

## **RANIPADMINI: A DEPARTURE FROM THE STEREOTYPE IN MALAYALAM CINEMA**

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### **Abstract**

In Malayalam cinema the woman is portrayed as a docile creature incapable of independent thinking. This paper investigates how the movie Ranipadmini veers away from the stereotype and attempts to portray women unconventionally as they journey through the Himalayas on a quest.

**Keywords :** *Ranipadmini, Malayali, movie, stereotype*

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En route, Padmini encounters Rani (Rima Kallingal) whose help she avails to reach her destination, or destined person to be precise. Rani herself is here and on the run because she managed to injure, both physically and the pride of, a gang of thugs. Padmini also has a police inspector on her trail, sent by her mother-in-law. The movie follows the adventure of these two women as they journey across the Himalayas in search of Padmini's husband. They meet several characters on the way, who add to the humour and entertainment of the movie.

While the movie has commercially succeeded, it has also been tagged as a women-centred film by the Kerala audience. The movie has appealed to a vast number of women across the state. But criticism has also arisen against the movie deeming it as less than representative of the Malayali woman. In this context, it is necessary to first identify the idea the ideal Malayali woman or the Malayali Manga, as she is known, to understand the stereotype and how the movie diverges from this aspect.

The Malayali Manga has long been considered the epitome of women and an ideal every Malayali female should aspire to become. The concept includes physical, mental and emotional characteristics. The dozens of Malayali Manga contests run during Onam are a further illustration of this fact.

Physically the woman must look slightly buxom in all the right places and should be neither thin nor fat. The song Gaja rajamukhi provides an elaborate, head-to-toe description of all the qualities that a woman needs to have physically. Dressed well in a traditional 'set' sari, with accompanying gold ornaments, sandalwood paste on the forehead and sindoor if married, she will also wear a string of jasmine flowers in her hair that is necessarily long, well-oiled and plaited into a long snake-like form. Her gold anklets should make the most delicate sound as she walks past you, very subtly shaking her hips in a feminine walk. Her well-balanced diet of natural food and excellent water sources ensures her wheatish skin remains clear and glowing. When this woman talks to you it will be with the utmost courtesy and the softest of sounds. She will never be heard raising her voice, getting angry or using foul language as it does not suit her flawless character. Blogger Terin Rajan notes that one should never see a Malayali woman "speaking foul words or insulting a person as it is seen as a sign of weakness. It's against their culture and pride".

Intellectually she has no place and no business being there either. She is to be seen not heard. Intellectual or academic work is rarely ever considered a need for women, points out blogger Sruthi. The only contribution of her mental faculty would be "upholding traditional virtues" of chastity, religiosity, fidelity, and sincerity whether in service to God or family or man (qtd. in Usha 15). Women are expected to have received an education up to the undergraduate level, and at the most a master's degree. "Beyond that, they are discouraged to study because they might fail to get suitable alliances in the marriage market because they could appear to be over qualified for the prospective groom. A Ph.D. is rarely considered to be a door for

required to be instead a companion for her mother-in-law. Even the gifts for occasions such as her birthday or wedding anniversary are gifts for the household (buffaloes, water heater, etc.). Her life is meant for the family and not herself. Her social circle must be limited and she must cook and clean - the duties of a housewife. "Her job or educational status commands little respect" (Usha 6).

Rani moves away from this stereotype. She is the sole bread winner of her family of three women. She gets into fights and is regularly fired from jobs. Her boyish hairstyle and clothes add to the character she portrays. She manages to outsmart a couple of goons, when they confront her for complaining about them to the authorities. Leaving them in hospitalized conditions, she sends her family away and journeys to the Himalayas, meeting Padmini en route.

In many ways Rani and Padmini are both the Other. They are women in a society which asks them to be submissive and forever cater to the desires of their family, placing themselves always last. They are asked to behave or be left out, to submit or face the consequences. "Though formally educated, she is depicted as a docile and meek person. On the screen, as well as beyond, in the society, she gets little opportunity even to form her views, leave alone to air them" (Usha 30).

Movie reviewer Deepa Soman explicates that Aashiq Abu cautions Malayali women against the glorified 'docile personalities' that they are asked to live up to, right from childhood. Society has enforced roles on them but they refuse to accept them. Padmini, though brought up in a traditional household, refuses to accept the iron will of her mother-in-law who doesn't want her working or having fun with her husband. Rani is more of a tomboy and constantly seems to be getting into fights and losing her job. She goes far beyond the definition of femininity in all she says and does. Neither agrees to stick to the stereotype and reject its notions. Rani does not take any kind of nonsense as is visible when she tackles the goons who came to harm her for reporting them to the police. When Padmini is asked by her mother-in-law to refrain from sexual relations before a pooja, she sneakily does the opposite and smirks next day over it.

Revolt against the norm to find answers seems to be the solution that the movie provides. While Rani gets into physical fights, Padmini fights with her actions. Their trek up the Himalayas to meet Giri, despite all the obstacles they face, can be seen as a sign of their determination to find answers and solutions. Through them, director Aashiq Abu tries to put forth questions to the audience such as how long must a wife be silent to whatever ill treatment she receives at the hands of the family; what must a woman do when her husband is also against her; should a woman always be submissive, and is marriage the only option for women.

Femininity in all its forms is celebrated in the movie. The main characters are all women. It's women that traverse the Himalayas who are the focus of the movie. Women become adventurers. Women face challenges. Women are wanted for their