

## UNDERSTANDING THE POST SECULAR TURN IN MALAYALAM CINEMA: AN INTROSPECTION OF DIVERSE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY FEMALE CHARACTERS OF MOLLYWOOD

## Asiya Ali Akbar Hussain

EFL Teacher, New College Group, Liverpool, UK

## **Abstract**

Can a woman remain to be a feminist and religious at the same time? This has been a question of recent debates. The liberal feminists have labelled religious women as either fundamentalist or conservative. They think of religion as detrimental to the rights of women. The paper is an attempt to manifest that women can exercise their free will even under religious premises. It also promotes alternate thought approaches that go beyond the binaries of resistance and subordination and questions the conventional understanding of self-realisation with autonomous will. The analysis is carried out by studying the female lead characters in Malayalam movies like Neru (2023) Aami (2018), and Thattathin Marayathu (2012), in the backdrop of Post Secular Feminist theories proposed by Afia Zia, Saba Mahmood and like-minded theorists. The study further expands to define 'agency' as proposed by the feminist anthropologist Saba Mahmood under the semantic framework and an individual's potential to realise the self under religious constructs.

Keywords: Agency, Cinema, Faith, Feminism, freedom, Post-secular, Religion.

In the realm of Malayalam cinema a shift has occurred that reflects the changing values and beliefs of society. This change is evident, in the emergence of narratives delving into women empowerment within the context of religion and cultural norms. The intersection of feminism and religion in art has provided a platform, particularly in the Malayalam film industry. The emergence of secular ideologies challenging traditional norms has amplified the portrayal of feminist perspectives. Notably, films like *Thattathin Marayathu* (2012) *Aami* (2018) and *Neru* (2023) challenge views that often portray religion as a barrier to womens autonomy. These films showcase a form of feminism intertwined with identity, where female leads assert their independence while staying true to their faith.

The discourse surrounding feminism has evolved significantly in exploring the dynamic, between secularism and religion. The idea of the secular shift involves a significant shift, in perspective that acknowledges the continued presence of religious elements within a society typically seen as secular. The works of thinkers like Saba Mahmood, whose "Politics of Piety" challenges established ideas about agency in discussions play a role in understanding the emergence of post secular feminism in the Malayalam films mentioned earlier.

Mahmood suggests that conventional feminist frameworks sometimes overlook the diverse realities at play. She stresses the importance of research on womens agency particularly given how Western mainstream media often depicts Muslim women as heavily constrained by religious and patriarchal control. She explores how women navigate within contexts, an experience that can both restrict and empower them. This examination focuses on the interactions between religion, gender and agency within traditions with an emphasis on Muslim women. "The ongoing importance of feminist scholarship on women's agency cannot be emphasised enough, especially when one remembers that Western popular media continues to portray Muslim women as incomparably bound by the unbreakable chains of religious and patriarchal oppression" (Mahmood, 2005,p.7)This challenges the view that sees piety as limiting influence.

Instead, Mahmood argues that these activities give women the opportunity to express their identities and autonomy. Viewed through the lens of freedom her artwork reveals an interplay, between empowerment and constraints prompting us to rethink how modesty serves as an expression of collective values.

This idea aligns with the perspectives of Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska who argue that secular and religious aspects are not inherently opposing forces. Their examination of secularization and spirituality highlights gaps in studies on religion. They explain how the absence of reflection distorts our understanding of womens experiences within spiritual contexts.

According to Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska (2015)

"Examples of the neglect of religion in women studies and feminist studies can be found in the indexes and contents pages of feminist readers and anthologies, revealing incidences where feminist theological reflection and women's religious or spiritual experiences are generally absent" (Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska, 2015, pp. 245-246).

Beyond diminishing the complexity of womens identities this exclusion reflects a tendency to marginalize spirituality in feminist conversations. They propose that multiple dimensions can coexist simultaneously influencing an individuals self perception and capacity, for agency (Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2015).

In her work *Faith and Feminism In Pakistan*, Afia Shehrbano Zia stresses the importance of redefining agency beyond the notions of oppression and liberation found in mainstream feminist beliefs (Zia, 2019). Her perspective encourages a look, at how women perceive their capacity to take action within contexts emphasizing the empowerment that comes from inner conviction rather than societal validation. This research underscores the necessity of examining secular narratives to understand womens roles in contemporary society, where films merely reflect the shared reality.

The intricate interplay between faith and feminism poses challenges to ideas of womens roles in religious spheres. As noted in the study many women reclaim their faith as a source of strength than subjugation (Zia, 2019). This stance showcases how religious beliefs can empower women with autonomy despite constraints. However navigating the tensions, between authority and personal autonomy remains an issue. Ultimately the literature underscores that women shape

their identities by blending their beliefs with values (Zia, 2019) showcasing their ability to carve out spaces of independence while honoring their spiritual convictions. Therefore belief can serve as both a source of strength and a test, for the religious feminist movement leading to a deeper understanding of women's roles in today's society.

When exploring secular feminism it becomes important to consider how faith and politics interact. Lair (2012) stresses that the core value of democracy lies in allowing individuals the freedom to practice their faiths. This principle extends to choices regarding religion promoting a society where diverse beliefs can coexist peacefully. Debray (2009) argues that grappling with the concept of God in a context involves acknowledging both political dimensions of faith and empowering women to shape their identities within their religious customs. Additionally, Habermas (2008) highlights the significance of fostering dialogue between religious perspectives. He suggests that a post-secular society should foster respect and understanding. By nurturing such an environment post secular feminism can thrive by ensuring that womens religious choices are respected and valued within frameworks (Lair, 2012; Debray, 2009; Habermas, 2008).

*Thattathin Marayathu*, directed by Vineeth Sreenivasan stands out as a highly acclaimed romantic comedy that embodies post secular feminist themes, in Malayalam cinema.

The movie tells the story of Vinod, a Hindu boy and Ayisha, a girl in the midst of tensions. Ayishas character provides an opportunity to explore how one's beliefs can empower them to challenge norms while staying true, to their faith. This suggests that having agency can coexist with convictions.

Throughout the film Ayishas choices mirror Mahmood's idea that women can assert their independence through their devotion. For example she asserts that her faith is her choice and that love should not be restricted by their backgrounds (Sreenivasan, 2012). This statement showcases her balancing desires with expectations demonstrating a deep connection with her faith that goes against traditional gender roles and rigid community divides. The female lead draws strength and determination from her practices like prayers as she faces the challenge of loving someone from a different faith background. This portrayal echoes Blairs discussions on understanding how personal beliefs interact with life in societies (Blair, 2012).

Furthermore, Ayisha's subtle yet impactful resistance, against systems is noteworthy.

In contrast, to the feminist narratives that often involve challenging authority directly, Ayisha takes an approach by pursuing her goals while respecting her cultural norms. This aligns with Mahmoods view that religion can also empower individuals of oppressing them (Mahmood, 2005).

At the core of Ayishas's story is her exploration of how a secular society can respect individuals' choices in expressing their beliefs. This mirrors the ideas put forth by thinkers like

Jürgen Habermas, Tony Blair and Régis Debray who delve into the relationship between secularism and personal faith.

In a vein, the 2018 Malayalam film *Aami* directed by Kamal tells the moving tale of Kamala Das also known as Madhavikutty, a writer who made a personal decision to embrace Islam. Habermas argues in his writings on discourse that secular societies should uphold not state neutrality on religious matters but also protect individuals' rights to freely practice their faith (Habermas, 2006). Kamala Das beautifully embodies this struggle through her life choices. Her journey, into a faith is intertwined with her expression of desire and individuality. Qualities spark societal debates, especially within the patriarchal backdrop of her era.

The movie effectively portrays Kamala's character development showing how her decision to wear the veil, a symbol of modesty, in culture goes beyond religious practice as Mahmood's concept of agency suggests (Mahmood, 2005). Instead, it represents the layers of her identity where freedom, desire and spirituality

A very recent Jithu Josephs crime thriller movie *Neru* (2023), the narrative underscores the resilience and agency of Sara, a young Muslim woman with a disability, who is a victim of sexual violence. Situated within a post-secular feminist framework, the film challenges pervasive assumptions about the agency of religious women, particularly in the context of their struggles for justice.

Despite disapproval concerning her self-identity Sara remains resolute in her modesty and refusal to stay quiet. She emerges as a symbol of resistance embodying notions of autonomy advocated by Afia Shia, who argues that mainstream perceptions of women often overlook their ability to navigate sociocultural contexts (Zia, 2019).

Sara's devout parents unwaveringly stand by her side demonstrating that religious convictions do not hinder one's commitment to seeking justice. Their unwavering support reinforces the notion that faith can coexist with involvement, in legal advocacy.

*Neru* challenges the belief among feminists that women who are religious cannot actively participate or oppose significant issues.

In the film Saras journey is portrayed, highlighting her engagement with the system as she and her family challenge societal norms and assert their rights. The intricate interplay of faith, identity and resistance provides a nuanced understanding of empowerment, in narratives reshaping discussions on feminism within a religious context (Zia, 2019).

Traditional feminist theories have often emphasized secularism as a framework for women's liberation viewing religion as a tool of oppression. Scholars such as Judith Butler have articulated this perspective by analyzing how cultural stories shape identities and proposing that normative structures constrain autonomy (Butler, 1990). These views advocate for separating aspirations from affiliations to achieve genuine autonomy.

However, movies like Thattathin Marayathu, Aami and Neru challenge this view by illustrating how women derive strength from their beliefs. Characters like Aysha, Kamala and Sara navigate their paths while staying true to their faiths suggesting a link, between individual freedom and spiritual commitment.

The complex connection challenges beliefs by suggesting that self determination is not solely dependent, on rejecting religious affiliations but can actually be strengthened by embracing them.

This study delves into the portrayal of characters in Malayalam cinema through the lens of scholars like Saba Mahmood and Afia Shehrbano Zia illustrating how they navigate their faith to assert power rather than succumb to oppression. This marks a departure from narratives on gender, religion and individual agency.

Through an examination of Malayalam cinema plots, we scrutinize the oversimplification of feminist ideologies. In this context, women are viewed not just as individuals seeking liberation but as agents of navigating their religious beliefs while exercising autonomy in the pursuit of justice and equality. Thus Malayalam cinema emerges as a platform for understanding the complexities of gender, religion and empowerment contributing to broader discussions, on the evolving landscape of feminist thought in today's society.

## **Bibliography**

- Blair, T. (2012). Faith and Politics. London: Demos. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/God in Government final.pdf
- Butler, J. (1990). Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge.https://www.routledge.com/Gender-Trouble-Feminism-and-the-Subversion-ofIdentity/Butler/p/book/9780415389556?gad\_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjw8rW2BhAgEiwAoRO5rGKPNUdfEtobLkkOpBDg7hlSFC7BVwmPclBZViu2yYv33t8to\_VcOBoCbY8QAvD\_BwE
- Habermas, J. (2008). *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Joseph, J. (Director). (2023). Neru [Film]. Ashirvad Cinemas.
- Kamal. (Director). (2018). Aami [Film]. Prime Creations.

- Llewellyn, D., & Trzebiatowska, M. (2015). Secular and religious disconnections: Understanding the dynamics of secularization and spirituality. Sociology of Religion, 76(4), 200-260
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton University Press.https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvct00cf
- Sreenivasan, V. (Director). (2012). Thattathin Marayathu [Film]. Lumiere Film Company.
- Zia, A. S. (2019). Faith and Feminism in Pakistan: Religious Agency or Secular Autonomy? Liverpool University Press. <a href="https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3029r6v">https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3029r6v</a>