






The Good, the Bad and the Ugly! Paradigmatic Analysis of Adultery Trope Variances in Movies

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ABSTRACT

To investigate sexist variances in the narratives of Malayalam movies concerning the portrayal of adultery, a semiotic analysis employing paradigmatic tradition is used. Analyzing the portrayal patterns, this study identifies and characterizes three typical adultery narrative devices (or tropes) that sexist: the “Good” Adultery (between a married man and an unmarried woman who is in a long-term relationship with the adulterating partner), the “Bad” Adultery (between a married man and a woman with unclear marital status [such as a sex worker] or an unmarried woman who engages in a short-term relationship with the adulterating partner); and the “Ugly” adultery (between a [married or unmarried] man and a married woman in a short-term relationship). Gender discrimination is identified in these variations, regarding the roles the man and woman assume in adulterous relationships, characterization of them and their affairs, fabrication of narratives, and the responses of the spouses (from acceptance and accommodation to rejection and revenge).

Keywords

film analysis; gender studies; Malayalam movies; narrative devices; sexism

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INTRODUCTION

Adultery, which has existed since the inception of marriage and is intertwined with the age-old concept of romantic love (Lawson & Samson, 1988), may extend beyond extramarital sexual relationships to include non-sexual acts (Cossman, 2006). Extramarital emotional affairs devoid of physical intimacy could also be construed as adultery, as they violate emotional connections with a spouse (Hunt, 2021; Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 2009).

Moreover, in the present times, the pervasive influence of social media and virtual communities has transformed human interaction, leading to the emergence of virtual adultery and adversely impacting marriages (Pfeiffer, 2011). Practices such as cybersex, e-mail flirtations (Cossman, 2006), romantic interactions in virtual gaming worlds (Pfeiffer, 2011), and erotic chat-room exchanges (Mao & Raguram, 2009) can be considered forms of virtual adultery, illustrating the diverse manifestations of adultery. Nevertheless, adultery is popularly defined as sexual relations outside of marriage (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2021) and is a common theme in Malayalam movies that may contain underlying sexist elements in male-dominated narratives. Feminist Film Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory can provide a nuanced framework for identifying and analyzing benevolent sexism in adultery narratives. Accordingly, in the present study, the focus is specifically on forms of adultery that exhibit explicit, implicit, or intended sexual predominance, aligning with the prevailing Indian understanding that adultery pertains to sexual relationships.

A recurring on-screen theme, adultery, is showcased in divergent forms and settings, encompassing a plethora of attitudes ranging from positive to negative. For instance, the Bollywood movie *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna* (Johar, 2006) depicts an intense-romantic adulterous affair between two married individuals in the urban backdrop of New York City. This setting allows for departure from Indian reactionary nationalist nostalgia and offers an exploration of unconventional conjugality (Kamble, 2011). Another notable film is *The English Patient* (Minghella, 1996), an Oscar-winning epic-romantic-war-drama that glorifies an illicit affair between a man and a married woman amidst a desert expedition and war (Rogers, 1997).

In contrast, *The Painted Veil* (Curran, 2007) is based on W. Somerset Maugham's novel delves into the darker side of infidelity: it portrays an adulterous affair that comes when the lover abandons the adulteress after exposure (Bemporad, 2007).

For this study, we chose the Malayalam movie medium because of its familiarity with it, recognizing that a comprehensive and critical analysis of films often requires contextual awareness and understanding of the underlying cultures and societal attitudes that they represent. Many scholarly studies have specifically identified and

examined the manifestation of entrenched sexism in Indian literature and popular cinema (Abbasi-Bhura, 2001; Jha, 2016; Joshi, 2020; Karupiah, 2020; Mukhopadhyay & Banerjee, 2021; Pauwels, 2007), and have discussed its societal repercussions (Ganguly & Dutta, 2019).

Can the Portrayal of Adultery Sexist?

In male-centered societies, gender discrimination, female indoctrination, and serfage are the expected norms. This societal mindset is often reflected in Indian movies, which predominantly focus on male characters, and the Malayalam film industry is no exception.

Sexism is ingrained in movie narratives and is evident either explicitly or implicitly through the representation and portrayal of women. Additionally, adultery, a common plot in Malayalam movies, can also carry existing undertones that shape its depiction and influence viewers' judgments. For instance, classic movies like *Chemmeen* (Kariat, 1965) glorify the chaste woman and vilify female infidelity as a sinful act that brings dishonor to her man, eventually leading to his tragic demise, while movies such as *Neelakuyil* (Bhaskaran & Kariat, 1954) portray an upper-caste ideal wife accepting her husband's illegitimate child born from a violation of a lower-caste woman, disregarding the husband's crime and betrayal (Rajendran, 2014). Despite being recognized as progressive, the so-called "new-age" Malayalam cinema or the "new-generation movies" have failed to challenge patriarchy, instead perpetuating sexist traditions and presenting women as subjugated individuals (Gopinath & Raj, 2015). Understandably, the industry has made limited progress in restricting regressive gender ideas that were profuse and explicit in Kerala cinema's earlier era. This also applies to the depiction of adultery. Although modern Malayalam movies are not as irrational and regressive as their older counterparts are, they still exhibit subtle sexist takes on adultery.

A notable example is *Diamond Necklace* (Jose, 2012). In this film, the traditional ideal wife is depicted as chaste, innocent, and devoid of any identity outside of her husband. Her husband engaged in a sexual encounter with another woman who was unaware of his marital status. When another woman discovers that her lover is married, she is overwhelmed by guilt and remorse, eventually seeking solace and redemption in the Himalayas. Meanwhile, the husband, who is equally culpable for committing adultery, continues his life with his wife, as if nothing happened (Gopinath & Raj, 2015). These portrayals of adultery reinforce the existing notion that infidelity is shameful, repugnant, and immoral when committed by women, but is considered casual and ordinary when perpetrated by men. Sexism can persist in contemporary films through the depiction of discrimination based on the marital status of individuals involved in adulterous affairs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study draws on Feminist Film Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory. Feminist Film Theory emerged in the 1970s alongside traditional film theory, influenced by the women's movement of the 1960s, and informed by significant feminist literary works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (Beauvoir, 2011), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (Friedan, 2013), and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (Millett, 2000) (Hollinger, 2012). This theoretical framework considers cinema a cultural practice that perpetuates gender-related myths, placing the issues of representation and spectatorship at its core (Smelik, 2016). Therefore, Feminist Film Theory offers a critique of mainstream cinema and advocates for alternative forms of filmmaking (Hollinger, 2012). It strives to expose and engage in discussions about the effects of the conflicting ideals of femininity portrayed in movies (Neroni, 2016).

Feminist Standpoint Theory, originating from feminist thinkers within the Marxist tradition, has been recognized as "one of the most distinctive contributions of feminist thought to the theory of knowledge" (Longino, 1993). It offers an alternative approach to knowledge justification and "good science," reconciling the need for relevance with rigorous research and practice (Swigonski, 1994). Nancy Hartsock, an advocate of Feminist Standpoint Theory, adapted Marxist concepts and incorporated feminist insights to argue that women's unique positions provide a basis for feminist claims and offer a valuable method to analyze events and phenomena (Hekman, 1997). It is rooted in the understanding that marginalized individuals experience a different reality because of their oppression (Swigonski, 1994). It acknowledges that members of the sidelined and subjugated groups may have insights and information about discriminatory issues compared to those in more-privileged positions. For instance, in a study focusing on women, a female researcher might identify problematic concepts and methods that others might overlook, such as disregarding domestic labor as meaningful work (Crasnow, 2014). Therefore, this theory opens up new possibilities for conducting inquiries into nature and social relations from the perspective of marginalized individuals rather than from the viewpoint of the powerful (Swigonski, 1994).

Research Problem

Adultery has long been a recurring theme in storytelling and continues to be prevalent in contemporary popular cinema. Nevertheless, the portrayal of adultery in movies can be inherently gender-related and may exhibit sexist tendencies, like other representations of women in films and industry. In other words, there is a possibility of double standards in how adultery is depicted based on gender and propagating regressive notions. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the portrayal of adultery in

Malayalam movies to identify embedded sexism by categorizing adultery based on gender differentiation and conducting a comparative analysis of the narratives woven around adulteries.

Adultery can be portrayed in several ways as part of divergent narratives eliciting a variety of attitudes and value judgements among viewers. It could be presented as acceptable when the protagonist is indulging in the act and deemed atrocious when the person being cheated upon is the protagonist. In addition, sexist variances in the portrayals may manifest depending upon the marital status of the man and woman indulging in it, but such discrimination has evaded scholarly attention. With an understanding of Indian cultural settings and sexist portrayals in Indian cinema and in a view to expanding theoretical understanding in this area, we suspect discriminatory portrayals based on the marital status of those engaged in adultery, especially women, and aim to identify distinct and popular narrative devices of adultery in Malayalam movies and characterize them as tropes.

A trope is a storytelling device or convention used to describe recognizable situations. It is a generally recognized image filled with multiple contextual connotations, establishing a new visual metaphor ([Bucciferro, 2021](#)). Narrative tropes are narrative elements, such as archetypal characters and plot arcs, that are frequently observed in film text ([Gala et al., 2020](#)). In this study, a trope is viewed as a popular narrative device (or micro-narrative) woven into a movie plot to build the main narrative.

METHOD

A semiotic analysis of the naturalistic paradigm using the Paradigmatic tradition is employed to investigate the sexist variances in the narrative devices (or tropes) embedded in the chosen Malayalam movies concerning the portrayal of adultery. Feminist Film Theory uses structuralist frameworks such as semiotics to study the pervasive power of patriarchal imagery ([Smelik, 2016](#)). Hence, this study applies paradigmatic analysis to examine film texts for hidden sexist and patriarchal patterns. According to the naturalistic paradigm, there are multiple realities that are constructed and holistic; the known and unknown cannot be separated and are interactive; it is not possible to differentiate between cause and effect because all entities contribute to the mutual simultaneous formation, and inquiry and investigations are inherently value-bound ([Frey, 1994](#); [Lincoln et al., 1985](#)). Adultery is a common feature in Malayalam movie narratives, and five Malayalam movies with a definite and pronounced portrayal of adultery as part of their narratives that had hit the theatres within the past two decades (2001 to 2020) were purposively chosen for the analysis. Thus, the movies

Balettan (Vinu, 2003), *Innathe Chinthavishayam* (Anthikad, 2008), *Kerala Cafe* (Ananthan et al., 2009), *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (Ranjith, 2009) and *Cocktail* (Kumar, 2010) were selected for analysis.

To identify differentiation in the portrayals, researchers identified as many as 15 parameters. The study design and analytical parameters are listed in Table 1. Paradigmatic analysis refers to text examination to expose hidden patterns of contradictions that create meaning. It posits that meaning is created through relationship formation and that the most significant type of relationship in the creation of meaning in language is that of opposition (Berger, 2018). This kind of analysis constitutes a contemplation of the positive or negative connotations of each signifier and the presence of ‘underlying’ thematic paradigms, where paradigmatic relations are the oppositions and contrasts between the signifiers that belong to the group from which those employed in the text are taken from (Chandler, 2021). In the present study, however, paradigmatic analysis was used to identify contradictions in the portrayals of adultery in the chosen Malayalam movies.

For the analysis (see Table 1), 16 factors that could possibly have sexist variations based on the marital status of the adulterers were identified.

Table 1

Variables Under Study

Criteria	Categories or explanation
Marital status	Married (M); Unmarried (UM); Unclear or Sex worker (US)
Age	Young adults (Y - Less than 36 years); Middle-aged adults (M - 36-55 years); Older adults (O - More than 55 years) (Petry, 2002)
Number of lovers outside marriage	In numbers
Presence of Spouse	Present or absent
Role of the man and woman in the affair	Short-term fulfiller of sexual needs Short-term provider of financial support Short-term provider of social support Short-term provider of emotional support Long-term fulfiller of sexual needs Long-term provider of financial support Long-term provider of social support Long-term provider of emotional support Perpetrator of the forced affair Victim of the forced affair

Nature of affair	Sexual and complicit (Affair is to just satisfy sexual needs) Romantic (Apart from having the affair to satisfy sexual needs, the adulterers share love, respect and affection) Sexual and forced (Engagement in sexual activity without the consent of one of the partners)
Term of affair	Short-term (Ten years or below) or long-term
Treatment	Loving, respectful or disrespectful
Pregnancy and the number of children conceived by the adulterers	Planned pregnancy or unplanned pregnancy and the number of children
Intimacy of spouse	Intimate, unintimate or unperceivable
Degree of disclosure to spouse	Open or secret
Degree of acceptance	Accepts, accommodates or rejects of the spouse
Portrayal of affair	Explicitly sexual, implicitly sexual, coquettish (that includes flirtation and romantic-mild-sexual acts such as hugging and kissing) or platonic
Fate of adultery at the end	Inconclusive /Conclusive
Genre of adultery portrayal	Comedy, romance, drama, thriller, action, psychological-thriller, horror, historical, sci-fi
Adultery subtypes	Types of adulteries committed identified through qualitative analysis
Adultery Trope	Popular narrative devices based on the portrayal patterns

Source: Primary data.

RESULTS

The study analysed the five chosen Malayalam movies—Balettan, Innathe Chinthavishayam, Kerala Cafe, Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha and Cocktail. Except for Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha, which had two adultery plots (adultery committed by the protagonist and his parent), every other movie in the sample accommodated one each. To understand sexist variations, the adulterers were categorized based on the marital status of the adultery partners (Types 1, 2, and 3; refer to Table 2).

Table 2

Identification of Adultery Categories

Criteria	Gender	Type 1 Adultery	Type 2 Adultery	Type 3 Adultery
Marital status	M	Married	Married	Married/unmarried
	F	Unmarried but in a long-term relationship with	Unclear/sex worker/unmarried but in a short-term	Married but in a short-term relationship with the adultering partner

	the adultering partner	relationship with the adultering partner	
Identification	Identified in Kerala Cafe and Balettan	Identified in Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha (Hero's parent's plot) and Innathe Chinthavishayam	Identified in Cocktail and Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha (Hero's Plot)

Source: Primary data. Authors' analysis.

After identifying the adultery categories, they were coded against the other chosen variables by closely reading the narratives to identify possible relationships and patterns. Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 present the analysis and coding results.

Based on the narratives and variations in the portrayal, the adulteries were characterised as 'Good' Adultery—identified in *Kerala Cafe* and *Balettan*—'Bad' Adultery—identified in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (Hero's parent's plot) and *Innathe Chinthavishayam*—and 'Ugly' Adultery—in *Cocktail* and *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (Hero's plot) (refer to Table 3).

Table 3

Portrayal of the affair

Criteria	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Portrayal of affair	Implicitly sexual/ Coquettish/ Platonic	Implicitly sexual/ Coquettish	Implicitly sexual/ Coquettish
Fate of adultery at the end	Continues	Conclusive	Conclusive
Genre of adultery portrayal	Romance, Drama	Drama	Drama, Thriller
Adultery sub-tropes	Accidental adultery; Sympathetic adulterer; Provider turned adulterer; Sister wives	Provider turned adulterer; Compensatory adultery	Adultery for lust; Vengeance of the spouses
Adultery Trope	"Good"	"Bad"	"Ugly"

Source: Primary data. Authors' analysis.

Reviewing the analysis results, we understand that there are some variations in the portrayal of adulterers in the films based on the marital status of the adulterous partners. For instance, in the "Good" adultery trope, adultery is portrayed as an unfortunate mistake committed by noble people motivated by good intentions. Similarly, when adultery was committed by philandering married men, the narrative was weaved in a way to portray it as "Bad," and when both parties in the affair were married, it was narrated to be "Ugly."

The “Good” Adultery Trope

Reviewing the narrative parameters, it is deduced that the Type 1 adultery presented in *Kerala Cafe* and *Balettan* is portrayed in a “Good” way.

Characterisation of the Adulterers

Table 4

Characterisation of the Adulterers

Criteria	Gender	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Age	M	M	M/O	Y/M
	F	Y	Y/UK	Y
Number of lovers outside marriage	M	1	1/Multiple	1
	F	1	1	1
Presence of Spouse	M	Present/Absent	Present/NA	Present
	F	NA	Absent/NA/Unclear	Absent/Present

Source: Primary data. Authors’ analysis.

Both *Kerala Cafe* and *Balettan* feature a common character–narrative thread: while the mistresses are presented as socially isolated unmarried loners, the (happily married) men become involved in unintentional extramarital affairs after initially acting as providers, either financially or emotionally, for the mistresses. Consequently, these men end up forming second families, as their lovers give birth to their children. *Balettan* tells the story of a married man who, despite his deep love for his wife, succumbs to temptation when circumstances beyond his control disrupt his life (according to the character narrating the tale). While away from a work assignment, the man offers shelter to the father and daughter in need. However, the next day, he discovered that the father had committed suicide and the daughter was in tears. In response to this tragedy, the man takes on the role of protector and provider, comforting the distraught young woman. This act of kindness gradually evolves into an extramarital affair that results in the formation of a second family with children. In *Kerala Cafe*, a similar pattern emerges, with men engaging in infidelity while awaiting work. Unlike *Balettan*, the mistress in *Kerala Cafe* is employed and does not require a financial provider. Here, however, she forms a deep emotional connection with the man, which she lacks due to the absence of close family ties. Despite his love for his wife, the man unintentionally enters into an adulterous relationship, unaware that the emotional bond would develop into romantic involvement and ultimately lead to the creation of a second family.

Roles and Incentives

Table 5

Roles and Incentives

Criteria	Gender	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Role of the adulterer in the affair	M	Fulfiller of sexual needs/Provider of social support/Provider of emotional support/Provider of financial support	Fulfiller of sexual needs/ Provider of financial support/ Provider of social support/Provider of emotional support	Fulfiller of sexual needs/Provider of emotional support
	F	Fulfiller of sexual needs/Provider of emotional support	Fulfiller of sexual needs/Provider of emotional support	Fulfiller of sexual needs/Provider of emotional support

Source: Primary data. Authors' analysis.

In the portrayals of "Good" Adultery, single women seek comfort, companionship, and emotional support from married men in circumstances that bring them together. Over time, these relationships evolved into sexual affairs. These mistresses are motivated by the need for emotional connections, companionship, and financial support.

While men initially enter these relationships with good intentions to help and solace women in distress, they inadvertently become entangled in adulterous affairs, leading to moral dilemmas and guilt. However, they benefit from gaining emotional connections and fulfilling their sexual needs.

Nature of the Affair

Table 6

Nature of the Affair

Criteria	Gender	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Nature of affair		Sexual and complicit, Romantic	Sexual and complicit, Romantic	Sexual and complicit, Romantic
		Long-term	Short-term	Short-term
Treatment	M	L/R	L/R	L/R
	F	L/R	L/R	L/R
Pregnancy and the number of children conceived by the adulterers		0-2	0-1	0

Source: Primary data. Authors' analysis.

Regarding the nature and portrayal of affairs, both *Kerala Cafe* and *Balettan* depict long-term affairs that are romantic, sexual, and complicit. Both movies depict adulterous partners treating each other with love and respect. The children were born out of these affairs. The cheating husband in *Balettan* has two children with his mistress, whereas the adulterer in *Kerala Cafe* has one. These affairs are portrayed as inconclusive, with the mistresses remaining faithful to their lovers as extended families, even after the death of these men.

Familial Impact

Table 7

Familial Impact

Criteria	Gender	Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
Intimacy with spouse	M	Intimate	Intimate	Intimate/Unperceivable
	F	NA	NA	Intimate/Unperceivable
Degree of disclosure to spouse	M	Open	Secret	Secret
	F	NA	NA	Secret
Degree of acceptance of the spouse	M	Accepts and accommodates	Rejects/NA	Rejects/NA
	F	NA	NA	Rejects/NA

Source: Primary data. Authors' analysis.

In *Balettan*, the wife discovered her husband's affairs after his death. She grieves, but ultimately accepts her husband's daughters as her own. Similarly, the wife in *Kerala Cafe* learns about her husband's affairs days before his death. Lying on his deathbed, her husband makes the last request, asking her to take care of his lover, who is pregnant with his child. She fulfils this wish by accepting the mistress and the child as a family. Thus, both spouses of adulterous men accepted and accommodated their affairs. In *Balettan*, the man's second family becomes known to his family and friends after his death, and, although saddened by the revelation, they accept and accommodate it. However, *Kerala Cafe* does not show anyone outside the immediate family to discover the affair. In both movies, the affairs are not publicly disclosed, sparing mistresses from perhaps brutal reactions. Battling emotional stress, the adulterer in *Kerala Cafe* meets a fatal end in a drunk driving accident.

Similarly, the cheating husband in *Balettan*, burdened by emotional conflict and guilt, succumbs to a heart attack. Both films portray the revelation of infidelity, causing significant suffering to families and children due to the ensuing conflicts.

Portrayal of the Affair

Explicit depictions of sexual acts were absent in both films. In *Balettan*, the adulterous affair is narrated by one of the characters and there is no visual depiction. On the other hand, *Kerala Cafe* implies the sexual aspect through flirtations and minor physical touches. Scenes showing the man and his mistress entering a room and, on the bed, together imply sexual relations. Both films utilize romance and drama genres to portray extramarital affairs. The subtypes found in the Good adultery narratives are as follows: Provider turned adulterer (when men who step in to help women in distress become their lovers), sympathetic adulterers (adulterers who deserve pity), accidental adultery (unintentional infidelity), and sister wives (wife accepting the mistress as her husband's second wife).

Adulterer Perceptions: Justifications, Emotional Conflict, and Moral Dilemmas

Adultering men in *Kerala Cafe* and *Balettan* are deeply engaged in their relationships with their mistresses, considering them meaningful and not merely driven by desire. Consequently, they assume responsibility for their lovers and children born from these affairs. Simultaneously, they share deep romantic connections with their wives.

As a result, these men experience intense emotional-moral dilemmas and endure a profound sense of guilt for betraying their spouses. In *Kerala Cafe*, the mistress faces moral-emotional conflict when her lover refuses to leave his wife for her. She refuses to be the "other woman" and demands recognition and dignity associated with the position of a wife. Conversely, the mistress in *Balettan*, although emotionally and morally conflicted, felt too remorseful to meet such demands. While all the characters involved in adultery experience moral dilemmas and bear the burden of guilt and shame, they find solace in the fact that their infidelity was unintentional and not motivated by lust.

Embedded Sexism

Feminist literature identifies cultural mechanisms that perpetuate ideas that subjugate women when internalized. One such notion is the belief that men are essential for women's well-being, breeding dependency on men, and ultimately disempowering women (Rowland-Serdar & Schwartz-Shea, 1991). *Balettan* and *Kerala Cafe* depicted unmarried women leaning on married men for emotional or financial support, validating the existence of dependence. Furthermore, this dependency hinders women's autonomy, rendering them subservient. According to feminist scholars, the lack of autonomy is linked to self-abnegation, adaptive preference formation, and the adoption of other practices of gender oppression (Stoljar, 2013).

Therefore, depictions of adultery in the movies *Balettan* and *Kerala Cafe* can be considered sexist and regressive, since they present women as helpless without male

support. The long-standing patriarchal cultural norms may have influenced filmmakers' adoption of such existing characterizations and narratives.

The “Bad” Adultery Trope

A parametric analysis of the portrayal pattern of Type 2 adultery reveals a mildly unfavorable narrative treatment, leading to its categorization as “Bad” Adultery, portrayal-wise.

Characterisation of the Adulterers

In the “Bad” trope, adultery is plotted as affairs between married men seeking sexual pleasure outside of marriage and unmarried women or those with unclear marital status, such as sex workers, engaged in short-term sexual relationships. For instance, in the film *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*, the protagonist's father is portrayed as an opportunistic abuser who exploits vulnerable and impoverished women for sexual gratification. Likewise, in *Innathe Chinthavishayam*, an adulterous male is depicted as a philanderer engaging in multiple affairs. When his wife confronts him, he gaslights her, accusing her of being suspicious, and not allowing him personal space.

Roles and Incentives

Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha and *Innathe Chinthavishayam* portray adulterers, whose motivation lies in fulfilling their sexual desires. The mistress in *Paleri Manikyam, Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*, engages in an adulterous relationship with financial, emotional, and social support, whereas the motivations behind those in *Innathe Chinthavishayam* are unclear. Consequently, male adulterers assume the role of providers (financial, emotional, and social support) and fulfillers of sexual needs, while women reciprocate by satisfying their emotional and sexual needs.

Nature of the Affair

Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha and *Innathe Chinthavishayam* depict short-term adulterous affairs characterized by romance, sexuality, and compliance. Adulterers treat each other with love and respect in both movies. In *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*, the mistress gives birth to a child after the affair ends and marries another man who accepts the child. However, *Innathe Chinthavishayam* does not portray the concept of children resulting from adultery.

Familial Impact

In *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*, it remains unclear whether the spouses (the man practicing polygamy) are aware of his adulterous affairs. In *Innathe*

Chinthavishayam, the wife catches him multiple times. Eventually, she separates from him following a verbal conflict and confrontation, rejecting adultery. However, she later forgives and reunites with him after undergoing transformation and remains faithful. The adulterous affairs of the man in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* are an open secret accepted and tolerated by his family and society due to fear of his power, wealth, and influence, leading to unquestioned infidelity. In *Innathe Chinthavishayam*, the wife's friends intervene and advise the adulterous husband, resulting in him abandoning his promiscuous lifestyle. The movies did not depict the societal condemnation of cheating husbands, and the mistresses were not shown to face repercussions for their involvement with married men. Furthermore, both films portray the negative impact on families and children following the revelation of affairs due to the ensuing conflicts.

Portrayal of the Affair

The narratives portray adultery without explicit sexual elements. The affairs are not visually depicted, but conveyed through flashback narration by a character in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* and implied phone calls in *Innathe Chinthavishayam*. In addition, *Innathe Chinthavishayam* implicitly shows flirtations that imply sexual relations.

Narratives were presented using the drama genre. The subgenres employed in the narratives are Provider turned adulterer (when men who step in to help women in distress become their lovers), Adultery for Lust (committing adultery to satisfy sexual desire), and compensatory adultery (justifying adultery by blaming the wife for being incompetent).

Adulterer Perceptions: Justifications, Emotional Conflict, and Moral Dilemmas

Adulterous men do not face ethical or moral dilemmas or experience a sense of guilt, as they regard affairs as casual encounters. For instance, in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*, the man humorously asks, 'How can one help but get drawn when a beautiful woman appears?'. In *Innathe Chinthavishayam*, the man avoids confronting his promiscuous behavior and adultery by blaming his wife for her distrust in him and inability to fulfill his needs. He only confronts the truth of his actions when he witnesses his wife forming a connection with another man, which leads to an emotional dilemma. However, the mistress in *Paleri Manikyam* experiences remorse and emotional-moral conflict because of her involvement with a married man. After exposure, the feelings of mistresses in *Innathe Chinthavishayam* were not shown.

Embedded Sexism

Feminist scholars have revealed the existence of sexist and ageist double standards that affect women's sexuality. As women age, their sexual identities and sexuality become marginalized, rendering them less desirable and subjecting them to neglect (Calasanti et al., 2006; Jen, 2018; McHugh & Interligi, 2015). Notably, *Innathe Chinthavishayam* and *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* reinforced these double standards by normalizing the involvement of men in infidelity and including relationships between older men and younger women. This further perpetuates the discriminatory notion that men are entitled to embrace sexuality throughout their lives, whereas women face limitations.

Second-wave feminism endorsed the sexual liberation of women and fought for their sexual autonomy, rejecting androcentric and sexist practices that position women as passive participants in the realm of sexuality (Abrams, 1995; Tandon, 2008). Feminism recognizes sexual freedom as a crucial aspect of liberation, as it entails dismantling the restrictions that deny women the sexual agency that men enjoy (Tong & Botts, 2018). In contrast to these feminist ideals, *Innathe Chinthavishayam* and *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* depict men as promiscuous and engaging in multiple affairs, while women's sexual agency is constrained. Consequently, the films normalize and reinforce the sexual freedom of men, particularly those with power, influence, and high social standing, while restricting the sexuality of women. It is plausible that the filmmakers chose to conform to these prevailing sexist and ageist norms because of concerns about audience acceptance and potential Box Office failure. Filmmakers may have perceived that audiences were not yet prepared to embrace alternative portrayals of sexually liberated and older women engaging in sexual relationships. Conforming to traditional gender dynamics has become a risk-averse strategy, and such trends could perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

The "Ugly" Adultery Trope

The examination of the narratives featuring Type 3 adultery suggests that it was portrayed as highly unfavorable, casting it as an "Ugly" Adultery.

Characterisation of the Adulterers

The "Ugly" Adultery is characterized as extramarital affairs between married individuals, driven primarily by lust. In *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (hero's plot), the adultress lacks an intimate-emotional bond with her husband, who resides on a different continent, and engages in infidelity to meet her sexual needs. Conversely, the cheating wife in *Cocktail* maintains an intimate bond with her husband but indulges in adultery at her workplace to fulfil her sexual desires.

Roles and Incentives

Understandably, both *Cocktail* and *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (hero's plot) portray them as lust stories, and the incentives for the adulterers are primarily the gratification of their sexual needs. Thus, in the "Ugly" adultery narratives, the individuals involved are shown to engage in adultery for sexual desires.

Nature of the Affair

The "Ugly" Adulteries in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (hero's plot) and *Cocktail* are depicted as short-term affairs that are romantic, sexual and complicit. Additionally, both films depict adulterers treating each other with love and respect. In *Cocktail*, the affair concludes when spouses discover it and seek revenge. Similarly, in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (hero's plot), the affair comes to an end when the husband of the adultress returns.

Familial Impact

In *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* (Hero's plot), spouses remain oblivious to adultery. Conversely, in *Cocktail*, spouses of adulterers conspire to seek revenge when they become aware of the affairs. They subject their cheating spouses to emotional distress and blackmail until they confront their betrayal and accept their guilt. Ultimately, the spouses end up forgiving them but do not accept or accommodate the affairs. A forgiving wife asks her husband, "Will you have forgiven me if I was the one who committed adultery?" The husband's reactions showed that he would not have been able to be as forgiving as his wife.

Notably, forgiveness appears to be a virtue practiced exclusively by women in these films regarding adultery. The movies depict adulterous affairs kept secret from society, thus avoiding societal reaction. In *Cocktail*, a female adulterer suffers from depression and suicidal tendencies due to the mental stress caused by her spouse's discovery of the affair. Her lover also experiences significant stress, emotional turmoil, and guilt.

Portrayal of the Affair

The portrayals of affairs in both films are not explicitly sexual, relying instead on minor physical touches and flirtations to imply sexual relations. Scenes such as a man and a woman entering a room alone and lying in bed together are used to imply sexual relations without explicit visuals. Both films employ elements of drama and thriller genres to depict affairs, employing subgenres such as Adultery for Lust and Vengeance of the Spouses (spouses taking revenge when they discover the adulterous affair).

Adulterer Perceptions: Justifications, Emotional Conflict, and Moral Dilemmas

In *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*, the adulterer faces a slight moral and emotional dilemma but justifies his actions as an inherent trait inherited from

his philandering father, whom he holds responsible for "the sin in his blood." However, the adulteress in the film does not feel guilty and attributes her infidelity to the lack of intimacy and long-distance relationship with her spouse.

By contrast, *Cocktail* portrays the devastating aftermath of the affair's discovery by spouses. The adulteress, tormented by guilt, shame, and emotional distress, attempts suicide but survives, resulting in paralysis. Her lover also experiences extreme remorse, but does not resort to drastic, life-threatening measures, such as his mistress.

Embedded Sexism

Feminist movements advocate the acceptance of women's sexuality and condemn sexist practices that suppress and shame female sexuality. Third-wave feminism emphasizes women's agency and choice, asserting that expressing and negotiating sexuality is an individual's freedom (Snyder-Hall, 2010). However, *Cocktail* portrays female sexuality and sexual desire in a negative light, presenting adulteress as a disgraceful woman expressing her desires. Her husband shames her, saying, 'Your dignity is even beneath that of a prostitute'; although he eventually forgives her. Conversely, her lover is more easily forgiven by his wife, who excuses him because of his role as an exemplary father for their daughter. These depictions highlight the sexist double standards that normalize male sexual desire while demeaning female sexual desire. The filmmakers likely chose to emphasize the repercussions faced by married women in her adultery to appeal to a wider audience, considering the challenge of presenting female desire, which may be difficult for the Indian audience to accept. By highlighting the adulteress's remorse and the ordeal she faces, the film aligns its message with patriarchal norms. *Cocktail*, however, raises a question about the sexist of double standards that expect women to forgive adulterous husbands, whereas men are not expected to forgive their wives' infidelity.

DISCUSSION

Paradigmatic analysis, primarily aimed at identifying variations and contrasts, of the depictions of adultery in the sample of movies served to identify sexist tropes or popular narrative devices pertaining to familiar archetypal characters and plots. Three distinct tropes were identified and categorized based on the marital status of individuals involved in adulterous affairs, especially women. Based on the characterizations, portrayal, narrative elements and how acceptable or unacceptable the adulterous affairs were depicted, the adultery tropes were named and classified as "Good," "Bad" and "Ugly."

Feminist Film Theory and Feminist Standpoint Theory offer a theoretical framework for identifying distinct sexist variances in adultery tropes. To consider infidelity an issue

for feminist critique is to identify heterosexuality, coupling, and monogamy as devices employed to control women and their sexuality (Rosewarne, 2009). Since Feminist Theory views issues through a gender-disparity lens (Enns, 2010), such manifestations of inequalities in adultery narratives become a feminist issue. Adultery can be complicit in the maintenance of patriarchy and, at the same time, resist it (Rosewarne, 2009). It can be patriarchal with gendered consequences (Van De Berg (Pseudonym), 2022). Rosewarne (2009) states that in the case of a committed monogamous relationship that both parties had agreed upon, the violation by means of adultery is a feminist issue, especially when sexual inequalities are perpetuated. Another factor that makes infidelity of interest to feminist activism is the matter of consent, as individuals (including women) are considered to possess the right to make choices about their bodies and sexual health (Landon, 2017). Historically, males have been the primary perpetrators of adultery, and feminists view infidelity as a manifestation of the entitlement that men often assume in relationships, whereas women have often had to tolerate it for economic reasons (Jenkins, 2015).

This was reflected in most of the movies analyzed in this study, especially in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*. This does not exempt men from being victims of adultery, restricts infidelity to be a mere heteronormative monogamy issue, and also means that only those who cheated are victims. Infidelity is a complex issue that defies such assumptions (Van De Berg (Pseudonym), 2022). Movies such as *Cocktail* and *Paleri Manikyam: Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha* portray husbands as suffering from their wives' adultery. However, female infidelity can be viewed as a pro-feminist act of subversion and a challenge to the patriarchal status quo, representing an act of liberation (Frelick, 2001). This is embodied in the dissatisfied wife in *Paleri Manikyam* (the hero's plot).

The sample movies reflect the portrayal of men of all ages as sexual beings. Nevertheless, only young women were showcased as desirable and exhibiting sexual desires, thus conforming to sexist and ageist double standards against women. Men enjoyed sexual freedom and indulged in multiple affairs, while women were restricted and portrayed as faithful to their lovers and husbands. The likelihood of engaging in adultery is influenced by factors such as power dynamics and social exchanges. Individuals with power are more prone to adultery, irrespective of gender, as power boosts confidence and minimizes potential consequences or adverse repercussions (Lammers et al., 2011).

From the perspective of social exchange, individuals are more likely to commit adultery when their earnings are greater than those of their spouses (Munsch, 2015). This is applicable to the adulterous landlord in *Paleri Manikyam: Oru*

Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha, as he engages in open adultery, and both society and his family never dare to question him, intimidated by his wealth and power.

Women venturing outdoors for careers become economically independent and are likely to develop relationships with the opposite gender, leading to adulterous affairs (Drigotas & Barta, 2001). This trope is embedded in the majority of the sample movies analyzed, especially *Cocktail* and *Kerala Cafe*. While sexual motivations drive men to commit infidelity, women are largely driven by marital dissatisfaction and emotional deprivation (Drigotas & Barta, 2001).

Feminists criticize arranged marriage, a common practice in South Asia, for oppressing women and perpetuating patriarchy by denying them the choice to choose their partners and expecting them to be subservient to their husbands (Aguilar, 2013). Mukhopadhyay & Banerjee (2021) studied Indian cinema that propagated sexist notions and observed that male polygamy and adulterous affairs were portrayed as acceptable, whereas females were vilified for the same. *Balettan*, *Paleri Manikyam*, *Oru Pathirakolapathakathinte Katha*, *Kerala Cafe*, *Cocktail*, and *Innathe Chinthavishayam* followed similar patterns in their narratives where wives offered their cheating husbands a tearful reconciliation, as such forgiveness is expected of their virtuous-feminine nature.

Reviewing the sexist portrayals, the so-called “Good” adulteries were long-term affairs, leading to the development and maintenance of a secondary family, sometimes with children, garnering the acceptance of both the family of the men in the affairs and the audience. Adulterers’ intimacy with their spouses was not affected by extramarital affairs. While the “Good” adultery was portrayed to be an open affair, gaining the acceptance and accommodation of the wife of the adultering man, the “Bad” and “Ugly” adulteries were intentionally secretarial affairs that, when exposed, received the spouse’s rejection as a response. While the role of the male adulterer in the “Good” adultery was to provide social, financial, and emotional support apart from fulfilling sexual needs, in the “Bad” and “Ugly” adulteries, the main role of the male adulterer was to fulfill sexual needs and, in some cases, provide financial and emotional support. Double standards were also perceived in the roles assigned to the males and females engaged in adulterous affairs. Men were portrayed as providers of social, financial, and emotional support, whereas women were portrayed as merely fulfilling their partners’ sexual needs and offering emotional support. The “Good” adulteries were portrayed as continuing affairs at the end of the narratives, while the “Bad” and “Ugly” ones were portrayed as conclusive episodes.

There were also differences in the deployment of subtropes within the three adultery tropes. The “Good” adultery trope depicts unintentional adultery committed by good men due to the circumstances (subtropes Provider turned adulterer, the

Sympathetic adulterer, Accidental adultery) where he steps in with good intentions but ends up with a secondary family that his wife accepts and accommodates (Sister wives). In contrast, the subtropes employed in the “Bad” adultery showcased intentional adultery by promiscuous husbands (adultery for lust) who felt no guilt and blamed their actions on the perceived flaws of their wives (Compensatory adultery). In the “Ugly” adultery, intentional affairs between married people primarily driven by sexual needs (Adultery for lust) were portrayed, with revenge enacted by the spouses when they became aware of the infidelity (Vengeance of the spouses).

CONCLUSION

A paradigmatic study of a sample of Malayalam movies finds that there is indeed a sexist differentiation in adultery narratives and identifies three tropes: popular narrative devices, which were categorized as the “Good” Adultery (between a married man and an unmarried woman who is in a long-term relationship with the adultering partner), the “Bad” Adultery (between a married man and a woman with unclear marital status, one who is engaged in flesh trade or an unmarried woman who is in a short-term relationship with the adultering partner) and the “Ugly” adultery (between a married or unmarried man and a married woman in a short-term relationship with the adultering partner). The classification of adulteries is based on how the affairs are portrayed in the narratives analyzed using a set of parameters. The “Good Adultery” trope has the wives forgiving and accepting their adulterous husbands and accommodating their open affairs, whereas the spouses of the adulterers reject the secret affairs when exposed and even seek vengeance in the “Bad” and “Ugly” adultery tropes. This highlights the societal expectation that women should react negatively and seek revenge when facing infidelity. It also implies that women should protect their marital relationships and defend their honor, contributing to the patriarchal notion that a woman’s worth is tied to her fidelity and ability to maintain a stable marriage.

Also, the “Good” Adultery stands out from the other tropes due to the presence of children born from the affair, which elicits sympathy and acceptance. In the “Ugly” Adultery trope, men merely fulfil sexual needs, while in the “Bad” trope, they also provide financial support. In the “Good” Adultery, social support is an additional aspect.

In all cases, however, the role of women in adulterous relationships is limited to fulfilling sexual needs, providing emotional support, and reinforcing sexist notions. While the “Bad” and “Ugly” adulteries have conclusive endings, the “Good” counterpart continues. The subtropes that constitute the three main tropes are yet another exhibition of sexist discrimination. Only men are shown to be promiscuous and indulging in multiple affairs (Bad adultery), while women are portrayed as loyal to a

single lover even though they are engaging in adultery. This contributes to normalizing sexist double standards that accept promiscuity and sexual freedom among men while rejecting the same for women.

Furthermore, most movies depict women depending on their lovers for their financial needs (“Good” and “Bad” adultery), whereas none of the movies shows men dependent on women. Such portrayals maintain the sexist notion that women are dependent on men for survival. Forgiveness and accommodation of affairs are only observed among wives (especially in the “Good” Adultery), aligning with the traditional notion of a patient and compromising woman, ultimately serving patriarchy.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Data curation: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Formal analysis: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Funding acquisition: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Investigation: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Methodology: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Project administration: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Resources: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Software: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Supervision: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Validation: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Visualization: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Writing – original draft: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S.; Writing – review & editing: M.S.K., F.P.B., & A.S. All the authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available because of the institution’s policies.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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