

Breaking Norms: Erotic Capital and Female Resistance in Select Malayalam Films

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Abstract

This study explores the portrayal of women's erotic capital as a tool of revenge and resistance in three selected Malayalam films: *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (1999), *22 Female Kottayam* (2012), and *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014). This study aims to examine how the female protagonists in the selected texts use their erotic capital to fulfil their vengeance and assert agency. Expanding on Catherine Hakim's theory of erotic capital and Audre Lorde's perspective on the erotic as a source of power, this study examines how female protagonists strategically utilize their physical allure, psychological agency and social skills to challenge patriarchal oppression. Through content and discourse analyses, this study highlights the nuanced ways in which these characters assert their agency, dismantle systemic inequalities, and disrupt traditional gender roles. The films not only portray the duality of the female body as both a site of oppression and a tool of resistance, but also contribute to broader discussions on power, sexuality, and gender in Indian cinema. By framing these narratives within the socio-cultural context of Malayalam cinema, this study underscores the transformative potential of erotic capital as a means of female empowerment and resistance.

Keywords: Erotic capital, Female resistance, Malayalam cinema, Patriarchy, Gender

Introduction

"Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama" (Lorde, 1978, p. 88).

The exploration of erotic capital has become increasingly significant in contemporary social sciences and gender studies, sparking interest and controversy. Catherine Hakim introduced this concept in her book *Honey money*, defining erotic capital as the combination of sexual attractiveness, behavior, and attitude that enhance one's ability to attract desire (2011). As Audre Lorde succinctly states, historically, men have mischaracterised the erotic and wielded it against women, turning it into something trivial and distorted (1978).

Nevertheless, experiencing the depth of the erotic brings profound internal satisfaction, setting a standard of honour and self-respect that women can uphold and aspire to, recognising its true power and value (Lorde, 1978). According to Roshan and Shashikantha, when women gain control over their bodies, it significantly contributes to their overall empowerment, enabling them to challenge patriarchal structures (2023). Therefore, the originality of this study lies in the context of how women have utilized their erotic capital as a means of resisting patriarchy. It attempts to explicate the use of erotic capital by women as a weapon to avenge patriarchal forces in relation to three Malayalam films: *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (Kumar,

1999), *22 Female Kottayam* (Abu, 2012), and *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (Neerad, 2014).

These three films were selected for their relevance to the 21st century and their compelling exploration of the theme of extreme vengeance. They are among the very few that feature instances where female protagonists use their erotic capital to avenge the trauma of parental murder (*Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* and *Iyobinte Pusthakam*) and rape (*22 Female Kottayam*), two emotionally potent themes in Malayalam cinema. Given the practical limitations of this research, such as the sheer volume of Malayalam films and time constraints, the focus is narrowed down to these two triggers, as it is neither methodologically sound nor feasible to include all possible motivations for vengeance. Although there are films that deal with women's erotic capital, such as *Vaishali* (Bharathan, 1988), where erotic capital is mobilized by the female protagonist not for herself but for the welfare of her people, they fall outside the scope of this research, which is concerned with the strategic wielding of women's erotic capital for vengeance. Moreover, these films are distinguished by their portrayal of complex and realistic protagonists who are not merely secondary to the male-driven narrative but are central to the storyline.

The centrality of these female characters is further reinforced by the distinct narrative and aesthetic phases adopted by selected directors in Malayalam cinema. Rajeev Kumar is recognized for his layered narrative style, combining melodrama with visual symbolism. His expressive framing and dramatic visual compositions in *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* bring female desire, suffering, and revenge to the forefront. Aashiq Abu's films are marked by morally complex characters and socially rooted narratives. Through realistic performances in *22 Female Kottayam*, he disrupted conventional representations of women in Malayalam cinema. Amal Neerad, a cinematographer and director, uses meticulously composed shots that accentuate dark and cynical themes in his films. Through a combination of motifs such as feudal authority, patriarchy, and violence, he effectively portrays the grim facets of rebellion and oppression in *Iyobinte Pusthakam*. Across their bodies of work, all three directors share a common interest in interrogating gender

discrimination and problematizing the female body as a crucial site through which patriarchal violence is articulated and laid bare.

In addition to the thematic portrayal of erotic capital, the operation of the cinematic gaze in the selected films also warrants attention. Contrary to Laura Mulvey's argument about the male gaze, where the camera and narrative structure align with positioning women as objects of male desire (1973), the selected films offer a more complex negotiation. As Andrew Dix argues, various features of mise-en-scène do not harmoniously exist together, but often develop tensions that disturb the smooth functioning of the film (2016). Even though the female body is foregrounded through close-ups, sensual costumes, and eroticized visual imagery, these elements do not often produce uncomplicated visual pleasure for the spectator; rather they disrupt voyeuristic looking by relating eroticism with revenge, trauma, violence, and grief. The gaze becomes confrontational as the camera shifts from erotic portrayal to physical and psychological suffering, compelling viewers to acknowledge the violence within male desire. As a result, the male gaze is destabilized, oscillating between attraction, moral disquiet, and discomfort.

Beyond this visual dynamic, the selected female characters may also be understood within the broader context of Malayalam cinema as a cultural industry that reflects social notions of gender. In addition to entertainment, cultural industries engage in circulating meanings and ideologies related to sexuality, femininity, and power. While the revenge narratives discussed in this study grant their female protagonists a certain level of agency through the use of their erotic capital, they simultaneously reveal the social constraints that limit such agency. Thus, these films not only portray women's resistance to patriarchy but also uncover the structures that govern female representation in Malayalam cinema. By analyzing how erotic capital is strategically navigated by women in the selected films, the study explores the intricate relationship between power, gender, and cultural production in Malayalam film industry.

Understanding erotic capital

The concept of erotic capital, as expressed by the British sociologist Catherine Hakim, incorporates a range of aspects such as beauty, charm, and sexual appeal that can enhance the attractiveness and social influence of an individual (2011). She posits it as being equally important as social and human capital.

Simultaneously, Judith Butler in *Bodies that matter* argues that sex is not a fixed biological fact, but a regulatory ideal that is enforced and materialized over time. This is attained through the reinstatement of norms related to a body's behavior, appearance, and performance (1993). Thus, it plays a crucial role in the materialization of sex and gender performance, indirectly paving the way for the objectification of the female body. As this gains societal influence, the demand for sex from women intensifies. Here, Lorde's opinion of the necessity of reclaiming the role of erotic power in dismantling oppressive structures comes into play. She further suggests that by accepting and manipulating the codes of femininity, women not only conform to patriarchal expectations of sex but also indirectly use it as a means of enacting revenge and reclaiming agency. This is where we can bridge Butler's and Lorde's notions, resulting in the idea that by realizing erotic capital as a source of power, women can challenge oppressive patriarchal forces.

However, this understanding of the empowering potential of erotic capital remains contested. In contrast to Hakim's assertion that erotic capital can be empowering, Dana Kaplan and Eva Illouz argue in *What is sexual capital* that social mobility obtained through erotic capital is ultimately a tool of patriarchal oppression rather than empowerment (2022). They introduced the concept of sexual capital, which is defined as the resources and advantages that an individual can gain from their sexuality. "In common sociological usage, sexual capital refers to the returns people may receive from investing money, time, knowledge, and affective energy in constructing and enhancing their sexual self, the aspect of their identity that concerns sexuality" (Illouz, 2022, p. 3). This critique can be countered by recognizing that erotic capital coexists with power dynamics and inequalities, offering a lens through which individual agency within

these structures can be examined. Furthermore, acknowledging the existence of erotic capital need not necessarily endorse gender stereotypes; rather, it can be an initiation to examine how these dynamics operate to find ways to challenge them.

Considering the threat that women's erotic capital can pose to a male dominant society, it has been suppressed by patriarchal power structures and is often considered taboo. As Audre Lorde reiterates in *The uses of the erotic*, it has been misnamed as pornography, preventing women from leveraging it in empowering ways. "The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic" (1978, p. 88). This constrains them from using their erotic capital to express and enhance their social standing. It is made to believe that only by the suppression of this power that women can truly be strong (Lorde, 1978).

While this study adopts theoretical frameworks developed by Western thinkers, it also acknowledges the limitations of using such concepts in Malayalam cinema without adequate cultural contextualization. In a caste- and class- driven community like Kerala, it is difficult to rely solely on Western theories to understand the nuances of female agency, eroticism, and spectatorship in the region's films. Nevertheless, this study does not treat these theories as universally applicable; rather, it deploys them critically to examine how concepts like erotic capital operate within Malayalam cinema – a space where female sexuality is regulated and politicized simultaneously.

Method

This study employs content and discourse analyses as its primary research methods to analyze the portrayal of erotic capital in the selected Malayalam films. By organizing key scenes, character portrayals, cinematographic choices, and dialogues, these methods enable a qualitative exploration of the thematic, narrative, and visual content within the films to understand the

central concept. This study adopts close reading as its analytical strategy to examine scenes in which erotic capital plays a major role in the plot. It analyzes how narrative and visual elements create meanings of agency, female defiance, and revenge.

Contextualizing Malayalam cinema

Cinema can be considered the biggest reference of human commitment towards the efforts to understand, interpret, and imagine the ‘social’ and ‘political’ in modern times. Malayalam cinema, in particular, has dealt with contemporary social realities and themes with a higher social and emotional impact that have the potential to spark strong debates (Sreekumar & Raj, 2023). Despite its relatively small market and low-budget productions, Malayalam cinema has made significant contributions to the Indian New Cinema movement, known for its offbeat approach rooted in the region (Arora, 2004).

Malayalam cinema has also explored intersectional narratives that reflect women’s diverse experiences. However, whether these experiences have been placed within the chaste domesticated domain, must be discussed. In her book *Women in Malayalam cinema: Naturalizing gender hierarchies*, Meena T. Pillai critically observes how female sexuality and desire are controlled within Malayalam films, using the film *Idavazhiyile Poocha Mindapoocha* (Alley Cat - Silent Cat) (Hariharan, 1979) as an illustration. “What is striking about the film is the overt aggressiveness with which the unfolding of female sexuality and clandestine desire is nipped off and not allowed to achieve even narrational fulfillment” (2010). The female protagonist of the film is outcast as a nymphomaniac when she is found to have sexual desire for her husband’s friend. In an industry where a considerable number of films portray men engaged in extra-marital relationships with normalcy, a similar expression from a woman is dealt with harsh moral judgment. Consequently, the narrative suppresses the development of sexual desire when it originates from a woman (Pillai, 2010), thereby reinforcing patriarchal control over female sexuality.

Despite the progressive reputation of the Malayali community, the representation of women’s erotic capital

– particularly when it involves elements such as nudity – might seem to remain a contentious issue, especially when Malayali female actors take on such roles. A recent incident surrounding Payal Kapadia’s Cannes Grand Prix winning film, *All We Imagine as Light* (Kapadia, 2024) underscores this dichotomy. As Princy Alexander accurately observes in her article published on the *Onmanorama* news portal, despite being an artistically acclaimed work that garnered global recognition, the film is famous among a segment of the Malayali audience for its focus on the lead actor’s (Divya Prabha) exposed bosom or a ‘leaked’ lovemaking scene, rather than its cinematic brilliance (2024). Adding to this discourse, Divya Prabha observes the stark hypocrisy in the audience’s reception. She expresses astonishment at how Malayali viewers laud international actors like Emma Stone and filmmakers such as Yorgos Lanthimos for their bold work in *Poor Things* (Lanthimos, 2023), while exhibiting discomfort and intolerance when similar artistic choices are made by Malayali women (2024). This disparity reflects a deeper cultural bias, revealing the limits of acceptance of representations of women’s agency and eroticism within the local context.

The depiction of women in Malayalam cinema may have often been shaped by a constructed set of ideals that women are expected to adhere to, even when portraying strong characters. Aneeta Rajendran in her article “You are woman: Arguments with normative femininities in recent Malayalam cinema”, refers to this as “normative femininity”, wherein most female characters conform to heterosexual and patriarchal norms (2014). Although the Malayalam film industry has introduced diverse female characters, the portrayal of their sexual or erotic autonomy is not given much focus, possibly due to its adherence to the framework of “normative femininity”. However, some films challenge this by presenting female characters with agency over their bodies. This article examines three such Malayalam films that complicate the portrayal of female protagonists by delving into themes such as their expression of sexual desire and erotic power. These depictions disrupt expectations of “normative femininity”, offering audiences compelling and complex portrayals.

The narratives of the selected films incorporate women's use of their bodies as a mode of revenge. In a patriarchal society, where female sexuality is often deemed dangerous and subject to control, the female protagonists navigate the erotic power of their bodies to confront and resist the dilemmas caused by male dominance in their lives. In the article, "Body, gender and sexuality: Politics of being and belonging", Sabala and Meena Gopal strongly articulate how women's bodies have become a site of resistance as the domination imposed on them becomes unbearable. According to them, "when women start perceiving the body as a resource, recognize their personhood and identity, then agency and empowerment come into play and women take possession of their body" (2010, p. 50). Moreover, the authors also expound how women's body, as a symbol of identity and a site for transgression, has allowed them to turn it into a mode of empowerment, thereby navigating and resisting the forces that seek to control them. "Women have also used their bodies as resources to survive a harsh everyday life in a world that is ordered by relations of gender inequality and economic necessity. Even as the body has been symbolized as giving identity, a sense of personhood and recognition, women have used it as an instrument for subversive expression and transgression" (Sabala & Gopal, 2010, p. 46).

Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu: The strategic use of beauty and seduction

Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu is one of the most notable women-oriented films in the female revenge drama genre of Malayalam cinema. The title, which translates to "her eyes lined with kohl, she dons the bindi", signifies the protagonist Bhadra's strategic use of her appearance and erotic capital to fulfill her vengeance. Directed and written by T. K. Rajeev Kumar, the narrative centered around a formidable peasant woman, Bhadra (Manju Warrier), positions the film ahead of its time. As Jumana P. notes in her thesis, Bhadra is portrayed as an unforgiving daughter, with fire in her eyes and ache in her heart, determined to avenge the murder of her parents (2018).

Bhadra's vengeance is rooted in the deep injustices faced by her parents, who were loyal workers at the estate of a wealthy landlord, Natesan (Thilakan). Her father, Chandrappan (Siddique), was a trade union leader who led a protest against Natesan demanding fair wages for the workers. Moreover, Natesan had harbored lustful intentions toward Bhadra's mother, Gouri, who consistently rebuffed his advances. Natesan kills Chandrappan and fabricates a story to cover up the crime, alleging that Chandrappan had ordered the workers to bury him alive as a sacrifice to avert a breach in the embankment and this story spreads like a folklore. To escape Natesan's relentless advances, Gouri commits suicide. Her death, witnessed by young Bhadra, left her with a deeply traumatic childhood, fueling her determination for vengeance. Fifteen years later, Bhadra infiltrates Natesan's household, first as a field worker and later as a domestic helper. Over time, she realizes that Uthaman (Biju Menon), Natesan's son, who had murdered her father's friend (Chackochi) was also as exploitative as Natesan. The story then unfolds as Bhadra skillfully uses her erotic capital to seek revenge, turning it to manipulate the very system that exploited her.

Once Bhadra realizes the power of her body, the film navigates her through carefully crafted visual framing and mise-en-scène. The second half of the film focuses on the techniques she adopts to execute her plan through lighting, camera, and costume. She adorns herself in a *settumundu* (traditional Kerala saree), accentuates her look with a red bindi, sharpens her eyes with black kajal, and lets her hair hang down, embodying a powerful and assertive persona. This deliberate enhancement of her appearance is highlighted through close-up shots of her lips, eyes, anklets, hair, and body manners. Through this thoughtful self-presentation, she reasserts her identity, transforming cultural adornments into tools of defiance.

Natesan and Uthaman, as privileged landlords, represent the systemic exploitation of working-class women, whose bodies are reduced to sexual objects. The women workers in their field are compelled to work with their chests uncovered, a practice that Bhadra boldly questions at the beginning of the film. While the bodies of working-class women were considered polluted, they

were expected to be sexually available to the landlords. According to Sabala and Meena Gopal, “.... the bodies and sexuality of the women of the lower castes/classes was available to all. They could be used and abused by all men in power” (2010, p. 47). Bhadra subverts this dynamic by turning her erotic capital into a tool of resistance.

Bhadra, having strategically gained job as a housekeeper in Natesan’s house, finds herself the target of Uthaman’s sexual advances. With cunning precision, she reverses the power dynamic, transforming his lust into the instrument of his own destruction. Rajeev Kumar, places Uthaman and Bhadra within asymmetrical framings to visually mark the shifting power relations. Seductive scenes often begin with medium shots before shifting to close-up shots of gestures and bodily proximity, thereby creating an apparent intimacy.

Bhadra’s plan with Natesan is a layered and calculated strategy. By allowing him to believe that she is drawn to his power, Bhadra gains his trust and ensures his downfall. Natesan’s Ayurvedic treatment (a traditional Indian system of holistic healing using herbal medicines) acts as a catalyst for Bhadra’s execution of her strategy, providing more opportunities to create scenarios of being physically close to him. By positioning herself as his caretaker, Bhadra further solidifies Natesan’s trust and effectively eliminates any suspicion he might harbor. A discussion between Natesan and his *vaidyar* (Ayurvedic doctor) reveals the belief that the presence of a young virgin girl can aid an old man’s recovery, providing Bhadra with the perfect opportunity to execute her plan. Bhadra uses the moments of proximity such as massages to heighten Natesan’s attraction towards her, thereby surreptitiously exploiting Natesan’s sexual vulnerability as a means to defeat him. The camera alternates between Natesan’s desire and Bhadra’s restrained expressions, exposing the irregular gendered power dynamics.

To set the climax of her revenge, Bhadra lures both Natesan and Uthaman to the paddy field where her father was buried years ago. She reveals her identity to Natesan by repeating the words he once used to sexually objectify her mother:

My heart stirs when her anklets jingle. My entire body trembles when she lets her hair down. That small red

bindi feels like it’s calling out to me. What beauty she possesses! It feels as though the creator crafted her with the utmost care, solely to disturb the slumber of mankind. (Kumar, 1999, 2:00:07)

This revelation leaves Natesan in shock, and by the time Uthaman also arrives, they get into a fight out of jealousy and hostility. As it starts to rain, they stumble into a waterlogged field, which floods after Bhadra breaks the embankment where her father was buried. A power cable snaps and falls into the water, electrocuting them both. The flooded field, the rain, and the embankment serve as metaphors for justice cleansing off oppression, fortifying the film’s critique of feudal patriarchy. The chaotic movement of the camera during the fight between Natesan and Uthaman symbolizes the overthrow of patriarchal dominance.

22 Female Kottayam: Sexual violence and retribution

22 Female Kottayam is one of the most celebrated and debated female-oriented films in the Malayalam film industry. Directed by Aashiq Abu and written by Syam Pushkaran and Abhilash S. Kumar, the story revolves around the life of a 22-year-old Malayali-nurse, Tessa (Rima Kallingal) from Kottayam (Kerala), whose life takes a dramatic turn after she meets Cyril (Fahadh Faasil), a travel agent, during her journey to pursue her career abroad. Tessa’s character represents the broader demographic of Malayali nurses, particularly from the central Travancore belt of Thiruvalla and Kottayam, who migrated overseas from the 1970s onwards. This migration, initially frowned upon, gradually became a common aspiration because of its high financial remittances (Sebastian, 2016). This historical context situates Tessa’s story within a broader socio-economic framework, highlighting the gendered dimensions of migration and labor. The film explores Tessa’s romantic relationship with Cyril, which quickly becomes exploitative. Her life takes a traumatic turn when she is raped by Cyril’s boss Hegde (Pratap K. Pothan). Although Cyril ostensibly seeks revenge, he ultimately betrays her. As the narrative progresses, Tessa is falsely charged with drug possession and imprisoned. In the prison, she

befriends Zubeida (Resmi Sateesh), who reveals Cyril's true identity: a pimp who deceives and exploits women with Hegde, who has a history of sexual violence

including the rape of an eight-year-old girl. This revelation exposes the systemic nature of their violence.



Figure 1 Scenes from the film *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* (1999)

Source: Prime Video



Figure 2 Scenes from the film *22 Female Kottayam* (2012)

Source: Sun NXT

Upon her release, now profoundly transformed, Tessa embarks on a journey of retribution against the men who exploited her. Zubeida's guidance becomes pivotal as she instils in Tessa the realization that her body, often weaponized against her, can also be a source of power. In

a poignant scene, Zubeida tells Tessa, "We women are born with a weapon. That is both our problem and our power" (Abu, 2012, 1:28:03). This paradoxical statement encapsulates the film's central theme: the duality of the female body as both a site of oppression and a tool of

resistance. As Usha Venkitakrishnan and Sunil George Kurien remark, rape victims are often degraded and outcasted in society (2003). Tessa reenters into this hostile social landscape, resolute to dismantle the system that oppressed her. With the help of DK (Zubeida's friend) she orchestrates the murder of Hegde using a venomous cobra. Her friend Tissa K. Abraham, plays a crucial role in executing this plan by manipulating Hegde through the tactical use of her sexuality.

The culmination of Tessa's revenge is when she confronts Cyril. She meets him at his studio, pretending to be an aspiring model. Although Cyril eventually realizes her identity, Tessa seduces him and gains his trust to execute her plan. By the end of that night, Tessa accomplishes her mission of revenge by castrating Cyril. As Rohini Sreekumar and Sony Jalarajan Raj assert, "she neutralizes the power of phallus from the pimp that defines his life by it because the emptiness that this castration

delivers is far more lethal than any other punishment" (2023, p. 116).

The setting of Cyril's studio deepens the film's commentary on visual perception. Through the camera's repeated attention to factors such as subdued lighting, intimate framing, interior space, and bodily proximity, the film allows spectatorship to coexist with an awareness of Tessa's hidden intention of strategic manipulation of sexual desire. Moreover, the use of shot/reverse-shot editing – which allows "for a close matching of the characters' positions" (Bordwell et al., 1979) highlights the emotional tension between Tessa and Cyril in the studio scene. While Cyril perceives the encounter as a sexual intimacy, the spectator gradually recognizes Tessa's strategic execution of her plan of revenge. Thus, the alternate framing technique supports the film's portrayal of Tessa's journey from victimhood to vengeance, challenging conventional narratives of female passivity.



Figure 3 Scenes from the film *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014)

Source: JioHotstar

***Iyobinte Pusthakam*: Desire, deception, and the disruption of patriarchy**

Iyobinte Pusthakam (2014), a gripping Malayalam action-thriller directed by Amal Neerad and written by Gopan Chithambaram and Syam Pushkaran, is set against the lush backdrop of mid-20th century Munnar. The film delves deeply into themes of power and revenge,

unravelling through the turbulent dynamics of a patriarchal family. At its core is the family of Iyob (Lal) and his three sons: Ivan (Jinu Joseph), Dimitri (Chemban Vinod), both ruthless and driven by ambition, and Alosy (Fahadh Faasil), a compassionate soul who returns home after serving in World War II. Iyob, the father of the three sons, is a cunning landowner who rises to prominence

under the patronage of a British planter, Harrison (Sal Yusuf). Following Harrison's death, Iyob illegitimately claims his property by throwing out Kazhali (Lena), a woman from a marginalized community whom Harrison had kept as his partner and the rightful heir of his property.

Rahel (Padmapriya Janakiraman), the daughter of Thacho (one of Harrison's servants), represents a complex subversion of traditional feminine archetypes. Thacho (Sunny Kottayam), executed under Harrison's orders due to his association with Kazhali, leaves behind Rahel, whom Harrison asks Iyob to protect as a means of atonement. However, Iyob's decision to arrange her marriage with Dimitri – a man notorious for his womanizing tendencies – sets the stage for a tragic yet calculated tale of revenge. The film's narration delivers a powerful statement as it unveils Rahel's true identity to the audience: "Rahel was the landmine that Harrison had left behind" (Neerad, 2014, 2:08:08). She initially appears to conform to traditional domestic roles, performing acts of servitude and submission. However, beneath this facade, she meticulously strategizes the destruction of the man and his family responsible for her father's death.

As Dimitri's wife, Rahel endures years of sexual abuse and torture in silence. However, as the film progresses, it becomes evident that she was strategically using Ivan as a pawn in her plan to kill her husband. Her scrupulous use of seduction as a means of manipulation is apparent in her relationship with Ivan, whom she lures into an affair to further her scheme. In a decisive moment, when Dimitri physically assaults Rahel, Ivan intervenes abruptly. This raises Dimitri's suspicions about Ivan's frequent visits to Rahel, sparking a violent confrontation between the brothers. Amidst this altercation, Rahel seizes the opportunity to kill Dimitri by striking him from behind, with Ivan delivering a final blow. Immediately after, Rahel reveals her true intentions to Ivan, exposing the entire sequence as a fastidiously planned act of vengeance.

A crucial scene in the film occurs when Rahel subtly challenges Ivan's authority, questioning his claim over his brother's murder: "So, who did you actually kill for that?" (Neerad, 2014, 2: 06: 58). This provocation not only undermines Ivan's male ego but also underscores Rahel's

intelligence and agency, positioning her as the true architect of the family's destruction.

Iyob, now aware of Rahel's intentions, grows increasingly paranoid. In a pivotal scene, Rahel watches Iyob flee the house, a triumphant smile spreading across her face. Shortly thereafter, Ivan and his men pursue Iyob, indicating that Rahel has informed Ivan of Iyob's escape with the property documents. This act not only instigates a violent confrontation between father and son but also underscores Rahel's strategic manipulation of the household's power dynamics.

Rahel's mastery over these dynamics is further illustrated through her alliance with Angoor Rawther (Jayasurya), a wealthy Tamil trader. Despite Iyob's opposition, his sons forge pacts with Rawther, and Rahel capitalizes on this relationship. She cajoles Rawther to eliminate Ivan in exchange for her companionship and the promise of ownership over the estate. As Josephine and Catherine argue in their article, Rahel's ability to evoke desire in those around her becomes a central mechanism of her power. Ivan's desire for Rahel leads to Dimitri's death, while Rawther's desire for her results in Ivan's demise (2021). Through these calculated manoeuvres, Rahel ensures that the conflicts among the male characters culminate in the death of Iyob, Ivan, and Angoor Rawther. Notably, Rahel refrains from targeting Alosy, despite making a subtle advance toward him. This distinction highlights her nuanced approach to revenge; unlike the other men in the family, Alosy had neither harmed nor abused her.

The culmination of Rahel's vengeance is marked by her suicide, a narrative choice open to multiple interpretations. Her death may signify the exhaustion of her existence following the fulfilment of her revenge, or it may serve as a commentary on the cyclical nature of violence, wherein women who transgress societal norms are ultimately erased. Her trajectory in *Iyobinte Pusthakam* aligns with broader feminist discourses on the intersection of erotic capital and power, demonstrating how sexual agency can serve as both an instrument of resistance and a tool of subjugation within patriarchal frameworks.

The film's mise-en-scène reinforces Rahel's triumph, particularly through the symbolic act of her blood splashing onto a *Gone with the Wind* poster. This striking visual metaphor underscores themes of control, retribution, and the subversion of traditional power structures. Throughout the film, the camera frequently lingers on Rahel's restrained expressions and prolonged silences, capturing her calculated responses to the events unfolding within the household. By employing close-up shots which emphasize details of gestures (Bordwell et al., 1979), the film invites spectators to reflect on cues beneath Rahel's outward passivity.

Furthermore, the background score accompanying Rahel's presence enhances the theme of erotic power that surrounds her. The music underscores her dual role as both a strategist and a victim, enhancing the complexity and tension of her character. Through these cinematic techniques, the film not only emphasizes Rahel's centrality to the narrative but also invites an intense exploration of her erotic capital and silent resistance that challenge patriarchal structures which seek to confine her.

Reclaiming the female body as resistance

According to Sara Ahmed, "feminism might pick up from the experiences that leave us vulnerable and exposed" (2017, p. 22). The body becomes a site where patriarchal power is negotiated, experienced, and resisted. In this sense, feminism develops through the embodied experience of violence, fear, and vulnerability. The selected protagonists' pursuit of vengeance and resistance stem from the transformation of their trauma, oppression, and humiliation into agency. The films discussed in this study emanate two different forms of vengeance driven by experiences caused by patriarchal forces. Tessa in *22 Female Kottayam* seeks retribution for rape – a crime which is most often delineated due to the interaction of factors such as hegemonic framings of sexual violence in the media, societal perceptions of shame and honour, and the role of legal and political structures (Lodhia, 2015). On the other hand, Bhadra in *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* and Rahel in *Iyobinte Pusthakam* depict revenge driven by murder of their parents. Tessa's transformation manifests through her bodily agency and sexuality as sites of

revenge, shattering conventional victim narratives. Bhadra's controlled seduction becomes a means to penetrate and ultimately overthrow feudal power structures and Rahel's sophisticated manipulation of desire serves as her weapon to orchestrate the collapse of her oppressors.

Additionally, while this study forefronts gender as a central axis of analysis, it remains attentive to the fact that gender cannot be treated as an isolated category. Factors such as class, socio-historic background, and caste can intersect in complex ways to shape agency and vulnerability. Although such identities are experienced at individual selves, they reflect larger systems of power which determine an individual's privilege (Shields, 2008). In the selected films, the protagonists' ability to navigate their erotic capital is often mediated by their class position, urban mobility, and educational access. For example, Tessa's professional background and urban autonomy significantly differ from Bhadra's navigation of feudal hierarchies. Similarly, Rahel's location within a colonial-capitalist plantation economy redefines the possibilities and risks of her resistance. The social class of a person often mediates agency, resulting in an uneven distribution of access to resources and modes of resistance. Owing to her professional status and urban mobility, Tessa has more resources to fall back on than Rahel and Bhadra, allowing the former with less immediate risk in navigating her erotic capital (Sara, 2017). Therefore, erotic capital functions as a socially stratified strategy, revealing the intersectional dimensions associated with gendered resistance.

Within these unequal social conditions, revenge emerges as a recurring mode of emotional and narrative framework. In all three films, revenge functions as a central plot driver. According to Grobbink et al., a person's revenge is not only shaped by external injury but also by their emotional and psychological endurance, including their way of processing internal humiliation, hurt, injustice, or betrayal (2014). The tendency to seek revenge is subjective and remains relatively consistent over time. Within the selected films, revenge moves beyond an individual psychological response and can be theorized as a gendered form of resistance and survival.

Unlike conventional masculinist portrayals of revenge – characterized by weapons, physical power, and violence – the female protagonists rely on their erotic capital to avenge sexual assault and parental murder. However, this form of revenge is neither uncomplicated nor unilateral. It becomes a two-way harm in which the avenging women also simultaneously suffer. Their pursuit of vengeance signals a lack of faith in institutional justice and societal protection, especially for orphaned or socially marginalized women who lack familial and social support structures. Hence, revenge in this context is not a mere act of retribution but a strategic mode of self-assertion and resistance, while simultaneously raising concerns about their existential aftermath and social reintegration.

The analysis of the three selected films depicts a significant departure from established representations of female sexuality in cinema. These narratives collectively disrupt the patriarchal gaze that traditionally reduces women's allure for male gratification, instead positioning erotic capital as a means of female assertion. Each protagonist demonstrates strategic engagement with sexual agency to navigate and suppress oppressive systems in distinct yet thematically connected ways. The examined films collectively illustrate how female protagonists – often peripheralized within cinematic narratives – seize narrative control through calculated performances of power and desirability. By transforming sexuality from a mode of oppression into an instrument of vengeance and a powerful means of subversion, justice, and self-empowerment, films like *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu*, *22 Female Kottayam*, and *Iyobinte Pusthakam* challenge the patriarchal narratives and dominant ideological constructs.

Conclusion

The exploration into Malayalam cinema's portrayal of women's erotic capital as a tool of revenge contributes significantly to the discourse on the intersection of sexuality, body, power, and gender, offering diverse perspectives on how women navigate their agency within patriarchal societies. By examining Bhadra in *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu*, Tessa in *22 Female Kottayam*, and Rahel in *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, this study

highlights the distinct ways in which women reclaim and navigate their agency within patriarchal societies. These narratives reveal how erotic capital – encompassing social skills, physical attractiveness, and psychological manipulation can be strategically wielded as a mode of empowerment and resistance.

The themes discussed in these films resonate beyond Malayalam cinema, finding parallels in other regional films. Characters like Aarti in *Khoon Bhari Maang* (1988, dir. Rakesh Roshan) (Hindi), Andrea in *Vada Chennai* (2018, dir. Vetrimaaran) (Tamil), and Nandhini in *Ponniyin Selvan: I* (2023, dir. Mani Ratnam) (Tamil), further illustrate how women's erotic capital is utilized as a means of empowerment across diverse cultural and cinematic contexts. These portrayals can be explored further for understanding similar themes in the broader cinematic landscape.

Beyond its analysis of the selected films, this study contributes to feminist film theory by reconsidering the representation of female sexuality in Malayalam cinema. By framing erotic capital as a site of agency, the study intervenes in feminist film theory by suggesting that its strategic use can reshape spectatorship and complicate classical Mulveyan frameworks of the gaze. The study also extends Catherine Hakim's idea of erotic capital and Audre Lorde's finding of erotic as a source of power into the context of cinematic analysis, thereby offering a methodological template to interpret women's eroticism as a performative method in regional films. In doing so, the study enriches feminist film discourse by highlighting culturally specific ways of intersection among sexuality, resistance, and revenge within the socio-historical context of Malayalam cinema. Moreover, by centering female perspectives and experiences, the study confronts patriarchal narratives that frequently sideline or erase women's voices. This aligns with the core aim of feminist film theory: to provide a critical lens for examining how cinema can reinforce, mirror, or challenge gender power dynamics. Altogether, the study opens avenues for exploration of evolving roles of women in cinema and society.

Limitations

In contemporary discussions, the focus on women's physical beautification is increasingly being questioned, making it important to clarify that this article does not equate erotic capital solely with outward appearance or bodily adornment. While characters like Bhadra in *Kannezhuthi Pottum Thottu* and Rahel in *Iyobinte Pusthakam* use conventional markers of beauty and seduction as part of their strategies, Tessa in *22 Female Kottayam* relies on strategic agency, psychological manipulation, and calculated decision-making to achieve her objectives. The representation of erotic capital in these narratives, therefore, encompasses various tactics, both explicit and subtle, that women use to challenge patriarchal power structures. This complexity underscores the nuanced ways in which women assert agency, resist oppression, and navigate systemic inequalities.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

The authors have utilized Generative AI tools exclusively for the purpose of enhancing language clarity and readability. These tools were at no point used to generate original scholarly ideas or comments, nor did they substitute the author's intellectual contribution. Following the use of AI assistance, the authors thoroughly reviewed the whole manuscript and assume full responsibility for it. By declaring this limited use of AI, the authors reaffirm their commitment to the publisher's ethical principles.

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ⁱ *Gone with the Wind* poster. (1939). Directed by Victor Fleming. Selznick International Pictures.