



Intersectional Analysis of Women's Portrayal in “Pathonpatham Noottandu”: Exploring Gender, Race, and Colonial History in Nineteenth Century Kerala

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The topic of women's representation in the media has been the subject of discussion and analysis for several years. This research paper inquiries into the delineation of women in the 2022 Malayalam film *Pathonpatham Noottandu* through feminist film theory, post-colonial theory and the male gaze theory to explore the intersection of gender, race, and colonial history in shaping the portrayal of female characters.

The paper examines the experiences of lower-caste women in nineteenth century Kerala within the context of social and gender inequality. The research highlights those women belonging to lower castes experienced extensive discrimination and oppression, including adherence to strict dress codes and exclusion from certain religious practices, which is depicted in the movie. Even though these events occurred centuries ago, they remain relevant in the twenty first century due to the persistence of various forms of discrimination against women. Retelling this history serves as a reminder to effect positive change and prevent such discrimination from occurring again.

Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of women's experiences in nineteenth century Kerala, which faced significant challenges in terms of social and economic empowerment. It underscores the importance of continued investigation and the implementation of policies to address the obstacles encountered by women in the region, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups.

Keywords: women's representation, lower caste women, nineteenth century Kerala, dress code, gender inequality, discrimination, retelling history

INTRODUCTION

Despite comprising half of the global population, women have been historically oppressed and marginalized in almost all societies. Their societal position is commonly regarded as inferior to their male counterparts, and this perception can be traced back to ancient times. Aristotle's seminal work, *Magnum Opus Politics*, asserted that women were inferior to men and ought to be ruled by them. This view is emblematic of the longstanding and systematic discrimination against women across various cultures. Women are often deemed the weakest segment of society due to biological differences. As a result, women have had to struggle continuously for their fundamental human, economic, and political rights.

The situation of women in India is no different from the global context. While women have been active in Indian society since ancient times, their lives have been characterized by continuous struggles. The state of Kerala is no exception to this reality. The status of women in Travancore, an erstwhile princely state in Kerala, has undergone numerous changes over the past centuries. According to most authorities, women were always considered minors at law and remained under the tutelage of someone throughout their lives.

Contemporary films utilizing medieval history as a narrative backdrop are offering fresh perspectives and novel insights. Despite the temporal distance of the depicted events, their continued relevance in the modern age is palpable, particularly in the face of ongoing discrimination against women. Although legislative reforms have been implemented to safeguard marginalized groups, such individuals remain vulnerable to various forms of exploitation in the present era.

Vinayan, a filmmaker, has crafted a remarkable film that tells a moving story set in the nineteenth century when the princely states of Travancore experienced a reformation movement that brought about significant sociocultural transformations in society. Vinayan's cinematic work delves into the intricate social stratification, prejudicial beliefs, and inequitable practices entrenched in the caste system. The biographical account of Arattupuzha Velayudha Chekavar, revered as the pioneer martyr of the Kerala renaissance in the nineteenth century, is employed as a vehicle to explore these themes. Hailing from a privileged *Ezhava* (other backward caste) lineage, *Chekavar's* occupational proficiency as a trader and adeptness in *kalaripayattu* and martial arts are highlighted. His inadvertent challenge to the domination of the *savarna*, or the upper castes, triggers a lifelong mission to combat this system of injustice. This is evidenced in his unwavering support of Nangeli's anti-breast tax campaign and his advocacy for women's rights to cover their chests, as well as his construction of a temple that transcends caste-based barriers. Vinayan's film is a portrayal of *Chekavar's* transformative impact on societal perceptions, with the script and dialogues composed by the filmmaker himself.

In the Odanadu village of Arattupuzha, Panicker was born in 1825 to an *Ezhava* family. During his bloody battle to create the Kingdom of Travancore in the previous century, Martanda Varma had taken over the territory. In the decades that followed, social constraints on the inferior strata of society grew more stringent. Martanda Varma and his successors implemented an extractive taxing regime to suit the demands of the arising military-fiscal State. At the same time, communities like the *Ezhavas* endured increasing untouchability restrictions and lost the independence they once had. Many served as soldiers and commanders for Martanda Varma and his vanquished adversaries, but they were subsequently forbidden from joining what would become Travancore's Nair Brigade.

Despite this, the *Ezhava* aristocracy persisted, especially in Central Travancore. They were landowners, Ayurvedic doctors, Sanskrit academics, and warriors who continued to practice in their own *kalaris*. They continued to be "untouchable" despite all of this, though. A fleet of merchant ships that cruised in the Arabian Sea belonged to Panicker's family, which was a prime example of this "aristocracy."

At the age of 29, he constructs the Shiva temple in Mangalam. The 'higher' deities had taken possession of all temples at this point, and *Ezhavas* were no longer granted permission to enter them, making it a crucial period. At the same time, women in Travancore were rising in protest to the severe dress codes that were in place there. Hindu women of the "upper caste" who wore a *melmundu* to hide their upper bodies were prohibited from doing so. The

Channar movement was led by the *Nadar* women, and it commenced in 1813. In 1859, a group of *Ezhava* women in Pandalam (not Cherthala as is shown in Pathonpatham Noottandu) organized their own uprising.

The conflict began when a woman belonging to the *Ezhava* community wore traditional attire which offended the *savarna* community. The attire included a *mookkuthi* (nose ring), parted hair with jasmine flowers, *achipudava* (lower body cloth) reaching the ankles, and *melmundu* (a cloth worn over the shoulder). As a result, the *savarnas* attacked the women and cut off their noses. When this news reached Panicker, he responded by ordering *mookkuthis* (nose pins) and distributing them to local *Ezhava* women, leading a procession with them. The *savarnas* attempted to prevent the procession, but were defeated in a confrontation, which came to be known as the *Mookkuthi Samaram*. Panicker was also involved in other struggles, such as a farmworker's strike against fellow landlords and a similar agitation in which he distributed *melmundus* to the women of Kayamkulam. These events inspired broader movements, with *Ezhava* women in other parts of the state following suit.

Gender and Power in Historical Movies: Analyzing Women's Representation in 'Pathonpatham Noottandu'

The epic film "*Pathonpatham Noottandu*," directed by Vinayan, is an intricately woven narrative that sheds light on the struggle against systemic oppression and subjugation of the lower classes in the region of Travancore during the nineteenth century. The film presents an intricate portrayal of the hierarchical social order prevalent in that era, characterized by stringent limitations on the clothing choices of the lower classes, notably regarding the covering of their mammary glands. The dominant upper class exhibited a sadistic inclination, evidenced by their propensity towards voyeuristically enjoying the spectacle of two individuals engaged in physical conflict of disparate power dynamics. The ruling elite demonstrated a tendency towards voyeuristic pleasure-seeking, whereby they utilized the tax system not solely for financial gain, but also as a means of satiating their sexual desires.

The film's protagonist, Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker, emerges as a chivalrous fighter who wages a valiant struggle against the oppression of the lower classes in a socio-historical milieu wherein they were consigned to a subaltern position in society. The core conflict of the movie stems from the imperative of the warrior to safeguard his clan versus the ambitions of the Travancore leaders to exploit the citizenry. The film depicts the struggle for social justice against a backdrop of oppression, subjugation, and prejudice faced by the lower castes, who were subjected to unjust levies such as the "mulakkaram" (breast tax), "talakkaram" (head tax), and "meesakkaram" (moustache tax).

The film's writer-director Vinayan establishes the character attribute of Arattupuzha Velayudha Chekavar, played by Siju Wilson, as a valiant warrior and an effective leader at a tender age through a mandatory skirmish scene. Subsequently, Anoop Menon enacts the role of the king, Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal Ramavarma, who is a man of integrity, but the remaining leaders of the state are determined to exploit the subjugated populace to an extent that necessitates Chekavar's intervention to thwart their nefarious plans.

Velayudha Panicker becomes known as the hero of the famished tenants and the *Ezhava* caste women who had no right to cover their breasts. The young person, who was then known as Arattupuzha Velayudha Chekavar, quickly became aware of the unfairness experienced by the lower castes and reacted against it whenever he could. This portrayal is in line with the social and political climate of the time, wherein those who belonged to the so-called lower castes experienced rampant injustice and prejudice.

The film's depiction of the hierarchical social order, characterized by stringent limitations on the clothing choices of the lower classes, and the exploitation of the tax system for voyeuristic pleasure-seeking, is a stark reminder of the socio-historical milieu of Travancore during the nineteenth century. The film's intricate portrayal of the struggle for social justice against a backdrop of oppression, subjugation, and prejudice faced by the lower castes is a

testament to the filmmaker's ability to craft a compelling narrative that sheds light on a crucial chapter of Indian history. In conclusion, "*Pathonpatham Noottandu*" is an epic cinematic work that deserves recognition for its nuanced portrayal of the struggle against systemic oppression and subjugation of the lower classes in Travancore.

The study of historical movies necessitates a critical examination of the representation of women using feminist film theory, postcolonial theory, and Mulvey's theory of scopophilia. Scopophilia refers to the pleasure derived from looking and is an essential aspect of cinematic spectatorship. According to Mulvey, mainstream cinema employs a male gaze that objectifies and sexualizes the female body for male viewer gratification. This gaze reduces women to passive objects of male desire and erases their subjectivity and agency.

In the context of historical movies, Mulvey's theory of scopophilia necessitates a thorough investigation of the ways in which the female body is portrayed and positioned within the narrative. This requires identifying how the camera lingers on the female body or objectifies it through close-ups or slow-motion shots. Additionally, it involves analyzing how the female body is positioned within the story, whether as a passive object of male desire or as an active agent of her own volition.

Employing Mulvey's theory of scopophilia, feminist film theory, and postcolonial theory to scrutinize the representation of women in historical movies offers a powerful analytical framework to identify and criticize the intersectional operation of gender and race within the visual and narrative elements of cinema. Such a methodology affords a valuable tool for examining how gendered and racialized power structures are established and perpetuated through mainstream media.

The Legacy of Nangeli's Resistance: A Story of Intersectionality, Oppression, and Collective Action in 19th-Century India

In the movie *Pathonpatham Noottandu*, Kayadu Lohar completely shows justice to her character Nangeli. In history, Nangeli was a courageous and determined woman who lived in the nineteenth century in the southern Indian state of Kerala. She was born into a lower-caste community, which meant that she faced many forms of discrimination and oppression throughout her life. One of the most oppressive practices that women from lower castes faced during this time was the "breast tax," which required them to pay a fee in order to cover their breasts in public. The tax was enforced by upper-caste landlords, who had the power to punish those who refused to pay. Nangeli was determined to resist this unjust system and refused to pay the breast tax. Instead, she chose to cut off her own breasts as a powerful act of protest. Her actions inspired other women from all castes to come together to demand change and fight for their rights. The movement for social reform gained momentum, and despite opposition from local officials, the government was eventually forced to act. In 1924, the breast tax was abolished, and women were no longer forced to pay for the right to cover their breasts in public. Nangeli's brave protest had a lasting impact on the fight for women's rights and social justice in Kerala. Her story is a powerful reminder of the importance of standing up for what is right, even in the face of overwhelming opposition. It is a testament to the strength and resilience of women, and the power of collective action to bring about meaningful change.

In many ways, Nangeli was a trailblazer for the women's movement in India. Her actions inspired other women to demand their rights and to fight for equality and justice. Her courage and determination continue to inspire people all over the world, and her legacy lives on as a powerful symbol of resistance to oppression and injustice. Nangeli's protest also sheds light on the intersectional nature of oppression. As a woman from a lower caste, she faced multiple forms of discrimination and oppression, and her protest was a direct challenge to the systems of power that sought to control and marginalize her and other women like her. Her story reminds us that we must address the intersections of race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression if we hope to achieve true social justice.

The *Breast Tax* is another historical short film that sheds light on a significant but often overlooked aspect of Indian history. Directed by Yogesh Pagare, this film also depicts the story of Nangeli, a woman from nineteenth century India who refused to pay the breast tax imposed on lower-caste women. The film portrays the struggles faced by Nangeli and other women from her community due to the unjust and oppressive social norms of their time.

The film is shot in a digital format and is produced by Saumy Shivhare and Yogesh Pagare under the banner of Vijayshree Films. The cinematography by Jai Kamal Suthar and the background score by A. Sivamani enhance the visual and emotional impact of the film. The lead roles in the film are played by Anushree Kushwaha, Saumy Shivhare, and Nazneen Patni, who deliver impressive performances that effectively bring the story of Nangeli to life.

The *Breast Tax* falls under the history genre and provides insight into the cultural and social aspects of nineteenth century India. It highlights the plight of lower-caste women who were subjected to discriminatory practices and struggled to assert their rights and dignity. The film received critical acclaim for its powerful and evocative portrayal of Nangeli's story and her resistance against the oppressive practices of her time. The *Breast Tax* is an engaging and thought-provoking film that sheds light on an important but often neglected aspect of Indian history. Its artistic and narrative excellence makes it a valuable addition to the genre of historical films, and its depiction of the struggle of lower-caste women for equality and dignity resonates with audiences across the world.

The tale of Nangeli's sacrifice, although widely believed in Cherthala, has yet to be officially recognized as a historical event. Nevertheless, her courageous act of covering her breasts to protest unjust taxation imposed by the government deserves to be acknowledged as a significant moment in the struggle for gender equality, particularly in the context of women's fight for the right to bare their chests. However, the covering of the breast was later used as a tool of social control, rather than an act of modesty. The introduction of taxes like *Mulakkaram* (breast tax) and *Thalakkaram* (head tax) was aimed at filling the coffers of local kingdoms. Nangeli's defiance, therefore, was not just against unfair taxation but also against the oppressive practices of the state and upper castes. She utilized her body as a tool of rebellion, which is a powerful statement in the context of women's struggle for autonomy.

In conclusion, Nangeli's sacrifice is an important part of the history of women's struggle for equality in Kerala. Her bravery should be documented in textbooks, as it serves as a poignant reminder of the ongoing battle against gender oppression and the role of women's bodies in such struggles.

CONCLUSION

By examining the experiences of lower caste women in nineteenth century Kerala, the study highlights the persistence of gender and social inequality and underscores the importance of continued investigation and policy implementation to address the obstacles faced by marginalized groups. Through the application of Mulvey's theory of scopophilia, the research emphasizes the need for critical analysis of the representation of women in historical movies to identify and critique the intersectional operation of gender and race within mainstream media. The paper's findings reveal that the film offers a nuanced portrayal of the struggle against systemic oppression and subjugation of the lower classes in Travancore, shedding light on a crucial chapter of Indian history. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the complex and multifaceted nature of women's experiences in nineteenth century Kerala and highlights the relevance of the historical analysis for understanding contemporary gender and social issues. The analytical framework employed in this research can serve as a valuable tool for future investigations into the representation of marginalized groups in mainstream media and for the development of more inclusive and equitable cinematic narratives.

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