

## Red Dots on Silver Screen: Menstruating Women of Malayalam Cinema

Jahnvi Nair \* & Arunima S. \*\*

**Abstract:** Menstruation once shrouded in societal taboos and constrained by sexism, patriarchy, and discrimination, has undergone significant shifts in public perception in recent years. This natural biological process was often associated with shame, stigma and marginalisation. In storytelling, menstruation has traditionally symbolised a character's coming of age, often portrayed with undertones of disgust, fear, or shame. As a powerful medium with substantial societal influence, cinema has played a crucial role in transforming these narratives. Contemporary Malayalam cinema has introduced strong female characters that address menstruation with the gravity and normalcy it deserves. Through these portrayals, cinema has successfully challenged entrenched beliefs and reshaped societal attitudes, demonstrating the potential for change. This paper examines the representation of menstruation in Malayalam cinema, analysing the diverse characterisations of menstruating women and the broader societal implications of these depictions. By exploring how these characters and their experiences are portrayed, this study aims to elucidate the evolving narratives surrounding menstruation and its impact on societal perceptions.

**Keywords:** Menstruation, Malayalam cinema, Women, Stigma, Entrenched Taboos.

If one were to choose a single word to address taboo in India, 'menstruation' would be the most apt one. Despite being highlighted by its social construction, menstruation is a natural, self-evident bodily process. Historically, it has received minimal attention and care due to patriarchy and societal ignorance, leading to its perception as something disgusting and shameful by people of all genders. Women have experienced discrimination in society solely because of menstruation. This biological process has determined their vulnerability, often evoking a sense of confinement within the four walls of their households. Many women come to believe that they are impure, shameful, and less worthy during this period.

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\* Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, University of Kerala, Kariavattom Campus.

\*\* Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Loyola College of Social Sciences, University of Kerala.

However, as society has progressed, education has gained importance, helping to shape people's understanding of taboos, especially regarding menstruation. Society is now starting to recognise menstruation as a real and natural process rather than ignoring it. This societal progress is a reason for optimism, as discussions around menstruation have begun to intersect with social realities and gender identity, enabling women to become more open about sharing their experiences related to the menstrual cycle.

Cinema is a popular medium that captures and reflects societal experiences on the silver screen. It embodies the values, dreams, and aspirations of various communities, showcases real-life events, and addresses societal issues. Through cinema, audiences can reflect on their own lives and the world around them. It has the power to immerse viewers in narratives that allow for relatable experiences.

According to Corrigan and White (2004), the film is a work of art splendidly layered with cultural practices. As a depictive art form, cinema operates within a matrix that shifts between 'realism' and 'fantasy', 'art' and 'entertainment'. Consequently, cinema can significantly influence individuals' thoughts, actions, beliefs, and behaviours, broadening our understanding of the world we inhabit (Cloete, 2017). Thus, it becomes a vital cultural product in the process of meaning-making, which sociologists are keen to explore as a way to understand societal dynamics (Nascimento, 2019).

While cinema touches on various aspects of human life, it has historically been hesitant to discuss menstruation openly. Its portrayal of menstruation has often been marked by shame, with early films representing the topic symbolically rather than directly (Kay, 2017; Verma, 2020). Despite its status as a natural bodily process (Bhandre, 2019), menstruation has frequently been omitted from many women-centric films as well.

However, cinematic representations of menstruation that highlight the struggles and issues women face have begun to emerge, particularly in Malayalam cinema. Recent films in this industry demonstrate a growing awareness and sensitivity in addressing menstruation. Nonetheless, depicting menstruation and its associated issues remains challenging, as mainstream films often neglect the mere existence of menstruation. This ongoing lack of acknowledgement keeps menstruation out of the public eye, relegating it to a private matter that is considered unsuitable for the silver screen. Such disregard for menstruation undermines its significant role in women's lives and reinforces the age-old practice of silencing discussions about it in front of men, thereby making it problematic.

Menstruation encapsulates some of the most deeply entrenched taboos in Indian society and has long been enshrouded in shame and stigma, primarily due to patriarchal norms. Although this biological process is

fundamental to women's health, it is perceived as a marker of impurity, contributing to the marginalisation of women and reinforcing gender-based discrimination. Women, conditioned to view themselves as diminished in value during menstruation, have often been isolated within the private confines of their homes, hindered by the belief that their bodily functions render them vulnerable and impure.

The gradual evolution in the societal understanding of menstruation has been driven by the expansion of education and the proliferation of awareness campaigns that seek to challenge these traditional taboos. As menstruation becomes a topic of public discourse, it intersects with broader conversations surrounding gender identity, social realities, and women's rights. Increasingly, women are articulating their experiences, breaking the longstanding silence surrounding the subject.

As a potent cultural medium, cinema plays a critical role in shaping societal perceptions and reflecting social realities. It serves as a mirror to society, capturing the values, aspirations, and struggles faced by individuals across different contexts. Corrigan and White (2004) argue that film is a layered work of art, deeply embedded in cultural practices and oscillating between realism and fantasy. Cinema's ability to influence thoughts, behaviours and beliefs positions it as a critical tool for understanding and interpreting the world we inhabit (Cloete, 2017). Therefore, sociologists regard cinema as a significant cultural product that enriches the process of meaning-making within society (Nascimento, 2019).

Despite its far-reaching influence, cinema has traditionally been reticent in treating menstruation. Menstruation is often omitted or symbolically represented, particularly in mainstream cinema, where it is seldom depicted as a normal aspect of women's lives. Instead, it is often associated with shame. Early cinematic representations rarely addressed menstruation directly, usually framing it within disgust or secrecy. Even in women-centric films, menstruation is frequently conspicuous by its absence, reflecting the broader societal discomfort with the topic. However, in recent years, menstruation has emerged as a recurring theme in cinema, particularly in Malayalam films that explore its complexities and realities with greater nuance. These films portray menstruation as a natural process and illuminate the social struggles and challenges faced by menstruating women. By bringing menstruation into the public sphere, these films challenge longstanding cultural silence and contribute to a broader re-evaluation of gender norms and societal attitudes.

This study seeks to explore and analyse the representation of menstruation in contemporary Malayalam cinema, focusing on how these films reflect and challenge societal perceptions of menstruation. By examining the characterisation of menstruating women, this research aims to uncover the

evolving narratives surrounding menstruation and its impact on gender identity and social dynamics in India. By employing a sociological lens, the study will assess the role of cinema in shaping public discourse on menstruation and its potential to effect social change.

### **Red Dots and Stigmas**

Menstruation, a natural and essential aspect of women's health, is unjustly burdened with various taboos. These taboos, deeply rooted in social, cultural, and religious contexts, often leave individuals feeling perplexed. The symbolic pollution associated with menstruation, a concept that retains power in a world governed by science, is a stark injustice (cf. Coronil, 1997; Goffman, 1963; Little, 2012; Miner, 1956; Moeran, 2014).

Alexandra Parnebjork, a Sexual and Reproductive Health Adviser for Plan International, states, "The stigma which surrounds menstruation, in high and low-income countries alike, both stems from and worsens gender inequality. It comes from a perception of girls as less worthy. And by exposing them to discrimination, much of it based on myths and poor education, over time these misconceptions can seriously erode girls' confidence and limit their life opportunities." Menstruation is a natural and healthy aspect of women's reproductive health. However, practices such as burying cloths used during the time of menstruation to ward off evil spirits force individuals to isolate themselves in darkness, experience loneliness and remain confined within spaces constructed not just from cement and steel but also shaped by the oppressive forces of patriarchy and systemic discrimination, continue to prevail.

Women and girls are marginalised and often instructed to abstain from everyday activities. While they may be told that they need to rest, the reality is one of exclusion. They are often prohibited from cooking, cleaning, or even touching or seeing certain items. In some regions, specially designated dishes are allocated for their consumption. Isolated behind closed doors, women silently endure the physical discomfort and emotional fluctuations associated with menstruation, effectively rendered anonymous within the family and household, not solely by men but also by women in similar contexts.

In Suriname, a country in South America, it is believed that menstrual blood is dangerous. There exists a prevalent belief that a woman can exert her will and wishes over a man using her menstrual blood. Surprisingly, similar beliefs and practices are found in some Asian countries also, including India.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the representation of menstruation in Malayalam cinema. This approach is particularly well-suited for uncovering in-depth and focused narratives,

themes, and character portrayals related to menstruation. By utilising qualitative techniques, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how menstruation, as a natural biological process, is depicted and perceived within the cinematic context of the Malayalam film industry.

### **Research Design**

This research employs a systematic content analysis, focusing on a curated selection of Malayalam films in which menstruation is a significant theme or narrative element. Content analysis is a robust methodological approach for examining media portrayals of social issues, as it enables a systematic and objective examination of the content. Through this method, the study aims to identify and analyse patterns, themes, and representations of menstruation within the selected films.

### **Selection of Films**

The films selected for this study have been meticulously chosen, taking into account their explicit focus on menstruation, their impact on audiences, and their cultural significance within the Malayalam film industry. These films offer a representative cross-section of Malayalam cinema, engaging with the subject of menstruation either as a central theme or an integral aspect of character development and narrative structure. Due to the limited number of Malayalam films that address menstruation directly, this study spans a broad timeframe from 1972 to 2023. This extended period is essential for capturing the meaningful evolution of the portrayal of menstruation within the industry. By encompassing films from several decades, the study facilitates a comparative analysis that traces the shifts in societal attitudes and cinematic representations of menstruation over time.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis for this study employed a comprehensive thematic approach, beginning with Initial Coding, to systematically identify instances of menstruation in the selected films, encompassing direct references, visual cues, and symbolic representations. These initial codes were subsequently organised into broader themes during the Theme Development stage, including stigma, normalisation, resistance, empowerment, and societal change. In the Interpretation phase, these themes were analysed within a specific sociological framework to critically assess how they reflect or challenge prevailing societal attitudes toward menstruation.

### **Women on the Silver Screen: From the Typical to the Atypical**

Malayalam cinema is known for its representation of contemporary social realities. Current political and social themes often influence its making, resulting in movies catering to dominant ideologies—political, cultural,

social, or financial. However, the filmmakers often choose a different approach in the portrayal of characters. Even though massive male heroes are in the lead, the female characters are typically shown as submissive. Women-oriented problems, their sexuality, and their physical and social issues are rarely addressed. In earlier Malayalam cinema, women lived under the shades of men, protected and guided by them. Strong and independent female characters were portrayed as antagonistic, often greedy or evil, while beauty defined the softer, more vulnerable female leads.

However, cinema underwent a significant shift as society and technology progressed. Rather than giving room for the existing large-scale themes of politics, the elite class culture, and conflict between the rich and poor, roles were written for live characters modelled directly from society and irrespective of gender. From the superstar cult culture, narrations of contemporary real-life stories and incidents concerning livelihood and human spaces started to be portrayed as themes which are normalised norms of society. It started bringing up, discussing and criticising subjects like masculinity, patriarchy and sexuality. This transition in cinema, also called the new generation of cinema, came about in 2010. Contemporary Malayalam Cinema has tried to explore menstruation in its every aspect. Introducing and placing different characters that represent women who menstruate in Malayalam cinema creates a new thought in the audience by making them think and analyse. Menstruation is viewed as a natural biological process in a woman's life. Rather than symbolically representing it like in earlier times, it is portrayed directly and as real as it is.

The 1972 film *Chemparathy*, directed by P. N. Menon, includes scenes that explain the female lead Santha's (played by Roja Ramani) puberty ceremony, known as 'Tirandukalyanam.' The scenes represent the imagery of how a teenage girl's first menstruation is celebrated in a household. Even though the family is poor and unable to afford much of the ceremony, they still elaboratively celebrate her menarche. Her emotions—such as joy, confusion, happy tears, and excitement—are portrayed very realistically. Adoor Bhavani, who plays Santha's mother, gives her daughter clothes and other necessary items as she enters her first menstrual cycle. The mother also prepares her daughter by brushing her hair and applying kohl to her eyes. Additionally, she takes out a small package containing a piece of jewellery she saved for her daughter. While the process is depicted very realistically, other shots suggest the idea of encouraging women to embrace their womanhood through established standards of beauty and societal expectations.

N. Sankaran Nair's *Thulavarsham* (1976) revolves around the life of Ammini, played by Sridevi, and portrays the onset of menstruation with a realism that distinguishes it from treatments of the topic both in its era and

contemporary times. The scene in which Sridevi shockingly discovers blood stains on her skirt captures her initial fear and confusion, which is soon met by her friend's blushing laughter. The conversation between these two friends powerfully conveys that menstruation is a natural biological process beyond human control. Ammini's mother, played by Kaviyoor Ponnamma, reacts with genuine happiness upon learning about her daughter's experience. She reassures her not to be upset, using the euphemism 'Kutty vayas ariyichu' to inform others. The film also depicts various ceremonies associated with menstruation, such as making Ammini sit before a lit lamp for four days, restricting male presence, and taking her to a pond for ritual purification, while the representation of how Hindu families celebrate 'Thirandukalyanam' is particularly noteworthy. Furthermore, Ammini is advised to relinquish her childhood antics, adopt a more mature demeanour, and exercise caution in her interactions with the opposite sex, reflecting real-life scenarios during this pivotal phase. The film beautifully illustrates the onset of menstruation and its impact on adolescent experiences, including infatuations, relationships, and sexual maturity. Additionally, it subtly addresses implicit ideas regarding the silencing and concealment of menstruation, the regulation of interactions with men, and warnings about sexual maturity, relationship dynamics, and character changes typically associated with menstruation and hormonal fluctuations. Unlike many other Malayalam films, Thulavarsham highlights menstruation rites right from the outset. Ultimately, this film indicates the major events and drastic changes that occur in a girl's life during and after the onset of menstruation. However, it does not explicitly centre on menstruation; it effectively portrays the struggles and societal norms that shape and condition a woman's life.

Rathinirvedam (1978), directed by Bharathan, portrays a teenage girl experiencing menarche while riding a bicycle. Upon noticing blood stains on the cycle, she realises that she has begun menstruating. This scenario contrasts sharply with the scenes depicted in the earlier film Chemparathy. In Rathinirvedam, when the girl becomes aware of her menstruation, it is symbolically represented through blooming flowers. The film aims to explore the various aspects of human sexuality, and by using blooming flowers on screen, it illustrates how menstruation serves as a connecting element to the girl's sexual maturity. In contrast, Chemparathy directly presents the realities of menstruation and the associated ceremonies, offering a more straightforward depiction.

K.G. George's film Aadaminte Vaariyellu, released in 1983, is regarded as a seminal work that resonated with Malayali audiences for its foresight. This groundbreaking cinema focuses on the narratives of three female protagonists, portrayed by Sreevidya, Soorya, and Suhasini. George has consistently crafted strong female characters who are multifaceted, powerful, and complex. The female leads in his films frequently navigate

intricate crises and make consequential decisions. The film provides a realistic visual representation of menstruation, notably through a scene that depicts menarche. Rather than resorting to symbolic implications, the film presents the actual experiences faced by women. K.G. George's audacious approach to portraying reality and the complexities of everyday life on screen is commendable. The sparse employment of unrealistic conventions to depict natural processes and the emotions of human beings, particularly those of women, distinguishes this film. The portrayal of the character's menstrual days is executed with a notable degree of realism.

On the contrary, 'Pavithram', released in 1994 and directed by T.K. Rajeev Kumar, portrays menstruation through symbolic representations. The film primarily addresses the sensitive topic of geriatric pregnancy, which Rajeev Kumar captures beautifully in all its nuances. Concurrently, the character Meenakshi, played by Vindhuja Menon, experiences puberty. The process of her first menstruation is depicted solely through various symbols, including broken bangles and glass shards, smears of red 'chanthupottu' on her white cloth, and mood fluctuations from happiness to fear, shyness, anxiety, and pain. Through its characters, the film elucidates the typical advice family members offer to girls upon attaining menarche. Meenakshi's character undergoes a significant transition following her first menstruation, evolving from a traditionally dressed village girl to one who gradually adopts Western outfits, music, and friendships. This transformation reflects the hormonal changes and experiences that a teenage girl undergoes during puberty and is portrayed effectively in the film. The duality chosen by the director to address such a sensitive topic as advanced-age pregnancy stands as one of the pivotal themes of the movie while presenting menstruation symbolically through shots that convey the emotions and circumstances the girl encounters.

### **Depiction of Menstruation in Malayalam Cinema: A Historical Analysis**

The depiction of menstruation in Malayalam films from the 20th century reflects broader sociocultural perspectives on this natural biological process, capturing the societal standards, restrictions, and transformations women experienced during that era. An analysis of films such as Chemparathy (1972), Thulavarsham (1976), Rathinirvedam (1978), Aadaminte Vaariyellu (1983), and Pavithram (1994) reveals a progression in the portrayal of menstruation, highlighting evolving societal norms, gender expectations, and growing awareness.

In the early films Chemparathy (1972) and Thulavarsham (1976), menstruation is depicted through a ceremonial and traditional lens, reflecting the cultural customs prevalent at the time. These films portray menstruation as a blend of personal and communal experiences, underscored by practices that reinforce conventional gender roles. For instance, Chemparathy presents menstruation through coming-of-age



rituals, while Thulavarsham authentically depicts a girl's first menstruation, emphasising the emotional and societal pressures associated with this transition.

These portrayals stress the societal expectations for women to embrace their roles as prospective mothers and homemakers. Despite this, the films subtly critique these expectations by highlighting the emotional distress and anxiety surrounding menstruation, which was viewed as a rite of passage into societal norms rather than a natural biological event. In Rathinirvedam (1978), menstruation is metaphorically linked to sexual awakening and maturation, represented through symbols such as blossoming flowers. This symbolic approach reflects the era's discomfort with direct discussions of menstruation, opting instead for metaphorical imagery to signify the transition from childhood to adulthood.

K. G. George's film *Aadaminte Vaariyellu* (1983) marks a significant shift in the representation of menstruation in Malayalam cinema. The film's explicit and realistic portrayal of menstruation, devoid of symbolic embellishments, was groundbreaking for its time. By presenting menstruation as a tangible aspect of women's experiences, the film challenges traditional norms and highlights the oppressive societal expectations placed on women. This film indicates a growing willingness to confront the realities of women's lives and suggests a gradual shift towards recognising women's autonomy and addressing their issues more openly.

By the mid-1990s, Pavithram (1994) continued to employ symbolic representations of menstruation, such as broken bangles and red stains, to signify the onset of puberty. However, this symbolic portrayal was accompanied by a more nuanced depiction of a girl's transition into adolescence, capturing the ambivalent emotions of fear, shame, and curiosity that accompany menstruation. This reflects a persistent societal discomfort with openly discussing menstruation despite a slow shift towards greater openness.

Collectively, these films illustrate the sociological transition in Malayalam cinema from the 1970s to the 1990s regarding the portrayal of menstruation. Early films reflect a profoundly traditional society where menstruation was ritualised and symbolically tied to a girl's entry into womanhood, reinforcing gendered expectations and social conditioning. As the century progressed, a notable shift towards more realistic and open portrayals, exemplified by *Aadaminte Vaariyellu*, mirrors broader societal changes in Kerala, influenced by increased education, feminist movements, and the gradual relaxation of patriarchal norms. Although menstruation continued to be depicted symbolically in films like *Pavithram*, there was a growing acknowledgement of the need to address the complexities of womanhood more openly.

Overall, the evolving depiction of menstruation in Malayalam cinema provides insight into Kerala's changing cultural and social dynamics. The transition from symbolic to more realistic portrayals reflects broader societal shifts in gender roles, women's autonomy, and the normalisation of menstruation as a natural aspect of life. This analysis underscores cinema's role as both a reflection of societal values and a catalyst for social change, contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender and bodily autonomy.

### **Contemporary Depictions of Menstruation in twenty-first Century Malayalam Cinema**

The transitions of a teenage girl hitting puberty are well depicted in the 2010 film 'Mummy & Me'. Director Jeethu Joseph has crafted a narrative showcasing how Jewel Joseph, the character played by Archana Kavi, evolves from a clingy child into an arrogant teenager in the wake of her menarche. This transformation illustrates the influence of hormonal changes during adolescence on young women. However, the depiction leans towards framing these changes as personality defects rather than acknowledging the natural progression associated with menstruation. Consequently, the experience of menstruation is silenced, being considered neither a humanising change nor a normal facet of a girl's life.

The beginning of the twenty-first century heralded the rise of trio friendships and adolescent confusions in Malayalam cinema. The 2006 film 'Notebook', directed by Roshan Andrews, introduced menstruation as a key narrative element, thus making it a prominent aspect of the silver screen. The film revolves around three close friends—Pooja (Parvathi), Sreedevi (Maria), and Saira (Roma). Sreedevi, a sensitive and kind Brahmin girl, experiences her menstruation during a chemistry practical. In a moment of crisis, her classmates ask a male peer, Sooraj (played by Skanda), to purchase sanitary napkins, addressing the situation albeit indirectly. While the film attempts to normalise menstruation, it simultaneously reinforces associated stigma by employing euphemisms and avoiding direct discussion. Sreedevi is characterised as shy and introverted, conveying her internalised beliefs surrounding menstrual taboos. Additionally, the film sidesteps critical discussions regarding pre-marital sex, the normalisation of sexual intimacy, and the necessity of sex education in schools. Nevertheless, it does reflect on the dynamics of female friendships and the bonds formed through mutual affection and attention.

In the context of deep-rooted sexism and misogyny, the 2007 film *Chocolate*, directed by Shafi, offers no reprieve. The narrative revolves around Shyam Balagopal (played by Prithviraj), the only male student in a women's college studying for his master's. A notable scene depicts a girl passing a package wrapped in newspaper across the classroom; Shyam assumes it is bread and opens it, only to discover it contains sanitary pads.

His embarrassment, followed by laughter from the class, underscores societal misconceptions around menstruation, exposing the underlying patriarchy and sexism that permeate the portrayal of women's hygiene and products. This scene perpetuates the notion that sanitary napkins are objects of shame, deserving mockery and concealment. Tragically, male ignorance and aversion towards menstrual products are presented as acceptable humour.

Kanakam Kamini Kalaham, a 2021 satirical film by Ratheesh Balakrishnan Poduval, effectively portrays menstrual challenges in a professional environment. Vincy Alosious plays Shalini, a receptionist confronted by HariPriya (Grace Antony) amidst suspicions of theft in their hotel. HariPriya notices a sanitary napkin cover in Shalini's bag, leading to an empathetic response from her. This scene highlights the exhaustion, pain, and emotional turmoil women often endure during menstruation, illustrating society's neglect regarding PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome) and associated mood swings. The implications of stigma surrounding open conversations on menstruation emerge, along with the difficulties faced by working women who must navigate their menstrual cycles without consideration in the workplace.

Asanghadithar, a film by Kunjila Mascillamani included in the anthology 'Freedom Fight' released in 2022, offers a captivating narrative centred around the struggles of saleswomen on Kozhikode's SM Street in accessing toilet facilities. With a documentary approach, Kunjila captures the plight of women who must rely on a local restaurant for restroom access. The lead character, Srindaa, delivers a compelling performance, portraying her advocating for toilet access from her boss while resorting to collecting urine in a bottle. As the situation deteriorates, women from nearby shops unite to demand basic facilities. The film candidly portrays their fears, frustrations, and determination, shedding light on a pressing issue that continues to afflict many.

A powerful exploration of entrenched patriarchy is presented in Jeo Baby's 'The Great Indian Kitchen' (2021), which starkly depicts the raw realities of Malayali households. Suraj Venjaramoodu portrays a sociology teacher who teaches about societal structures yet embodies a toxic patriarchal attitude at home. Nimisha Sajayan's character, constrained by patriarchal norms, ultimately defies societal expectations, depicting her journey toward liberation. The film poignantly exposes the stigma surrounding menstruation, featuring a scene in which Nimisha asks her husband to procure sanitary napkins during her menstrual cycle, an act perceived by him as a grave insult due to his deeply ingrained beliefs.

'The Great Indian Kitchen' also addresses the Sabarimala controversy, where menstruating women are barred from temple entry. Jeo Baby effectively highlights how menstruation is perceived as impure even

within the intimate confines of one's home, reflecting the ongoing implications of such views in twenty-first-century society. The film critiques the structures that perpetuate these beliefs, revealing the mental anguish menstruating women endure.

Conversely, films such as 'Kakshi: Ammini Pillai' (2019), directed by Dinjith Ayyathan, and 'Journey of Love 18+' (2023), directed by Arun D. Jose, provide alternative perspectives but perpetuate the stigma surrounding menstruation. 'Kakshi: Ammini Pillai' presents a scene in which Ahmed Sidhique's character, Sajith Kumar, experiences shame and disgust when he realises he must purchase tablets to delay menstruation during a family pilgrimage—further reflecting societal misconceptions that regard menstruation as a secretive matter unworthy of open discussion. In 'Love 18+', the female protagonist mentions her period as a reason she cannot marry, and a male character suggests pills to delay it, reinforcing outdated beliefs.

'Oh, My Darling' (2023), directed by Alfred Samuel, explores the relationship dynamics between Jenny and Joel, featuring Jenny grappling with Mayer-Rokitansky-Küster-Hauser (MRKH) syndrome, a condition affecting the female reproductive system. The film showcases Jenny's emotional distress upon realising her inability to menstruate, illustrated in scenes contrasting her experience with that of her twin sister, Jasmine, whose menstruation elicits happiness in their mother. Jenny's struggle with societal expectations and envy towards her sister culminates in poignant moments. Still, overall, the film treats menstruation with sensitivity, embracing the reality of Jenny's condition without leaping into stigma or shame.

'Nayattu' (2021), directed by Martin Prakkat, marks a notable shift in societal narratives. In an emergency, Praveen Michael (Kunchako Boban) discreetly asks his colleague Sunitha (Nimisha Sajayan) if she requires anything, implicitly suggesting the acknowledgement of her menstrual needs. The subsequent shot of him purchasing sanitary napkins indicates a transformation in male attitudes towards menstruation, suggesting a progressive understanding beyond the barriers of stigma, shame, and disgust.

In summary, in the twenty-first century, Malayalam cinema has significantly evolved its portrayal of menstruation, transitioning from symbolic and stigmatised representations to more direct and realistic depictions. This shift is exemplified in films such as 'Mummy & Me' (2010) and 'Notebook' (2006), which incorporate menstruation into the core narratives. While 'Mummy & Me' explores the psychological and hormonal changes experienced by a teenage girl, it often frames these transformations as defects rather than typical aspects of adolescence, indicating a limited normalisation of menstruation. In contrast, 'Notebook'

attempts to address menstruation within a school context yet continues to rely on euphemisms, highlighting the need for open discussions and improved sex education.

Films like 'Oh My Darling' (2023) delve into the emotional aspects of a young girl with MRKH syndrome and reflect societal pressures surrounding reproductive health while presenting a more nuanced perspective on menstruation as a natural process. Conversely, certain films, including 'Chocolate' (2007) and 'Kanakam Kamini Kalaham' (2021), perpetuate societal stigmas associated with menstruation. The former trivialises menstruation through embarrassment, while the latter underscores the minimisation of women's health issues, particularly in professional contexts, despite acknowledging the challenges women face,

The evolving narrative surrounding menstruation can also be seen in films such as 'Asanghadithar' (2022), 'Nayattu' (2021), 'Kakshi: Ammini Pillai' (2019), and 'Journey of Love 18+' (2023). The acknowledgement of male characters purchasing sanitary products signifies a shift toward empathetic portrayals of menstruation. Nonetheless, films like 'Kakshi: Ammini Pillai' and 'Journey of Love 18+' highlight the persistence of stigma, indicating that while progress has been made, the journey toward the complete normalisation of menstruation in Malayalam cinema and society remains ongoing.

## **Discussions**

The researchers have analysed various Malayalam films and their treatment of menstruation, concluding that the concept of menstruation is often treated with ambivalence and indifference. It is frequently concealed, underrepresented, or omitted in most of these films. While certain films have attempted to address the topic of menstruation, the screen time allocated to this subject is generally minimal and often characterised by a degree of immaturity in its treatment. Major reasons for such omissions may include the perpetuation of age-old taboos and stigmas associated with societal constructs surrounding menstruation. Although many films aim to normalise menstruation, it is frequently either omitted, concealed, or mocked within the narratives. Consequently, acknowledging or accepting menstrual representation in films is complex.

Sabu (2020) also supports this notion in her paper, which asserts that Malayalam cinema propagates the idea that a woman's body should be represented as not menstruating. This perspective is similarly evident in various sanitary pad commercials that encourage women to conceal the markers of menstruation. Menstruation is frequently depicted as a threat that should be controlled, kept secret, and excluded from public discourse.

Male scriptwriters wrote the majority of the films analysed for this paper. This male perspective may explain why menstruation is depicted through

a lens that lacks many authentic female experiences associated with it.

Menstruation is dealt with considerable curiosity in Malayalam cinema. While Malayalam films are often regarded as path-breaking, innovative, and inspiring, their treatment of menstruation frequently lacks realistic or positive portrayal. There are several symbolic associations connected to the representation of menstruation. Films such as 'Rathinirvedam', 'Thulabhaaram', 'Chembarathi', and 'Aadaminte Vaariyellu' depict menstruation in a straightforward manner. They illustrate the 'Thirandukalyanam' ceremony, the transition from childhood to adolescence, behavioural changes, and sexual development in a normalised way.

In these films, whenever menstruation is discussed, euphemisms such as "therandu" and "vayas ariyichu" are employed, suggesting that a woman is ready to accept a man as her sexual partner. Such discussions often highlight the reproductive aspects of women in the storyline, with little effort made to challenge stereotypes and address the problematic issues surrounding this subject. The films provide scant attention to identifying or nullifying the challenges women face regarding menstruation, and there are few active conversations aimed at breaking the stigma that surrounds it.

Early twentieth-century films typically considered menstruation a private matter. It was celebrated within the family prior to a girl's sexual advancement, yet also imbued with the notion of impurity. This represented menstruation as a subject unsuitable for public discourse. In 'Rathinirvedam', menstruation is symbolically represented through the imagery of a blossoming flower. Such a lack of acknowledgement in these films may lead women in society to live as if menstruation does not exist in their lives, perpetuating the taboos surrounding it. As cinema reflects society, it serves as an indicator of reinforcing age-old beliefs that silence 'menstruation' as a topic only pertinent to women.

As time progressed, shifts in Malayalam cinema's approach to depicting menstruation became evident. The threshold and impact of films on societal norms are significant. Audience celebrations of actors create a tendency to idolise characters, which shapes principles, attitudes, norms, and opinions in society. However, when it comes to menstruation, cinematic portrayals primarily evoke silence, stigma, shame, and concealment, contributing to the prevailing notion that menstruation should be a source of shame. Various research articles indicate that society generally prefers menstruation to be concealed. Thus, films that project the idea that menstruation should be hidden further entrench this belief among individuals, fostering a cycle of ideology. Conversely, cinema should serve as a medium to promote active discussions regarding menstrual health, education, awareness, hygiene, and self-care practices. Such dialogue can help transform the popular culture surrounding

menstruation that perpetuates stigma and taboos.

In the current landscape of Malayalam cinema, many early twentieth-century films depicted menstruation in a more natural manner while simultaneously promoting the idea that it is a private aspect of womanhood, integral to a girl's transition from childhood. However, these films could have addressed health, hygiene, and educational aspects surrounding menstruation. Nevertheless, they offered a realistic representation of menstruation as a regular part of life. As time progressed, more symbolic representations emerged around menstruation, including motifs such as red flowers, blossoming flowers, giggles, blushing, confusion, and feelings of shame and dilemma, which can be seen in films like 'Notebook'.

Films such as 'Chocolate' and 'Mummy & Me' offer minimal representation of menstruation but inadvertently endorse the notion that it should be hidden from the male audience. These films depict the transition from childhood to adolescence concerning menarche. This pattern may stem from the prevalence of male-perspective scripts. As a result, menstruation risks being trivialised or mocked. Newton (2016) argued that jokes centred around menstruation signal there should be no relevance given to its normalisation, thereby perpetuating male ignorance regarding menstruation. Such jokes may convey a message that regards a biological process as inconsequential and suitable for ridicule. Notably, contemporary films like Notebook illustrate how women can provide compassion for fellow women experiencing menstruation. While Malayalam cinema often overlooks a nuanced understanding of menstruation, some films strive to depict female bonds and the ways women empathise with and care for one another. However, this portrayal often reinforces menstruation as a women's issue, enabling men to disengage from its significance and trivialise the subject.

As Malayalam cinema has evolved, films such as 'Great Indian Kitchen' (2021) and 'Asanghadithar' (2022) have increasingly emphasised the urgent need to accurately and sensitively address menstruation and women's hygiene. These films focus on dismantling stereotypes and challenging the stigma surrounding menstruation, aiming to shift societal perceptions and eradicate age-old notions that view menstruation as impure. By portraying menstruation as a normal biological process, these films bridge the gap between traditional societal attitudes and a more informed understanding of menstrual health. Despite these advancements, the representation of menstruation in Malayalam cinema remains limited, even within the progressive or women-centric films of the new generation. While some films have attempted to address menstruation, few have treated it with the necessary concern, acceptance, and positivity required for its full normalisation.

The depiction of menstruation in Malayalam cinema has undergone considerable changes from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, mirroring broader societal transformations. In the twentieth century, films such as 'Chembarathi' (1972), 'Thulavarsham' (1976), and 'Rathinirvedam' (1978) employed symbolic imagery and ritualistic representations of menstruation. These films often reinforced traditional norms and stigmas associated with womanhood, portraying menstruation as a rite of passage necessitating adherence to cultural rituals and standards of beauty.

In contrast, twenty-first-century films like 'Mummy & Me' (2010), 'Notebook' (2006), and 'Nayattu' (2021) have adopted a more direct and realistic approach. These films address menstruation's psychological, emotional, and social impacts while challenging the persistent stigma. This shift from symbolic representations to more explicit portrayals reflects a gradual movement towards normalising menstruation and questioning entrenched patriarchal attitudes.

Nevertheless, despite the progress made, elements of shame and secrecy surrounding menstruation continue to persist in some cinematic portrayals. This indicates that while significant strides have been taken, further efforts are necessary to normalise menstruation in both film and broader societal contexts fully.

## **Conclusion**

The absence of menstruation in earlier Malayalam cinema and its unparalleled presence in the spotlight of contemporary Malayalam cinema is striking. Historically, Indian cinema has largely neglected the subject of menstruation, which has seldom been considered a topic for discussion on the silver screen. Throughout cinema's history, menstruation was rarely addressed and, when mentioned, was often surrounded by stigmas and taboos. It was typically associated with shame, disgust, fear, or deemed something that should be concealed. This pattern persists even in female-centric films that promote feminist, activist, or revolutionary storytelling. The scenario in Malayalam cinema is no different, particularly in its earlier iterations. However, there are exceptions. Researchers note significant omissions of menstruation in Malayalam cinema, which have influenced societal perceptions and perpetuated the stigma surrounding it in Kerala. This has adversely impacted women's and girls' freedom to discuss menstruation and access menstrual hygiene products for generations openly.

Nevertheless, due to various interventions and the heavy influence of modernity and feminist ideologies, there has been an evolution in the filmmaking landscape. Contemporary Malayalam cinema acknowledges women's issues and experiences from a fresh perspective. It endeavours to portray the changing roles of women in the social context, reflecting the actual transformations occurring in society. This article examines the



reasons behind the historical omission of menstruation in Malayalam cinema and how recent films have begun to address this gap, offering proper narratives regarding menstruation and providing it with significant screen time. Rather than focusing solely on unrealistic, symbolic, and problematic representations of menstruation, the article also explores the tangible aspects of this natural process.

The interplay of menstruation depictions in cinema is critical, as film serves as a widely accessible medium with the potential to eliminate the negative cultural taboos associated with menstruation (Yagnik, 2012). Late Malayalam cinema plays a pivotal role in presenting an authentic portrayal of menstruation on the silver screen, working to dismantle problematic ideas surrounding it. This paper conducts a thematic analysis of Malayalam films that have discussed, portrayed, and depicted menstruation, involving the selection of significant films, research designs, and analytical techniques. By employing a qualitative study approach primarily based on content analysis, this research involved carefully selecting and examining various Malayalam films to identify instances of menstruation representation.

The analysis facilitated understanding cultural implications and community perspectives related to menstruation as represented in Malayalam cinema. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, including the subjective interpretative nature of the data. Furthermore, given the extensive array of movies produced in the industry over the years, the researchers faced challenges in selecting and making the films accessible.

Menstruation is a natural bodily process; however, in Indian contexts, including Kerala, it is frequently linked with notions of impurity and pollution. As a mass medium with extensive reach and influence, cinema can significantly contribute to changing erroneous perspectives associated with menstruation. Malayalam cinema is presently on a progressive trajectory, poised to play a notable role in shaping societal attitudes and beliefs regarding various aspects of human life and the surrounding environment. While addressing menstruation, cinema possesses the capacity either to reinforce stigmas and taboos or, conversely, to challenge them. This paper concludes that there exists an apparent demand for more films that address and explore the concept of menstruation in twenty-first-century Malayalam cinema.

This consideration is vital, as it is through representation that we can contest the stigmas and taboos associated with menstruation. Understanding menstruation as a natural bodily function—neither impure nor polluted—can potentially lead to the representation of such topics as central narratives that resonate with larger audiences, fostering significant impact. If cinema succeeds in accurately representing menstruation, it can

help eliminate the marginalisation experienced by women and girls within society. The researchers have emphasised how Malayalam cinema can contribute to changing the negative connotations surrounding menstruation by authentically portraying it on the silver screen.

As noted, the omission of menstruation in films creates gaps in knowledge and understanding of menstrual practices, which in turn normalises them. The menstrual taboos perpetuated by media, particularly cinema, can solidify into cultural norms, profoundly affecting women's psychological and physical well-being. Failure to depict menstruation meaningfully can lead to the accumulation of misinterpretations that reinforce existing stigmas and taboos in societal mindsets. It is paramount that scriptwriters ensure that women's experiences are not overlooked in any form.

Mulvey (1975) posits that an asymmetry in gender power exists, wherein patriarchal discourse shapes societal narratives, leading to misrepresentations of menstruation in cinema. This dynamic reflects the broader societal context. As discussed, menstruation has frequently been reduced to a mere marker of women's sexual availability and reproductive capacity, regarded as a phenomenon that does not concern men (Sabu, 2020).

Reviewing the history of Malayalam cinema, it is evident that menstruation has been primarily represented through symbolic and unrealistic portrayals rather than through authentic narratives. However, contemporary Malayalam films strive to foster a positive outlook on menstruation by attempting to break the silence around the questions and aspects associated with menstrual dynamics in society.

Currently, female directors, scriptwriters, and technicians are more visible within the Malayalam film industry. These favourable conditions have prompted recognition of the variety and diversity of women's menstrual experiences, fostering optimism that such experiences will be more accurately depicted on screen in the future. Over time, cinema is likely to transform, promoting inclusive narratives that resonate with broader audiences.

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