

Female Gaze in Anjali Menon's Movies *Bangalore Days* and *Koodae*: An Analysis

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Abstract: After the term "male gaze" was coined by Laura Mulvey in 1975, the term attained critical attention as a fascinating point for film analysis. In response to Mulvey's theory, the feminist critics appropriated the alternative term "female gaze" to distinguish the female spectator, character or director of an artwork; more than an emphasis on gender, it is an issue of representing women as subjects having agency. It is significant because it introduces more diverse voices that are often overlooked in film analysis. In modern real life, one does not see a woman always seeking a man's help to keep her stand. They are far stronger than what is portrayed in the movies. Anjali Menon, the famous Malayalam film director and screenwriter, has tried to bring neutrality between the genders in her films. This paper aims to discuss the search for the female gaze in Anjali Menon's movies *Bangalore Days* (2014) and *Koodae* (2018). With a view to understanding its social and cultural implications.

Keywords: Female, Male gaze, gender, power, politics, perception, representation.

1. Introduction

Laura Mulvey, a British filmmaker and feminist coined the term "Male Gaze" in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". According to her male gaze is not about who is directing, acting, or the gender of the audience but it is a political system more particularly the dominant patriarchal order. According to her, it is constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer: "the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses."

Even the dialogues, shots, and lighting are done in favour of men who may be mimicking female characters while in the same film the ladies are shot from a different angle. Women, according to her, are placed in movies only for the sole purpose of pleasure. They are the objects of entertainment for men. The movie can continue even without the female characters. Race too plays an important role in gazes. Race is a part of the male gaze. For example, if a black man is shown admiring a white woman onscreen, then he will be lynched. Women appear to be vessels under the male gaze. This does not mean that one can blame the men because it originated from the age-old patriarchal thinking of society.

There are three ways of male gaze from a feminist perspective: how men see women, how women see themselves, and how women see other women.

Immediately after Mulvey published her essay, feminist critics wanted to know about the female gaze. Thus, originated the concept of "female gaze", implying that women too have their distinct perception and identity. Traditionally, women do not see the world differently from men rather women are supposed to internalize patriarchal order as men are. The most common explanation of the female gaze in movies is how a female sees a man on the screen. Some other examples are the camera is at eye level. Instead of the upper angle as in the male gaze movies, the

camera will be level or straight in the eye. With the female gaze, the audience understands the desires of a female. It brings awareness consciousness and balance between the male and female characters. Also, the women onscreen cannot be seen in real life; they are far stronger and so limited in number. In the new perspective, women claim an equal portrayal of both men and women in the movies. Most of the female gaze in films depends on the costume and makeup of the characters. These characters unlike the male gaze movies have minimalistic makeup and their costumes are everyday costumes that they feel comfortable with instead of over makeup and showing certain body parts.

This paper discusses the search for the female gaze in the movies *Bangalore Days* and *Koodae* by the Malayalam filmmaker and screenwriter, Anjali Menon. Unlike her contemporaries, Anjali Menon does not follow the usual artistic style or the common genre. All her films have one or more NRI, family, and also cross-cultural interactions. Her films underscore that men and women are equal in society and they mock at patriarchal thinking. She does not claim to be a director or writer of feminine gaze movies, though many elements betraying those aspects can be seen in all her movies. These represent the attitudes and ideas of the new generation girls and their perception-men respecting women and a liberal relationship with them-ultimately both women and men mutually being rescuers, women being complex and carefully etched out as men. All these follow the female gaze points: it sees people as people and rather empathizes than objectifies. *Bangalore Days* and *Koodae* illustrate such a perception.

Objective

The paper aims to highlight the female gaze vis-à-vis the male gaze in the Malayalam film industry with special reference to Anjali Menon's popular movies *Bangalore Days* and *Koodae* with a view to analyze the interplay of gender, power, politics and social perception as represented in the two films.

Hypothesis

The film industry has always been controlled by men from the start. The female gaze though started in the late 1970s made its active presence as a critical strategy only in the late 2010s. The Malayalam director, Anjali Menon's movies are the best examples of the female gaze in the contemporary situation as defined by the interplay of gender, power, politics and social perception. The paper is an attempt to understand the implications of the female gaze in two of her movies, *Bangalore Days* and *Koodae*, from the above perspective.

2. Literature Review

There have been many studies done on the 'male gaze' a term mentioned by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Strategies" but the same cannot be said of the female gaze. The "female gaze" arose from the term male gaze. It was a question brought about by many feministic critics who questioned if there can be a male gaze and why can't there be a female gaze. Some lectures and discussions have been conducted on the topic but other than that there is no solid text. The feminist critics after many efforts put down three principles of the female gaze which are depicting men as sexual objects by heterosexual female spectators, the visual dimensions of female desire and strategies that are unique to the female filmmakers. This thesis is on the third strategy in which reality is taken into consideration by female film director Anjali Menon in her movies. The paper will deal with the female gaze in the Malayalam film industry along with feminist theories. This will be done with the Anjali Menon's *Bangalore Days* and *Koodae*. *Bangalore Days* and *Koodae*.

Female Gaze in *Bangalore Days*

Bangalore Days directed by Anjali Menon, is a 2014 Malayalam comedy movie about three cousins, Divya Prakash aka Kunju (Nazriya Saleem), Krishnan P P aka Kuttan, and Arjun aka Ajju (Dulquer Salman). Being relatives they are on very close terms as to share many family matters. The story is narrated by Kuttan, who is a self-conscious and shy person and is more attached to his homeland than any other city. Though very vulnerable he is a new-gen patriarch who holds a way on every matter. Anjali Menon beautifully portrays what Kuttan thinks about women through his dialogues:

"vellavum, mannum, pennum..."

(Trans: "water, soil and girl. . ." [are of a piece])

He describes to his cousins how his ideal bride should be: "sari uduttu, chai konduvannu..." explaining how much the world wants to end patriarchy but still, some men want their women to be perfect for the man.

When he sees a couple kissing, and no one around him is bothered by it including his cousin, he is flabbergasted and tells him:

"mullu ilayil veenalum, ila mullil veenalum kedu ilak aanu"

Again emphasizes the male gaze point regarding how women should conduct themselves.

When he enters an aeroplane for the first time and sees Meenakshi who is an air hostess in a sari, the camera focuses on how he sees the air hostess without creating a male gaze for the audience. He tells himself that he has found his wife when she serves him tea with a shy smile. They become more than friends soon and he tries to please her by changing his looks showing the shift from the male gaze to the female gaze. By the end of the movie, one can see that he gets his ideal wife but instead of her being a Keralite she is a foreigner with the qualities of a 'Kerala girl'.

Next is the character of Divya Prakash aka Kunju played by Nazriya. Her life too is controlled and decided by the family. She is an NRI with dreams of having a love marriage and doing an MBA but due to her superstitious mother and a pandit, she is forced to marry at the age of 20. Her husband Das played by Fahad Fasil takes her to Bangalore soon after the marriage. Through her character, one can see that she is not mature enough to get married just like most Indian girls. The elders of the family believe that she will learn to take responsibility once she is married and this is the main reason why most Indian women face abuse in their in-law's houses. Her character is not introduced in the typical male gaze fashion rather she is shown to be answering a question about what she wanted to be in the future. The song "tuddakkam maangalyam" (Trans. "An auspicious beginning. . ." tells one of the life of a woman after marriage and it becomes true as she does not have a fairy tale married life rather her husband is aloof. He doesn't say anything when he catches her smoking on the 'mandapam'. On their first night, the husband is off doing his office work leaving her alone and wondering. From then on, the story shows that the husband and wife rarely communicate let alone have any intimacy. In a way, they are neutral to the patriarchal society. They do not go and interfere in others' business. The husband is shown to be an introvert while the wife is an extrovert. When the cousins ask why they haven't gone on their honeymoon she doesn't have an answer. When Das asks her to get ready for dinner, she is very excited but the dinner turns out to be a business dinner making Divya disappointed.

Through this, one can see the actions that a girl expects from her husband. A small outing alone together, talking about them and their future together. After a while, one can see that Divya has lost her hope as her husband who likes to do everything on his own including washing his dishes making her wonder why they even married. She lives her old life without telling her husband or even if she did tell he didn't care or mind. They fight constantly and during one such fight, the husband leaves leaving the key to the room that Divya was forbidden to enter. She discovers there that her husband had a lover and it was her room. She sees photographs of her husband smiling and tells her cousin Ajju that she had never seen her husband smile like that. She says that she is leaving the house showing that she made the decision on her own which is very rare in male gaze movies. When she returns home, she tells her mother about the situation who tells her husband and, in the end; the whole family comes to know. The narrator aka Kuttan tells the dialogue

“randu per tamill samsarichu tirkkaanulla kaaryam naatukarum veetukarumarinju divorce vare etti”

(Trans. “a matter that could have been solved by the couples themselves has come to be known by the relatives and now it has ended up in divorce”)

Another important point to note is that, after Divya gets to know about Das's affair Das neither denies the relationship nor stops Divya from going home. He willingly gives time and space to Divya. He respects her wishes and desires after the incident as Divya too did not create a scene but rather left quietly showing that she has started becoming mature and has the right to make her own decision. When Ajju, who works as a mechanic and rider gets to know the real story of Das aka Shiva, he calls Divya and tells her about it. Now the choice to sign the divorce papers is Divya's alone. She decides to save her husband from the trauma that he had been facing after the death of his lover and returns to Bangalore. She goes back to the flat where they live and tells Das to dismiss the maid who is also a problem creator between them. She sells her favourite jewellery to get admission for MBA which was her dream rather than marriage. She then visits Natasha, Das's lover's house and becomes close with her parents. From there she gets to know about Natasha and how she bravely fought alone for her love. Divya reveals her identity to her parents and brings Das to meet them. Das meanwhile has undergone a drastic change. He starts noticing Divya's likes and dislikes without interfering with her life. He respects her privacy and acts as a roommate rather than a couple. Here another aspect of the female gaze becomes evident: men respecting women's wishes. Divya bringing back Das to the present from the past shows that it is not always the knight in shining armor saving the damsel in distress. Instead, it is the damsel who rescues the knight from distress. This is another aspect of the female gaze. Das admires and respects her even more.

Another important factor that the paper wants to highlight and is relevant to the male gaze is that men see that women are capable only to cook and look after children, but it is not so. Divya does not know how to cook and manage a household. She is a studious and creative girl. She draws on the balcony glass, because of this she and Das fight. Das tells her that she should sit at home instead of creating problems for him by scribbling on the walls. Paintings are to be done on paper and canvases not on walls according to Das. In the morning Das wakes up to the light penetrating her painting on the glass wall and realizes that girls are as creative as men. There are many other instances in the couple's life through which Das admires Divya.

The next cousin is Arjun aka Ajju who as his cousins call him “a new-gennaadodi” (Trans. “a rustic new-gen”). He comes from a broken family where his parents are divorced. Neither of his parents wants him and hence he believes himself to be an outsider or a spare in himself. He suffers from that but would not tell anyone about it except for his cousins. He is comfortable only around his cousins. He is often misunderstood and misread due to his nature. He is neither vocal nor secure. His nicest side comes with his two cousins Kuttan and Kunju. He is described as an intelligent and smart person who could earn a living using his brains

but instead, he likes to ride and paint on public walls. He has been spotted by the police many times but escapes. Ajju is against all laws set by the society including patriarchy and expectations of the family. He feels comfortable only with his two cousins, Kunju and Kuttan. He goes to Bangalore on his bike. He admires the voice of Sarah a radio jockey. He has not seen her but is fascinated by her. He wakes up every morning to her beautiful voice which is filled with positivity. Through her voice, some changes are seen in him. He later tries to find her and is shocked to see that she is physically handicapped. He is filled with wonder about how such a person can be so cheerful, bubbly, and carefree. He is drawn to her. Her energy is not a vibrant one but rather it is earthly and grounded and she sees him just like how Divya and Kuttando. When he sees that she is the daughter of an army officer his voice becomes sarcastic he and tells her:

“Ithintae akathu nadakunathu nammak uuhikaamennae ullu”

(Trans. “one can guess what happens inside this compound...”)

But she tells him that

“Athu sheri aayirikum but oro veetilae oro windowyillkudae nokumbo different lives aayirikumennu”

(Trans. “Maybe it's true, but when one look through each window in each house the story would be different”)

This encourages Arjun to go inside the army quarters for her birthday. She intrigues Arjun and he finds in her what he desires: a certain kind of warmth, and security and she is more sorted than he is. Sarah is another example to bring positivity into Arjun's life. Arjun becomes a changed man after meeting her. He becomes more caring and thus surprises his cousins. Though he has been put in many difficult situations that he did not take seriously, choosing whether Sarah should leave him and go to Australia or make her stay confuses him and therefore he believes that he should make the decision which is going back to his old self or have a sorted life with Sarah.

At the start of the movie, one sees that Arjun needs to feel secure and help from others even though he denies but towards the end of the scene when Arjun visits Das one sees that Arjun is a saviour of the relationship. He tells Das that he knew who Shiva aka Das is and that Divya had come back after hearing the truth and not because of any force from her family.

Many other side characters changes in the movie, one of which is Kalpana, who acts as the mother of Kuttan. When her husband leaves her and goes to Goa, she immediately decides to go to Bangalore with her son though he was willing to stay back in Kerala. Upon reaching there one can see that she is amazed by the facilities in Bangalore. One can see her transformation when she sits in front of the TV. At first, she is learning to operate the TV and in the end, one can see her admiring her reflection on the TV. Again, her dressing undergoes complete change from saree to churidar and towards the end pants and shirt. Even though she has transformed physically she is an emotionless person and does not care what her husband or son wants. Fed up, her son sends her to America to live with his sister. One can see

the character development of Kalpana in the movie. While in Kerala she was bothered by what people would say about them when she goes to Bangalore, she does not care what others think. Again, this is a female gaze. The character development is not done for the satisfaction of men but to show the audience how one's life changes when one moves from one city to another. Most of the other characters are in support of patriarchy and also the male gaze. The way Nazriya is dressed up for Das for the 'pennukaanal' (Trans. "First visit to the girl's house as part of a proposal"), and later, the first night, is an example. Divya is not bothered about how she is dressed. One can see the character of Nivin Pauly constantly combing his hair.

Female Gaze in *Koodae*

The film is about a sexually exploited man in his childhood and how he tries to forget the past and enjoy the present with the positive vibes from his sister and the help of a childhood friend. The film starts with Joshua (Prithviraj) cleaning sewage in Dubai. He gets a call from his father informing him of his sister's death. The journey from the sewage place to his home is shown in complete silence with it the other workers with him are real life cleaners. All of them are silent. They do not talk to each other and are confined in their worlds thinking about how they can make the lives of people living in their homeland peaceful and happy without letting them know about their hardships. Such films are very rare in the Malayalam film industry and this genre has just recently sprouted in Kerala. Anjali Menon portrayed reality through this movie by using actual workers as cast in her movie. The journey to his home is filled with his old memories: about his school, friends, teachers, etc.

Throughout the movie, one can see flashbacks which play an important part in Joshua's present life. The main flashback is about how Jenny (Joshua's sister), played by Nazriya, was dragonised with a rare condition when she was small and how it could lead to her early death if the right treatment was not given. This brings us to the present and then Joshua asks his father for a car and his father gives him a van which was used as the ambulance for Jenny. He again goes back to the flashback of how his performance in school has come down due to the constant fight between his parents on the treatment of their daughter. The mother will go to any end even if it means superstition. Joshua was only good at one thing in his life and that was football. He forms a close bond with his coach but later avoids him as the family does not have enough money to send him to learn football. In the ambulance, he suddenly sees his sister's ghost who unlike other ghosts is not clad in a white saree or dress and does not have long teeth, etc. as Jenny, herself points out worried if there is any problem with her ghost form. She is full of laughter and positivity that it will be difficult to believe that she is a ghost. Jenny starts bringing positivity into Joshua's life without him realizing it. He sees his childhood sweetheart, who is now divorced, and recollects how he had helped her get into the football team. Though they have feelings for each other they do not openly confess them. She experiences sexual assault from her nephew and cousins and therefore she tries to commit suicide.

Even though it is Joshua who prevents her from taking a drastic step it was Jenny who saw her going to suicide and

warns Joshua about it. In male gaze movies, the female is shown as careless and only bothered about their looks and gossip but in real life, both men and women are equal observers. When Joshua was fifteen, the family was still suffering financially due to his sister's illness; therefore his uncle offers to take him to Gulf. Though the film does not exactly show what happened to Joshua when he leaves, there is a scene where his uncle touches him in inappropriate ways on the train.

Joshua had the opportunity to show his uncle's true face but he did not do so as he was more worried about his family. From this small scene, one can understand how Joshua was treated when he was just fifteen years old. After this incident, Joshua does not let anyone touch him as it reminds him of his insecurities. Neither does he tell anyone about it until the end. But Jenny somehow came to know about it. This shows that either Jenny is a figment of his imagination or he may have told Jenny, the host, about his trauma. Through this, one can see that men too are fragile. They have feelings and emotions but due to the patriarchal system, they are afraid to show them. They can go into depression or have many other mental problems.

The movie shows how Jenny helps Joshua come back and face reality in a positive and easy-go way. Then there is Joshua helping Sophie not commit suicide and to come away with him. Then towards the end of the movie, one can see that Jenny disappears and Sophie had indeed seen Joshua behaving oddly at certain times. She also realizes that whatever Jenny was, she had helped Joshua be the man that he is now, and now that Jenny had disappeared; it is her duty to keep Joshua sane and happy which she willingly does.

3. Conclusion

Through both these movies, one can see what the female gaze exactly is. It is not just a female admiring a man's body, but, such movies are about reality and how women see society instead of the made-up fictional society. Anjali Menon has done a wonderful job in bringing reality into the movies without making it boring. Through her movies, one can see how it is not just men who save the damsel in distress but the damsel can save the knights too. All her characters are wearing comfortable outfits and have light makeup, especially the actresses. They are wearing casual clothes or clothes that just befit the occasion. These are all the main aspects of female gaze movies. These movies betray in a remarkable manner the intersection of questions of female existence, gender, sexuality and identity in their representation as social and cultural constructs at different points, which all have political implications in the everyday.

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