

The Role of Cinema in Fostering Social Change: A Study of film *Manikyakallu* in the Context of Gender and Society

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Abstract

Cinema has evolved as a tool for redefining social awareness rather than merely a source of entertainment. In the context of gender and society, films become more impactful vehicles for questioning traditional norms, breaking down stereotypes and shaping inclusive future. This paper examines the role of cinema in promoting social change with a focus on how teachers are portrayed as pioneering figures who address the intersections of gender, education, and society while actively fostering gender equality. By analysing the Malayalam movie Manikyakallu, the paper explores how a teacher not only restores a neglected rural school, also challenges deep-rooted hierarchies of gender and class. By empowering students, breaking down patriarchal assumptions and encourages active participation, the film highlights the teacher as an agent of social reform. The paper further links with Kerala's real-life initiatives such as gender-neutral textbooks, U-shaped classrooms seating, and Changathi literacy programme, which foregrounds the active role of teachers in creating gender-inclusive and socially aware classroom environment. This showcases how reel narratives and real practices together promote that social progress depends upon redefining both gender relations and educational structures in the quest of gender equality. Ultimately, the paper claims that cinema by depicting teachers as catalysts for gender equality and social change, emphasizes the essential role in building a more equitable society.

Keywords— Cinema, Education, Gender, Society, Social Change, Teachers, Transformation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender is not a biological aspect rather a socially constructed reality that mould the expectations, behaviours, and identities. Society provides the structure within these gender rules are created, supported, and may challenges. Throughout cultures, these construction of gender and society have often shows inequality, restricting women, limiting the possibility of non-conforming genders. Anyway education and cultural narratives play a crucial role in changing such ideas, opening paths towards gender equality and inclusivity. In this context, teachers and films appear as two powerful tools of transformation. Teachers are not mere knowledge transmitters, they shape the values, foster inclusivity, and develop awareness among children, making classrooms sites of

social change through critical thinking. Cinema, as a cultural text, it's not merely a source of entertainment; it works as a reflector and shapes the society. Cinema questions established customs, breaking down the stereotypes, and propose possibilities. Within this space the role of a teacher becomes very important both as a cinematic character and in real life, they symbolises the guiding light, shaping minds and even works for social progress. A teacher on screen can also impact the students through conveying the awareness on gender and how they breakdown the inequalities and fosters new way of thinking in the younger generation.

The contemporary Malayalam film becomes a strong critique of gender inequality in works such as *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, and *Njan Marykutty* focuses on the issue of male dominance, domestic

violence and transgender struggles. Similarly, Kerala's educational landscape highlights gender-neutral textbooks and U-shaped classrooms. The remain unexplored is the intersection of two areas ie, how cinema shows teachers as changing figures who address the issues of gender and social change. The 2011 Malayalam film *Manikyakallu* gives a unique idea in which, they present the teacher not merely as a knowledge sharing guide but as a social changer who rebuilds a failing school into a space of empowerment and inclusivity.

This paper argues that *Manikyakallu* showcases the teacher as agent of change in the context of gender and society, while also resonates with Kerala's real-life educational improvements. By analysing this film with other gender-oriented Malayalam films and other discourses on education and gender, this work brings out the combined role of cinema and teaching as tool for creating a more equitable society.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Cinema as Public Pedagogy

Cinema has been evolved as an instrument of learning and socialization not merely a form of leisure. Scholar, Henry Giroux(2004) argue that films functions as "public pedagogy" which means it provide values, attitudes, and the way of seeing the world outside traditional classroom setting. Films structure cultural imagination and can support the ideologies or can challenge them. In India, cinema has historically played a vital role in nation-building and social reform. In Kerala, the impact of cinema is strong because films are deeply integrated into daily life culture and public discourse. The recent trends of films are questioning the issues related to class, gender, domestic violence etc... which fosters the public to rethink about these issues. Recent trend includes the open ending movies also give an opportunity to rethink about that particular issue. Films also play a crucial role in promoting critical thinking among the masses.

In this perspective, *Manikyakallu* operates as a form of pedagogy for the people. This movie presents education not only as the formal way of transferring knowledge but also as a transformative practice that instills value of equality, justice and empathy. This film showcases a dedicated teacher and change the destiny of children from a disadvantaged background along with that it provides how inclusive classrooms can challenge traditional gender roles.

Gender as a Social Construct

Gender as a social construct, Judith Butler(1990) explains gender is not biological, it is moulded by the social norms, and cultural practices. Therefore, gender inequalities are learned behaviours shaped the expectations of the society. Male is considered to be the strongest, competitive, and outspoken meanwhile the female roles are constrained as care takers, silence and tolerance. The patriarchal society encourage the male dominant values and reduces the opportunities for women. Schools are the most influential place to understand about the gender roles. Through textbooks, classroom discussions and teacher as a tool provide awareness regarding gender neutrality. Breaking the binaries and the idea of other gender also provide a gender- neutral atmosphere. Transgender individuals face a lot of discriminations from the educational field and society.

The movie *Manikyakallu* portrays a model of schooling where equality and dignity are given priority over patriarchal hierarchies. In the film the teacher encourages the active participation of students irrespective of gender and sets up a inclusive learning environment. In this way the film resonates to Butler's argument of gender fluidity.

Teachers as Agent of Change

Teachers serve as crucial agent of change by moulding the student's knowledge, values, shapes their behaviour and to equip the students to fit in the society. Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy in Oppressed*(1968) emphasizes that teachers must acts as liberators who brings up critical thinking in their students. Similarly, Bell Hooks describes education as the practice of freedom, where classrooms can become spaces of empowerment and equality.

In the film *Manikyakallu*, the teacher protagonist embodies a vision of transformative change. He had transformed the entire rural school students empowered by encouraging the students irrespective of gender and give equally opportunities to actively participate and to think about the need of learning not only just about the curriculum and to goes beyond it. Here, teacher has the role of an educator as well as a social reformer. Teachers can break the traditional norms regarding gender issues. Teachers promote inclusive learning, the role is not only as mentor rather a societal reformer by influencing the students.

Film Analysis

The Malayalam film *Manikyakallu* portrays how a school, the students and the entire people have transformed through the influence of the teacher Vinayachandran. The film sets in a rural and marginalized setting, a school which has not basic facilities, it symbolizes the failure of educational system the school was totally neglected, lack of students and continuously students fail in examination due lack of interest, the students didn't get proper guidance. The lack of students in the school and the total neglect of the school by the Government, the village people which leads the teachers to be lazy and teaching become a side business for them. The school become a symbol of hopelessness. For eg: "Poojyam Award Vannamala Govt. Model High School nu", "Vattapoojyam nediya Keralathile Oreyoru school." Into this context, Vinayachandran enters, whose sincerity, pedagogical practices and his personal commitment towards the education demonstrate the transformative power of education.

The film addresses the social issues of poverty, inequality, and lack of infrastructure of the school. Many of the students dropped their learning due to poverty in the house and went for job, children came under the influence of alcohol, carrier of drugs and less participation in every activity. The teacher character in the movie motivates the students, make aware of the need of education, stops child marriage and make aware the parents about its consequences. Inspire his colleagues to be active part of shaping the young mind. He promotes positive reinforcement among students and encourages them to be active part of society. Through the lessons, he given outside the curriculum shaped the students about the societal values. The film has also showcase the lack of awareness of parents regarding the importance of education, which they promote child marriage, and child labour. Here, the teacher acts a social catalyst goes outside the classroom setting and make aware the people for promoting or doing such activities which is harmful to the society.

Paulo Freire's idea of critical pedagogy is especially helpful for understanding *Manikyakallu*. Freire believed that education should not be a one-way process where teachers simply "deposit" knowledge into students, but a dialogue that helps learners think critically about the world around them. This is exactly what we see in *Manikyakallu*: the teacher avoids rote learning and instead inspires students to take pride in their school and see themselves as active participants in their own future. He gives equal importance to boys and girls in the classroom, quietly breaking the village's long-

accepted belief that girls should step back while boys move forward. bell hooks' idea of engaged pedagogy also helps explain the teacher's approach. Hooks argues that real learning happens when teachers care about the whole person-their feelings, experiences, and struggles. In the film, the teacher does just that: he treats his students with empathy, encourages them, and pushes them to believe in possibilities beyond textbooks. Judith Butler's view of gender as something shaped by society also fits here. The film shows how boys are expected to grow up as breadwinners while girls are pressured to drop out, but the teacher challenges these roles by making the classroom a space of equal opportunity. Together, these perspectives show that *Manikyakallu* is not just about one teacher in one school-it is about how education can become a powerful tool to question old inequalities and open the way to a more equal society.

Malayalam cinema has strongly engaged with challenging or questioning the gender issues and showcases the patriarchal society. The movies such as *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, and *Njan Marykutty* discusses about the different gender issues, starting from patriarchal dominance to domestic violence. *The Great Indian Kitchen*[2021] criticizes the repetitive cycles of unpaid domestic labour and marital oppression in a male dominant house. Where the women was not allowed to go out for a job, they are merely settled down to the role of care takers of home, to cook, to clean and look after the guests who came to the house. Here, the female character is mentally and physically oppressed by the husband and his father. Finally, she gets out of the house by leaving them for ever. In the film *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* [2022] too we can see the domestic violence faced by the female character and resistance by divorce. *Njan Marykutty*[2018] brings the struggles of transgender identity in a deeply gendered society. The movie highlights the discrimination and stigma faced by transgender individuals and emphasis the importance of acceptance and inclusion.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Manikyakallu* suggests that the film is not only about an idealistic teacher but also about the possibility of structural change through education. The teacher's efforts to create a participatory, respectful classroom mirror some of Kerala's real-world educational reforms. For instance, the introduction of the U-shaped classroom model in many government schools reflects the same philosophy of dialogue and inclusivity. By physically arranging students in a semi-

circle, the hierarchy between teacher and student is minimized, and every child is given equal space to speak. This resonates with Paulo Freire's critique of the "banking model" of education and aligns with bell hooks' call for classrooms to be sites of care and engagement.

Another important initiative is the gender-sensitive pedagogy adopted in Kerala's state textbooks and teacher training programmes. Lessons are consciously designed to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and to encourage both boys and girls to pursue education and careers beyond traditional roles. This echoes Judith Butler's understanding of gender as socially constructed: by changing the way children learn and interact, schools play a role in reshaping gender identities.

In the context of Malayalam cinema, this emphasis on education as transformation distinguishes *Manikyakallu* from other films that only portray gender oppression. While *The Great Indian Kitchen* or *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* show the everyday struggles of women, they do not propose structural solutions. *Manikyakallu*, however, points toward education as a sustainable and collective way forward, where teachers become agents of social justice.

Thus, the findings suggest that *Manikyakallu* is more than a story of one school-it symbolizes how Kerala's larger educational vision, through innovations like the U-shaped classroom and gender-inclusive pedagogy, positions the classroom as a site where entrenched inequalities of caste, class, and gender can be challenged and reimaged.

IV. CONCLUSION

Cinema is no longer just about entertainment; it has become a powerful space where society can see itself, question itself, and imagine change. When we look at films through the lens of gender and society, we notice how they push us to rethink stereotypes and inequalities. Malayalam films such as *The Great Indian Kitchen*, *Njan Marykutty*, and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* are strong examples. They raise important questions about domestic violence, the struggles of transgender people, and the realities of patriarchal control within marriage. Yet, most of these films stop at showing the problem or the resistance.

What makes *Manikyakallu* stand out is that it offers a way forward. The film does not only show gender issues; it places the teacher at the centre as a figure who can bring real change. By reviving a failing rural school,

motivating children, and treating boys and girls as equals, the teacher becomes a model of hope. He shows that education is not about rote learning but about nurturing confidence, questioning injustice, and building a fairer society.

Theories such as Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, bell hooks' engaged pedagogy, and Judith Butler's ideas on gender as a social construct help us see how this teacher's role is transformative. At the same time, Kerala's real practices-like gender-neutral textbooks and inclusive classroom designs-prove that what we see on screen can also inspire real social change.

In this way, cinema, when it places teachers at the heart of the story, does more than entertain. It invites us to imagine schools as places where equality can take root and where tomorrow's citizens can learn to question injustice. *Manikyakallu* reminds us that films have the power not only to reflect society but also to shape it-by showing how education and teachers can lead the way toward gender equality

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