

Dialectics of Gender Issues in the Select Episodes of M. T. Vasudevan Nair's Manorathangal

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Abstract

M. T. Vasudevan Nair is a prolific contemporary writer and journalist from Kerala who has authored numerous short stories, novels, screenplays, and articles for journals and newspapers. His fiction frequently delves into the lives of women and exposes the mechanisms of patriarchal subjugation in society. The present paper examines the socio-psychological dynamics of gender in the selected episodes "Olavum Theeravum: Ripples and the River Bank" and "Kazhcha: Vision" from the anthology Manorathangal. "Olavum Theeravum" portrays the lives of an uneducated mother and daughter living in poverty and foregrounds the patriarchal pressures imposed upon economically vulnerable women. "Kazhcha" delineates the experiences of an educated woman who struggles to attain personal freedom and equality while confronting patriarchal restrictions on her creativity and self-expression. The episodes also draw attention to the importance of quality education, gender equality, and decent work and economic growth. Through the female characters Beevathu, Nabeesa, and Sudha, Manorathangal reveals the ways in which social norms, economic deprivation, patriarchal authority, and psychological pressures shape women's lives. The paper argues that the selected episodes provide a critical representation of women's struggles for dignity, identity, creativity, and autonomy in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gender, women, identity, creativity, society, autonomy.

Gender Dynamics and Patriarchal Power

Gender dynamics concern the ways in which social norms, roles, expectations, and power relations shape the interactions between men and women in families and society. The study of gender is necessarily informed by cultural, historical, and economic factors, which vary across societies. Gender relations therefore involve continuing negotiations and conflicts between structures of patriarchal authority and women's attempts to establish equality and autonomy. Sylvia Walby, citing Max Weber, describes patriarchy as a system in which men exercise authority through their position as heads of households (19). The history of patriarchy demonstrates how women have been subordinated through structures of masculine authority and economic power. Traditionally, patriarchal societies have positioned men as providers and women as caregivers. Such arrangements have also enabled the regulation of women's sexuality and reproductive lives through relations of dependency and servitude. The continuing tension between inherited patriarchal structures and contemporary claims for gender equality makes the study of gender dynamics significant to literary and cultural criticism. M. T. Vasudevan Nair is one of the most respected writers in India, known for his finely crafted novels and short stories and for his nuanced portrayal of human relationships.

His works frequently capture, with subtlety, the pain, anguish, desires, and contradictions that shape human existence.

Changing Representations of Women in Indian Cinema

Contemporary Indian cinema has witnessed a significant transformation in its representation of women. Earlier films were predominantly male-centred, while female characters were often constructed around ideals of beauty, chastity, self-sacrifice, and domesticity. In recent decades, filmmakers have increasingly explored more complex narratives of women's lives, representing them as assertive, practical, career-oriented, and capable of making independent choices. Actresses such as Kangana Ranaut, Priyanka Chopra, Vidya Balan, Rituparna Sengupta, Anushka Shetty, Sheela, Revathy, Manju Warrier, Urvashi, Parvathy Thiruvothu, and Nayanthara have undertaken challenging roles that contribute to changing representations of women in Indian cinema. Cinema plays an important role in shaping cultural perceptions of personality, identity, and gender. Streaming platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime have further expanded opportunities for narratives that challenge conventional representations of women. Within this changing cinematic landscape, *Manorathangal*, based on the works of M. T. Vasudevan Nair, offers nuanced representations of human nature and gender relations.

The present paper examines the episodes “*Olavum Theeravum: Ripples and the River Bank*” and “*Kazhcha: Vision*.” In “*Olavum Theeravum*,” M. T. Vasudevan Nair portrays women's lives against a backdrop of poverty and patriarchal domination. The episode explores human loss, longing, betrayal, and the complexities of relationships in rural Kerala. It foregrounds Baputty's selfless love and sacrifice and his deep attachment to Nabeesa, while also contrasting traditional values and beliefs with the changing circumstances of Nabeesa's life. The natural setting functions symbolically, reflecting both the beauty and harshness of life and mirroring the emotional journeys of the principal characters.

Gender, Poverty and Patriarchy in “Olavum Theeravum”

Priyadarshan translates Nair's narrative into a visual medium through the performances of Mohanlal as Baputty and Durga Krishna as Nabeesa, supported by Surabhi Lakshmi as Beevathu, Hareesh Peradi as Kunjali, Babu Annur as Abdu, and Mamukkoya as Mammadikka. The episode uses character interaction and dialogue to reveal the social and psychological pressures affecting women. The opening conversation between Abdu and Baputty provides an account of Abdu's past. After his father's death, men begin visiting his home and offering food and expensive clothes. Abdu eventually realizes that his mother, Beevathu, has been forced into prostitution. Ashamed and unable to understand the economic circumstances that have shaped his mother's life, he leaves home, thereby abandoning both his mother and his young sister, Nabeesa. His later death while narrating his past to Baputty intensifies the episode's representation of poverty, social stigma, and psychological suffering.

Beevathu's circumstances demonstrate how economic deprivation can expose women to exploitation. The absence of adequate financial and social support places her and her children in a vulnerable position. Abdu, unable to perceive the structural conditions behind his

mother's situation, interprets her life through the moral codes of a patriarchal society. The resulting shame leaves a psychological scar on him and affects the entire family. The episode consequently suggests that women's marginalization cannot be understood solely through individual morality; it must also be examined in relation to poverty, social expectations, and unequal power structures.

Visual Adaptation and Characterisation in “Olavum Theeravum”

The episode further exposes the sexual exploitation of economically vulnerable women. A middle-aged man approaches Beevathu's house under the pretext of asking for fire, but his intention is to establish an intimate relationship with Beevathu and Nabeesa. The metaphor of fire acquires a sexual implication in the dialogue. His behaviour demonstrates how patriarchal power can turn economic vulnerability into an opportunity for exploitation. Kunjali similarly attempts to gain control over Beevathu and Nabeesa by exploiting their financial difficulties. When Beevathu is unable to repay a small loan, Kunjali intervenes and subsequently attempts to use his economic power to secure access to Nabeesa. Nabeesa resists his advances. When he learns about her relationship with Baputty and Baputty's intention to leave Valakkadavu with her, Kunjali sexually violates Nabeesa. The episode thus presents patriarchal masculinity, economic power, and sexual violence as interconnected forms of domination.

Priyadarshan's casting and visual treatment reinforce the social realism of the episode. Mohanlal's appearance and mannerisms suit Baputty's occupation as a timber trader, while Durga Krishna portrays Nabeesa through restrained speech and intense emotional expression. Surabhi Lakshmi presents Beevathu as both authoritative and caring, and Hareesh Peradi portrays Kunjali as an affluent trader whose dress, mannerisms, and interactions reveal his domineering personality. The actors collectively evoke the social milieu of 1960s Kerala. The Malabar setting, with its distinctive cultural practices and traditional customs, becomes an important context for understanding gender relations. Priyadarshan's visual style, the use of local idiomatic expressions, and the work of producer Aswathy Nair and music director Bijibal Maniyil contribute to the adaptation of Nair's original story.

Matriliny, Female Agency and “Kazhcha”

According to Kamal Haasan's prologue, Nair's representation of powerful women was influenced by his mother, Ammalu Amma. The episode “Kazhcha: Vision” extends this interest in women's identity and agency. The discussion of Kerala's former matrilineal social structure in the prologue also provides a context for considering women's historical position and the changes that followed the decline of matriliney. “Kazhcha” critically questions patriarchal structures that place women in secondary positions and restrict their participation in social and creative activities. The relationship between Sudha and Prabhakar becomes the central site through which the episode explores marital tension, female identity, and self-assertion. Parvathy Thiruvothu plays Sudha, Narain plays Prabhakar, and Harish Uthaman plays Viswanathan. The episode was directed by Shyamaprasad and is presented as part of the Manorathangal anthology.

Sudha's Marital Conflict and Patriarchal Control

Shyamaprasad foregrounds Nair's concern with female subjugation, identity, and self assertion. The narrative centres on Sudha's relationship with her husband, Prabhakar, and on her gradual rediscovery of her interest in music. The episode begins with Sudha's journey from Madras to her native village in Kerala. She informs Prabhakar of her decision to travel, but his sarcastic response immediately reveals the strained nature of their relationship. Through flashbacks, the audience witnesses Prabhakar's drinking, his indifference towards Sudha's musical interests, and his attempts to control her financial decisions. When Sudha sends money to her mother, Prabhakar questions why her mother needs financial assistance and orders Sudha not to send money. His dismissive attitude towards her singing and his insinuations about her association with other people expose the patriarchal assumptions underlying their marriage.

Patriarchal Expectations and Sudha's Resistance

Sudha's return to her mother's house provides a temporary space for introspection. Her mother and acquaintances, however, continue to interpret marital stability according to conventional patriarchal expectations. They advise Sudha to preserve her marriage and suggest that children might resolve marital difficulties. Sumathy, who is aware of Sudha's troubled marriage, similarly advises her to compromise for the sake of family honour. Such responses demonstrate how patriarchal values can be reproduced not only by men but also by women who have internalized conventional gender expectations. Sridevi and Sumathy have adjusted their lives to established social codes and therefore find it difficult to imagine alternatives to those codes. Sudha's silence, however, gradually becomes a form of resistance: rather than accepting the judgments imposed upon her, she turns inward and begins to reconstruct her sense of self.

A Room of One's Own: Creativity and Autonomy

The episode gives particular importance to Sudha's creativity. Shyamaprasad presents her as an innovative and creative woman whose musical talent has been constrained by her marital circumstances. She finds solace in singing and eventually receives an opportunity to perform on Doordarshan Television. Her public performance brings recognition from neighbours and colleagues and encourages her to continue developing her talent. She seeks a place in which she can rehearse and meets Viswanathan, an engineering graduate who is dissatisfied with his professional life and has developed an interest in music. He provides a space for musical rehearsals. Their shared appreciation of music allows Sudha to reconnect with an aspect of herself that has been suppressed within her marriage.

Sudha's reference to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* is especially significant. The idea of a room becomes a metaphor for intellectual and creative autonomy. For Sudha, the need for private space is not merely physical; it represents the right to cultivate an identity independent of patriarchal expectations. Her renewed engagement with music enables her to recover a sense of selfhood. In this respect, the episode presents creativity as an important means of self-assertion and psychological emancipation.

Marriage, Sexual Autonomy and Female Agency

The episode also introduces the question of women's sexual and marital autonomy through the character of the Big Mother. Unlike Sridevi and Sumathy, she speaks openly about her past marital experience and refuses to treat marriage as an unquestionable institution. She recalls her first husband's personal qualities but also acknowledges the incompatibility between them and describes her decision to end the relationship. She subsequently marries another man and argues that the continuation of marriage depends upon the choices of the individuals involved. Her conversation with Sudha challenges the assumption that a woman must remain in an unhappy marriage for the sake of social respectability. The Big Mother's perspective therefore provides an alternative discourse on female agency, intimate relationships, and the right to make personal decisions.

Contrasting Forms of Patriarchal Oppression and Resistance

The selected episodes of *Manorathangal* reveal different dimensions of patriarchal power. "Olavum Theeravum" represents the intersection of poverty, gender inequality, social stigma, and sexual exploitation through Beevathu and Nabeesa. Their vulnerability demonstrates how economic deprivation can intensify women's exposure to patriarchal domination. "Kazhcha," in contrast, focuses on an educated and economically active woman whose struggle is primarily psychological and relational. Sudha's journey towards self-recognition is articulated through music, creative expression, and her refusal to allow conventional expectations to determine her identity. The two episodes therefore present distinct but interconnected forms of gender oppression and resistance.

Conclusion: Gender Equality, Autonomy and Creative Freedom

The present study has examined the socio-psychological dynamics of gender in "Olavum Theeravum: Ripples and the River Bank" and "Kazhcha: Vision," with particular attention to Beevathu, Nabeesa, and Sudha. "Olavum Theeravum" demonstrates how a family living in poverty can become vulnerable to patriarchal exploitation and social stigma. It also illustrates the difficulty women face in challenging deeply embedded traditional beliefs. "Kazhcha" explores the impact of patriarchy on an educated woman and emphasizes the importance of personal autonomy, creative freedom, and the capacity to make decisions concerning one's own life. Taken together, the episodes suggest that meaningful gender equality requires not only social sensitization but also access to education, economic agency, creative self-expression, and freedom from restrictive patriarchal norms.

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