



## FRAMING THE MARGINALIZED: A CRITIQUE ON THE PORTRAYAL OF PHYSICALLY CHALLENGED FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SELECTED MALAYALAM MOVIES

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### Abstract

Disabled women occupy a multifarious and marginalized position in Indian society, which makes their daily life experiences perplexed and difficult. Disability is such a stigma; and if it is a girl or woman with disability, the process of stigmatization and discrimination is multiplied. It is in this context, that this article tries to analyze the portrayal of female protagonists with orthopaedic impairments in three popular Malayalam films, released within the gap of a decade. The selected films are *Mazhayethum Mube (Before the Rain Comes)* released in 1995, *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum (Meera's Sorrow and Muthu's Dream)* released in 2003 and *Banglore Days* released in 2014. Through these selected films, the article argues that the disabled body becomes the primary identity of such women in a society and they are in a constant negotiation to achieve certain societal gender roles. The article will also focus on the intersections of disability with gender, family, marriage, class, rural/urban divide and also on the concept of

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internalization of disability using these three particular films as primary texts

**Keywords:** *Disabled women, Malayalam Cinema, Disability and Gender, Disability and Class.*

### **Introduction: The Shifting Paradigms of Disability Discourse**

The conceptual debate around disability studies has included the issue of whether it is legitimate even to posit a biological, medical or health dimensional definition of disability. There are many models, components and conceptual meanings of defining disability. Today disability is described more in terms of social discrimination and prejudice rather than individual medical conditions. Disability activists in the US, the UK, Scandinavia and other Western European countries campaigned for a change in the way that disability was understood, demanding the redefinition of disability from a personal, medical problem to a political one (Driedger 1991). No longer, they argued, should disability be seen as a problem of the individual's 'body' and thus something to be treated by health and social care professionals, but instead it should be seen as a political and socially constructed problem with a focus on the disabling barriers faced by people with an impairment (De Jong 1981; Finkelstein 1980).

Very soon afterwards, feminist disability activists and scholars were keen to name this disadvantage as social oppression: the concept 'disablism' sat comfortably alongside sexism and racism (Morris 1991). Disabled feminists such as Jenny Morris, Carol Thomas, Simi Linton and Rosemary Garland-Thomson have argued that disability studies has failed to adequately theorize the experience of disability from a gendered perspective and needs to engage more with feminist perspectives. Similar arguments were made years later in the Indian scenario by disability activists like Anita Ghai. For example in her article "Disabled Women: An Exclusive Agenda of Indian Feminism" she says, "Indian feminist scholarship has looked at embodiment along the axes of caste, class, and historical phases such as the impact of colonization; however, the impaired body has not been considered as having analytical consequence" (Ghai 55).

#### A Brief Look at the Selected Movies

- a) *Mazhayethum Munbe* is a 1995 Malayalam movie directed by Kamal and written by Sreenivasan. The movie revolves around the life of Nandakumar, a college lecturer, his fiancee Uma (who becomes paralyzed at one point in her life) and a teenage girl Shruthi who has infatuation for Nandakumar. Nandakumar is ready to wait lifelong for Uma to return back to her previous life. But at some point of time, Uma feels that she is a burden for him and forces him to marry Shruthi. The marriage doesn't turn up well and their relationship was very cold. Nandakumar abandons his house and Shruthi commits suicide after giving birth to his child. When Nandakumar finally returns back at the end of the movie, he finds to his surprise that his kid is taken care of by Uma whose condition has now improved.

- b) *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* is a 2003 Malayalam film by [Vinayan](#). This movie is about a brother Muthu protecting his disabled sister Meera. They live with their grandmother and uncle, both of whom regard Meera as a curse for the family. Aswathy , a village girl has feelings for Muthu but he does not reciprocate it openly because of his concern for his helpless sister(whom he thinks will be deserted if he has his own family). Throughout the movie we see the vain efforts of Muthu to cure Meera of her disability and to arrange a desirable marriage for her. Meera thinks that she will be a constant burden for her brother and finally commits suicide.
- c) *Banglore Days* is a Malayalam movie released in 2014, written and directed by Anjali Menon. The film's story revolves around the life of three cousins Divya, Kuttan and Arjun, who share a close bond since childhood. As the movie progresses, each of them finds their respective life partners(Divya through arranged marriage and others on their own). Arjun who is a bike racer, falls in love with an RJ named Sarah, who is a paraplegic. He starts to like her attitude and starts to follow her. They become good friends but Arjun is saddened when he learns that Sarah is to leave for Australia on a University scholarship. Arjun gets a chance to race on the same day that Sarah has to leave for Australia. Divya, Das and Kuttan cheer for him and he wins the race. After the race, Arjun realizes that Sarah is the most important part of his life and asks her not to go.

#### Disability and its Intersecting Social Categories

It would be unwise to generalize the disability experience. Various aspects of disability like the difference/ relationship between impairment and disability, disability as a negative social response to impairment and the influence of various social categories like gender, sexuality, class, family, ethnicity etc should be taken into consideration. The level of acceptance, discrimination and stigma varies with the type of disability, family's educational background, the region etc. This article will focus on the experience of the physically disabled women in Kerala and its association with the institutions of gender, family, marriage, class etc as represented in the selected movies.

##### a) Disability and Gender: The Disabled Woman as the Grotesque Other

“Disability and gender are social constructions endorsing the cultural inscriptions on the bodily impairment and biological text.”( pg 935 *Encyclopedia of Disability* ,Volume 2).). The image of disability may be intensified by gender; for women a sense of intensified passivity and helplessness, for men a corrupted masculinity generated by enforced dependence. Women with disabilities are in a continuous negotiation to achieve the expected societal gender roles in aspects related to femininity, sexuality and marriage ability. For example, the protagonists in *Mazhayethum Munbe* and *Meerayude Dukhavum* are shown as

women who follow certain feminine code of conduct. They are shown to wear either sarees or skirt and blouses, put on bindi and make up and do household chores as much as possible.



Figure 1: Screen shot from the film *Meerayude Dhukavum Muthuvinte Swapnamvum* (2003), where the disabled Meera sweeps the house, literally crawling on the ground.

b) Disability and Family

“Within the cultural context of India, the disabled are seen as suffering the wrath of God and being punished for their or their family’s misdeeds” (Ghai 4). Another cultural construction of disability sees it as eternal childhood, that demands lifelong care and support from family members. The care giving of children and relatives with disabilities is frequently portrayed as stressful experience for the family. The language of over protection often mis-heartens the disabled. Mothers in the family are usually considered as the primary care givers. The male partners are usually expected to perform a secondary role. This notion is reinforced in the selected movies. The silent absence of a mother figure in *Mazhayethum Munbe* and *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* puts the disabled women at the hands of their fiancé and brother respectively. Though they are protected by the hero, the absence of a mother who gives them an emotional support and care is conspicuous when compared with *Banglore Days* where Sarah has a supportive mother who is proud of her daughter and gives her all freedom. Nothing is spoken about her father figure and that does not seem to affect her in any ways.(In fact the absence of a controlling male figure and her family settling in a metro like Bangalore in a way accelerates her freedom.) Whereas Uma(in *Mazhayethum Munbe*) and Meera(in *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* ) lacks this emotional support and eternal support from a mother, which in turn makes them feel that they are a burden to their male counterparts. The educational and financial background of the family also affects the acceptance of the dependent disabled . In *Mazhayethum Munbe* and *Banglore*

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Days, the physically disabled are accepted by the immediate family members who have reasonable educational background and financial status . But the situation of Meera in *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* is strikingly different. The uneducated grandmother and uncle consider her as a family curse. Poverty compels her to resort to begging in the absence of her brother.

c) Disability and Marriage

Generally, disabled women are not considered “marriagable” because their impairments are seen as “imperfections”. Disabled women (especially the intellectually disabled) undergo forced sterilization. It is popularly assumed that disabled women are asexual. Consequently they feel guilt, shame and fear in front of the society. Marriage is often seen as institution that guarantees acceptance and inclusion in the society, especially for women. Whether the disabled women are married or not, the stigma is always with them. Either they cannot marry because of disability or if they do marry, disability makes the survival of a happy life difficult. These women are often perceived as being unable to fulfill the variety of roles that society expects from a normal woman, such as mother, wife and sexual partner. The institution of marriage is discussed in the selected movies also. It is the institution of marriage that creates turmoil between Nandakumar and Uma in the movie *Mazhayethum Munbe*. Uma feels that she is not fit to be his better half. When Uma compels him to get married Nandakumar asks, “Is marriage the greatest thing in one’s life.” The voice of the society is conveyed through Shruthi who accuses Uma of being selfish and possessive by forcing Nandakumar to sacrifice his life and pleasures for her sake. The movie proves that the disabled woman is not fit to get married when Nandakumar marries Shruthi, despite his feelings for Uma. The movie *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* also highlights the institution of marriage. The title of the movie may be translated as Meera’s Sorrow and Muthu’s Dream and Muthu, the central character always says that his greatest dream is to see his sister getting married. The movie discusses about how marital status of a disabled girl in natal home influence marriage negotiation of other siblings. Muthu spends his entire life to earn for his sister’s treatment and to give a decent dowry for her. Marriage becomes the be all and end all of Meera’s life and Muthu always believes that her life would be secure only in the hands of another male who will protect her like him for the rest of her life. The movie has many scenes which shows the sexual vulnerability of Meera (like the scenes where the “Sidhan”(a criminal in the disguise of a saint) tries to molest her) and she becomes a weakling always to be protected by another male. But Sarah in *Banglore Days* is not shown as a weakling or as sexual puppet waiting to be sold in the marriage market. She is well educated and does the job of her own choice. When Arjun tries to follow her, she resents like any other normal woman does. She accepts him only when she is sure that he loves her for who she is and that he does’nt do it out of sympathy or to play tricks with her. Sarah’s

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mother does not approve of the relation all of a sudden (like Muthu in *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum*) and she does not consider it as something great on the part of Arjun to propose her disabled daughter. Instead she questions Arjun about his family and job and says that she will not give her daughter's hand to him unless he secures a safe financial position. The mother not at all seems to be disturbed about a protector figure for her daughter but she in turn is anxious about her future and education.

### d) Internalization of Disability

The disabled always feel that they should not engage in certain social activities and this results in lower levels of self esteem and a kind of internalization of disability. "Stigmatized from birth, through neglect they grow up with the tyranny of a society that demands perfection."(Gary 1021). In the case of a disabled female, family plays an important role in developing this negative energy either by treating the disabled female member as an inconvenience or by having an over protective attitude towards the disabled woman. In both the movies, *Mazhayethum Munbe* and *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum*, there is a kind of internalization of disability for the disabled women. When Uma in *Mazhayethum Munbe* becomes paralyzed she feels suffocated the care and love bestowed on her by Nandakumar. She feels that she is just an inefficient and worthless body waiting for death and this makes her force Nandakumar into another marriage. The condition of Meera in *Meerayude Dukhavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum* is even more pathetic. She does all the chores of the family just like a normal woman, but still she is considered as a worthless woman (except by her brother). She always feels that she is a burden for his brother and his future and accepts all proposals which comes on her way just to satisfy him. It is this feeling of self pity that drives her to a suicide at the end of the movie. But Sarah in *Banglore Days* is never dis hearted. She in fact becomes a ray of hope for everyone she meets. The city of Bangalore awakens by hearing her inspirational words (she is a RJ) and it is this attitude which attracts Arjun. She never pities herself and is even shown to take motivational classes for school children. Again, "for severely disabled women, the ability to walk is so much important because walking is associated with enabled condition that can lead to desired life" (Ghosh). While the physically disabled women characters in the other two movies are either assisted/carried by a male supporter, the automated wheelchair in *Banglore days* gives Sarah a sense of power.



Figure 2: Screen shot from *Meerayude Dhukavum Muthuvinte Swapnavum*, where Meera is being carried by her brother.



Figure 3: Screen shot from *Banglore Days*: Sarah in her automated wheel chair.

#### Conclusion

“Being unable to adequately effect a masculine or feminine performance and being evaluated by others and themselves in terms of this inadequacy have significant consequences on the life of people with disabilities” (Gary 334).. The myth of the beautiful body defines the impaired female body as unacceptable and unfeminine. The roots of such thinking are found in Indian mythology: Lakshmana, brother of Rama, cuts off the nose of Shurpanaka, sister of Ravana, who is interested in him. That Lakshmana can only respond to what he defines as unacceptable behaviour by disabling the ugly female monster indicates how disability and de-sexing are



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equated in the Indian psyche. Movies in some sense seems to exaggerate these traditional notions though have been some kind of sensitization in the later years (as in *Banglore Days*). The issues of education, employment, sexuality, exploitation and rights of disabled women should be given greater prominence.

### Notes on Contributors

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