

Gendered Frames- Representation of Women in Malayalam Memes and Reels

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Memes, reels and other viral trends are powerful means of communication in the digital era. They can effortlessly communicate humour and sarcasm to a wide audience. They can portray professional success of women, celebrate women's independence as well as act as a medium to resist patriarchy. They can also portray the stereotypical women, who are meek, gentle and docile, objectify women's bodies and may trivialize the experiences and emotions of women. Memes and reels are means of hyper-visibility provided by social media especially, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and X (formerly, Twitter). In the socio-economic context of Kerala, memes and reels play a major role in shaping the perspectives and identities of women and can mould the attitude of society towards women. They ascribe multiple roles to women, such as 'the modern girl', 'the nagging wife/girlfriend', 'the mother', 'the cunning/ annoying/ traditional aunty' and 'the bold influencer'. They can reinforce or subvert patriarchal ideologies by presenting such roles of women, through humour, irony and relatable contents. This led to a new trend- digital feminism- which promotes feminist ideas, expressions and activism in online spaces. Social media thus promotes digital feminism as well as perpetuates commodification of female bodies and patriarchal norms. The paper titled, 'Gendered Frames- Representation of Women in Malayalam Memes and Reels', studies how women are represented in Malayalam memes, reels and other viral trends and how they oscillate between empowerment and objectification of women.

Key Words- Representation, social media, digital feminism

Introduction

Representation refers to depiction of something in visual, written or audio sources. It also analyses what images and texts actually mean. Representation thus refers to meanings and interpretations embedded in images or narratives of books, films, songs, paintings etc. There have been various studies on how various groups like women, people of LGBTQ, people of colors, have been shown in media. Early writers like Betty Friedan, Molly Haskell, James Baldwin, and Vito Russo pointed out stereotypes and unfair images. Researchers like Gaye Tuchman and George Gerbner showed how some groups are ignored or misrepresented. Tuchman calls this process as symbolic annihilation. Later scholars such as Laura Mulvey, Bell Hooks, Richard Dyer, Edward Said, and Stuart Hall studied how media reinforces or challenges power. Laura Mulvey talked about the “male gaze” in film, Bell Hooks explored how Black women are represented, Edward Said showed how Western media often portrays the East as weak or exotic and Stuart Hall explained that media messages can have many meanings depending on how audiences decode them. Cultural studies looked at how media relates to power and resistance and how people resist dominant factors. Postmodern thinkers believe that in today’s media world, meanings and identities are fluid, mixed, and constantly changing—and therefore, there is no single truth or fixed identity.

Literature and Society

Literature is a reflection of the society. Literature is often considered as the mirror of society because it reflects people’s lives, thoughts, and attitudes. Through its characters, stories, and emotions, literature aims to teach, inform, and entertain. It also shows how society and human

values change over time. Literature also reflects the evolution of women, from being silent and submissive figures to independent and self-aware individuals.

In ancient India, women were respected and the Rig Veda and the Upanishads mention about Gargi and Maitreyi, who were sages and philosophers. The epics and Puranas like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, portrayed strong women like Sita and Draupadi, but also revealed how women were treated unfairly in a patriarchal society. During the medieval period, women were mostly shown as wives and mothers, living under strict social norms. Over time, literature began to show women expressing their opinions and slowly gaining more space in society.

In Indian literature, Mahadevi Varma, a Hindi poet, wrote about women's freedom and struggles. Jai Shankar Prasad presented women as strong symbols of faith and beauty. Kamala Das wrote openly about love and the inner life of women. R K Narayan presented traditional women who quietly accepted their roles as wives, mothers, or sisters, who rarely rebelled against social rules.

Modern women writers have tried to change this image and have started to explore women's identity, emotions, and struggles for freedom. Anita Desai in her books like *Cry, the Peacock* and *Fasting Feasting*, wrote about women searching for self-identity and meaning in a patriarchal world. Shashi Deshpande's books including *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *Roots and Shadow* show middle-class women facing frustration, silence, and inner conflict. In books like *Insatiable* and *Starry Night*, Shobha De portrayed modern, urban women who break social taboos, speak openly about love, and challenge traditional gender roles.

Representation of Women in Mass Media

With the rise of women's rights and feminist movements, the participation of women in media production has significantly increased. But the way in which women are presented in films, novels, television and social media remains slow to change. Women continued to be portrayed

through male gaze, i.e., as objects of beauty, rather than as individuals with power, intellect and identity. In most of the advertisements today, men are represented as strong, intelligent and active whereas women are represented as beautiful, dumb and dependent. Men appear mostly in advertisements related to cars, technology and professional items while women appear in household, beauty and nurturing related items. Even matrimonial advertisements promote colorism and commodification.

Representation of Women in Films

Women, in general, are portrayed as gentle, subservient, glamorous and sometimes ruthless, in Indian films. In the beginning, the production of films in India was completely under the control of men. During 1950s, 60s and 70s, women were presented as stronger roles in mothers, sisters and lovers. Modern films show the strength and independence of women. Films like *English Vinglish*, *Queen*, *Mary Kom*, *Kahani*, *Thappad*, *Paadam Onnu: Oru Vilapam*, *How Old Are You?*, *Take Off*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* represent women as independent courageous and professional. The mesmerizing beauty of women have been objectified and glorified in early Malayalam films. Also, several modern films also present vulgar scenes, double meaning dialogues and sexual content, thereby turning women into objects of desire. Many films include 'item songs' in which females dance in sexually suggestive moves to fulfil voyeuristic desires of men. When women obey the male characters, they are angels and when they protest against social norms, they are represented as monsters.

Representation of Women in Social Media

Social media is one of the most powerful and popular platforms in the world. TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X (previously, Twitter) are the most used platforms. They allow users to share photos, stories, videos, and messages and thus, help them to express themselves and connect with others. Women are more interested in food, fashion, entertainment, and films,

while men focus more on sports, games, and technology. Women's profiles often highlight beauty, style, dancing, and emotions, and many post pictures of food, travel, or makeup to gain attention or followers. Women also become victims of sexual abuse, online bullying, or body shaming. Social media platforms give space for women to express their feelings, concerns, opinions, creativity and talent and can also set a medium for activism, entrepreneurship and spreading awareness on relevant issues. Social media help women to build online communities and challenge stereotypes. It offers freedom and voice to women, and simultaneously reinforces social pressures.

Kerala is one of the most literate states in India, and women's education is high compared to many other regions. Women here have more access to smart phones and social media. Women in Kerala use social media for education, business, communication, self-expression and entertainment. In Kerala, the digital spaces have introduced new opportunities for women. Especially during the Covid- 19 pandemic, many women entrepreneurs in Kerala used social media to start business, market their products and make various tutorials. They used social media for empowerment and financial independence. However, access is not equal to all. Many tribal and rural women, depend on the male members of the family for mobile and internet use. The representation of women in social media in Kerala reflects progress and problems. On the one hand, women use social media for entrepreneurship and to share their voice, but on the other hand, women are still portrayed through traditional and narrow images in some contents. Many viral videos, reels and memes from Kerala show women mainly as homemakers, wives and objects of beauty.

Social media is a global platform and there is no major filtering system to control and eliminate wrong ideas and perceptions. Social media can spread wrong news and false information,

including gender discrimination and stereotypical portrayal of women, swiftly to a larger audience.

Representation of Women in Malayalam Memes and Reels

The concept of meme was first coined by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*, in 1976. He used the term meme, 'as a Darwinian gene- centered approach to cultural evolution' and considered it as a 'unit of cultural transmission'. With the rapid growth of internet and computer usage, the concept of meme evolved with new meanings. The meme that is generally used in popular culture now is 'Internet meme'. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines meme as an 'amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media'. Their themes can vary from serial social issues to pure humour and can be shared in various social media platforms. Since 2017, short videos have been popular in Facebook and Instagram. People prefer short videos resonating to the fast pace of contemporary life. Vertical short videos were started by Tik Tok in 2016, and later in 2020, Instagram announced Instagram reels and YouTube announced YouTube Shorts. Memes and reels can directly or indirectly promote gender discrimination, by normalizing sexist stereotypes under the guise of humour. Memes and reels can create a lasting impression in people's minds.

Malayalam memes and reels are associated with the vibrant visual culture of Kerala. They are influenced by Malayalam films, television and everyday discourses, and turn familiar images into relatable jokes. Memes mix viral issues, film scenes/dialogues and Malayalam language to share ideas and perceptions on politics, caste, social issues and romance. Reels combine videos, music, performance and editing techniques to create short videos of sixty to ninety seconds, that are easily relatable and shareable. Both reels and memes use humour and irony as key tools. Humour in a patriarchal society works unevenly, because what seems to be funny to one group

may not be funny to another and may hurt their emotions and can even lead to further subjugation of the latter. In Kerala's online spaces, women are often, subjects of joke, which criticizes their clothing, language, behavior, resistance and independence.

The 'gendered frame' refers to how representations define and limit the concept of gender. In Malayalam memes and reels, women are often reduced to certain types like 'the demanding girlfriend', 'the stylish and outspoken modern girl' or 'the ideal women' who is modest and family- oriented. These stereotypes may seem to be harmless, but they reinforce the unequal power relations that exist in Kerala society. The reels are very popular that even ordinary people can get visibility and can earn money. But this visibility may come at a cost, that they may be subjected to cyber bullying and online violence. Also, in Kerala, majority of the cooking reels and household reels are also handled by women. They post recipes and provide tips for managing the household.

There are financially rich influencers who showcase their creativity, talent and posh lifestyle. They are never ridiculed or called out. But when women from poor financial background try to do the same, they are ridiculed, bullied and harassed online. Also, women who don't cook, widows who post happy online content and women who outsmart the male members in the family, are subjected to cyber bullying for not following the traditional social norms. Glamy Ganga, a fashion and lifestyle influencer became viral through her YouTube videos and Instagram reels. Initially she was mocked for her appearance and humble background, but she responded with humour and confidence, turning ridicules into empowerment.

Another example is the viral bus- incident reels where women film men who stare at them in buses. The videos sparked debates on harassment, morality and policing of women's bodies. Thus digital media has helped women to record and expose gendered violence, and forces the society to confront everyday sexism. These reels are forms of self- protection as well as public

testimony. Another collective act of digital resistance came through ‘#YesWeHaveLegs’ campaign, initiated by the film actress Rima Kallingal and supported by many women in the film industry, as a response to online trolling that mocked women for wearing shorts and showing their legs. They posted the images of their legs proudly and thus challenged moral policing.



Figure 1 #YesWeHaveLegs Campaign

Figure 2 Vasu Annan

Meme

PUBLICATION

If reels are about performance and presence, memes are about commentary. Malayalam memes are usually vibrant and politically shrewd. They also degrade women in multiple ways. A striking example is the ‘Vasu Annan Memes’, derived from the Malayalam film *Kunjikoonan*, released in 2002. Vasu is a goon who rapes and kills the heroine, but the memes reinterpret an act of violence into a joke. The popularity of such memes reveals a disturbing tolerance for misogyny with in digital humour content in Kerala. Following the hit film, *Premalu*, 2024 Malayalam film, memes featuring the character Reenu are used to represent ‘modern Malayali women’ who is beautiful, educated and attractive, but her love for the protagonist is portrayed as her being attracted to him only after knowing that he is leaving to the UK soon. There are ‘Modern girl Memes’ which present young educated women as those who wear western clothes, drink coffee in expensive cafes and always post selfies. These memes often come with captions

like ‘Nammude Samskaram Poyallo’ meaning, our culture is lost or ‘Insta penkutti mindset’ meaning, mindset of an Instagram girl. The ‘Kitchen/ Marriage Stereotype Memes’ which is common in Facebook pages like Troll Malayalam and International Chalu Union etc show newly married women as unable to cook, hesitant to do household chores, nagging their husbands, always on phone and arrogant towards family. Such memes reinforce domestic roles of women and portray them as incompetent and dependent.



Figure 3 Premalu film meme



Figure 4 Ideal mother as the manager of the household



Figure 5 Renu Sudhi, a widow and influencer on Instagram, who has faced cyber bullying for posting content

Not all memes are misogynistic. There are meme pages that criticize popular narratives that idealize meek and gentle women, criticize smart and independent women and present patriarchal storylines. The memes that mock the popular Malayalam TV serial *Chandanamazha*, are circulated widely. These memes criticize the dialogues and ideas of the wicked mother-in-law and the poor daughter in law.

There are memes ridiculing feminist collectives and feminist influencers with captions like, 'feminist logic be like' and shows women shouting irrationally. Such memes reduces feminism to acts of anger or attention seeking and dismisses women's activism as a joke. There are troll memes that target celebrities for speaking on gender or freedom. For example, Parvathy Thiruvothu criticized misogynistic dialogues in Mammootty's film, *Kasaba*, a 2016 Malayalam film, and meme pages circulated images mocking her as over-smart and attention seeking. The images of feminists in jeans, kurtas, large bindi, wears make up, big earrings and hair put up also have been trolled in several meme pages. These meme pages try to silence women's voices in the public sphere using humour to shame dissent.



Figure 6 Meme on girls who wear make up



Figure 7 Meme trolling Feminists



Figure 8 Rima Kallingal, Malayalam Actress, trolled for being a feminist

Conclusion

The present study of Malayalam memes and reels shows that representation is not a neutral process. Entertainment also has social meaning. When women are repeatedly portrayed through narrow stereotypes, it limits the possibility of women emancipation. The advertisements in social media through reels and memes often create an unreal image of women, that fits male-centred marketing. They rarely reflect the real life of women and shows women as commodities in the market of popular culture. Women in India are not a homogenous group and they belong to different religions, regions, castes and class, with different talents and dreams. So social media should be more responsible when it represents women characters. Reels and memes should act as instruments that help people to empathize with experiences of women and should focus on more progressive representations of women, going beyond the stereotypes. To make a more balanced digital culture, creators should become more conscious of the gendered frames they produce. Responsible humour could be encouraged, women creator could

be supported and viral contents should be critically engaged to shift the tone of Kerala's online spaces.

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(RASHTRAKAVI MAITHILI SHARAN GUPT)

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