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Deciphering Female Body Politics in *Ammu* , *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *Pathombatham Nootandu*

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Introduction

Women as a group have often been victims of oppression. Cinema being a medium that forms a part of the public sphere too has represented the same. Objectification of women is not something that is limited to a single entity. Objectification is something that is beyond the boundaries of caste, race, religion etc. The worth of a woman is equated with their appearance and their sexual functions. At the same time the female body not only becomes an object of pleasure but also becomes a site of power for males. The idea of controlling women by establishing a control over their body is one among the techniques through which patriarchy operates. Women on the other hand are denied control over their bodies, the violence inflicted on the female body places women in mental trauma. The female body undergoes a constant pressure to conform to the societal demands and norms constructed in patriarchal society. The idea that a woman's body should be transformed and molded according to the needs of their partner reflects on how women lack rights on their body. This paper examines how women are represented in the selected movies; *Ammu*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *Pathombatham Noottandu* which portray women belonging to different time periods are objectified as instruments of sexual pleasure and victims of violence. The paper also attempts to unveil how cinema as a medium has brought into frame the experience of women, examining the changing trends in film narratives. The paper also attempts to read these film narratives in the light of the theory of body politics.

Recuperating Female Body Politics

The identity of an individual is inextricably bound with his/her body. In the case of women this notion is more relevant as society tends to equate women with her body. In a patriarchal society the female body is a collective space that is controlled by social and cultural norms. French theorist Judith Butler talks about this in her work *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*:

“The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies.” Women lack autonomy over their body and become a site of oppression. Female body from time immemorial has been considered as objects of child bearing. Their body becomes an attestation of male aggression.

Films being part of the public sphere is a creative medium where the daily experiences of people are documented and reproduced. The potentiality of cinema is so huge that often they challenge the existing notions. At the same time, they often reflect social issues and unknowingly they reassert certain notions which become embedded in the minds of the audience. In the case of women, cinema for a long time has reasserted the gender role that is assigned by patriarchal society. For a long time, the majority of film narratives focused on male characters and their perception of life. Female characters were attributed with supporting roles in movies. They were often treated as objects of pleasure and at the same time also mere instruments for male aggression. They were denied independent space and their perspectives were rarely showcased. They bore the weight of male violence. Female body always became a spectacle in many films. This tradition of justifying toxic masculinity functioning on the oppression of women continued for a long time. The women's voices remain unheard or as Arundhati Roy said, “there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.” (3) It is only recently that women were attributed with space in cinema. Their version of narration, their experiences were brought into frame recently.

The experience of women and the way their bodies are dictated according to the norms constructed on patriarchy has only been discussed in cinema very recently. The idea of ‘female’ as ‘other’ is clearly reflected in cinema. The psychological manipulation of creating

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fear as the methodology to control and objectify the female body is not something new. Patriarchy has operated through fear as a means to inflict violence on women and negate their identity. This also leads to another conclusion that often women are never given agency on deciding about pregnancy. It is the male partner or her in-laws who decide when she should become pregnant. This contributes to another idea of necropolitics put forward by Achille Mbembe.

In the selected movies, of which the first one is *Ammu* (2022), which brings into frame on a multifarious level on how a woman is strangled in a patriarchal society. The first scene when the child asks the central character Ammu (Aishwarya Lakshmi) whether she likes the groom Ravi (Naveen Chandra) and Ammu replies that she doesn't know, maybe, this very first scene gives us an insight of how a young girl is not given freedom and how she is situated in a state of ambiguity in marriage related issues. Then in the next scene where Ravi tells Ammu that she need not go for work and he justifies this by saying "A man who lives off his wife's money is no man at all" (*Ravi* 00:07:56-57), this shows how the idea of independent women are perceived in a patriarchal society. The movie explicitly reveals the idea of male gaze. The male gaze as defined by Laura Mulvey 'is the act of depicting women and the world from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects for the pleasure of the male viewer' (62). Throughout the movie there are various instance where Ammu becomes a victim of male gaze. The scene where Ravi suggests that he thought about buying chocolates and teddy bear as gifts rather than sewing machine through which Ammu can earn, reveals the deeply ingrained notions of patriarchy who consider women as a child, thus placing them as objects who they can play with. The scene where Ravi insults Ammu, and defends the same by saying that he was frustrated and she never understood him, disseminates how women are considered as inanimate objects without emotions and feelings.

Throughout the movie Ammu is portrayed as a being that lacks agency over her own body and life. When she dresses up well for a function, Ravi instructs her to change asking whether she is trying to seduce someone by dressing up well also projects the hidden notion that women who dress up well are trying to attract male attention. She is expected to behave according to what Ravi instructs her to. The first time that Ammu gets slapped by Ravi, she is in a state of trauma, she cannot accept the incident and she is terrified. On seeing the horror in her eyes

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Ravi justifies his action by saying that he was angry and it was out of his uncontrollable emotion that he hit her. He also says that it was out of love that he reacted in that way defending his action. When Ammu narrates this incident to her mother the instant question that her mother asks is what mistake did she commit. This unrecorded law constructed on the notion of male chauvinism that men have the right to punish women when they commit any mistake regardless of the fact that any form of violence can be employed is questioned by Ammu in the movie. The movie also unleashes how the female body has been the site of stress buster for males. Ammu's mother also justified her husband's action by saying that men are entitled to get angry, they can only show their anger and work stress only on us. This elucidates the age-old tradition of how patriarchal society guaranteed male dominance and control over the female body.

There are countless instances in the movie when Ravi questions Ammu's individuality thus treating her as an object which can be used and tortured according to his wish. After the initial incident of slapping on a minor argument continues for a long time. Ammu at an instance decides to leave the house, but she comes back feeling guilty even though she was smeared in blood after she got beaten up by Ravi mercilessly. At one point, she even asks the question why she should feel guilty even though she did not commit any mistake. But then again she pacifies herself saying that her husband loves her and returns. Ravi takes advantage of Ammu by telling her it is out of love that he beats her and indulges in physical relationship even though Ammu is not willing. This repeats and Ammu decides to take pills to avoid pregnancy even though Ravi wants to have a baby. Ammu starts taking pills without knowing that Ravi has swapped the pills with another one. Ammu even questions what right Ravi has on her body when she chooses to react and complain, Ravi threatens her and calls her mentally unstable. The idea of women who chose not to conform to the rules as 'mad' is an age-old practice that patriarchal society propagated. Necropolitical aspect in the movie can be glimpsed where Ravi dictates on how Ammu should live; she becomes a puppet controlled by Ravi in the initial part of the movie.

According to Achile Membe "Necropolitics entails the "subjugation of life to the power of death". This aspect is evident in the case of Ammu as she leads a life that is equal to death in the initial part of the movie. The movie brings into frame dual perspectives when every aspect

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is presented. In the second half of the movie Ammu rises from her deadly state like a phoenix rising from the ashes. She manipulates and cleverly takes revenge against her husband. At the end of the movie Ravi faces an inquiry from his higher officials in the police department. This inquiry was the result of Ammu and the group of supporting women with her who took efforts to bring the true face of Ravi to the society. She rises strong and puts Ravi behind the bars. Hence, she gains control of her body and life. The idea that women are incapable of revenge and are vulnerable is completely shattered at the end of the movie thus providing a broader perception of women.

In the case of *Pathombatham Noottandu*, a historical narrative that is set in 19th century Travancore in Kerala, reflects on how women were victims of double marginalization. From the initial scenes of the movie itself, women are presented as spectacle that enhances the visual pleasure of male characters. The first scene where the Colonizer gazes at a girl from lower cast and later on sexually exploits her. The upper caste landlord presents the girl as a gift for the Colonizer to enjoy in order to get his favours. Here the female body is objectified for the pleasure of the colonizer. Her vulnerable identity as a lower caste girl is exploited in the women. At the same time upper caste landlords make remarks about how the girl's body is impure and how he tried to clean it and make it presentable, as it was a time where lower caste women were denied the right to cover their breasts with clothes.

In the second half of the movie, the character of Nangeli, a lower caste woman (Kayadu Lohar) is hunted down by an upper caste male who fights with her and publicly insults her by removing her breast cloth. She is looked upon by him as an object of pleasure. He threatens to cut off her breast but fails. At the end of the movie Nangeli is again hunted down for wearing breast cloth and she is beaten up publicly as a punishment for covering her breast. She is asked to pay breast tax and also to remove her breast cloth. Nangeli removes her breast cloth and cuts off her breast and offers it as breast tax. Here the female body becomes a site of protest and resistance. Her dead body is burnt to ashes in order to erase her existence. This narrative of Nangeli dictates how the female body was perceived in the 19th century and at the same time also how patriarchy operated on female objectification. Nangeli's action offers a female perspective to the movie at the same time exposing the experience of women. Her death showcases her unwillingness to conform to the rules constructed by the patriarchal society.

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Another character Katha (Madhuri Braganza), a prostitute whose identity is defined by her female body. She is objectified and her identity is framed by this objectification. Her individuality is thus negated. Not only were the lower caste women objectified, the character of Savithri Thampuratty (Deepty Sati) is a testament that the female body was considered as an instrument of pleasure regardless of caste and creed. Savithry Thampuratty was denied choice to select her suitor, she was forcefully married to an upper caste old man who was rich and had a reputed social status. The old man marries her not out of love but out of lust. He died on the first night when he was indulging in physical relationship. She kills him. This shows her protest towards patriarchal society and her reluctance in a marriage where her voice is not accounted for.

In comparison with the two movies *Jaya Jaya Jaya He* narrates the story of a young girl Jaya (Darshana) who from her childhood onwards lived according to her parents wish. Even though she was clever and studious, her parents' ignorance and their patriarchal mindset prevented them from providing education for Jaya. She protested, but her protest was unheard. She fell in love with her teacher during her degree, whom she thought believed in rights of women and empowerment of women. To her surprise her teacher never believed in women empowerment in praxis. Jaya realized this only after getting into a relationship with him. He turned out to be a male chauvinist who doubted her and controlled her. He even slapped her numerous times. This idea inflicting pain over a woman and evoking fear in her mind is a methodology adopted by patriarchal society to establish control over women, Jaya's character from her childhood can be seen as being strangled under patriarchy. She was never allowed to breathe her own air. She was a puppet controlled by social norms. When her parents came to know about her relationship with her teacher, they took another decision of marrying her off regardless of her will. Jaya was constantly crucified for the outcomes she got after living a life dictated by others.

During Rajesh's first meeting with Jaya, he promises Jaya's parents that he will allow her to study after marriage and he will send her for PSC Coaching. At this point too Jaya's choice is not taken into account. After her marriage Jaya enters into a house where male domination is soaring. Rajesh is a macho hero who controls everyone by making them vulnerable. Everything happens in the house according to his wish. The male choice of food is given

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importance, regardless of the fact that his mother struggles to make them. He fails to understand his sister's problem in marriage and bluntly calls her 'fat' even though weight gain was due to hormonal issues. Female characters in Rajesh's house behave in accordance with his rules. Rajesh finds it intimidating to see Darshana watching videos. At one point he starts slapping her when she fails to behave accordingly. He tries to patch up with her by treating her in a restaurant, where his male chauvinistic attitude stands in front and he orders his favourite dish leaving no room for Jaya's choice. This series of violence and patch up repeats, placing Jaya in a state of trauma.

In the second half of the movie Jaya emerges as an empowered woman by learning martial arts through new media, even though she was restricted to the four walls of the house. She reacts fiercely when Rajesh tries to physically abuse her. For sometime, Rajesh feels vulnerable, and he seeks advice from his brother. He advises that once Jaya has kids then she would be under Rajesh's control. Rajesh fakes being a nice and changed man, and Jaya gets pregnant. Later when Jaya finds what Rajesh's plan was she becomes terrified and she loses the baby due to high blood pressure. At this point her parents and her in-laws blame her for the abortion regardless of the fact that she was under stress and pressure in her marriage with Rajesh. Throughout the movie Rajesh's mother can be seen as a woman who bluntly follows patriarchal notions, as she constantly says that her son is really innocent even though she too struggles under him.

Jaya at the end decides to take up the same business that her husband does and use this as a revenge against Rajesh. The important aspect is a conversation that takes place in court, when Rajesh tells with pride that he is a liberal man who provides freedom to his wife. The reply by the judge is an issue to be addressed where she says who is Rajesh to provide freedom to his wife, as freedom is not something to be provided by someone it is a natural right. The last scene in the movie is similar to the scene in the play *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, where Nora Helmer walks out her house gaining independence and freedom. Jaya walks out of the court being an empowered woman who shows stubbornness in neglecting the notions put forward by patriarchy. She takes revenge on Rajesh by taking up the same business Rajesh pursued and overwhelming him by her success over him in the same.

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Jaya's parents are a perfect example of how patriarchy dominated and controlled society for generations. Being a woman, her mother never identifies with the experience that Jaya shares but rather justifies the actions done by Rajesh. The values that she ascribes to Jaya are the patriarchal notions ascribed and ingrained in her mind by her parents. She never questions anything but rather blindly swallows everything told to her by her brother and husband. Jaya in the initial part of the movie has null existence as she does everything according to what others ask her to do.

Conclusion

Cinema being a part of the public sphere has a greater potential to reflect society. Film as medium is also a cultural artifact that showcases cultural values and social norms. At the same time it is also ascribed with certain functions, of which the most important is to showcase human experience. While for a long time, the experience of women was superficially recorded, the selected movies bring into frame the essential experience of women and how their bodies become a site of oppression. Their existence is valued only by the bodily functions ascribed to them. The women characters in the selected movies of male aggression. They are denied control over their body. Their experience as women is projected in a wider angle, thus giving them a space in the narrative. There is a change in the trend of cinema, where the questions raised by women characters are given prominence. Women were always considered as vulnerable by males. This vulnerability and their helplessness have helped these women characters in realizing their true worth and made them adopt any possible method to come out of patriarchy. The idea of controlling the female body as means to establish dominance over women is shattered in the selected movies. The women characters come out of patriarchy from a state of powerlessness to empowerment.

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