

Online Misogyny and Cyber Attacks: An Analysis of Social Media Discourses in Kerala

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Abstract

Over the years, with potential interfaces for extreme interactivity, social media have apparently turned out to what Jean Baudrillard terms hyperreal- that represent a “better real”. However, these platforms are not purely what its owners created, but what people attribute to it and how they appropriate it in different socio- cultural and political contexts. Hence, the power relations both in macro and micro level contributes enormously to the discourses evolving in social media platforms. This paper seeks to analyses the discourses in social media in the wake of award winning Malayalam actress Parvathy’s criticism of patriarchy prevailing in Malayalam film industry pointing to the “misogynistic” dialogues in Mammootty starrer film Kasaba. Analysing the messages, tolls and comments that appeared in the Facebook pages of Parvathy and Women in Cinema Collective and the comments under the video song of the upcoming movie of Parvathy, My Story this paper tries to understand the interplay of patriarchy, fans and shaming of actress. The discourses of misogyny underpin threats and vociferous appeal for a collective boycott of Parvathy’s films. In this context, the paper examines how patriarchy overruns the political economy of film industry.

Key words: Patriarchy, Political Economy, IFFK, Kasaba, My Story

Introduction

The tools and technologies of human communication have been undergoing tremendous metamorphosis throughout the ages. The history of all hitherto existing media can be seen as a process of refashioning where each medium was striving to achieve immediacy and hyper mediacy (Bolter & Grusin, 2003). As Bolter and Grusin (2003) put it, both the new and old media will engage in an equally contributing effort to remake themselves and each other. In a sense, when the newly introduced medium tries to cover up the limitations of older medium by providing much more user friendly options, the older medium also tries to reshape it to ensure its existence in the array.

Today we live in a world where the geographical boundaries and time constraints blurred to a great extent with the pervasive potential of fluid cyber technologies. Social Media transformed our life into an unimaginable landscape where the technologies have a significant impact on the way we live in, interact with each other, how we die and what we are after the death too (Elaine Kasket, 2013). At the same time, human intellect and capabilities are constantly reshaping and remoulding the technologies and networking platforms to make them much more flexible and fluid.

According to Robert Payne (2014), by the second decade of the 21st century we have shifted to a more complex age of Virality from a period what Bolter and Grusin (1999) termed as the age of Mediality. In the time of Mediality we witnessed the virtual production and circulation of texts, visuals and audio, whereas the age of Virality is further characterized with its potential to spread the media contents more like the structural functioning of the virus. The uncontrollable and rapid circulation of media contents through Social Networking Sites are being materialized easily because of the horizontal structure of the platform- which can be attributed to the notion of Rhizomatic construction of Gilles Deleuze (2007). The social media communication, to a great extent, move away from the traditional hierarchies of content movements where a powerful producer pumped the messages to the less privileged consumers. Even though the political economy of these platforms apparently contributes to strengthen the profit driven motives of the neo-liberal regimes, the way the media content circulates among the networks always have multiple openings and this contributes almost to an ongoing progression of the contents.

The popularity of social media platforms has had a significant impact on social discourses that fall in varied interests. As dialogue and participation take the centre stage in these platforms, a networked society of participatory culture has emerged (Castells, 2012, Jenkins, 2009). This participatory culture has been serving contradictory changes in the way people engage in a discourse and the way a discourse is being created. Cyber-attacks, trolls and bullying have become

common terms in these days and majority of social media discourses, one or the other way, entail these emerging phenomena.

Kerala, as one of the states with higher literacy rate and internet penetration, has a considerable number of social media users which largely involve in the public discourses. Intertwining a strong thread with the real life events, the social media population of the state has many a times proved to be crucial in driving and shaping the public opinion. However, the underlying socio- cultural and political power relations have been playing a vital role in the discursive practices in the social media platforms too.

Kerala has been witnessing a heated discourse over the misogyny prevails in the film industry of the state, which has particularly got a fillip ever since the famous actress Parvathy made a remark in the open session of International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK). The social media have been the driving force of these discourses which gradually seemed to be an apparent cyber-attack. This paper analyses these social media discourses and seeks to explore the interplay of patriarchy and political economy of the film.

Patriarchy and the Disciplining of Female Body

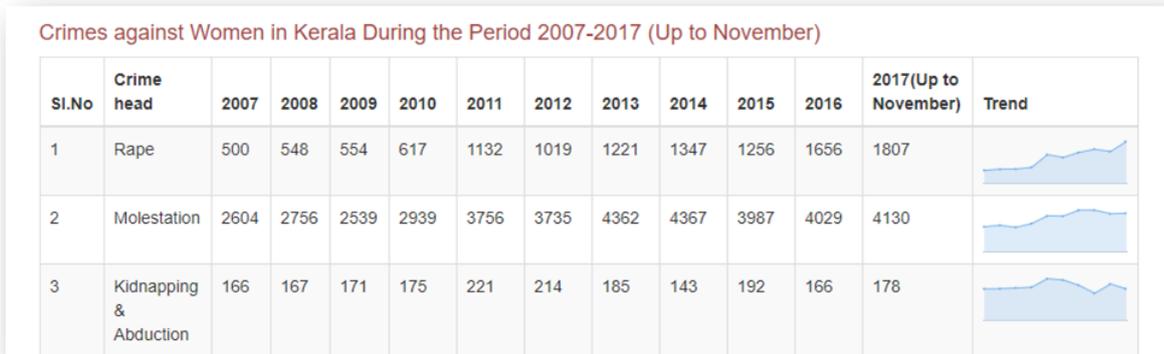
Subjectivity has been a vital concern for Foucault (1981) throughout his philosophical enquiries, and he locates the process of subjectivation in the centre stage in his conception of power. For Foucault (1981), subjectivity is very much premised on the social context and it is constituted through a “game of truth” that is nothing other than the power relations. Though Foucault’s works were predominantly gender neutral, his conceptions of subjectivity, knowledge, discourse and power could be significantly adopted to theorize female bodies, subjectivity and the patriarchy prevails in different socio-cultural contexts. Criticizing Foucault’s gender neutrality, and acknowledging the validity of his power conception, King (2004) propounds that, gender, femininity in particular “is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control”. According to King (2004), even when feminine lens of power is absent in Foucault’s work, the female body itself exemplify Foucault’s conception of discipline and power.

Patriarchy has been perceived as a disciplinary power that operates through the social institutions and as a regime that controls the female body and subjectivity. In a study on Kurdish women, Yaquabi (2016) observes patriarchy as a biopower in Kurdish society. Biopower, according to Foucault, is the technologies, knowledges, discourses, politics and practices, used to bring about the production and management of a state’s human subject, its body and behaviour. (Danaher, 2000). Yaquabi (2016) argues that patriarchy is inherently a biopower tool as it always holds the gazing power. Patriarchy establishes women as a descending individuals and thus close monitoring is easily materialized.

Patriarchy in Kerala

Kerala, the state which has higher dignity of social development, has also given some paradoxical reports in terms gender sensitivity and domestic violence. The recent study of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) proved to be one of such contradictory indicator where the NFHS report says 69 percent housewives in the state apparently endorse the domestic violence that they face. One of the leading newspapers of the state Mathrubhumi reports, “When compared to NFHS 3 result published 10 years back, the number of people who supported domestic violence have increased. In Kerala, 66 percent women and 54 percent men were supportive of domestic violence according to the previous survey”. In a study on the family structure, women’s education and work in Kerala Eapen and Kodoth (2003) perceives that the domestic violence and dowry system in the state indicate the embodied subordination of the women. According to a report published in the official website of Kerala Police, the crime against women in Kerala has been on gradual growth since 2007. In 2007, the total number of rape cases in Kerala were just 500 whereas in 2017 it reached a record statistic of 1807. A similar growth can be seen in molestation and abduction cases. Quoting S Sreekanth, Circle Inspector of Hi-tech cell, The New

Indian Express reports, “A minimum of three complaints are being received daily by the 19 cyber cells functioning in the state. This shows the social media abuse against women is soaring by no means. Most of the complaints are related to creating fake profiles and derogatory remarks” (The New Indian Express, Jan 6, 2018)



Picture 1: Crime against women in Kerala during 2007- 2017 (Source: <http://www.keralapolice.org/public-information/crime-statistics/crime-against-women>)

Referring Ramanathaiyer and MacPherson, (2000) Bradley and Pallikkadavath (2013) notes “The social situation in Kerala is deeply patriarchal and strong gender stereotypes prevail, which prevents freedom, mobility and independence among women”. Exploring the female labour force participation in the state, Muzumdar S and Guruswamy M (2006) perceives that, though the women in Kerala are enjoying better standard in comparison with other regions of the country, they have extremely low participation in economic related activities.

Locating the nexus of Patriarchy and Political Economy in Malayalam Film Industry

Analysing the prevailing misogyny in the film industry of Kerala and the patriarchal elements that are deep rooted in the social system of the state, Meena T Pillai (2017) argues that, despite holding the higher literacy rate, the labour atmosphere in Kerala in different workspaces such as industries, administrative and educational sectors are largely grounded and driven on misogyny. She perceives that the misogyny has been well entrenched in the “religious, social, cultural and political unconscious of the state”. The culture industry of the state, especially the film sector is found to be satisfying the male desires both in economic and libidinal terms and thus it has become “a suprstructural expression of reified capitalist patriarchy”.

Quoting the 68th report of National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), Meena T Pillai (2017) says that female labour participation in Kerala is miserably lagging compared to that of men. While males’ labour participation marks the figure of 57.8 percent, the female labour participation is just 24.8 percent. Meena T Pillai (2017) argues that the state has been witnessing the emergence of new patriarchies with the growing clutches of market economy where culture of commodification is an inherent norm. She observes the presence of a network in the Malayalam film industry wherein the super stars become the controllers of different entities inside the industry such as production, distribution, exhibition etc. This network eventually resulted in the formation of an ownership conglomerate which is largely driven by the stars.

Methodology

Grounding on the inputs gained from the relevant literature and theories, the researchers employed a qualitative textual analysis of the comments appeared under actress Parvathy’s Facebook posts and in the YouTube video song of the upcoming movie *My Story*. The comments for the analysis were taken through purposive sampling and were analysed

under two broad themes to trace the role of patriarchy in fans' cyber-attack and the correlation of fans and political economy of the film in social media discourses

Tracing the Role of patriarchy in Fans' Cyber-attack

Ever since actress Parvathy made a comment pertaining to the misogynist dialogue in the Mammooty starrer film *Kasaba*, the Facebook pages of Parvathy and Women in Cinema Collective (WCC) - the organisation which she is affiliated to, is flooded with an organised comment attack from seemingly the fans of Mammooty. Most of these comments apparently embody the patriarchal regime of truth and aims to discipline Parvathy's subjectivity. Several Facebook comments under Parvathy's Facebook posts, which were made after her remarks in the International Film Festival of Kerala, apparently mention her gender and tries to demean the women organisation that she is affiliated to. These comments directly try to generalize the opinion to the whole female population and attributes several negatives to the female. While majority of the comments are blatant attack on the actress with derogatory languages, in order to reflect on some of the apparent patriarchal elements in the fans' comments on Parvathy's Facebook posts, the following comments are taken for the discussion.

Comment 1: The status of both men and women will remain the same even if 99 percent reservation for women becomes a reality. Stupid persons like you signifies it.

Comment 2: The women society including you will always try to see what the others cannot. When you people curse, you will act as if you tease, when you people rejoice you will act as if you cry.

The above mentioned two comments carry the traditional and long standing patriarchal believes of Kerala society. While the first comment carries the logic of male dominated society where women are said to have less wisdom compared to that of men, the second comment tries to reinforce the patriarchal imagery of a women where they were attributed as someone who always wear a mask to masquerade the reality.

Comment 3: Don't think that you became popular. Feminism is a comedy.

Comment 4: Dear Feminichis (a word that uses to mock Feminists) don't expect standard comments from us. You people will get what you deserve.

The third and fourth comments are visibly attacking the feminist movements and tries to establish feminism as a bad thing which arguably deserves filthy languages from the public. In a lion majority of the comments in Parvathy's and WCC's post they were mentioned as 'Feminichis' which is a word with immense negative tone. The fourth comment carries an attacking the feminist movements and tries to establish feminism as a terrible thing which arguably deserves filthy languages.

Comment 5: Hi Number 1 feminist Parvathy! Don't come with these kinds of dialogues when women are ready to strip themselves if they are getting Lakhs. Don't you feel ashamed to reduce the size of your dress as the remuneration increases? First you go and purify the actresses and then make comments on men

Comment 6: Be it Manju Warriar, Bhavana, Kavya, Geethu Mohandas...all actresses are leading immoral life.

The above-mentioned comments try to make a blanket argument that the women in the film industry are demeaning the morality of the social fabrics. Both these comments try to establish the actresses as what Pitsoe and Letseka (2013) mentioned as "others" and tries to bring them as docile subjects.

Fans and Economy in Social media discourses

The whole social media discourses that happened after Parvathy's remarks were actually fueled by the fan base of Mammooty. The fans carried out an organised social media attack, especially in Facebook and Youtube which have apparently taken the issue to the economic arena. In Malayalam film industry, the Fans Associations of the stars play a

vital role in the political economy, both as common audience and as a decisive force to determine the subject position of the actors in the industry. These prevailing orders have had visible reflections in the social media comments of the fans in Parvathy's page. Some of the comments that carry this nature are taken for the discussion here.

Comment 1: You Feminichis became what you are with the money that we (the public) spent for the entertainment. Let see who will be there to watch your upcoming movies.

Comment 2: You people are earning your daily bread with film whereas for us it is mere entertainment. Better behave yourself

Comment 3: If we people (audience) could catapult you to the stardom we can pull your legs too.

Comment 4: Boycott Parvathy's film now onwards.

Comment 5: Nothing ends here... The producers who are planning to do a film of Parvathy, beware. If she is acting we will definitely boycott the film

Comment 6: Let us pray for the producer of My Story!

All the above-mentioned comments categorically sound a strong threat that has direct relation to the economy of the film. As fans associations play a seminal role in setting the public trend in the theatre, their organised boycott urges will have definite consequences. As Meena T Pillai (2017) observes, the film industry in Kerala is greatly run by a strong network that comprises stars, fans associations, and different organizations which ultimately constitute the political economy of the same.

Conclusion

The social media comments under the Facebook pages and the YouTube video song of the upcoming movie *My Story* significantly reflects on a thickly interwoven thread between the fans, patriarchy and political economy of the Malayalam film industry. The social media discourses are in a way turn out to be organised cyber-attacks towards women to discipline female subjectivity and thus perpetuate the patriarchal fabric that already prevails in the society. While the social media comments are analyzed in this paper to trace the interplay of patriarchy, fans and political economy, it should also be noted that these discourses never stay in isolation and these are the apparent reflection of the socio- cultural and political context that prevails in Kerala.

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