

Beyond the Figure of the Husband: Television Serials and the Cultural Image of the Malayali

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Abstract This paper tries to explore the marginality of women to public life in Kerala, an issue which is increasingly coming under critical scanner, the question of modernity and the representation of the popularly known Malayali women, in the popular television serials in Malayalam television channels and to trace the changes in the depiction of women characters in Malayalam television serials. Most of the Television serial in Malayalam are best known for being melodramatic and for its sentimental plot revolving around trivial day to day life of the Malayali women, especially, the rift between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, the adopted girl child and the step-mother, drift among sisters and so on and so forth. In this paper, we argue that though most of the television serial are based on trivial happenings and events, but some of these melodramatic serials subtly project and share the anxieties of lost innocence, traditions and tries to retell the necessity to regain the lost Malayali values and ethics to the new generation. For the purpose of this we choose to discuss popular Malayalam serials like *Bhaghyalakshi*, *Saaryu*, *Balamani*, and *Parasparam*.

Key words Malayali; women; television serials; culture

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Introduction

“God’s Own Country!”¹ the slogan of Kerala Tourism Development Corporation, is perhaps the best way to introduce the Malayali, the inhabitant of Kerala, the South-Indian State, which enjoys a unique position in the political map of India. Kerala is way ahead of the other Indian states in social indicators like birth and death rates, infant mortality, sex ratio, fertility rate, life expectancy, couple protection rate, maternal mortality, economic growth and literacy. Lately, the “Kerala Model” of development, which is highest in India and is comparable with that of many first world nations, has generated critical interest worldwide. These high social and economic development indices have given rise to the “myth of the Malayalee women” (Pillai 1).

This paper tries to explore the marginalization of women to public life in Kerala, an issue which is increasingly coming under critical scanner, the question of modernity and the representation of the popularly known *Malayalimanga*², in the popular television serials (soap serials) in Malayalam television channels. The paper attempts to trace the changes in the depiction of women characters in Malayalam television serials. Most of the Television serial in Malayalam³ are best known for being melodramatic and for its sentimental plot revolving around trivial day to day life of the Malayali women, especially the rift between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, the adopted girl child and the step-mother, drift among sisters and so on and so forth. In this paper, we argue that though most of the television serial are based on trivial happenings and events, but some of these melodramatic serials subtly project and share the anxieties of lost innocence, traditions and tries to retell the necessity to regain the lost Malayali values and ethics to the new generation. For the purpose of this we choose to discuss popular Malayalam serials like

1 The slogan of Kerala Tourism Development Corporation.

2 Malayalee women.

3 Malayalam is the official language of Kerala.

*Bhaghyalakshi*¹, *Saaryu*², *Balamani*³, and *Parasparam*⁴.

The Malayali community, especially women have been able to carve out a distinctive identity of their own in every walk of life. The various legislations enacted first in the erstwhile states of Travacore, Cochin and Malabar and later on in the present state of Kerala, which is a union of the earlier princely states, played a great role to revoke the legal framework of matriliney in the state. Many of these legislations aimed at bringing about radical changes in the structure and practice of family system. The high rate of literacy amongst female and the equally high of women employment, high physical health achievements, and reservation of one third of seats in local governance for women has undoubtedly strengthened the position of the Malayali *manga* in the public sphere. But at the same time the alarming rate of female suicide, dowry-related deaths, domestic violence, and gender and caste based crimes also confine women to their domestic sphere.

Though viewing and appreciating television serials, considered mainly as women's affair is viewed with contempt especially amongst the intellectual in Kerala, there has been many attempts to study and analyse the effect of television serials on the private and personal spaces of the Malayali, to understand the visual discourse and viewership, to explore gender based issues, to explore the stereotypical depiction of female characters, the politics of production of serials, and also debates on wastage of time. These serials have also led to the breakdown in family relationships where most women spend their evening hours in front of television serials and men hang out with their friends outside. The recent unprecedented increase of alcoholism in the state and its relation to serials would prove as an interesting area of study. But no considerable effort has been made to understand the subtly hidden anxieties that lies buried under these popular cultural artefacts.

Between Reality and Imagination

To understand the relationship between the average Malayali women, most of who despite being educated are forced to spend their entire life cooking and bring up their children and have little or no economic independence, we believe that it is highly imperative that we understand the other side of the relatively economically

1 *Dir.Purushothaman*. This serial is still aired on Surya TV from 7.30 to 8.00 PM (Monday-Friday). The discussions are based on the story of the serial till 10.03.2016.

2 *Dir.BaijuDevaraj* was telecasted on Surya TV.

3 *Dir. Gireesh Konni* was telecasted on Mazhavil Manorama channel.

4 *Dir. Sudheesh Shankar* This serial is still aired on Asianet from 7.30 to 8.00 PM (Monday-Friday). The discussions are based on the story of the serial till 10.03.2016.

successful Malayali women, a relatively recent phenomenon in Kerala.

The economic aspirations and imagination of the average Malayali has always been identified and linked to the concept of *pravasalokam*¹. The present economic affluence that Kerala enjoys and the high social and economic development induces are directly linked with the remittance of the immigrants. The political economy of the state and the cultural image of the Malayali has an irrevocable relationship first with the Persian Gulf and then with countries like Australia, United States, Canada, United Kingdom and other European countries. The Persian Gulf has played and still in limited manner continues to play an important role in the life and economy of the Malayali. The initial days saw the people especially men, who migrated both legally and illegally to Gulf to work as skilled or unskilled labourers in the construction industries, a tradition that continues even today. Kerala had a significantly better nurse-people ratio compared to the rest of India even at the time of independence. Arguably this created a favourable social environment in Kerala for the migration of women as nurses. Soon the Kerala male also wore the nursing cap and started migrating to the west. The last decade of the twentieth century saw a large number of Malayali youth venturing into professional educational institutions with the motive of securing a job visa abroad. Some of others who failed to take up nursing or any other career that would help them secure a job visa to the west tied knot with those who had already migrated.

Kerala is also home to one of the largest working women population in the country. Many women have been able to secure job both in the government and private sector. The boom in Information Technology (IT) sector and the opening of Industrial Park in different parts of the state provided new job avenues to many men and women. The initiatives of the State government and local financial institutions also helped many youths both male and female in setting up their own business enterprises. The image of the strong Malayali women of yesteryears was returning and this was exploited by television serials like *Bhaghyalakshi*, *Prasparam* and others.

But this economic affluence was not without adverse effects. Recent studies however indicate growing uneasiness when Kerala's social development outcomes are linked to non-conventional indicators, particularly in the context of the rising visibility of mental ill-health among women and the aged, gender-based violence, and the rapid growth and spread of dowry and related crimes (Eapen and Kodoth 7). These studies indicate that education alone does not enable women to address gender-specific problems.

1 The world of the Exile.

Even if employed, these women have little control over her earnings and are dependent on various factors like family and society. And every often is treated as a milch cow who has to shoulder the burden of the rest of the family, this has been one of the recurrent themes of many popular television serials. The new generation serials in Malayalam depict a strong working woman who shoulders the responsibility of the family but refuse to be exploited both socially and economically.

History of Television and Television Serials in Kerala

Although television made its debut in India in 1959, it took more than two decades to reach Kerala. The Government of India in the initial days used television largely as an instrument of social change and Doordarshan, the official government broadcaster, only aired programmes which focused on issues like national integration, agricultural development, literacy, education, health and family welfare. Things however began to change by the 1980s when Doordarshan, gradually, moved away from its exclusive focus on educational programmes and began experimenting with entertainment programming. In 1984 it began broadcasting *Hum Log* (We, the People), a part-educational and part-entertainment television soap opera. The unprecedented success of television serials like *Hum Log*, *Buniyad* and others paved the way for the telecast of *Ramayan*¹ and *Mahabharat*² mythological epic.

DD Malayalam³, the first television station in the Malayalam language continued its monopoly until the 1990s when the Indian government opened its skies to private satellite channels. In August 1993 Asianet, the first private television channel in Malayalam, also the first regional channel in India, began satellite broadcasting. Asianet focused mainly on films and film-based programmes along with news and news based programmes. Later in the year 1998, the Chennai based Sun TV network launched its Malayalam channel, Surya TV. Then in the year 2000, Kairali TV under the aegis of Communist Party of India (Marxist), was launched. It was a 24-hour news and entertainment channel. It was followed by India Vision in 2003

1 The sacred Hindu text which tells the story of Rama, depicts the duties of relationships, portraying ideal characters like the ideal father, the ideal servant, the ideal brother, the ideal wife and the ideal king.

2 A Hindu epic narrative of the fates of the Kaurava and the Pandava princes, the Kurukshetra War. It also contains philosophical and devotional material, such as a discussion of the four "goals of life" or *purushart has* and the Bhagavad Gita.

3 It is part of the Doordarshan, the official government broadcaster, and broadcast programme in Malayalam and is owned and controlled by the government.

the first 24-hour exclusive news channel in Malayalam; Jeevan TV, an enterprise by the Catholic Church in 2002; Amrita TV by Amritananadamayi Matt (Ashram); Shalom TV (2005), an exclusive channel for Christian devotional programmes promoted by a Catholic organization in 2005; Manorama News, an exclusive news channel from the house of Malayala Manorama in 2007; and Jai Hind TV, backed by Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee¹ (KPCC) in 2008. Asianet, Kairali, Surya, and India Vision have presently more than one channel each that offer specialized programmes.

The popular television serials telecasted by Delhi *Doordarshan* not only attracted huge audiences in the Hindi belt and generated enormous revenue but also opened up vast avenues to create awareness on several gripping problems that the country faced. Television serials in Hindi addressed largely to North Indian audiences and were unable to converse with the entire nation. In the beginning, adaptations of well-known regional literary works were given preference in the regional languages. *Vaitharani*, an adaptation of a radio play by noted playwright T. N. Gopinathan Nair and directed by celebrated writer and film director P. Bhaskaran, is said to be the first soap opera in Malayalam, telecast from Thiruvananthapuram *Doordarshan* Kendra. This weekly serial which consisted of 13 episodes was aired at 7 pm from November 1988 to February 1989. Apart from *Vaitharani*, two other serials namely *Rohini* directed by Rajasekharan and *Varam* directed by G. S. Vijayan were also telecast from November 1988. The serials turned out to be a huge success and this led *Doordarshan* to commission more serials. Thirteen-episode serial was the order of the day in which one episode was telecast once a week. This numeral 13 was sacrosanct in *Doordarshan* circles and it was obtained by dividing 52 weeks in a year by four so that a serial lasted for a quarter of a year.

Among the private channels, Asianet and Surya TV were the frontrunners in telecasting serials which drew Malayalee audience like never before. Taking a cue from Doordarshan, Asianet began with weekly serials but soon switched over to daily (Monday to Friday) format. The credit for initiating a mega serial also goes to Asianet. *Shree*, directed by Shyam Sunder, broadcasted on Asianet, was the first mega serial in Malayalam and it was a definite breakthrough in television industry. This serial broadcast at 7.30 pm was rated as one of the most watched programmes by Malayalee viewers in those days. The narrative structure of the serial was melodramatic, women-centred and sentimental. The audience was mostly comprised of women but men and children also sat along to form a large family audience. The

¹ The controlling authority of Indian National Congress in Kerala is called the KPCC. Its head office is situated in Thiruvananthapuram, the Capital of Kerala.

success of a serial directly depended on the melodramatic and sentimental contents in its narrative structure. It became hugely popular and at the same time generated revenue hitherto unheard of in Malayalam television.

The television occupies a unique place in the cultural dynamics of all societies and the Malayali is no exception. The Malayalam television serial although criticised for being extremely melodramatic in nature, we argue that they help us to understand how the society negotiates with various social, cultural and economic issues. Today there are around 16 Malayalam channels and the main five private channels like Asianet, Surya TV, Amritha, Mazhavi Maoraman, and Flowers broadcast serials from 6.30 to 10.00 PM (from Monday to Friday) apart from few other reality shows. These serials have to their credit audience from every walk of life and people of different age groups.

Changing Cultural Image of the Malayali

Unlike a majority of the television serial in the Hindi language which narrates the saga of *Saans* and *Bahu* (the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law) in the traditional Hindu joint family, the television serials in Malayalam revolves round contemporary issues that engulf the average Malayali women and society. Kerala shares a different demographic pattern when compared with the rest of the country, especially the high level of education amongst women and the relatively high level of working women. Though matrilineal in character the Malayali society is very much patriarchal and many Malayalam serials like *Bhaghyalakshi*, *Saaryu*, *Balamani*, and *Parasparam* discusses how women negotiate and resolve contradictions surrounding their marginality. Most of the present television serials in Kerala discusses and projects issues like disintegration of the joint family system and the problems of nuclear family, corruption involving women, the problems related to education and the use of new technologies rather than the household struggle between *Saans* and *Bahu*, dowry death, the increasing rate of crime and social isolation of women.

The early serials both in Hindi and Malayalam emphasised the mythological ideal of Sati-Sita-Savitri stree (sacrificial-submissive-chaste women) who tried to hold together the traditional joint family and are performers par excellence in their roles as wives and daughters-in-law who epitomes the role of self-sacrifice, patience and chastity. For instance, the Malayalam serial *Sthree*¹, which run into nearly 400 episodes, narrated the story of Indu, a young woman who marries for love in a vio-

1 Directed by Shyamshundar and Telecasted on Asianet, *Sthree* has the credit of being the first mega serial in Malayalam.

lation of social and familial norms. Indu who is well educated, intelligent, beautiful and modest, soon wins over the members of her husband's family through her good behaviour. Though Indu was very much devoted to her husband beyond all else, she becomes separated from her husband when he is implicated in the murder. Indu who was pregnant with at the time of their separation, raises their child on her own and remains loyal to her jailed husband. When faced with unwelcome advances from other men, she transforms herself into a well-prepared woman to defend her honour and chastity. After many years of separation Indu and Hari become united but Indu soon realises that Hari had remarried under the influence of his family. Instead of being angry or disillusioned by the turn of events Indu willingly offers to give away her child, who had also been her only source of companionship and happiness, to her husband Hari, so that he could lead a good life full life. Indu's story was such a huge success among largely female audience and Indu and Hari became synonymous with the ideal couple. Most of the Malayalam serial of the early days followed this plot and story line.

Till very recently some Malayalam television serial like *Kumkumapoovu* (Dir. Praveen Kadakkavoor) were known for their melodramatic character. *Kumkumapoovu*, broadcasted in 785 episodes, tells the story of Professor Jayanthi and her illegitimate daughter Shalini. Jayanthi, the protagonist was made to believe that her child died immediately after birth. But Jayanthi meets Shalini years later, when Mahesh marries the legitimate daughter of Jayanthi, Amala. Amala hates Shalini because her husband and his family looked after her after rescuing her from Markose, who treated her unkindly Jayanthi father had entrusted Markose with the responsibility of raising Shalini. Amala who later on learns from her husband that Shalini is her half-sister tries to harm her in all possible ways. The rest of the plot of the serial moves from realises of truth and the crisis of accepting each other and negotiating with the new identity. The serial ends with the death of Professor Jayanthi. The extreme disparity between the villain's brutality (here Amala and Markose) and the victim's (Shalini and Jayanthi) meekness attempts to make the audience cry and arouse feelings of outrage at the injustice of it all. Though serials like *Stree* and *Kumkumapoovu* tried to show the existence of different kind of justice and moral system at work for both men and women, they failed to project the real changing face of the Kerala society. Rather they emphasised the age-old traditional view of women as a reflection of the male desire, by showing and limiting them within the kitchen and bedrooms. They failed to bring about the aspirations of women and their urge and need to exits outside of male specularisation and desire, to exist on her own terms.

Notion of the woman as the “other,” as different from the normal male, was the image of the Malayali manga that was epitomised by the lead character of the Serial *Stree*. Ironically this image still engulfs the consciousness of the average Malayali, who see women as self-suffering, sacrificing and family oriented. Most of the other serials produced during this period continued this stereotypical depiction of women in their roles whether it the role of wife, sister, daughter or mother. This image of the Malayali women is also found in the Malayalam films of the early days; however, this stereotypical depiction has now begun to be questioned with greater intensity and the new generation Malayalam cinema has begun to characterise a powerful woman who dare to challenge the established norm.

Arguably the serial *Parijatham*, (Dir. by Baiju Devaraj) acts as a connecting bridge between the old and the new generation Malayalam television serials, *Parijatham*, revolves around the romantic relationship between the lead characters Seema and Jayapal, know JP, which quickly turns out to be a fake and treacherous plot by the latter to trap Seema. But unfortunately, Seema’s sister identical twin sister Aruna falls prey to the plot. While Aruna is the traditional Malayalee girl — virtuous, soft spoken and eternally forgiving, Seema epitomises all that could be termed anti-traditional in a young Malayalee woman — she is passionate, outspoken and vengeful. The story is about Seema taking on the role of Aruna for the sake of obtaining for her sister her rightful place as wife in the JP household, following her fake marriage and rape by JP.

The new generation¹ television serials in Malayalam signal the emergence of a new trend in the representation of ideal Malayali manga, based on the traditions of ideal Indian womanhood, a trend characterised by the domestication of the female subject, by recentring within the large, extended family and the home and her traditionalisation through the figure of the mata (mother), the sumangali (auspicious married woman), the pativrata (chaste wife). The new generation serials in Kerala show the presence of a strong female character who tries to make their own space by redefinition of marriage, the myth that womanhood that renders female desire culturally inconceivable.

The narrative of the Malayalam serials *Parasparam* and *Bhagyalakshmi* challenges the image of the domesticated womanhood. The lead characters, Deepthi and Lakshmi in television serial *Parasparam* and *Bhagyalakshmi*, respectively challenge the traditional behavioural pattern set for the daughter-in-law. The plot

1 New generation is a discursive term derived from media discourse to refer to a new set of films in Malayalam which depart from the conventional style. I choose to extend the same term to refer to the new serial produced in Kerala, as they also depart from the conventional style.

of *Parasparam* revolves around the Deepthi, a bright and independent young girl who dreams of becoming an honest IPS officer¹ with support from her family, but the untimely death of her father and mother her brother Gopan, who is weary of her dreams, make her to marry Sooraj, a bakery owner. Sooraj, never dared to dream beyond looking after his house, siblings and his bakery and always loyally carried out the orders of his mother, Padmavathi, a traditional and stubborn lady who wants all the family members to follow her command and live with her in own house. Like Sooraj, her mother in law Padmavathi is also unaware that she is Deepthi is well educated. Padmavathi warns Deepthi of her ambitions. She believed that if Deepthi is allowed to follow her dreams she would erode the family traditions and move away from them. Sooraj, on the other hand, offers to set her free. The narrative of the serial at this point of time tends to replicate the plot of the earlier serials. Deepthi, willingly sacrifices her dreams and tries to a traditional housewife by helping Padmavathi in the kitchen and her husband Sooraj at his bakery. But the story changes when she discovers her husband's talents in cooking and make him win in a cookery competition. Sooraj, persuades her to prepare for the civil service examinations secretly. Padmavathi, who discovers this first tries to discourage her but later on agrees on the condition that she should secure a posting in the same place and should live with them in their own house. Deepthi, realises her dreams of becoming an IPS officer and keeps her promise to Padmavathi. Padmavathi and Soorja were taken into custody by a group of terrorist. Deepthi successful cracked down a terrorist attack, but Padmavathi receives a bullet injury during the police operation. This distances the father-in-law from her. The police department applauds her bravery and decides to send her for training to the Scotland Yard.

The new socio-cultural and economic division which has given more opportunity and freedom to women has paved way for a new social stratification in Kerala society. Marriage which was earlier considered as a legal contract where women “disappears” as the property of her husband has now come to be redefined as a legal contract among equals. A new morality in marriage is evident in the representation of both Deepthi and Lekshmi as oscillating between the roles of active desiring subject and passive object of desire, countering the traditional gathering of roles in culture, which figured actively and exclusively only as a male domain. The new generation serial *Bhaghyalakshi*, unlike the other family television serials it does not deals with in-law fights, illicit relationships and other negative elements in life, but explore the life of a working woman — their joys, sorrows, trials and their contributions to family and society. The story of *Bhaghyalakshi* revolves around the

1 IPS (Indian Police Service) is one of most top government jobs in India.

life of the lead character Lekshmi, a working girl who looks after her family after the sudden death of her father. Lekshmi is forced to marry Gautham to protect the honour of both her and Gautham's family, when the bride, her younger sister Kavya elopes on the day before her marriage. The serial moves around the problems which she has to encounter for pursuing a job which she needs and the problems that erupt in her family. Like Deepthi in *Parasparam*, Lekshmi also aspires to be independent. The lead characters in these serials represent the urge of the new generation female who try to create their own space both within the family and outside without compromising on their freedom, integrity and dreams. For both Deepthi and Lekshmi marriage does not signal an end, but is a new ground for where they negotiate a new set of values between wife and husband, premised in gender and sexual equality rather than inequality.

The gendered, domesticated and subversive nature of civil society in India confines women's participation in public sphere in the name of the family tradition and honour, and threats to their own security. The orderliness of domesticity which the civil society demands or rather imposes on woman reframes her from stepping out into the active public arena, a notion which is now highly challenged and discussed by the civil society in Kerala. The woman characters in new generation Malayalam serials do not merely to entertaining their audience but signal a change towards gender equality which has already begun in various corners of the state. Women's right to live independently and decide her own fate is another major theme which television serials like *Bhaghyalakshi*, *Parasparam*, *Saaryu*, and *Balamani* echoes. While *Balamani* directed by Gireesh Konni, revolves round Sumangala of Azhakathu family, her sons Arvind, Anand and Ananthu and her three daughters-in-laws- Mythili, Abhirami and Balamani. The plot of the television serial *Balamani* moves around the incidents which happens in the life of Balamani, who is deserted by her husband Ananthu and how Balamani cleverly plays her part to overcome those and hold the family together. We find a similar plot in the serial *Sarayu*, directed by Baiju Devaraj, which tells the story of a widowed working women and the problems which she has to suffer both from with the family and outside being a widow.

Most of the serials discussed above also raise social issue like divorce, widow remarriage and politics of social exclusion and subtly brings to questions the fundamental relations between men and women. While the serial *Balamani*, the protagonist Balamani after being deserted by her husband Ananthu seeks shelter in the house of a fish vendor without realising that her son has been hired by her husband to kill her. She decides to raise her son by herself in the midst of utter poverty without seeking the help of her rich in-laws. The serial also subtly discusses the is-

sue of rearing of children in divorced families, an important question which is now addressed in Kerala, which has one of the highest divorce rates in India. *Sarayu* on the other hand discusses the plight of widow who like other are subject to patriarchal customary and religious laws and confront discrimination and exploitation both at the hands of her family members and the general society. *Sarayu* does not try to fight back at the laws and patriarchal order but overcomes her marginalisation and social exclusion by upholding her integrity and identity. At a time when her family members raise question on her morality and chastity she leaves the comforts of her in-laws' house with her daughter to make a world of her own. At no point in the entire narrative she succumbs to the treacherous deeds of her enemies but decides to remain as a mother devoted to her child. Moreover, her economic independence ensures her a free and secure world. A dream which many women in Kerala, which ranks first among the Indian States in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) and Gender Development Index (GDI).

Bhaghyalakshi, Parasparam, Saaryu, and Balamani discusses the impact and effects of the changing social patterns like industrial development, urbanisation, migration, nuclearization of families, rise of divorce rates and their how the family especially the joint family tries to overcome these problems through negotiations and at the same time allowing an independent space to the "other."

Camouflaged Ideologies and the Middle Class

To reconstruction and rewrite the patriarchal order by posing questions at its unorthodox characteristics with the intention of exposing its limitations is arguably one of the camouflaged ideologies of the new generation television serials in Malayalam. These new television serials with a strong women centred narrative expose how the hegemonic force of patriarchy bred by nationalist fervour and the right-wing ideology use the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of women as goddess and/or mother, to oppress her. The ideology linked around the myth of the Sati-Savitri-Sita has played a crucial role in limiting the place of woman in public sphere in literature, arts and in historical debates in the subcontinent and also in forming the ideology of the dominant middle class society.

The same ideologies also governed the politics of production and representation of woman in the earlier serials like *Stree* and other popular serials. These serials projected the necessity of tolerant and sacrificing woman for the success of the male in the family- whether father, husband, brother and son. Debatably, most of the serials in Malayalam try to uphold the ideas of Hindu nationalism which are

based upon the Hindutva ideology which have provided women with the means of political assertion while at the same time withholding them from achieving total freedom. They emphasise the need for patriarchal policing which glorifies the legend of Sati-Savitri-Sita to reinforce and maintain the classic female Hindu stereotypes such as the chaste wife or heroic mother who protects the family like the manly Hindu warrior. The strongly Hindu centred narratives help to portray to the outside world what Hindu nationalists are fighting for, the perfect Hindu family. This attitude often clashes with followers of feminist nationalism.

Falling in line with the plot and narrative of other television serials in Hindi language, most of the earlier day serials in Malayalam too exploited the image of perfect woman who accepted their fate with a smile. They also depicted women who were taught to accept their own situations and blame themselves for their misfortunes. As Banerjee holds the deliberate silence on the structural violence of a woman's life emerges from her sexuality within patriarchy. This power relation within the structure of the family is never questioned, even by women, and as a result the inequality which exists within the structure of the family is conveniently ignored and at the same time accepted for maintaining the Hindu ideology of family, which according to Mazumdar will always remain sacrosanct.

It surprising and ironical to note that though Kerala has a good number of Christian and Muslim population the narrative of most of the television serials in Malayalam centres round the traditional Hindu joint or extended family, as phenomenon which is fast becoming a thing of the past in Kerala. Despite of being limited to the Hindu family the Malayalam serials does not merely talk about the Hindu family alone. These sacrosanct ideology and family structure is applicable not only to Hindu family but the Christian and Muslim communities in Kerala also hold a very similar family structure. By this however I do not mean to say that there are no Christian and Muslim characters in Malayalam serials, they most serve as supporting characters and at times negative characters. There were also a few serials like *Manasaputri*, (Dir. Sudheesh Sankar) which is the story of Sophie and Glory; and *Ente Pennu*, directed by Sreejith Palery, which features characters like Emmanuel Isho and Father Joseph Illikkan in the main roles. Apart from these have in there has been only very little or no attempts to create serials where Christian and Muslim characters have played the central role, but these serials failed to gain considerable reception. The politics of representation based on religion in Malayalam cinema and serials stills awaits a detailed study.

The new generation serials in Malayalam echoes the observation that Kapur and Cossman have made in relation to Hindutva's conception of women: "The

constitution of the new Hindu woman — a woman who may be educated, and who may work outside of the home, a woman who is strong and powerful, inside her family, and her community — is still a woman constituted through traditional discourses of *matrishakti*, as mother and wife, and of Sita, as chaste, pure and loyal” (Kapur and Cossman 10). We find examples of this the serial *Parasparam*, and *Bhaghyalakshi*, where the central character Deepthi realises her dreams of becoming an honest IPS officer and at the same gowns herself into the role of wife, and daughter-in-law, while Lakshmi tries to realise of fulfil the wishes of her heavenly father by attempting to regain his business. In *Sarayu* the protagonist Sarayu after the death of her husband tries to rebuild her dreams alone. The new generation Malayalam serials like *Bhaghyalakshi*, *Saaryu*, *Balamani*, and *Parasparam* sketch the image of the women who try to fight form erasing their subjectivities, by making their own name, identity and fulfilling desire.

The popularity of serials is partly due to the reassertion of representational trends like the idealisation of domesticated womanhood and the centrality of the extended family, which nonetheless is continuous with the hegemonic representations of womanhood and family in cinema and television in post independent India. Or what Chatterjee notes as the “identification of social roles by gender” (The Nation 198) corresponding with the social separation of “space into ghar,”¹ the outside world as “typically the male domain and bahir”² the home that is female in representation is challenged by the new generation television serials in Malayalam. Their narrative arguably can be seen as a part of the review which attempts to discuss, question and overview the historical location of gender in discourses of identity and subtly redefining gender roles in a new evolving public sphere of Kerala.

It can also be argued that the bulk of theorizations on nationalism and gender that unwittingly align themselves with the hegemonic nationalist narratives of gender and family assigns two categories to the private, supposedly apolitical and domestic. Opposing the views of Yuval-Davis who argues that the construction of the public-private divide is in itself a political act and that political power relations with their own dynamics exist in both sphere (Yuval-Davis 12), feminist scholars such as Carol Pateman argue that the very concept of the modern individual who naturalises the public-private divide (Carol Pateman 10). However, we should not fail to acknowledge one of the most important contributions of feminism to social theory, which has been the recognition that power relations operate within primary

1 Means “house” in Hindi.

2 Means “outside” in Hindi.

social relations as well as within the more impersonal secondary social relations of the civil and political domains.

According to Yuval-Davis, the implicit division of civil society into the public and private spheres, with the former being marked as male domain and the latter as female domain, which is not politically relevant, lies under the neglect of women as biological, cultural and symbolic producers. (Yuval-Davis 16) The exclusion of women and their gendered character and identity is also at the same time contextual. It is important to note that Chatterjee's argument about the marking of the domestic domain as a sacred space outside the purview of the modern state did not apply to regions like Kerala, in the way it did to Bengal. (Chatterjee 171-92) In early 20th century Kerala, community reform movements enjoyed enormous clout and the state was in fact called upon to legislate in order to transform the inner-most social spaces of marriage and family by community movements whose major agenda was, the transformation of internally-heterogeneous, loosely structured pre-modern caste groups in to internally homogeneous, strongly bound and mutually exclusive modern communities (*Domesticating Malayalees: Family Planning, the Nation and Home-centred Anxieties in Mid-21st Century Keralam*, Devika 46). These transformations which was at the heart of the modernizing process of communities were strongly informed by the ideology of modern gender and resulted, not in the undoing of patriarchy but its re-doing in ways that were complex and perhaps more difficult to resist (Devika 46), a theme which the new generation television serials in Malayalam has exploited.

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