

DEEP FOCUS

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Identification, Desire, Otherness: Susanna and its Public

Bindu Menon



This paper is an attempt at understanding the reception of a particular film, *Susanna*. It was released in December 2000 and fared well in the National and State awards. Discussions around *Susanna* started much before the release of the film. One reason for it was the censor board decision to issue an 'A' certificate to it. T.V. Chandran, is considered an important contemporary film maker and has an authorial history of directing some of the important films in Malayalam¹. As such by the time of the release of the film, high expectations for an 'art film' had already set in². The release of the film was followed by discussions in newspapers, television and in meetings organized by women's groups and film societies. A wide range of positions were taken by various groups and people in these discussions. While some of them hailed *Susanna* as a film, which rendered deep fissures in the middle class morality of Malayalees and as carving out a space for women etc.³, feminist critics have generally criticised the film for representing women as passive victims⁴. Some of them argued that *Susanna* could transcend the traumatic experiences only through a sublimation of femininity, which in turn doesn't help in putting up a resistance against patriarchal forces. Marxist feminist critics accused *Susanna* of being complacent with neo-capitalist forces and ending up in missionary activities⁵. It is at this juncture that the Sexworkers Organization at Thrissur, 'Jwalamukhi' barged into a discussion on the film organized by a Film Society at Thrissur and later

organised a public function at Thrissur to felicitate the director and the actress.

By looking into the debates which arose around the film and the conceptualization and formation of sexworkers forum in Kerala, I am trying to analyse the tensions inherent in the process of identity formations and the centrality of popular cultural forms to it.

This became a fascinating object of study precisely in terms of the 'publicness' of the act. It is also interesting because it helps in addressing some issues related to cinema and political subjectivities. The concept of 'public' can be mobilized to address a number of key concerns in film studies. In particular, thinking of cinema in terms of public involves an approach that cuts across, theoretical and historical, textual and contextual modes of enquiry.

Further thinking about cinema in terms of the public is reconstituting a horizon of reception, not just in terms of sociological determinants, but in terms of multiple and conflicting subjectivities and constituencies. This is not an attempt to demand a conception of audiences in plural, but to invite attention to instances where collectivities are formed around cinema.

Susanna-the text

The film is about Susanna, a middle-aged business woman and her relationships with five men. But before this affluent present Susanna had a difficult

past. Daughter of a plantation labourer, she falls in love with a wealthy planter's son. They elope, get married and have a daughter. But the planter pleads with Susanna to entice his son into a respectable alliance and she does so. The son gets killed in an accident or it is told so by the planter. The planter steps in and takes care of her and the child. But he also forces her into concubinage with him and four of his friends, each of them wealthy, educated and respectable middle-aged men. They start a business venture for her. Susanna outgrows her bad experiences and becomes a strong and learned woman. In the present, the five old men are shown as frequently visiting Susanna seeking her friendship, affection, and peace of mind. Each of them are weighed down by their past misdeeds to her and in the present are shown more as people dependent on her. The relationship causes turmoil in these men's families and Susanna is being hunted down by some of their family members. Her own son-in-law makes advances towards her and her daughter also have a false impression of her. By the end of the film, Susanna starts an old age home where the men in her life are also inhabitants.

Public Sphere and Dominant Discursive Practices:

The 'act' needs to be discussed at different levels. I try to discuss the conditions under which this collectivity gets formed and how they constitute themselves as public. The historical constellation at which the act takes place is the formation of sexworkers movement in Kerala, the debates on sexuality which it initiated in the Kerala public sphere, the impact upon Malayalee intellectual domains caused by feminism and the increasing 'sites of enunciation' for feminist politics.

To understand the significance of the articulation in public, we should recognize that the elite public sphere is limited to the middle class and is constituted by excluding groups like sex workers. In fact, though there had been different discussions on *Susanna*

organized by women's groups and film societies none of the sex workers were invited to participate in them. Social workers who were in the forefront in organizing the trade union like Dr. Jayasree were invited. A meeting at Thrissur by Navachithra Film Society was the first in which they articulated their position in public. Further, looking at the history of the trade union activity, we rarely see those articulating theoretical positions in the public. We see them often uttering testimonials in the public—testimonials of pain. I would say that this is the first act where they traverse this terrain of pain and arrive at a language of autonomy. Another interesting factor is that discussion on cinema and literature are signifiers of high modern sensitivity and also an important 'site of enunciation' for all sorts of political concerns in Kerala. The history of the formation of a public around cinema shows that sections of the middle class, upper caste and male viewership of the cinema fashioned itself into a 'public' distinct from the rest of the audience and has constituted itself as a public in the Habermasian sense of the term in that it makes the public sphere, which though narrowly conceived, functions as an authority to which appeals could be made in matters of 'common interest'. This is not to suggest that the only public that was formed in and around the cinema is one that consists of educated, upper caste, middle class men. Nancy Fraser has argued that contemporaneous with the bourgeois public sphere, several subaltern counter publics also arose and they were capable of challenging and critiquing the dominant publics and circulate different constructs. Regardless of any knowledge of the actual composition of the female audience, Malayalam cinema from the early days itself has addressed female audience as a significant group. Some of T.V. Chandran's films *Alicinte Anveshanam* and *Mankamma* has addressed female spectators in the text but it was in *Susanna* that a female audience was actively sought through debates organized around the preview of the film and TV promotionals

especially by Asianet, the major Malayalam private satellite channel stepping in as the distributor of the film. From the early 1980s itself a growing autonomous women's movement and feminist writers have fashioned themselves into a public and is a considerable presence in the public sphere. I try to show that the conflictual relations between these several publics and other audience groups is central to the understanding the public sphere of cinema.

I would also like to add that acts like this should not be analyzed as just another case of difference in reception, but as the appropriation of a particular kind of political activism, determined by political imperatives⁶.

Further what emerges prominent is that in the process of consolidation of new selves and political activism, the 'sexual subaltern' is engaging with and rearticulating dominant discursive practices⁷.

It is important to note that unlike fan clubs this is not a collectivity for cinema, but a collectivity where cinema becomes an instance. Most of the sex workers are cinephiles. Further cinema halls are spaces of solicitation for sex work and repose. Homeless, many of them take rest in cinema halls by bribing the staff and paying for tickets at each show. Discussions on cinema halls are particularly relevant since they became an occasion for the articulate middle class public to arrive at definitive normative formulations on the nature of the filmgoing experience on the one hand and the nature and function of the public space opened up by the cinema on the other. The use or abuse of the space of the cinema hall is a pivotal issue in these discussions. It is important to hold in mind that sex workers for a long time have been considered as a polluting presence in many public spaces, cinema halls in particular. *Susanna* works in the interstices of exhibition spaces and claims over it from different publics too.

The emergence of a new political subjectivity:

By 1999, sex workers of Kerala had formed an all Kerala network and its first State level conference was on Feb

1999 at Trivandrum. Even before this, AIDS prevention works were taken up by the NGOs among sex workers in different towns of Kerala and localized attempts for organization were already there. 'Jwalamukhi' at Thrissur was one such organization. The attempts for organization by sexworkers opened up a debate on sexwork, legality and sexuality in Kerala. It is interesting that during the discussions on the formation of a trade union by sex workers, they were mainly positioned as 'other' women⁸.

It was an often aired fear that the trade unionisation and legalization of sex work might lead to a diffusion of the boundaries of 'good' women and 'bad' women. Though the arguments around legalization of sex work and trade union formation varied, they were systematically portrayed as 'other' in various ways, bad and poor, unethical, exploited, oppressed, incapable of any political agency etc. The most recurring argument was that the attempt to legalize sex work should be seen in the context of the expanding global sex markets of neo- capitalism and its attempts to ensnare more and more women into its deceptive network⁹. Feminists have also raised the issue that the subject hood attributed to women by the existing patriarchal power structure is that of an easily available consumer commodity that can be subjugated using lust. They rejected sexwork as potential work place, and sex work as one which no woman would choose consciously and invariably express the fear that once legalized, women will choose it as a profession. Thus women who presently engage in this profession are either victims or bad women. Strangely some even expressed the fear that if sex work gets legalized, the boundaries between 'good' women and 'bad' women might diffuse resulting in a situation where every woman would be treated as a potential sexworker¹⁰. Attempts to form trade unions should be replaced by the correct form of political action, that is to address patriarchy and eradicate sexwork, in the process reforming and rehabilitating sexworkers as well¹¹.

One important rationale invoked by both pro and anti positions was one of the rationales for social change or the capability of this movement to achieve comprehensive change in the situation of Malayalee women, or even the whole Kerala society. Many of them, including feminists while acknowledging the specificity of sex workers' conditions, rejects the movement saying that it doesn't address the general condition of Malayalee women. Hence, sex workers are not proper feminist subjects prevents the specificity of their situation, prevents them from developing a perspective that could analyse and represent the whole of Malayalee women, I feel that though being judged as a negative representation *Susanna* offered a range of subjectivities to be articulated for the sex workers. These subject positions were political, ethical, and moral and argued around many attributes usually associated with that of a conventional femininity like motherhood, love, care etc. These were often conflicting and supplementing at times. A public act of this kind could also have been in response to this othering process in the public. The sex workers' reading and appropriation of the film text is illuminative of the marks of subalternity of their identity where they were laying claim to some of the elite preserves.

Conditions of Possibility:

Even while situating reception within a specific historical and social framework and even as the category of the spectator has become problematic, we still need a theoretical understanding of the possible relations between films and viewers, between representation and subjectivity. I feel that the questions raised in the name of cinema can not be answered through empirical media reception but through a reconsideration of experience. For this one has to first dispose with the notion of experience as unmediated observable truths and reconstitute it as a process which is constructed within the specific cultural discourses. The conditions of possibility of

experience might be through structures that might simultaneously restrict and enable agency and interpretation. The constitution of identities can hardly be seen as a more or less harmonious process, resulting in stable identities and would amount to underestimate the tensions involved in the formation of selves and also the possibilities of fragmented or incomplete selves.

In a discussion with sex workers on *Susanna* and the felicitation meeting which was held, they described how they arrived at a decision to felicitate the director and actress. Our discussions with them had been around the text, other discussions on the film, discussions among themselves, and the event itself.

Nalini Jameela, one of the leaders of 'Jwalamukhi' described it thus:

"Some of us had watched the movie and found it interesting. They felt that the story was quite similar to one of our friends'. They suggested that the rest of us should watch it and especially people like me. I watched it and was struck by *Susanna's* resemblance to my friend's life. We discussed it among us at 'Jwalamukhi'. I used to read the discussions in newspapers. Meanwhile I started thinking that this isn't just a similarity, but in fact reflecting the many facets of our reality. It was then that a discussion was held by a film society here at the Sahitya Academy hall. Sara Joseph talked against the film. We also talked about what we felt. One man who is a cultural activist here also spoke. He said that *Susanna* is only a wealthy concubine—a *chinna veedu* and this is not a practice in Kerala. This is just Malayalee hypocrisy. How can he say that while all of us know what happens to women who are poor. See what happens to construction workers, a number of poor women have to be like this. Later we felt that we should exemplify that we also have the capability to organize and express our opinion in the public. That is how we decided to organize a felicitation."

At the same time Sujatha, an activist at CARE says: "After the meeting at the Sahithya Academy hall, Maithreyan asked us why we don't organize a meeting for this and said that he can contact T.V. Chandran for this. But you know the whole proceedings of the meeting; from welcome speech to thanks giving was performed by the sex workers themselves".



These narratives are carefully articulated and in a sense responding to the many discussions in the public sphere, which were trying to diffuse their agency by saying that the whole event from the moment of inception was the initiative of social workers. While going through several news letters and papers written by the sex workers themselves, it is interesting that the terminology was at most times in the form of a claim¹². It is interesting that most of these narratives are marked by the terms that cluster around the regime of self- autonomy, identity, liberty, choice, rights etc.

At the same time it is also to be noted that these participations in the public sphere were not received with applause. Fears of disrupting 'normal' public life and lack of discipline always figured in the discussions around their activities including the felicitation event. A report in the 'Rashtra Deepika' daily on the felicitation function illustrates this. The meeting witnessed heated exchanges between the director and some cultural activists, and there were instances where the director intervened when Sara Joseph talked and he lashed out at feminists. But the report places the onus of this on the sex workers organization. The report says: "Because of the organizer's unawareness the discussions went wayward from the beginning itself. Just after the welcome speech every one was invited to speak on the film. There were around thirty sex workers present. It was they themselves who initiated the

discussions. They preferred to see the movie as solely representing the sex workers' issue."

During the discussion special attention was given to sequences in the text which were controversial or much discussed¹³. The discussions were often conflicting with certain positions they have taken in other contexts. It was often stated that the term sex worker was uttered in a

derogatory manner. We asked whether they felt so. Sarada responded: 'See it might seem to you as derogatory. I asked Vani about this. I sat next to her. She said that it was directed towards the society. We also felt so. The dialogue suggests that whether you are a sex worker or a concubine you will be considered the same.'

Regarding the feminist critique that the film doesn't help to put up a resistance against patriarchal forces, Nalini responded: "See in the film Susanna doesn't accept the young man when he proclaims his love. She could have accepted him as a sixth man. She would not. That is how women are. They are essentially moral. And you know it is a great act to deny oneself and extend care to the other. It is not necessary that we should always protest. *Susanna* is a film which shows the life of women like us. It is not a real story. But it represents real condition, hitherto unrepresented."

During the discussions it was a widely held position that *Susanna* can not be identified with sex workers in terms of class. Sarada says: "Susanna exemplifies that there is no difference whether you are rich or poor. Finally you will be pelted with stones. *Susanna* is a modern woman. She has read a lot. But why did she bring up her daughter in a conventional manner? Class differences do not help you in many ways. What we felt important is that *Susanna's* problems are almost similar to ours."

This is a rather conflicting position when read along with certain other positions taken by the sex workers themselves in another context. In the manifesto of the trade union they try to define sex workers as distinct from other people who do sex work in different spaces mostly the upper strata of the society. They argued that they are far removed from the realities of the sex workers in the street and should be viewed differently.

When asked about which was the most appealing / important scene for them in the narrative, most of them said that it was the scene where Susanna was pelted with stones and other kinds of violence met by her that interested them. It is important that Susanna meet this violence rather mutely and collapses to the ground. It is also interesting that the sex workers do not generally meet violence this way. There is any number of instances where they have fought back the police and goondas in the street itself. In fact the one pivotal point for the trade union being formed was these daily forms of violence met by them.

Simultaneously I would like to draw attention to the history of attempts to organize the women in Kerala, in which middle class women's lives stay more or less the central epitome of liberation for women and even for feminist women who were at least critical of parts of it. The feminist critique is hardly a critique that foregrounds the structural advantages of being middle class/ upper caste/ modern educated in Kerala which is also an identity actively pursued and constituted by Kerala's unique experience of development.

Identification, desire and otherness:

A film text can hardly be described as a single, coherent discourse. There could be multiple discourses structuring a text, which interacts with other discourses, and in the interface, other discourses may arise. It is difficult to locate the process of identification within a text. There might be identifications and resistances at the same location

of reception to the same text. Rather than seeking to locate a single subject of the text, what arises here is the presence of putative selves of different discourses.

Further, identification is deployed in a specific manner in critical discussions in Kerala. Identification has always been recognized as a part of the construction of the viewer subject of the commercial cinema. The art cinema movement in Kerala from the beginning itself has tried to alienate the viewer subject and deny visual pleasure. The cinematic tropes deployed, (black and white films, disavowal of star system) were attempts at cultivating a viewer who engages with the text in a high modern self distancing fashion. *Susanna*, like T.V. Chandran's many other films has different cinematic trope, invoking visual pleasure. The important among it is the way the film has made use of the star system by casting Vani Viswanath as the protagonist. Vani Viswanath's many characters in Malayalam films can be described as possessing the traits of a 'phallic woman'. In various films she has donned unconventional characters, as police officer, a tomboy and most of the times, challenging male authority. She is also the only one among female stars who does action films in Malayalam. This intertextuality and the almost iconic status of Vani with 'other' woman also work together with the cinematic tropes.

Sasikala said: "Susanna is not just a sex worker. She has qualities. She is well read, speaks English, she is caring, has ethics. She is at the same time a mother, concubine, friend and business woman." It is interesting that the whole question of identification is also rendered a bit problematic by the event. It can be argued that the responses to the text were not solely grounded on identification to the character as sex worker but to the 'other' womanness in the film.

Getting back to the film text we should not limit to the main narrative itself, without paying much attention to the subversive/transgressive subplots in the film; mainly the drinking session between the two women. This can be described as a classic case

of woman desiring woman sequence. One among Susanna's lovers, Colonel Ramachandran Nair's wife comes to meet Susanna. She says, "My husband and son say you are the person whom they love most in their lives. They are the most loved people in my life. So I wanted to meet you." They become friends and a drinking session follows, where both of them get drunk and pokes fun at society's hypocrisies towards women. The next morning Colonel comes to Susanna's place and tells her that his wife is missing. Susanna tells him that his wife was at her place and adds laughingly that there is nothing to worry because there is nothing like *Fire* between them. By extension the attempt to rule out a lesbian relationship through a piece of dialogue is not accidental.

And it is important that both these women sort of represent the primary tensions set up within the film, between normative family and heterosexual arrangements outside the family. This arrangement is everything that the family is not. Love, care etc. Urmila Unni represents the good part of it and is meeting the good other woman. The pleasures of this feminine desire cannot be collapsed into a single identification, since difference and otherness are continuously played upon in the film. Does it offer a woman spectator with fictional fulfillment of becoming a feminine other? The text at the same time denies complete transformation by insisting upon differences in the final drive to achieve an ideal femininity. It is engaging with the archetypes of the *prostitute and mother*. In the process it tends to collude both in favour of constituting an ideal femininity which is grounded on altruism. This is a position often repeated in modern Malayalam literature and cinema too.

But cinema can rarely be assessed on themes. Here too we are zealously protected from any visuals of female sexual pleasure and it is important that *Susanna* becomes powerful not through her sexual power but altruism. The reordering of society is

contingent upon a sublimation of femininity and this is expressed through textual and metaphorical devices. By the end of the film she is erased of all sexuality and becomes a divine mother. Though the gendered essentialisms, stereotypes and symbols are quite problematic, I feel we should also see that *Susanna* makes several significant departures in the deployment of narrative strategies. The disengagement with the conventional narrative angle of the 'art' film enabling to set up a different discursive structure. Though there was resentment towards these strategies, particularly in discussions around the film by saying that no heroine was so much pampered by her director like this in Malayalam films, I feel it is an important cinematic trope which invites differential readings from groups like sex workers seeking other womanness and identification in the text. What kind of a spectator would it interpellate? I think the pleasures of this female spectatorship should be explored more. What we see here is an instance where classic psychoanalytic theory fails to address pleasures through its either desire or identification framework.

This is not to separate the actual social viewer and the spectator-subject, but to situate the shifting subject positions marking the narratives in specific relations of representation and reception, and as part of a larger social horizon defined by overlapping local, national, global, face to face and even de-territorialized structures of public life.

Conclusion:

*The new selves of sex workers in Kerala, constituted through discursive practices of trade union organization have an emancipatory potential. But this is never to be an absolute possibility because of their own engagement with the dominant discursive practices and the various constructions of 'dominant' and also the quite problematic relationship with it. The reception of the film *Susanna* shows how these newly evolving selves construct and consolidate themselves as a public. More importantly it suggests*

that cinema can at certain junctures function as a matrix for challenging social positions of identity and otherness. It also renders the easy categorization of either identification or desire framework in psychoanalysis a bit problematic.

[This is a revised version of an earlier paper jointly written and presented by me and Reshma Bharadwaj at the 3rd Daniel Thottakkara memorial seminar on Cinema Culture at Sacred Heart College Thevara on 8th February 2002. The discussions at the seminar helped me a great deal in revising the paper. I would like to thank Dr. Madhava Prasad, Dr T. Muraleedharan and Dr V. C. Harris for their insightful comments. I am extremely grateful to Dr. J. Devika who helped me with their comments of an earlier draft. I am especially thankful to Reshma Bharadwaj for sharing many of the material on sex workers' movement. This paper has also benefited from her ongoing PhD project on New Social Movements in Kerala.]

Notes

1. Chandran's cinematic style has been described as of extreme intellectual honesty in which he moves away and undoes what is called an internationalist idiom. See R. Nandakumar, 'Narrative Angle and the encoding of discursive structures: Reflections on the Films of T.V. Chandran', *Deep Focus* Vol.VI, No.1,1997.
2. I use the terms 'art' and 'commercial' not as given categories but as discursive categories engendered by the new Cinema movement and the discourses around a new cinema.
3. C. S. Venkiteswaran, 'Susanna : Beyond the feminine mystique', *Deep Focus*, November 2001
4. C. S. Chandrika, 'Susannayude Chiriyilenthirikunnu', *Mathrubhumi*, January 21,2001.
5. P. Geeta, 'Susannayude Raashtreyam', *Deshabhimani* weekly, February 7, 2001
6. It is interesting to note that during a discussion on films in general they talked about a recent popular film *Subradharan* which has its story set in a brothel. When asked why they didn't attempt at generating a

discussion on this film they said, "Because there is no need for it". *Susanna* is an art film and there were discussions on it which didn't ask our opinion. There is no discussion on this film. Further this is just a love story and not a serious film like *Susanna*.

7. The concept 'sexual subaltern', refer to the broad theoretical category that brings together a range of sexual minorities, lesbians, gays, bisexual, sexworkers, communities like hijras (Transvestites) etc., in the post colonial location. It is not to say that it is homogenous or stable, but complex and contradictory. It is not invoked exclusively as an identity of resistance to dominant sexual categories.
8. Janaki Nair in her important work on women and law in colonial India speaks of the fear shown by the Nationalists particularly about the distinctions between 'respectable' and 'disrespectable' would be obliterated. Set off from the westernized women, the lower caste women and the uppercaste conservative women, the middle class women took her place in the public sphere which can be seen as an extension of the liberal space created within middle class families without levelling gender relations in any fundamental way. She further argues that the political economy of colonial modernity had defined the contours of 'respectable' and 'disrespectable' sexuality more sharply confining more acceptable forms of female sexuality within the sphere of reproduction namely family, i.e. within monogamous heterosexual family. See Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India*; Kali For Women. New Delhi
9. In the wake of discussions on the formation of sexworkers' movement the term prostitution came to be displaced by sexwork. Though it is highly contested on the grounds whether sexwork can be considered work in a classical political economic sense, especially in a context where the discourse within the movement contains ambivalences around categories like alienation, reification, pleasure etc, the movement has rephrased the term and used it to shift the discussions from a moral terrain.
10. See C. S. Chandrika: 'Women who are made Prostitutes'; *Malayalam Weekly*, April 2

11. K. Ajita, 'Keralathine Thailand Akkarathu', *Madhyamam Daily*, January 8, 1999
12. Some excerpts from the *Jwalamukhi* news letters are evidence to this. "In the meeting conducted by Navachithra to discuss the film *Susanna* we also participated and intervened in the discussions along with the renowned writers and cultural activists of Trichur." *Jwalamukhi News Letter*, Vol.1, No:2
 "On the World Human Rights Day a public meeting was organized in Trichur and along with the prominent human right activists of Trissur, *Jwalamukhi* activist Smt Nalini and Smt Lalitha too spoke." *Jwalamukhi News Letter* Vol..1.No.1"
 "It was we who gave the welcome speech and presided the protest meeting held at Elthuruth demanding a probe in Ramani's murder. We played a crucial role in making this meeting a success in which writers like Sara Joseph, Vysakhan, Pavithran etc. participated." *Jwalamukhi News letter* Vol.1; No:1
13. The interviews were done jointly by me and Reshma Bharadwaj both in formal and informal situations. Further we are aware of the fantasies of the other that might claim a role in our analysis. We have been associated with the group for a fairly long period, not as researchers but as feminists who are interested in their union. In the due course we have discussed our politics, desires, passions and differences. But they were not in equal terms and most importantly we figured as each others 'other' in both our narratives. We know that 'our' project of analyzing 'them' is an important regulative practice which produces our own subjectivities as well as theirs. We know that we have been taking shifting positions to their experiences; sometimes we have sympathized with them, sometimes valorized their freedom and have often expressed it. They have responded to us in turn in various ways. Sometimes our sympathies had been dismissed by them as middle class anxieties and flung back upon us, sometimes accepted. Our appreciations have been met with joy and sometimes they performed to it. The performative nature of relationships in interview situations like this needs further analysis.

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