

WHEN HER EYES REWRITE THE FRAME: A CRITICAL READING OF MALAYALAM MOVIE “*SOOKSHMADHARSHINI*”

Author:
Renna Rahmath C¹

Abstract:

Contemporary movies have a greater significance in developing culture. Its popularity is not so low; therefore, it will have greater effects. Most visual media influence how people behave and, consequently, shape culture. They also act as a medium in developing a specific culture. The representation of women in movies and television is an area that continues to spark discussion in many ways. Democracy is built on equal representation, which guarantees the rights of all groups, including women. This research is an attempt to explore various types of Female Gazes that are operative in the Malayalam movie *Sookshmadarshini*, which is directed by the Malayalam movie director MC Jithin and released on 22nd November 2024. The movie stands apart from most traditional narrative films as it depicts female characters. By placing a woman at the centre of the narrative, *Sookshmadarshini* questions traditional power dynamics in patriarchal households, and stereotypical gender roles. Priya's determination to uncover the truth, despite potential risks, defies patriarchal norms that often discourage women from questioning male authority. The film highlights the shifting paradigms in contemporary storytelling by portraying female characters as bold and assertive.

Keywords: Female Gaze, Spy Gaze, Feminist Film Criticism, Male Gaze, Visual culture

1.1. Introduction

Culture is a powerful communication tool that can transmit a wide range of feelings, customs, and beliefs. It is developed at a very young age based on the things we pursue from our surroundings. The term "visual culture" describes how media shape cultural values. It includes movies, advertisements, artwork, video games, and more, all of which influence how people behave and, consequently, create culture. Movies have a significant impact on perception, education, and thought. Characters must be portrayed accurately because even small changes can lead to social unrest. Since viewers frequently identify with on-screen characters and see their own realities reflected in movies, women's representation is a hotly debated topic in contemporary culture.

In most sectors, women are not getting equal opportunities as men. This discrepancy is caused by several factors, including cultural customs, male-dominated film narratives, and ignorance. The notion that women exist to serve men has been reaffirmed by traditional films, making this bias a social construct and a norm. Viewers are inclined to accept whatever is represented or shown on the screen. Most of the earlier Malayalam movies represented women as a means for sexual satisfaction or as a machine that does all the housework. Over the years, this has changed, particularly in Malayalam cinema. In the past, with very few exceptions, women were frequently portrayed as gossips or in domestic roles, seductive public women, pictured as patriarchal objects which served to further male dominance. The 'hero' was firmly established as a male character. This portrayal affected societal perceptions, which gradually changed over time as movies shape culture.

In contemporary Indian movies, one can see strong female representation rather than them just being portrayed as not the relevant characters or as in supporting roles. Nowadays, movies are taking a different path, deviating from traditional gender roles. When one comes to the latest trends, it is quite different. One can see women involved in the narratives. They also portray women as antagonists. This led to a departure

¹ Assistant professor, Blossom Arts and Science College, Kondotty

from conventional gender norms. This gives the film a multifaceted perspective. Some recent films continue the trend of deeply examining women's stories, which empowers them. They also emphasize the independence and relationships of women. Therefore, to conclude there is a gradual journey in the history of movie in placing women in leading characters and agential 'female gaze'.

This research is an attempt to explore various types of Female Gazes which are operative in a Malayalam movie *Sookshmadarshini*. In the movie Priyadarshini generally called Priya is the main character stared by Nazriya Nazim with secondary four more major female characters who support Priya's enquiry into some suspicious activities going on in one of the houses in their neighbourhood. The movie stays apart from most of the traditional narrative films as it depicts women characters for the development of the plot and the resolution of the conflict rather than a person just to satisfy the household chaos and sexual desires. *Sookshmadarshini* questions traditional power dynamics in patriarchal households and stereotypical gender roles. The film highlights the shifting paradigms in contemporary storytelling by portraying female characters as bold and assertive.

The research objective is to analyse how the trend has changed from old to contemporary movies in the representation of women and the variety of roles they play, giving greater emphasis to their own space. It also examines in detail how the 'female gaze' has evolved and expanded. In addition, the paper showcases different representations of women in the movie *Sookshmadarshini* and their importance in the construction of the narrative. Apart from this, it also gives an insight into how the movie *Sookshmadarshini* can stand alone when it comes to the term 'female gaze' and how it deviates from the tradition followed by the old movies, also the way the movie draws a line between the ethics of surveillance originating out of curiosity through 'spy gaze'.

In the present research the methodological perspectives largely followed are the related theoretical inputs on feminism, Feminist film theory and 'female gaze'. The research adopts a close textual analysis including visuals and audios, in depth reading of character representations and comparative analysis of other relevant movies, popular writing on traditional movies, medias and characters.

Primary data: Major research is dealing with *Sookshmadarshini* a Malayalam movie directed by MC Jithin and released on 22nd November 2024. Along with this, information is also collected from different theoretical textbooks.

Secondary data: Secondary information is gathered from different research articles published by authors in relevant sites and publications. Major findings are obtained by closely watching *Sookshmadarshini* supplemented by watching some of the relevant old Malayalam movies, contemporary movies and some archival materials. These sources especially movies try to show the exact shift in trends.

The study hypothesises that in movie *Sookshmadarshini* 'female gaze' has depicted positively as it assures equal representation by portraying different female character, including the protagonist and the supporting characters with their active participation in the story building and the moving of the narrative also by resolving the crisis especially through 'spy gaze', which make this movie different from traditional films where women were only considered as object of sexual desire rather than being subjects.

1.2. When Her Eyes Rewrite the Frame: A Critical Reading of Malayalam Movie *Sookshmadharshini*

'Visual Cultures' refers to how images, visuals, and symbols portrayed on the screen influence cultural values, identities, and communication. Adorno and Horkheimer's work 'The Cultural Industry: Enlightenment as a mass deception' clearly describes how Culture becomes an industry and leads to mass deception. They say:

All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, The power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing, but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the crash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors' incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947)

When a movie is made, a lot of importance should be given to the proper representation of characters. The question, how are they represented? Or What are their significance in this movie? is very important. Women representation is a major debate topic nowadays. Because they can see their own life through moving pictures. Earlier women were represented to satisfy the male pressure. It is very rare in old movies where women are placed as the central characters. This also created an image of “Hero” who is always a male figure. Feminist film criticism is a theoretical criticism which had originated from both feminist politics and feminist theorists. Many theorists have contributed to these studies, The most important people among them are Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Barbara Creed, and Carol Clover.

Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinemas” describes the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight socially established interpretation of sexual difference which control images and exotic ways of looking. She says:

This complex interaction of looks is specific to film. The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical filmmakers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate attachment. There is no doubt that this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the "invisible guest," and highlights how film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms. Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end, cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret. (Mulvey, 1975)

She also explains how psychoanalytic theory can be applied here to describe the social unconscious formed due to patriarchal norms. She says, “Recent writing about psychoanalysis and the cinema has not sufficiently brought the importance of representation of the female form in a symbolic order in which, in the last resort, it speak castration and nothing else” (Mulvey,1975). A notion that women can only exist in relation to castration and cannot transcend that is created through movies. Then, in patriarchal culture, women are seen as signifiers for the male other, constrained by a symbolic order that allows men to use language to impose their fantasies on the silent image of women To sum-up women play two roles in the formation of the patriarchal unconscious. Her actual lack of a penis serves as the first symbol of the threat of castration. Once this had achieved then she has no more role.

1.3. Women as objects and male gaze

The male gaze always figures its fantasy of females on the screen. Women are always looked at and displayed, where their appearance meant for strong visual and erotic pleasure only. This create a sense where it is felt as women are objects who are only meant for “mage gaze.

As per the archetype created by the dominant patriarchy the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Hence, men act in the primary role in forwarding the story, giving less priority to women. Then definitely women would come into a second position with a few exceptions. Viewers will take this seriously and then relate this with their day today life in most of the cases. The character in the story can reflect better than the subject, just like the image in the mirror. So, whatever represented in the screen are passively accepted by the audience so it can shape their perception. The boundaries of screen space tend to be blurred by camera movement and technology as well as invisible editing. Each character will be associated with the scopophilic nature of men and women actively or passively, and as she becomes a passive victim for that, she is isolated or portrayed as glamorous and sexist; her erotic portrayal is only meant for a male audience. It is also implied as her lack of penis is a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. The fetishist Scopophilia built up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying.

Female gaze is a term coined in counter to Laura Mulvey’s “Male Gaze” which concentrate more on the things that women bring to storytelling and the narrative depth of the story. This often challenges the traditional norms of patriarchal dominance in movie and the voyeuristic portrayal. In this research, we will analyse how this representation of women has shifted gradually from older to newer movies.

1.4. *sSookshmarshini*: The Female Gaze and/or Surveillance

Sookshmarshini (Spy Glass) is a 2024 Indian Malayalam-language mystery thriller film that unfolds a fascinating mystery under the direction of M. C. Jithin. Priya, a job-seeking housewife in a Kerala neighborhood, suspects bakery owner Manuel and his reclusive mother Grace after strange occurrences like a lizard feast and a house fire where Grace disappears. She discovers Manuel's ruse with uncle Roy and cousin Dr. John with the help of friends Stephy, Sulu, and Asma.

Priya sneaks into their house and discovers traces of bones on painted walls. Manuel drugs Stephy, seduces her, and schemes to harm Aditi, Diana's partner, because of her sexual orientation. A flashback shows that Grace planned Aditi's murder while hiding the fact that she was the mastermind behind Diana's honor killing. Priya exposes everyone by rescuing Aditi, ramming Manuel, and alerting the police.

By presenting women in roles that go beyond domestic duties or male satisfaction, *Sookshmarshini* subverts conventional cinema. The plot is driven by the inquisitive housewife protagonist Priya, who suspects her neighbor Manuel and solves the main mystery. These characters actively resolve conflicts, embodying the female gaze and subverting traditional male-centric narratives, with the help of friends Stephy, Sulu, Asma, and others like Diana and Aditi.



Scene from Sookshmarshini, directed by M C Jith, AVA Publications, 2024. Timestamp 02:20:55

Priya defies conventional gender roles in film by becoming an active female lead in *Sookshmarshini*. Motivated by a deep curiosity, her "spy gaze" propels the story, making her the main character solving Manuel's sinister mystery. In contrast to stories that are dominated by men, this change gives the female perspective more authority and enables viewers to experience the story through her insightful perspective. Her resourcefulness and attention to detail, which are rarely shown in traditional movies, are highlighted in a pivotal scene where she uses double-sided tape to retrieve her nose pin from the kitchen sink. On screen, Priya redefines women's agency.

Inspired by classics such as Alfred Hitchcock's *"Rear Window,"* the film reimagines voyeurism from a female perspective. Priya's genuine concern for the safety of her community motivates her surveillance of Manuel. In contrast to conventional depictions, this viewpoint turns watching into a proactive and protective activity.

The story highlights the power of female connections and group wisdom. Priya works together with her female neighbours, creating a network of support that helps her research. The significance of women's viewpoints and experiences is emphasized by this collaborative approach, which also shows how social ties can inspire action and empowerment. The storyline gains depth from the women's camaraderie. The story revolves around Priya's foresight and proactive approach. Her capacity to recognize hidden dangers and take appropriate action demonstrates a deep-seated agency that is frequently underrepresented in conventional narratives. Her acts exhibit a balance between strength and vulnerability, offering a realistic representation of a woman's agency in her social setting. This feature of the movie, in which female characters are portrayed as brave and assertive, emphasizes the changing paradigms in modern storytelling.

The film is a relevant illustration of the deconstruction of the female gaze since it offers a compelling plot in addition to commentary on the changing portrayal of women in movies. The supporting characters such as Sulu and Asma are not just a passerby character or the characters who spend most of their time to tease others. They are actively presenting a storyline. Their presence helps to create more depth to the entire story

line also, they also played a crucial role in helping Priya for finding the culprits. Each of the character have their own story to describe which is highly relevant for the development of the plot. Especially the character Stephy is depicted as divorced and single-parented, so she can be easily manipulated by emotions.

Sookshmarshini subverts traditional cinema, in which women merely embellish stories, by empowering women across the neighborhood to resolve the main conflict. Independent of her helpful but marginalized husband, Priya's "spy gaze"—noting Antony's milk spill lie and smashing a glass building in the climax—emphasizes her astute observation and fearless agency. Asma, Stephy, and Sulu, a nosy investigator, are friends who actively analyze events and represent collective female insight. The title, which translates to "deep looking," emphasizes this gender politics by highlighting women's resourcefulness outside of male reliance.

Through Priya's "spy gaze," *Sookshmarshini* examines the moral conflicts of curiosity by fusing intrusion with vigilance. Her investigation into Manuel's family reveals a serious crime, but it also violates privacy by recruiting neighbors and posing consent-related questions. Even though her perseverance uncovers murders connected to honor and homophobia, it raises questions about whether good justifies going beyond the bounds of authority. Curiosity is portrayed in the movie as both an ethical conundrum and an essential instrument for discovering the truth.

Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), in which a bored photographer named Jeff Jefferies uses binoculars to spy on neighbors and suspects salesman Thorwald of murder after noticing suspicious suitcases, is reminiscent of *Sookshmarshini*. Involving girlfriend Lisa and nurse Stella, what starts out as idle voyeurism turns into obsession, fusing harmless curiosity with intrusion. Hitchcock examines the morality of surveillance: is it acceptable to pry without permission if it reveals criminal activity? Jeff is hurt even though Thorwald is apprehended. Priya's "spy gaze" also traverses morally dubious areas, exposing horrors within the family while violating privacy. *Sookshmarshini* is similar to *Rear Window* in that it blurs the moral boundaries between neighbourly concern and invasion of privacy as Priya's routine life leads to surveillance of Manuel's house. She uses unethical methods to delve deeper in spite of warnings, motivated by a sense of urgency to prevent harm. This raises the age-old question: do ends justify means when community safety is at stake? The movie encourages viewers to consider their own prying boundaries and the social consequences of doing so by appealing to a universal neighbourly curiosity that is heightened by suspicion. Essentially, it deftly analyzes the morality of curiosity by balancing one's own ethics against the larger good of revelation.

Queer anxiety is also an important conflict discussed in this movie. The major happening in this movie is due to the same also class conflict. Diana the person who is murdered in the movie, the sister of Manuel was in a lesbian relationship with Aditi Thyagarajan a person who belong to a Hindu Community. Being a Syrian Cristian Diana's family can't accept this act in any sense, it's a kind of humiliation for them. To keep the family's reputation from being tarnished, her mother, Grace, plans the murder. The family's commitment to patriarchal and heteronormative ideals is demonstrated by this act, which drives them to commit a horrible crime to maintain their social status. One can see a woman is planning to kill a woman herself especially her own daughter. This shows the bitter reality of Patriarchy and pride in caste. In addition to being a personal decision, her relationship with Aditi directly challenges the heteronormative order that her family maintains. Not only in conservative family structure, one can also see the same happening in the modern family structure too. Diana's queerness is viewed by her family as a "deviation" that needs to be fixed or eliminated. The question why people see that as a deviation rather than a choice is relevant which should be asked. The family's reputation is at risk due to Diana's overt disobedience as she chooses to love someone else, so they decide to silence and get rid of her rather than face social disgrace. This implies the real-life incidents where LGBTQ+ people are coerced, or even killed to "restore" family honour are mirrored in Diana's enticement to return home under the false pretence of her mother's illness. In the climax of the movie, Grace says that: "Ippo kudumbakkarkku maathrame ariyoo. Iniyum vaikippicha naatukaan ariyum. A ppanppopanmaar aytta undakki vecha andhasa ivalaayttu illathakkan povunnuthu. Athinu njan sammathikkilla" (At the moment only, our family knows about this. If we wait longer the whole town will find out. Our family's reputation painstakingly build by our ancestors, is about to be destroyed of her, I won't allow that to happen) (Jith 2:14:10)



Scene from *Sookshmarshini*, directed by M C Jith, AVA Publications, 2024. Timestamp 02:15:10

Through Diana's tragic death at the hands of her family due to her lesbian relationship and adoption plans, *Sookshmarshini* challenges patriarchal control. By putting "honor" ahead of her daughter's independence, Grace exemplifies internalized patriarchy and exposes women as oppressors. This is similar to the ongoing honor killings that silence LGBTQ+ women who challenge sexuality and independence standards. The movie asks why queerness is still illegal, why female agency is a threat to society, and how far women must go to achieve true freedom—promoting acceptance over violent tradition.

To sum up one can say that by portraying different women characters and their movements *Sookshmarshini* is a movie which discusses a lot of relevant social issues. This movie deconstructs the idea of traditional 'female gaze' by inculcating many women representations and leading the story through the women protagonist Priya. The movie can stand against the traditional narrative films which only portrayed women as an object rather than being subject. The movie also tries to discuss the ethics of surveillance and the problematic nature of curiosity also its positive sides. Through the depiction of the character of Diana and her murder the movie also shows how long a woman has already travelled and still must travel to attain her complete autonomy on her personal choices and emotional chaos. Through various depictions of scenes, it also shows how women are keen on observing and analysing things and how they can solve problems like men. So *Sookshmarshini* directed by MC Jith, as a movie is the best example of Deconstruction of 'female gaze'.

1.5. References

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