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'BREAKING' THE SILENCE AND 'FIGHTING' BACK: CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE RESPONSE TO GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN SELECT MALAYALAM FILMS

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Abstract: *Representation, particularly mediated forms such as cinema, has always been a powerful tool to enable social change. On the one hand, cinema functions as an instrument that reinstates hegemonic patriarchy, but on the other, it also becomes "a tool for political resistance and subversion" (Lauret, 1991, p. 66). Recently, South Asian cinema and, more specifically, the corpora of Malayalam cinema*[1] *has emerged as an empowering platform that addresses structural and institutionalised inequalities of gender. Broadly, the paper discusses the shift in the representational praxis of gender-based violence in Malayalam cinema, more specifically, the female protagonists' responses to violence. Specifically, the paper focuses on two recent Malayalam films,* Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey (2022) *and* The Teacher (2022). *The films present vigilantism as a means of female empowerment, offering an alternative narrative to traditional portrayals of victimhood, and how it can resist feelings of powerlessness in the face of gender-based violence. Therefore, anchoring on Laura Mattoon D'Amore's theoretical framework of vigilante feminism (2017), the study examines the intersection of vigilantism, gender-based violence, and cinematic representation, in an attempt to locate both the covert and overt forms and responses surrounding violence against women.*

Keywords: *vigilantism, gender, gender-based violence, Malayalam cinema, representation*

[1] Malayalam cinema, originating from Kerala, India, is a prominent regional film industry known for its thought-provoking narratives, nuanced performances, and innovative filmmaking techniques. Since its debut in the 1930s with the silent film *Vigathakumaran*, directed by J.C. Daniel, Malayalam cinema has gained renown for its unique storytelling approach and has continued to captivate audiences with its diverse cinematic offerings.

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence has been a continuous concern in society, and its representation in cinema has always been a topic of debate. Within the domain of South Asian cinema, the representation of gender-based violence is often situated within broader discourses related to feminism, activism, and social change. The potential of cinema as a powerful medium for raising awareness, initiating critical dialogue, and challenging established norms that perpetuate gender-based violence cannot be sidelined or negated. Malayalam cinema, in particular, has seen a considerable transformation in its portrayal of gender-based violence over the years.

The inhuman ostracisation and expulsion faced by P.K. Rosy, Malayalam cinema's first heroine, is a significant testimony to the problematic history of women within the cinematic archives of Kerala. From the very beginning, Malayalam cinema attempted to replicate and reinforce the "male-dominated social structures and socialisation practices" (Montesanti, 2015, p. 1), pigeonholing women into spaces of structural and epistemic inequalities. Before the emergence of the parallel movement in the 1970s, Malayalam films reinforced hegemonic ideals of male-centricity and women's "willing submission to the heteropatriarchal norms" (Rajendran, 2014, p. 61), curating what Aneeta Rajendran calls "normative femininity" (2014, p. 61). The 70s witnessed the emergence of female-centric films that attempted to challenge traditional gender norms and highlight women's issues. Films like *Ummachu* (1971), *Chattakari* (*The Anglo Indian Girl*, 1974), *Rathinirvedam* (*Adolescent Desire*, 1978), and *Avalude Ravukal* (*Her Nights*, 1978), to name a few, attempted to portray agentic women, capable of challenging social norms. However, despite these efforts, most commercial films continued to relegate women to spaces of marginality.

The autonomous women's movement that emerged in Kerala during the 1980s brought increased attention to issues of violence against women, challenging the prevailing patriarchal structures in both politics and society. This shift in social consciousness began to be reflected in cinematic narratives as well. Prior to this movement, as noted by Maya Subrahmanian (2019), "violence against women in Kerala had been kept out of sight by a veil of socio-political favours and male-dominated culture" (p. 4). This societal silence was mirrored in earlier Malayalam films from the 1980s through the early 2000s. In these films, women who were subjected to gender-based violence were depicted as passive victims who accepted their fate and succumbed to death by suicide (*Aa Raathri* (*That Night*, 1983), *Padheyam* (*Food for the Journey*, 1993), *Hitler* (1996)). Others

were shown enacting revenge through the murder of their perpetrators, but invariably faced severe consequences for seeking justice, exemplified through films like *Yavanika* (*The Curtain*, 1982), and *Kasthooriman* (*Musk Deer*, 2003). The most common narrative, however, featured either a male hero saving the wronged woman and/or avenging her honour (*New Delhi* (1987), *Chindamani Kola Case* (*The Murder Case of Chindamani*, 2006), *Janakan* (2010)). This often led to an over-glorification of heroic masculinity, with the male hero using violence to reassert his dominance. As Rohini Sreekumar and Sony Jalarajan Raj observe, "when male heroes are given the agency to control the narrative of a crime film, female characters are often portrayed as victims who need saving or glamorous objects that act as distractions to heroic gallantry" (2022, p. 107). Even while ostensibly addressing violence against women, these representations perpetuate problematic gender dynamics.

The mid-1990s saw a significant shift in public discourse around gender-based violence in Kerala. High-profile cases like the Suryanelli incident, where a 16-year-old girl was kidnapped and sexually abused by 42 men over a month, incited these autonomous groups to protest in lieu of the victims (Subrahmanian, 2019, p. 4). As the movement brought the issues of rape, sexual exploitation, and dowry deaths into public discourse, Malayalam cinema also began to incorporate these into its corpus, albeit through the repetitive tropes mentioned earlier. Furthermore, the influx of women into the global workforce since the 1990s created male anxiety about empowered and agentic females. This anxiety was addressed in films by developing a diegetic response against the autonomy of urban, educated, working women (Kumar, 2015, pp. 34-35). The films depict cosmopolitan sensibilities as "divisive and disruptive" while legitimizing the qualities of the submissive female (Sreedharan, 2010, p. 82). However, the introduction of the New Generation wave in Malayalam cinema marked a significant shift in both the representation of women and their responses to gender-based violence.

The female characters in these films are portrayed as taking issues into their own hands in order to secure justice for themselves and other women. Vigilantism, as a response to injustice, has become a prominent theme in several films. The 2012 film *22 Female Kottayam*, directed by Aashiq Abu, marked a turning point in the representation of female protagonists seeking revenge against their perpetrators. While initially hailed as an iconic mainstream feminist film, it falls into the contentious rape-revenge genre, which has been criticised for its often-exploitative nature. As film critic Alexandra Heller-Nicolas notes, such films often make "explicit that rape (or the threat of rape) has triggered the revenge" (2021, p. 10). However, as Rohini Sreekumar and Sony Jalarajan Raj

(2022) suggest, *22 Female Kottayam* presents an interesting narrative possibility that goes beyond the conventional rape-revenge films in Malayalam. Tessa (played by Rima Kallingal) breaks the conventional tropes ascribed to heroines, "exhibiting a type of femininity unfamiliar to the Malayali audience, or at least one not frequently portrayed in cinema" (Sreekumar & Raj, 2022, p. 116). While she opts to kill Hegde (the man who actually raped her), she devises a different, more psychologically disturbing punishment for Cyril (a pimp who pretended to be her boyfriend). By castrating him, Tessa effectively strips away the physical symbol of power that defines his role as a pimp. This act of emasculation imposes a lifelong consequence that, in Tessa's view, surpasses the finality of death (Sreekumar & Raj, 2022, p. 116). Also deviating from what film critic C. S. Venkiteswaran refers to as "mindless violence" (qtd. in Menon, 2024), this representation of vigilante justice has spurred conversations concerning women's roles in pursuing justice and the effectiveness of the judicial system in resolving gender-based violence.

More recently, and interestingly enough, Malayalam cinema began to explore the trend of women exercising vigilante justice through the performance of martial arts. As Laura Mattoon D'Amore theorises, vigilante feminism is the "performance of vigilantism by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection, and the protection of others, against violence—such as sexual assault, abduction, abuse, and trauma—because they have been otherwise failed in that manner" (2017, p. 386). Films like *Godha* (*Arena*, 2017), *Bheemante Vazhi* (*Bheeman's Path*, 2022), *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022), *The Teacher* (2022), and *Rekha* (2023) challenge traditional gender roles and expectations, portraying women as capable of defending themselves (through martial arts) and seeking justice on their own terms. Anchoring on D'Amore's theorisation of vigilante feminism, this paper analyses the films *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *The Teacher*, both of which feature women using martial arts as a means of vigilante justice against their perpetrators. While *Bheemante Vazhi* and *Rekha* also portray female characters that combat structural violence and exercise agency through martial arts, the two films chosen for analysis explore how the protagonists engage in vigilantism as a means of seeking justice specifically against violence inflicted on their bodies. The present research examines how self-defence (through martial arts) is portrayed as a powerful instrument for women to fight against gender-based violence and how this new representational shift influences the epistemic and systemic inequalities of gender. The paper further explores how the act of vigilantism can help protagonists resist "feelings of powerlessness" in the face of gender-based violence (D'Amore, 2017, p. 391). Rather than propagating violence for the sake of dominance, these films use violence as a means to seek justice from a system that denies women the same

(D'Amore, 2017, p. 386).

2. The evolving corpora of female vigilantism through self-defence in Malayalam cinema

The tendency in Malayalam films to reassert systemic inequalities of gender underwent a pivotal shift in the second decade of the 21st century. This period witnessed the emergence and popularity of what is popularly known as the New Generation wave in the cinematic history of Kerala. These corpora of films broke out of the normative dictums ascribed by heteropatriarchal society to explore the narrative experiences that were, till then, sidelined or tabooed (Basu & Tripathi, 2022, p. 3). The films, beginning with *Traffic* (2011), *Chaappa Kurishu* (*Heads or Tails*, 2011), *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), to the most recent films including *Uyare* (*Up Above* 2019), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022) and *The Teacher* (2022), were marked by perceptible unconventionality in technical, structural and thematic facets imbuing a sense of freshness into this regional mediascape. These films explore issues like patriarchy, gender-based violence, workplace harassment, and the complexities of modern relationships in a more nuanced and sensitive manner. Unlike the films from the previous decades, these films attempted to dislodge themselves from the accepted ideals of the patriarchal nation-state. The thematic transformation further inspired a radical shift in the portrayal of female characters as well. The films engrafted a dynamic variation from the normative triad of dutiful mother, wife, and sister, and created complex, multi-dimensional female characters, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes associated with "normative femininity" (Rajendran, 2014, p. 61). Within the emerging corpus, the representation of female characters in Malayalam cinema who are skilled in martial arts and capable of defending themselves opened a new dimension to analyse female agency through transgression.

Through films like *Godha* (*Arena* 2017), the Malayali New Generation directors attempted to show how the female protagonists destabilise the restrictive patriarchal dictums that curb their desires and agency. At the outset, Basil Joseph's *Godha* narrates the familiar narrative of Aditi Singh (played by Wamiqa Gabbi), a Punjabi wrestler's arduous struggles against the patriarchal society to pursue her passion in wrestling. The rest of the film follows how her coincidental befriending of a Malayali youngster, Aanjaneya Das (played by Tovino Thomas), becomes instrumental in her achieving her dreams. One hour and five minutes into the movie, the director presents an interesting

sequence where Aditi mercilessly thrashes two men who attempt to harass her in a public space. The sequence "challenged not just notions of femininity but more importantly established the role of man as the protector" (Ray, 2018, p. 368). Furthermore, these representations of women "taking up self-defence … contributed to women's independent identity formation, questioned stereotypes of femininity and … notions of family and gender violence", contributing constructively to the broader feminist narratives of resistance and empowerment (Ray, 2018, p. 369).

While the men perplexedly question and comment on the martial art form performed by Singh, the women discuss how equipping themselves to defend against oppression, including domestic violence, is necessary for their survival. However, it's crucial to note that such representations of fighting female bodies often come with their own set of problematic implications. As scholars like Lalitha Gopalan (2002) and Yvonne Tasker (2013) have pointed out in their analyses of Indian and American action heroine imagery respectively, the portrayal of aggressive female bodies is frequently accompanied by elements of fetishism and sado-voyeurism. The imagery of mobile and vengeful women, as well as the violence they endure, is often "excessively sexualised" (Tasker, 2013, p. 152) through strategic clothing choices and camera angles that "fragment the female body" (Gopalan, 2002, p. 37, p. 45). In the context of *Godha*, this sexualisation is subtly present in the way Aditi is depicted. The choice of having her wear a red saree during the action sequence can be interpreted as an unconscious attempt to sexualise the fighting female body. This depiction, at least unconsciously, serves to eroticise Aditi's display of strength, potentially undermining the empowering aspects of her character by catering to a voyeuristic gaze.

Other recent interventions, including *Bheemante Vazhi* (*Bheeman's Path*, 2021) and *Rekha* (2023), also present complex portrayals of the fighting female body, challenging conventional representations while navigating the problematics of sexualising the female body. Although a peripheral character, Hamza breaks new ground with Anju Chandran (played by Chinnu Chandni), a plus-sized judo trainer, confronting idealised notions of female beauty in action heroines. While this departure from conventional standards potentially liberates the character from traditional objectification, it raises questions about whether it truly escapes the male gaze or simply shifts its focus. *Rekha* offers a darker take on female vigilantism, aligning with what Tasker and Gopalan identify as mobile and vengeful women. However, it's crucial to analyse how the film frames these confrontations and whether it inadvertently glamorises or fetishises female violence. Both films present alternatives to the overtly sexualised portrayal of fighting women often seen in mainstream cinema, yet they prompt us to consider whether any depiction of a fighting female body can entirely

escape objectification in a patriarchal society. In this context, the subversive politics of female resistance through self-defence and vigilantism directly challenges the oppressive sexual and physical domination inherent in patriarchal society. To fully grasp the significance of these cinematic portrayals of female vigilantism through self-defence, it is crucial to examine them through a more comprehensive theoretical lens.

3. Theoretical framework: Gender representation and vigilante feminism in contemporary Malayalam cinema

The evolving representations of female vigilantes and self-defence practitioners in Malayalam cinema present a complex landscape that both challenges and inadvertently reinforces patriarchal norms. These portrayals ostensibly subvert traditional gender roles by showcasing women taking charge of their own safety and retribution. However, they also reveal the persistent tensions between progressive representation and deeply ingrained societal expectations. The depiction of women engaging in self-defence and vigilante actions, while empowering, often grapples with the fine line between portraying strength and inadvertently sexualising or fetishising female bodies in action. They also, nevertheless, transcend mere entertainment, transforming into what Shohat and Stam describe as "a nurturing space where the secret hopes of social life are played out, a laboratory for the safe articulation of identity oppressions and utopia, a space of community fantasies and imagined alliances" (1996, p. 166).

The representation of female characters in Malayalam cinema who are skilled in martial arts and capable of defending themselves against oppression is a powerful development that subverts, or at least questions, traditional notions of femininity. In this context, vigilante feminism, as conceptualised by Laura Mattoon D'Amore (2017), provides a crucial framework for understanding this trend in which women employ martial arts as a form of justice-seeking and self-empowerment. In her essay "Vigilante feminism: Revising trauma, abduction, and assault in American fairy-tale revisions" (2017), D'Amore defines vigilante feminism as "the performance of vigilantism by girls and women who have undertaken their own protection, and the protection of others, against violence—such as sexual assault, abduction, abuse, and trauma—because they have been otherwise failed in that manner" (2017, p. 386). This framework is particularly relevant in analysing films like *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *The Teacher*, where female characters actively resist oppression through physical means. The representation of vigilante feminism in cinema can be seen as a

response to pervasive rape culture and systemic failures to protect women. While vigilante methods of feminism may not be a perfect solution, the presence of the methods in cinematic representations reflect real-world frustrations with systemic inequalities. These films therefore attempt to offer a powerful, if not controversial, vision of female agency. They offer a fantasy of empowerment where women can level the playing field and bring justice. As Kristin de Welde argues, when a victim of violence defends herself, "she regains some of the control that is being threatened" (2012, p. 22).

The integration of women into the action genre, traditionally dominated by male heroes, represents a significant challenge to established gender norms in cinema. The action genre has historically relied on "the idea of the hero as a powerful and charismatic protagonist, in accord with traditional formulations of masculinity" (Gallagher, 1997, p. 27). The emergence of female characters skilled in martial arts not only disrupts this male-centric narrative but also provides a powerful visual metaphor for women's capacity to defend themselves. As stated by Shoma A. Chatterji, "There are many ways of practicing feminism in films. It is a flexible set of possible strategies, adaptable, creative and occasionally at odds" (1998, p. 2). By structuring the analysis of the two films of *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *The Teacher* through the lens of vigilante feminism, the paper attempts to examine how Malayalam cinema is not only reflecting societal changes but also actively shaping new understandings of gender, violence, and resistance. This shift from portraying women as passive victims to active agents of justice represents a significant evolution in the larger corpus of Indian cinema's approach to gender representation as well. However, it is important to note that, while these films present violence as a means of seeking justice, they do not propagate violence for the sake of dominance. Instead, they depict it as a response to a system that denies women equal protection and justice (D'Amore, 2017, p. 386).

The importance of analysing vigilantism through martial arts in these films lies in several key factors. Firstly, it represents a significant shift in portraying women in Malayalam cinema. The emergence of female characters who actively defend themselves through martial arts challenges these stereotypes and offers a new narrative of female empowerment. Secondly, the use of martial arts as a form of vigilantism provides a physical manifestation of women's resistance against patriarchal violence. In a society where women's physical strength has often been undervalued, these representations offer a powerful visual metaphor for women's capacity to defend themselves. This representation is particularly significant in the Indian context, where discussions about women's physical autonomy and safety continue to be pressing social issues. As D'Amore claims, "These are not choices made in vacuum; vigilante feminists' responses to patriarchal violence are directly

related to the violent world in which they exist" (2017, p. 391). Rather than succumb to the feeling of powerlessness, these women "seek paths of justice that deeply unsettle the structures of power implicit in patriarchy" (D'Amore, 2017, p. 390). As mentioned in the introductory section, the two films considered for analysis here focus on female vigilantes who defend themselves against the victimisation of women through violence. These films particularly explore how the protagonists "wield the forces of power and violence that have always been accessible to men" (D'Amore, 2017, p. 398) against physical violence inflicted upon their bodies in both private (domestic) and public spaces.

4. Violence in the domestic space: A reading of *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022)

Vipin Das' *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* explores the agentic transformation of the titular character Jaya (played by Darshana Rajendran). Born into a highly patriarchal family, Jaya faces constant gender-based discrimination, exemplified by her family's refusal to support her college education while funding her brother's more expensive engineering degree. This narrative examines the pervasiveness of systemic constraints imposed on women, such as restricted mobility and the denial of personal agency, which are further reinforced through acts of physical violence (Levy, 2008, p. iv). The deliberate absence of point-of-view shots in the film's first half astutely represents Jaya's lack of agency. She is repeatedly framed in long or mid-range shots, which not only visually distance her from the audience but also reflect her peripheral role in her own life. Her initial attraction to a male character is not based on his physical appearance but rather on his ostensible support for women's rights, specifically their need for agency, and respect—aspects she has been denied throughout her life. However, this appearance of support is shattered when he eventually resorts to violence, slapping her for defying his wishes. The conscious use of shot- reverse-shot in the scene where Jaya is slapped reflects the pervasive nature of domestic violence, as the camera's movement between the aggressor and the victim visually reinforces the imbalance of power.

Instead of supporting an emotionally vulnerable Jaya, her family decides to marry her off to a poultry farmer, Rajesh, a stranger to her. Jaya's life becomes even more harrowing when the hot-headed Rajesh begins to take out his frustrations on her by slapping her. When Rajesh first slaps Jaya for questioning his wastefulness, he perceives her inquiry as transgressive and demands respectful acknowledgment of their hierarchy. In these scenes, the perpetrator's face is clearly visible while Jaya's is often obscured. The film employs cyclical shots of slapping, apology, and repeated

violence, with the mother-in-law's decreasing shock at each incident illustrating the normalisation of abuse. From a sociological perspective, according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) conducted in 2014-2015, it was found that 27% of married women in India reported experiencing slaps from their husbands as very common (Sharma & Tripathi, 2023, pp. 127-128). This lack of attention to slapping as a significant form of abuse in marital relationships reflects a societal norm where such behaviour is sometimes seen as a "husband's entitlement over his wife" rather than as a form of abuse (Sharma & Tripathi, 2023, p. 128). The film effectively examines how this narrow understanding of abuse overlooks the emotional and psychological impact of "gender microaggressions" like slapping (Joshi, 2020, p. 9). The narrative takes a decisive turn when Jaya, who secretly begins learning and practicing martial arts, responds one day by beating him black and blue. Besides the feeling of shame at being beaten at the hands of his wife, Rajesh, for the first time, experiences a sense of fear. This fear is vividly illustrated in a contrasting scene: after enduring a series of beatings, Jaya used to flinch every time Rajesh came near her. But after the incident, Rajesh is shown flinching every time she is in proximity. This scene is also the first instance of a point-of-view shot from Jaya's perspective, marking a significant shift in the narrative.

Jaya's violent response offers a feminist fantasy (D'Amore, 2017, p. 390) of women being able to defend themselves when societal structures fail to support them. Initially, she is shown to be pleading with her family members to help her escape Rajesh's torture. Not surprisingly, her actions unsettle everyone, including her in-laws and her parents, who berate her for physically torturing her supposed protector. Jaya's messages to her brother asking for help allude to the 2021 case in Kerala where 21-year-old Vismaya committed suicide due to "severe sorts of verbal and emotional cruelties that subsume insult, ridicule, and humiliation" (Fathima & Dharmadhikari, 2022). Jaya recounts that in the six months of their marriage, Rajesh beat her twenty-one times, which might add up to 1,680 slaps if she continues to adjust for the next forty years. The statistics that she recounts reflect the horrifying actuality of all the victims of domestic violence who are coerced by their families and society to adjust to their circumstances. However, it should be noted that Jaya's transformation into an agent of violence is shown as a "corrective to the feeling of powerlessness" (D'Amore, 2017, p. 390) that she has been forced to endure throughout her life. Following his brother's advice, Rajesh plans to capture a video of himself heroically exacting revenge against his wife by defeating her in a violent confrontation, intending to sustain the patriarchal power dynamics. Even at this moment, Jaya does not initiate the violence; she says, "You hit first; only then will I hit" (Das, 2022, 1:11:12-1:11:14). The director's decision to distinguish between Jaya's defensive violence and Rajesh's

aggressive behaviour adds another layer of complexity to the narrative. By emphasising that Jaya's actions stem from self-preservation rather than a desire for power, the film navigates the fine line between justified resistance and perpetuating cycles of violence.

5. From victim to vigilante: Resisting the victim position in *The Teacher* (2022)

Whereas the first film considered for analysis examines the systemic inequalities women face in the domestic space of "home", Vivek's latest directorial venture, *The Teacher*, offers a harsh critique of the "pervasive rape culture" (D'Amore, 2017, p. 402) that threatens women in the public space. The narrative begins *in media res*, when the protagonist Devika (played by Amala Paul), a sports instructor, wakes up with a confused yet gnawing feeling that she has been physically violated. The narrative alternates between past and present to set a tone of her life with her husband, Sujith (played by Hakkim Shah), and her revolutionary mother-in-law (played by Manju Pillai). At the beginning, her last coherent memory of the incident was a conversation with four boys who visited her school for an inter-school sports meet. After a quick sweep through the school, CCTV footage and porn sites reveal nothing of consequence, she regains a sense of normalcy in her life. Unfortunately, Devika's suspicions of being sexually violated are confirmed when she tests positive for pregnancy.

The film reworks the popular myth that developed after the infamous Delhi Rape case of 2012: "The greatest danger to women lay in the stranger lurking in the streets after nightfall" (John, 2020, p. 140). However, she systematically gathers evidence against her four attackers who used Rohypnol to incapacitate her. Throughout the film, the camera follows Devika in public spaces, unsettlingly reflecting how women often feel in such environments—a sense of powerlessness. The camera often zooms in as if from the perspective of a leering man, further emphasizing this discomfort. Similar to the previous film, there is a curious lack of point-of-view shots until the very climactic fight scene, which again serves to reinforce Devika's initial sense of powerlessness.

When she confides in her husband, Sujith, he and his friend claim that "girls should know better. If they knew better, they would change their behaviour and would not be attacked" (Grilo & James, 2010). By involving his friend, Sujith violates Devika's privacy, bringing in a third person without her consent. This breach of trust is particularly egregious in cases of sensitive issues like rape, where maintaining the survivor's confidentiality and respecting their

autonomy in deciding who to confide in is crucial for their emotional well-being. Furthermore, his questioning of Sujith's masculinity and inability to "control" his wife's mobility and, therefore, defend her honour "identifies an emerging cultural imaginary where women's bodies become sites of affliction, aspiration, or downfall, and women's freedom is cast as the primary source of twisted desire-related problems in the Indian city" (Pinto qtd. in Sen, Kaur & Zabiliūtė, 2019, p. 2). Sujith's dissuasion of Devika's decision to file a police complaint against her perpetrators reinforces the patriarchal notion of conserving the family honour at the expense of the victim's "fragmented sense of self" (Mukherjee, 2005, p. 206). The film, from this point on, deviates from the normative account of the masculine quest for vengeance to defend the patriarchal honour by "focusing on the victim's sense of self, denied to her by both the rapist and the enforcement agencies" (Menon, 2006, p. 95).

Devika systematically tracks down Naveen (played by Shajeer P. Basheer), the leader of the group, and befriends him. She pretends to be interested in re-engaging in sexual intercourse with him and invites him alone to meet. To her surprise, Devika is confronted by all four of her violators, who continue to berate her for her failed attempt to replicate a *22 Female Kottayam* mode of vengeance (by castration). They agree to destroy the videos of the act if she agrees not to pursue the issue any further; if not, they will leak the same on porn sites, and therefore tarnish her reputation. At this exact point, with just 12 minutes remaining, the film shifts its narrative to a surprising turn. In a subverted replication of normative heroism, Devika locks the door behind her rather than walk out. She overturns the dynamics where the perpetrators are trapped with the vigilante survivor. A series of flashbacks reveal that she is trained in martial arts and adept at the usage of nun-chucks. The ensuing fight between her and her four perpetrators satisfies the feminist fantasy of fighting back against her perpetrators. As Walker notes, men are typically not expected to surrender to their assailants without putting up a fight; women are often advised not to resist for fear of enraging their attacker (2001, p. 131). In a society that fails to protect or bring them justice, Devika uses the tools of "male violence" (D'Amore, 2017, p. 402), here symbolised by her usage of nun-chucks, which she re-appropriates to enact this revenge. As the scene progresses, this act of "physical vigilante feminism" (D'Amore, 2017, p. 398) slowly transforms her from being powerless to becoming agentic. Along with her confidence, the physical domination over her perpetrators enables her to re-take her lost bodily autonomy. As Nira Gupta-Cassale opines, "the confrontational and assertive nature of this resistance" (2000, p. 232) of the vigilante survivor creates an unnerving

unease for the hetero-patriarchal society that demands silence from these women.

6. Redefining vigilante feminism: Narrative subversion of retaliation and resolution in selected texts

While the two films centred around the new vigilante female are structured around the narrative of feminist resistance to institutionalised violence against women, they are far from being "formulaic" (Gupta-Cassale, 2000, p. 231). All of the female protagonists are subjected to violence of different forms and in different spaces, throwing light on what Jessica Valenti describes as a "rape schedule" (2007, p. 63). These vigilantes, be it Jaya from *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* or Devika from *The Teacher*, stand apart in their decision to challenge systemic sexism rather than merely critiquing them from the sidelines. These films present the novel approach to representation of vigilante justice and the portrayal of gender-based violence. Specifically, there are four key ways in which the select texts deviate from the corpora of Malayalam films that feature a female vigilante.

Firstly, there is a deliberate departure from treating the fighting female bodies as embodiments of sexualised spectacles. This visual strategy effectively shatters the male gaze, redirecting focus from the characters' physical appearance to their transformation from victimhood to a position of agency. By presenting strong, assertive women without resorting to fetishisation or sado-voyeurism, these films challenge the conventional portrayal of women in action roles. This visual strategy embodies the vigilante feminist ideal of reclaiming traditionally masculine domains of violence and power for feminist purposes (D'Amore, 2017). However, it should also be noted that the representation is not merely an "implicit reworking" and/or mimicry of normative template of the masculine hero archetype. This distinction is particularly evident in the films' (non) usage of background score during action sequences. In mainstream Malayalam cinema, as in many film industries, there's a practice of employing mass background music during heroes' action sequences. This music often serves to amplify the hero's dominance and masculinity, becoming as integral to the portrayal of heroism as the action itself. As Ann-Kristin Herget (2021, p. 24) states, "the existence of a well-established stock of musical stereotypes and instrumental clichés that evoke more or less distinct supra-individual associations that can shape the interpretation of the visual content of a motion picture". The films present a significant departure from this convention. During Jaya's and Devika's action

sequences, the films notably abstain from interspersing their fights with typical mass background music. This deliberate choice in sound design underscores that the focus is not on the masala aspect of heroism or on creating a spectacle of macho dominance. Instead, the absence of such musical cues during these sequences emphasises that the violence depicted is not meant for entertainment or to showcase physical prowess. Rather, it's a fight for dignity and it effectively reinforces the films' broader themes of empowerment and resistance against systemic oppression.

Secondly, there is also a noticeable departure from traditional representations of reconciliation or violent resolution. From the 1956 classic *Chemmeen* (*Prawns*) to *Kettyolanente Malakha* (*My Wife Is My Angel*, 2019), such scenarios of domestic violence or violation of dignity in familial or marital spaces resulted in the heroine being forced to either confront the violent repercussions of defying "essentialised constructions of womanhood" (Menon, 2009, p. 288), or forgive and return to the husband to celebrate the glorified notions of family. Here, Jaya chooses to move out and support herself by taking up a business. Despite harsh criticism from her family, Jaya finally stands by her decision to defy "traditional norms that eschewed the use of physical force" (Kim, 2019, p. 155) to protect herself from battery. *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* breaks these conventional dictums when the protagonist chooses her dignity rather than submitting herself to the "rules of behaviour" and "role allocations within the structures of the family" (Menon, 2009, p. 290). Similarly, in contrast to other rape-revenge dramas in Malayalam, *The Teacher* does not culminate in the death or violent castration of the perpetrators. This is where the narrative deviates from previous representations of physical vigilante feminism. While theorists like Audré Lorde critique the temporary resolution gained from appropriating (violent) patriarchal tools to dismantle the oppressive structures, Devika's decision to instil fear in the violators effectively addresses this concern. It is this conscious and retaliatory disobedience to the rape culture, by moving into a novel reconceptualisation of vigilante justice, that transforms the film into a feminist revision.

Thirdly, these films go beyond mere physical retaliation, incorporating broader societal critiques and diverse supporting characters. While forsaken by her husband and ridiculed by society, Devika's "sustained counteracting of abuse and manipulation" (Mukherjee, 2005, p. 208) is supported by an array of characters, including her mother-in-law, who enlists Mani, a gay ex-convict (played by Chemban Vinod Jose) to help Devika with her mission. Mani, along with a gay police officer, helps Devika to subdue the perpetrators and exact her form of justice.

As transgressors of the accepted "brand of masculinity" (Cockburn & Enloe, 2012, p. 553), the involvement of the gay men in this act of vigilantism augments the resistance against oppressive patriarchal forces. These "sympathetic men" (Gupta-Cassale, 2000, p. 232) offer support without enforcing passivity to the protagonist's vigilante narrative. Their subversive status enables them to comprehend Devika's resolute resistance against the agents of patriarchy. Interestingly, director Das uses social media as an important ancillary tool to examine and question societal response to issues of violence against women. The development and popularity of social media have had a significant impact on public perception of challenges confronting women and crimes against women in India. On the one hand, the popularity of social media has sensitised the public to several critical issues, including women's safety and gender equality.

However, on the other hand, there has been a phenomenal rise in desensitisation to the same issues, as well as the normalisation of toxic patriarchal values and misogyny. The video of Rajesh being beaten up by Jaya is accidentally uploaded to the internet, causing a huge furore. The director brilliantly shows how the public moves from supporting the heroism of the female vigilante in the first week to branding her a blight to the ideals of femininity by the fourth week. This transformation of (online) public perceptions shows how society eventually attempts to coerce women to cede "control of (their) bodies…and passively enables violence against women" (Walker, 2001, p. 131). Jaya's determination to "empower herself through violence, channelling vigilante feminism" (D'Amore, 2017, p. 398) creates a counter narrative to society that almost always tries to deflect blame from the perpetrators of violence. As with *22 Female Kottayam*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* succeeds in modifying the popular narrative that usually characterises the victim's vigilante response as irrational. Instead, the narrative identification of Jaya as the hero of the film "validates women's refusal of the hegemonic control men have had over violence" (Rajendran, 2014, p. 67). These intersectional approaches align with vigilante feminism's goal of unsettling power structures on multiple fronts, offering a more comprehensive vision of social change.

Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, the reclamation of oppressive spaces as sites of retaliation presents a powerful visual metaphor. Both films cleverly transform spaces traditionally associated with female vulnerability into sites of empowerment and retaliation. When Devika decides to meet Naveen, the choice of meeting space decided by him, a secluded lodge, gives a possible forewarning for the female to be subjected to further violence. As Aneeta

Rajendran observes, the lodge is "a conclave of possibly unsafe masculinities; it has always been stigmatised as unsafe for the respectable (young) woman" (2014, p. 63). By confronting her attackers in locations traditionally associated with female vulnerability, Devika succeeds in symbolically and literally reclaiming her agency. This spatial reconfiguration is mirrored in *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* as well. Here, the domestic sphere—often romanticised as a sanctuary became a site of oppression and violence for Jaya. Her act of retaliation within this very space, culminating in her departure, represents a profound reclamation of dignity. This transformation is reinforced through visual cues as well. For instance, when Devika initially walks into the lodge, the camera follows her with her head held low, her stance scared and cautious. However, after defeating her perpetrators, she walks with her head held high. The same visual progression is seen with Jaya. Her movements significantly change after she retaliates and defends herself from Rajesh's violence. Crucially, both narratives eschew simplistic portrayals of empowerment. Martial arts skills function as an important tool in these spatial and bodily reconfigurations. By integrating martial arts as a form of vigilantism, these films create a powerful alternative to traditional victimhood narratives. They effectively critique patriarchal structures while simultaneously presenting a vision of female agency that is neither reductive nor reactionary.

7. Conclusion

Over the last few years, violence on the female body has been the locus of countless discourses in Kerala. The insidious hegemonic masculinity ingrained in the cultural milieu of Kerala has monopolised the narratives of the female body, injecting a biased meta-narrative into the collective memory through commercial media discourses. The hyper-glorification of roles assumed by women (mother, wife, sister) and the ensuing myths promulgated through the very commercial discourses have debased the autonomy they have over their bodies. An interesting example is the much-celebrated song from the 1986 Malayalam film *Rakkuyilin Ragasadassil*. At the outset, the song praises the qualities of a wife (patient, capable, harbinger of prosperity) who sustains the family unit. However, a close reading of the song reveals that the song is merely a mediated propaganda to force women into submitting to the constrictive notions of patriarchy. The song glorifies wives as domesticated slaves, a "quality" that has been regarded as the yardstick for ideal wives in Kerala. As J. Devika opines, "The ideal woman was thus

imagined to possess both the 'natural' disposition as well as the practical, socially acquired ability to care for her family members" (2019, p. 81) physically. The cinematic representations ensured the reconditioning of any transgressive female to yield to the notion of a "labouring rational housewife" (Devika, 2019, p. 81). The recurrent projection of female characters as a "semiotic unit" (Krishnan, 2010, p. 110) reinforces the "structured subordination" (Woollacott, 2005, p. 116) and gender inequality, thereby calling for a constant re-formation of spaces for women to experience an integral sense of self (Mathur, 2008, p. 63). The New Generation films attempted to offer these spaces of re-formation by reconceptualising the treatment of gender-based violence.

The recent trend of female characters using martial arts as a means of vigilantism to combat gender-based violence is a welcome change from the earlier portrayals of (feminist) responses to gender-based violence. The films *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *The Teacher* highlight the use of vigilantism through martial arts as a means to seek justice against a system that has failed them over the years. These films mark a significant departure from previous narratives, as they refrain from glorifying violence or promoting toxic masculinity. They emphasise women's empowerment within and beyond physicality, marking a significant shift from the conventional ideological constructs. They challenge traditional narratives by exploring how women perceive violence done to them and the subsequent transformation and empowerment that can arise from such experiences. The use of martial arts in these films is particularly significant as it challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, portraying women as capable of defending themselves and seeking justice on their own terms. This paper aspires to contribute to the ongoing conversation and provide a valuable framework for analysing and understanding the representation of gender-based violence in cinema. However, as D'Amore states, while such narratives foreground "popular cultural fantasies of (feminist) strength like these, we must find real social change that lessens the real pain of the real effects of these traumas" (2017, p. 402). While diegetic representations like these can incite social awareness, they also risk becoming mere "symbolic activism" (Thomson, 2014, p. 274); they may be powerful but ultimately remain performative.

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