

Transformations in Malayalam Cinema:

The Representation of Abortion in *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's*

Dissertation submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, in partial
fulfillment for the award of M.A. degree in English Language and



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2024

Certificate

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **Transformations in Malayalam Cinema: The Representation of Abortion in *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's*** is a bona fide record of sincere work done by Sandra Ravi, Register Number: 220011028701, Bharata Mata College, under my supervision and guidance and that no part of this thesis has been presented for the award of any degree, diploma, title, or recognition of this or any other university.

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I hereby affirm that the dissertation entitled **Transformations in Malayalam Cinema: The Representation of Abortion in *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's*** is a record of *bona fide* research work done by me under the guidance of Ms. Sabitha Zacharias, Asst. Professor, and that no part of this project has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, title, or recognition of this or any other university.

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Acknowledgement

I find myself fortunate to be surrounded by people who are forever willing to help and guide me. I take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to **Ms. Sabitha Zacharias** for guiding me in accomplishing my research work titled **Transformations in Malayalam Cinema: The Representation of *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's***. Her supervision and support truly helped in the progress and timely accomplishment of this research work.

I express my sincere thanks to Dr. Johnson K.M, Former Principal and Academic Director, Dr. Lissy Kachappilly, Principal, Dr. Thara Gangadharan, Head of the Department, and all other faculty members of my college for their support and concern. I'm also grateful to my beloved Mother and Father, family members and friends for their loving encouragement. Above all, I thank God Almighty for constantly supporting me and for blessing me with such wonderful people in my life.

Sandra Ravi

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This dissertation follows MLA 8th edition.

Chapter 1

Cinematic Depictions of Abortion

Abortion has been a topic of controversy, both as a medical and social issue, since the beginning. The subject of abortion and its rights have varied significantly throughout history. It was criminalized in many societies based on social, political, legal, and religious contexts. Countries across the world approach abortion differently resulting in different ways of implementation of abortion laws. Some countries have extremely restrictive laws associated with abortion, allowing access to abortion only when the life of the mother is in danger, while several countries have more liberal policies that allow access to safe abortion under certain conditions. India is one of the countries that have liberal laws regarding abortion rights, but abortion is still stigmatized in the country due to social, religious, and political factors. It is also important to note that the legal status of abortion reveals a country's socio-political and religious environment.

The period of feminism in the United States is divided into four distinct waves. Second-wave of feminism began in the 1960s and lasted till the early 1990s before being replaced by the third wave of feminism, demanding reproductive rights including access to safe and legal abortion. The landmark decision by the U. S. Supreme Court regarding the case of *Roe v Wade* that happened on 22 January 1973 granted women in the United States the right to decide whether to have an abortion taking down several abortion laws and leading to debates regarding the moral, religious and legal sides of abortion. Thus, abortion laws have always been changing across the world depending on the social and cultural contexts. The debates regarding the moral and legal sides of

abortion continue as people identify themselves as belonging to pro-life who support the right to life against abortion rights and pro-choice who support the right to choose whether to have an abortion or not. However, on 24 June 2022, Roe v Wade was overturned in Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization.

Cinema has always been a powerful platform for mirroring and shaping societal attitudes towards gender roles, reproductive choices, and personal autonomy. Several films have addressed the issue of abortion from time to time and these portrayals have always varied significantly depending the societal attitudes and cultural contexts. The representation of abortion in films and media has greatly influenced the audience's perception regarding abortion rights. Therefore, the relationship between the portrayal of abortion in films and societal attitudes is always reciprocal as they continue to influence each other. The depiction of abortion in films has changed over time moving from treating abortion as a taboo subject to recognizing it as a reproductive right. In earlier decades, abortion in films had been represented in a negative light contributing to the conservative attitude and fears in society. However, today these attitudes have progressed to an extent, if not completely. Films from around the world that have the subject of abortion as the major part reveal broader societal attitudes towards women's reproductive choices and personal autonomy.

When compared to the Indian film industry, other industries, particularly in Western countries have always produced a greater number of films touching the topic of abortion regardless of the perspectives. The earlier portrayals of abortion in films, based on cultural and societal context, often depict it as a dangerous procedure, raising questions regarding morality and consequently representing women who seek abortion

as morally wrong and rebellious. Some of the films that address abortion in the world cinema are *Blue Denim* (1959), *Alfie* (1966), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Vera Drake* (2004), *Juno* (2007), *Obvious Child* (2014).

In India, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act of 1971, allows women to have safe access to abortion services under certain conditions. *Kya Kehna* (2000), *Aitraaz* (2004), *Salaam Namaste* (2005), *Terre Sang* (2009), *Raazi* (2018), are some of the Hindi films that touch on the subject of abortion, albeit the films center around other issues. Although these films were made after the MTP Act, the concept of abortion in most of the above-mentioned films is represented in a negative light. In most Indian films, the subject of abortion is always presented as a minor plot element rather than a central theme, sometimes using it to develop the storyline. Even when the subject of abortion is presented as a minor plot, the film does everything to project abortion as a taboo subject eventually contributing to the abortion stigma that still exists in the country. Despite being far more liberal towards reproductive rights than in several countries, the right to abortion remains a sensitive topic in India. The right to abortion in India is driven by a combination of legislative, societal, medical, and economic aspects. Often culture, tradition, and religious beliefs become the key factors that influence the portrayal of abortion in the films. There are much less films that address abortion as a reproductive right in India.

Malayalam cinema often serves as a mirror to the complexities of the region's culture and tradition, frequently criticizing stereotypes, though not always. The Malayalam film industry has generally managed to create great films from the beginning and the industry is always famous for wonderfully capturing the realities and

presenting them with much more authenticity. However, it is unfortunate to say that when compared to Bollywood, the Malayalam industry does not have enough films which represent abortion. Kerala, known for its high literacy rate and progressive approach towards many of the social issues, nonetheless holds traditional views on gender roles and reproductive rights.

This project explores the representation of abortion in two Malayalam films *Kana Kanmani* (2009) directed by Akku Akbar starring Jayaram, Padmapriya, and Baby Nivedita and *Sara's* (2021) by Jude Anthany Joseph starring Anna Ben and Sunny Wayne. The study delves into the depiction of male and female characters, examining how these representations are shaped in relation to women's reproductive choices and the associated gender roles in Kerala, and by extension, in India. Additionally, this study aims to understand the concept of motherhood in the films and the cultural and societal contexts that may have influenced its depiction, as well as that of abortion. Therefore, the project seeks to illustrate how the films reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles and societal expectations regarding motherhood and abortion rights. The study also focuses on key scenes that address the theme of abortion, examining character interactions and dialogues through appropriate theoretical frameworks.

Kana Kanmani (2009) features Jayaram as Roy, Padmapriya as Maya, and Baby Nivedita as Anakha. This drama-horror film revolves around the life of a married couple and their daughter. There is also tension between Roy and Maya's families since Roy is a Christian and Maya is a Hindu. Towards the second half of the film, it is revealed that the couple has had an abortion before having Anakha. Roy and Maya had already decided not to have children until they became financially stable enough to afford a

child. Both families become elated on hearing Maya's pregnancy news and oppose the couple's decision to have an abortion. The family members do so by trying to make them guilty saying it is a sin to destroy a life, nevertheless, the couple goes for abortion. Later the film asserts that their decision to abort their first child was a huge mistake by incorporating supernatural elements in the film. The whole point of the film was to take a stand against abortion, thereby becoming a pro-choice film. The mother is criticized and made feel guilty for going forward with the decision of abortion even though, the husband apparently had the upper hand in making the decision. This film is the remake of the Hindi film *Gauri: The Unborn* by the same director.

Sara's is one of the very few films from India that takes a different approach towards the portrayal of abortion. The film *Sara's* is about Sara Vincent (starring Anna Ben) who aspires to become a filmmaker and is certain about not wanting children from the very beginning. She gets married to Jeevan Philip (performed by Sunny Wayne) who shares the same thoughts with her about having children. Later she decides to have an abortion because of an accidental pregnancy. However, Sara is not presented as a selfish woman for making decisions regarding her reproductive choices as one would expect in comparison to the messages given by previous films about abortion.

The research analyzes the film *Kana Kanmani* to prove how certain portrayal of male and female characters reinforces traditional gender roles and misinterpretation of abortion. *Kana Kanmani* was released in the year 2009 which is a decade and five years ago. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that the cultural and societal context of the time might have influenced the portrayal of gender and abortion in the film. On the other hand, *Sara's* subverts the very same gender roles and presents the concept of

abortion in a more progressive way. The representation of women's issues including reproductive choices in film becomes crucial as it reflects societal attitudes towards women and their rights. The two films *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's* are significant for the research because Kerala's changing attitudes towards the stereotypical gender roles and reproductive choices that are often misinterpreted in present day can be seen when these two films are analyzed from a feminist perspective.

The project is divided into five chapters. The first chapter "Cinematic Depictions of Abortion" serves as the introduction to the theoretical frameworks used, analysis chapters and the conclusion of the project. The second chapter "Theoretical Foundations for Film Analysis" is dedicated to the theoretical framework, explaining the theories of Laura Mulvey, Stuart Hall, and Judith Butler. It focuses on the male gaze theory, encoding/decoding model, and gender performativity used in this study. The third and fourth chapters analyze the films *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's* respectively by applying the above-mentioned theories. The final chapter titled "Shifting Paradigms in Abortion Depictions" compares the representation of abortion in both films and concludes that the cinematic depictions of abortion evolve over time by influencing and reflecting societal attitudes towards abortion in a reciprocal manner.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Foundations for Film Analysis

Feminist film theory has been enormously influenced by feminism, a social movement divided into four waves. The feminist film theory is associated with second-wave feminism and as a theoretical concept, it came into being around the early 1970s in the United States. It primarily drew from sociological perspectives and concentrated on examining the roles and functions of female characters within various film narratives and genres. Feminists treat cinema as a cultural practice that shapes and perpetuates stereotypes and myths, including the roles and characteristics attributed to women and femininity, as well as those associated with men and masculinity. Guided by a (post) structuralist approach, feminist film theory transformed from merely interpreting a film's apparent meaning to exploring the deep-seated structures that underpin how meaning is formed. This perspective asserts that gender, or sexual difference, is fundamental to the process of meaning-making in the film. Drawing insights from Marxist critiques of ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, feminist film theory contends that cinema is not just a passive reflection of social relationships but an active agent in constructing the meanings of sexual difference and sexuality.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his existentialist work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), introduced the concept of *le regard* or the gaze. He analyses how the act of gazing at another person can form a subjective power dynamic. According to Sartre, when someone gazes at another person, they objectify them and reduce them to a mere object of perception rather than recognizing them as a full, autonomous human being. From a psychological perspective: "to gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a

psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Schroeder 1998, 208).

The concept of the male gaze in cinema, as articulated by the British feminist film theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey, in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), proposes that cinematic representations are heavily influenced by sexual inequality and the asymmetry of power between men and women. The male gaze in visual arts and literature, is the act of depicting women and the world from a male perspective, often reducing women to mere objects of sexual desire for the pleasure of heterosexual male viewers. Her essay was influenced by the theories of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud and it concentrates on the relationship between the spectator and the characters on screen and it is explained using the concept of scopophilia (deriving pleasure from looking). “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is a foundational essay that played a significant role in steering film theory toward a psychoanalytic perspective.

The male gaze, which represents the aesthetic pleasure of the male viewer, is a social construct shaped by patriarchal ideologies and discourses. This gaze tends to objectify women onscreen, reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating societal norms that prioritize male perspectives and desires in visual storytelling. Mulvey finds that female characters onscreen are seen as passive and are reduced to objects of men’s sexual desire which often leads to a tendency to objectify or sexualize women onscreen.

Mulvey finds three "looks" or perspectives that occur in film which, contribute to the sexual objectification of women. The first is from the perspective of the male character and it is about how he perceives the

female character. The second is from the perspective of the spectator as they see the female character on screen. The third "look" or perspective joins the first two looks together: it is the male audience member's perspective of the male character in the film. This third perspective allows the male audience to take the female character as his own personal sex object because he can relate himself, through looking, to the male character in the film. ("Feminist Film Theory")

The concept of male gaze is the male way of looking at the female characters or it is how the spectator can see the female characters only from a man's perspective. The term female gaze in feminist theory refers to the gaze of the female spectator and is related to how women portray, perceive, and are represented in artistic works. It is about how women are represented as active subjects with their own agency, rather than as passive objects. The concept of the female gaze is a response to Laura Mulvey's male gaze, which represents the gaze of a heterosexual male viewer, the gaze of the male character, and also the gaze of the male creator of the film.

Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with the role of social institutions in the shaping of culture, "...cultural studies is not one thing; it has never been one thing" (Hall 1990, 11). Stuart Henry McPhail Hall, a Jamaican-born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist, and political activist, was one of the founding figures of the school of thought known as British Cultural Studies or the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Hall's work talks about the issues of hegemony and cultural studies, taking a post-Gramscian stance. The encoding/decoding model of communication, which was a way to explain how signals are prepared for sending

through technology, became much more popular when it was adapted by Stuart Hall for a conference addressing mass communication scholars. This framework is widely used in media studies and cultural studies to analyze how meanings are constructed through communication processes. By applying a Marxist perspective to this model, Hall's study, titled "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse", gives a theoretical approach to how media messages are produced, disseminated, and interpreted, by the audience depending on their social, cultural, and personal backgrounds. Therefore, according to this model, the audience is capable of decoding the given message by associating it with their own social contexts and as a result of this, they are also capable of changing the messages through a collective action. "The level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where already coded signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional more active ideological dimensions" (Hall 1973, 12).

The process of encoding is the production of the message. Here, the sender creates the message using coded meanings. This process involves verbal tools like words, signs, images, and videos as well as nonverbal tools like body language, gestures, and facial expressions. The sender uses these symbols with the belief that the message will be understood by the decoder or the receiver. The process directly impacts how well the message is understood by the decoder. In essence, the process of encoding is not just about transmitting a particular information, it is also about creating it in a way such that the message is comprehensible and impactful to the intended audience. The decoding of a message has its base on how the audience understands and interprets

the message. Here, the coded information is interpreted and translated into a comprehensible form. In decoding, the aim is to simplify and extract meaning from the message. Therefore, encoding/decoding involves translating a particular message for an easy and clear understanding. However, it is also possible for the receiver to understand the message in a different way from what is intended by the encoder.

In his essay Hall, criticizes the traditional model of communication which moves linearly from the 'sender' through the 'message' and finally to the 'receiver'. This model requires the sender to create a particular message and fix its meaning, which is then communicated directly to the receiver. According to Hall, this model of communication is too neat and linear. He suggests that there is something more to this linear fashion of communication. Hall focuses on how the audience generates meaning rather than discovering it. His point is that (i) meaning cannot be fixed or determined by the sender, (ii) the message is never straightforward, there can be multiple interpretations, and (iii) the audience actively interprets the message rather than being passive recipients of the message.

He proposes a four-stage mode of communication which consists of the production, circulation, use, and reproduction of media messages. Firstly, the production is where the process of encoding begins, that is, the process of creating and structuring information for communication. This particular process is highly influenced by the beliefs, values, and societal norms and this reveals what is considered acceptable in a given culture. The creators depend on their technical abilities and professional beliefs to craft messages effectively. The creators also assume what is acceptable or desirable to the audience and therefore the message is created according to the audience's interests

and preferences. These assumptions are significant when it comes to how the creators should shape and present the content such that it resonates with the intended audience. The socio-cultural political situation also plays an important role in the process of production because it influences the selection and treatment of the topics and the intention of the message. Therefore, the production process involves numerous factors. "...knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience" (Hall 1980, 53) make up the "production structures of television" (53). Conversely, "topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations" (53) represent the broader socio-cultural and political structure. Circulation is based on how an individual audience perceives information differently depending on whether it is presented visually or in written form and how it circulates or spreads influences the audience's interpretation. This plays an important role in shaping audience reception. The feedbacks from the audience about the message such as through ratings and reviews are used in the process of production for creating future content. When it comes to use, for a message to be effectively "realized" (53), "the broadcasting structures must yield encoded messages in the form of a meaningful discourse" (53). This indicates that the audience must actively interpret and engage with the given media message for it to be successfully understood and integrated. Reproduction is the next stage which occurs immediately after the audience interprets a message based on their own experiences and beliefs. This stage determines what the audience members do once they have interpreted the message, whether they act on it or not, depending on how the

message influences them, leading to various complex consequences in perception, cognition, emotion, ideology, or behavior. Therefore, Hall suggests that encoding and decoding are important stages in communication. In essence, an event cannot be shared or presented exactly the way it happens if one is not physically present there. Instead, events can be shared through audio-visual forms. Once the message is received by the audience, they interpret it depending on their social and cultural perspectives. As mentioned earlier, a message can be decoded differently from what is intended. For this, Hall suggests three hypothetical positions of decoding. The first one is the dominant-hegemonic position which occurs when the audience interprets the message exactly how the creators intended. They accept the dominant message. Next comes the negotiated position, which occurs when the audience acknowledges or partially accepts the encoded message but still interprets it based on their social, cultural, and personal contexts. Therefore, this reveals a mixture of acceptance and rejection of a message. The final one is the oppositional position. Here, the audience may understand the dominant message or the intended meaning but completely reject it and end up interpreting it in a contrary way. This is based on one's personal experiences.

However, Hall's encoding/decoding model faces three challenges. The first problem is associated with polysemy, according to which the audience may find entirely new meanings in the text that are not related to the intended message at all. This means that the audience may create meanings that go beyond the simple agreement or disagreement with the intended message. The three hypothetical positions of decoding are all associated with the dominant message. However, polysemy and opposition are distinct from each other, although they are interconnected. Polysemy means that the text

can have multiple meanings and does not necessarily involve rejecting the intended meaning but finding different or additional meanings. Opposition, on the other hand, is more about challenging the intended or dominant meaning. The second problem concerns the aesthetics. TV viewers often focus on the aesthetic in addition to the content or what the creators expect the audience to interpret. This way of looking at the style and structure of the film is different from understanding the message. It involves analyzing the way the text is put together and its narrative techniques. The third problem is about the position of encoding. Hall's model assumes that media producers consistently encode messages from a dominant-hegemonic position that aligns with the dominant ideology. His model does not talk about the possibility of the producers encoding a particular message but not necessarily supporting the dominant ideology.

The project makes use of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding in analyzing how the films *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's* have encoded certain messages and themes concerning the issue of abortion in two opposing ways. It also explores how these messages and themes might be interpreted by different audiences based on their socio-cultural and political contexts.

Judith Pamela Butler is an influential American philosopher and scholar in gender studies whose works have tremendously contributed to the advancement of the fields of political philosophy, ethics, third-wave feminism, queer theory, and literary theory. Butler in the essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", argues that gender is performative, which means that gender is not an inherent identity or role but rather a series of actions that can

change over time. Butler says that since gender identity is shaped by certain behaviors or actions, it allows the construction of varied genders through different behaviors.

...if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 1988, 520)

In the book, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Butler clarifies the misreading and misinterpretations regarding gender performativity that reduce the enactment of gender and sex to a mere daily choice.

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and

even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (Butler 1993, 95)

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler challenges the notion that gender roles, including that of motherhood, are inherent and fixed. Butler argues that such roles are established and reinforced by socio-cultural and repeated actions. Butler envisions a future where the body, including those aspects related to motherhood, transcends the restrictive and traditional views that define it by naturalistic standards. “The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (Butler 1999, 119)

The project gives a detailed explanation of how the films *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara’s* present contrasting views on motherhood and abortion, depending on the various socio-cultural contexts of the time. It also analyzes the representation of male and female characters using Butler’s concept of gender performativity, examines the messages the two films are trying to convey, and explores how the films reinforce or subvert traditional gender roles.

Chapter 3

Dissecting *Kana Kanmani* by Akku Akbar

Kana Kanmani (2009) directed by Akku Akbar and written by K. Gireesh

Kumar revolves around a couple struggling amid the consequences of their decision to have an abortion years ago. Roy (Jayaram) is a very busy architect, while his wife Maya (Padmapriya) is a working woman. The film becomes further interesting when the life of their daughter Anakha, also known as Anu, is threatened by the ghost of their unborn child. The film incorporates supernatural elements to make the film even more appealing to the viewers. The film gives insight into the emotional turmoil of the couple following the hardest decision they had to take regarding their life which they never thought would have such a significant impact on their life.

The representation of abortion and the characters in *Kana Kanmani* can be analyzed using Laura Mulvey's male gaze from feminist film theory. When the concept of the male gaze is applied to the film, it becomes clear how the perspective of heterosexual male characters becomes crucial for the female characters' decision-making. This analysis goes beyond the traditional focus on the sexual objectification of women, denying women the agency to make decisions regarding their bodies. Both the families become overjoyed with the news of Maya's first pregnancy. However, Maya does not seem to be enjoying the happy news. Things take a turn when an extremely disappointed Roy makes his appearance. The film focuses on the disappointment in Roy's face indicating that something is wrong and this seems to make the audience curious about the upcoming drama. The fact that Maya's uneasiness is not focused on and ignored by the family members shows how Maya's perspective is seen as passive

and may be natural because women often become confused or overwhelmed with their first pregnancy. This reinforces the idea of the male gaze, wherein women are rejected for their autonomy. There is a tendency for people to invalidate the feelings of women regarding their pregnancy, hoping that they would become used to it.

Coming back to the film, Roy's appearance creates uneasiness among the members. Taking Maya to their room, he confronts her regarding the pregnancy. Roy criticizes her for revealing the pregnancy to the family members. He appears extremely disappointed thinking that she desired to celebrate the news. When Maya makes it clear that she did not tell them about the pregnancy and that they somehow found out, Roy declares that he knows a woman is capable of hiding her pregnancy if she wants. It seems like he is directly blaming her even for becoming pregnant. What follows reveals how Roy's perspective is given more importance compared to Maya's perspective. Roy states that he does not want to bring a child into the world unless he becomes financially stable enough to afford a child. However, Maya's current take on the pregnancy is not portrayed in the film. In this particular scene, Roy is the only one stating his reasons for not wanting a child. Without asking Maya what she feels about the pregnancy, Roy rushes to make yet another decision that they should abort the unborn. It becomes clear that only the male protagonist's perspective is prioritized in the film and that the female character's right to decide or even have an opinion is blatantly denied. Maya, although not given the right to opinion, appears conflicted struggling between whether to have or not have an abortion. Roy also accuses her of giving importance to her father's happiness by deciding to keep the child although she has not had a chance to state her opinion. This reveals how Maya is left with no option other than to follow either the

decision of her father or husband, reflecting the societal expectation of women to be passive beings and follow the decisions made by men. Roy proceeds to state that he gets to make decisions regarding his child and by repeating the phrase “my child” (*Kana Kanmani* 01:15:31), he is also denying Maya a mother’s rights over her child. Thus, according to the male gaze, the male character somehow seems to convince the spectator of his perspective so much so that even the spectator gets to watch the film only through the perspective of the male character and it becomes even more complicated when the spectators or audience do not mind ignoring the female character’s agency. The audience identifies themselves with the male character, thus deriving pleasure from being able to align with the one who has the absolute authority to make decisions.

Classic cinema, adds Mulvey, stimulates the desire to look by integrating structures of voyeurism and narcissism into the story and the image.

Voyeuristic visual pleasure is produced by looking at another (character, figure, situation) as our object, whereas narcissistic visual pleasure can be derived from self-identification with the (figure in the) image. (Smelik 1999, 353)

In the following scene, both the families are outside the couple’s room, overhearing their conversation. Krishna Iyer, Maya’s father, yet another male character, enters the room and tries to coerce them out of Roy’s decision about abortion. He proceeds to say that Roy does not have to be upset at Maya because he is the one who decided to celebrate the news by inviting guests. Here, Iyer is repeating exactly what Roy is trying to do, that is, denying Maya the agency to have an opinion illustrating

how the male gaze diminishes women's autonomy over their bodies and choices. Both Roy and Iyer do not see the need to involve Maya in their respective decisions. Iyer's attempts at making the couple feel guilty even for thinking about abortion indicate that the film is trying to promote the idea of pro-life. He claims that a baby takes its life just when it is conceived inside the mother's womb and no one has the right to deny the unborn child's right to life, at the same time denying an adult woman's rights. As we move forward, it becomes clear that he is not just representing the families' voice but also the voice of the society of the time. The film also chooses a male character to convey the message instead of a female character. Maya's grandmother who is the eldest among both the families never gets to have a say in the matter. Her opinion is reduced to merely focusing on the disappointment in her face. A more convincing reason for choosing Iyer over his mother could be to feed the spectator's desire to see a strong male character making crucial decisions. This narrative contributes to the entrenched belief that only men in the family are capable of making strong and practical decisions, further strengthening the audience's mentality or belief that a man's judgment is naturally more rational compared to a woman's judgment. This remains just the same even when there is an older and more experienced woman present. The film *Kana Kanmani* has successfully reinforced this idea. Looking through the lens of the male gaze, this perspective denies women the right to express their opinions. Consequently, this marginalization not only excludes women from decision-making but also normalizes a framework in which women themselves may come to accept their lack of agency as the norm. As a result of this, even the female spectator is unknowingly forced to agree with the perspective of the male character. Iyer also brings religion into the

matter to further emphasize his disappointment and decision against abortion because he believes that the unborn child could bridge the religious disparities between Maya and Roy, who are Hindu and Christian respectively, mirroring the broader perspective of Indian society. This perspective reinforces the male gaze by framing the woman's role primarily through motherhood and placing societal and familial expectations above her autonomy.

Iyer's claims about his desire and right to have a grandchild are presented in a manner that not only appeases the audience but also enables them to relate to the sentiment, particularly older citizens. So far in the film, conversations have occurred only between the male characters while Maya is presented as standing silently in the background without being able to take part in the conversation which results in her expected role as passive without autonomy, being reinforced. There is a constant fight between Roy and Iyer as to who gets to influence Maya, though it appears that no one of them cares for her opinion. Iyer directly talks to Roy because he knows who has the upper hand in the decision. Only when he realizes that Roy is adamant in his decision, he turns to Maya to remind her of her role as a mother. Through the lens of the male gaze, it is evident how the female character's perspective is only the last option.

At the hospital, the doctor asks them whether they are sure about the decision to abort. The doctor tries to convince Maya that she has already become a mother upon conceiving and questions the morality behind separating a child from its mother, referring to abortion as murder. This reinforces a pro-life stance. The doctor by referring to Maya's role as a mother tries to encourage how it is not expected for a mother to commit such a cruel act. The notion that it becomes impossible for a woman to even

think about abortion, the moment she realizes that she is pregnant is reinforced through the doctor's statement. Thus Maya is expected to fulfill her destined role as a mother despite the couple's decision of delaying having children. The doctor despite being a woman is presented in a way such that she conforms to the perspective of the male characters.

In the second half of the film, their unborn child's ghost possesses their daughter Anakha's body, threatening to kill her as revenge for being denied the right to live. The ghost identifies herself as Shivani, the name that Roy and Maya had planned for their first child if it was a girl. By naming the unborn child, the fetus is attributed an identity and personhood, reinforcing the notion that the unborn child has an established identity. This is used by the narrative to evoke sympathy and emotional attachment from the audience. The depiction of the unborn child having a life also reflects society's attitude toward the reproductive choices of women. It reinforces both the society's and the male character's view that granting women authority always has consequences. Iyer warns Roy and Maya that the unborn child's soul will never forgive them if they were to move forward with abortion and Iyer's warnings are proved right through the portrayal of Shivani's desire to take revenge on them.

The theme of guilt plays a crucial role in the film. Although Maya's decision was significantly influenced by Roy, Shivani directs her questions and accusations at Maya hoping to make her guilty. When analysed through Judith Butler's gender performativity, Maya as a woman and mother is expected to feel more guilt and responsibility. Shivani's questions make the audience feel love and affection for the unborn child. Her dialogue delivery is articulated in a way that evokes sympathy in the

minds of the audience. The parents, especially the mother, are blamed and labeled as selfish for prioritizing their own lives. This judgment persists despite Roy's original justification for the abortion is now considered rational. However, when analyzing the film, the societal and cultural contexts of the time it was produced should be considered. The socio-cultural and personal perspectives of the audience play significant roles in shaping their attitudes towards the subject. The audience desires to see the characters, particularly Maya, getting punished for their sin. Consequently, the viewers derive a certain pleasure from watching the characters go through moral and emotional dilemmas as a part of their redemption. This can be related to Freud's concept of scopophilia (deriving pleasure from looking), which has been effectively used by Mulvey in explaining the male gaze. This further creates stigma and guilt surrounding the subject of abortion by reinforcing the narrative that women who choose abortion should feel ashamed and seek redemption.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model helps us understand how the film *Kana Kanmani* and its creators encode messages regarding the concept of motherhood and abortion, and also how audiences from different socio-cultural backgrounds might decode these messages. Various instances from the film reveal that the creators believe in the concept of the unborn child having a life of its own from the moment of conception, thus encoding a pro-life message that might influence the audience against abortion. Considering the year in which the film came out, which was 2009, it can be said that the selection of the topic depended upon the social and cultural situation of the time. The opening scene of the film begins with the depiction of stormy weather with thunder and lightning, which can be seen as a symbol of the danger that is about to

make its presence. Combined with the focus on a haunted-looking house and the sound of a baby crying in the background, the film reveals its plan to add a supernatural element to it. This disturbing scene is contrasted with a peaceful, everyday moment of a family, where Maya is seen trying to wake their daughter while Roy is getting ready for work. This juxtaposition gives a hint that there is a constant presence of danger that is going to embrace this family shortly. Additionally, the family moment can be seen as encoding cultural and familial ideals about motherhood and the importance of sticking to traditional gender roles.

Despite her professional identity as an interior designer, Maya is always presented as fulfilling her traditional gender roles as a wife and a mother. While Maya juggles with household chores, Roy is portrayed as either getting ready for work or complaining about Maya for not waking him up early in the morning. Maya's maternal duties as a mother are reinforced as she is always expected to be available for her daughter. The scene where Anakha says, "Amma, brush" (*Kana Kanmani* 00:04:56) to which Maya responds, "Coming" (00:04:58), even when she is struggling in the kitchen, reveals not just how much Anakha is dependent on her mother but also how Maya is expected to conform to her traditional gender roles. This performance of femininity is encoded in the repetitive tasks she undertakes, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of her family's needs. These scenes serve as a microcosm of traditional Indian family dynamics, by giving a specific message about the gender roles and the expectations of motherhood. The grand celebration of Maya's first pregnancy, despite the religious tensions between the families, gives an insight into society's attitudes towards pregnancy and motherhood, especially within Kerala. The celebration is made

more exciting with the inclusion of a joyous song about pregnancy that enquires the expectant mother whether the baby will be a girl or a boy. The festivity might suggest that pregnancy is an event always worthy of joyous celebration. This is a reflection on how ingrained cultural norms and beliefs shape one's attitudes toward the choices regarding pregnancy and motherhood. The family members, upon learning the pregnancy news, put certain restrictions on Maya's movements, urging her not to stand, walk, or do any activity that might be dangerous to the baby. This immediate shift in their behaviour can be associated with Foucault's concept of biopower. The pregnant woman will be under constant surveillance, with the family members enjoying the agency to control her body and movements.

The doctor serves as a significant factor in encoding the dominant message that the film is trying to represent. Her strong opposition to abortion might heavily influence the audience's perception. The doctor's claims to have witnessed how babies would react to the abortion procedure, although a piece of exaggerated information, are crafted in a way that elicits a deep emotional response. This depiction reinforces the pro-life message and questions people's morality, especially that of the mother. The scene's focus on Maya's facial expressions reveals her internal turmoil, suggesting that she is influenced by the doctor's arguments against abortion. The doctor's persuasive speech and Maya's visible dilemma, help to encode the film's message regarding the moral complexities concerned with abortion, subtly guiding the audience to empathize with Maya's predicament and question the morality of abortion. The choice of having a doctor, a health professional, and an educated authority, speak strongly against abortion is likely a deliberate strategy by the film's creators to lend credibility and weight to the

anti-abortion message. The fact that they have a doctor deliver such a message helps to influence the audience to decode the message more comprehensively. The small model of a baby in the womb placed on the doctor's table serves as yet another significant symbol within the film's encoding framework. The baby's fall out of the womb as Maya accidentally knocks down the model foreshadows the abortion that is about to happen and visually represents the disruption of the life of the fetus. The deliberate blending of the visual and narrative elements in the hospital scene encodes a pro-life message framing abortion as a morally and emotionally charged issue. Through this, the creators aim to influence the audience's perception and judgments about the act of abortion. The figure of a little girl that Maya initially draws right after her marriage, while she and Roy discuss their first child, becomes an important symbol in the film. This haunting figure occasionally appears in the film, for instance, it is seen on the back of Anu's dress as well as on the mirror when no one is watching. The little girl's figure, which is later used by Shivani to represent herself, symbolizes the presence and unfulfilled life of the aborted child. The appearance of the figure is a constant silent reminder of the morally wrong acts that Roy and Maya have committed in the past.

The departure of the little girl's figure from Anu's body symbolizes that Shivani has given up the idea of revenge against her parents and forgiven them while still being able to deliver a strong message against abortion. The addition of supernatural elements serves the purpose of reinforcing the film's anti-abortion message. The film comes to its conclusion with the depiction of yet another stormy night. The presence of the wind symbolizes Shivani's ethereal presence. Roy and Maya make a small space in the middle of their bed for Shivani. Before leaving Anu's body, Shivani had revealed how

she had always longed to sleep in between her parents. She had also requested them to create a space for her between them whenever there was a stormy night. In the present, the couple's gesture symbolizes their acceptance of Shivani, their aborted child. Thus, the film's bittersweet ending tries to evoke introspection and empathy among its audience regarding the moral implications of abortion and the profound emotional aftermath it can entail.

Coming to the process of decoding, the audience, after watching the film will be able to interpret the film's message about abortion based on their experiences and socio-cultural and political background. Some viewers might decode the film's dominant message, accepting the portrayal of abortion as morally questionable, exactly as the creators wanted. They may believe that the addition of a supernatural element in the film was fitting for the film as they perceive it to be the consequence of abortion. Two other Malayalam films that similarly deal with abortion are *Notebook* (2006) and *Anamika* (2009). *Notebook* portrays abortion as a deadly procedure that leads to the death of a teenage girl. Therefore, the film in its attempt to warn society of teenage pregnancies and its consequences, ends up creating stigma and fear around the process of abortion. Similarly, *Anamika* also reinforces the stigma surrounding abortion by presenting it as a cruel act that leads to deep emotional turmoil. The depiction of the subject in these films, which were created around the same period, mirrors Kerala's socio-cultural beliefs and attitudes towards abortion. This similar portrayal of abortion also suggests that the audience of the time might have interpreted the subject in a way that contributed to its stigmatization. Other viewers might choose to decode the message in a negotiated way, leading to a mixture of acceptance and rejection. While partly

accepting the dominant message they might try to bring their own experiences and perspectives into the interpretation. Viewers also oppose the dominant message critiquing its portrayal of abortion. They might interpret the supernatural element as exaggerating and manipulating enough to instill unnecessary fears about abortion in people. Oppositional viewers may argue that the film overlooks women's right to make decisions regarding their bodies and reinforces societal taboos about abortion. Therefore, as Hall suggests, the meaning cannot be fixed by the senders allowing the audience to actively participate in bringing out multiple interpretations rather than being passive recipients of the message.

Chapter 4

Deconstructing *Sara's* by Jude Anthany Joseph

Sara's, a 2021 Malayalam film directed by Jude Anthany Joseph and written by Akshay Hareesh, successfully subverts traditional gender roles, resulting in a more progressive portrayal of the concept of abortion. The film takes a bold approach to challenging the traditional portrayal of abortion that the Malayalam audience has commonly encountered in the past. The characters of Sara and Jeevan are played by actors Anna Ben and Sunny Wayne. Other important characters in the film are Sara's father, Vincent, portrayed by Benny P. Nayarambalam (who is also Anna's real-life father), and Jeevan's mother, Reethamma, played by Mallika Sukumaran.

By portraying Sara as a co-director, whose biggest dream is to become a freelance director, the film deviates from the depiction of conventional professions or domestic roles that the women are expected to occupy on-screen. The film also reveals the many challenges including sexual objectification that women have to face in the industry. The portrayal of Sara being asked for sexual favors in return for giving her story an opportunity reveals a deeper layer of manifestation of the concept of the male gaze. More than the sexual objectification of women for visual pleasure that Mulvey explains, the instance in the film gives an insight into how women are treated as some sort of commodity not just onscreen but also in real-life scenarios. By refusing to succumb to the expectation to exchange sexual favor, Sara denies the male character onscreen and the audience the pleasure they expect to derive from the male gaze perspective. The film intentionally rejects this expectation by presenting Sara as a character who gives great importance to her autonomy. This deviation allows the

audience to reconsider their perspectives regarding women's roles. The departure from the male gaze perspective, allows the film to be analyzed through the lens of the female gaze which gives importance to a woman's autonomy instead of expecting women to be passive.

The conversation between Sara and her high school boyfriend serves as an example of how she refuses to conform to what society expects from her as a woman. When her boyfriend expresses his plans to have children with her in the future, she states that she does not want to have children. Their conversation unfolds in the following manner:

Boyfriend: "We'll get married in 2018..."

...and have our first child in 2020

A girl...a little baby Sara!

And we'll name her Trisha

Then in 2022...we have a boy. It has to be a boy! Surya!"

Sara: "I don't want to give birth!"

Boyfriend: "Huh? How can you not give birth? Women have to do it don't they? My mother gave birth to me...your mother gave birth to you..." (*Sara's* 00:06:02-00:06:30)

The arguments of the boyfriend reflect the deeply ingrained societal norms and the fact that how, from a young age, he has internalized the societal expectations of traditional gender roles. His justification of his statements by reminding Sara of their mother's role in giving birth to them further proves Butler's idea that gender is not an inherent identity but a series of actions that society uses to categorize individuals into

their respective genders. While it is perfectly valid to have plans about whether or not one wants to have children in the future, assuming that the other person also wants the same sometimes becomes problematic. In trying to convince Sara to conform to her traditional gender roles, the boyfriend is claiming his traditional male role of decision-maker. His question, “Women have to do it, don’t they?” (00:06:27) is rhetorical. He is not expecting Sara to answer the question but is rather trying to affirm that her role as a woman is ultimately to be a mother. This reveals not only his belief and expectation regarding a woman’s role but also the society’s perception that motherhood has to be a woman’s primary purpose.

Applying the concept of the male gaze, the boyfriend’s desire to decide when and how Sara should become a mother reflects a rejection of Sara’s autonomy. Although not visually, Sara is objectified here by being expected to remain passive while a man decides what she should do with her body. However, Sara’s statement, “I don’t want to give birth”, (00:06:21) disrupts both her boyfriend's and society’s perception of a woman’s role. Sara’s decision subverts the traditional perspective of the male gaze by allowing her to claim her agency concerning her body. When looking through the perspective of the female gaze, the audience understands that her decision is a valid expression of her autonomy. Consequently, this encourages the audience to see her as an autonomous individual with her desires and goals.

A song that talks about the exhausting and challenging situations that women have to go through during the period of pregnancy is featured in the film. The song presents a pregnant Sara struggling with various symptoms that come along with pregnancy from losing her appetite and constant vomiting to finding it difficult to sleep

comfortably. The lyrics in the song hold significant importance as they depict what Sara is feeling. For instance, the lines,

“And a lot that she treasures one by one has to be let go...All the time she flew high are now just a memory”, (00:07:38) in the background as she watches her female friends going on a trip reveals Sara’s fears. The fact that this song is one of Sara’s recurring dreams underscores her clear stance on not wanting children. Her response after waking up from sleep also suggests that she does not feel happy about the events of the dream. The song makes it clear that Sara is not only concerned about giving up her dreams but also about the struggles that she would have to go through physically during pregnancy. Moreover, Sara also states that while she does not hate children, she does not know how to handle them. Audiences may interpret the song differently based on their social, cultural, and personal experiences. However, the song’s departure from the traditional portrayal of pregnancy which overly glorifies pregnancy and its sacrifices, as encountered in earlier films, might encourage the audience to recognize the perspective of women who choose not to become mothers. While not all women have to abandon their dreams upon embarking on pregnancy and motherhood, the song reveals the unspoken realities of pregnancy that might be valid reasons for some women not wanting children.

Another scene that reveals how society often expects women to conform to their gender roles is where Sara's parents try to convince her to get married. Since she knows that Sara will not listen to her, the mother approaches Vincent to talk to Sara about marriage. This scene mirrors how mothers in Kerala, and India more broadly, depend on their husbands to bring such matters to their children, rather than approaching them

directly. This happens either because of the father's expected traditional gender role as the head of the family who has the absolute authority in decision-making or because the father might be closer to his children. The scene reflects the societal view that men's voices and opinions are authoritative and persuasive. However, in the film, it is apparent that Sara is closer to her father which might have made the mother believe that Sara would consider marriage if her father brings up the subject. This subtly subverts the concept of the male gaze, as if Sara considers her father's advice, it is not due to the inherent authority of his male perspective but rather because of her relationship and trust with him.

When Sara visits Jeevan's sister, a forensic surgeon, as part of her film, she hears Jeevan, who is babysitting his sister's children, say, "I have decided...I will only have a girl...Who won't give birth." (00:25:21-00:25:24). With this, it becomes clear that he prefers a woman who does not want children. This directly challenges the traditional roles assigned to women in society. Jeevan, by stating his preference, is not expressing his desire for the woman he marries to conform to his idea if she desires to give birth instead he is looking for a partner who shares his perspectives. Jeevan's subversive statement highlights the acceptance of the idea of female agency's autonomy to decide on their bodies.

Jeevan and Sara's bond starts with their conversation about children and their mutual difficulty in handling them. From the very beginning, both are confident that they do not want children. Sara sees a potential partner in him not just because of their shared decision not to have children but also because they feel they are compatible.

Their conversation as they slowly get to know each other as a part of the possibility of romance, can be contrasted with Sara and her ex-boyfriend's conversation.

Sara: "Parenting is such a risk, right?"

Jeevan: "I swear!"

Sara: "To define a child's character...

... it takes a sacrifice of at least 20 years of your life. If you are not up to that, you shouldn't do it!" (00:26:59-00:27:23)

Sara also adds that no one seems to understand her decision to not have children. However, Jeevan as compared to her ex-boyfriend takes a different stand by replying that he understands her. Subverting the concept of the male gaze, Jeevan as a supportive partner, shows respect for each other's perspectives.

After the marriage, when relatives from both families visit them, Sara and Jeevan inform the family that they are not going to have children. Reethamma immediately misunderstands the situation, assuming Sara has some health issues because of which she cannot conceive. Reethamma accuses Vincent of marrying off his infertile daughter. This reflects not only Reethamma's but also society's fear of discovering that a woman cannot give birth, to the extent that infertility is considered a disability that strips a woman of her ultimate purpose. Reethamma also reinforces the concept of traditional gender roles when she says that it is the duty of Sara as a woman to give birth and bring up the children while the only responsibility that Jeevan as the father has to do is, to spend time with them after returning from work. Jeevan's statement that the final decision has to be Sara's since it is her body, reflects a shift from traditional male attitudes towards the subject. The film diverges from the traditional

depiction of male characters, with the portrayal of supportive figures such as Sara's father who respects her choices, and Jeevan, an equally supportive husband who is willing to share household responsibilities. This film, through the portrayal of such characters, challenges the conventional gender roles and instead supports Sara's autonomy, unlike the typical male characters in many Malayalam films.

When Sara gets pregnant despite using proper contraceptive measures, their family and close friends celebrate, thinking that the couple will eventually become happy and accept the child. This is a reflection of a common mentality of society that sees pregnancy as possessing the power to transform and influence an individual's decision, despite their initial decision to remain child-free. Jeevan experiences a dilemma when Sara becomes pregnant, despite having previously shared her decision not to have children. His inner conflict becomes apparent when he observes one of his colleagues taking measures such as avoiding smoking because his wife is pregnant. Observing his colleague, Jeevan, who is about to smoke, stops himself. This scene underscores the societal pressure and the internal struggle Jeevan faces as he navigates the expectations of impending fatherhood, despite initially aligning with Sara's desire. His hesitation reflects the broader theme of how societal norms can influence and challenge personal decisions, even for those who initially resist conforming to traditional roles. Additionally, Jeevan's friend comparing him to the colleague who has just announced his wife's pregnancy just four months into marriage can be seen as questioning Jeevan's potential to become a father, coming off as an insult. This scene reinforces the traditional gender roles which often tie a man's worth and masculinity to his ability to procreate.

Analyzing the important theme of this project which is the representation of abortion in the film, it is evident how the film subverts the traditional ideas and societal attitudes towards the concept of abortion. When they visit the doctor, Sara firmly states her decision that she wants to terminate the pregnancy. Jeevan appears contemplating and tells Sara that they should think about it. Jeevan's response indicates that he wants to reconsider the abortion while Sara remains resolute in her decision to terminate the pregnancy. The doctor, while not persuading them against abortion, advised that they should consider counseling to discuss the matter thoroughly. The suggestion stems from his observation of the couple's differences in opinion and emotional tension. This scene represents abortion through a lens of thoughtful consideration. The doctor's response suggests that he holds respect for personal agency. Thus the film acknowledges the emotional and relational complexities that come along with the decision-making regarding an issue like abortion, underscoring that the decision should be made collaboratively and with full awareness of each person's feelings and perspectives. The doctor informing the couple about the importance of thorough communication indicates the need for informed and consensual decision-making, consequently presenting abortion as a valid option that requires careful deliberation, rather than as a stigmatized or one-dimensional choice.

When Sara brings up the matter of abortion, her mother becomes upset while her father takes a more practical approach and ensures the mother that he will talk to her. The father's approach cannot be seen as asserting the male perspective but instead, the film subverts the male gaze by allowing the father, a male, to give importance to Sara's take on the subject, indicating respect for her autonomy rather than expecting her to

conform to his opinions. His respect towards Sara's decision is evident since he asks for her decision before asking if Jeevan also has the same approach. However, he also considers the complexity of deciding about abortion, and he, for a moment, represents the societal assumption that the primary reason for a woman's decision to terminate her pregnancy is her career. Sara, however, asserts her autonomy and agency by stating that her decision to have an abortion is not solely driven by career reasons. Reethamma, while not questioning the morality of abortion, disagrees with Sara's decision because she cannot digest the fact that Sara does not want children. Reethamma questions Jeevan by asking if he is also supporting the decision and if he is really a man. This reflects societal attitudes that expect men to assert control and make major decisions, particularly regarding family and reproduction. Sara subverts these gender roles and the male gaze by firmly taking charge of her own decisions and questioning Reethamma's assumptions. Sara says that she prioritizes her happiness, career, and life, reinforcing her autonomy and challenging the traditional idea that a woman should sacrifice her life to make others happy. Through this scene, the film rejects the conventional idea that a woman must conform to male perspectives. Instead, it supports the female gaze by highlighting Sara's agency, her right to make decisions about her own body, and her pursuit of personal fulfillment on her terms. Most importantly, the fact that the film is said from the perspective of a woman, is an indication of the film's rejection of the male perspective that expects a woman to be just a womb owner.

Analyzing the film based on Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding reveals the filmmaker's aim to convey a message emphasizing the importance of prioritizing a woman's autonomy in decisions regarding reproductive choices including abortion. The

film thus encodes a dominant message that prioritizes the reproductive choices of women, thereby emphasizing the importance of one's autonomy and agency. Through various symbols, narrative elements, and character interactions, the audience gets to see how the film shapes its approach toward pregnancy, motherhood, and abortion.

Sara's conversation with her ex-boyfriend at the beginning of the film and her assertion that she does not want to give birth sets a precedent for understanding her later decision-making process when faced with an accidental pregnancy. By establishing Sara's stance early on, the film lets the audience interpret what her decision might be if she were to encounter an accidental pregnancy later in the film. The scene in which her boyfriend leaves behind the uneaten egg after hearing Sara's statement that she does not want to give birth symbolizes more than just a rejected snack. It not only serves as a representation of the boyfriend's rejection of Sara's decision but also mirrors broader societal attitudes towards a woman who refuses to conform to what society thinks is ideal of her gender role. The song is another element using which the creators encode the film's dominant message. The song which concentrates on the conditions that women have to face during pregnancy not only mirrors Sara's fears but also some of the valid reasons why some women may choose to remain-childfree. The song also gives a hint about how the film is going to handle the subject of reproductive choices.

When the characters and their approach toward the concept of abortion are analyzed, the audience might be able to interpret them based on their social, cultural, and personal experiences. The film is also able to encode its message through the actors' facial expressions, which convey emotions, reactions, and fundamental themes. Sara is the main character in the film as its narrative centers around Sara's decisions regarding

her body. Therefore, the film also places significant importance on Sara's facial expression as it explores various instances. Sara's immediate statement while discussing the pregnancy, "I don't want this, Doctor" (1:14:19), indicates how the film tries to emphasize her right to make decisions regarding her body. Observing Sara's response may initially seem emotional and stubborn, suggesting a reaction driven by immediate feelings rather than reasoned thought. However, the film reminds the audience about how Sara remains confident in her decision not to have children, as the film continues to represent that Sara's stance on abortion is rooted in careful consideration and firm conviction. Thus the film encodes a message regarding abortion that gives importance to Sara's right to choose and her ability to make appropriate decisions about her reproductive health. There is also a particular scene that focuses the camera on Sara's face after she talks to her father one last time regarding her decision. Her father says, "...you will give your script to many people to read and they give all kinds of opinions but... when you write the climax, it should be all your own... You write the scene exactly as you wish, whatever you do, Papa is ok with it" (1:42:55-1:43:10). After listening to her father, Sara stares at the wall on which it is written 'a film by Sara Vincent' and smiles. Her father's advice, in this context, has broader implications that go beyond filmmaking, instead, it extends to Sara's personal decisions, particularly regarding abortion. His words reflect a supportive stance towards her autonomy and agency. This scene allows the audience to interpret the message that the decision-making process, whether related to one's career or in their personal life, should be based on their own beliefs and values rather than external expectations. Sara's character encodes the themes of autonomy, agency, and opposition to societal expectations

regarding gender roles and reproductive choices. Jeevan's character represents the complexities of balancing societal expectations and personal beliefs. Though initially he aligns with Sara's decision on not wanting children, the inner conflict that he goes through when Sara decides to have an abortion, is to some extent, influenced by the expectations of those around him. Despite this, Jeevan comes to realize the importance of not forcing one's opinion on others with the help of the doctor. In the end, Jeevan seems happy and contented with Sara's decision and her success in the film industry.

The conversation with the doctor holds a significant purpose in encoding the message about the reproductive choices of a woman. He says, "According to the 1971 Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, if a woman due to her pregnancy, mentally or physically suffered any issue, she can decide not to take the pregnancy forward. She doesn't need even the husband's permission to do that" (1:45:11-1:45:28).

The film effectively uses a doctor, a health professional, and a powerful authority, to educate the audience about the law regarding abortion rights. Therefore, employing a doctor enhances the reliability and persuasiveness of the message, allowing the audience to decode the message and understand the importance of women's reproductive rights. The doctor also addresses the widespread issue of people starting their journey as parents without adequate preparation to face the challenges and responsibilities that come along with parenthood. He further explains the role that a parent plays in shaping their child's character. To support this, he says, "Better not be a parent than be a bad parent" (1:47:44). The film intends to present abortion as a responsible choice for those who are not ready to take on the responsibility of a parent. This view of the film never portrays abortion as a morally wrong decision but instead

supports the idea that choosing to terminate a pregnancy can be a thoughtful decision that is taken in the best interest of both the potential child and the parent. With the doctor's words, "It's your body and the decision should be yours" (1:48:15), the film reinforces the importance of a woman's rights over her body. The film's choice of a male doctor as a gynecologist can also be seen as its attempt at subverting the male gaze.

The film's ending, just like how it deviates from the traditional representation of pregnancy, motherhood, and abortion, takes a very different approach. Towards the film's conclusion, the scene where a very stressed Jeevan waiting restlessly in front of a theatre, might confuse the audience into thinking that he resembles a father waiting in front of a labor room. This assumption is even more enhanced by the sound of a baby crying in the background, making the audience believe that Sara is giving birth. However, this scene reveals a frustrated father carrying his crying child outside the theatre where Sara's first film is being played, which turns out to be a huge success. This is deliberate on the filmmaker's part, challenging the audience's expectation and the traditional portrayal of a film's ending which usually concludes with the woman being confirmed to societal norms and gender roles. Therefore, the representation of abortion in the film can be understood as a response to societal questions and assumptions, conveyed in the form of messages through certain scenes, characters, and symbols. Right from the beginning of the film from Sara's conversation with her ex-boyfriend to the doctor's advice and the ending of the film, help the audience interpret the encoded message and interpret it based on their social and cultural backgrounds.

The process of decoding is complicated because audiences from different backgrounds interpret the film based on their experiences. The dominant message of the film according to the detailed analysis, is that it supports the reproductive choices of a woman, consequently encouraging the audience to understand the same. The film reviews suggest that many audiences can decode the dominant message as it is. Some of the audience reviews that align with the dominant message of the film are: "...it is necessary to acknowledge the extreme significance of Sara's. This is not an esoteric film that might reach only the converted. Instead, Jude Anthany Joseph has created a mass-targeted, full-blown commercial film that takes this explicit stand: her body, her choice. About time too" ("Sara's Movie Review: A Brave Film on Women's Reproductive Rights with Its Own Share of Unconscious Bias-Entertainment News , Firstpost"). According to Geeta AM: "Sara's is different and lightheartedly focuses on changing mindsets in modern India. I thoroughly enjoyed the film" (Google Review). "Excellent movie. A very relevant topic for today's times . A mature theme handled with maturity and finesse" (Pillai Google Review).

These reviews reveal that the audience has decoded the message the way the creators intended. "India's projected "post-pandemic baby boom" does not seem to be happening. If anything, many gynaecologists across the country say they are still conducting fewer deliveries than they did in pre-pandemic days. Instead, several doctors told The Print, there has been an uptick in requests for abortions." (Ghosh). The lack of access to contraceptive measures during the COVID-19 lockdown might have resulted in unwanted pregnancies. This context might have, to some extent, shaped the dominant viewers' perception, making them more empathetic towards Sara's decision and

supportive of the film's emphasis on bodily autonomy and personal choice. Those viewers that interpret the message in a negotiated way, partially accept the dominant message while still interpreting it based on their experiences:

The movie's protagonist is a woman who is a high achiever- a girl with dreams. Which is great! But the movie, despite all its feel-good vibes, has also villain elements, very well in disguise- pregnancy, infants and toddlers (basically all little human beings)...It also portrays abortion as a clear cut solution to challenges faced by a woman's career due to pregnancy....Human life is precious from the point it comes into being- from the point of conception. Abortion should not be normalised. (Benny Google Review)

The making of the movie is really commendable. It's a movie you'll enjoy watching. The actors have done a brilliant job. Having said that, I strongly don't agree with the message and the concept the movie portrays...killing a person is murder, then killing a child inside the womb is equally murder. I hope this movie does not encourage many more abortions in the country just for materialistic gains. (Felcy Francis Google Review)

These reviews are examples of how audiences decode the message in a negotiated ways. Some viewers strongly disagree with the message intended by the creators and interpret the message in an opposing manner:

A movie that's totally unacceptable. People may have different choices about career, important life decisions but the joy of motherhood cannot be described in words or in a movie... I wish I had seen Sarah directing her

first movie with her big baby bump and her husband supporting her in the shoot. I wish I had seen Sarah taking her second movie and inspiring her daughter/son to be like his/her mommy. But what Sarah did instead cannot be accepted as her passion /feminism, I see it as a sin". (Bency Google Review)

"Abortion is a planned murder. Climax of the movie is not at all acceptable... why none in the movie cares about the unborn child... The child is also having equal rights to live in this world... IT'S NOT A CHOICE, IT'S A HUMAN BEING" (Susan Google Review).

These reviews prove that the idea put forth by Stuart Hall that a meaning or a message, cannot be fixed and the audience instead of being the passive recipients takes an active role in interpreting the message based on their backgrounds.

Chapter 5

Shifting Paradigms in Abortion Depictions

The third and fourth chapters of this project have provided an in-depth analysis of the representation of abortion in the films *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's*. Through a comparative approach, it has become evident that each film addresses the concept of abortion in distinct ways. Utilizing the male gaze theory and the encoding/decoding model, the analysis reveals nuanced insights into how these representations are constructed. The periods in which these films were released, one in 2009 and the other in 2021, significantly contribute to the divergent portrayals of the same subject.

Based on the information provided in both chapters, it is transparent how *Kana Kanmani* reinforces the traditional perspectives regarding the subject of abortion. *Sara's*, on the other hand, subverts the conventional attitudes toward women's reproductive choices including abortion. In *Kana Kanmani*, the story follows a male perspective, reinforcing the concept of the male gaze, consequently portraying Maya as a passive being without the agency to make decisions regarding abortion. The film portrays a woman who is stripped of her autonomy regarding decisions about her body. However, *Sara's* tells the story from a female perspective, successfully subverting the idea that men should be the ultimate decision maker. In the doctor's cabin, Maya is put in a dilemma about whether to proceed with an abortion, promoting the idea that women should either be against or confused when making decisions regarding their reproductive choices. The film deliberately uses a female doctor to reinforce the notion that a baby's life begins at conception. *Kana Kanmani* utilizes this belief to convince the audience that how abortion becomes a morally wrong act, that has serious

consequences. Therefore, its stance as a pro-life film becomes evident.

Additionally, the film employs supernatural elements to deliver its message of anti-abortion. However, in *Sara's*, the scene in the doctor's cabin is presented in an entirely different manner compared to *Kana Kanmani*. The male doctor in *Sara's* respects Sara's choice emphasizing the existence of legal rights of women regarding their reproductive health without needing a husband's permission. The doctor as a professional, also promotes the idea that decisions, especially regarding abortion should be made after thorough discussions. Therefore, it is clear that the film is not promoting or overly glorifying abortion. Sara, unlike Maya never seems to be confused in her decision, instead, she is confident and assertive. The film thus emphasizes women's rights over their bodies. The characters in *Sara's* are also different from the characters in *Kana Kanmani*. Even the characters who are against abortion do not see it as a morally wrong act that is to be stigmatized. The film also does not make use of any supernatural elements to convey its message, instead, it takes a more believable and practical approach.

The father figures in both films play significant roles in shaping the narratives. Krishnan Iyer from *Kana Kanmani* is a traditional and conservative figure who forces Maya to keep the unborn child, opposes abortion, and views it as murder. His attitude is deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, reflecting a more conservative societal view prevalent in 2009, where abortion is heavily stigmatized. On the other hand, Sara's father, Vincent is more supportive and progressive. He is willing to discuss the matter with Sara rather than directly going to Jeevan, unlike Iyer who mainly talks to Roy ignoring Maya's presence. Although Vincent warns Sara that the decision of abortion is

not an easy task to make, he tells Sara that the decision has to be hers. He also states that whatever decision she makes he will be with her. He challenges traditional gender roles, advocating for a more egalitarian perspective on women's rights. Vincent's attitude reflects the more progressive views of 2021. Consequently, the contrasting portrayals of the father figure in *Kana Kanmani* and *Sara's* reveal the evolving societal attitudes towards abortion.

Moving to the characters of the husband, we can see that Roy's character is more coercive and takes the authority to make decisions solely into his own hands. Later, when the film's anti-abortion message is delivered, Roy feels guilty. Jeevan has been a supportive husband from the beginning. Although he shows indifference towards Sara's decision regarding abortion at one point, he tries to discuss the matter with Sara instead of forcing his opinion on hers. However, he understands Sara and is proud to see Sara become successful. Reethamma, who initially opposed Sara's decision also supports Sara in the end. Thus the Malayalam films *Kana Kanmani* (2009) and *Sara's* (2021) offer contrasting representations of abortion, reflecting evolving societal attitudes and cultural contexts in Kerala. However, applying Stuart Hall's approach, the audience reviews reveal how they actively interpret meanings and messages in different ways despite the period of release of the films.

The analysis of the films reveals evolving societal attitudes towards abortion. It demonstrates how the portrayal of characters, the representation of gender roles, and their approach to abortion, change over time. A film's portrayal of a particular subject and societal attitudes towards it are reciprocally related. This comparison confirms that notion. The analysis also highlights the influence of contemporary issues on the

portrayal of topics. For instance, *Sara's* reflects contemporary issues such as increased abortion rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it more relevant and relatable to modern audiences. The analysis further explores how the narrative elements encode specific messages about abortion and the representation of abortion in the two films, considering cultural, societal, and temporal contexts.

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