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Broken Innocence, Sanctioned Fury: Virginity, Trauma, and the Gendered Conditions of Female Violence in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

In both mainstream and regional cinemas, female virginity has often functioned as a symbolic measure of moral purity and social value. This paper investigates how Malayalam cinema, in particular, constructs narratives where female agency is delayed or denied until a traumatic rupture—often sexual in nature—occurs. The analysis focuses on critically acclaimed films such as *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (1999), *Puthiya Niyamam* (2016), and *Lilli* (2018), exploring how virginity operates as both a narrative boundary and a trigger for transformation. Drawing on feminist film theory, psychoanalysis, and cultural studies, this study argues that cinematic representations across contexts frequently rely on trauma to legitimize female violence. The trope of the "female avenger" is conditioned by patriarchal anxieties: only women who have been violated or betrayed are granted narrative license to be violent. Virginity, therefore, becomes a thematic site where control over female bodies intersects with cultural discourses of honor, caste, and morality. By situating Malayalam cinema within a wider cultural and cinematic framework, this research interrogates the persistent coding of female rage as reactive rather than autonomous, and examines the limitations of current cinematic practices in representing unmediated female power.

Keywords: Virginity and Moral Purity; Gendered Violence in Indian Cinema; Feminist Film Theory; Psychoanalytic Trauma; Female Avenger Trope; Spectatorship and the Male Gaze; Caste and Cinematic Morality

Introduction

Cinema, as a cultural apparatus, often reflects and reproduces dominant social ideologies. In the case of Indian cinema—both mainstream and regional—female sexuality is routinely depicted not as a site of personal agency, but as one deeply entrenched in notions of family honor, societal morality, and patriarchal surveillance. Among these tropes, virginity emerges as a recurring symbolic indicator of a woman's worth. Particularly in Malayalam cinema, as in other regional traditions, a woman's narrative trajectory is frequently determined by whether she has preserved or lost her "purity."

This paper explores how such representations condition the emergence of female violence. Female characters are often portrayed as passive and nurturing until their virginity is forcibly taken—through rape, deception, or betrayal. Only then do they transform into vengeful figures, sometimes violently reclaiming their agency. This phenomenon is not unique to Malayalam cinema; it resonates across global cinematic traditions. However, the films discussed here exemplify how regional cinema negotiates these

themes within specific cultural, caste-based, and gendered frameworks. The central argument is that cinematic violence enacted by women is rarely autonomous—it is almost always mediated by trauma, loss, or moral disruption.

Literature Review

Feminist film scholars such as Laura Mulvey, bell hooks, and Gayatri Spivak have long interrogated the structural positioning of women in visual culture. Mulvey's foundational concept of the "male gaze" critiques how women in cinema are constructed as objects of visual pleasure, rarely as subjects with independent desire or agency. Hooks extends this critique by highlighting how race and class intersect with gender in shaping spectatorship and representation. Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" informs this paper's concern with how female characters, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, are denied voice unless through violence or abjection.

Within Indian cinema, scholars such as Jyotika Virdi and Ravi Vasudevan have emphasized the melodramatic register through which female suffering is narrativized. Virdi, for instance, identifies how victimhood becomes a legitimizing discourse for female action. This paper extends such insights to examine how virginity—coded as innocence—is framed as a prerequisite for female transformation into agents of revenge. The study further engages with psychoanalytic theories of trauma (Kristeva, Freud) to explore how violated female bodies become sites of narrative rupture and catharsis.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology, employing close readings of selected Malayalam films to analyze their narrative structures, visual codes, and gender representations. The theoretical framework draws primarily from:

- **Feminist film theory**, particularly the works of Laura Mulvey on the male gaze and visual pleasure;
- **Psychoanalytic theory**, especially Julia Kristeva's writings on abjection and trauma;
- **Postcolonial and cultural theory**, with reference to Gayatri Spivak's ideas on subaltern subjectivity and agency;
- **Cultural studies** to situate cinematic tropes within broader socio-political discourses on caste, class, and morality.

These frameworks allow for a layered understanding of how virginity, victimhood, and vengeance intersect in cinematic narratives.

Analysis: Broken Innocence and Conditional Agency

Virginity as Moral Anchor

Virginity in Malayalam cinema functions not merely as a biological or romantic condition but as a moral anchor that determines a woman's eligibility for narrative sympathy and social legitimacy. Female protagonists are consistently framed as morally upright until they are "broken" by violation. The preservation of virginity becomes a metaphor for the containment of female desire—and its loss, a necessary rupture for unleashing rage.

In *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), Tessa is introduced as a soft-spoken, idealistic young nurse who dreams of building a life with her partner in Canada. Her characterization closely aligns with the archetype of the "pure" woman in Indian cinema—modest, nurturing, and sexually restrained. However, the narrative quickly dismantles this image when she is brutally raped and betrayed by the very man she trusted. The

trauma she endures is not only physical but symbolic: it marks the forcible loss of her virginity, which the film treats as a pivotal rupture of innocence. This moment reconfigures her narrative identity from the chaste, passive heroine into a "fallen" woman who, having been violated, is now permitted to act violently. The film's structure hinges on this moral shift: only after her sexual purity is destroyed does Tessa gain license to commit brutal acts of revenge, including the sadistic mutilation of her rapist. Importantly, the cinematic gaze never fully celebrates her autonomy; rather, it frames her violence as justified solely because it emerges from suffering. In doing so, the film reinforces a troubling narrative trope—one where a woman's empowerment is contingent on the violation of her body, and her vengeance becomes thinkable only after she is rendered "impure."

In *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (1999), Bhadra's quest for revenge is rooted in a deeply personal and politically charged trauma: the brutal rape and murder of her mother by a powerful feudal landlord, Natesan, when Bhadra was a child. Her return to the village years later is not framed as a spontaneous act of vengeance but as a meticulously planned retribution steeped in memory, caste oppression, and intergenerational violence. As a lower-caste woman with no legal or institutional recourse, Bhadra operates within a socio-cultural framework that denies her justice through formal means. Consequently, she weaponizes her body and strategically enacts seduction as a calculated method to gain access to and ultimately dismantle the very patriarchal structure that harmed her. Her proximity to the men responsible for her mother's death, including Natesan, is achieved by appealing to their desire, feeding their illusion of control, and then subverting it. Importantly, the film presents this seduction not as a product of sexual liberation but as a tactical necessity—one that is only narratively acceptable because of Bhadra's caste status. While her upper-caste counterparts in Malayalam cinema are typically portrayed as morally constrained by notions of modesty and virtue, Bhadra's social position allows the film to depict her as transgressive without fully endorsing her actions. Thus, her revenge—though morally justified—is visually and narratively mediated through a caste-coded logic that equates lower-caste female agency with shame, cunning, and sexual deviance..

The Spectacle of the Female Avenger

Across both global and regional cinemas, the image of the female avenger is often framed not as a normalized expression of agency but as a spectacle—her rage rendered palatable only through melodramatic or fantastical devices. In early Malayalam cinema, the "Yakshi" trope exemplifies this strategy, as seen in films like *Lisa* (1978), *Manichitrathazhu* (1993), and *Akasha Ganga* (1999). These narratives feature women who return from the dead as vengeful spirits, their capacity for violence legitimized only through supernatural transformation. By positioning female vengeance within the realm of the spectral, these films imply that such power is incompatible with the lived realities of womanhood. The dead woman, no longer bound by societal norms, becomes a vessel for displaced rage—but only at the cost of her humanity. This cinematic pattern functions as a patriarchal mechanism, ensuring that women who resist, retaliate, or transgress must do so from beyond the grave, reinforcing male authority within the realm of the living.

Trauma, Caste, and Cinematic Boundaries

Even in more recent cinematic portrayals, female rage continues to be contained within patriarchal frameworks. In *Puthiya Niyamam* (2016), although Vasuki appears to independently exact revenge on her rapists, the revelation that her husband — disguised as a female police officer — secretly guides her throughout the process reasserts male authority over her actions. Her violence, though methodical and

calculated, is ultimately permissible only because it is sanctioned and orchestrated by a protective male figure. Rather than presenting her vengeance as an act of autonomous agency, the film subtly reinscribes patriarchal control, ensuring that her power operates safely within the emotional and familial boundaries expected of a "virtuous" woman. This narrative device upholds the larger cinematic pattern wherein female empowerment must remain narratively supervised and ideologically palatable.

In *Lilli* (2018), the titular character's turn to violence is presented as justifiable only through the extreme trauma she endures. Abducted while pregnant, subjected to torture, and forced to confront the brutality of her captors, Lilli's transformation into a vengeful figure is grounded in her status as a violated and endangered woman. Her maternal condition adds a layer of emotional legitimacy to her rage — she is not simply fighting for herself but for her unborn child, making her violence palatable within the dominant moral codes of cinema. Unlike traditionally "respectable" heroines, Lilli's brutality is not framed as deviant but as a desperate, reactive measure to reclaim bodily autonomy and dignity. Yet, even in this narrative, the film stops short of portraying her violence as an autonomous act of agency; it remains reactive, emotionally charged, and bound to the idea of the violated female body as the catalyst for revenge. Thus, Lilli, like Tessa and Bhadra, becomes violent only after a profound rupture — reinforcing the cinematic pattern where female rage is allowed to surface only in the aftermath of suffering and violation.

This cinematic pattern reveals an intersectional policing of female agency. Women from lower-caste or socially marginal backgrounds are allowed to be violent, while upper-caste, middle-class women remain bound by ideals of dignity and self-restraint. The films often end with the female avenger displaying remorse—crying after revenge, expressing loss—thus symbolically re-domesticating their power. Unlike male protagonists who walk away from violence with pride, female characters must bear the emotional burden of their actions.

Conclusion

This study has explored how Malayalam cinema, much like its national and global counterparts, encodes virginity not merely as a personal attribute but as a symbolic threshold that structures female subjectivity and agency. Through the case studies of *22 Female Kottayam*, *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu*, *Puthiya Niyamam*, and *Lilli*, we have seen how female characters are largely denied access to violent agency until their sexual purity is violated—either through coercion, betrayal, or trauma. The "loss" of virginity becomes the narrative fulcrum around which a woman's transformation into a violent subject is justified, thus revealing the deeply embedded patriarchal logic that equates victimhood with moral license.

Yet, even in moments of apparent empowerment, female rage is framed as exceptional, unnatural, and emotionally burdensome. Whether it is Bhadra's seduction-coded revenge enabled by her lower-caste status, Tessa's brutal retaliation anchored in sexual betrayal, or Vasuki's vengeance orchestrated under male oversight, each narrative reinforces the idea that women's violence must be mediated—either by trauma, by class and caste positionality, or by patriarchal approval. In contrast to male protagonists who often enact violence with impunity and pride, female avengers are rarely granted the satisfaction of moral closure; instead, they must cry, repent, or retreat, signaling an uneasy reconciliation with normative femininity.

These representational patterns underscore what feminist theorists like Laura Mulvey and Julia Kristeva have long argued: that female agency, particularly when tied to the body, remains abjected within cinematic discourse—something to be feared, regulated, or redeemed. Virginity becomes not just a

biological or cultural construct, but a cinematic threshold that women must cross—often violently—to access narrative centrality, even as they remain bound to patriarchal frames of morality.

For cinema to become a genuinely feminist space, it must envision female subjectivity as powerful in itself—not as a reaction to loss or violation, but as a proactive assertion of presence, autonomy, and ideological complexity. Women's anger, desire, and vengeance must be de-exceptionalized and de-pathologized. Only then can regional and national cinemas dismantle the symbolic regimes that continue to script women as either victims or monsters, and begin imagining them as agents in their own right.

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