



Gendered Discourses in Women's Magazines: Constructing Femininity and Masculinity in Malayalam Popular Media

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Abstract: Popular magazines play a significant role in shaping cultural perceptions of gender roles and identities. This paper examines the representation of gender binaries in two widely circulated Malayalam women's magazines, *Vanitha* and *Grihalakshmi*. Drawing on feminist media studies and discourse analysis, the study explores how these publications construct socially accepted notions of femininity and masculinity. Through qualitative textual analysis of editorials, advertisements, serialized fiction, and lifestyle columns, the research demonstrates that the magazines frequently depict women as domestic caregivers, emotional nurturers, and consumers of beauty and lifestyle products. Male identities are simultaneously portrayed through normalized forms of authority and emotional distance, reinforcing patriarchal cultural expectations. The findings support Littosselitti's argument that magazine discourse often constructs exaggerated gender binaries in which men and women appear in symbolic opposition. The paper concludes that women's magazines, despite addressing female readership, often reproduce traditional gender ideologies embedded within socio-cultural structures.

Keywords: gender discourse, media representation, Malayalam magazines, femininity, masculinity, popular culture

1. Introduction

Mass media plays a crucial role in shaping cultural norms and social identities. Among the many forms of media, women's magazines hold a distinctive position because they combine entertainment, lifestyle advice, and cultural commentary. Through narratives, images, and advertisements, these magazines contribute to the construction of gender roles and expectations within society (Gill, 2007).

Gender theorists have argued that media discourse frequently relies on binary representations of masculinity and femininity. Such representations present men and women as fundamentally different categories, each associated with specific behavioral norms and social roles. According to Judith Butler (1990), gender is not a natural attribute but a socially constructed identity that is performed through repeated cultural practices.

Women's magazines often participate in this construction by presenting idealized models of femininity centered on domesticity, beauty, and emotional labor (McRobbie, 1991). At the same time, these magazines may also reinforce patriarchal expectations by portraying men as authoritative and emotionally detached figures.



This study investigates gender representation in two prominent Malayalam women's magazines, *Vanitha* and *Grihalakshmi*. By examining their textual and visual narratives, the study seeks to understand how regional media contributes to the reproduction of gender binaries within contemporary cultural discourse.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Representation and Gender

Scholars in feminist media studies have consistently emphasized the role of media in reproducing gender ideologies. According to Erving Goffman (1979), media images frequently encode subtle cues that reinforce hierarchical gender relations. Women are often depicted in passive or domestic roles, while men are portrayed as active, authoritative figures.

The concept of the **male gaze**, introduced by Laura Mulvey (1975), further explains how visual media constructs women as objects of observation and consumption. Although Mulvey's work focused on cinema, her insights have been widely applied to advertising and magazine culture.

2.2 Discourse and the Construction of Gender

Language and discourse play a central role in shaping social identities. According to Deborah Tannen (1990), popular discourse often exaggerates gender differences in communication, creating stereotypes that portray men and women as fundamentally distinct.

Similarly, Michel Foucault (1978) argues that discourse functions as a mechanism through which power relations are produced and maintained. Media narratives therefore do not merely reflect social realities; they actively participate in constructing them.

Within magazine discourse, Littosselitti suggests that men and women are frequently portrayed as opposing categories engaged in symbolic struggle, reinforcing rigid gender binaries (Littosselitti, 2006).

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a **qualitative textual analysis** approach. The analysis focuses on selected issues of the Malayalam magazines *Vanitha* and *Grihalakshmi*.

The following sections were examined:

- Editorial columns
- Cover stories
- Advertisements
- Cooking and lifestyle sections
- Serialized fiction and short stories

The study identifies recurring themes, narrative patterns, and linguistic structures that contribute to the representation of gender identities.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Symbolic Significance of Magazine Titles

The titles of both magazines themselves reveal embedded gender ideologies. The term *Vanitha* directly translates to "woman," explicitly addressing female identity. Meanwhile, *Grihalakshmi*, meaning "goddess of the household," reflects a traditional cultural ideal in which women are associated with domestic virtue.



This symbolic framing reinforces what feminist scholars describe as the **ideology of domestic femininity**, in which women are primarily positioned within the household sphere (Gill, 2007).

4.2 Domesticity and Culinary Narratives

A significant portion of both magazines is devoted to cooking recipes and household management. These sections frequently link culinary expertise with maternal care and emotional responsibility.

Such representations naturalize domestic labor as a feminine duty rather than recognizing it as socially constructed work (Butler, 1990).

4.3 Beauty and Consumer Culture

Another prominent theme is the emphasis on beauty and fashion. Articles focusing on makeup, clothing, and lifestyle trends occupy considerable space within the magazines.

Advertisements reinforce this focus by portraying women as primary consumers of beauty products and household goods. Gill (2007) describes this phenomenon as a **postfeminist media culture** in which empowerment is expressed through consumption and aesthetic self-presentation.

4.4 Gender Narratives in Serialized Fiction

Serialized stories and novels in these magazines often portray female protagonists navigating domestic struggles and emotional conflicts. These characters are typically depicted as patient, resilient, and morally virtuous.

Male characters, on the other hand, are frequently portrayed as authoritative figures. Traits associated with traditional masculinity—such as emotional restraint and dominance—are normalized within these narratives.

4.5 Binary Gender Construction

Collectively, these representations produce a simplified binary model of gender. Women are associated with caregiving, beauty, and emotional labor, whereas men are associated with authority and rationality.

Such binary constructions reinforce Littosselitti's argument that magazine discourse often portrays men and women as fundamentally opposing social categories.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Malayalam women's magazines such as *Vanitha* and *Grihalakshmi* play a significant role in shaping gendered cultural narratives. Although these publications target women readers, they frequently reinforce traditional stereotypes of femininity and masculinity.

Through editorial content, advertising strategies, and fictional narratives, the magazines consistently associate women with domestic responsibilities, emotional care, and aesthetic self-presentation. Male characters, meanwhile, are depicted through conventional ideals of authority and control.

These findings confirm that popular media remains an important site for the reproduction of gender binaries within contemporary society. Future research may explore how digital media



platforms and evolving readership patterns are transforming gender representation in regional media cultures.

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