



VARATHAN; A SYMBOLIC EXUBERANCE OF MALE GAZE

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ABSTRACT

In the recent decades film has been dynamically interfacing with literature and life in a rapidly changing cultural context. It is also the medium with immense mass appeal. It is a polyhedral phenomenon which is influenced by the different cultures and influences other cultures. Gender representation is at the heart of such cultural negotiation. Central to such negotiation is the figure of Woman, which has long served as a powerful and ambivalent patriarchal symbol, heavily over determined as an expression of the male psyche. The notion of identity is neither stable nor permanent. It is a continues process of construction and reconstruction. When it comes alive as in the case of women the process get entangled with the age old customs and traditions which were originally be maintained in order to curtail the freedom of women. The central idea of male gaze embodies woman as a spectacle. Varathan (Outsider) is a 2018 released Indian Malayalam language movie directed by Amal Neerad which is an unofficial remake of Straw Dogs (1971) by Sam Peckinpah. Based on the dictum of male gaze the paper analyses how the Malayalam movie Varathan (Outsider) visualizes the aspects of male gaze.

KEYWORDS: Film Feminism , Male gaze , Gender.

INTRODUCTION :

The concept of film seems to be regarded as a polyhedral phenomenon which is influenced by the different cultures and influences other cultures. The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of cinema, a new art form which also came to be known as film, moving pictures, or movies (Gibson). In the recent decades cinema has been dynamically interfacing with literature and life in a rapidly changing cultural context. Film is also the medium with immense mass appeal. Gender representation is at the heart of such cultural negotiation. Central to such negotiation is the figure of Woman, which has long served as a powerful and ambivalent patriarchal symbol, heavily over determined as an expression of the male psyche. The 'image of woman' has also been a site of gendered discourse, drawn from the specific, socio-cultural experiences of women and shared by women, which negotiates a space within, and sometimes resists patriarchal domination.

The central idea of male gaze was originally brought to centre of discussion by the eminent feminist Laura Mulvey in her path breaking essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. Her attribution of the meaning of the term embodies woman as a spectacle in the film. As far as the practitioners of feminism were concerned the meaning is extended to print, multimedia as well as film as a product of

male gaze. In this world which has always been dominated by man, there has been a long history of oppression against women. The history of Indian cinema presents a woeful picture of discrimination and marginalization of women. Whether it is a film of the 50s or of the 90s there has been little difference in the image of the celluloid woman. Commercial films are not going to change overnight in their attitude towards them, an attitude marked by discrimination and exploitation. This image has been so constantly drilled into the Indian female psyche that women themselves have started believing in this 'self-portrait and no one can disagree with the strong subconscious influence and hypnotic effect that films have on our minds. The makers of these films (mostly men) emphasize that they are simply catering to what the audiences are accustomed to seeing. There is a strong resistance to the image of the woman who is articulate, vocal and independent. The celluloid lady has always been flown as a secondary, subservient figure. It is a different form of enslavement.

Varathan (Outsider) is a 2018 released Indian Malayalam language movie directed by Amal Neerad which is an unofficial remake of *Straw Dogs* (1971) by Sam Peckinpah. The movie tells the story of Aby and his wife Priya who were lands in Priya's village "Pathinettam Vayal" and moved to her ancestral farm house in the hills. Priya who is leading a modern life became targeted by the particularly unrefined male dominated culture of the village. From the first day of her life in the village she feels some sort of insecurity amidst the presence of her presumably meek and socialite husband. Of course she was afraid of the people who leased the land for cultivation. Recurrently the villagers and the people around them are shown ogling them with distaste. This is most important part in which the director infused the concept of male gaze as a tool to indicate the constrained social setup of the village. The whole village is shown as a "masculine infested" place of insecurity and lost hope. Occasionally the movie fills with dialogues which treat the outsiders as troublemakers of the village. As in one such instance Benny, the family's local hand and a politician opined that the outsiders come to their village for their enjoyment and the villagers have to get along with the after effects of those troubles made by the 'varathans'. This is the overall idea of the villagers on the outsiders where they forget that their ancestors were also outsiders. The idea of insider outsider conflict even reach up to the level of moral policing which is a frequent social activity today. The people who engage in moral policing themselves violate the moral codes. They even scan each and every one who pass through their life and vicinity and try to invade into their private spaces. That is the point where Aby's family security became threatened by the people outside their private space. The insiders of the village became outsiders for the family.

In the movie sexual objectification created with male gaze have far reaching effects. As it is one of the major part in the patriarchal order in which women are not equal to men. The spectator in this culture is a man based on the patriarchal order, and this is what makes the spectacle a woman. She is presented as an embodiment of eroticism which marks her as an object to fulfill the immature fantasies of the spectator who is a male. The film aestheticises the message portrayed by making the women as the victim of gaze. The gaze that is presented in the movie viewed the character of Priya as a vehicle of fetishistic fantasies, disregarding her identity and personality. In one such scene a character named Jithin who was erstwhile classmate of Priya, who is somewhat an anti social element, stole her undergarments from the washing place and held it tight with encircling emotions with violent inhalation.

In the essay Objectification theory: Toward Understanding Women's lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks, Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts asserts that as a result of the sexual objectification women have a self image they are constantly being monitored by others which causes stress and mental disorders, which is applicable to the predicament of Priya. Along with the traumatic mental state caused by an abortion and the fear of being watched by the outsiders had affected her psyche. Two scenes in the movie underline the same. One in which the character of Priya in bed being

watched by an anonymous person through the tapestries of the windowpane and in another scene she was being watched in the bathroom by a man from the farm through the ventilator. In both circumstances she was alerted but the cold reaction from her husband irritates her.

The notion of 'identity' itself is neither stable, nor permanent. It is a continuous process of construction and reconstruction which functions as a warning to any critic who tries to establish final and achieved models of representation. In the movie *Varathan* identity of women in a society is showed as manipulated by the eyes of male characters. The idea represented signifies even though women have their own space in the society it is always relied under the surveillance camera of the male eyes. In a very critically acclaimed scene the director shows the exactness of the male gaze. Where an elderly man of his late sixties scans Priya through his spectacle in the village centre and opines about her sexual appeal to the people around there. He even tries to recollect from his ruminated memory about the elder sister of Priya, which also filled with sexual connotations. An array of elderly men joins him in watching her makes the scene brilliant and real, which is a common scene in rural countryside, where the outsiders (even the insiders) are monitored because of their dress codes and mannerisms which are strange to the spectator. In another scene the same person is presented as an agnostic one by using his mobile phone camera to shoot the visuals of the man and woman who came to the village for a vacation.

As far as the movie is concerned the whole events were presented as a subject of male gaze. Even the husband character is not aloof from gazing on his wife. In the end scene he consciously crushes the cockroach which crept towards him and looks at his smiling wife who once remarked that Cockroaches are not meant to be pets so can be killed. The gaze that he pushes on his wife indicates the assertion of his intense masculinity over his wife.

The movie *Varathan* had unfailingly portrayed the uninhibited nature of the masculine predominance by means of gaze and sexual objectification. With a rather ironic sequence in which the heroine shoots down one of her prime persecutor is a symbolization of the feminist discourse where the women fought back her oppressors. She not only over powers him by means of her renewed physical energy but also through the psychologically inflicted pain upon her oppressor. But in the denouement sequence it is shown that she submits herself to her socially recognized husband who showed his violent masculine self to persecute the villains or the anti social elements who hacked into their space. And she willingly accepts his final look and gaze and enjoys it like that of a rape from a sincere rapist as we could find in the essay penned by Janice Radway on the romance novels of the past. With this deep complex structure the movie put forwards two sorts of gazes. First one is by the society of spectators to whom the women represents fetishistic fanciful object and second sort by the socially manipulated role handled by the husband who fascinates his wife with his masculine self to prove his "ability". One cannot deny the fact that everything revolves around the issue of pleasure, and it is here that patriarchal repression has been most negative (Kaplan,1983,205-206). The extremity of patriarchal domination of female sexuality may be a reaction to helplessness in the face of the threat that Motherhood represents. As in the movie the heroine is denied of the bliss of motherhood and represented as the victim of gaze."Men act, women appear. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at." This quote suggests very succinctly the position of women in the realm of the 'look', including within the mainstream popular cinema. How so ever looking at a the construction of the movie as a whole rather than simply isolating certain scenes and shots it is clear that idea of gaze especially that of the male gaze is well positioned. The men's weakness does not mitigate them yet projects its narrative power throughout the movie. The movie itself turns out to be a discussion on the exuberance of male gaze in the society.

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