FEMALE STARDOM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE STAR IMAGE CONSTRUCTION OF MALAYALAM ACTRESS SHEEULA

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ABSTRACT:
The notion of Stardom in the film field dates back its origin from the Hollywood cinemas and gradually shifted to Bollywood and later to regional cinemas. Star value attracts the financial backing for a movie. Broadly speaking the idea of stardom was predominantly linked to male star. If it comes to female stars the concept of stardom is poles apart. Female stars in the industry were taken granted for the purpose of giving the audience a human sense of beauty and eroticism. This paper is an analysis of the stardom of the yesteryear Malayalam actress Sheela who ruled the Malayalam film industry constantly for 23 years, which is a rare concept in the regional cinema world. She has surpassed the glory of superstardom with 475 films in her credit; a record may be unfeasible for any prevailing actress to outshine. She began her acting career in 1965 and up to 1985 she was active in the limelight of the industry handling strong character roles. After a break of 18 years she returned to celluloid in 2003. 

Keywords: Charisma, Malayalam Cinema, Sheela, Star image, Star Value, Female Stardom, Male Stardom.

STARS AND STARDOM

“I use stars to make my cinema more effective ...........My films are better with stars than without”. (Jean - Pierre Melville)

The term stars refer to a conspicuous prodigy wherein occurs a shift in status or position of many actors or actresses achieving mass popularity either suddenly with the release of one film, in which he or she acted, or gradually with a number of movies. Stardom is measured in terms of his or her presence and the number of films or succession of films winning success at the box office. The greater is the success of the films, the more important becomes the stars charging more and more for his or her presence in some of the films (Morgin, 1961).

The star system, in fact, has remained from the daylights of the silent era of Indian cinema but, with the passing of time, the system became more and more stable, especially during the 1940’s when the presence of black money created its direct effect on this system. It is significant to observe that the life span of some stars totally depends on his fate and till the time a star is competent to attract audience otherwise, they become an unsolicited figure for any moving picture because the newcomer very frequently replaces the existing ones. But, even then the miracle of star - tantrum has survived for long and some of the stars of the early period continue to prevail over the silver screen (Arora, 2004).

More than the media depiction stardom is a vibrant course of production activity of the media industries and the media texts that amounts to the star images and viewers’ reaction. The interplay between the star screen images and off-screen images act as an important technique for the production of the star as a real life
Stars are so influential in the industry that they have the power to control the economic feasibility of the entire film world. Richard Dyer says that the concept of star phenomenon relies fully upon collapsing the difference linking the star as an individual and the star as a performer. Audiences invest a lot in cinema so engagement with movies has turned out to be a public and social activity (Metz, 1982). Stars are the vital element of all the major movie industry and play a crucial role in the production, distribution and marketing. For producers, a star is a raw material - a talent capable of producing steady and worthy performances. With an eye to capitalize the audience expectations and to further develop the star’s growing reputation writers, directors and producers occasionally design projects with a particular leading light in mind (Dyer & McDonald, 1998). The star vehicles, according to Richard Dyer, showcases that star’s persona and thus tell us that movies of a specific star have typical characteristics which result from the films’ effort to hint the aura of the star.

According to Dyer ‘charisma’ is one that key quality in the film stardom, which highlights, stars as being special and set apart them from other audience members investing them with obvious magical traits. Mary Ann Doane’s response in ‘Film and the masquerade: Theorising the female spectator’ suggests that viewers of both gender indulge in some sort of role play while they view movies. This allows for the opportunity that members of the audience identify with stars on screen across gender lines (Doane, 1982, pp: 74-87).

The Malayalam cinema unlike other regional cinema has its own flavour with film usually made on shoe – string budget. Besides, “the intellectual climate of the lively awareness of the educate middle class also helped in conditioning the preference of the audience, who apparently, does not have much use for escapist fantasies or vulgar display of repressed sex on screen. It is noteworthy that the concept of romantic hero does not find a place in the earlier Malayalam cinemas. Generally, the main characters of that time were workers, rickshaw pullers, fisherman or educated youth in search of jobs. All time popular actors of Malayalam cinema Sathyan, Madhu and Prem Nazir have rudeness in looks and bearing unthinkable in stars of Hindi or other regional cinema” (Arora, 2004, p.177). The Malayalam cinema, in spite of having a small market, with low budget films and literate, intellectual audience, has led to booming of an artistic, realistic, off beat cinema rooted in this region. It has also been one of the leading contributors to the Indian new cinema (Arora, 2004).

Though Malayalam cinema shares some qualities with other regional movie houses in India, Kerala’s precise socio-political status, which stands distant from the rest of the country, has made a payment for the making of a film culture that is quite cut. Malayalam cinema has played a prime part in imagining the Malayali as no other art form might possibly possess. It presented a new terminology for the Malayalis to stand for himself/herself in one which seems like more secular and independent than the languages of all

1 Kerala (Keralam), the south-west region state of India on the Malabar Coast was formed on 01 November, 1956. Malayali is the term attributed to the native speakers of Malayalam language.
earlier discourses in the artistic fields (Pillai, 2010).

To state clearly, “actor” is not a synonym for a “star”. Actors perform characters on-screen and a versatile actor generates composite characters. But a star’s existence goes beyond the performance. A star not only makes the character credible, but also possesses an overtly recognized charisma that entices spectators to the film and stay behind in the viewer’s mind even after they move from the theatre. While the stars may come by this charisma naturally, in largely studio heads, talent agencies, publicity outlet and the stars themselves cautiously endorse the public’s esteem (Rosen, 1981).

Superstars are those who makes substantial fame and achievement in their field and whose pay packet are greater than the income of their competitors. Superstardom in art is mainly by two factors: a hierarchy of talent and the flawless or almost ideal reproducibility of an art (Rosen, 1981). Moshe Adler (1985) describes a process for the emergence of a star, but in this course the star comes to light among the several talented artists. Here the emergence of the star happens from a chance event. Consumers opt for an artist at chance once they add a new face to their consumption basket and merely by good fortune one of these performers end up with more patrons than the rest. This opening benefit makes the fluky performer more popular. As consumers have a preference for popular artists, others will also have an inclination towards the artist and thus an initial advantage can thus snowball into superstardom (Adler, 1985).

For Malayali and for Malayalam cinema Sheela, the legendary actress from South India (Kerala) was an ultimate name of an actress who has captivated generations for nearly 23 years with her flawless style and magnificence. She perfected each and every character that came to her both in commercial and artistic value movies. She was the unchallenged queen of Malayalam film industry who was called as “Sheela Amma” by the industry with veneration. Sheela, one of the most successful female stars in the history of the Malayalam cinema as well as the Indian cinema was at her zenith as the main lead heroine in almost all the movies released during the period of 1962-1985. Sheela absolutely ruled the silver screen for 23 years as the leading female lead. Undoubtedly she is capable to be called both as a talented actor and a star; who created her own domain by her acting proficiency. Sheela’s star persona of good, strong, independent women is most obviously shaped by a canon of movies. She constantly looked for novelty in characters and was not ready to curb in enchanting roles. She always wanted to be the queen of the industry by her splendid performance and she inhabited the celluloid as an emperor (Gopalakrishnan, 2012, pp. 79-83).

GLIMPSES TO SHEELA’S STARDOM

Sheela, the celluloid queen of Malayalam cinema has acted in almost all the South Indian Languages (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam). She was fortunate to share screen with all prominent superstars like Prem Nazir, Sathyan (Manuel Sathyeneshan), Madhu (Madhavan Nair), Jayan (Krishnan Nair), Kamal Hassan, Rajani Kanth etc. Sheela was the first leading actress of the Malayalam cinema who acted in more than 475 films amid the period of 1962 to 1985. Subsequent to a gap of 18 years, in 2003

2 In 1985 at the peak of the career Sheela took a gap from acting to raise his only son George.
Sheela came back to the silver screen by playing a central role in the film *Manassinakkare* directed by Sathyan Anthikad.

Sheela, along with evergreen actor Prem Nazir have the Guinness book record of acting the largest number of movies (107) together successively as hero and heroine. The majority of her films with Prem Nazir were unbeaten at the box office having sober and sentimental stories with harmonious songs and sequences. She has acquired an archetypal momentous way of dialogue presentation and vibrant voice quality to amaze the audience and she had dubbed for her entire movies. Sheela who had a lower middle class upbringing started her career at the age of 13 to sustain her family going through hard times due to the sudden demise of her father, who was a railway employee. Sheela's career as an actress set in motion as a replacement in a drama structured by the railway employees. Though she had her debut in Tamil movie *Paasam* (1962) opposite to MGR\(^3\) her first feature film in Malayalam was *Bhagyajathakam* (1962) with Satyan. Like the name Bhagyajathakam (Lucky Horoscope) suggests; her entry to Malayalam cinema industry was too a Bhagyajathakam for her and to the cine world for getting such a competent and versatile actress (Dennis, 2014).

As an actress, she by no means keen on acting and left out every bit of the gratification of the childhood and teenage due to her hectic schedules in films. Though she starts off performing in Tamil movies she was not at ease with Tamil industry and immediately moved to Malayalam cinema when she was offered lead role in Bhagyajathakam. After Paasam, majority of the Tamil movies offered glamorous sexy roles intending to objectify her body. But Malayalam film industry greeted her with strong character roles which impelled her to plump for a lingering career in Malayalam movies (narrated by Sheela in an interview aired in Kairali Channel\(^4\)).

Stars are not at all known for their performances in movies, but also known for the off-screen image that circulates in several media texts such as gossips, promotional articles, and interviews (Naremore, 1998, p.157). The star images were created purposeful so the audiences can identify with a star and this image gives the star a unique identity thus enabled the studios to distinguish and market their films through stars. With their beauty, affluence and lifestyle stars embodies the glamour and charm of the film industry. A star is always known through his or her constructed image (Dyer & McDonald, 1998).

**SHAPING OF SHEELA’S STARDOM**


\(^3\) The Tamil actor Marudhur Gopalan Ramachandran is popularly known by his initials MGR.

\(^4\) Kairali Channel is an Indian television channel broadcasting in Malayalam language.
Chukku (1973), Sarapancharam (1979), Vazhve Mayam (1970) etc.

She gained a widespread appreciation for her role as Karuthamma in the President’s Gold Medal Award winner film Chemmeen (1965) directed by Ramu Kariat. The movie was grounded on the novel written by Jnanpith Award holder Thakazhy Sivasankara Pillai in the same name. Chemmeen (The Shrimp), an epic depiction of a particular fishing community in Kerala focuses on local culture, mythology and the issues related to caste and community differences. The vulnerable and concerned young woman sandwiched between the husband and the lover was acted tremendously by Sheela through her brilliant expressions.

In Thulabharam (1968) both Sheela and her contemporary Sarada exhibited stunning performance and the movie possessed a thundering hit. The movie focused on the adverse situation existed among the political and trade union’s related to the labour issues. It rendered a rational picture of the working class that frequently falls prey to the malevolence of the management-trade union conflicts in factories. Apart from Malayalam this super hit movie which won two National Awards was remade in Tamil, Telugu and Hindi. Sheela showed her bold performance as an advocate to find justice for her childhood acquaintance who was thrust to shoot down her children owing to penury.

In Adimakal (1969), Kadalpalam (1969) and Vazhve Mayam (1970) Sheela and the male lead Sathyan both showcased their tremendous acting skills. Adimakal (1969) based on a novel by Pamman bagged the National Award for the Best Feature Film in Malayalam and Film Fare Award for the Best Malayalam film. In the well received box office hit movie Kadalpalam (1969), Sheela and Sathyan (who handled dual roles of father and son) gained wide appreciation for their splendid acts. The movie was an adaptation of the widely accepted professional stage play of the same name authored by the prominent dramatist K. T. Mohammed. In Vazhve Mayam (1970) the character of a dutiful wife who is wedged in misunderstandings and suspicion of the marital life was safe in Sheela’s hands. The scuffle of a woman from her young age to the middle age for a reverential life who was misjudged in her life was depicted marvellously on the silver screen by this fabulous actress.

The film Kallichellamma (1969) based on a novel by G.Vivekanandan remained a great challenge in Sheela’s career for which, the critics admired her deeply. The Malayali spectators still remembers the multifaceted women Chellamma and only extremely gifted artists would be capable to carry out that character which she performed superbly. For this superb performance she secured the Best Actress Kerala State Film Award for the year 1969. Sheela’s bold and startling performance and her versatility in Kalaripayattu styles was witnessed in the movies based on Vadakkan Pattu stories (Ballads of North Malabar) like Othenante Makan (1970), Aromalunni (1972), Thumbolaarcha (1974), Kannappanunni (1977) and Kadathanattu Makkam (1978.). Kadathanattu Makkam (1978) holds a further specialism of being the 100th film featuring Prem Nazir and Sheela as the leading duo. (Gopalakrishnan, 2012)

Sheela co-starred with Kamal Hassan in Vishnu Vijayam (1974), Mattoru Seetha (1975) and in Eetta (1978). Mattoru Seetha directed by P Bhaskaran is a remake of the Telugu film O Seetha Katha

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5 Kalaripayattu, one of the oldest Indian martial in existence is widely practiced in Kerala.
Malayalam cinema was intensely influenced by the social realist aesthetic. The 1950’s and 1960’s was deemed as the literary decades dominated by literary works and in sixties, Malayalam cinema had produced strong women characters. The movies of this time are hence seen to endow its heroines with both a public and a private ideal. Films inexorably bear several relationships to the political and social values of the culture that produces and consumes them. Mainstream narrative films tend to articulate popular sentiments and frequently reflect the dominant ideological assumptions of their civilization (Pillai, 2010).

Sthanarthy Saramma (1966), Kanakachilanka (1966) Aswamedham (1967), Agniputhri (1967), Punnapra Vayalar (1968), Adimakal (1969), Ezhuuthatha Kadha (1970), Anubhavangal Paalichakal (1971), Kapatika (1973) are some of the movies that exposed Sheela’s sturdy courageous women characters with her exceptional performance. In the flick Makane Ninakku Vendi (1971) Sheela had played the character of Prem Nazir’s mother, with whom later she created a history in the Indian cinema. Whilst heroes are paid more in the film industry, Sheela was remunerated more than the male protagonist, Prem Nazir in the movie Thumbolaarcha (1974); this solitary event confirms her star value and her inevitability in the Malayalam movies (Dennis, 2014).


Looking from an industrial viewpoint stars can be seen as an element for investment. Since a star image guarantees profits and safe investments from companies outside the cinema industry, it is viewed as a form of capital. Stars are considered as marketing tools and their images are promoted with the intention of having an effect on the entertainment market (McDonald, 2000). Mary Ann Doane and Jackie Stacey emphasized the construction of female identity and the efforts of the female actors who try to define her in the patriarchal society. They deemed that a star is a construction, an outcome of the culture, industrially manufactured and prefabricated by men (Doane, 1987; Stacey, 1994).

“When Sheela’s contemporaries had a subtle, sensuous figure, hers is more vividly which the Malayalam cinema has
not witnessed yet. The Malayali audience was expecting such a sought of chubby and fleshy body figure and when she entered into the industry this hidden concept of the viewers about the female actress were fully satisfied and they were thrilled to see her on screen. The sensuous way of dialogue presentation was started from her. She was the superstar of the industry and also an object of desire for the audience. In her case nudity was expressed explicitly through camera movements. She never exposed her body, but had a magical power to evoke a sensuous feeling in the viewers and always carried a charm. She maintained the morality, what the malayali audience expected from her”® (John Paul, Script Writer).

Marjorie Rosen’s Popcorn Venus examines the female stars of each decade and accounts for the transformation of the female onscreen images with respect to women’s place in society at any one time. She says that movies not only reflect the social structures and changes, but also misrepresent them as per the fantasies of their male creators (Rosen, 1973, p.12).

Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, the most notable study that discussed the relation between women and the pleasures of film even though does not deal with stardom or female stars directly, but it looks at the placing of women in narrative cinema and talks about the relation linking spectator and star image. Mulvey argues that the concept of pleasure is imperative in the analysis of a star image and the spectators gain a particular pleasure from watching stars otherwise there won’t be any stars at all (Mulvey, 1975).

CONCLUSION
Sheela had tried her hand at direction by directing two films, *Yaksha Gaanam* (1976) and *Shikarangal* (1979) which was later remade in Tamil. For *Shikarangal* (1979) she wrote the story, script and screenplay. Even though she had played the lead in Thoppil Bhasi’s *Aswamedham* (1967), depicting the role of a leprosy patient, whom propagates positive messages to the general public regarding the stigma emotionally involved with the dreaded disease; the actress still had an ambition of doing an AIDS patient character. Sheela believes that stars are capable of creating awareness among the public through movies.

“She has surpassed the glory of superstardom with 475 films in her credit; a record may be unfeasible for any prevailing actress to outshine. No actresses from the Malayalam cine industry have broken the records owned by her and without mentioning Sheela’s career and her stardom the history of Malayalam cinema is incomplete. It’s not essential that a talented actor should be a star and vice versa. But in her case she is a blend of the two: a talented actress with a star value. Merely a few female actresses have got this appreciation and she is one among them”® (Byju Laila Raj, Artist).

As an actress, she was extremely selective and under no circumstances, sought to be confined in stereotyped roles and every time she held a preference for assortment character and themes. Sheela was an actress who has fetched up in the cinema and who had endured for the celluloid. Her entire life is crammed with the cinema and devoid of cinema her life is zilch. Her devotion and industrious have helped out her in attaining the peak of the stardom.

6 Told by John Paul, Scriptwriter in a personal interview with him.

7 Told in a personal interview with Byju Laila Raj, a Psychologist and an Artist (Painter & Singer)
REFERENCE: