

## Gendering stardom: Why Manju Warriar is not equal to Mohanlal

Arya MP

Research Scholar, Postgraduate, Department of English, St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth, Thrissur, Kerala, India

### Abstract

Gender became, and still remains the focus of heated debate in Malayalam film industry (Mollywood: the film industry of Kerala, India) post the actor assault case in February 2017. The contemporaneity of the issue leads to this research paper, which is an exploration of the role played by gender in shaping stardom in a regional film industry such as the Malayalam industry. Stardom is analyzed by choosing the personas of Manju Warriar (signifying the female superstar) and Mohanlal (representative of the male superstar). The paper traces the reasons, both cinematic and pragmatic, to explore how the actors' persona, political stances, characters enacted, and critical reception at theatres that point towards the creation of a gendered stardom rather than an objective renown and fame that they enjoy in the present cultural scenario. The scope of the research lies in exploring how gender is not a passive, but an active participant in the mental creation of icons in spectators. The findings are also portentous in understanding how the spectator's psyche is unconsciously constructed to imbibe gender as a means of 'Othering'.

**Keywords:** gender, stardom, stereotyping, persona, spectator

### 1. Introduction

The Oxford Dictionary defines the term 'actor' as "a person whose profession is acting on the stage, in films, or on television" ("actor"), and proceeds to explain how the word has evolved in terms of gender. An actor initially signified men on stage (as roles of women were also portrayed by men). Later it expanded to include women who were into acting, but eventually giving way to the gender-specific term "actress" to refer to them. However, contemporary film language has reverted to using "actor" as a gender-neutral term, to denote individuals of any sex who engaged an acting career. Even the evolution of a mere term in acting has gained momentum as representative of the gender issues it connote.

The same has been true in the case of the terms 'superstar' and 'megastar', both implying a man, whose superlatives they transform to be naturally. The prefixes 'super-' and 'mega-', in film terminology, thus become masculine, thereby gendering the film language. This tendency has become so internalized that when referring to a superstar who is a woman, her gender has to be specified, as in "female superstar". Not ignorant of the complexities of such usages, Dr. Meena T. Pillai writes in her article "From Rosy to Manju", "In choosing to meld her personal life with her public career, Warriar has become the first female superstar of Malayalam cinema, one who refuses to conform to fossilized notions of "superstardom".

### 2. Manju Warriar: Steps to a Superstar

The acting career of Manju Warriar in Malayalam cinema initially extended only for a five-year period (1995-1999). Though her years active in the industry were very brief, she had already made her mark through her acting caliber that won her many accolades. Warriar is also an accomplished dancer. In 1999, she dropped her professional career accompanied by her marriage to co-actor Dileep. Unlike the contemporary times when marriage does not mean a break

from acting careers (or any other career at large), Warriar belongs to an era when getting married begins a new phase of a woman's life, and puts an end to her profession, especially in the case of women in the film industry. However, almost coinciding with her divorce with Dileep in 2015, Warriar has returned to acting, and is presently one of the leading actors in Malayalam cinema.

Receiving considerable approval and admiration, she has surpassed the mere status of an actor to occupy the complex position of a star who is a "person, performer, sign, and asset" (McDonald 1) in the psyche of Malayalee spectators. She has transformed into a brand- be it for freedom of women, resorting to biofarming, fighting cancer, or living one's dream. From the initial phase of her career (in the late 1990s) where the actor instilled a 'girl next door' image, the makeover Warriar has undergone has gained state-wide applause. Sangeetha Padmanabhan, in her article "Her Again: Becoming Manju Warriar" writes, "Manju in her comeback was not only an actor, but also a brand that embodied a combination of facets- of a model, dancer, actor, and a social being." Though it has never been an easy job to regain her status as an actor and boost herself to have a firm place in the industry, Warriar has been largely successful in her endeavors. Her current stardom and appreciation amongst the audience calls for a review of the probable reasons that underscore her 'second coming'.

The major reason without denial is Warriar's acting potential, which had already gathered her critical appreciation even during her primary phase. Warriar was fortunate to give life to some of the memorable characters backed by outstanding scripts like in *Thooval Kottaram* (1996), *Sallapam* (1996), *Kaliyattam* (1997), *Pranaya Varnangal* (1998), *Summer in Bethlehem* (1998), *Kanmadam* (1999), *Pathram*(1999), *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (1999), etc. But it needs to be noted that the 1990s scripts were indeed haunted by the patriarchal undercurrents, which echoed Warriar's roles as dependent

on, and subservient to the male lead. In her latter phase, the films that she undertook had a major shift of focus, which revealed itself in liberated women who had their share of freedom and financial independence to begin with. Films like *How Old Are You?* (2014), *Rani Padmini* (2015), *Udaharanam Sujatha* (2017), etc. stand testimony to this.

The differences in portrayal of women in the gap of almost a decade (which incidentally also marked the turn of the century) is also a reflection of the societal shift that has enabled the twenty-first century Malayali women more access to public spaces, activities, and progressive and managerial positions. A critical study of Warriar's characters themselves discloses how this shift has taken place over the years. Though with reluctance, patriarchal clutches have been considerably loosened, and Malayalam cinema (at least post 2010) has proven to be an inspiring factor for this affirmative change. Pooja Pillai notes in "There's something about Manju Warriar" that Manju Warriar has received a special love from the spectators like no other actress in the industry has. She attributes this fondness also to the instantaneous and immense success that Warriar attained through her memorable characters and a natural talent at hand to enact them with grace.

Apart from her professional excellence that she happily gave away for her married life, her personal life has also been a factor that influences her warm reception in the spectatorial psyche. To lay down only the bare bones of the story, Warriar's personal life, which begins from her marriage to her co-actor Dileep while she was at the zenith of her career, has always been on the limelight. Her divorce from Dileep in 2015, and his marriage to another actor Kavya Madhavan in 2016 had raised considerable sympathy towards Warriar. This sympathy easily gave way to a special love and affection for the actor by 2017, following the actor assault case.

A female actor was kidnapped and sexually assaulted on February 17, 2017; following which Manju Warriar's public comments about conspiracy led to the arrest of Dileep. The Police argued in court that Dileep had engineered the incident due to personal vendetta that he had with the victim. These dramatic events played a pivotal role in gathering the public's attention towards the gender disparity that existed in cinema, though there were myriad attempts to whitewash Dileep's image and darken that of the victim.

Choosing her as one of the remarkable individuals of 2017, *The Open Magazine* describes her so, "She is Kerala's only female superstar, and in a maelstrom of misogyny, she is the definitive expression of the modern Malayalee woman". Women in Cinema Collective (WCC), an association of the women in cinema, which was formed on November 1, 2017 by many women including Warriar has also received adequate public support owing to the inequality in the Malayalam film industry that it exposed. Thus, though Warriar has proven her ability as an excellent actor, her personal life and her stances in situations of personal crises has crept into being a major factor that has shaped her present stardom. As Dr. Meena T. Pillai notes, in Manju Warriar's case, the personal has become the political.



Fig 1: Manju



Fig 2: Manju Warriar versus Mohanlal: An Analysis of Stardom

At this juncture, juxtaposing Manju Warriar's stardom with that of Mohanlal (a male superstar of Malayalam film industry) would be convenient to better understand the role played by gender in shaping star personas. Mohanlal has been chosen as he is one actor who has co-starred with Manju Warriar in many of their successful films. Beginning his career as a villain in the 1980 film *Manjil Virinja Pookal*, Mohanlal has developed to become one of the leading stars ever since. In spite of the many state, national, and popular accolades, Mohanlal has also been awarded the Padma Shri, and Padma Bhushan (two of the highest civilian awards in India). He has also received honorary doctorates and the status of a Lieutenant Colonel by the Indian Army. Apart from a brilliant acting caliber, Mohanlal is also noted for his theatre performances, singing, and writing ventures, earning him the superstar title way ahead of Warriar.

Does the stardom of Manju Warriar differ from that of Mohanlal? If yes, how? It must not have much to do with their acting caliber, as each actor has his/her own methods of acting, which cannot be set as a benchmark to compare another actor to it. But certain differences in the acting careers of both of these actors would help us progress to negotiate their contested stardom. After all, "stardom is a phenomenon best investigated not through a single critical optic but a multi-stranded approach that is sensitive to the several domains of industrial production, textual composition, ideological formation, and audience response" (Dix 199).

One of the most obvious differences of their stardom lies in Manju Warriar's intermittent appearances on screen compared to Mohanlal's consistent presence. Mohanlal's consistent presence on screen has helped etch his figure and characters in the minds of the public. The 1990s-2000 phase which focused on the male macho hero-films helped establish the image of Mohanlal (and a few others) as a superstar. Though that phase is no more in existence, and modernity has completely revolutionized Malayalam film industry, the fans associations have helped the star image to remain constantly in the limelight. The fandom that he earned is also an aftereffect of his continuous presence on screen.

Though several issues and controversies have been promulgated in the name of Mohanlal, none have been so poignant enough to hold the public's attention. "One of the most significant tropes in the cultural and social imaginary of Kerala is that of family and stardom, which often necessitated the portrayal of the star's family as essential to the constitution of the star persona. The star's credibility rested on his secure conjugal status and the apparent conjugal bliss of his spouse" (Pillai). Mohanlal satisfies this category adequately. Though his immediate family details are publicly known, and many rumors have circulated in and out, none has gained news value, nor have they stayed in the news diminishing or elevating his star status.

Whereas Manju Warriar has been in the news for most of her career, more for her personal life than her films. Her marriage, family life, divorce, return to Malayalam film industry, the actor assault case, her political stances that followed, etc. still remain entrenched in public memory; and partially decides her status as a star. The inconsistency that held her back from a continued acting career is looked upon only complacently as a woman's decision to prioritize her family, as it should ideally be in a patriarchal and feudal society. This difference in the personal life being tagged on with one's professional life becomes an issue only for Manju Warriar, as she is a woman –without question, gender is the issue at play here. *Heavenly Bodies* by Dyer explores the process of star manufacturing, which holds true in the case of Manju Warriar. "A film star's image is not just his or her films, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio handouts, and so on, as well as interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings in 'private' life" (2-3).

The second and a more subtle reason of why Mohanlal's stardom differs from, and stands above Manju Warriar's stardom owe a major share to their characters that have been portrayed on screen. Mohanlal and Warriar has been a well-loved pair on screen, both during the initial and the latter phase of Manju Warriar's career. Films like *Aaram Thampuran*, *Kanmadam*, and *Summer in Bethlehem*, all of which played a part in etching the couple in popular imagination, belong to the late 1990s phase. All of these films were box-office hits, and proved instrumental in popularizing the celebrated couple as trendsetters. But, on closer inspection, these films do not seem very innocent in their portrayal of gender; in fact, they even play a significant part in establishing the gender stereotypes of the ideal Malayalee woman and man in the spectators' psyche. Examining the basic thread of these films can substantiate the case. *Aaram Thampuran* (1997) revolves around a

feudal hero Jagannadhan (Mohanlal) who returns to regain his ancestral property and eventually become the "thamburan" (feudal lord) amidst villains who are handled with physical, political, and intellectual tactics. Unnimaya (Manju Warriar), the heroine, is an orphan who lives at the ancestral property at the mercy of Jagannadhan. Throughout and at the climax of the film, it is Jagannadhan who protects and decides to offer Unnimaya a life of security (of course, it comes as a bonus with marriage). *Kanmadam* (1998) <sup>[3]</sup> portrays Manju Warriar as a woman who tries to be the 'man' of an impoverished household, only to end up falling for Mohanlal, who ultimately takes up the responsibilities on his shoulders, and thus 'saves' her and the household alike.

*Summer in Bethlehem* (1998) was a film that revolved around Abhirami (Manju Warriar) who is witty, bubbly, and energetic to keep the plot engaged. But a subtle hint is given about something that troubles Abhirami's mind leaving her moody very often. This turns out to be her love for a failed revolutionary and convict about to be hanged, Niranjan (Mohanlal). On Niranjan's insistence, Abhirami marries Dennis, and the film ends on a happy note. Although Niranjan (Mohanlal) makes only a cameo appearance (he appears on screen for hardly five minutes), it is him who steals the show, overshadowing Abhirami (Manju Warriar) who is apparently the nucleus of the film. All of these films showcase how the spectator's psyche is channeled to accept the Mohanlal-Manju Warriar couple as complementing each other's roles, with the male counterpart (Mohanlal) taking an upper hand in protecting and offering better prospects in life to the female counterpart (Manju Warriar).

The case of the films that appeared in the latter half of Manju Warriar's career (2014-present) is no different. The films that pair the duo include *Enum Eppozhum* (2015), *Mohanlal* (2018) <sup>[14]</sup>, and *Odiyan* (2018) <sup>[15]</sup>. *Enum Eppozhum* portrays Manju Warriar as an accomplished advocate (Adv. Deepa) who lives by herself, and takes care of her daughter. Vineeth N. Pillai (Mohanlal), who is after her for an interview, in the long run becomes her savior in her times of crisis, finally leading to an anticipated love affair. *Odiyan* is a hero-oriented film where Warriar plays a typical heroine who waits for the hero to provide her a secure relationship till the end of the film, which he does.

The most significant film in the present that brings out the politics of stardom by narrating a tale of stardom is *Mohanlal* (2018) <sup>[14]</sup>. In *Mohanlal*, Manju Warriar plays Meenukutty (an ardent Mohanlal fan), whose celebrity worship syndrome leads her family life into shackles. The film is suggestive, as Mohanlal fans and Mohanlal films are represented with an aura- they have the ability to lead people's life astray, as well as to regain sanity and find resolutions to their crises. Mohanlal films are what served as the therapy that helped Meenukutty survive the psychological trauma inflicted upon her (as a child) by her father's death. It is also Mohanlal fans who help her get back to life by providing medical aid after an attempted suicide. The film is an example of the star persona becoming an icon, a larger-than-life figure that controls not just the spectator's film-going habits, but entire life as well. "The simplest message is an image; and the simplest image is a person" (Castells 158). Manju Warriar enacts Mohanlal's mannerisms and repeats his dialogues, thereby identifying herself as a mere fan of Mohanlal, the

'superhero'; this automatically places her own star image (as a star) as one that follows and feels subsidiary to that of Mohanlal.

### 3. Conclusion

In her abstract to the article "The Many Misogynies of Malayalam Cinema", Dr. Meena T. Pillai writes, "The aporia of Kerala's modernity that results in certain retrograde tendencies is most evident in its cinematic discourses, especially those built around its current investment in male superstardom." Superstardom, itself a well-orchestrated enterprise, seems to ostracize women in their claims to be superstars in their own right. They appear to be pushed back to remain only at the receiving end of male superstardom. Malayalam cinema, which has travelled a long way from being a mere art to developing as a cultural industry, has unfortunately preserved its retrograde tendencies in the case of accepting a woman's success (and stardom) as equal to that of a man. Though conveniently concealed in the modernity aesthetic, the institutionalized misogyny still peeps its ugly head out of the scripts, production, distribution, and reception of films.

Most of the popular star readings "are interested in what their objects of study reveal about culturally dominant models of gender, race, and class" (Dix 208). However, it is a welcome change that the era of masculinist superstars is gradually weakening, and is gradually making space for feminine stars to shine with equal brightness. Considering the very factors of Manju Warriar's short-term acting career and personal life dragged into the political may also be looked upon in the affirmative. Her capability to garner the status of stardom in spite of these influencing parameters showcases her acting potential and reach amongst the Malayalee audience. A still patriarchal psyche that underscores the various niches of Malayalam film industry and the film-going audiences may take more time to undo its misogynic attitude; but the fact that it is happening (even though at a snail pace) is a comforting fact. The role that Manju Warriar has played in this direction is indeed commendable.

Female actors and technicians in Malayalam film industry have slowly gained voice and agency at least in the twenty-first century. Anjali Menon, Parvathy, Rima Kallingal, etc. are some of them who have made their presence felt in the industry without yielding to compromising situations that earlier subjected women to shame for the sake of survival in the film platform. Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) has proved to be an organization that has held to its nerves regarding the women's problems and representation in cinema. The myth of superstardom have been busted to a great extent also by the re-entry of more socialist themes emerging from new and young film-makers. Perhaps, more than competing for an equal stardom, the coming generation of film-makers should strive to create characters (of any gender) that stand the test of time.

The role of star spectatorship in constructing and re-constructing superstars also requires more research in terms of gender. "Psychoanalytic work on star spectatorship has tended to be less empowering of women as viewing subjects, often restricting them to such unattractive options as passive or even masochistic identification with the female clotheshorses that have often featured in narrative cinema" (Dix 213). The othering that happens in patriarchal cultural industries regarding gender may be resolved only through

conscious attempts from spectators to oust such misogynic notions and preconditions that strategize fandom and superstardom alike. Only the innovative interventions made from the perspective of spectators can bring in transformations in the arena of changing notions about stardom, and even cinematic industry at large.

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