalyse

societal introspection and ideological contestation. Judith Butler's assertion that "representation is itself a site of power" (Butler 183) becomes particularly relevant here, as cinematic representation actively participates in reshaping cultural values and social ethics. Within the framework of this study, Malayalam cinema emerges as a vital feminist pedagogical and cultural force that not only reflects social change but actively contributes to it. By educating audiences, challenging hegemonic norms, and legitimising women's voices, these films function as cultural texts that intervene in patriarchal discourse. Cinema thus becomes both a mirror and a method—reflecting gendered realities while simultaneously teaching viewers to imagine more equitable social relations.

II. CONCLUSION

The analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that Malayalam cinema has undergone a significant ideological transformation, evolving from a medium that largely reproduced patriarchal norms to one that increasingly interrogates and resists them. Early cinematic representations confined women to roles defined by silence, sacrifice, and endurance, thereby normalising gender hierarchies and male authority. In contrast, contemporary films foreground women's lived experiences, emotional depth, and agency, positioning female characters as central narrative subjects rather than peripheral figures. This shift reflects a broader feminist consciousness within Malayalam cinema, where gender is no longer treated as a fixed identity but as a site of contestation and redefinition.

Through a close reading of films such as *Achuvinte Amma* (2005), *How Old Are You* (2014), *Uyare* (2019), *June* (2019), *Sara's* (2021), and *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), the study reveals how female empowerment is articulated through diverse yet interconnected forms—maternal authority, professional self-realisation, bodily autonomy, emotional agency, reproductive choice, and resistance to domestic exploitation. These narratives collectively dismantle patriarchal assumptions by exposing everyday misogyny, challenging moral policing, and legitimising women's voices and desires. Empowerment in these films is not portrayed as a singular act of rebellion but as a sustained process of self-awareness, resilience, and ethical refusal.

Malayalam cinema emerges as a powerful feminist pedagogical and cultural intervention that not only reflects social change but actively participates in shaping it. By transforming private spaces into political sites and ordinary experiences into acts of resistance, these films expand the possibilities of cinematic representation and feminist discourse. The study thus affirms that Malayalam cinema functions as a counter-discursive space where women's voices challenge patriarchal authority and imagine more equitable social relations, reinforcing cinema's role as a critical medium of cultural negotiation and social transformation.

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