

# Politics of Embodiment in the Digital Age: Reading Select Media Images from Contemporary Kerala

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## Abstract

One of the salient features of fourth wave feminism is its strategic use of new media and communication technologies. Through individual and collective interventions, feminists use these media platforms to script counter-hegemonic discourses. New media also facilitate the dismantling of the silos in which mass media existed, enabling new forms of media convergences, accelerating the production, distribution and consumption of media content. This media convergence offers new affordances for women to turn feminism into an everyday practice, enabling novel modes of networking and agency. In this phase, feminists emphasised the significance of embodied practices in liberating women from repression. Regulation of woman's corporeality through systemic regimes and the idea of transgressing bodies came under increased feminist scrutiny. Reimagining the materiality of the female body to contest the meanings imposed on it in dominant discourses and forming new subjectivities are important concerns in feminist politics. The images selected for this study heralds a fresh turn in feminist activism in Kerala where virtual embodiment is used to interrupt the patriarchal logic that frames woman's corporeality. Through the two visual texts from the mediascape of Kerala, this paper intends to look into the ways in which they challenge the fetishised understanding of female breast and build a seamless continuum between physical and virtual resistances.

**Keywords:** Body Politics; Breasts; Sexualised body; Corporeality; Repressed bodies.

## Introduction

Media and technologies of communication have become an integral part of human lives. Since the advent of mass media in the twentieth centu-

ry, media platforms have been influencing public opinion in a variety of ways. While the capitalist forces in the twentieth century were mostly interested in using the media for profiteering through marketing and advertising, the media affordances - print, electronic and digital - offered a variety of possibilities for mediated socialites. The media economies of the last decades of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century resulted in the emergence of new forms of media practices to maximise the reach and influence of ideas. These media ecosystems offered new strategies for political communication, propaganda, persuasion, resistances and activism to shape affective communities. The ever changing dynamics of media in constructing the social world has made it an important component in the key debates in cultural studies. The interesting concerns of the media in the twenty-first century include "convergence, democratisation, customisation, commercialisation, participation, platform, and the interrelated triplet of the global, the transnational and the local" (Turner, 2020). The increasing presence of the media culture influences the fabric of everyday life through its hegemonic control over people's leisure time, political views and behavioural patterns. The different types of words, images, sounds and stories disseminated through media constitute the inventory of everyday life which are appropriated and interpreted by the audience.

The media exposes us to a number of artefacts which are ideological products associated with specific rhetorics, policies and agendas. When the different texts in media and users meet each other, meanings get crystallised through specific modes of interpretations predicated from the negotiations between the text, the mental models of the audience and the cultural discourses of everyday life. One of the major aims of the organisers of social movements of the twentieth century was to ensure sufficient mass media coverage. The packaging of the images of protest through mass media was a major agenda in these movements to communicate the messages to people outside the protest groups and "to attract the attention of and intervention by the third parties with the policy formulators and decision makers" (Smith, 2001). The visibility in the mass media platforms was also essential to influence the prioritisation of issues in social debates and discussions. With mass media being owned and controlled mostly by corporate tycoons, the protests and resistances of the marginalised sections of society were largely invisibilised and ignored. Through their definitions of newsworthiness, the selection of issues in mass media and their descriptions were determined by the dominant ideologies. The gatekeeping strategies practised by mass media seemingly "to transform information about billions of events into a manageable subset of media messages" (Shoemaker, 2009) have been detrimental to the cause of the

marginalised. The engagement of the media with the socialites of the day changed drastically with the advent of New Media. Contemporary times have seen the dynamic leveraging of media technologies to script new forms of aspirations by the voiceless and marginalised.

New Media has radically transformed the civil society's interventions in the meaning making processes through media. The digital technologies offer people a variety of avenues for participation and socio-political expressions, enabling them to overcome "voice poverty" (Reid, 2020). While the question of inclusivity is a limitation of digital citizenship as in the case of national citizenship in recent times, digital citizens are privileged with different options of communication to confirm that *their version* of a story or issue is mediated to a collective society. It was in the 1990s that the internet gained global attention as a space of non-hierarchical, self-generated communication. A new logic of media activism realised through technology resulted in the circulation of new stories by/of the aggrieved, marginalised and silenced. For instance, the members of the digital movement BURN! in California in the 1990s "expressed their belief that free access to information is a direct challenge to corporate media's monopoly over the means of communication" (Wolfson, 2014). The digital spaces evolved into laboratories of activism weaving together alternative ideologies and counter-discourses across nationalities and diverse constituencies. Activists were forming new networks of solidarities to script oppositional movements contesting the dominant systems of thought and life practices.

Coming to the twenty-first century, new media has revolutionised the communication industry through media convergences that condition the experiences of the day. These convergences have resulted in the merging of mass media with new media through digital technologies. Thus "there will be no more need for having a television and a computer separate from each other, since both would be able to do the job of the other" (Chakaveh, 2007). Media convergences have made possible the sharing of tasks, technologies and content. The digitisation of media has resulted in the flow of contents across spaces, blurring the boundaries between mass media and new media and offering a dynamic experience. For instance, we have live streaming of television programmes and online editions of magazines and newspapers. This media landscape has increased the reach and influence of information across the globe. The fluidity in the dissemination of media content has facilitated the accessibility of the images chosen for this study from the virtual space.

New Media is now a thriving space for non-normative discourses. Civil organisations and individuals use the affordances of new media to mobilise public opinion against the institutionalised regimes of power. New patterns of participatory culture have emerged out of these digital spaces where the netizens engage in self-mediation (Chouliaraki, 2012), blurring the “traditional boundaries between media producers and consumers and for leading to hybrid forms of civic participation” (Chouliaraki, 2012). While the latest Information Technology (Guidelines For Intermediaries And Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 enacted by the Government of India has a different story to tell, the earlier days of new media in the form of blogs, streaming services and social media networks offered new forms of visibility to the ordinary people to raise concerns which otherwise were mundane and insignificant for those in power. These spaces dismantled the public/private binary and empowered the netizens to use them as personalised spaces of the autonomous self. Hannah Arendt has theorised on how the “space of appearance”, the common visibility of actors generates power” (Marquez, 2012), bringing together citizens in fighting and celebrating the everyday life. Digital actors curate the type of images and messages that they share in new media to define their identities. This project of self-mediation is carried over through semiotic systems and hypertexts.

Media activism, especially through digital media, have empowered women to claim agency over their lives. There are now more frequent instances of women’s use of new media to disrupt the patriarchal ideologies. An alternative media economy is constructed by the activists to raise a constellation of issues, challenge the hegemonic gender notions and visualise social change. Fourth wave feminism is defined by the extensive use of digital technologies by feminists to advocate gender justice. The politicisation of everyday life is an important aspect of this phase since “the political can be present within the personal, without needing to be framed as explicitly political” (Highfield, 2016). Social media affordances play a significant role in building connectivities through hashtag movements that initiate discussions across the board. One of the earliest examples of online feminist activism rising above the offline/online binary in India was the Pink Chaddi (PC) campaign set off by Nisha Susan in 2009 in Facebook to instigate public outrage against the Sri Ram Sena’s attack on women in a Mangalore pub. Since then, Facebook and Twitter have been extensively used by activists in India to influence social perspectives. While the nineteenth century bourgeois public sphere was an assemblage of newspapers, magazines, television and radio (Habermas, 1984), the digital sphere has emerged as a counter-public sphere, challenging the

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dominant public sphere, “to speak in one’s own voice, and thereby simultaneously to construct and express one’s cultural identity through idiom and style” (Fraser, 1990).

Fourth wave feminism has marked a paradigm shift from the earlier presumptions about the neglect of structures of embodiment in digital activism. While the early discussions of digital activism, founded on a binary logic of the virtual / real, regarded “the disembodied gaze and the transcendence of dematerialised information as salient features of the digital aesthetics” (Munster, 2006), new genealogies of understanding digital activism since the last decades of the twentieth century have been experimenting with the possibilities of embodied experiences through digital spaces. Digital activism has started being discussed through the corporeal frames, highlighting the fact that the body cannot be erased/nullified from the constitutive processes of humaneness. Fourth wave feminists have made strategic uses of the corporeal turn in digital activism to launch feminist protests across transnational spaces, “bringing together diverse feminist constituencies, digital platforms enable new kinds of intersectional conversations” (Baer, 2015). The body exists as a porous boundary (Butler, 2004) through which we situate ourselves in an enmeshed field of associations with others, mediated through the offline and online protest sites. Engaging with the body becomes critical in contemporary feminist discussions because “it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings” (Butler, 2004).

Cultural contexts attain significance in decoding the body rhetorics as a strategy for communication. The understanding of corporeality is deeply enmeshed in the dialectical relationship between the text (body), contexts (culture) and audience. With the dissimilarities in the interpretative habits and cultural ideologies, “...different audiences...perceive the rhetoric of the body in accordance with their own positionalities and worldviews, and assign their own conceptual frames to the materiality and symbolism of the body” (Khrebtan-Horhager 2015). A deeper interrogation of the embodied dimensions and the hermeneutics of the body throwing light on the fundamental ontologies demands the use of specific instances from any culture. If we are to debate the masculine constructions of the desiring female body, we need to bring in examples which are socially constructed and culturally contingent to decipher the social inscriptions on bodies. This paper emerges out of the two controversies that stirred the social fabric of Kerala in the last decade. The latest controversy erupted because of the pictures that a woman named Rehna Fathima posted of her children

painting on her naked torso (opindia.com, 2020). The cultural vanguards of Kerala considered this act outrageous to the cultural traditions of the state, compromising social and moral values. The much debated cover page of the breastfeeding mother featured by the model Gilu Joseph and carried by the Malayalam magazine *Grihalakshmi* (thenewsminute.com, 2018) in 2018 is the other instance that will be looked into, to put into perspective the woman's naked body as a contested site of social repression. The use of an image that was circulated through mass media, as an instance of digital activism, is done to emphasise the modification of mass media as spaces of new modes expressions through media convergences enabled through the digital accessibility of mass media productions. The attempt here is to critique essentialist notions about a woman's body and nurture an understanding of the body's historicity taking seriously the subversive potential of the micro-moments of women's corporeal resistances. This paper intends to elucidate the dialectics of the socially determined regulatory practices that strive to impose negative self-conscious emotions on a woman's body and the branding as corrupt those bodies that escape the cultural politics of body shaming. Exploring the unseen dimensions of the instances under focus, the paper will move beyond the temporalities to theorise on the proliferation of interpretations they elicit regarding the agency of women over their bodies.

The woman's body has always been a contested site of divergent perceptions, "as reproductive, sexual, insatiable, as a commodity, a place of purity, as Mary and Eve, of sin and flesh and monstrous appetites – a map of spatial, temporal and lived female experiences" (Coy-Dibley 2016). Different cultural ideals of the constitutive practices of the female body constructed through discursive spaces influence and dictate the social perceptions and individual experiences of the body. Feminist thinkers have been invariably alert to the coercive forces of social conditioning that induced in women the urge to use the techniques of self-fashioning to adhere to the societal norms of female embodiment and to position themselves within the normative frames of motherhood / sex object. The feminist attempts were towards the strategic dismantling of the objectification of the female body, and the reclamation of the woman's authority over her own body, reinforcing the subversive potential of the feminist slogan 'The personal is the political.'

Problematising the polemics over the baring of the woman's body is a major concern in feminist debates over body politics. The unclothed female body still occupies a liminal space of the representable / unrepresentable. The framing of the unclothed female body within the ambiguities of the

naked / nude becomes one of the major concerns in debating the social stigmas associated with a woman's body. Kenneth Clark in his investigation of the semantic disputes between the two terms explains the naked as "bodies deprived of clothes, 'huddled and defenceless'" contrasted against the nude, considered the idealised image of the body as "the body 'clothed' in art; the nude is the body re-formed rather than deformed, 'balanced, prosperous and confident" (Nead, 1992). The conceptual grounding of this paper inclines more towards John Berger's inversion of Clark's placing of the naked / nude in binary opposition. In his reevaluation of the terms in the work *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Berger considers "To be naked" as "to be oneself" (Nead, 1992). He emancipates the idea of the naked from the repertoire of patriarchal conventions that subordinates the female body under a politics of shame which demands serious interrogation. The mapping of shame and obscenity onto the spatiality of the woman's naked body were among the many political ways of limiting the contours of the body. Body shame acts as discursive sites of social acceptance / rejection. "Inscribed on the body, shame as a *habitus* constitutes a system of dispositions related to a person's being and doing in the world" (Arel, 2016). There is a larger politics writ into the affective experience of shame. Different types of socio-political dynamics precipitate shame which is culturally inherited by women. Through the dogmatic ideas of embodiment and subjectivity, the discourses of shame and obscenity attempt to censor a woman's possibilities of self-presentation. Moreover, in the patriarchal discourses, the female body is expected to act as the site for the articulation of insecurities, anxieties and vulnerabilities.

The massive controversy stirred by the two instances under investigation disproves the popular claims of social liberation of women. The cultural sensibilities of the land have been marred by rigid norms of gender inequality and stereotyping structured into the social psyche across generations. The 'commonsensical' assumptions that the society has nurtured regarding the normative codes of femininity have been detrimental to the personhood of women, reducing them into passive recipients of the unchanging legacy of Malayali womanhood. Even in the current decade, the feminist activists of the state are struggling to counter the legitimising of biological determinism that condition the social and individual responses to women's negotiations in all spheres of lives. Women themselves are mostly unable to recognise how the subjective filters of their mind are products of patriarchal conditioning. The misogynistic blinders that they conveniently adorn cause them to disparage in most virulent terms the feminist ventures to script a new narrative of woman's liberation, uncontaminated by patriarchal frames of understanding. We need to re-read

the images of Rehna Fathima and Gilu Joseph under the limelight of the deep-rooted patriarchal prescriptions for the performance of the female body prevailing in the social fabric of Kerala. Transnational discourses on the female breasts offer us interesting insights into the fetishisation of female breasts in patriarchy. #Freethenipple campaign, launched by activist Lina Esco in 2013, has been one of the popular 21st century feminist movements in social media, which reimagined women's subjectivities through the reclamation of the body. This movement aimed at causing disruptions to the "patriarchal framings of the breast as inherently sexual and the associated practices of concealment and censorship" (Matich, 2018), was one of the earliest performances of digital embodiment. The movement critiqued the poststructuralist concern with the discursive construction of the woman's body which ignored "the lived material bodies and evolving corporeal practices" (Alaimo, 2008). The attempt has been to emancipate the woman's body from patriarchal rationalities and abjection via erasure of definitive social inscriptions. Here, the plasticity of the body renders it resilient enough to act as a site of resistance as well as subversion when confronting power. This brings us to one of the major arguments of this paper - human subjectivities are complex formulations shaped by means of the interactions of technology with embodiment.

The culture of sexualization perceives breasts as sites of obscenity, guilt and shame. "The cultural identity of the breast has seen a marked shift in the last thirty years and the breast has become an icon of sexuality" (Battersby, 2007). The social expectations on women to don the mask of shame over their breasts have been violated in both these instances and there begins the play of significations over the images as obscene and titillating. The politics behind these exclusive interpretations of the breasts of women is thrown into sharp relief when seen in comparison to the privileging of the bare male torso which do not elicit such disparaging comments. Feeding or otherwise, a woman's body is only a sexual object to the patriarchal world which calls for prohibitions and censoring. On the contrary, the male body enjoys the freedom of different types of expressions and experiences beyond the heteronormative economy. "...even though men's breasts equally qualify as erogenous zones, men's "chests" are not reduced to their sexual contexts. The view that women's "chests" are inherently sexual oversimplifies the biological picture, making it difficult to recognize female breasts as multifunctional" (Sander-Staudt, 2010).

The societal responses to both the instances bear a few similarities, especially the ways in which they became victims of biopolitics and legality at the very moment of their presence in the public sphere. The international



bodies like UNICEF and the global media were quick to laud the iconic and bold cover page of *Grihalakshmi* for demystifying breastfeeding and prompting young mothers to overcome the shame dynamics that taint their experience of motherhood. The cultural taboos around breastfeeding in public spaces act as an ethical burden over the emotions of any mother, further limiting her freedom of movement when she is lactating. It is unfortunate that these taboos breed notions of embarrassment in women across the globe. "It is the feeling of exposing oneself to others when breastfeeding that elicits the feeling of embarrassment" (Battersby, 2007). Acquiring for women the legal right to breastfeed in public was one of the focal points in #Freethenipple campaign as well. *Grihalakshmi* was trying to free women trapped in this labyrinth of social stigma by imagining a new narrative of social visibility. Though there were many in the state who appreciated the emergence of a new discourse, a set of lawyers in Kerala filed a case against the magazine under Sections 3 and 4 of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986.

Shifting to the instance of Rehna Fathima, she had already ruffled many feathers in the social fabric of Kerala through her loud expressions of desire as a part of the Kiss of Love movement in 2018 and her challenging of the male bastions of religious strictures through her failed bid to enter the shrine of Sabarimala which was forbidden to menstruating women until the Supreme Court verdict of 2018 undoing the socio-religious restrictions on menstruating bodies. The instance we are considering here should be read as part of the continuum of her pasts and probable futures of contesting those socio-cultural stigmas that foil a woman's attempts to experience her body and desire with utmost freedom. The new technologies of visualities enabled the unfolding of these two images virtually anywhere. Together with these layers of camaraderie enjoyed by the images, a deeper level of similarity of deviating from the rulebook exists between them – the revealing of the women's breasts. The branding of obscenity and moral outrage over the images should be interrogated through the ontological existence of breasts as tangible symbols of sexualization.

The politics of legality tormented both the images. Seen from a neoliberal perspective, these were two bold attempts to violate juridical categories and normative assumptions which demanded disruptions by the rule of Law. The legacy of biopower inherent in neoliberalism demanded the elimination of these spaces of corporeal resistance through legal measures. Rehna Fathima was booked under Section 67 of the IT Act (electronically transmitting sexually explicit content) and Section 75 of the Juvenile Justice Act for cruelty to children. While the editors of *Grihalakshmi*

also had to enter into a legal fight, the court in that case took a progressive approach, stating that "What may be obscene to some may be artistic to other; one man's vulgarity is another man's lyric" (deccanchronicle.com, 2018). The court further observed that it defies logic when a cultural space celebrating the paintings of Ravi Varma finds obscenity in the cover page. In a lighter vein, we could even take it further and imagine if Ravi Varma had a camera with him to capture the images of the models rather than painting them on his canvas. Her case became more complicated with the state machinery immediately issuing an arrest warrant against her, making it an obvious instance of the machinations of biopolitics. Rehna Fathima was denied anticipatory bail by the Supreme Court of India in August 2020 with the observation, "What is the impression this will give to the children about the culture of this country?" (timesofindia.com). The use of legal texts to attempt erasure of spaces of cultural dissent that has occurred in both the instances could be better understood through the working of biopower theorised by Foucault. In these two instances, we can tease out the neoliberal methods of disciplining the body and bringing it under regulatory control through social censures and governmentality. The disciplining techniques of social dissent and legal measures was not so steadfast in gagging the creative freedom of the magazine probably because through a new culture of visibility, it was indirectly reinforcing the maternal instincts.

Rehna Fathima's obvious departure from the social strictures on motherhood has compounded the chances of her being penalised by law. She was powerfully grounding the materiality of her body in a prediscursive frame outside the "sexed specificity of the female body" (Butler, 1993). Rehna was rewriting the symbolic significance of the body using the body as a site of dissent. She was scripting a new conversation of resistance using her body as the canvas to encourage the creative imaginations of her children. She was imagining a true liberation of the female body, quite in tune with the feminist corporeal concerns which focused on the body "as a source of knowledge, as a site of resistance, and the locus of subjectivity" (McLaren, 2002). While the agency of the baby carried by Gilu Joseph has never been under scrutiny, Rehna was criticised for 'using' her pre-adolescent children to pose for the photo. This is a highly complex issue as it raises many critical questions which we need to address to disentangle many preconceived ideas. How do you understand the use of words like 'indecent' and 'obscene' to address this issue? How do we address the issue of agency of children? Without having an informed interaction with the children, how did the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights assume that the children had suffered mental trauma?

While Gilu Joseph's picture was outrightly a mediated narrative, Rehna's was a self-styled performance as an autonomous disruptive agent of conventional legacies of patriarchy that groom women as passive objects of male desire. The following could be the possible reasons for the palpable social distress at her act: (1) The social psyche has always been accustomed to the gendered imbalance in looking at the female body through the male gaze where the former exists as a passive object to be looked at. Female bodies are reduced to the status of objects of pleasure sans agency. A culture which celebrates the canvas of Raja Ravi Varma and relishes the cinemascapes of Bollywood was disturbed by the FB posts of Rehna. The two earlier instances are of blatant male bastions in which the passive bodies of women become tools for voyeuristic consumption and pleasure. Coming to Rehna Fathima, here we have a woman who uses her agency for the self-willed exposure of her naked torso.

As in the case of Gilu Joseph, this was also another attempt at desexualizing the female body. Through her bold venture, she already escaped the discourses of shame and obscenity that are used to limit the feminine experiences of the body. (2) The agency of children has been a mostly unexamined concept as it is generally assumed that children are incapable of exerting their agency until a particular age in life. However, agency has now become one of the key concepts explored in Childhood Studies. Though sorting the issue of agency which has a strong philosophical dimension can be difficult, the recent studies have elaborated on the visibilities of children as social actors. We have witnessed in 2020 children coming out in large numbers demanding substantial measures to curb global warming. It is sheer hypocrisy which refuses to question the agency of children when they conduct marches against climate change while at the same time lamenting over the use of her children as 'passive objects' of activism by Rehna. Both these instances demand a perception regarding children as active participants "to symbolise the future needs and hopes of society as they are considered the future generations" (Rodgers, 2020). Moreover, just because Rehna doesn't fit into the mould of womanhood that the society has homogenised is no reason to throw aspersions at her under the presumption that she is incapable of addressing the well-being of her children.

(3) The presence of her 'son' in the photo might have been another strong reason for the virulent indictment of her act. The patriarchal epistemologies of knowledge makes every attempt to nurture in boys and young men an erotic curiosity over a woman's body. This obscure frame of understanding limits their perspectives of the woman's body to that of a sexual tool

to play out their erotic fantasies. The increasing violence against women across the state is one among the many consequences of the culturally imposed aura of enigma framing the woman's body. Rehna was taking many steps forward in rupturing this enigmatic continuum that generations inherit through the freedom she gave her son to use her body as a site of creative imaginations. She was making it obvious that it is high time that we nurture a generation which can perceive a woman's body as one among the different possibilities of physical existence, no more and no less. (4) The immediacy with which the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights stepped in to protect the rights of the children stinks of conspiracies of biopolitics working through governmentality. The eyes of the children, not yet contaminated by the male gaze, might regard it only as the body of their mother and not as a site of sexual desire. However, the Commission should be considered as objectifying the female body as a sexualised space and reading its nudity as obscenity. Rehna's political use of new regimes of visibility negating the private / public divide and her baring of her torso which is understood as the site of sexual desire caused the Commission to instigate an investigation of the issue.

Both Gilu Joseph and Rehna Fathima were problematising the binaries of societal beliefs and practices to develop a nuanced and variant understanding of existing thoughts. They were trying to imagine new possibilities of social configuration beyond the binaries of the sacred / profane, mind / body and private / public. While the majoritarian society was thriving on the exclusivity of these terms which were always positioned as contradictory ways of experiencing lives, the two visual images examined here were collapsing the fixities of such binary terms. They were unsettling these fundamental dyads in western epistemes. They were building a continuum of human experiences and de-essentialising the hierarchical privileging of social concepts. Here were two instances which mocked at a culture which attributed sacredness to motherhood while simultaneously imposing profanity on the body of the mother. They were making a jibe at the tall and mighty thoughts that constitute the 'Kerala Model' while cherishing the Judeo-Christian conceptualisation of the female body as a repository of disordered desires and anti-social corporeality that call for prohibitions and censorship. And the most assertive way of invisibilizing women is to confine them to the innards of the private spaces and curbing their agency by taking a paternalistic attitude of 'protecting their privacy/safety'. Nevertheless, it is commendable that the High Court of Kerala finally issued two landmark judgments with respect to these two visual texts. The division bench of the Kerala High Court, comprising Chief Justice Antony Dominic and Dama Seshadri Naidu, was able to make an

observation beyond the binaries in the case against *Grihalakshmi* by stating that “Obscenity lies in the eyes of beholder” (asianage.com, 2018). Later, in June 2023, Rehna Fathima was acquitted of all charges by the High Court of Kerala upholding her right to bodily autonomy under Article 21 of our Constitution. Challenging the selective understanding of nudity of the upper body of women as obscene in contrast to that of men, Justice Kauser Edappagath observed that this issue “cannot be characterised as a real or simulated sexual act nor can it be said that the same was done for the purpose of sexual gratification or with sexual intent” (ndtv.com, 2023). The court also made references to the semi-nude art works in ancient temples to critique the social backlash against Rehna Fathima.

The state of Kerala was in a state of utter confusion and chaos over these two instances primarily because of its continuing adherence to the prudish Victorian standards of morality under which women are always under surveillance to thwart their attempts at ‘deviance’. The different discourses that emerged in nineteenth century Kerala bear testimony to the influence of Victorian ideals over the congealing of the frames of reference used to make value judgements on the visibilities, emotions and sexualities of women. One section of the society of Kerala has still not been able to think beyond the idealised version of femininity created by the novelist O. Chandu Menon in his novel *Indulekha* (1889), the first full-fledged novel in Malayalam. The heroine Indulekha in the novel, imagined as a fair skinned, educated lady who makes sure her love life is accepted by the Karanavar (eldest male member of erstwhile nair tarawads who controlled the entire joint family system) is also described as someone who is soft-spoken and polite, unable to create physical noise even through laughter. In the typical nineteenth century Malayalee style, she moves in set-mundu, the traditional attire of nair women in the state. The stagnancy in the society’s worldview on the concept of woman becomes quite obvious when we see young girls being admonished for their style of dressing or their sense of (im)mobilities or even their rebuffing of the meek, silent modes of existence. Furthermore, every year, the women of Kerala, across class, caste and generations, celebrate Keralapiravi (birth of the state in 1956) on 01 November by dressing up in the traditional set-mundu, re-enacting the generic model of ‘the Malayalee Women’. Rehna Fathima, more than Gilu Joseph, was questioning the hypocritical pretensions of the society and trying to awaken it from the puritanical undercurrents that dictate its sociality.

A fleeting glance through some of the movie clips in Mollywood would definitely strengthen our critiquing of the skewed understanding of the

freedom of women that the state nurtures. Even without looking into the larger world of Indian Cinema, we have enough and more instances of the screen presence of the nakedness of women in Mollywood Cinema. Beyond the concerns of certification of the movie by the Censor Board as 'A' in the case of those movies with explicit scenes of intimacy and violence, there have never been instances of denying theatre presence to these movies. Even movies without an 'A' certificate contain scenes depicting nakedness of the female body to varying extent. It is interesting to further note that many of the cover pages of the popular health magazines in the state carry sexualised images of women which invite erotic ways of looking. These are instances of fetishism of the female body to suit the male gaze, titillate the audience and yield voyeuristic pleasure. The capitalist craving for accumulating profit that dictates these visualities overpowers the puritanical strain of thoughts that runs high in the state, without generating even a modicum of social resentment. Laura Mulvey has theorised extensively on this obvious sexualization of the female body on screen. "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey, 1975).

It is high time that the people of the state stop revelling in male scripted narratives of progress and development that continue to deprive women of the right to enjoy and experience life to the fullest as human beings and limit their spatial dimensions to the realm of sexualization. The society has to overcome its misogynistic interpretations of the female body as the locus of fatal desires and embrace Merleau-Ponty's concept of the living body which frees body from bio-scientific descriptions and "attempt to describe and understand the fundamental interrelatedness of consciousness and embodiment, and thus to bypass the dualisms of mind-body, interior-exterior and consciousness-nature" and to perceive the body "as a totality of external and internal perceptions, intelligence, affectivity, motility and sexuality" (Oksala, 2005). The caption #BodyArt and Politics that Rehna Fathima has given to her post speaks volumes about her intentions of disrupting our social conditioning founded on misogyny and masculine privileges. These two instances may be fragmented moments of new forms of engagement with women's corporeality but they definitely deserve applause for trying to create a critical idiom for women to break out of the glasshouses of social stigmas and taboos and experience the world on their own terms. Furthermore, these images were initiating debates on the significance of cybernetic subjectivities in resignifying the

materiality of the woman's body through the affordances offered by digital media as spaces of "transgressive feminist thinking" (Wechie 2016).

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