

Urvashi on Screen: Undoing The 'Kula Sthree' Heroine in Malayalam Cinema

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine Malayalam cinema of the 80s and 90s as an 'ethnographic site' to review Urvashi's performances on screen, giving way to new modes of sense-perceptions of "womanhood" on screen, than what was expected from a 'kulina' female star on the screen. This study is an attempt at a feminist recovery responding to call for looking at how audio-visual strategies have been mobilized to create sensory perceptions within the melodramatic form in vernacular cinema, through different iterations. In this paper, I have examined how Urvashi through her own style of acting put together new rhythms of sense-perceptions in Malayalam cinema, that often disturbed and sometimes subverted codes that were used to embody the ideal feminine or the kulasthree heroine on screen.

Keywords: Malayalam Cinema, Melodramatic Form, Actress, Performativity, Femininity

Urvashi (born as Kavitha Ranjini in 1969), the renowned Malayalee South Indian actress, has acted in over 350 films (as of 2025), in languages such as Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada and Telugu. She won 5 Kerala State Awards for Best Actress for the following films: *Mazhavilkavadi*, *Varthamanakaalam* (1989); *Thalayanmanthram* (1990), *Kadinjool Kalyanam*, *Kaaakkatholaayriam*, *Bharatham*, *Mukhachithram*, *Kazhakam* (1995) and *Madhuchandralekha* (2006) and *Ullozhuku* (2024). She won two National Awards, both for Best Supporting Actress, first in 2006 for her role in the Malayalam film *Achuvinte Amma*, and in 2024 for her role in *Ullozhukku*. She has written and produced a handful of films and has acted in Tamil television serials in the early 2000s and also worked as a TV host in Tamil TV channels. Two of her sisters were actresses themselves, *Kalaranjini* and the late *Kalpana* who was known for her comic roles in Malayalam cinema. Urvashi has been much appreciated by audiences, especially in Kerala, and by her colleagues in cinema, for the talent she embodies as an actress on screen.

This paper attempts to examine Malayalam cinema of the 80s and 90s as an 'ethnographic site' to study Urvashi's performances on screen, giving way to new modes of sense-perceptions of "womanhood" on screen, than what was expected from a 'kulina' female star on the screen. How does Urvashi's/ the female actor's performance/performativity contribute to a visuality that challenges normative or standardized notions of femininity on screen? This study is in response to call for looking at how audio-visual strategies have been mobilized to create sensory perceptions within the melodramatic form in vernacular cinema, through different iterations, through a feminist eye.

This paper relies on the filmic phenomenological framework that draws attention to the corporeal processes of the making and reception of the image. Drawing from Sobchack, this paper then argues for a method that replies on the phenomenology of the eye that sees cinema as the expression of an experience of an experience. This filmic phenomenology finds its way in the work of Ravi Vasudevan in the context of Film Studies in India. In his seminal works *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* and *The Melodramatic Public*, Vasudevan . puts forth an archaeology of the film form of melodrama in India, and illuminates the modes of seeing/perception that this form puts together.

Aligning with this phenomenological impulse, this paper then turns to the screen to attempt to etch out the rhythms of sense-perceptions mobilized by Urvashi as an actor on screen in her important works in the beginning of her career in Malayalam cinema. This will thus be an appraisal of what a female body or signifier enunciated differently in the Malayalam cinema practice of the 1980s to construct forms of appreciation that were unique. Malayalam cinema of the 1980s is often studied through the lens of male filmmaker-auteurs, who are also nostalgically remembered and often romanticized in the Kerala public sphere. This paper in that sense becomes a feminist recovery that seeks to challenge this patriarchal mode of writing film history, often erasing the presence and contribution of women to the screen. For this, I have chosen 5 Malayalam films, of the 1980s-1990s, in which Urvashi has acted, which helps me demonstrate the challenge to the dominant patriarchal visuality that Malayalam cinema has constituted of a heroine, within the purview of this paper.

It is useful to see how Urvashi as a woman has been also under the attack of the public eye and media discourse, as an actress who was once married to the popular actor Manoj K Jayan in 2000 and then divorced him, while seeking custody of their only daughter Teja Lakshmi, in 2008 (IMDB News, TNIE, Asianet News etc)¹. The media discourse centred around her alleged alcoholism which was how Manoj K Jayan talked about Urvashi during their court case, to the media (IndiaGlitz Tamil, Asianet News etc)². There were also reports of her slurring words during a public event (Reporter Live, Kairali News)³, again allegedly due to alcohol abuse, leading to Urvashi suing Manoj K Jayan for calling her drunkard publicly (News 18)⁴. Urvashi almost disappeared from the public sphere⁵ until she remarried and gave birth to her son and resurfaced on the screen through films. Again, the conversations and discourse became about her acting prowess, until recently when her daughter Teja Lakshmi was bound to make her entry into Malayalam films, and her father Manoj K Jayan spoke sentimentally about her being Urvashi's daughter and praised her for her acting talent (Manoj gets emotional as he speaks about Urvashi at daughter's movie launch, <https://www.onmanorama.com/entertainment/entertainment-news/2025/06/11/manoj-k-jayan-urvashi-daughter-kunjatta-debut-emotional-speech.html>)⁶. This was happening after a social media discourse in which Urvashi has made her way into reels or posts that celebrate her and the National Award she received for *Ullozhukku* (2024). Few weeks later, when Urvashi was interviewed on the sets of her new film, *Urvashi*, who usually does not talk about her divorce in a personal tone or rather has a language that does not get personal, was seen to be emotional and talked about her hurt in how she was never acknowledged by Jayan or the scandalous remarks made about her earlier. She ends the interview abruptly while talking about this.

This oscillating tendency of the moralistic patriarchal lens with which she is viewed as a woman, who is "alcoholic" and is divorced, to the recent praise with which she is a recipient of, make up the signifier of Urvashi in the public sphere. This paper will look at how these oscillating tendencies of characterizing a woman as a "chantapennu" and a "kulasthree" come together in her on-screen presence. This is generally confined to one of these categories in the melodramatic form in Malayalam cinema and Indian cinema at large. Melodrama is always mapped with its stylistic excesses and sentimentalities, often identified as a feminized aesthetic, whereas realism with its claims of being able to appropriately representing anything and everything is seen as a different epistemological project. In Indian cinema, the clearly defined categories of the heroine and the vamp often played out on screen. This will be taken up in a later section in detail.

Urvashi with her presence, presentation and representations of the characters she played on screen in the beginning of her career, the 1980s, a time in Malayalam cinema, that is mostly discussed in terms of

good writing and the “middle-brow” cinema that walked the middle line, which had artistic considerations while being widely released mainstream films, and 1990s, disturbed this conception of the “ideal feminine” on screen. Sajitha Madathil (2022,2023) in her work has done the task of writing histories of women in theatre, especially actresses, who have been left out by the Left pantheon in their historiography of theatre in Kerala. Meena T Pillai edited a volume titled *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies* (2010) in an attempt to fix the gaps of the attention paid to women and female representations in Malayalam cinema and essays in it paid attention to the historical mappings of gender in Malayalam cinema (Pillai, Nair, Venkiteswaran, Harris) representation of women in Malayalam cinema and gender constructs (Sreedharan, Gopinath, Menon, Rowena, Muraleedharan, Damodaran), soft-porn and the figure of Shakeela (Radhakrishnan). My own study here will be in continuum but will also locate the female actor/ actress on screen in her relation to cinema, the screen and the Kerala public sphere at large.

The Constitution of the ‘Ideal’ Malayalee Woman in the Kerala Public Sphere

It will be useful to examine the ideas of ideal femininity that were historically constructed to produce the figure of the upper-caste Hindu woman, the kulasthree, in Kerala society. Feminist scholars in Kerala have produced work in unpacking and sketching the production of this normative womanhood, both in society and on screen. Feminist scholars like J Devika, Praveena Kodoth, Mini Sukumaran etc have theorized the formation of notions of the “Ideal Malayalee woman” in the Kerala public sphere in the 20th century, founded on upper caste notions of femininity, interacting with ideas drawn from the experience of colonial modernity⁸. The new ideal “Malayalee woman” is produced with the primary role of being educated and to work, only to contribute to the constitution and sustenance of the nuclear patriarchal family. She gets constituted significantly differently from the earlier Nair woman who was part of matriarchy and was not involved in marriage at all.

Devika (2010) writes about the construction of language in which women are addressed in Kerala from early 20th century with two Malayalam terms in her book *Kulasthreeyum Chanthapennum Undaayathengane?* : “tharavaatilprinavaal”/ “kulasthree” for ‘good women’ and “chanthapennu” for bad women. The new elite of the 19th century, the upper-castes who gave up on certain traditional norms by embracing colonial modernity but still held onto vestiges of traditions of Brahmanical patriarchy, continued to use the ‘tharavaadu’, ‘kulam’, which are sites of caste purity to locate the ideal Malayalee woman or the ‘kulasthree’.

It is within this constructed matrix of the normative ideal Malayalee femininity, an embodied and performed “kula-sthree” on-screen that I locate Urvashi as a female actor that offers a deferential iteration of femininity through her performance of women on screen.

It is in this sense, I have sought to locate Urvashi on screen as defying the construction of the ‘kulinasthree’/ ‘kula sthree’[1], in this paper. Urvashi as an actor mobilises sensuous perceptions through her range of performances in films of the 80s and 90s, that is difficult to box her as embodying just the feminine or the non -feminine.

Thekulasthree heroine in Malayalam Cinema

Feminist and anti-caste scholars have looked at the dominant codes of construction of the kulasthree heroine on screen in Malayalam cinema from different modalities.

Meena T Pillai (2010) writes that in early Malayalam cinema heroines were bestowed with all the good virtues that were evident in films with titles that had the names of these characters. She clearly traces the shifting Malayalam cinema discourse in the 70s and the construction of the myth of the feminine who finds happiness only within the home. When it comes to the 80s, she writes that Malayalam cinema becomes “more capitalistic, patriarchal and neo-liberal” .Thus she traces continuities and shifts in the construction of the “ideal feminine” embodied in the heroine in Malayalam cinema over the decades.

In her discussion on women and melodrama in the “middle cinema” of K G George, in the 80s, namely *Yavanika* and *Adaminte Variyellu*, Bindu Menon discusses the narrativity that these films offer as that of a gendered modernity, of negotiating spaces between ‘home’ and the ‘world’, pleasure and impossible choices, in her chapter “Malayalam Middle Cinema and the Category of Women” in the book *Women in Malayalam Cinema: Naturalising Gender Hierarchies* (2010). Menon notes, “By representing women’s choices between public and private, work and home, these” films act as a cultural form that have shown female subjectivities under negotiation.” (P 119)

Navaneetha Mokkal (2011) has written about the mutually constitutive relationships between the “excesses” of Malayalam cinema and moral anxieties within the regional Kerala public sphere, centred around the protagonist of the 1978 film *Avalude Ravukal*, a prostitute named Raji, played by Seema. She discusses the discourse generated around the film and its moral nudges that were co-constitutive of the its “excesses”.

Aneeta Rajendran writing about the normative constructions of ideal Malayalee femininity on Malayalam cinema in her paper “You Are Woman Arguments with Normative Femininities in Recent Malayalam Cinema” (2014). She traces the investment of mainstream Malayalam cinema in a normative ideal femininity through the figure of the “sexually chaste heroine” over its history, who never challenges the “biographical arc” of the male hero, the woman who belongs to the Kerala model and like its critique seen in *Devika*, *Thampi*, *Koduth* etc never has authority over her life and even her own “psychic life”, the ideal “*veettammaa*” standing in for the “good woman” through a valorised idea of motherhood.

Jenny Rowena in a two-part article published in *Round Table India* and *Savari* (2016) discusses the movie *The Dirty Picture*, which was supposed to be based on the South Indian actress “*Silk Smitha*”. She critiques feminist scholarship that tends to read both the filmic narrative and the figure of ‘vamp’ as liberatory for its ‘savarna’ness, going back to the reading of devadasi traditions as well. She also mentions in the article that *Silk Smitha* was posited as a vamp on screen in opposition to the chaste, upper-caste heroines of the times like “*Radha*, *Radhika*, *Sreedevi*, *Sumalatha*, *Poornima*, *Urvashi*, *Sahasini*, etc” (The ‘Dirt’ in *The Dirty Picture*: Caste, Gender and *Silk Smitha* – Part 2). Rowena writes about her lens as an Ambedkarite critique of ‘savarna’ scholarship. This is an important intervention to feminist scholarship with an Ambedkarite intersectional lens.

Carmel Christy has discussed the dominant notions of caste and gender that has led to the discursive formations of the contemporary public sphere in her chapter “The Politics of Sexuality and Caste: Looking through Kerala’s Public Space” in the book *Kerala Modernity — Ideas, Spaces and Practices in Transition* (2015). She looks at the “*Suryanelli*” sex-scandal case and how it configured publicly in Kerala in the sites of law, media and cinema. She examines the narrative detail in the film *Achanurangatha Veedu* where the sexually harassed girl’s background is underlined to be a Dalit Christian one and how that renders the sexuality of the harassed girl in congruence with her caste.

Actress in Malayalam Cinema

On the one hand, there are the questions of representation and identity within filmic texts, as raised by the works discussed above. Alongside, both in terms of Film Studies and Women’s studies scholarship on cinema, there is also the need to look at the corporeal aspects of performativity and its relationship to the cinematic apparatus for us to get a detailed and phenomenological reading of cinema. Very few studies in Film Studies have attempted to do this in the Kerala context.

Sajitha Madathil has discussed the life and work of *Velukutty Ashan*, the first female impersonator in Malayalam sangeetanataka history, who rose to heights of fame with his role of *Vasavadatta* in the stage adaptation of *Kumaranasan’s Karuna*, in her essay “Constructing the Feminine on the Malayalam Stage and Beyond”(Madathil, 2022). She writes about now his performance on stage as women ranging from *Vasavadatta* to *Sita* involved a performative construction of the feminine, along with costumes and make-up. She traces the

history of how the first female actresses emulated Velukutty Asan's mannerisms, attire, and make-up as he had already constructed the dominant notions of ideal femininity on stage, evoking desire and pleasure in the audience. This also led to issues in his own personal life. This is an important study for us to understand how actors can shape and perform gender codes and norms or even break them, with their performativity on the stage or screen.

Madathil's work discussed earlier also illuminates the discursive history of "actress" in the Kerala public sphere. In her work on early actresses in Kerala, she brings forth and recovers the life-stories of these actresses to look at how they negotiated a caste-riven and patriarchal public sphere in Kerala.

In the last decade, there have been a lot of attention paid in academia and Kerala Studies to the first actress of Malayalam cinema, P K Rosy, a Dalit woman who was forced to flee Kerala, facing the wrath of the Nair community, after she played a Nair woman in J C Daniel's *Vigathakumaran* (1928). There are also populist recoveries that centres Daniel's plight in having made the film and of suffering loss, like in films like *Celluloid* (2013), directed by Kamal. There have been earlier attempts at recovery by journalists like Kunnukuti S Mani, Chengallotu Gopalakrishnan. The works of Jenny Rowena (2013), Bindu Menon (2017), Sajitha Madathil (2022, 2023) et. al. all have contributed to this recovery. Aleena Akashmittayi, a poet and writer, has consistently written and pointed to the erasure of P K Rosy and her struggles in the Kerala public sphere.

Urvashi, hailing from an upper caste location, and coming from a family that is connected to the arts via her parents' theatre company, did not face the ire of the mainstream industry which was largely populated by upper-caste actresses playing lead roles, especially since the 80s. She was known to many people working in Malayalam cinema owing to this, which she has stated in many of her interviews. But the characters she played, and the rhythms with which she played them, along with her own lifestory that distorts the narrative of a female actor who then retires to become an ideal "housewife" and "mother", and instead took alternate routes to continue being an actor is my site of analysis here. For this, I will be doing a close reading of her early films, which helped constitute, what came to be known as her 'style' in acting, later.

Close Reading of Early Career Urvashi Films

Vasudevan (2010) has outlined the need for Film Studies in India to turn from the solely textual interpretative mode, which in India has a history of entanglement with political theory, and has called for "ethnography", for the study of films. Locating the actress and her rhythms of sense-perception requires a close-reading of some of her early films for us to locate how she disturbs the ideal feminine or the signifier of the kulasthree on screen in Malayalam cinema. I have chosen some of her most popular films, her most discussed scenes or songs, and is unable to take a holistic study within the limitations of this paper.

Nirakoottu, Yuvajanotsavam, Deshandakilikal Karayarilla, Karimpoovinakkare: The Early 80s

In the early 80s, she played a variety of roles like the angered sister of the murdered heroine in *Nirakoottu*, a central character who is a love interest in *Yuvajanotsavam*, a teacher in *Deshandakilikal Karayarilla* who is held responsible because 2 students disappear under her watch, and *Karimpoovinakkare*. For the purpose of the paper, I have chosen films and characters where she mobilizes rhythms and writes in her style, to women who either are upper-caste but does not necessarily have those virtues in character or non-savarna or sub-altern characters. I will begin with *Ponmuttayidunna Tharaavu* which literally marked her arrival to Malayalam cinema as a female actor who could bring humour to screen.

Ponmuttayidunna Thaaravu (1988)

In this folk-tale like film, Urvashi plays a village lass named Snehathalatha, an upper caste girl whose father Panicker is an astrologer. Next to them live the village's goldsmith Bhaskaran and his sister and parents.

Snehathalatha played by Urvashi is first shown at the local Bhagavathi temple, praying to the idol. Urvashi is a figure of piety, good values, what one would call a kuleenawoman or a kula sthree, modest in appearance,

praying at the temple. Her devout facial expression changes in a matter of seconds, when she catches sight of Bhaskaran beyond the temple wall.

The following scene takes place just outside the temple, adjacent to the temple wall. In this scene, Snehalatha has transformed into a shy lover calling Bhaskaran “Bhaskaretti” lovingly. But she also immediately seems to be upset for him not giving her a gift on her birthday, which happens to be on the same day. She also reminds him of the money her father had given him to make a pair of gold earrings for her. He presents it to her there, and Urvashi’s face immediately changes and lets Bhaskaran know that he better give it to her father himself or he is bound to feel suspicious about the nature of their relationship.

It might be difficult to separate out the mis-en-scene of the film and what Urvashi as an actor brings to this brilliantly crafted and scripted film. But the complex character Snehalatha is embodied in the actor Urvashi, in the way her emotions and expressions progress in one single scene, exposing Snehalatha to us, slightly, but not entirely, in the first half of the film.

Snehalatha is immediately contrasted with Parvathy, played by Shari, the poor teacher who earns a living by teaching children classical dance on the first floor a building that is in shackles, right above the local tea shop, whose owner Abubaker is annoyed and rattled by the sound and power of the dancing feet hitting the floor, in the dancing class.

When there is a false alarm that Bhaskaran’s bed ridden father passed away and the whole village convenes in his room only to realise he is just asleep, the cattlerearer and tea shop assistant Paapi tells Bhaskaran’s sister not to cry like this: “My heart burnt hearing you cry dear. Don’t cry like this.” Hearing this Snehalatha laughs, inappropriate for a serious occasion. The way Urvashi brings this mischief into the screen is noteworthy. She laughs without being coy and like any person humoured by the situation.

In another scene, when Bhaskaran visits Snehalatha in her house to flirt, her father unexpectedly arrives, but she asks Bhaskaran to leave only after drinking tea, which is objected to by her father. She goes inside and expresses the fact that she is offended by her father’s behaviour, in the most convincing manner, which is seconded by her mother. We again are not able to gauge Snehalatha and her love for Bhaskaran. Does she truly love him?

Later that night when Bhaskaran jumps the fence bordering their houses, to meet her in secret, she warns him that her father is suspicious, but at the same time laughs with abandon, at Bhaskaran’s joke.

In another scene when Panikkar, Snehalatha’s father is consulting as an astrologist for Paapi, Snehalatha isn’t interested in it; rather is peeping into Bhaskaran’s house. Even though the scene isn’t built around Snehalatha, her glance which seems so natural and not at all forced, furthers Snehalatha’s interest/liking for Bhaskaran for the audience.

The most craftfully done scene in the film, according to the director Sathyan Anthikad himself, is the scene where she looks at Bhaskaran seductively while hanging clothes on the line, while he is working in his backyard. Urvashi just smiles looking at Sreenivasan while hanging the clothes. There is perhaps nothing sensuous in that act itself but the rhythm with which she hangs the clothes and gives that special smile is sensuous and evocative. A scene that could easily be constructed with overt sexual tension or gestures done by the actor, is played with simplicity and rhythm and restraint by Urvashi. It is enough to lure Bhaskaran to her house in the next scene and the spectator is so convinced in his act of running to her house, once she goes inside.

Another display of the complexity and playfulness Urvashi brings to the scene almost confusing the spectator would be the scene where she asks Bhaskaran to gift her a 10 sovereign gold chain if her parents would have to be convinced about their relationship; Urvashi brings so much conviction into the scene that one can’t blame Bhaskaran for agreeing. Up till this moment, because of the conviction which Urvashi has played Snehalatha, we are not really sure if her love for Bhaskaran is pretense or not. In fact, even after the film ends we do not know if Snehalatha faked it at all. This owes it to the brilliance of the actor Urvashi, the complexity of expressions and emotions she brings up in each scene, not allowing us to fit her into any

stereotype of the “good” girl. Ravi Vasudevan writes in his *Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture*, “The [Indian] social film of the 1950s . . . tends to split the woman in terms of the figuration of her desire. Legitimate figures are held close to the patriarchal hearth . . . and a more overt sexuality is displaced to another figure.” (also quoted in Majumdar, 2009) Urvashi is unafraid to be mischievous and present with abandon as Snehalatha.

Snehalatha’s manipulative nature but soon comes across in the scene when her father confronts her about the gold chain. Her countenance even before she speaks assumes an innocence which also indexes the performance. Urvashi says the dialogue “Enikkonumormayilla Achan”(I don’t remember anything father), extrapolating her from guilt and shame, by claiming innocence , egged on by her mother. This is the same innocence she projects, when Pavithran (played by Jayaram) comes for her pennukaanal (meeting prospective bride). She in her sari embodies only shyness, innocence, and grace. She is back to being the kula sthree/ kulina barely speaking to him.

This portrait of a woman who cheats her lover, by taking a gold chain and getting married to someone of her own caste hinges on her oscillation between fondness and the manipulative switch she makes to adhere to caste and patriarchal norms. Urvashi’s embodiment of Snehalatha makes her convincing, while she is innocent and loving, mischievous, while she laughs with abandon and then later switches, to manipulate and get away from the village itself. There is no self-pitying but an understanding of Snehalatha’s ways that Urvashi embodies in her portrayal of the character.

It is to be noted that she plays many characters other films in 1988, almost all in notable roles, like in *Thantram*, *Mattoral*, *Mukthi*, *Oru CBI Diary Kurippu*,highle different in tone and theme from *Snehalatha*.

Mazhavilkavadi (1989)

Urvashi appears as Anandavalli in *Mazhavilkaavadi*, another one of Sathyan Anthikad films, only after the first half of the film, for which she won a State Award for Best Supporting Actress. The choice to do this film itself needs to be appreciated where an actress who has been established as a heroine has rarely played a supporting role, in a film, where another actress plays the ideal heroine, the hero’s love interest. She is shown to be a talkative, uninhibited, “naive girl. But there is no characteristic shyness that is often seen in actresses embodying small town girls or the village belle. Urvashi seems to be unaware of her body and its presence on screen. The song “Thankathoni . . .”, a very rare instance in Malayalam mainstream cinema where a woman who is not a vamp, is posited as a desiring woman, would be a constructive site of analysis to show how Urvashi plays this on screen. The way she runs, collects water from the river are all completely in opposition to the body language embodied by the ‘ideal feminine’ in lead actresses of the time. She is everything but what is deemed as graceful in the conventional sense. But that in no way breaks her rhythm or makes her ‘clumsy’. Be it the almost impossible shot of lying down on a piece of rock slowly, or her almost comical running which goes with Anandavalli’s general hyper behaviour. Anandavalli is the polar opposite of Ponumuttayidunna Tharaavu’s *Snehalatha*, without any ulterior motives, but love and desire to embody for the hero, unabashedly.

“Thankathoni . . .” begins with Urvashi’s feet splashing water in a river.[2] It cuts to her running rhythmically but with abandon which then cuts to a bird in an evening sky. That cut or juxtaposition captures the mis-en-scene of the song; Anandavalli who is free as a bird. Urvashi transforms into a coy yet desiring woman as she begins to sing the lyrics of the first stanza, standing against a tree. From the tree, she walks to the edge of the field, sits there, cutting to a close up of her singing. It is Urvashi’s movements and small gestures that modulate the rhythm of the mis-en-scene of the song, where camera movement is almost absent except for a couple of pans. The next sequence shows Urvashi running in a yellow dhavani, towards a bullock cart in which Jayaram is travelling. The rhythm and mode of running Urvashi adopts is unique in Malayalam cinema; it came to be associated with her as a characteristic feature. She runs quickly and not slowly, with her hands moving too. Rather her speed, and the way she holds

herself and her hands is one of child-like play but full of love and desperation. This is followed by a shot of her walking alongside the bullock-cart, holding onto it, confidently, full of desire and happy.

The next sequence happens by the river on a rock. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is the tiniest movement in Urvashi's body and the flowing river that guides the sequence's rhythm. Even with all the energy that translates on screen, Urvashi is not clumsy even for a moment on screen. On that small rock she sits, moves her legs in water synchronised with the rhythm of the song, lies down on the rock in a top angle shot and continues to play in the water with her hand. In the next stanza, Urvashi is seen collecting water from one bank of a river/pond, while Jayaram sits on the other side brushing his teeth. She looks at him and lets go of the vessel in his direction, runs to the other bank to collect the vessel from him, walks away gaily, turning back quickly, just once to catch a closer glimpse of him. The song ends with a long shot-long take of Urvashi running below the Pazhani hills, a whole stanza goes uncut in the rhythmic and child-like running of Urvashi.

Mukhachitram (1991)

In Suresh Unnithan's Mukhachitram, Urvashi does not appear on screen, until the second half of the film. She plays Savithri kutty/Lakshmi kutty, whose life has taken a turn after Mathutty (played by Jayaram), who used to be a street musician, fakes his identity as a band teacher in a village school with the prodding of another teacher from the school named Kannan (Siddique). They are asked to present a wedding photo of Mathutty if he has to retain his job and stay in the headmistress's outhouse. Mathutty is presented as a Hindu upper caste married gentleman, with the name Sethumadhavan Nair. They visit a photography studio in town to choose from a range of passport size of photos of women who had taken their pictures there, along with the owner. Mathutty chooses Lakshmi Kutty's photo as his wife for his wedding photo. Following this seemingly simple act Lakshmi Kutty's life takes a horrifying turn where she is believed to be dead, but there are gangsters behind her for a murder she has witnessed, on the night she flees home following the misunderstandings the wedding photo creates.

This is a back story that is not available to us when Urvashi appears on screen. We have seen her only as Lakshmi Kutty, the 'wife' of Mathutty/Sethumadhavan Nair in his wedding picture, presented to Gomathy Teacher(played by KPAC Lalitha) who is the owner and headmistress of the school. A woman named Pathu who often visits the area to sell snacks spots this photo on Mathutty/ Sethumadhavan's house-wall and informs him that this is Savithri Kutty and she passed away few days ago, when her body was found on the railway track.

Urvashi's performance in the film elevates the melodramatic elements on which the pleasure of the film is hinged upon, to another level. She arrives one rainy stormy night and takes over the house as Lakshmi Kutty, leaving the spectators puzzled and bewildered just like Mathutty. Her entry is similar to Sarada's entry to Sathyan's house one night in Yakshi (1969)[3]. She is supposed to be a dead person and how she ends up being this living person impersonating Mathutty's supposed wife is a mystery.

Urvashi brings spunk and poignance simultaneously to the character. She behaves with all the authority in the world, as the rightfully married wife of Mathutty/Sethumadahvan, making Gomathi Teacher like her immediately. She dominates not only the premises of the house, but also the screen with her talkative nature, how she chides Mathutty and her confident and caring ways, which makes him like her eventually. It is an almost unusual kula sthree on screen- vegetarian, ritualistic, devout but not shy even a bit, and one who decides to take her fate into her own hands. She is an upper-caste Hindu woman who decides to live the role of the wife of an orphaned Christian, into which she is interpellated through the fabrication of the photograph. These performances where there is multiple levels of performativity happening within the story of a film, are films where Urvashi has thrived as an actor. Quintessentially melodramatic, with secret harbour and truths to reveal in the end, the presence of a female actor like Urvashi, who is supposed to be an unmarried woman who spend time in a home with a single man, and the desirous atmosphere this coming

together creates is elevated with Urvashi's own dual performance of femininities- of the kula sthree and the desiring woman.

Vishnulokam (1991), My Dear Muthachan (1992)

In Kamal's *Vishnulokam*, Urvashi plays a "nadodi"(wandering community) character named Kasthuri, who tours through villages, along with a troupe of small-time performers. Kasthuri appears as a naive girl in the first scene, when the bullock cart in which the performers are travelling, stops at the central part of the village, in which the film unfolds. She is seen brushing her teeth with charcoal using her fingers and gives a rather impish childish smile in return to the gaze of two ruffian-oglers of the village. In the next scene, where they are seen in front of a large manor of a feudal Hindu family, Kasthuri slowly slips away and tries to steal an egg, when the youngest child in the manor spots her; she acts abashed at being caught but does not drop the egg and eventually takes it. There are myriad expressions that pass through Urvashi's face then, for such a small gesture: that she is apologetic and will drop it, but after sizing up the child's expression, she emotes using her face and gestures: "Oh its Ok?" and slowly takes the egg and hides it in her dress. In another scene, that involves the ruffian oglers, Kasthuri is seen to be washing clothes in the river, while they hide behind shrubs to catch a glimpse of her; they even discuss amidst themselves whether she is actually female or a male dressed up as one. She catches sight of them and lovingly calls them beside her where everyone is convinced by her gesture but slaps one of them when they approach and asks them to run away. In a previous scene too when she is dressing up for a performance, they both play peeping tom; she smiles at them from the interior of the tent ardently but chides them in the next moment for being indecent. Urvashi pretending on screen to these trouble makers is so genuine like the characteristic feature of a person in real life, who has figured a way in the world to protect herself and just be.

In the film, she is later heart broken when she discovers Shanku's (Mohanlal) love for Savithri, a damsel/kula sthree in distress, from the manor next to their performance ground. She fights with Shanku and later reconciles realising his brotherly affection for her. The moment of reconciliation is a long take with both Mohanlal and Urvashi crying their hearts out in relief which then adds to the melodramatic codes of address seen in social tragedies.

In Anthikad's *My Dear Muthachan*, Urvashi plays a minor character named Clara. She is the daughter of the maid-servant Kunjamma (Philomina), who works in a rich house, with 4 children, whose parents have just passed away in an accident. Clara arrives after being summoned by Kunjamma. after her love affair with a Muslim boy back in her village creates a scandal.

Two sequences/scenes need to be sketched out here in detail, even in a film where Urvashi plays a minor character, who is not necessarily instrumental to the plot being taken forward. There is the scene where Urvashi having arrived at the house, and starts working there, goes to give tea to the eldest daughter Maya, her employer. She tells Maya that her Ammachi must have misled her about her personality and goes onto narrate her love story in the most poignant manner. Though the film and the scene in itself seems to ridicule a naive woman easily falling for advances by men, Urvashi spins the scene around with humour and an ordinariness in the flow of her narration, taking away the sinful nature of the act. Maya responds with slight ridicule; Clara doesn't seem to notice. Clara narrates her story of being a "good girl" with such conviction, of falling in love accidentally, without intending to do so, that too with a Muslim man ("I go from home to typewriting institute, typewriting institute to home" is a cult dialogue now, especially in the age of insta reels). The scene is played out in a long shot and close-ups of both the actors. When she says the famous dialogue, it is accompanied by gestures, bringing in a measured humour to the shots.

Another memorable scene from the whole film is when Clara has just exited from the church and Sreenivasan's character follows her to explain what had actually transpired the previous night. A letter intended for Maya reaches Clara accidentally and she mistakes that he is in love with her instead, but is caught by her mother, while she waits near the kitchen window to meet him and is given an earful. Clara

tries to rush away from him, having taken the words in the letter genuinely, and when Sreenivasan's character explains that it was all a mistake, she genuinely cries. Moved by her earnestness, Sreenivasan calls her to explain everything and they eventually elope. This scene which starts with Urvashi running away spotting Sreenivasan's character in her characteristic humorous uninhibited manner ends with her earnest sadness about being hoodwinked for being a maid.

Labour and the female actor Urvashi

Urvashi, from the beginning of her career, till date, gets asked the question about her acting prowess and how she was open to doing minor roles in films that were headlined by other female actors, like in the case of Mazhavilkavadi, My Dear Muthachan etc. Right from her earliest available video interview in AVM Unni Archives (1992) to her interviews throughout the years, till the most recent one, Urvashi (and her sister Kalpana) has maintained that they were trained at home to see acting as "work" or "labour" and that it was like an office job, where they had to give their all. She also often refers to her father and mother's theatre company and the impact it had on her as a child. This perspective of a female actor. Early on, that acting even if it is an art, is fundamentally to her a form of labour or a job is markedly different to the dominant discourse of being a 'kalakari'/ artist in mainstream cinema or other art forms in Kerala. This answer which was said with conviction initially, then becomes an automatic response to the media's most repeated question for Urvashi. Even if it is produced for the media and the public, the fact that she did minor characters or even villainous characters while being a so-called "top heroine" remains. Her career that then entered a different phase in the 90s, with her acting in what was known as low budget B grade movies, headlined by actors like Jagadeesh, like Sthreedhanam (1993), Ponnaramthottathe Rajaavu (1992), Kudumbavishesham (1994) etc. attests to this idea of acting being "work" which she caters to and her readiness to do any role, with any actor as her pair, despite being playing the lead to actors like Mohanlal, Mammotty, Jayaram etc. Jagadeesh has underlined this quality of Urvashi in his recent interviews, and had said that many actresses were not ready to play his heroine in these films, but Urvashi never hesitated. He also highlighted how she was put down for choosing to do those roles in the public discourse of those times. It is also a question of privilege to choose to do some roles and not do others, in a film industry that churns younger and newer heroines, every few years. In that way, Urvashi is also known to have been the breadwinner of her family, building a house for them, taking care of all the members of the family for as long as she worked or got married. This is also one of the reasons, other than her own personality or disposition, she is not posited as an "auratic" heroine, unlike Shobhana, in the media's and public discourse. Actors like Urvashi and Seema have had to talk of this as a profession or a job, rather than just "art". In furthering my research, my enquiries will also look at the often dichotomous relationship that is constructed around female actors, labour and art.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to examine how Urvashi through her own style of acting put together new rhythms of sense-perceptions in Malayalam cinema, that often disturbed and sometimes subverted codes that were used to embody the ideal feminine or the kulasthree heroine on screen. From her choice of roles to the abandon she embodied in her laugh to run on screen put her together as an who does not comply with the 'coy', 'disciplined' femininity that was the hallmark of the '80s. This also led to her being chosen for roles that are not the kulasthree, like we saw in the paper. She later adapted her career and appeared in the relatively low-budget B grade movies of the late 90s, alongside actors like Jagadish, who weren't seen as heroes until then. This 'abandon' in one sense also led to her public shaming later when she got divorced from the actor that she was married to, references to her drinking habits all make up, a certain presence of the female persona that is at once desired on screen and rejected otherwise. Her spontaneity and vulnerability are often at display in her recent interviews too, almost as if the Urvashi she played with abandon on screen could make its way to the real world. This paper has attempted to complicate the figure of the actor Urvashi, relationship between the actor's body, labour, art and the screen in Malayalam cinema.

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Appendix

End Notes

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12. J Devika has written about the constitution of maleness and femaleness of individuals in the Kerala public sphere, tracing it back to the era of 19th century reforms that called for ‘self-development’ from various quarters, mediated by colonial modernity, in her essay “The Aesthetic Woman: Re-Forming Female Bodies and Minds in Early Twentieth- Century Keralam”. (Devika, 2005).
13. Here it is important to revisit Devika, who has written about the construction of the ideal Malayalee women within Kerala modernity in the 20th century. She writes that the domestic woman and aesthetic

woman was separate and could only come together when aesthetics was mobilised for the pleasure of the husband alone. She writes in her essay “Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies over Women Writing Their Lives in Kerala” “The ideal woman in whom these figures are seen to combine harmoniously, is expected to remain strictly self-controlled and provide aesthetic pleasure to the husband. In this sense, this ideal woman differs sharply from the kulina of the classical texts.” (Devika, 2006)

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